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Body Politic:
A Critical Comparison of Marina Abramovic and Chris Burden

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

Art History

by

Lauren J. Minor

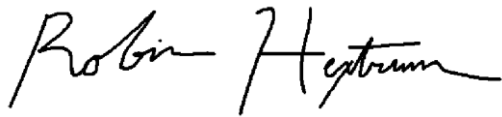
December 2020

Faculty Advisor/Reader:
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robin Hestrum". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Faculty Advisor/Reader

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BODY POLITIC: A CRITICAL COMPARISON OF MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND CHRIS BURDEN

Lauren Minor

Bachelor of Arts in Art History, Fine and Performing Arts Department

Regis University, (December 2020)

Assistant Professor Robin Hextrum Thesis Advisor

A significant component of contemporary arts is performance art. Two spearheads of the birth of performance art are the Serbian artist Marina Abramovic, and the American Chris Burden, both of whom worked primarily in the 1970s. Abramovic and Burden have often been compared for the similar characteristics of their work: both artists create intense, provocative, and violent work. While Abramovic uses these aspects of her work to make political or social commentary, and connect to her audiences on a humanistic level, Burden uses these aspects without creating a deeper meaning or inspiring thoughtful dialogue. By exploring several comparable works by both Abramovic and Burden, we can understand that Burden's works are regressive and have little to no artistic merit; with a closer look, we see that Burden uses his position as a white, American man to create work that is harmful to both women and minorities. However, critics then and now have acclaimed Burden's work as "innovative" and "avante-garde." They praise his willingness to break boundaries by making work of an extreme nature, yet leave Abramovic out of the conversation despite the merits of her work, thus illustrating a substantial gendered bias. After conducting in-depth analytical comparisons of the two artists' work, and observing how their race and gender positionalities come into play in their respective works, we understand that critics and historians have unfairly commended Chris Burden, and ignored important aspects of Marina Abramovic's contribution to art history. This thesis sets out to question Chris Burden's historical canon as a performance artist, and rather, emphasize the foundation that Abramovic truly set.

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Acknowledgements

I have more people than I can count that I am eternally grateful for, and who have supported me through working on my largest and most difficult academic work thus far. I of course will begin with my thesis advisor and mentor, Robin Hextrum. Robin, I am so thankful for your support and guidance on this paper, as well as in the last few years. I feel so lucky that you were willing to help me on this project this year and help me prepare for graduation, and whatever pursuits come next! Your comments and critiques have empowered my work, and I have you to thank for my growth through this project.

I would also like to thank my mentor Dr. Barb Coleman. It is only with Barb's help and occasional tough-love that I am becoming the art historian that I am. Barb always told me I wasn't seeing the big picture in art, and I hope that I have come a long way in that process. Thank you Barb, for being the first person to critique Picasso to me. I am sure this project illustrates just how meaningful and important that example was for me. Turns out, sometimes in art, the greats aren't *that* great.

I would like to thank my dear friend Margaret Gentry. Margaret, thank you for taking the time to support not only this project, but me as a scholar. You always told me what I am capable of, and I could not have done it without your intellect, integrity, and friendship.

Finally, I would like to thank my 8th grade history teacher, Amanda Darnell Stone. In 8th grade, I wrote a paper about Vincent Van Gogh, and you told me it was good. It wasn't good, but look where I am now! That was the day I became an art historian, and I could never have done it without that very first paper. Thank you for being my teacher, then and now.

Introduction

American artist Chris Burden (1946-2015) and Serbian artist Marina Abramovic (1946-) are two of the most significant and famous performance artists, with critics often referring to both artists as art-celebrities. Both artists took up careers in the 1970s, Burden on the West Coast and Abramovic in the Communist Belgrade before relocating to the United States in the early 2000s. Burden is the artist behind *Shoot* (1971), one of the most acclaimed performance pieces of all time, and Abramovic created the three month long piece *The Artist is Present*, one of the most commercially successful and resounding performance pieces of all time.

Today, both artists are considered foundational to the formation of performance art, however, the art establishment remembers the artists rather differently. Burden has been highly exalted for his performance art. Critics and historians have remembered him as an unmatched force in his time, praising his daring and dangerous work for its avant-garde nature. Alternatively, Abramovic was either shrugged off or rebuked by the European audiences she performed in front of in the 1970s. American audiences have taken a greater fascination to her work, thanks to her 2010 piece *The Artist is Present*, which gained substantial online acclaim. However, along with her novel fame has also come many sharp criticisms, with critics and historians reprimanding the artist for a supposed capitalization of her celebrity, as well as online communities creating significant conspiracies that not only is Abramovic a satanist, but that she was also involved in a pedophile ring in 2016. This baseless slander has hurt Abramovic's contemporary career, as well as prompted audiences to question the validity of her early work.

However, this disparity in reception is not due to a genuine polarity in the quality of the artists' respective works. Instead, this is indicative of a larger pattern of gendered bias in the reception, criticism, and dialogue surrounding performance art. In reality, while both artists

explore similar general concepts, Abramovic has a greater focus on vulnerability, submission, and relationship, while Burden continuously renders art about violence, power, and dominance. As a white American man, Burden uses his social position to create an exhibition of toxic masculinity and subtly promote male dominance. Alternatively, as an immigrant woman, Abramovic creates art about the feminine experience and uses art as a means of creating emotional connection.

In this thesis, I will compare Abramovic and Burden through the analysis of four of Abramovic's works and five of Burden's. Using these comparisons, I will deconstruct and analyze the works in an investigation to understand why Chris Burden has been seen as a figurehead of performance art, while Marina Abramovic has been put down and forgotten. Chris Burden is hailed as legendary, out of the box, and dedicated, when in reality, his art is a spectacle of a male superiority complex. Marina Abramovic was time and time again the vanguard of relevant performance art. This case study reveals a broader pattern of unfair and biased critical response, where the reception of the work does not accurately represent its quality.

To begin, it is important to examine and understand the context of performance art and the politics of the 1970s. Performance art has an extensive history, dating back to Dada Cabarets and the "Happenings" of the 1960s.¹ However, it is still considered a non-traditional art form, meaning it was at first pushed to the sidelines of the avant-garde art world in favor of more established arts such as painting and sculpture. Performance art is a contemporary art form, rebelling against the art world in its non-object, non-material, non-commercial nature. It is also considered conceptual art, partially for its immaterial nature, but also for its tendency to explore society and culture with commentary via the performance itself. It can involve a live audience

¹ Tate. "Performance Art – Art Term." Tate. Accessed November 01, 2020.

watching the artist perform, or alternatively, invite the audience to also participate in the performance. While some performance art provides a thoughtful meaning or offers commentary on some matter, other performance art appears to be lacking in purpose, and instead is used only as a means to exhibit socially unacceptable behavior in the name of art. We will soon see that Abramovic fits the former category, and Burden the latter.

Performance art specifically proliferated in the 1970s alongside the Civil Rights Movement and second wave feminism. Women were especially attracted to performance art for its direct correlation to the body- an important topic to women in the 1960s (and still to women today). Performance art allowed women artists to explore their bodies through artwork and *as* artwork. Performance art also interrupts the art-historic tradition of women presented in art as sexual objects designed for the male-gaze. In *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Carolyn Korsmeyer states:

Performance art affords an immediate means to engage with audiences and to explore and enact ideas about identity and the cultural construction of femininity. Since so much of the Euro American visual art tradition depicts female bodies (especially young and voluptuous), much performance art upsets that tradition by means of exaggeration, violence and, reversal.²

In much performance art by women, female artists explored their bodies on their own terms, often incorporating disgusting elements, violence, and forfeiting their agency to the audience. This directly opposed many notions of what a woman should be, and how a woman should act. These performances also commented on the reality that, often, women have little agency.³ Marina Abramovic's contemporaries include Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneeman, and Laurie Anderson, all of whom experimented with these components in their performance pieces.

² Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Pg. 126.

³ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Feminist Aesthetics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. January 12, 2017.

It is also vital to note the dynamic between performance art and nudity. A significant amount of performance art by men, women, and non-binary artists has been performed by the artist in the nude, or with the artist nude by the end of the performance. This again speaks to women exploring their own bodies, as well as transgender and non-binary folks exploring their gender and identity. In the 1970s, women presented their *nude* bodies in art, again as a comment on the nude female body in art history, but also as a statement of sexual liberation, affirming the freedom that women possessed over their own bodies. For example, in 1969, artist Yayoi Kusama staged an orgy in the garden area at the Museum of Modern Art.⁴ Kusama painted her now signature polka dots all over the performers before setting them off to perform. Of course, the orgy was disbanded quickly by authorities, but it brings up several important ideas: is sex still obscene if it is art, or if there is an art component?, is there a line of separation between pornography and art? Can women be in charge of sex, can she call the shots? As a Japanese woman, is Kusama commenting on the fetishization of Asian women? Female performance artists made clear that they had something to say about their bodies, sex, and their position in the world.

Similarly, many performance artists in America used their work to comment on the Vietnam War which lasted from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s. Many artists who sought to create dialogue about the war used themes of violence and pain in their performances. This list of artists includes Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and Chris Burden. These artists are commonly remembered for their original and experimental work, with critics justifying the extreme nature of their work as groundbreaking, and thus valuable.

⁴ Cole, Rachel. "Yayoi Kusama." Encyclopædia Britannica. October 18, 2012.

Up until this point, there was no frame of reference for violence in art, actual, genuine, physical violence to self or to another. It had never been done before. Limits had been placed on violence in a legal sense; if you hurt someone, you will be punished by the law. However, this straightforward solution became disheveled when violence imbued itself into “art.” Chris Burden even defined art as, “a free spot in society, where you can do anything.”⁵ With performance artists seeking to advance the avant-garde and do what had never before been done in art, many explored violence without limit and excused it in the name of art. This trend was common in Burden’s work as he purposefully broke laws and physically harmed people, women especially. Fortunately, Burden’s contemporary, Abramovic, took her work much more seriously; *Rhythm 0* exemplifies performance art using danger and the extreme to create meaningful dialogue.

Abramovic’s 1974 *Rhythm 0* was the final performance in the five-part *Rhythm* series (figure 1), all of which were performed in or around Belgrade.⁶ In *Rhythm 0*, the artist prepared a table of 72 objects, ranging from lipstick and wine, to chains and knives: objects of both pleasure and pain. This collection of objects also included a gun with a single bullet. A gallery label Abramovic wrote, read:

Instructions.

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance

I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.

In the first hours of the performance, the audience members attempted to talk to her, place objects in her hands or manipulate her body to move. As the performance progressed, the audience members slowly grew violent with Abramovic. At one point, a man cut her neck with a

⁵ Schjeldahl, Peter. "Performance." *The New Yorker*. May 7, 2007.

⁶ Perry, C. "Rhythm Series (1973-74)." University of Oregon. March 13, 2015.

knife and drank her blood.⁷ At no time did Abramovic appear to react to the actions of the audience, even while genuinely enduring pain. At one point during the piece, an audience member put the single bullet into the gun, placed the gun in Abramovic's hand, then wrapped the artist's fingers on the trigger. Other audience members reacted quickly and took the gun away from Abramovic.⁸ In different interviews, the artist contradicts herself by referring to the person with the gun as both "him" and "her," so it remains unclear whether it was a man or woman who instigated the situation.

Art historians continue to dispute how *Rhythm 0* ended, so the conclusion of the performance remains unclear to this day.⁹ In *Performing Endurance*, Lara Shalson states about the ending to *Rhythm 0*:

There are two conflicting accounts of how *Rhythm 0* ended. Some commentators have indicated that the performance was terminated by the intervention of the audience and a struggle over the gun. However, Abramovic herself, while affirming that the gun incident happened, insists that it did not bring about an end to her performance. Rather, she asserts that she finished the performance at exactly the previously appointed time.¹⁰

While most scholars believe that the incident with the gun ended the piece, Shalson determines that this cannot be the case: the image artifacts of Abramovic holding the gun show the artist clothed, while later images (images determined to be nearer to the end of the piece) show the artist fully nude, the audience having stripped her.¹¹ This means that even after the incident with the gun, the audience continued to objectify her. While they saved her from death, they carried on other methods of torturing her instead.¹²

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shalson, Lara. *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics since 1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg.75.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid..

Abramovic stated in an interview that she received criticism for the early pieces in the *Rhythm* series for not being extreme enough.¹³ Accordingly, she developed the idea for *Rhythm 0*: giving the *audience* the ability to determine what would happen during the piece. *Rhythm 0* is a complicated exploration in self as object, as well as the grim reality that strangers were willing to physically hurt a woman when given permission in the name of art. This study also illustrates the reluctance of the audience members to protect Abramovic until the last possible second, the moment before they could not turn back. Why did they allow the man to slice her neck open? Why did they allow each other to take off her clothes? The audience members had multiple opportunities to stop hurting Abramovic, but never did. Abramovic's performance piece revealed that aggressors and bystanders alike were willing to treat her as an object until her life was at stake. Abramovic was substantially at risk for violence because her female identity made her more prone to gender based cruelty. As I will illustrate in the following section, not only was Burden not at risk of this gendered cruelty while performing, but he also never endangered himself to the degree that Abramovic did.

Rhythm 0 is Abramovic's ultimate inquest into her limits as an artist, a major theme in her career and work. This piece is about endurance- Abramovic has the capability to call the piece off at any point, and yet she persevered through pain and the threat of death. This piece considers physical and mental human limits. Abramovic later stated one aspect of performance art which is so captivating for both artist and audience is "the state of the total presence in one's own body,"¹⁴ making clear how dedicated she is to her work. Shalson dryly notes that *Rhythm 0*

¹³ "Marina Abramović. *Rhythm 0*. 1974: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. March 2010.

¹⁴ Demaria, Cristina. "The Performative Body of Marina Abramović: Rerelating (in) Time and Space - The European Journal of Women's Studies 1(3):. 2004.

brings an end to the *Rhythm* series, as well as her performance pieces permitting audience members to harm her.¹⁵

Katherine Guinness and Grant David Bollmer argue in *Marina Abramovic Doesn't Feel Like You* (2015) that, “While she may feel the pain ... for these performances to be effective the audience must bear witness to her feeling. *Rhythm 0*, as a collaborative, participatory performance, emerges from an inability to grasp the pain of another.”¹⁶ Abramovic makes herself completely vulnerable, creating a space in which her audience can empathize with her, and feel her pain. Yet, they choose not to. This is a very touching sentiment, and a very revolutionary artistic concept. Performance art creates a space and time in which we can experience the same thing as another, and as Peggy Phelan says, performance art “remains a compelling art because it contains the possibility of both the actor and the spectator becoming transformed during the event's unfolding.”¹⁷ Marina Abramovic’s performance art invites the audience to be human with her, and feel what she is feeling.

In contrast to Abramovic, performance artist Chris Burden created dangerous spectacles, but never truly put himself in danger. Chris Burden’s 1971 performance piece *Shoot* was the first of its kind, and has been subject to significant dialogue since he performed it (figure 2). In this piece, Burden’s friend, Bruce Dunlap, shot Burden in the arm once with a .22 rifle.¹⁸ The bullet skimmed Burden’s arm, and he began to bleed slightly but he was not badly injured.

Burden originally intended for the bullet to lightly graze his arm and produce a single,

¹⁵ Shalson, Lara. *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics since 1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg.70.

¹⁶ Guinness, Katherine, and Grant David Bollmer. "MARINA ABRAMOVIC DOESN'T FEEL LIKE YOU." *Feral Feminisms*. 2015.

¹⁷ Phelan, Peggy. “Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2004, pp. 569–577. Pg. 574.

¹⁸ Guinness, Katherine, and Grant David Bollmer. "MARINA ABRAMOVIC DOESN'T FEEL LIKE YOU." *Feral Feminisms*. 2015.

dramatic drop of blood.¹⁹ However, the man shooting Burden missed this margin slightly, and the bullet made more contact with the skin than intended. While Burden was injured slightly, this work did not actually put Burden in danger of substantial harm, or even loss of control. Burden scripted *Shoot*, preplanned the sequence of events, and established agreed protocols with audience members.²⁰ Furthermore, Burden performed shoot in front of an exclusive audience. The small group in attendance was made up of his friends, who were also responsible for taking photographs and videos of the event for publication.²¹ Burden had established relationships with the person behind the gun as well as every witness to the piece. Burden had an inveterate plan. Yes, the man shooting Burden could have missed Burden's arm significantly, killing the artist. Yes, the man shooting the gun could have purposefully shot Burden, killing the artist. But these possibilities are diminished nearly completely because Burden maintained total agency over his performance. Abramovic surrendered her agency, and had no bond of trust with her audience. Abramovic forfeits control absolutely. Burden begins in and remains in control during his piece.

In the video artifact that survives *Shoot*,²² We simultaneously see Burden's reaction to being shot as we hear the gun go off. Burden grabs his arm and begins to stumble forward. After only a few steps, Burden stops, removes his hand to look at the wound on his arm, grabs it again, and continues forward as the clip ends. The story continues that Burden was then taken to the hospital to be bandaged where they told the doctors and staff a small accident had occurred.²³ Altogether, this performance piece lasted less than a minute and a half, and had a handful of select audience participants. *Shoot* is remembered through a limited number of images, and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ New York Times. "Shot In The Name of Art." Youtube.com. Uploaded May 2015.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Burden, Chris. "Shoot." Video, accessed on Youtube.com at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ri1Zwz9eKeU>.

²³ New York Times. "Shot In The Name of Art." Youtube.com. Uploaded May 2015.

random redistribution of the short film clip online. Burden specifically chose a handful of photos from a larger assortment of photographs, which he then allowed to be circulated. The rest were never preserved or documented.²⁴ In *The Performativity of Performance Documentation*, Philip Auslander retrospectively criticizes Burden's artistic methods, questioning if they were for the sake of art or for the sake of celebrity, saying, "It is an open question whether the friends were there to witness a performance or a photoshoot - in either case they did not see the event depicted in the photograph."²⁵ Burden purposefully manipulated which images would be associated with *Shoot*, choosing ones that appeared most intense. These images do not relate a completely accurate depiction of events. Rather than seeing the art, the audience sees the images *he facilitated for audiences to see*. This is a very disingenuous artistic practice.

In 2015, Burden said that he conceived the idea for *Shoot* from seeing news coverage of Vietnam on television.²⁶ Vietnam, the first televised war, was especially traumatic to the many Americans who had never before witnessed an actual, physical war personally or visually. Burden said that he saw young men like himself shot on television everyday which inspired his desire and willingness to be shot himself.²⁷ At the time, Burden said, "I set up those unexpected, dreaded situations as an attempt to control fate. Instead of letting things happen to me, I made them happen."²⁸ Here Burden implies that something along the lines of getting wounded in the Vietnam War is not a significant trauma, but instead simply a "dreaded situation." Here we plainly see that Burden is so far removed from these horrible realities that he does not understand

²⁴ Auslander, Philip. "The Performativity of Performance Documentation." Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012. In *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (2014). Pg. 48

²⁵ Ibid 49.

²⁶ New York Times. "Shot In The Name of Art." Youtube.com. Uploaded May 2015.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Small, Michael. "He Has Forsaken the Violent Art of His Youth, but Chris Burden Is Still Out to Startle." Volume 32, no.9. Pg. 2

or attempt to empathise with the traumatic, life-long results that men in the war would actually, tangibly experience. It is clear Burden thinks very little of genuine agony and pain, he mocks it.

However, this piece is not an authentic likeness to the experience of an equal young man serving in Vietnam, and Burden was underhanded to compare his piece to such. The art world remembers and even honors Burden disposing himself to danger in the name of art, but in reality, Burden was not in authentic danger as if he were actually in war, and despite what critics have acclaimed, his life was not on the line. Burden chose a close friend, Bruce Dunlap, who had experience with guns before the piece and whom he believed would not purposefully (or even accidentally) endanger him vitally. He and Dunlap also practiced the piece beforehand using targets to be certain that Dunlap would be able to accurately shoot the identified spot in Burden's arm without missing.²⁹ Even though Dunlap's shot gave the bullet slightly more contact with skin than Burden had anticipated, he was still far from gravely injured. The myth that Burden was genuinely in danger in *Shoot* is an aggrandizement of the artist's actual dedication to the craft, and is inaccurately remembered. Chris Burden's *Shoot* was not extraordinary or extreme; in fact, it was marginal. It was not a groundbreaking artistic feat. *Shoot* is the apotheosis of a young, reckless man playing with guns.

In *Politics of Misfire*,³⁰ Faye Gleisser argues that Burden's willingness and even his ability to complete this performance piece hinge on his positionality as a white American man. Gleisser points out that *Shoot* took place during the Vietnam War, and she emphasizes that when it comes down to numbers, while only 10% of American residents were Mexican American, 20% of Vietnam's soldier deaths were Mexican American men.³¹ This either indicates that more

²⁹ New York Times. "Shot In The Name of Art." Youtube.com. Uploaded May 2015.

³⁰ Gleisser, Faye. "Asco, Chris Burden, and the Politics of the Misfire," SAGE Journals. December 2018.

³¹ Ibid

Mexican American men were drafted to Vietnam, or that Mexican American men were ordered to the front lines of the fight more often. Either of these options represent a disproportionate mortality rate for these young men in Vietnam, and reflect a significant advantage Burden would have maintained, had he been drafted. The Vietnam War was not a reality for Burden, and it is contemptible that he downplayed the serious situation for his own benefit.

Gleisser's second argument is that disenfranchised artists could not pull off such a violent stunt without facing serious repercussions. Gleisser draws a fascinating comparison of Burden to ASCO. ASCO, meaning the Spanish word for "disgusting," was at the forefront of Chicano arts on the West Coast and was known for fighting for Latino representation in public gallery spaces. ASCO was repeatedly defamed in east Los Angeles for "distasteful" art,³² and in response, the artists would often create even more outrageous and explicit art that celebrated Chicano and Latino culture. Gleisser points to ASCO in comparison to Burden: if one of the members of ASCO, who were all Chicano and mostly young men, had attempted to pull a stunt like Burden's *Shoot*, they would have been slandered and looked down upon for transgressing their subordinate racial positions, their careers over. While Burden was able to obtain a gun and do something that was arguably reckless in the name of art, a member of ASCO would face social and possibly legal repercussions for the action. Gleisser is highly doubtful that if a member of ASCO had done an equivalent art piece they would be remembered as an artistic genius as Burden is today. Burden said, "I had an intuitive sense that being shot is as American as apple pie. We see people being shot on TV, we read about it in the news-paper. Everybody has wondered what it's like. So

³² Ibid.

I did it.”³³ While Vietnam was government regulated gun violence, and people of color already faced racism and feared police brutality daily, Burden made an experiment out of it.

Shoot, both in acclaim and feasible possibility, is solely dependent on Burden’s racial and national position in society. Gleissar says:

Burden performs a deep knowledge of the societal protections he and his collaborators inherently felt they possessed. ... Art historical studies analyzing the ‘visceral intensity’ of conceptual and performance art tend to discuss ‘the body’ in universal terms only when the artists are white, and routinely remain silent on the topic of whiteness, which, as critical race theorists and curators have articulated, is the very function of its power – to remain unmarked and naturalized.³⁴

Shoot could only have been produced by a white American man using his apposite privilege.

Shoot is not an art piece exploring universality or humanity, and did not endanger the artist as we have come to believe. In fact, it is contingent on a specific nature, and wagers very little risk.

Shoot is more in line with schoolboy misbehavior than relevant and meaningful art.

Although Burden’s work *TV Hijack* is not as well known as *Shoot*, and could even be considered obscure, one can compare it to both *Rhythm 0* and *Shoot*; *TV Hijack* is also an extreme piece that deals with danger, pain, and a human as an object. Burden created this work one year after *Shoot* in 1972 (figure 3). In this piece, Burden visited a local news station for an interview after an invitation from reporter Phyllis Lutjeans. Burden had known Lutjeans for a few years when she worked at the Orange County Museum of Art and he was earning his MFA at UC Irvine.³⁵

³³ Small, Michael. "He Has Forsaken the Violent Art of His Youth, but Chris Burden Is Still Out to Startle." PEOPLE Magazine Archive. August 1989. Pg. 2.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Boehm, Mike. "Chris Burden's Youthful Edge Grabbed One TV Host by the Throat." Los Angeles Times. May 12, 2015.

Burden arrived on set with his own camera crew to film, reportedly so Burden could have his own copy of the tape.³⁶ Burden then asked if there was any possibility that the interview be broadcast to live television, to which the network agreed because they had nothing else currently airing on their channel.³⁷ Once cameras began rolling, what Lutjeans supposedly believed would be an interview about Burden and his art quickly took a different turn. Burden approached the reporter and put a knife to her throat, threatening that he would hurt her if the station were to stop broadcasting.³⁸ It is unclear what else transpired during the taping, because the physical artifact of the tape no longer exists, and instead a few pictures of the event have been preserved. At the end of the performance, Burden demanded the news station's copy of the tape, unwound the real, and destroyed the film. When the studio manager expressed outrage, Burden offered him his film crew's copy, which he did not accept. Burden's copy of the film has never been released or distributed, and it is unclear if it still exists in his estate.

While art historians remember this piece is dangerous and outrageous, they fail to see it as particularly problematic. Instead, it has only added to Burden's clout and dare-devil standing when it does happen to be acknowledged. Ultimately, Burden endangered a woman and threatened her life on live television. What this piece accomplishes is the demonstration that a man can harm a woman and have it broadcasted, and he will not face repercussions because it was done, apparently, for art's sake. Even today, there is little to no commentary censuring Burden's work, or conversation of whether his work is truly artistic, or just physically and socially harmful to women.

³⁶ Met Museum. "TV Hijack." Metmuseum.org.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

TV Hijack explores violence, specifically, violence to another. Burden seeks to test the boundaries of acceptable art by intentionally putting another person in danger, instigating a reaction of fear. Not only that, but considering that this piece was broadcast to television also adds the aspect of creating an even more acute sense of fear and public terror. By airing this on television, Burden makes anyone viewing the piece a bystander to his violence involuntarily, and the audience is in a helpless situation just like the reporter. Alternatively, in Abramovic's *Rhythm 0*, the artist only endangered herself, never anyone in her audience. Abramovic *comments* on violence, while Burden *creates* violence.

TV Hijack also leads us to question the role of media in art, and in our communities. This is one of the first times Burden uses television and media in his art, but it is nowhere near the last. In *TV Hijack*, the streaming of the piece is a conscious choice on Burden's part. Had it not been broadcast, *TV Hijack* would have been substantially more mythic. Without its broadcast, *TV Hijack* would have been a word-of-mouth story, and would not have added to Burden's fame and brand as he hoped it would. *TV Hijack* trivializes violence against women, and its status as an art piece dilutes the harmful and problematic nature of Burden's work. Celebrating *TV Hijack* as art praises Burden for violence and misogyny, not for making sincere and relevant work.

At some point, there were people who did see this piece live on television, and it is both abhorrent and curious. It is interesting for us to *ponder* the consequences of an action like this, by someone who calls themselves an artist, but it is unethical for them to be lived out on a real person behind the camera. Even if we had seen it live on television and experienced dread and anxiety as it happened, there is still a significant degree of separation between the real event and someone witnessing it on television, separated by space. But today, now that we are separated in space *and* time, we are often willing to appraise it as art, rather than creating a critical dialogue

on Burden as an artist and the nature of his work. Had Chris Burden not called himself an artist, it would be assault and attempted mortal harm. It would be disgusting that a man would be willing to go on television and threaten a woman with a knife. The community would be shocked and angry. *TV Hijack* demonstrates male entitlement, and justifies violence against women for the sake of art. *TV Hijack* is a crime that was never criminalized.

We can compare Burden to other extreme artists such as Joseph Beuys' piece *I Like America and America Likes Me* (figure 4), or even Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (figure 5). In his performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys locked himself in a room with a coyote for three days. This work is highly memorable and even controversial for the artist's willingness to put himself in harm's way. Although it is highly extreme as well as original, it is thought to represent Beuys' belief in unifying man with nature and is a critical response to America's involvement in Vietnam.³⁹ In *Following Piece*, Acconci follows random dwellers around New York until they enter a private space, in which the encounter ends.⁴⁰ While this piece is intense, and would likely be frightening to the person followed, Acconci stated it was really *he* who was giving up agency by following the person wherever they chose, rather than the person truly being followed.⁴¹

Beuys' piece is comparable in extremity to Burden's: in both *I Like America and America Likes Me* and *TV Hijack*, a human being is in danger, and both explore trauma and danger outside of the regular human experience. However, Beuys only puts *himself* at risk in the name of art, while Burden risks *someone else*, and without the victim's consent. Somewhat similarly in *Following Piece*, Acconci follows strangers without their consent, but does not physically

³⁹ Tate Museum. "Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments: Room 4."

⁴⁰ "Vito Acconci. *Following Piece*. 1969: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

endanger them. While *Following Piece* is uncomfortable and frightening, Acconci does not hurt, or threaten to hurt anyone. These aspects mark significant contrasts to Burden's work; Beuys and Acconci are both extreme, and using characteristics of danger, fear, and power in their works, but they either impose the harm and danger on themselves, or on no one at all. Burden, instead, *does* choose to inflict harm and danger on others. Burden crosses a significant line with his work, and instead of being artistic, is actually just cruel.

Of course, Burden firmly states he had no intention to harm Phylis Lutjeans that day. But what if something had not gone according to plan, as had previously happened in *Shoot*, and Burden nicked her throat with the knife? Not only this, but when we permit harm to happen to an unconsenting person for art's sake, we come to accept the violation of human rights. There is no truly comparable artist to Burden; Burden was and is the only artist willing to use his status as an artist to harm another human being. Burden creates art as if human rights are negotiable. This should not be a source of celebrity. Perhaps some could generously view *TV Hijack* as a criticism on violence in television, but really, it just *creates* violence in television.

Finally, in the recent years following Burden's death, Phylis Lutjeans has apprised news outlets that, infact, during the making of *TV Hijack* when Burden had attested he whispered obscenities to Phylis with the knife to her throat, he was actually telling her words of comfort and promising he would not hurt her.⁴² This is confounding information to come out 40 years after the making of the piece. Lutjeans had nothing to gain from lying about what Burden said to her after so long, so the conclusion is that Chris Burden is not only a misogynist, but an imposter. *TV Hijack* was violent, misogynistic art, disingenuous, and a ploy for small scale celebrity.

⁴² Southern California Public Radio. "RIP Chris Burden, Beloved Even by the 'victim' in 'TV Hi-Jack'." Southern California Public Radio. March 24, 2016.

While Burden was occupied with pulling stunts and brutalizing women for local attention, Abramovic was hard at work advancing performance as a genuine art form. After the completion of the *Rhythm* series, Abramovic continued to create performance art despite significant trauma from *Rhythm 0*. In 1975, Abramovic performed *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* in Copenhagen.

Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful is another of Abramovic's earliest performance pieces of her career (figure 6). In this piece, she films herself in front of a live audience forcefully brushing her hair in the nude, and repeating again and again, "Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful." With a brush in one hand and a comb in the other, Abramovic continues this for 50 minutes, scratching her face several times, but continuing nonetheless. While the meaning of this piece is generally open to varied interpretations, Abramovic spoke on *Art Must Be Beautiful* in 2010 during her MOMA retrospective *The Artist is Present*, saying that this piece was inspired by the traditional belief that art should serve an aesthetic, visual purpose.⁴³ Abramovic said that instead, she saw art as a tool to disturb audiences, and pose intellectual questions. By working as a woman artist in the 1970s using a non-traditional and experimental art form, using her own nude body in her work, and purposefully using qualities of violence and endurance, Abramovic herself was questioning the art world and society as a whole, and encouraging her audience to ask those questions as well.

Art Must Be Beautiful is posited during the peak of second wave feminism when women, especially artists, became interested in their relationship to their own bodies, and its apparent politicalization.⁴⁴ Due to its timely position during the second wave feminist movement, *Art*

⁴³ Kim, Hannah. "MoMA: Listening to Marina Abramović: Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful." InsideOut.

⁴⁴ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Feminist Aesthetics." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. January 12, 2017.

Must Be Beautiful is a statement on female identity and gendered expectations of women. The repeated phrase, “Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful,” illustrates the standards of physical appearance placed on women. More specifically, Abramovic calls attention to a beauty standard placed on her specifically in her career to not only make aesthetically pleasing art, but to also be an aesthetically pleasing woman for male visual consumption.

Physical standards became substantially more complicated during this period of second wave feminism as women artists began to explore their bodies publically for the sake of art, and for the sake of revolution. While art historically, audiences had been accustomed to renderings of the odalisque or desirable nudes by the likes of Gustave Courbet in art, women artists began to create art which purposefully clouded the appeal of their body to combat this patriarchal norm.⁴⁵ Artists such as Ana Mendieta, Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann, and Yoko Ono used their bodies as their artistic media. This mangled the art historical expectation that a nude female in art was there to appeal to male audiences. Now, the female body could disgust us or revolt us. Now, women could have a say on when and if they were sexualized, men no longer had as much authority.

Abramovic asserts herself as a revolutionary and subversive female artist by addressing gender and the female identity in her art, as well as creating art that is not beautiful, but violent and complicated. Abramovic creates a new image of woman as both powerful and rebellious. Better yet, that woman is herself. Abramovic is an artist who uses her own nude body in her art, making her work even more susceptible to gendered expectations of women and the art they make. There is no doubt Abramovic faced constant scrutiny for the nature of her art in the 1970s; in fact, she is still highly criticised today for anything from capitalizing on her current celebrity

⁴⁵ Ibid.

status to baseless accusations of satanism in her work.⁴⁶ *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* is a testament of Abramovic's willingness to usher an age of women creating their own narrative, expanding the image of who and what a woman can be, what an artist can be. *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* depicts the manic, internalized, and at times futile struggle to be a woman artist, and to be a woman.

Marina Abramovic explored agency in her work specifically by offering her own body to her audience. Chris Burden, alternatively, takes the agency of others for himself, objectifying them. *Match Piece* is another example of Burden taking the agency of another, personally manipulating it, and making someone else his own object. *Match Piece* was a live performance staged in 1972 (figure 7). Contrasting to *Shoot* and *TV Hijack*, *Match Piece* was open to the public during a spring show at Pomona College in California.⁴⁷ In this performance, Burden covers the floors and walls with white butcher paper, illuminating the room like a hospital, and kneels in front of two small televisions, also dressed entirely in white. Beside him is a naked white woman, lying supine on the floor.⁴⁸ According to New York Times, this woman was Burden's wife Barbara, but this is otherwise unconfirmed.⁴⁹ The televisions were turned on, and had live wires coming out of them. Burden used tinfoil to conduct heat and light the matches, and paperclips to shoot the lit matches at the woman.⁵⁰ An audience member recalled in 2010:

In all probability fewer than fifteen matches hit the girl. When hit by the hot matches she usually flinched, and when one landed directly on her she swept it off. ... The artist at no time showed any interest in the audience or the girl. His face had the sort of unself-conscious and disinterested expression one might expect from someone who was alone. He looked calm and absorbed in what he was doing.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Marshall, Alex. "Marina Abramovic Just Wants Conspiracy Theorists to Let Her Be." The New York Times. April 21, 2020.

⁴⁷ "Match Piece." Metmuseum.org.

⁴⁸ McMahan, Paul. "In the Front Row for Chris Burden's Match Piece, 1972." East of Borneo. October 2010.

⁴⁹ Plagens, Peter. "Art in California." The New York Times. September 02, 1973.

⁵⁰ Theartstory.org. "Weapons of Performance Artist Chris Burden." December 19, 2019.

⁵¹ McMahan, Paul. "In the Front Row for Chris Burden's Match Piece, 1972." East of Borneo. October 2010.

This is a very unsettling image of Chris Burden, one where this seems to be a natural and regular pastime for the artist, as if this situation was the every day. Here, we see Burden making something unnatural and cruel appear natural, commonplace.

In the same article, the speaker recalls a “boyish” quality to Burden as he knelt on the floor, seemingly consumed by the televisions, but simultaneously the author also recounts the feeling of walking in on a private sadistic fantasy.⁵² He describes a sense of innocuous boyhood paired with a cruel and misogynistic sexual perversion of a grown man. What do these conflicting messages tell the audience? By relating these separate images of innocent child and vicious man, does it pare down mens’ sexual fantasy of inflicting pain on women as a case of “boys will be boys?” Perhaps this repeated pattern of misogyny in Burden’s work is indicative that he, and his passive audiences, believe that harming women can be artistic and original. Unfortunately, from the perspective of the many women who have experienced sexual violence, it is not very artistic and it is quite common.

We can also analyze the passivity of the audience in this piece. In *Match Piece*, a man harmed a woman, and the audience members allowed its continuation on the condition it was within an art space. Burden’s work normalizes being a bystander to violence towards women just as much as he participates in the violence himself. Burden creates a spectacle of misogyny.

In order to compare *Art Must Be Beautiful*, *Artist Must Be Beautiful* to *Match Piece*, we must first analyze their respective comments on women. In *Art Must Be Beautiful*, Abramovic subverts harmful patriarchal expectations placed on women. By using her own nude body and harming herself, Abramovic resists the historical image of women in art to appeal to the male gaze as well as the expectations of women in society by presenting her own body in a disturbing

⁵² Ibid.

manner. She creates art that is *not* beautiful, breaking the historical mould of what is traditionally accepted in the arts. Conversely, in *Match Piece*, Burden enforces misogyny by purposefully hurting a woman, potentially his own wife, and leaves his audience with no clear message behind the piece. Burden circles back in time to the nude woman in art as a source of male entertainment. Abramovic recontextualizes how we see women in art. Abramovic makes herself an object, while Burden makes someone else the object. Abramovic may choose to harm herself, but Burden chooses to harm another. Abramovic charges forward in the name of art, while Burden mutters the same belligerent story again and again.

As the artists' careers progressed, both Abramovic and Burden began to create work which actively involved the audience and their relationships to time and space. Marina Abramovic's *The House With the Ocean View* and Chris Burden's *Do You Believe in Television* are both pieces that focus on the audience rather than the artist. Both of these pieces also relate in their political context. *Do You Believe in Television*, like *Shoot*, was influenced by the Vietnam War and the televised nature of the brutalities of war. Likewise, *The House With the Ocean View* was Abramovic's response to 9/11 and the changed community of New York.

House With the Ocean View (figure 8) opened at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York in November of 2002. Abramovic, who had been working in New York for some time around the early 2000s, was deeply saddened by the September 11 attacks. She stated that the citizens of New York had a scattered sense of community, and she wanted to make a performance to bring people together

For the piece, the gallery installed three elevated rooms, including a room with a cot, a room with a table and chair, and a room with a toilet and a shower. The rooms were suspended in the air, and connected to them were ladders made of knives, making it impossible to willingly

leave. For the performance, Abramovic lived in the rooms for twelve days with no other stimuli, and only water, but she was able to look out at the audience. Abramovic said of the piece:

The idea of the work was experiment. If I purify myself without eating for 12 days, any kind of food, just drinking pure water, and being in the present moment, here and now, in the three units on the wall, which represent my house, like bathroom, the living room and sleeping room, where the ladder coming down to the space are made from the knives, so you never can leave. That kind of rigorous way of living and purification would do something to change the environment and to change the attitude of people coming to see me. If they will just come and stay and forget about the time.⁵³

The concept of the piece is very simple: to acknowledge the altered existence for the people of New York and their collective fresh wound, Abramovic created a performance which would also simulate a transformed reality where time feels aimless, and Abramovic was completely vulnerable before an audience. Abramovic stated that guests would come out of curiosity, but end up staying for hours and coming back multiple days.⁵⁴

For the piece, Abramovic asked the gallery employees to sign an agreement stating they would not interfere with the piece.⁵⁵ Similarly, guests entered the space on the condition they were not allowed to speak during the performance, only to observe.⁵⁶ During the piece, Abramovic had to sleep, shower, and use the toilet in front of the audience. There was nothing between the audience and Abramovic, the artist was literally living her life in front of their eyes in an atemporal, minimal environment. Although Abramovic, and the audience, were not alone, they were isolated. Although time passed, days blurred together. Although nothing was said, much was shared between Abramovic and the audience, and the audience and each other.

⁵³ "Marina Abramović. The House with the Ocean View. 2002: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. 2010.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Martin, Naomi. "Iconic Artworks: Marina Abramovic's Performance 'The House With The Ocean View!'" Artland Magazine. September 18, 2020.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

House With the Ocean View is very straightforward and ultimately ends with little physical takeaway. In numerous of Abramovic's other pieces, the artist ends the piece with scars and bruises, both physically and emotionally. Because the nature of this piece is not violent and destructive, characteristics that defined Abramovic's early works, many write off *House With the Ocean View* as pointless in the genre of performance art, and especially from an artist who was once seen as incredibly prolific as well as contentious. This piece was disappointing to critics who believed that performance art was always masochistic.

House With the Ocean View is powerful exactly for its lack of spectacle. Just as in Abramovic's other work, the artist creates a relationship with her audience in this piece, and just as in her other work, Abramovic creates intimacy through opening herself up completely to vulnerability and transparency. Abramovic is not performing- this is really who she is as an artist and person. *House With the Ocean View* invites its audience into a space of confusion, silence, and vulnerability, and uses those terms to create togetherness. This piece is about coming together, and collectively healing. Conversely, this is nothing like Burden's approach to audience, time, and space. Burden's *Do You Believe in Television* did not use time and space to transform the audience, but instead frighten and manipulate them.

Burden's piece *Do You Believe in Television* is hardly remembered by critics and art historians despite its destructive and harmful nature. *Do You Believe in Television* was not recorded or photographed, or if it was, these have since been lost to time. This is curious, considering that Burden often chose select photographs to represent his performances, offering a sense of something material to the naturally immaterial performance art.

Burden performed the piece in Calgary, Alberta, and invited approximately 100 people into various levels of a three-story building.⁵⁷ Each level of the building held a television, which was connected to live film and sound equipment.⁵⁸ Burden was on the ground level of the building, and the cameras filmed a cross at his feet, which he made of black tape.⁵⁹ From the cross he was standing on and along the length of the stairwell, all the way up to the third floor, Burden created a path on the ground with several inches of straw. The straw path stretch from his feet up to the third story. The audience members walked on this straw while ascending the stairs.⁶⁰

At around 8:00 pm, after the audience members waited among the various floors of the building, Burden said over the speakers, "Do you believe in television?" Then, he lit a match and dropped it onto the straw covered cross which he stood on. The cameras relayed this onto the televisions that the audience members watched from each floor. Burden had silently tasked them with connecting that the straw they walked over upon entering was the same straw in which was now burning on the televisions. It is mostly unclear, or unknown, how the audience members reacted. One source cites that the flames burned up to the second level, when the audience members then extinguished the flames themselves somehow,⁶¹ while *Performance Anthology* states that the fire department arrived and put out the flames around 8:30.⁶² The true end to *Do You Believe in Television* remains an enigma to this day.

⁵⁷ Loeffler, Carl E., and Darlene Tong. *PERFORMANCE ANTHOLOGY*. SAN FRANCISCO: LAST GASP PR. AND CONTEMPORARY ARTS PR., 1989. Pg. 195.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 156.

⁶⁰ McMahon, Paul. "In the Front Row for Chris Burden's Match Piece, 1972." East of Borneo. October 2010.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Loeffler, Carl E., and Darlene Tong. *PERFORMANCE ANTHOLOGY*. Pg. 196.

The “meaning” behind the work is attainable at surface level: Burden asks his audience to associate what they see on the television in front of them with their immediate surroundings, connecting that the straw on fire was the same straw that was spread across the building. In this way, Burden attempts to comment on television and media. In an essay written by Nick Stillman for the contemporary arts website EastofBorneo.org, the author writes:

Burden was simply asking those present at these two performances to connect what they saw on a screen to what was happening in real life, but it was an unnatural request; television’s success depends on viewer disassociation from reality, or rather television’s ability to create an alternative version of reality.⁶³

The troubling word here is “simply,” Burden was asking for a *simple* understanding from the audience, to *simply* evaluate the situation. Then what? After the audience members correlate that the building is on fire, then what? Either Burden believes that his audience members are brainless and incapable of putting straightforward signs together, understanding their own lives are in danger, or this piece is truly as shallow as it appears. Furthermore, Burden asks for this “simple” understanding by endangering 100 lives, so clearly this is not simple, but inhumane and sickening.

If Burden *is* in fact asking this bare minimum of these participants, then we can assume it was achieved. It would be reasonable to speculate these participants could easily relate the straw on screen with the straw on the ground, and likely smell and see smoke at some point. So, then the art piece can be complete, because the audience members have successfully responded to Burden’s wish. However, even after completing this task, the audience members are still punished. They are trapped by the fire which climbs up the stairway, there is no way out. Even when they win, they lose. Burden’s piece is unfair to the participants by design. *Do You Believe in Television* plays God with the lives of 100 people.

⁶³ McMahan, Paul. "In the Front Row for Chris Burden's Match Piece, 1972." East of Borneo. October 2010.

I reiterate here what I have said for Burden's previous pieces: what if something had gone wrong? What if the participants were not able to put out the fire themselves, or the fire department was not called, or did not arrive on time? Burden puts 100 lives on the line, and spares his own by being located on the ground floor where he can easily evacuate. Burden puts 100 lives on the line, and for what purpose? Burden only proves that he, personally, can manipulate people in the name of art, to the point of fatality. Burden terrifies people and risks their lives for no valid artistic pay off. The ends do not justify the means because there were no ends, and nothing was accomplished. And, no artistic accomplishment can justify the death of 100 people.

Do You Believe in Television is a performance art piece depicting an artist with a God-complex. This piece uses the idea of "skepticism of media" to purposefully mislead the audience, and intentionally endangers them. *Do You Believe in Television* is not commentary on violence in media, it creates violence in media.

Burden eventually stopped creating performance art in favor of large scale sculptural work. One of his final performances, *Doomed*, is uninspired compared to his numerous brutal works, but is still unnecessarily destructive. Abramovic, however, continued to make performance art after the 1970s, and has been incredibly prolific since. In contemporary arts, Abramovic is immediately recognized for *The Artist is Present*. Together, these pieces illustrate the spectrum of performance art; while Burden constantly created shallow and self-indulgent performances, Abramovic constantly created meaningful and universal performances.

Marina Abramovic's 2010 piece *The Artist is Present* is often considered the artist's magnum opus, and a piece that gained attention all around the world (figure 9). Lasting from March 14 to May 31, *The Artist is Present* was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York,

where a large-scale retrospective of Abramovic's work was also exhibited simultaneously.⁶⁴ *The Artist is Present* is Abramovic's most uncomplicated and minimalist performance piece to date, yet possibly the most physically demanding for the artist. For the entirety of the performance, from mid-March to the end of May, the artist sat motionless and silent in a chair with an empty seat across from her. Audience members, one by one, could sit across from her and exchange gazes silently for as long as they pleased. Abramovic could not move or speak, only return their eye contact. The performance began each day when the museum opened and ended at closing time only to be restarted the next day. *The Artist is Present* lasted a total of 736 hours over the course of its performance.⁶⁵

The Artist is Present significantly different from Abramovic's previous works; it was not violent or painful, as critics and historians now expected from the artist. Instead, this piece focused on the temporary relationship between strangers that can be nurtured over a matter of minutes. Not only was Abramovic vulnerable, but now she invited her audience to be vulnerable with her. Some sitters stayed only a few minutes, and some sitters stayed several hours. Many sitters returned to sit across from Abramovic on multiple occasions. The piece even drew celebrity sitters such as James Franco, Bjork, and Lady Gaga, who did not sit but were present in the crowd. These celebrity appearances are credited for popularizing the performance on her Twitter.

This piece has hundreds of photographic relics. Upon entrance to the performance, sitters signed a contract agreeing to have their photograph taken and published. Each and every sitter had their picture taken by photographer Marco Anelli who was hired specifically for *The Artist is*

⁶⁴ MOMA. "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. 2010.

⁶⁵ Abramović, Marina, and James Kaplan. *Walk through Walls: A Memoir*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2018. Pg. 298–299.

Present. Many of the sitters had significant emotional responses when sharing eye-contact with Abramovic, and there are numerous portraits by Anelli who feature the sitters crying, most of whom are still smiling nonetheless. Accordingly, there are several images captured of Abramovic crying too, matching her sitter.

The Artist is Present is characterized by its rudimentary, humanistic element of simply exchanging time and space with another person, and it received many positive reactions. It was an alteration of what performance art had been chalked up to: extreme demonstrations of the self, sometimes to a detrimental degree. Instead, this piece was calm and anticipated, seemingly without a political message which could potentially divide audiences. This piece was about coming together and sharing essential human presence with another. It was not convoluted or even cerebral, yet it was still transcendent. In *The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real*, the author describes the meaning of this piece plainly, “we are both here, and we are both human; we share that with each other.”⁶⁶

Despite the candid nature of this piece and Abramovic’s position as its creator and performer, and the mostly positive reception the piece garnered, Abramovic also received some venomous criticism. Specifically, Abramovic was accused of capitalizing upon *The Artist is Present* and using the performance to grow her celebrity status. The piece was widely covered by online news platforms for the sheer volume of visitors it drew to the Museum of Modern Art. Up until this point in time, performance art did not have a significant reputation for immediate recognition, or ever for supposedly bringing an artist to celebrity-status. It is true that Abramovic had begun to make a name for herself after several years as a performance artist, and a pioneer in her field. She was known for being an intense woman artist, and an artist who had crossed many

⁶⁶ Lader, Ryan. "The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic's Performance Art " Writing Program " Boston University." 2013.

boundaries in performance art, and many boundaries as a woman artist. However, the status that Abramovic had gained through *The Artist is Present* is much more substantial, and surpassed the recognition she had obtained previously from the art world.

In *Celebrity 2.0: The Case of Marina Abramovic*, Sharon Marcus attributes this degree of fame to its alignment to the establishment of social media. Facebook and Twitter both had been formed only a couple of years before *The Artist is Present*, and naturally, the piece was talked about and circulated online during its performance. As already mentioned, celebrities such as James Franco and Bjork sitting for the performance, and Lady Gaga so much as mentioning the piece online drew significant crowds to see the performance. Unfortunately, this has been seen as Abramovic attempting to acquire fame through the piece, rather than her receiving it as a by-product of the piece.

Some critics also expressed skepticism toward the portraits taken of each sitter, and the several shots of Abramovic along with them. Some saw these photographs as opposing the nature of performance art; by taking a photograph (or many hundreds), you make an immaterial experience into a material memory, and you can also make a commercial profit with those photographs. Some even went so far as to say that the experiences of the sitters were not genuine; their reactions to sitting across from Abramovic were actually from seeing the portraits of other sitters and *expecting* to be moved and thus having an emotional response, a sort of placebo, instead of actually being moved.⁶⁷

Although these arguments could be reasonable without context, they do not tell the whole story. Performance art has been photographed or filmed since its popularization in the 1960s and

⁶⁷ Esner, Rachel, and Sandra Kisters. *The Mediatization of the Artist*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Chapter: "In Bed with Marina Abramović: Mediatizing Women's Art as Personal Drama by Marce Bleuler."

1970s for the sake of documentary. In Burden's *Shoot* for example, Burden specifically invited his friends to take several photographs for him, and he chose specific images to circulate. So, not only is Abramovic not the first and not the last performance artist to document their art, but performance art specifically would be seldom remembered and studied without its recording or photography. Abramovic cannot be blamed for famous sitters joining her performance and discussing it publicly, nor is it her fault that *The Artist is Present* occurred during an influx of growth to social media platforms. Marina Abramovic's work is famous because it is good art, and she is a good artist. She is deserving of recognition for her fifty years of revolutionary art work. Fame is just a consequence.

The Artist is Present is a performance piece that emphasizes the very gentle and savory aspects of human nature. *The Artist is Present* uses time and space to encourage compassion and humility just by sharing a moment with a stranger. Abramovic creates so much with so little, and demonstrates how artwork can connect us. Tragically, Burden's work does the opposite.

Burden's final performance piece was *Doomed*, which he performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago on April 11, 1975. After *Doomed*, Burden continued to make sculptural art but would never return to performance again. For this performance, Burden laid on a floor of the gallery near a wall, beneath a sheet of clear glass and a clock on the wall (figure 10). Burden would remain laying under the glass until an audience member interfered with the performance or interacted with him, which the audience members and museum employees were not apprised of.

The piece lasted for approximately 45 hours- after two days, employees of the museum began to worry for Burden's health and well being, and they left a pitcher of water near Burden, consequently ending the piece. Burden crawled out from underneath the glass and left to another

room of the building, returning with a hammer and a sealed envelope. Burden used the hammer to smash the clock as well as the sheet of glass. Leaving the envelope behind, he exited the building. In a 1975 editorial piece, friend of Burden's and member of the audience Roger Ebert explained:

The envelope, sealed, contained Burden's explanation of the piece. It consisted, he had written, of three elements: The clock, the glass, and himself. The piece would continue, he said, until the museum staff acted on one of the three elements. By providing the pitcher of water, they had done so.⁶⁸

Ebert also described the two days of the performance as somewhat anticlimactic. In the very first hours of the piece, Ebert said that there was an energy among the audience members as they waited for Burden to *do* something, and that they tried to interact with the artist, but were halted by the unknowing museum attendants:

The audience perhaps expected more. There was a pregnant period of silence, about 10 minutes, and when at the end of it nothing else had happened, there were a few loud whistles and sporadic outbursts of clapping. Burden did not react. At various times during the next two hours, audience members tried to approach Burden with advice, greetings, exhortations, and a red carnation. They were politely but firmly kept away by the museum attendants. A girl threw her brassiere at the glass; it was taken away by a smiling guard.⁶⁹

Thus, this was the beginning and end of Burden's final piece, *Doomed*. After several years as a commercially successful artist on the West Coast, with exhibitions all around North America, Burden finished this part of his career with this insipid performance. However, being Chris Burden, he recalled a dramaticized and heroic series of events, stating:

I thought perhaps the piece would last several hours. I thought maybe they'd come up and say, 'okay, Chris, it's 2 a.m. and everybody's gone home and the guards are on overtime and we have to close up.' That would have ended the piece, and I would have broken the clock, recording the elapsed time. On the first night, when I realized they weren't going to

⁶⁸ Ebert, Roger. "Chris Burden." *Roger Ebert*. May 25, 1975.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

stop the piece, I was pleased and impressed that they had placed the integrity of the piece ahead of the institutional requirements of the museum. On the second night, I thought, my God, don't they care anything at all about me? Are they going to leave me here to die?⁷⁰

Chris Burden put himself at the mercy of his audience for *Doomed*, but clearly not to the extent that Abramovic consistently did, and still does to this day. Ebert's article reported that Burden urinated himself, which is to be expected after 45 hours, which put him in "psychological danger."⁷¹ Before the performance had even gone on for 24 hours, Chris Burden began to feel nervous, worried that the audience would not allow the performance to end. This was one of the first, and the last, times that Burden allowed himself to be the object of the piece, and it frightened him.

Doomed was a performance piece about endurance, though Chris Burden failed, as he endured very little. *Doomed* moves the agency from the artist and gives it to the audience, however, constrained by the social conventions of museum and gallery space, they are unaware they hold this agency at all. This itself could also be considered a failure, as the museum staff unnecessarily prolonged the performance and inhibited a genuine performance piece. While *Doomed* is seemingly a straightforward performance of endurance (though again, a failed one), Burden complicates its meaning through his final pernicious actions of the piece.

Our understanding of *Doomed* is confused by Burden destroying the piece's material components: the sheet of glass and the clock on the wall. The natural assumption one could make is that the clock is a symbol for time, and when Burden destroys the clock with the hammer, it means that humans, or maybe Burden specifically, conquer time. By choosing to smash the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ebert, Roger. "Chris Burden." *Roger Ebert*. May 25, 1975.

clock, Burden demonstrates that he is in control; the agency that he previously allowed the audience is now his again, just as it always had been in his work. Burden once again makes it clear that he is in control, never willing to truly submit himself to the will of his audience. Unsurprisingly, *Doomed* is yet again another performance piece in which Chris Burden is self-indulgent through unnecessary destruction and attention-seeking exhibition. Once again, Burden leaves the audience scrambling to locate the meaning of his work; a difficult task, because there is no meaning to his work.

Although this is where Burden's career in performance art ended, the artist has not been forgotten. In fact, he is still a staple in the history of performance art canon, mainly for *Shoot*. Despite the significant trend in the last few years to denounce misogyny and toxic masculinity with the #MeToo movement, and a more targeted examination of male artists and their work by authors like Linda Nochlin, Chris Burden has been left out of the criticism entirely.

In fact, he is spoken about quite fondly. People Magazine said of Burden in 1989, "One way to describe [Burden] is the B word: brilliant, ... He makes a powerful and subtle comment about the mores of our time and often shocks people in doing so."⁷² Contemporary art critic Donald Kuspit said, "Burden's early self-torturing performances were more extreme than the typical avant-garde risk-taking ... Burden's destructiveness is more complicated than the usual daredevil 'flirtation' with death ... [Burden] has his hand on the very pulse of art."⁷³ In 2007, The New Yorker described Burden as "... immediately taken very seriously as the most extreme and enigmatic of provocateurs in a subculture that, in highly educated ways, reflected the

⁷² Small, Michael. "He Has Forsaken the Violent Art of His Youth, but Chris Burden Is Still Out to Startle." PEOPLE Magazine Archive. August 1989.

⁷³ Jones, Amelia. *Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities*. Vol. 17. Art History Journal. 1994. Pg. 568.

political disarray of the nation during the seemingly eternal Vietnam War, and prefigured the swing-barrelled rage of punk.”⁷⁴ Widewalls Magazine said in 2019:

Chris Burden is a seminal figure in contemporary art. His performances in the 1970s redefined the possibilities of the medium; his subsequent sculpture and installations have sought to extend the limits of the physical and explore the psychological impact on the individual of actions and objects in the world.⁷⁵

These reviews of Burden’s work are problematic as well as disputable. These critics make sense of Burden’s work as thought-provoking through their extreme nature. However, they do not address that people other than the artist were mocked, harmed, and attacked in Burden’s art. These reviews are a gross misunderstanding of Burden’s work, and a denial of the tangible harm and trauma he caused to his unconsenting participants. This canon of performance art is misinformed and troubling.

Chris Burden is considered the poster-boy for performance art for his danger-prone performances, yet, where is the recognition for Abramovic's early work? Abramovic was doing equal performance work to Burden. Where Burden endured, Abramovic endured *longer*. Where Burden inflicted pain on himself, Abramovic withstood *more* pain. Where Burden *creates* brutality, Abramovic only comments on it.

Abramovic was also objectively *more* extreme than Burden. While Burden rarely gave agency to his audience, and a limited amount when he did, Abramovic gave unlimited agency to her audience, putting herself in a much more vulnerable position as an artist. Similarly, Burden’s pieces were always staged to some extent. Abramovic did not stage her work, again demonstrating that she gives the agency to the audience rather than maintaining it herself. Burden also often limited his audience to his personal friends, such as in *Shoot* and *TV Hijack*,

⁷⁴ Schjeldahl, Peter. "Performance." *The New Yorker*. 2007. Accessed November 1, 2020.

⁷⁵ Takac, Balasz. "When Chris Burden Tried to Shoot Himself for the Sake of Art." *Widewalls*. December 2019.

further controlling his work for the results he desired. Abramovic always held open audiences, notably during her *Rhythm 0* series in which she was always at risk of the cruelty of others. Burden manipulates the outcomes of his performance pieces, Abramovic allows her audience to decide how the piece goes. Where Marina Abramovic's art is a type of documentary, Chris Burden's is just theatrics.

Not only is Abramovic significantly less acknowledged for her monumental contributions to performance art, she is instead *criticised* for matters not even relevant to her art making. Before Abramovic was erroneously accused of using *The Artist is Present* for fame, she was shallowly scolded for aging gracefully, another jab at her exterior rather than dialogue about her work. In *Marina Abramovic: Witnessing Shadows*, Peggy Phelan attempted to criticize her appearance in a magazine, saying, "In 1998, Abramovic began to change her image. ... The cover of her extraordinary catalog, *Marina Abramovic: Artist Body*, features a photograph of her romping on a beach holding a beach ball aloft."⁷⁶ In the same vein, Sharon Marcus wrote in *Celebrity 2.0: The Case of Marina Abramovic*:

Although female celebrities usually shift from being erotic attractions in their youth to campy grotesques in old age (think of Joan Crawford or Mae West), Abramovic offers the interesting case of a female star moving in the opposite direction. In the first two decades of her career, she incorporated nudity and violence into her performances in ways that framed her as an attraction but complicated her erotic appeal. ... In recent decades, the artist has cultivated a more conventionally attractive image, but her body, the celebrity's most powerful source of both attraction and repulsion, remains at the center of her work.⁷⁷

Marcus implies that Abramovic has given her appearance greater attention as her notoriety increased. Critics were quick to delineate conversation about Abramovic's work to instead focus

⁷⁶ Phelan, Peggy. "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows." *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004). Pg 570.

⁷⁷ Marcus, Sharon. (2015). *Celebrity 2.0: The Case of Marina Abramovic*. Public Culture. 27. 21-52.

on her physical appearance and celebrity status. Another method of slander toward Abramovic has been online accusations that Abramovic is a satanist around 2016. The Guardian explained:

Abramović's profile has also brought her to the attention of a strange group of online conspiracy theorists who are convinced she is a cannibalistic satanist, or – because she is a member of the 'liberal elite' – part of a global paedophile ring. It started when an email Abramović had sent to her friend Tony Podesta, brother of John Podesta, who was running Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, was leaked. She was inviting him, John and a number of others, who had donated money to her institute, to a "Spirit Cooking" dinner – a joke, based on her work in which she scrawled "love spells" on the wall of a gallery in pig's blood. On the night, they did not – as the work suggested – consume 'fresh breast milk with fresh sperm milk,' ... She laughs wearily when I bring it up. 'This is something I have been deeply bothered by,' she says. 'I'm an artist, I'm not a satanist. They Googled me, and I am perfection to fit a conspiracy theory.'⁷⁸

Abramovic has been contacted with threats because of these rumors, which is concerning and deeply saddening.⁷⁹ Although this has mostly been seen as a ridiculous and untrue account of Abramovic, it has placed a biased lens over Abramovic's early work. Rather than examining Abramovic within the wide context of performance art, critics have now interpreted her works with a speculation of this satanism and witchcraft. Many artists have since used aspects such as blood, fire, and the nude body in their artwork, but no other artist has been called a satanist for it. Burden created a piece in 1974 called *Trans-Fixed* in which he nailed himself to a car in a crucifixion style, yet he has never been called blasphemous or sacrilegious. Instead, he is called a genius.

To compare meaning and analysis of the two artists' work is simple: Chris Burden's work has no deeper meaning than exactly what is on the surface. Chris Burden creates artwork about harm, usually, harm to unknowing other people, or to women specifically. When Burden does make artwork about harm to self, the harm he uses is negligible and temporary. Burden

⁷⁸ Saner, Emine. "Marina Abramović: 'I'm an Artist, Not a Satanist!'" The Guardian. October 2020.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

appropriates violence that does not belong to him, such as creating performance art about the Vietnam War, which he did not serve in. Finally, Burden's career is exclusive to someone with exactly his social and racial position: only a young, white, American man could get away with willingly shooting himself, staging a hostage situation on television, throwing live matches on a naked woman, and other irresponsible and violent antics and call it "art." For someone lacking these characteristics, these actions would be a prison sentence. While Abramovic comments on issues such as misogyny and violence in her work, Chris Burden creates misogyny and violence.

Conclusion:

While I was at first shocked and horrified by Burden's work, I was even more devastated to see his treatment in the art-historical canon. Burden is very much celebrated for his work as a frontrunner, but he is also valued as an exemplar to the form. Abramovic is celebrated as well, but this is a current phenomenon and it must be made clear that these artists, while both celebrated, are still regarded differently.

We observe Chris Burden as an image of performance art, so let us begin here. We must disassociate Burden as the model for early performance art. When we do, performance art as an art form becomes muddied. As Abramovic, and countless other performance artists demonstrate, performance art is very meaningful. And, it can be both extreme and meaningful.

Alternatively, Marina Abramovic constantly, time and time again, accomplished what critics believe Burden accomplished, and she did so without harming others. Abramovic pushed boundaries within performance art as an art form, as a woman artist, and as a woman. Abramovic is a stellar example of what performance art is, how moving it can be, and how it has flowed and changed from a contemporary art form into a post-modern one. When critics refuse to value and study Marina Abramovic's artwork, and instead comment on superficial, physical aspects of

Abramovic as a woman, art history follows suit. When art history reacts to women artists this way time and time again, they are pushed out of the discussion and forgotten, with artists like Chris Burden being recalled instead.

Burden allowed his audience to believe that consent and autonomy are negotiable, and up in the air if for the sake of art. This is not correct, it was not correct, and we must never allow it to appear correct again. This is why it is vital to filter Burden out of the spotlight of performance art history and replace him with artists such as Marina Abramovic. The performance art cannon would be just fine without Burden's violence and misogyny because these are not what performance art is truly about. Performance art transcends space and time, and is a tool to bring us together, to already have something in common. As Marina said, "Performance will survive because performance always survived, because it's an immaterial form of art."⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Saner, Emine. "Marina Abramović: 'I'm an Artist, Not a Satanist!'" The Guardian. October 2020.

FIGURES

Figure 1



Figure 1: Marina Abramovic during *Rhythm 0* in 1974. In this image, we see audience members surrounding her. One directly in front of her is holding a flower from her table of 72 objects. Her shirt has been ripped and her breasts exposed. Below the photo is a list of the 72 objects on the table. To the left is the performance instructions.

Figure 2

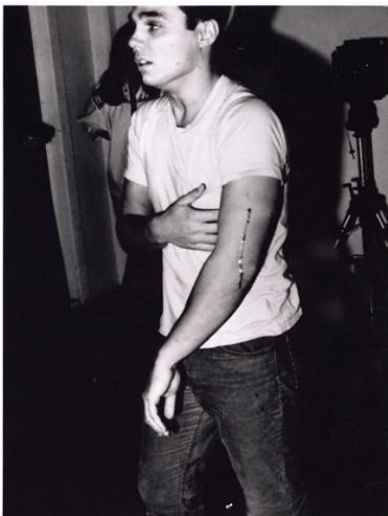


Figure 2: Chris Burden after being shot in *Shoot*. This photo is taken after the video artifact and Burden has moved from the location he was shot in. A small trickle of blood falls down his arm, and he appears distressed.

Figure 3



Figure 3: Surviving image of *TV Hijack*. In this image, Burden is holding a knife to Luthjeans throat. She appears to try to pull Burden's knife away from her skin. She looks extremely distressed, while he looks casual.

Figure 4



Figure 4: Image from Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me*. In this image, we see Beuys wrapped in a blanket, and holding a shepherd's cane. A coyote in the room with this grabs the blanket in his mouth, pulling it. Beuys resists.

Figure 5



Figure 5: Images from Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*. This collection of images shows Acconci in public spaces following strangers. In the bottom left image, one person appears to be running away from the artist.

Figure 6



Figure 6: Marina Abramovic in *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*. Abramovic is holding both a comb and a brush, and in this still from the video, the image blurs from Abramovic's movement. She grimaces in pain.

Figure 7

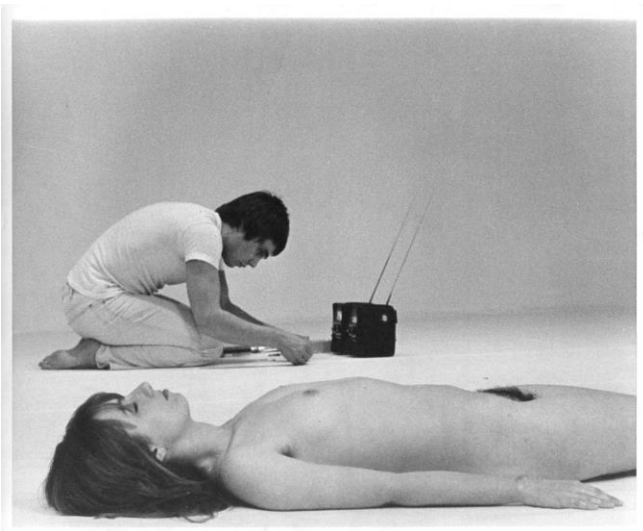


Figure 7: This image shows Chris Burden in front of two small television screens. He wears all white, and no shoes. In the foreground is the woman Burden throws matches at. She is completely naked, and in this image, her eyes are closed.

Figure 8



Figure 8: Abramovic during *House With the Ocean View* in New York. In this image, Abramovic is in the left room of the installation. She is nude, and bathing in the shower. In the foreground, we see the silhouettes of the many audience members.

Figure 9



Figure 9: Abramovic and a sitter during *The Artist is Present*. Abramovic wears a red dress. We know this image is from the first month of the exhibition, because we see the table between Abramovic and the sitter, which was later removed

from the performance.

Figure 10



Figure 10: Chris Burden and audience member during *Doomed*. In this image, we see Burden wearing a dark outfit laying underneath a large panel of glass. A woman stands in front of Burden. On the left, a hanging clock is on the wall, indicating it is around 3:45.

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Image Citations

Figure 1

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Willem Peppler, 1998. © 2018 Marina Abramović, courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery/(ARS), New York.

Figure 2

Shoot performance at F-Space Gallery in Santa Ana, California, 1971, Chris Burden. Gelatin silver print documenting the event by Alfred Lutjeans. 9 15/16 x 7 15/16 in. The Getty Research Institute, Gift of Art in the Public Interest and 18th Street Arts Center, 2006.M.8.41. © Chris Burden.

Figure 3

Chris Burden, still from *TV Hijack*, 1972. Photo: G. Beydler. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, © Chris Burden.

Figure 4

Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, Germany. Courtesy of SFMoMA.

Figure 5

Gift of the Gilbert B. and Lila Silverman Instruction Drawing Collection, Detroit. Copyright © 2020 Vito Acconci

Figure 6

Marina Abramovic, «Art must be beautiful», 1975 ©

Figure 7

Chris Burden, *Match Piece*, 1972. All photos: R. Boss. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA

Figure 8

The House with the Ocean View at Sean Kelly, New York. Living installation, November 15 - 26, 2002. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

Figure 9

"File:Marina Abramović, The Artist is Present, 2010.jpg" by Andrew Russeth is licensed with CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>

Figure 10

Chris Burden, *Doomed*, 1975

© MCA Chicago