

Paulina Sztabińska

Department of History of Art, University of Łódź

paulina.sztabinska@uni.lodz.pl

PERFORMANCE ART, PERFORMATIVITY AND THE ISSUE OF NEOMODERNISM

Abstract: Body art and performance art are often discussed together, and even identified as the same thing. A careful analysis of these artistic trends and the accompanying theoretical commentary tends, however, to highlight their differences. Body art turns out to be a phenomenon manifesting significant similarity to the modernist conception of art in the spirit similar to the concept of Clement Greenberg, while performance art largely rejects these assumptions. Performative aesthetics developed by Erika Fischer-Lichte on the one hand stems from challenging modernist artistic essentialism, but on the other emphasizes the role of “the radical concept of presence” of the artist.

The article presents a detailed analysis of two new creative achievements of Marina Abramović, the artist associated both with body art and performance art: *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) and *The Artist is Present* (2010). The indicated ambiguity of performance art has been radicalized in their case. They combine the modernist emphasis on authenticity, presence, and essentialism with the postmodern penchant for citing. The phenomenon of pastiche described by Frederic Jameson has been transformed in such a way that it is no longer empty but takes over the whole of the performer’s self.

The term “neomodern” is used today in a variety of meanings. The issues discussed in the article suggest the possibility of understanding it as overcoming the oppositions characteristic of modernism and postmodernism, while maintaining some of the features of these two trends regarding their respective approaches to art.

Keywords: body art, performance art, performativity, modernism, postmodernism, neomodernism, Marina Abramović.

In the first chapter of her book *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones writes: “Body art and performance art have been defined as constitutive of postmodernism because of their fundamental subversion of modernism’s assumption that fixed meanings are determinable through the formal structure of the work alone.”¹ She also cites the (unambiguous, as she puts it) opinion of Michel Benamou that “performance [is] the unifying mode of the post-modern.”² The American author mentions “body art” and “performance art” in the same breath as it were, thus suggesting that they are closely interlinked. While she does acknowledge that some differences can be noted between these artistic phenomena, they consist only in the fact that in the late 1970s artists turned from relatively modest, raw body art projects towards the projects on a broader scale and incorporating other media besides the artist’s body. Cited by way of example are Laurie Anderson’s theatrical performative practices (e.g. *United States*) and performative photographic works by Cindy Sherman (her “film stills”).³ Reflecting on the derivation of performance art from body art, Jones offers a curious remark: “In the 1980, body art as conceived in the late 1960s and early 1970s was increasingly perceived and spoken of as modernist in the conservative, Greenbergian sense – especially by art historians and critics from England and the United States oriented toward a Marxian, feminist, and/or poststructuralist critical theory.”⁴ I think it is worthwhile to tackle this topic and consider the legitimacy of distinguishing between body art and performance art, as well as their relationship with modernist and postmodernist ideas.

From the feminist perspective, body art seemed to be modernist due to its “naive essentialism.” It was in that spirit that Mary Kelly, artist and art theorist, wrote that it was characterized by a drive to replace the artistic subject with the presence of an active person, whose body was treated somewhat like the visual media in sculpture or painting. It was believed that the artist is an embodied “present and creative subjectivity,” which is an expression of “absolute essential self-possession.”⁵ In the case of body art, therefore, an admittedly radical

¹ A. Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1998, p. 21. In a footnote, the American author gives a long list of authors and titles of works in which this view was formulated.

² Cited *ibidem*, p. 21.

³ There are many more examples of the derivation of performance art from body art. One such clear example of the changes was the third International Symposium of Performance Art in Lyon, which took place in 1981. It was attended by leading world performers who presented actions and works of visual art (the symposium was accompanied by an exhibition of works of art by performance artists), on the basis of which art critics presented their conclusions similar to Jones Cf. *1979 / 1983. Five Years Performance-Art in Lyon*, exhibition catalogue, Comportement Environnement Performance Lyon France, Lyon 1984.

⁴ A. Jones, *op.cit.*, pp. 21-22.

⁵ Cited *ibidem*, p. 22.

change occurred in the nature of the employed means, as compared to the old artistic media, but the approach of the subject itself remained the same. One could say that, as in Greenberg's concept of painting and sculpture, theories of body art assumed that all that art is meant to be is "to be good as art."⁶ And according to the American modernist art critic, art is good when it focuses on the medium specific for the discipline. According to Greenberg, works of art (paintings or sculptures) are not just meant to teach, they do not need to celebrate or glorify anyone or anything, they do not need to fight for anything. Art in modernism "has become free to distance itself from religion, politics, and even morality."⁷ Such an essentialist approach to paintings or sculptures was replaced in the case of body art by a similar understanding of the role of the artist's body. It is regarded as a field of autonomous artistic activities focused on the relationship between physicality and psyche, characteristic of body art (distinguishing such type of artistic practice).

Kelly challenged that position, writing that the "authenticity of body art cannot be inscribed at the level of a particular morphology, it must be chiseled into the world in accordance with direct experience."⁸ Thus, while in the 1960s and 1970s it was thought that the body in body art should not serve any purpose, that nothing should be glorified by its actions or the actions performed on it, that it should not be used to fight for anything, in later years such views were rejected. Feminists recognized that the body is a "battleground" in the fight for the social issues important to women. Jones also believes that the earlier view on body art was based on "metaphysical statements," pointing out that feminist postmodernism rejected such notion, taking an "anti-essentialist" stance instead.⁹

Performative aesthetics seems to depart from performance art rather than from the concept of body art. Although the distinction between these two artistic phenomena may seem difficult or even impossible to outline accurately (especially since different authors describe the same artists, for example Marina Abramović and Gina Pane, using either of the two labels), it might be interesting to include it, at least from the point of view of an attempt to define the problem areas of modernism, postmodernism and neomodernism. While, as indicated in the example I have cited above, body art is associated with modernist attitude, consisting in the search for the essence of artistic phenomena, and requires compliance with media-specific boundaries of individual disciplines (according to Greenberg's assumptions and critical practice), performance (as well as the

⁶ C. Greenberg, *Modern and Postmodern*, "Arts Magazine" 1980, No. 54, p. 65.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Cited after A. Jones, op.cit., p. 22.

⁹ A. Jones, op.cit., p. 23.

theoretical and critical reflection associated with it) departs from essentialist assumptions. What is preserved is the conviction of the special role of the body and the presence of the performer, but there is also an openness to other purposes of art and the exploration of the possibilities of the actions on the fringes. Therefore, unlike in the case of body art, there is no seeking to determine a specific scope in which artistic activity would refer to the body of the artist, like a painter using a flat surface on which he arranges patches of color, or a sculptor manipulating space and three-dimensional objects shaped over the course of the creative acts.¹⁰ From the point of view of performance studies, which emphasize the relationship with performance art, what counts is not the “metaphysics of the body,” but rather the embodied action taking place in a specific location in relation to recipients who interact with the performer in visual, psychological, and sometimes physical terms. It was these features that Erika Fischer-Lichte pointed out when characterizing the aesthetics of performativity.

In her book on this subject she does not address the problem of body art as a separate issue, although she deals with what she calls “performances of self-mutilation” (e.g. Michel Journiac or Gina Pane). Self-mutilation was a particularly drastic and at the same time characteristic example of body art practices. One could even say that such actions were the essence of that artistic trend. However, the German author does not view this group of creative activities as a distinct variety of performative practices, but discusses them along with other types of performance and theater acting. She writes that although during self-mutilation the artists “refus[ed] to bestow specific meanings to their

¹⁰ This is how Roselee Goldberg characterized body art (using, as it happens, the name “performance” and only adding that she means its particular variety). She wrote that Vito Acconci’s art was “an attempt to transpose elements typical for one discipline into another means of artistic expression,” and for an artist who regards himself as a poet, the body is “an alternative to paper” (*Ciało artysty*, in: *Performance*, collective work, transl. K. Biwojno, M. Gutkowska, H. Siodłak, M. Śpik-Dziamska, M. Zamecka, Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warsaw 1984, p. 89). In the subsequent section of the text the artist describes the actions by Denis Oppenheim (writing, for example, that in *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* “he addressed the problem of ‘color change,’ ‘the problem of the traditional painter,’ only in that case his own body was the ‘pigment.’ With a book spread out on his chest, Oppenheim lay on a beach until the hot sun burnt his skin, thus achieving the color change he wanted” [ibidem, p. 92] and Chris Burden [ibidem, p. 93-94]). (e.g. Goldberg considers the action *Shooting*, during which a bullet fired from a distance of 4.5 meters should have grazed his arm, but instead ripped off a piece of his flesh, as a new way of addressing the subject of danger, explored in canvas painting and stage plays [ibid., pp. 93-94]). There is a clear assumption of the separation of painting, theater and body art as essentially different disciplines, though related in certain ways. Greenberg referred to similar problems when considering the relationship of painting and music.

self-injuries, based on a two-world model. Instead, they literally embodied the violence done against themselves,”¹¹ the difference does not entail the need to separate these types of actions and assign a distinct character (essence) to each of them. On the contrary, Fischer-Lichte redefines the concept of “embodiment” so as to cover both of these varieties of artistic practices. She writes that “If the redefined concept of embodiment refers to all that performative acts bring forth, with which the performers first and foremost bring forth their own corporeality in performance, then this concept is particularly suited to grasp what the artists did in their self-mutilating performances.”¹² Such type of performances can be therefore better understood not through their separation and search for the autonomous principles which would bring out their uniqueness, but rather through the cancelling of opposites. Such cancelling of opposites is virtually alien to modernists and Greenberg would accuse it of “lowering the standards” of art.

Taking into account the above considerations, the performative turn can be associated with postmodernism and performative aesthetics can be deemed a manifestation of an approach to art appropriate for that turn. I believe that the basic issues of the aesthetics of performativity according to Fischer-Lichte can be reduced to the following:

1. It is not the work that counts, but the event: it has not been created by way of production, based on knowledge and skills, but it is an event, an incident, a publicly presented coincidence;
2. Emphasis is placed on embodiment and presence: emotion is provoked by a phenomenal (available to the senses) performer here and now, and not a character portrayed on a stage, played by an actor;
3. The acting person being viewed is characterized by “a radical concept of presence” – he/she is the visible “embodied mind”;
4. He/she makes a mark of him-/herself with his/her material presence: he/she is the perceived subject revealing itself;
5. Meanings appear on the principle of emergence, leading to a non-antinomic character of “presence” and “representation;”
6. The existing order of perception is abolished and a new one is formed, in which the viewed character is recognized as both “the bodily being-in-the-world” and a sign;

¹¹ E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A new aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain, Routledge, London and New York 2008, p. 91-92. The theory of “two worlds” is associated with acting and refers to the simultaneous presence on the stage of actor as himself and as the character he is playing.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 92.

7. One should assume “perceptual multistability,” which opens a possibility of new meanings emerging by way of association;
8. The act of perception touches the viewer bodily, as the signified and the signifier are one, which eliminates the search for intentional meanings: the reception ceases to be decoding;
9. Reception is not understanding, but reacting by responding psychologically and physiologically to what is presented, as well as generating a variety of associations;
10. An autopoietic feedback loop is formed: mutual observation between viewers, the appearance of interactions, and sometimes also taking joint actions to interfere with the action of the performer.

Fischer-Lichte outlined the concept of the aesthetics of performativity starting from Marina Abramović’s performance *Lips of Thomas*, to which she repeatedly refers discussing different points of her theory. That performance was held on 24 October 1975 at the Krinzinger gallery in Innsbruck. Thirty years later, the same artist presented a much discussed artistic proposal in the United States. A multi-element action called *Seven Easy Pieces* took place in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. As part of the Festival of Performing Arts, the artist reenacted five historically important actions by other artists, and then repeated her own *Lips of Thomas*. Then, she gave one premiere performance. The reenacted actions were characterized by the fact that the physical presence of the artist was their crucial component. The question arises, however, whether it was the “radical concept of presence,” as Fischer-Lichte put it, with its associated energy, transformative power, etc. Another question concerns the relation of those actions to postmodern pastiche and citation practices. The latter were rejected both in the case of body art and performance art. From the point of view of both these trends of artistic actionism, activities cannot be repeated because each performance is to become a new fact.

The first performance to be reenacted was Bruce Nauman's action *Body Pressure* from 1974. According to the original idea, it consisted in the artist pressing his body against the wall of the gallery as hard as he could, focusing his full attention on the task. In the text accompanying the performance, he wrote:

Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard. [...] Think how various parts of your body press against the wall; which parts touch and which do not. [...] press hard and feel how the front and back of your body press together. Concentrate on the tension in the muscle, pain where bones meet, fleshy deformations that occur under pressure; con

sider body hair, perspiration, odors (smells). This may become a very erotic exercise.¹⁴

Re-enacting the performance, Abramović made several changes. The action took place in a large museum hall on the landing. Thus, the audience could see it from all sides as well as from the above, which was made possible by the unique architectural design of the museum. She pressed her body not against the wall but against a transparent glass pane, which revealed the deformations of the body that the audience of the original performance could only imagine. She performed her action at the intervals of five minutes for approximately seven hours from 5 PM until midnight. The text written by Nauman was recorded by Abramović and played repeatedly during the performance.

I have cited the description of that action on the basis of Shinya Watanabe's account, as it lets us visualize how Abramović carried out her re-enactments. Generally speaking, she took care to ensure that the event was a real spectacle. It could be viewed by more recipients and from all sides. Nauman's action was a personal experience.¹⁵ His text indicates as much, as there is no reference to the viewers there. However, in Abramović's version it is a performance. Thus, Watanabe is right to note that "some original intention of Nauman was not honored," but she "had the impression that the work's original radical-ness had faded away."¹⁶

The above remarks can also be applied to other re-enactments. For example, Vito Acconci's performance *Seed Bed* from 1972 was originally held at a small gallery. The viewers stood on a specially built ramp. Looking at them, Acconci masturbated for eight hours three times a week. The sounds he made during this activity were heard through a loud speaker. Abramović's performance was held at the Guggenheim Museum, where she arranged a circular stage for the audience to stand on, while she masturbated hidden underneath it. Watanabe points out that she supplemented the natural sounds made while masturbating with "film lines": "Ohhhhh, yes, I love you... Oh, oh, yes, I need you.... [...]"¹⁷

¹⁴ Cited after S. Watanabe, *Selected Writings. Marina Abramović "Seven Easy Pieces" at the Guggenheim Museum Looking for Others Whom You've Never Seen*, http://www.shinyawatanabe.net/en/writings/content_57.html (accessed 2 Aug. 2016).

¹⁵ This performance was regarded as conceptual, and therefore what mattered was not the visible but the mental level. It was designed not so much for the reception of sensory stimuli, but was meant to provoke thought.

¹⁶ S. Watanabe, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem.* Watanabe suggests that the lines might have been used because it is difficult to masturbate without any direct visual contact. Acconci had been looking at the viewers in the gallery, while Abramović did not see them, so she may have had to imagine her sexual partner.

The additions introduced an element of acting into the action or suggested that the physical activity of the performer was accompanied by the ideas relating to a sexual intercourse. In any case, the formerly direct relationship between the performer and the recipients was made more complex. Abramović did not reveal herself to the audience, but played a game based on uncovering and covering things. The fact that the action was invisible to the audience also considerably restricted the scope of their activity. In fact, they could only listen to the sounds and, activating their imagination, to guess what was happening. All that was left of the scope of the autopoietic feedback described by Fischer-Lichte was only watching the reaction of the other members of the audience.

In the case of the next re-enacted performance, the starting point was Valie Export's action *Action Pants; Genital Panic*, which reportedly took place in 1969. It is not certain whether it was indeed carried out or if the Austrian artist only talked about it. In any case, it involved Export in crotchless trousers revealing her naked body, pacing during a screening of an erotic film and saying "what you see here is the reality." The performance made a significant reference to Fischer-Lichte's theory of performativity, and specifically to her reflections on the non-presence of the real body in media images, e.g. on film or television. In the case of watching erotic films, the illusion of reality of the viewed scenes is an important element of their impact on the viewers. In the described case the illusion was shattered. Abramović, as Watanabe emphasizes, offered a bold interpretation of the performance. There were two chairs in the middle of a round podium. The performer was sitting on one of them wearing a leather jacket and black trousers with the crotch removed. She was holding a machine gun. Posing like that, she gave an impression of strength and aggressiveness. The effect was reinforced by the resolute gaze directed successively towards the individual viewers. It is natural, Watanabe notes, that when seeing a woman in crotchless trousers, almost all recipients will direct their gaze there. However, Abramović's gaze made the viewers feel like voyeurs caught in the act. The effect was reinforced by the machine gun, usually associated with the possibility of immediate punishment. In that case, therefore, the act of perception was controlled by the artist. The reference to Export's performance became a pretext to create a situation problematizing the issue of the presence of women in public space and the correlation "to see / to be seen."¹⁸

In the re-enactment of *The Conditioning, First of Self-Portrait(s) by Gina Pane* (1973), Abramović lay on a metal bed, under which there was a line of 15 lit candles. Like the other re-enacted performances, it lasted seven hours,

¹⁸ Ibidem.

so she had to replace the candles when they burned out. When they were full-length, their heat was most likely burning the prone performer. Thus, there was a strong effect of the material presence of the body and the items affecting it. There was no acting, no pretending, no simulating. But for the viewers, as Watanabe writes, it was primarily a "beautiful performance," affecting them with its poetic atmosphere, while the other ones were shocking. Thus an opportunity appeared for the viewers to approach the event in two ways: material and only phenomenal. In the case of the former point of view, the prevailing element was the awareness of the materiality of the body and the severity of the burns. In the latter the materiality was forgotten, dominated by light effects and associations with images featuring similar scenes.

The fifth re-enacted performance was a reference to the action by Joseph Beuys *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, from 1965. Abramović copied the characteristic appearance of the German artist. She was wearing a man's shirt and a sleeveless fishing jacket, while her face was covered with gold flakes. Standing on the stage was a chair with one leg wrapped with felt, as well as easels and several canvases. During the event, she recreated Beuys' actions as he explained the images to a dead hare. Thus, she recreated both the outfit, the scenery and the actions of the original. This led Watanabe to conclude that the issue addressed by Abramović was also similar: the birth of a myth, the problems of civilization and culture. Thus, it was a full-fledged re-enactment (including both signifying and signified elements), achieved through staging what in Beuys' case had been a specific event. The original performance was transformed into a kind of theatrical work. It is difficult to say whether it was meant as a critique of the current state of performance art, which more and more often involves specific performances repeated in different places, or rather the consequence of noting that because of their documentation the historical performances lose the characteristics of embodiment and presence, turning instead into stories. Characteristically, in the described case the role of the male performer was played by a woman. This gender difference is striking, despite the applied characterization. It is immediately noticeable even when viewing photos of Abramović's action. Thus, in the re-enactment of this performance the story is similar but the narrator changes. In any case, this action was an explicit reference to the problem of discourse and narrative.

The sixth action was based on repeating / recreating Abramović's own famous performance, *Lips of Thomas*. While in the above-discussed case she imitated or personified Beuys, this time she was to be herself. However, thirty years had passed since the first performance. Perhaps wanting to draw attention to the problem of the passage of time, the artist incorporated a metronome in the re-enacted action; its sound accompanied everything she was doing during the performance. First, she ate honey. Watanabe notes that she repeatedly

licked the spoon, which had overt sexual connotations.¹⁹ Then she opened a bottle of wine and drank it slowly, looking at the viewers. Next, she picked up a razor blade from the table and cut out a five-pointed star on her stomach. Watanabe notes that she did it very carefully, using a pattern previously drawn on her stomach. At this point the metronome slowed down.²⁰ This can be interpreted as a special emphasis on the repetitive, imitative nature of the action.²¹ The rest of the re-enacted performance was even more different from the original one. The artist put on the boots placed on the stage (which she had previously used during the performance *The Lovers - Great Wall Walk* in 1988) and a military cap that once belonged to her mother (who had fought in the guerrilla war against Nazi Germany). The cap bore the same star she had cut on herself. At the same time a Russian folk song about the tragedy of war was playing from the loudspeaker, while the artist was sobbing loudly. Once the song ended, Abramović took off the boots and lay down on a bed of ice. This time there was no interference from the audience, unlike the first time, when the performance was interrupted by the viewers trying to end the suffering of the performer. This time the audience only said things like “Please, please, finish” or “You can’t do that.” Nevertheless, she did not end the performance. When she got up from the ice after a while, her body began to tremble and then shake with the cold.

I am citing Watanabe’s fairly detailed description of this action to highlight how far it differed from the performance in Innsbruck in 1975. Apart from the minor differences, the most important one was the introduction of explicit references to World War Two. The star cut on her stomach, which originally evoked political associations, but whose impact was, as Fischer-Lichte stressed, primarily that of a real fact, in the re-enacted performance clearly took on the character of a sign. Also in the case of the blood seeping from it the semantics outweighed the material presence through the reference to the military cap with the very same star. Also the artist’s body was semanticized. It was both a real and concrete body, present here and now, at the Guggenheim Museum, as well as a signified body that had given the same performance thirty years earlier. The present body pointed to the former body, designated it. Similarly complicated was the semantic situation of the repeated activities. It was the “radical concept of presence” in its pure state as described by Fischer-Lichte,

¹⁹ Ibidem. It is not known whether she performed that activity similarly in 1975 in Innsbruck. Most likely not, because the earlier action was direct.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ It is worth noting that the star cut on her stomach in Innsbruck was irregular, done spontaneously, as evidenced by photographs taken that day. However, in the Guggenheim Museum it was based on a diagram sketched earlier.

although it was not an actor's reproduction of a character. Both possibilities became intertwined, which enhanced the "perceptual multistability," although in slightly different areas than the German author had anticipated. In contrast, the autopoietic feedback loop was much weaker. The recipients were primarily members of the audience who respected the order of events planned by the author of the performance, perhaps because they sensed a certain narrative in it, the course of which cannot be interrupted.

The final performance, a premiere one, was entitled *Entering the Other Side*. A huge installation in the shape of a dress was created in the center of the Guggenheim Museum, perfectly fitting the unique architecture of the place.²² The dress consisted of strips in different shades of blue. Located at the top of the structure, Abramović turned her body around, opened her hands and looked in all directions. When she was raising her hands it looked as if she was praying, invoking heavenly spirits, when she lowered them – she seemed to be calling upon the spirits of the earth. Before the end of the performance, which, like the other ones, lasted seven hours, she said:

Please close your eyes, please.

Imagine.

I am here, and now.

You are here, and now.

There is no time.²³

Summing up the project, Watanabe writes that

this new performance work is not the thing that I can evaluate blindly. It may be said that the performance is beautiful, such as the masterpiece artworks created in the 1960s, but there is no situation to receive this work in the present age. This is very disappointing, but it suggests that it may be important to make something completely new in our contemporary society.²⁴

The emotional tone of this statement, however, should not obscure the fact that *Entering the Other Side* is in many ways an expression of transgression. That transgression can be interpreted on different levels. Watanabe stressed the sensory-aesthetic and spiritual dimension of the event. I would like to include other issues as well.

²² Watanabe wrote that it evoked associations with the famous ten-meter-high dress designed by Yohji Yamamoto (ibid).

²³ Cited after ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

I believe that Abramović's new action concluding the series of re-enactments may be considered important from the point of view of the genre or medium. Prior to the action, a colossal installation was created. Its character was very well thought out. It was a perfect fit for the location where it was built. Therefore, as in the case of other important installations, it was the meeting with the place of the presentation that largely affected its character. The artist merged with the created structure. It is hard to imagine doing this same performance in a different location, for example in the gallery where *Lips of Thomas* was originally performed in 1975. During the action at the Guggenheim Museum Abramović's references to heaven and earth corresponded with the circles of the architectural structure reminiscent of the cosmic spheres. Also the appeal to the audience concerning everyone's location gained its appropriate meaning because the viewers were in different places of the museum and at different levels. As a result, the factors relating to architecture, installation and performance became impossible to separate, creating a unique whole transcending any divisions according to artistic disciplines. The performance became a total work of art. After postmodern dispersal and cancelling out of contradictions, the idea of a total work of made a reappearance .

Commenting on Abramović's re-enacted performances, Erika Fischer-Lichte did not see in them anything that would fundamentally alter the general character of her output. Instead of juxtaposing the artist's actions from the early 21st century with her earlier works, she regarded them as completely new, original artistic events, which, in some respects, referred to the performances of the past, but by no means repeated them.²⁵ She took into account the emergence of some previously absent elements, such as quoting from actions by other performers, but linked it with the artist's direct physical and mental presence, which she described in her book on performativity as "the radical concept of presence." It was this presence that made her view the new, concrete action of the physically present artist as the dominant factor in the re-performances, rather than the repetition factor, or the reference to the earlier performances. Amelia Jones, on the other hand, believes the opposite to be true. In her extensive article on both *Seven Easy Pieces* and the project which Abramović completed five years later, entitled *The Artist is Present*, she claims that we are not dealing with presence, but with "enacted 'presence'." She emphasized that "the life act itself *destroys presence* (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident)," while Abramović's proposal was "inadvertent parody of the structure of authentic expression and reception of 'true' emotional

²⁵ E. Fischer-Lichte, *Performance Art - Experiencing Liminality*, in: *Marina Abramović: Seven Easy Pieces*, cited after A. Jones, "The Artist is Present" *Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence*, "TDR: The Drama Review" 2011, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 32.

resonance that modernist art discourse [...] so long claimed for modernist painting and sculpture.”²⁶ She concluded, therefore, that what the re-enactments perhaps demonstrated was that the fact (emphasized by experts in performance art) that performance must be “showing doing”²⁷ will inevitably destroy all authenticity and disturb the real presence. In art, “authentic expression” – that utopia sought by modern artists – is impossible. Addressing Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* (Museum of Modern Art, 2010), which featured familiar objects used in the artist’s previous actions, as well as videos and documentary footage of her life and performances, reconstructions of her previous actions performed by dancers and other performers, and the artist herself sitting in a long, white dress²⁸ at the center of the exposition during the opening hours, Jones declared that all that makes one realize the paradox of trying to capture “‘presence’ as such,” which is “always already escaping into the past”.²⁹ As for the performers’ “claim of presence,” the American author was of the opinion that the 2005 and 2010 shows demonstrated that in the case of performance it depends on documentation. Jones claimed that

Looking at Abramović re-enactments in *Seven Easy Pieces* and her self-presentation in *The Artist is Present*, I find that what her recent projects expose [...] is that there cannot be a definitively ‘truthful’ or ‘authentic’ form of the live event even at the moment of its enactment – not even (if this could be imagined) as longed within the body that originally performed or experienced it. There cannot, therefore, be a re-enactment that faithfully renders the truth of this original event. Where would such a version of the live event reside at any rate?³⁰

At first glance, both opinions on Abramović’s projects presented here seem irreconcilable. They seem all the more mutually exclusive if we realize that the early works of Abramović (including her action *Lips of Thomas*) are often classified as body art and even regarded as one of the most important examples of the genre. Does this mean that in the 2000s the artist turned away from the principles she had followed earlier? It is particularly important to address this issue given the fact that in her 2007 interview with Amelia Jones, Abramović declared that “redoing is still performance and performance is somehow *living*.”

²⁶ A. Jones, *Artist is Present...*, p. 18.

²⁷ Cf. R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, third edition, ed. S. Brand, Routledge, London and New York 2013, pp. 28-51.

²⁸ The dress, as well as the other two – red and blue, were designed by Robert Tisci, Givenchy designer specially for this event.

²⁹ A. Jones, *Artist is Present...*, p. 18.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

For me the performance only has sense when you perform; otherwise it's dead".³¹ Is it possible that she contradicts herself in her "strong" (as Jones put it) statement? Or does she perhaps just want to draw attention to the different ways of understanding the meaning of redoing?

I believe that this problem can be explained by referring to the concepts of modernism, postmodernism and neomodernism. As indicated in the beginning of this article, the works of body art displayed several features compatible with modernist principles. Postmodernism, on the other hand, questioned such qualities of the artistic output as authenticity, presence, essentialist approach, etc. In postmodern painting or sculpture, the previously favored authenticity is replaced by inauthentic situations. One such example can be considered using the quote whose source is doubtful, or which is associated, as Achille Bonito Oliva defined it, with the "principle of betrayal".³² Frederic Jameson examines this issue using the concept of pastiche. As he puts it, „The great modernisms were predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body”,³³ while postmodernism is an era of pastiche, which is “the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language”.³⁴ Obviously, body art and performance art are not artistic styles. Their aim is not to create a work that would reveal a unique vision of the world held by a particular human individual. However, they can be considered as the radicalization of the modernist principle. Each performer as an individual identity faces his/her recipients as “the mind incarnate.” From this point of view, Abramovic's use of citation or pastiche may seem an unforgivable apostasy, the hidden causes of which should be discovered by art critics. That is why Jones considers the reasons for such a decision. Her statements are in contrast with the artist's declaration, in which she emphasizes that she is present during every performance, even one that is a re-enactment of another artist's action – she is present as “the mind incarnate.” Revealing oneself in this case is not fundamentally different from the situation where the reference associated with citing is absent. The performance remains “(a)live” because of the psycho-physical presence of the performer. Therefore, we can say that performance animates even those kinds of artistic activities that have lost their life. If a reenacted performance can be viewed as putting on a mask, it is a mask that adheres to the face and adapts its features so that they resemble the wearer's

³¹ Cited after *ibidem*, p. 26.

³² Cf. G. Sztabiński, *Eklektyzm a postmodernizm*, in: *Sztuka i estetyka po awangardzie a filozofia postmodernistyczna*, ed. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1994, p. 27.

³³ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, in: *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Seattle Washington 1983, p. 114.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

own facial structure. Such a pastiche ceases to be empty, as Jameson put it, and takes on the whole "I" of the performer.

I believe that if we trust Abramović's declaration, it may yield some interesting insights on how to overcome the artistic crisis of postmodernism, which is becoming increasingly discernible. The liberating power of creative nomadism, of the assimilation of the foreign, giving up the search for novelty and originality, freedom from the tyranny of unity and cohesion seems to be running out. At the same time a mechanical return to the questioned modernist values is impossible. This is why I interpret Abramović's suggestions expressed in *Seven Easy Pieces* and *The Artist is Present* as using the power of performance to animate even such varieties of artistic activities that are intended to appear in situations where the subject has died or was considered dead. Thus conceived neomodernism would not be restoring the forms of action, but their effects. Not superficial, stylistic effects, but the shaping forces, whose power has not expired, contrary to what may seem. One example would be the exhibition *The Artist is Present*, in which the artist's physical and psychological presence lent a performative quality to the different kinds of presented documentation and objects.

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PERFORMANCE ART I PERFORMATYWNOŚĆ A PROBLEM NEOMODERNIZMU (streszczenie)

Sztuka ciała i performance art często omawiane są łącznie, a nawet utożsamiane. Uważana analiza tych tendencji artystycznych oraz towarzyszących im komentarzy teoretycznych skłania jednak do zaznaczenia dzielących je różnic. Body art okazuje się wówczas zjawiskiem wykazującym istotne związki z modernistycznym pojmowaniem sztuki w duchu zbliżonym do koncepcji Clementa Greenberga, natomiast performance art założenia te w znacznym stopniu odrzuca. Także estetyka performatywna rozwijana przez Erikę Fischer-Lichte z jednej strony wywodzi się z zakwestionowania modernistycznego esencjalizmu artystycznego, choć jednocześnie akcentuje rolę „radykalnej koncepcji obecności” artysty.

W artykule szczegółowej analizie poddane zostały dwa nowe dokonania twórcze Mariny Abramović, artystki łączonej zarówno ze sztuką ciała i performance art: *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) oraz *The Artist is Present* (2010). Wskazana niejednoznaczność performance art została w nich zradykalizowana. Łączą one modernistyczne zaakcentowanie autentyczności, obecności, esencjalizmu z postmodernistycznym cytowaniem. Opisywane przez Frederica Jamesona zjawisko pastiszu przekształcone zostało w taki sposób, że przestaje on być pusty, a przejmuje pełnię „ja” performerów.

Pojęcie „neomodernizm” używane jest dziś w różnych znaczeniach. Omówiona w artykule problematyka sugeruje możliwość pojmowania go jako przekroczenia opozycji właściwych dla modernizmu i postmodernizmu, przy jednoczesnym zachowaniu pewnych cech obu tych nurtów myślenia o sztuce.

Słowa kluczowe: body art, performance art, performatywność, modernizm, postmodernizm, neomodernizm, Marina Abramović.