

Conversation with Marina Abramović

Clare Harris

Marina Abramović:

I want to talk with you about the ideas behind my exhibition in Oxford. There are just two pieces in the show: a set of gates and a portal. Every single culture has a relationship to portals and gates but in many different ways. I am curious to know what you think when I say 'portal'. What do you associate that word with?

Clare Harris:

At a general level, the portal may be a site of transition between life and death and between different states of consciousness. A point where mind and body dissolve maybe. But when you speak of these structures or concepts in relation to your exhibition, I immediately think of the role of portals and gates within Tibetan Buddhism. I particularly like the idea that the public are going to interact with these concepts within the gallery space and become part of the piece, like performance artists themselves. It will very much be an embodied experience for the visitor. To me, gates and portals have particularly strong associations with concepts and practices in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as in Hinduism and other religious contexts in Asia. They make me think of that amazingly complex diagram used within Tibetan Buddhism, the mandala. Gateways are significant elements in both the meditational diagram and the physical buildings that are created according to the design of the mandala, since they are portals marking transitional or liminal areas.

As you know, the mandala is a kind of cosmological dia-

gram, made up of a concentric series of squares and circles, the outer ring of which is composed of all the elements of the universe. The Buddhist meditator primarily engages with it as a mental exercise, in which they envisage themselves passing from this elemental ring at the edge of the circle and gradually moving through different zones (which may look like gardens or charnel grounds) to reach the representation of a deity (depicted figuratively or just via a syllable from a mantra) at the hub of the circle. The circle is subdivided into the four quarters of the universe, with gateways marking the cardinal points at East, West, North and South. As far as I understand it, from speaking with Tibetans and from what I've read about Tibetan Buddhism, the practitioner thinks of themselves trying to enter the mandala by passing through these gateways to the temple or palace in which the deity resides.

The mandala is more than just a conceptual thing, however. It's also present in the Tibetan Buddhist landscape in the form of temples and monasteries that feature a series of walls and gateways that a devotee must pass through to reach the central shrine. By entering a religious space like this, they seek to get closer to the most potent sacred object or person within that building. As such, the mandala is not just an image with doorways that may open into new forms of consciousness at a cognitive level, it can also be something highly material that Tibetans encounter on a quotidian basis, or that they go in search of on pilgrimages to remote sacred sites. The arduous nature of getting to such places and the wider effort involved in pilgrimage can be very powerful and transformative.

MA:

You open so many doors in my thinking. The portal, for me, is really about that changed state of consciousness. It's about going to different time dimensions and from the cosmic to the earthly. But then I think the physical body can also be a gate. The difference between portal and gate may be something that arises from conditioning the body to get into the portal. For me the gate is something you go through, and the portal is how transformations happen.

I watched Tibetans doing prostrations in Dharamsala (the Tibetan 'capital in exile' in India). In those places there were women who, even if they were not in good physical shape, would prostrate in front of the temple for up to twelve hours a day. It's extraordinary. Normally nobody could do that because it just hurts, but they seemed to be oblivious to the pain. I think this is a kind of necessary physical conditioning and preparation which can get the body into the state that makes it possible to become a portal.

CH:

Like you, I have seen Tibetans doing multiple full-length prostrations on many occasions; often they have been done by very devout members of the older generation. I have witnessed that in the Tibetan refugee communities in India, as well as at sites in Lhasa (the original Tibetan capital), such as the Potala Palace or Jokhang Temple. There, people spent a significant amount of time prostrating at the entrance to the Jokhang, positioning their bodies in relation to the most sacred object inside it: a statue of the Buddha.



Mount Kailash from Barkha Plain, 2016

Tibetan Buddhist practices of this sort are like an offering of a kind of spiritual and bodily labour. In doing them, the practitioner may learn to move beyond pain. But ultimately what a Buddhist is trying to achieve is the accumulation of merit that will bring a better life in the next incarnation. In making those physical gestures in front of a sacred building, they're making an offering of devotion to everything ranging from the most important person who has occupied it, such as the Dalai Lama, whose former home was the Potala Palace, to the Buddha himself, who is represented as a statue in the centre of the Jokhang, as well as to the principles of the religion in general.

I imagine one of the things you're most interested



Mandala of Hevajra Nepalese, dated 1461 (Nepal Samvat 581)
Tibet, distemper on cotton. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

in is the degree to which consciousness may be changed by physical actions of that sort. But because I have never done more than a few prostrations, I don't know how that happens! You (along with many Tibetans) will understand that much better than me, because you've done these long durational performances when the body is pushed to its limit. From what you've told me about your observations and understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, this is why you deeply respect what many Tibetans do on a daily basis.

MA:

Clare, one thing that is wonderful about you and why I love talking to you is because you say certain things that are like a trigger for me. You know what the idea is about and help make sense of what I do sometimes. Artists often do things by intuition, without realising exactly what is going on. Then later on, by seeing the effect of the work and by saying certain things we get clarification from others.

You said something incredibly important when you talked about offering labour, because offering labour is part of the process, and is the way we're changing consciousness. That's the essence of my performance work. That offering of labour is so much based on the Tibetan tradition for me — the kind of work that's not obviously useful. It's not like the work of building muscles or doing the gardening or constructing a house. I'm talking about something which is outside the normal and may not have any obvious sense to it, but it is all about the process. It's like something I did for three months during a retreat in a Tibetan community in India: making

little Buddhas by repeatedly filling a mould with clay. You make thousands of little Buddha images by putting in eight hours of labour per day. You may make a thousand or a million. Then the next three months labour of this sort is done in running water and you don't see any result because it is invisible. In the first sort you can see the result and touch it but for the water there is nothing. The result is not important. It is the process that matters. It's about the physical preparation, the labour and the merit that lets us get close to the portal and open it. In contemporary art nobody ever makes a connection with that kind of thing and that's why Tibetan Buddhism is so important to me.

CH:

So much of what devout Tibetans do relates to things you have mentioned there. Firstly, it's about the work of the body and the body being a kind of offering. Secondly, it is, as I said, about orientating the mind and the body in very particular kinds of ways. Thirdly, it is definitely about repetition. When you describe making thousands of little clay Buddhas (*tsa tsa* in Tibetan) in a mould, it's a similar thing to doing prostrations. And, of course, the more prostrations completed, the greater the distance covered, both physically and spiritually. I'm thinking of the full-length prostrations Tibetans do over several days around the sacred mountain of Kailash in Tibet and the extraordinary self-abnegation of it. Buddhists literally press every inch of their bodies against the earth as they circle the base of that exceptional natural phenomenon.



Detail, Dharmachakra Mudra, wall painting, Great Peace Stupa, Mindrolling Monastery, Clement Town, Uttarakhand, India, 2005

MA:

How many times do they do that?

CH:

As you know, there are special numbers in Tibetan Buddhism: 3 is good and 8 is also auspicious. So if a person could do 3 or 8 full *koras* (prostration routes) around the base of Mount Kailash, that would be excellent, but 108 would be even better. This reiterates my point about duplication and repetition: the more zeros you can add before the number 8 the better. I have also been told by Tibetans that if you die in the process of making prostrations around Kailash,

that increases your merit and improves your chances of a good rebirth immeasurably. This raises questions about duration and how much of a person's life is to be spent preparing themselves in relation to their death. This is something I know you are also interested in. When you said that you had done a three-month retreat in Dharamsala, that three-month time span was specific — correct? Many Tibetan religious practices of that sort are held over three days, three months or even three years, and during that time a person basically sets themselves apart from the world.

MA:

Yes. These monks might spend three years in a cave. That is really something. What's intriguing to me is not just the religious practice but the physical and mental changes of the person's being. Such activities become incredibly influential because, as the old saying goes, if you change yourself, you change thousands. As a performance artist, I deal directly with the public and you have to work on yourself to create that kind of transition. Otherwise, there is no impact. I'm not so interested in the objects, paintings and sculpture that Tibetan Buddhist artists make. What I'm most keen on is the process of change that you can only make through very rigorous spiritual practice. This is incredibly valuable.

CH:

Those retreats are about the relationship between the material and the immaterial. This reminds me of some other aspects of your work. You talked about the offering of labour



Turning prayer wheels at the Swayambhunath Stupa in Kathmandu, date unknown

and making something in water that constantly disappears. Obviously, there is no physical residue or evidence of that. As you know, a key concept in Tibetan Buddhism is non-attachment, the attempt to separate yourself from all kinds of material things, just as the Buddha renounced his riches as Prince Siddhartha. But non-attachment can also apply to people and places, as illustrated in Tibetan 'wheel of existence' paintings. They show the stages that a person must pass through as they learn how to make themselves more and more detached from the material world.

MA:

The stages of life you pass through when you have children, raise a family, and then move on to the next stage.

CH:

Yes, that is depicted in the wheel of existence paintings. In fact, there's a part of them that usually shows a potter making a pot which is there to illustrate attachment to material things. But it also alludes to the idea that even if you work hard to perfect the making of something you also have to learn to let go, to smash the pot or even not to make it at all. Same with children: you may create them but eventually you have to let them go.

Going back to the purpose of retreats in Tibetan Buddhism, especially the lengthy ones that were conducted in a cave or cell of some sort for up to three years. I believe that by being immured in a chamber, without light or sound or human contact, the practitioner would experience an acute kind of sensory deprivation that was designed to push their consciousness away from the body and towards a purer and sharper mental state.

Highly advanced practitioners deliberately shut down their senses in order to concentrate on the mind. I haven't attempted anything like this myself, but I think you will understand it from the procedures you follow in your performance work. In the 'long duration practices' (if I may call them that) of Tibetan Buddhism, something happens to the body when it is deprived of the sensory stimuli of normal life. As you know, many other religious traditions also feature practices

of cutting oneself off from the world in an attempt to achieve higher states of consciousness.

MA:

For me this is the most important task. I went on retreats and looked at different cultures in order to learn from them and to develop myself. I have then sought to use this knowledge in my art practice to translate the things I have learnt to the public, which is not easy at all. I have so many different ideas about how to do this but generally to me, less is best.

The Modern Art Oxford exhibition will not be just an exhibition. It's very rare to experience total silence and to stay in one place. The visitor will face a wall or sit for a certain amount of time in a chair. Then after some time they will pass through a simple copper gate, which is emitting light, and then go into another place. Then there is a selenite portal where the visitor will not be standing or sitting, but lying down. I think that will create a kind of conscious dreaming or a different perception of reality. It's not going to change their life, but this is an attempt to do something different because in a normal exhibition you're just a silent witness. At MAO, rather than just witnessing something in front of you, you will be participating, and something will be happening to you.

CH:

I really love the idea that the body of the visitor will be transformed by being in the exhibition space; that instead of the usual thing of standing looking at artworks, they will be positioning themselves and using their senses in very different

kinds of ways. Experiencing the contrast between sensory stimulation and deprivation will require them to rethink their body in relation to the space of Modern Art Oxford and of 'white cube' art galleries in general. It seems that when they put headphones on to experience silence, you are hoping the visitor will mentally realign themselves in a similar manner to some of the Tibetan Buddhist practices we have been talking about. But I need to ask this: sometimes sensory deprivation is used as a method of torture. Have you thought about what will happen to people if they have all their electronics taken away from them and the sound of the world switched off, so that they have to just listen to their own minds? For some people, that could be quite disturbing.

MA:

I have an answer to this. My three favourite places in the world are the monastery, the prison and the sanatorium. In all these places everything is exactly on time and the body is taken care of in a regular way: you eat at the same time; you have activities at the same time. Of course, your freedom is taken away when you are imprisoned, and you have to be sick to be admitted to a sanatorium; but monasteries are fantastic because you go there of your own free will. The idea for the Oxford show is that you are experiencing deprivation of your own free will. You're taking part because you agree to think differently about your comfort and to have a different experience of yourself. To do that you need certain conditions, and you must accept those conditions. This is why it is not a form of torture. Still, you would not normally put yourself into such

a challenging situation. Here, I'm doing it for you and then we can see what you get out of it in the end. This is what happens when I take my workshops at the Institute.¹ It is called the Abramović Method. In a nutshell, you are asked to do certain things that you would usually never do and this gives rise to different emotions. There is impatience, anger, and the enjoyment of being bored. Then you pass through all of this to get that sense of being truly present, when time doesn't exist, and everything is gone. But to achieve that you need to make a great effort and that is why the words 'offering labour' are so incredibly important for me. You don't get something from nothing. You have to invest, and that investment is not in a usual activity. As I said, you're not building a house, you're not making a garden. You're doing labour based on repetition, and that is a completely different kind of experience.

CH:

In this case, you're doing work on your inner self within an exhibition. It is a voluntary act to go into a gallery space, completely different from being incarcerated. That's an especially potent idea right now when we're just coming out of a pandemic and people have to make a very conscious choice about whether to go to exhibitions. Also, it may be precisely at this kind of moment that visitors may want to experience something that literally shuts down the noise of the world and enables them to focus inwards. Many of us found solace during the pandemic by going out into nature, getting away from the hubbub of the city, if we had that opportunity and privilege. Millions also took up practices that were repetitious, such as

knitting or walking the same route over and over again. There was a rediscovery of the simple pleasures of the body that gave people respite from the fear induced by global events.

Having watched the film *The Artist is Present* at MOMA New York ² I believe you did experience pain from just sitting in the gallery space for that extraordinarily protracted period of time. I think most people would have no idea of how hard it is to do that. For some, even lying down on a hard surface for more than a few minutes can be difficult. I wonder whether visitors to MAO will need some kind of preparation or introduction to the ideas that you want to pursue in the exhibition?

MA:

One way to cope will be to come many times to the show! What I'm offering are three different positions for the human body: sitting, standing and lying. These are three positions that the body assumes naturally. We will see what happens. When I did *The Artist is Present*, there were so many people there with so many emotions and different types of energy. Each time a new person approached me, I had to close my eyes and let go, so that I could be empty for this person. Otherwise, it's impossible. You have to be like a river. You can't be like a rock.

CH:

It has to flow away, otherwise it's too much to take on everybody else's emotional pain.

MA:

Yes. When I started doing my performances, I set myself a difficult task. It was very conceptual, very simple and very strict. I would set up a time and some conditions, and then only use my willpower to do it. It was during that process that I started learning things that I have since come to compare to Buddhist meditational practice. I remember when I was doing the piece called 'Night Sea Crossing'. After twelve days of not eating and just looking at Ulay³, he suddenly disappeared in front of my eyes and the place where he had been sitting became a pool of blue light. I was freaking out and thinking "Oh my God, is something wrong with me".

Much later, I was introduced to Vipassana meditation and other practices, like the Tibetan Buddhist Green Tara meditation, but I'd already done this from the performance point of view, creating my own restrictions and structure which brought me to all these realisations.

CH:

So you generated these methods yourself first and then over the years, when you've encountered the spiritual practices of other communities around the world and seen that they have similar kinds of effects, you've been making a comparison? Was it that way around?

MA:

Yes, exactly. The experiences that I had of 180-degree vision, of smell in the absence of somebody being in the space. There



Dharmachakra, Wheel of Transmigratory Existence, paper,
Tibetan School / American Museum of Natural History, New York, USA

are so many other abilities that I was discovering. There was incredible synchronicity and telepathy. You know it was not just given to me, but it came through incredible hard-core deprivations and restrictions. And then I started being interested in Tibetan Buddhism, reading about it, and getting to know the lamas, attending teachings and so on.

CH:

This is really helpful, both for me and for visitors to your exhibition at MAO. I appreciate the way you're explaining the derivation of ideas for your work, all the hard graft involved in it, and the echoes with what you've learned from your interactions with Tibetan Buddhist teachers and your own experience of Buddhist practice. It seems you first developed these states of heightened awareness intuitively through your art practice and then you've been looking for similarities in the practices of people from other parts of the world.

For example, I'm fascinated by how you pick up on things like the way that the body is so carefully orchestrated and controlled within the yogic practices of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. I'm thinking in particular about the *mudras* — the very specific hand gestures that symbolise key concepts in Buddhism and Hinduism. I can see how this has got such a lot of resonance, when you too are perfecting the movements of the body for your performances.

It reminds me of when you were being filmed with some objects from the Pitt Rivers collection.⁴ You positioned your body in a very particular way and with your hands hovering over the object, as if you were capturing the essence of it

without actually touching or intervening in it in any way. Then for the second shot for the camera, the object was removed but your hands remained in the same place. You seemed to just be holding emptiness.

MA:

For me, it's about the importance of the immateriality of performance. Emptiness is also so important. I believe that when you sit in one position for a long period of time and then go away, the energy is still there. Energy stays in the space. You just perceive it. You know the Tibetans have a very interesting conception of emptiness. A lama once told me it was also about 'suchness'. He said that 'suchness' is emptiness that is not completely empty but a kind of full emptiness. So it's a contradiction.

And going back to repetition, I really think it is a key concept for many cultures. Among the Australian Aborigines, for example, every ceremony is repeated exactly the same way as it has been for thousands of years. It's the same with the rituals of Siberian shamans. There's no room for innovation, as the rules were established in ancient times and must be repeated precisely. It is always the same, without any need for progress or modern technology. That's why it has such a power.

CH:

I'm afraid I don't agree completely. It is true that repetition is incredibly important in so many societies, and especially to ensure the accurate replication of ritual practices, whether

it is in Siberian shamanism or Tibetan Buddhism. But I don't think that means that there hasn't been any change or innovation in those communities. One of the things that has always impressed me when spending time in Tibetan communities is the extent to which new technologies are embraced. For example, twenty years ago, I remember a friend of mine showing me one of the first digital mandalas. It was a screensaver on his computer that was running in the background, constantly creating and then disaggregating a mandala in innumerable pixels and generating merit while he was doing his office work. It was a great time and labour-saving device; not completely unlike the water-powered prayer wheels or the prayer flags blown by the wind that were invented by Tibetans centuries ago. The nature of the technology was different, but all these devices enabled prayers to be repeated endlessly.

MA:

Labour-saving devices in Tibetan Buddhism. This sounds great.

CH:

But you're right that the principle of repetition is fundamental in many religions, including in Tibetan Buddhism. The more prayers that can be generated, whether by the spinning of a prayer wheel or the incessant movement of pixels on a computer screen, the better. But I think the wider question that anthropologists and many others are interested in is the role of repetition and rules in replicating a practice, whether in ritual or religious contexts or secular ones. They may

be necessary to enable the safe transmission of the specialist skills of knowledge-holders to future generations, especially in communities where that knowledge was not written down. In such contexts, practices in which a student learns by literally copying others with their own body are crucial. I think this may have echoes with your own work and how you train the younger generation at your performance art institute. It was revealing to me when you said that often artists aren't fully conscious of what they do, and they rely on intuition. I think there may be a connection with repetition in religion and ritual, in the sense that knowing the structure and rules facilitates replication over time and over generations. It creates an *enskilment* that is endlessly replicable, as well as allowing room for intuition and variation.

MA:

Yes. You have to learn to empty yourself so that you have the space for what I call liquid knowledge from the universe. There is so much knowledge that could be accessible to us, but we can't be attuned to it because we have so much of our own stuff inside ourselves. I have an artwork which I call *The Lovers: Boat Emptying, Stream Entering*.⁵ It's about being in a little boat on the ocean with your luggage. When the boat is hit by a storm, the only way to survive is to throw all the luggage away and then the stream will bring you to security. It's the same with everything: in order for liquid/universal knowledge to be accessible to every human being, we have to empty ourselves and then the truth can come in. This is what all religions are talking about, especially in asceticism,



Tibetan pilgrim prostrating at the Barkhor in Lhasa, Tibet, 2014

where deprivation functions as a kind of cleaning out process (I call it ‘cleaning the house’) in order to attain enlightenment.

Notes

¹ The Marina Abramović Institute is a performance art organisation founded by the artist in 2011 with a focus on performance, long-duration works, and the use of the ‘Abramović Method’.

² *The Artist is Present* was an extended performance Abramović engaged in as part of a retrospective of the same name held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. For the work, Abramović sat at a table across from an empty chair as museum visitors took turns sitting opposite her, locking

eyes with the artist in silence. Abramović performed this action for the entire duration of the exhibition, sitting with strangers for eight hours a day without break, for nearly three months.

³ Frank Uwe Laysiepen (1943–2020), known as Ulay, was a German performance artist. From 1975 to 1988 Ulay and Abramović were in a personal and artistic relationship, collaborating and creating performances together.

⁴ In August 2021, Abramović undertook a research residency at the Pitt Rivers Museum that was hosted by Clare Harris, Nicholas Crowe and other staff of the museum.

⁵ Marina Abramović *The Lovers: Boat Emptying, Stream Entering* (1988) is a video diary made by the artist while walking the Great Wall of China in 1988.