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## **Biopolitical Masochism in Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present***

Jaime Brunton

Commentaries on Marina Abramović's most recent performances have variously derided or praised the artist as an aspiring "international guru of consciousness raising,"<sup>1</sup> a narcissist, or a "relaxation-class dominatrix."<sup>2</sup> Authors are keen on pointing to Abramović's physical beauty to account for her charisma: Judith Thurman of the *New Yorker* writes that even "at sixty-three," "Abramović radiates vitality and seduction."<sup>3</sup> However, as Abramović has noted, "charisma" alone does not a performance make. A performance is about "presence": the act of committing "one hundred percent" to being bodily and psychically present before an audience.<sup>4</sup> Performance involves the staging of fidelity, both to the artist's self-directed program (Abramović's programs are often quite rigorous and physically demanding) and to an audience with whom the performance will not resonate if that fidelity is broken. Absent from much of the discourse surrounding Abramović is a careful analysis of the painful, masochistic core of her performances. The question of what her masochism means in a broader political and social context has not been, to my mind, satisfactorily answered. What needs are being met—for the artist and for the audience alike—in a performance such as the much discussed and heavily mediatized *The Artist Is Present* (2010)? What form of lack does Abramović's specific form of presence—informed by a history of masochistic art by female performers and bolstered, no doubt, by her star power—fulfill?

I focus on Abramović's *The Artist Is Present*, performed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, because of the way in which its intense physical demands (for both artist and participants) mirror and amplify the practices of quotidian life in the age of biopolitics

(that is, the practice of “biopower,” which Michel Foucault defines as “power over life” through the management human populations), drawing particular attention to the masochistic qualities of these practices. While others have noted that Abramović’s performances center on actions emphasizing purification and divestment with the aim to create deeper connections among the performances’ spectators and participants and with the present, how her work operates in the broader context of our current political moment has not been explicitly addressed in scholarly or popular discourses.<sup>5</sup> Much of this writing casts the masochistic tendencies of Abramović’s performances as responses to or enactments of her personal history (e.g., her ability to endure the intense migraines that afflicted her as a young adult, or life with her strict parents and their status as national heroes under the Tito regime in Abramović’s native Yugoslavia).<sup>6</sup> Such a narrow focus on Abramović’s psychobiography does not tell us what resonances her work might have in the present context, nor does it account for the intense affective power Abramović holds over spectators. Furthermore, it elides the importance of her commitment to the impressive physical demands of her performances—a commitment she has addressed explicitly in her interviews and implicitly in her reenactments of masochistic (and feminist) works by Valie Export and Gina Pane in her *Seven Easy Pieces*, performed in 2005 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. It is my contention that the masochistic tendencies of *The Artist Is Present*—tendencies that are enacted on Abramović’s own body as well as on the bodies of the spectators—are better understood as connected to the simultaneously constraining and productive forces of biopower, or as Michel Foucault defines it, “power over life.”<sup>7</sup>

I will not claim that the performance constitutes a direct response to biopolitics or that it necessarily marks an unproblematic space of resistance to biopower. However, I do think that Abramović’s focus on her body and psyche as well as on the bodies and psyches of the audience

in this piece make it particularly well suited to a discussion of the biopolitical in relation to masochistic art. While accounts of Foucault's concept of biopower generally emphasize the shift from disciplinary power to biopower, I would like to focus instead on the masochistic logic that undergirds biopower and how the formal elements of masochism play out in the practice of biopolitics. This article will first outline how contemporary biopolitical practices depend on masochism at a fundamental level, then it will turn to a discussion of the biopolitical and psychoanalytic valences of *The Artist Is Present*.

### **Masochism as a Constitutive Element of Biopower**

According to Foucault, in the development of biopower, "the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population" worked together to "invest life" with the power of the state.<sup>8</sup> While disciplinary power worked on and through individual bodies as they submitted to the regulated practices of social institutions (such as schools, the military, and workplaces), with biopower, regulatory power over populations takes the form of the observing trends (in birth and death rates, health, movement, etc.), with the aim of manipulating and/or exploiting them. This results in political power's total saturation of the populace. Disciplinary power set the stage for biopower by establishing "the individual-as-body" that assumes subjectivity through self-disciplined participation in institutions.<sup>9</sup> This power props up and gives rise to a biopower over populations, which monitors, records, analyzes, and shapes activities to suit the needs of the population (that is, the portion of the population whose needs are considered by the state to be real and worthy of being met). Biopower operates in tandem with relations of production, fostering "segregation" and "social hierarchization" in the service of capitalism. By segregating people from one another according to their function and then stratifying those divisions, biopower works to link "the accumulation of men to that of capital," ensuring that as the size and

strength of the population increases, the power with which it is invested remains in service of the state.<sup>10</sup>

Foucault writes, “For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (143). In the age of biopolitics, our very existence is politics. To come into being as a subject who counts is to subject oneself to being counted. Our behavior is no longer regulated by the sword but is shaped and reinforced by the “norm,” which operates in both the disciplinary and regulatory/biopolitical exercise of power; it “can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize.”<sup>11</sup> “Rights” (to “life,” “health,” or “happiness”) are conferred on subjects based on their adherence to norms.<sup>12</sup> In a curious turn, opposition to the biopolitical system that infuses us with its power actually takes the form of a demand for increased entanglement in that very system. In making rights claims, subjects whose health and prosperity are not deemed crucial to the functioning of the state ask the state to grant them “life” precisely by taking their lives as an object of study, manipulation, and control in the form of biopower.

Insidiously, biopower feeds on resistance, anticipating and subsuming that which would oppose it by appealing to affect and desire. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri emphasize, biopower differs from disciplinary power, which “fixed individuals in institutions . . . but did not reach the point of permeating entirely the consciousnesses and bodies of individuals.” Biopower goes deeper than discipline, down to the level of “control”: it is “expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations.”<sup>13</sup> As biopolitical subjects, we operate in service of the state via a mode of self-control that, though practiced in and through our own bodies and

minds, is simultaneously exterior; we operate in a network of power relations as the network operates through us.

These aspects of self-control and production are keys to understanding the masochistic character of biopower. Masochism, as defined in Sigmund Freud's reflections on clinical practice as well as in Gilles Deleuze's reformulation of Freud's definition, involves an internal operation in the form of a fantasy relation to an other—whether figured as the many authority figures and institutional others that play a role in constructing the superego or as a real individual with whom the masochist enacts (or fantasizes) a particular scenario. As I demonstrate, the masochistic situation, like the situation of biopolitics, depends on bodily behaviors and affects characterized by the suspension of time and activity in the service of securing pleasures that may or may not be conferred by the other. The issue of who is in control of these situations is complex; while the “victim” of masochism is at the mercy of the “torturer,” Deleuze reminds us that it is the victim who has constructed the situation in the first place, having selected a torturer and designed specific forms of torture for the victim's ultimate satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> Our entanglement with the biopolitical similarly entails a more or less willing engagement with the technology and bureaucracy that enable and promote life (or, at least, those forms of living deemed beneficial to the state). Examining both the production of life that is biopolitics and the production of pleasure in masochism prompts the question: What exactly is being produced, and for whom?

Our relationship to biopower collapses distinctions of interiority and exteriority, passivity and activity. We are subjects and objects of power as well as products and producers of power who are controlled by our voluntary participation in the lives we inherit, with all their attendant pleasures and pains. These masochistic elements of biopower overlap formally and thematically with Abramović's more recent performances. Self-inflicted pain and self-imposed submission to

violent acts have been central components of much of Abramović's oeuvre, often in very obvious and dramatic ways. In some of her best-known solo works, she has stabbed her fingers with knives (*Rhythm 10*, 1973), carved shapes into her skin (*Lips of Thomas*, 1975), and instructed spectators to use weapons and tools on her body at their discretion (*Rhythm 0*, 1974). The masochism at work in *The Artist Is Present*, however, with its emphasis on boredom and the physical demands of endurance, is less dramatically violent and is perhaps of a more complex character than these earlier pieces. These qualities, I argue, allow the performance to operate as a mirror to biopolitics, extending our understanding of biopower, masochism, and the relationship between the two.

### **Boredom, Catharsis, and Creation**

In *The Artist Is Present*, Abramović sat in a chair for eight to ten hours every day MoMA was open, without a break, from 14 March to 31 May 2010 (seventy-seven days total). Spectators were required to form a line and one by one were able to sit across from her for as long as they liked (times ranged from just a few minutes to the entire duration of a daily session). The participants' reactions were varied—some sat peacefully smiling, some attempted their own performances (examples include a woman who tried to disrobe but was stopped by a guard, a woman who changed into an evening gown and sat for most of the day, and a person who vomited behind Abramović's chair while in line), and quite a few others wept (attested to on the aptly named Tumblr webpage “Marina Abramović Made Me Cry”).<sup>15</sup> Abramović's own reactions were for the most part uniform and belied the physical demands of her daily ritual. Before a new person would sit, Abramović would look down, breathe, and then refocus a steady gaze on the next participant.

The performance was an exercise in boredom, fatigue, deprivation, and control for all participants. Jennifer Fisher's account of the experience of those waiting in line details the excitement, frustration, and physical discomforts of standing or sitting on a hard floor for hours on end and the uncertainty of whether it would be possible to sit opposite of Abramović before the museum closed (Fisher was denied a chance to sit after waiting in line before the exhibit's doors opened).<sup>16</sup> The most intense demands, however, were certainly those Abramović placed on herself: sitting nearly motionless on a hard wooden chair each day without a break or food over a period of months proved physically and mentally exhausting, as her words and body alike tell us in the documentary detailing the performance, *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (dir. Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre, US, 2012).<sup>17</sup>

In the documentary, Abramović is forthcoming about her anxiety leading up to the performance of *The Artist Is Present* and the pain she experiences during and after each sitting. At the end of one day's performance, she remarks to the camera, "Kids, this is about limit. Even for me." Abramović's emphasis on her own suffering and her address to the filmmakers (and to us as audience members) as "kids" are telling of her own self-conscious project, one that the performance and the documentary are meant to serve, as both are a means of making (and teaching) history. With her 2010 MoMA retrospective, Abramović, hailed as the "grandmother of performance art," takes up the role of educator, and her goal is to communicate to future audiences and artists what is at stake in performance art as a genre.<sup>18</sup> The documentary follows her to her home in New York's Hudson Valley, where she trains the young artists who will "re-perform," as Abramović puts it, five of her early pieces as part of the MoMA retrospective. In the film, Abramović discusses how very few artists from her generation still perform today and remarks that it is her "task to make history straight." She explains in the film that it is "important

for me to let [the performances] go also for my own ego and give five historical pieces to other younger artists to be re-performed.” In educating younger artists, Abramović first wants to contribute to the legacy of performance art, a genre that she explains has “been alternative since I was born.” Laughing, she adds, “I want [performance] to be really a form of art and respected before I die.” More important for our focus here on biopower and pain, Abramović emphasizes the role of training in performance art and the “determination” and “stamina” required “to conquer weaknesses.” The documentary highlights the young artists arriving at Abramović’s home, having committed themselves to three days of intensive training in preparation for their work at MoMA, which includes fasting and hours of sitting or standing in silence blindfolded or looking into the eyes of a partner. (It is also worth noting that to cultivate their ability to remain present to their surroundings, the young artists also must abandon their cell phones for the duration of their training—a reflection of Abramović’s commitment to a certain kind of presence that, as I argue below, is not privileged in a biopolitical society.) Abramović thus makes clear the centrality of suffering in performance, and the durational and participatory elements of *The Artist Is Present* in particular foreground the role of masochistic suffering as constitutive of biopolitics.

Abramović’s self-orchestrated submission to the pain of endurance reflects an operation similar to the masochistic aspect of biopower described above, in that Abramović is both subject and object of the performance, both torturer and tortured. Moreover, the long durational element of *The Artist Is Present* gives the appearance of everyday operations: while it is on the one hand a spectacular piece (she is on display before people, lights, and cameras), it is on the other hand simply her daily work performed during regular hours every day for a predetermined period of time, much like a work assignment. Indeed, the documentary highlights the work (administrative and technical as well as physical) that goes into staging the performance, and Abramović herself

remarks while sorting through piles of paperwork, DVDs, and photographs, “I would like to show how much it takes to be an artist.” The culmination of this mundane work is a performance that is itself mundane, ultimately reflecting back to us the mundane power of biopolitics: the pervasive aspect of biopolitics is at once awe-inspiring and merely quotidian (with each quality dependent on the other). One of the most interesting features of *The Artist Is Present* shown in the documentary is precisely its ability to both bore and fascinate, as the performance asks us to look past the boredom of an everyday experience to see what is actually there. As Abramović has remarked: “[The public] doesn’t have a clue about how to look at something for any length of time without getting bored. How can we go beyond that boredom? How can we see anything when nothing is happening? Teaching the public to do that is my big task now.”<sup>19</sup>

This foregrounding of boredom—and the possibilities that a prolonged encounter with boredom may allow—runs counter to the emphasis on production in a biopolitical society. Boredom and inactivity, in fact, are central to much of Abramović’s work. Abramović wants to “advocate the importance of being free to do nothing in a society that seems to be repulsed by this idea.” As Mary Richards comments, Abramović believes that by subjecting oneself to long periods of inactivity, one can “pass through” to open up creativity.<sup>20</sup> Rather than filling periods of boredom (by, for example, posting on Facebook or Twitter or consuming products and services to fill one’s free time), Abramović encourages boredom as a way of simultaneously producing for oneself and producing a sense of self. Both artist and spectator-participant subject themselves to this mode of (in)activity in *The Artist Is Present*. As the documentary shows, the performance inspires audience members waiting in line to fill the space and time of boredom in creative ways, whether it’s discussing the work with each other or reenacting the performance itself (the documentary shows several pairs of people, including two young children, engaging in

staring contests). The masochistic practice of forcing oneself to sit and wait, deprived of standard comforts (as a child punished by being sent to sit in a corner), can be seen as affording a productive or cathartic experience in the service of the self.

Given this cathartic element, *The Artist Is Present* might be read as an analogue to a clinical situation. Like the traditional psychoanalytic scenario, there are two participants: the artist (analyst) and the exhibit attendee (analysand). Rather than the analyst sitting behind the analysand, in *The Artist Is Present* the two are positioned face to face, eyes locked. The artist/analyst remains silent and, for the most part, expressionless (although she, too, has occasion to smile back or even cry, as she did when faced with her former partner Ulay). It is up to the participant/analysand to respond—as many did, either through self-scripted performances or by expressing emotions provoked by sitting before Abramović (smiles, tears, and so forth). And although there is a clearly demarcated space around both seated parties, they remain visible to the line of people surrounding them on all four sides. It is a situation in which the presence of artist and participant, as well as the presence of an outside world, cannot be disavowed. Transference and catharsis are staged before spectators who are themselves invited to sit in the participant/analysand's chair.

The performance thus combines the psychoanalytic concept of catharsis as abreaction or emotional discharge, which occurs during analysis through the evocation of a past trauma with the Aristotelian notion of the catharsis achieved on the part of the spectator of tragedy. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, “imitates people performing actions and does not rely on narration. Through pity and fear it achieves purification [*katharsis*] from such feelings.”<sup>21</sup> Artist and spectator, each returning the other's gaze, each seen seeing, experience the individual catharsis

of the one-to-one encounter as well as the purification of watching the overall drama unfold—from both on and offstage.

## **Living Labor in the Service of Presence**

From where does this need for catharsis originate? What precisely is being performed or reflected back to us in this staging of masochism? And why was *The Artist Is Present* so effective for many of its participants? Where do “pity and fear” enter into the performance? Why *this* experience, why now? We can begin to answer these questions in terms of our present biopolitical moment of segregation and stratification. Abramović has stated that “a performance is really about presence,” and *The Artist Is Present* takes this sentiment as its thesis.<sup>22</sup> The challenge is how to make something as simple and static as “presence” engaging to an audience who, while physically present at the performance, “can be who-knows-where, answering your Blackberry.” “The idea,” Abramović continues, “is how to create a piece so that consciousness, your body, and the moment of ‘now’ can all be there.”<sup>23</sup> A major risk of a performance like *The Artist Is Present* is precisely that the audience will not be fully present. As Abramović points out, one barrier to creating such presence in today’s biopolitical age is communication technology (e.g., the “Blackberry”). In a networked society full of distractions, a form of art that demands sustained attention for it to be successful is at a considerable disadvantage. I have already suggested the ways this performance relates to technology’s role in the constant deferral of boredom. Moreover, I think the emphasis on presence in *The Artist Is Present* (and Abramović’s pointing to the Blackberry as a key obstacle to presence) underscores the biopolitical ramifications of what Hardt and Negri identify as the “hegemony of immaterial labor.”<sup>24</sup>

Hardt and Negri focus their analysis on the historical shift from “the hegemony of industrial labor to that of immaterial labor” (142). While the actual production of material goods

in industrial settings has by no means waned, the authors assert that, qualitatively, the immaterial production of ideas, languages, images, knowledges, and so forth “has imposed a tendency on all other forms of labor” in our contemporary moment in such a way that the characteristics of immaterial production spill into other realms and modes of thought (141). One important characteristic of this shift is the emergence of the network as “the form of organization of the cooperative and communicative relationships dictated by the immaterial paradigm of production” (142). In this period characterized by the hegemony of immaterial labor, networks structure not only production but also our social existence; we are connected to one another in almost all aspects of social life through tangible and virtual networks (for example, transportation systems and the Internet). This insight highlights two key facets of the biopolitical character of our present moment: one, the blurring of lines between work time and free time or life time, and two, the role of “living labor” in “the production of social life” (146).

In our networked age, the nine-to-five workday largely has been replaced by work time that permeates life time. As an example, Hardt and Negri point to companies like Microsoft that attempt to keep workers in the workplace for most of their waking hours by offering leisure activities and meals. Another example is embodied by the Blackberry that Abramović mentions. Blackberries, iPhones, and the like give their users any number of leisurely distractions (like games, apps, Internet access regardless of location), but more to the point, these devices also give employers and employees/coworkers constant access to each other, since a phone call, text message, or e-mail can be received at any time. Such technology creates the expectation of unlimited availability and the capacity for nonstop work time, whether this work is done for employers or, as mentioned before, occurs indirectly, as in user’s production of content for social media. In contrast to material production (of cars, food, etc.), which produces “the *means of*

*social life*,” Hardt and Negri assert that immaterial production “creates *social life itself*” (146, emphasis in original). Immaterial production of “ideas, images, knowledges, communication, cooperation, and affective relations” define our daily lives to the extent that “living and producing tend to be indistinguishable” (146, 148). We are a population regulated by what we produce and the network in which we produce; in this way, according to Hardt and Negri, “immaterial production is biopolitical” (146).

It is in this context that art must compete for the spectator’s attention in a meaningful way. More than creating mere distractions with which a work of art must compete, the new paradigms of the network and immaterial production create a social world in which the very definition of *presence* changes. In our endless production of images, ideas, and affects, we are, in a way, constantly present. Yet such presence is felt only in short bursts and is dispersed across a wide range of interactions—Facebook posts to virtual friends, work e-mails, Tweets to Twitter followers, and so on. Abramović’s *The Artist Is Present* poses to this shotgun-blast style of presence, by contrast, a long durational performance. Here, not only the artist but also the spectators as participants must commit to an extended and often painful period of physical presence if they are to be rewarded with the emotional, psychological, and/or affective presence of the one-on-one encounter with Abramović. Both the artist and the audience labor together to cultivate a sustained and focused presence between two individual bodies/psyches. In this way, Abramović capitalizes, so to speak, on “living labor.” (This capitalization, of course, still functions within capitalism’s logics; not only is Abramović still profiting from the labor of the audience—a point I address later—but, as Yvonne Rainer, Douglas Crimp, and Taisha Paggett have argued, she also profits from the questionable labor practices imposed on young artist assistants in other performances.)<sup>25</sup>

Hardt and Negri define “living labor,” a concept initially developed by Karl Marx, as “the form-giving fire of our creative capacities.” Simply put, living labor refers to our ability to use what exists around us to produce things and relations—“the ability to engage the world actively and create social life.”<sup>26</sup> As Hardt and Negri note, living labor is precisely that which capital attempts to harness. However, even though capital has clearly been quite successful in this endeavor, it can never completely succeed. Despite capital’s drive to reduce living labor to that which is exchanged in the reproduction of capital, “our innovative and creative capacities” always exceed our capacity to produce capital: biopolitical production is “always excessive with respect to the value that capital can extract from it because capital can never capture all of life” (146).

The same could be said of the biopolitical production that takes place in *The Artist Is Present*. While the performance does not exist outside of capitalist production (after all, it does take place in a museum that requires paid admission, has corporate sponsorship, and reaps major profits for both Abramović and her gallery representative, Sean Kelly), the affective relations produced by the mutual labor of artist and audience in the service of presence necessarily exceed the exchange of capital. To an extent, of course, all art produces affective relations. But what sets *The Artist Is Present* apart and makes it important for a discussion of biopolitics is precisely the interconnectivity between labor and presence that is so central to the performance’s success. The performance operates as a form of immaterial production that creates what Hardt and Negri call “the common.” It relies on the labor of “cooperation, collaboration, and communication” to produce common (that is, not owned by anyone in particular but available to all) ideas, affects, and knowledge in excess of capitalist exchange. Because cooperative labor is built into the

structure of the performance itself, “the creation of cooperation has become internal to labor and thus external to capital” (147).

This discussion of labor leads us back to the questions that began this section: Why is this particular kind of laboring in the service of presence so appealing? Why were so many willing, even excited, to endure the demands of Abramović’s work? In her discussion of Abramović’s work, Maureen Turim writes that the “performances alternate between the desire to control (note the minimalist precision in her scripts for the performances) and the desire to submit (once committed to the script, she endures the fate that she has planned).” There is clearly a masochistic element to her scripted performances, but, Turim argues, this masochism should not be understood as “a direct pleasure from pain,” like that sometimes found in “the pornographic staging of masochism,” but is better grasped in Freudian terms as “a complex desire for pain.”<sup>27</sup> The masochistic elements of the performance perhaps can yield insight into the place of desire in biopolitics.

### **Moral Masochism and the Disruption of the Biopolitical Subject**

Citing Freud’s essay “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Turim notes the distinctions between erotic, feminine, and moral forms of masochism. While the first two forms have roots in a dualism of the subject and the other (the erotic or “erotogenic” form involves “pleasure in pain” and follows the libido throughout its changing phases, and the feminine form involves feminine passivity toward a more dominant partner), moral masochism can be described as a relation to the self. According to Freud, moral masochism derives from “a sense of guilt which is mostly unconscious.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the other two forms of masochism, moral masochism does not require suffering to be inflicted on the masochist by a loved person; rather, “the suffering itself is what matters.” Moral masochism entails an unconscious “need for punishment” that can

find fulfillment even “by impersonal powers or by circumstances.”<sup>29</sup> Following Turim, I would also argue that moral masochism offers a useful framework for understanding the self-scripted masochistic acts performed by Abramović. Whereas Turim focuses her analysis on the masochistic elements in relation to “Christian and particularly Eastern Orthodox moral masochism” (again, bringing us back to Abramović’s biography), I would like to reorient the discussion of masochism toward politics.<sup>30</sup>

In his definition of moral masochism, Freud is clear about the social and cultural dimensions of the superego, from which the masochistic ego seeks its punishment. Freud explains that the superego “came into being through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id’s libidinal impulses—namely the two parents.”<sup>31</sup> While these objects operate as “figures” in the subject’s “conscience,” they nevertheless remain actual entities in “the real external world.” Thus, “the super-ego, the substitute for the Oedipus complex, becomes a representative of the real external world” and sets itself up as “a model for the endeavours of the ego.” Over time, as the child detaches from the parental figures, other figures begin to take on more significance in the development of the superego—“teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes,” and finally, “the dark power of Destiny,” so that the whole social (or natural) world might come to find a place in the superego.<sup>32</sup> The workings of the superego in moral masochism, while instigated by the Oedipus complex, are nevertheless *socially* dependent. Freud makes this point even more clearly in “The Ego and the Id,” in which he asserts that “social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal.”<sup>33</sup> In what ways, then, are the social conditions arising from biopolitics productive to the superego? How might we understand *The Artist Is Present* as a manifestation of a contemporary brand of moral masochism?

According to Freud, the “turning back of sadism against itself regularly occurs where a cultural suppression of the instincts holds back a large part of the subject’s destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life.”<sup>34</sup> The regulatory effects of biopower can be viewed as an extension of the repressive power described here. The docility produced by practices of disciplinary power, as Foucault argues, has given way to a society of control, which in turn produces subjects who produce the state. The psychological mechanism for this production of self-control is the superego, which acts as an internal representative of repressive, prohibitive powers that the subject once encountered as real external figures. Paradoxically, the more the subject “controls his aggressiveness” in response to the imagined demands of the ego ideal, “the more intense becomes his ideal’s inclination to aggressiveness against his own ego.”<sup>35</sup> While Foucault would not give weight to the Freudian hypothesis regarding repression, it is useful to consider how cultural suppression might work in conjunction with the redirection and deployment of instinct in the production of social life. Without a libidinal investment in the operation of power in the production of subjectivity, it is difficult to see how that production would be successful, an issue that Judith Butler addresses and that I elaborate on below. As our desires are harnessed and redirected in the service of biopolitical production, what is our psychological connection to that which exceeds capital—to our remaining living labor? If we can in fact understand Abramović’s performance by way of moral masochism, then the labor involved in the staging of presence—the elaborate display of intense focus, commitment, and catharsis by artist and spectators alike—is the key. This labor can be understood in terms of a need it fulfills: a need for punishment that is controlled by the self.

On the one hand, we can easily read *The Artist Is Present* as demonstrating some of the bodily and psychological punishments that many people submit to in our contemporary

biopolitical, networked society—for instance, waiting in long lines to be counted, documented, and entered into information systems (at hospitals, Department of Motor Vehicles offices, schools, and so forth) and sitting for hours staring at computer or phone screens or out the windows of cars or airplanes. In both *The Artist Is Present* and daily life, subjects might be said to participate willingly in these activities (although there are obvious repercussions and difficulties in not participating, which in the biopolitical regime means refusing to be documented by the state). While labor is harnessed for the production of the state in the quotidian exercise of biopower, in the performance the labor is harnessed by the subject (the spectator as performer) in the service of the self. In other words, in *The Artist Is Present*, the subject subjects himself or herself to another set of punishments for a cathartic experience.

It could be argued that *The Artist Is Present* is not so much about providing an experience of self-control but is, more simply, putting biopolitics on display through the body of Abramović as the cool, detached instigator/regulator of the experience. Alongside the act of self-mastery, the performance operates as a visual metaphor for the lived experience of biopower, with the labor of the spectator being harnessed less by and for the spectator than by and for Abramović. Perhaps this reflection is itself the cathartic moment, the revelation that *The Artist Is Present* provides: its participants are crying and acting out precisely at the tragedy of biopower's circumscription of everyday experience. In this sense, Abramović takes on an uncanny role. She is the screen or window that *looks back* at me and in her silence, forces me to reckon with the Lacanian question: What does the other want from me? The performance might be read in this way as biopower reflected back to itself (to us). These dynamics show that the importance of the biopolitical and psychoanalytic elements at work in *The Artist Is Present* cannot be overlooked, especially considering what these elements might tell us about contemporary subjectivity.

Freud explains that moral masochism has both a destructive component, since it results from a death instinct that has “escaped being turned outward,” and an “erotic component,” since “even the subject’s destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.”<sup>36</sup> How are we to read the self-destructive element of moral masochism in the context of *The Artist Is Present*? It would be a stretch to claim that attending an art exhibition (even one as participatory and effective as the one under discussion) constitutes a self-destructive act on par with destroying one’s own “real existence,” as Freud says, to incite punishment from “the sadistic conscience.” However, the masochistic drive toward the “inexpedient”—toward that which does not serve the interests of the subject as it is constructed through biopower—does seem to be a salient aspect of the performance (169). Whether we read the performance as a reflection of biopower or as a harnessing of living labor toward a mode of production that exceeds capital, the work still calls into being subjects who have committed themselves to a kind of physical and psychological presence that biopower generally discourages. The result of this commitment, as discussed earlier, is often quite visibly moving for the participant; clearly, as Freud points out, the destructive component is still bound to desire in the practice of masochism, and thus is productive of “libidinal satisfaction.” What the performance shows is not a lashing out against what represses us (for, in fact, the performance appropriates many of the bodily gestures of waiting and gazing that biopower produces). Rather, the destructive impulse, which in a biopolitical society of control “has escaped being turned outward,” instead operates on the subject, foregrounding and, perhaps for a moment, partially undoing and reconstituting subjectivity in a process that is at once repressive and productive (170).

This simultaneity of prohibition and productivity finds support in Butler’s argument that becoming a subject involves both being subjectivized by and subject to discourse. According to

Butler, one is activated as an intelligible speaking subject through the very discourse that also delimits and constrains subjectivity. Butler argues for a notion of subjectivity that augments the Foucauldian emphasis on the primacy of discourse in the production of subjectivity and social relations (and the criticism of Freud's emphasis on the power of the prohibitive) from a psychoanalytic perspective. For Butler, prohibition itself is necessarily productive, and as psychoanalytic thought shows, "there is no desire without the law that forms and sustains the very desire it prohibits."<sup>37</sup> In fact, we cannot explain our "*attachment to subjection*" without the maintenance of desire within prohibition (102, emphasis in original). For Butler, this issue of attachment to subjection raises but does not answer "the question of masochism in subject-formation." Speaking specifically of sexuality, Butler points out that the prohibition of certain forms of desire not only forbids that desire but also intensifies the "focus" on that desire, thereby "eroticizing the law that would abolish eroticism" (103). Butler thus points to a masochistic undertone in processes of subject formation. However, she does not elaborate on the possibility of a constitutive masochism that is responsible for attachment to subjection or that is capable of subverting the law that enables subjectivity. Gilles Deleuze and Leo Bersani, though, attend to masochism's role in subject formation and view the eroticization of the law as signaling a masochism that occupies a central role in the production of life with potentially "shattering" (to use Bersani's word) effects on subjectivity.<sup>38</sup>

### **Masochism as Absurd Reversal of Patriarchal Law**

Reading *The Artist Is Present* through a Freudian lens as a masochistic desire for pain provides insights into the formation—and possible disruption—of subjectivity in biopolitics, yet Deleuze's theory of masochism as a suspension and reversal of the law brings into focus the specifically feminine (and perhaps feminist) performative aspect of masochism in relation to the

social realm. Deleuze offers a correction to the Freudian theory of masochism, arguing that Freud wrongly links masochism to sadism by reducing it to a form of sadism that has been turned back on the ego. Deleuze explains that masochism, far from being sadism's counterpart, operates according to its own unique logic. Masochism is primarily "formal and dramatic," "a state of waiting" in which "the work of art and the contract" come together to achieve a higher state.<sup>39</sup>

Deleuze's analysis of masochism (enacted through a reading of the stories of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, after whom the term *masochism* is named) resonates particularly with Abramović's performance in the context of biopolitics, in three respects. First, and most obviously, Deleuze notes the centrality of duration and suspense in his definition of masochism, pointing to the psychical suspense of reality in favor of fantasy as well as the physical suspense of motion over a long period of time. Deleuze finds that this painful state of waiting is a necessary prerequisite to pleasure, just as waiting is the necessary prerequisite to the pleasure of face-to-face presence in *The Artist Is Present*, which entails the suspension of motion over many hours and months, outside the daily reality of capitalist production. Second, Deleuze draws attention to the necessarily contractual form of masochism, explaining that the tortured always enters into a contract with the torturer, detailing the terms of his or her suffering in a process that, to some degree, blurs the distinction between passivity and activity. Abramović, in this respect, can be read as the icy mother figure with whom participants willingly enter into a contract. Finally, Deleuze finds in masochism an oppositional relationship to the superego and, relatedly, to the law and the father through the agency of the mother. According to Deleuze, the masochist ultimately removes the father from the familial drama (a point that Bersani also develops). The victim who suffers pain at the hands of the mother figure seeks out and submits to this pain not

as punishment for his or her own guilt but as punishment for the father, and all the father represents, within himself or herself. The masochist thus turns the law of the father against the father within the self and, in so doing, reveals the father's law in all its absurdity. In its imitation and elevation of the bodily positions produced by biopower, *The Artist Is Present* follows the masochistic aim "not to mitigate the law but on the contrary to emphasize its extreme severity" (91). In true masochistic form, the spectator-participants engaged in the performance "demand the punishment first and then order that the satisfaction of the desire should necessarily follow upon the punishment" (88–89). This punishment is pushed to extreme levels in the performance, as one may wait an entire day with only a mere chance at reaching the front of the line. In a final absurd turn, the reward that one waits for in *The Artist Is Present* consists simply of more sitting and waiting, but this time these acts take place within a context that biopolitics forecloses—one waits in the presence of an embodied other who returns one's gaze, essentially undoing the alienating and state-serving effects of biopower.

Mapping the biopolitical onto this scene in the form of "punishment" may at first seem like a stretch. After all, what is being reenacted in the performance are the kinds of motion and stillness to which one submits quite regularly and willingly in the service of the production of the state. Undoubtedly, we derive pleasure from our biopolitical existence; we enjoy the permissions granted to us by virtue of submitting to state policies and so forth. The laws that structure biopower (and the cultural forms that support biopower in the service of capitalism) are, by definition, productive of life rather than prohibitive. But *The Artist Is Present* diminishes the capitalist-productive side of the equation and forces the participant into an engagement with boredom that has no predetermined experience of pleasure, thus opening the possibilities for other kinds of creative activity.

Here, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the masochism at work in the performance produces precisely what biopower does without: a contract. While sovereign power in its classical form, according to Foucault, operated through the social contract that gave the sovereign the right to deny or allow life, biopower functions without such a contract. Biopower instead operates through the production of bodies and populations, with the sovereign becoming nearly invisible. In Deleuze's formulation, the masochistic subject "leeches power from the sovereign" to produce the fantasy of a contract.<sup>40</sup> This fantasized contract foregrounds the existence of a power relation between the self—who, in Foucault's paradoxical account, does not exist prior to biopower, which is its mode of becoming—and the sovereign. The masochistic contract thus reveals the processes that facilitate the construction of and consent to the law, which are necessary for the production of subjects and the functioning of biopower. Masochism is thus a structuring logic of biopolitics and, at its extreme end, a mechanism for understanding and producing opposition to biopower. In this way, *The Artist Is Present* can be seen as enacting and drawing from what Bersani calls a "productive masochism."<sup>41</sup>

In his reading of Freud's work, Bersani locates masochism as a driving force of life. Masochism is a condition that, by its very definition, extends painful tension, and such tension is required for the incitement to sexuality and the seeking of sexual satisfaction. Thus, masochism plays the decisive role in the development of sexuality; indeed, "sexuality is ontologically grounded in masochism," and, as such, "*masochism serves life*" (39). For Bersani, sexuality constitutes a "shattering" of the self in the face of an overload of stimuli (38). Rather than "an exchange of intensities between individuals," sexuality is "a condition of broken negotiations with the world, a condition in which others merely set off the self-shattering mechanism of masochistic *jouissance*" (41). Like Deleuze, Bersani, too, recognizes the oppositional power of

masochism insofar as it is a reaction against the law of the father. Bersani contrasts “productive masochism,” capable of “exploiting the shattering effects of sexuality in order to maintain the tensions of an eroticized, denarrativized, and mobile consciousness,” with the “derivative masochism” that is promoted by “the Oedipal father” insofar as he “inhibits fantasmatic mobility” (63–64, 46). While the former masochism is “repressed” in Freud, it is nevertheless a powerful force and one that, as Bersani notes, is both central to life and capable of productive “elaboration” in art (43). Moreover, its “shattering effects” have the capacity to unravel the Oedipal narrative and pose a challenge to the father’s law by extending the moment of tension—a moment that is prolonged to almost absurd lengths in *The Artist Is Present*.

The performance points, first, to the masochistic structure of biopolitics (which trades on boredom for the pleasure, however indirect, of the production of bodies and capital), and second, to the pleasures of masochistic *jouissance*, which may lie beyond boredom if it is divorced from capitalist production. The performance pushes the masochistic situation of the biopolitical to an extreme: waiting is rewarded with more waiting, this time in a face-to-face encounter with no predetermined or guaranteed outcome or experience, except for what one can produce in the moment. In this respect, I would argue that the performance amounts to a (limited) disruption of biopolitics that is of the same character as Sacher-Masoch’s subversion of the law. The masochism of the piece reveals the true character of patriarchal law and embodies the definition of masochism that Deleuze finds in Sacher-Masoch’s writings: “Suffering is not the cause of pleasure itself but the necessary precondition for achieving it.”<sup>42</sup> In short, the masochistic situation that the performance imitates and amplifies shows the law pushed to its extreme conclusion, revealing a power that only reproduces itself in an absurd cycle dependent on our labor.<sup>43</sup> Whether we are to read the absurdity of the performance as a valid, if momentary,

oppositional practice with liberatory potential or as merely absurd in a more conservative sense, enabled and bolstered as it is by the very capitalist system that it in some ways critiques, remains an open question.

## **Presence, Recognition, and Breakdown of the Biopolitical Subject**

In simple descriptive terms, *The Artist Is Present* could be characterized as the staging of a confrontation between self and other. Abramović, as the only permanent participant in this staging, positions herself as the other who is confronted repeatedly by the spectator-participants' gazes. The confrontation is scripted and restricted: the participants may not touch Abramović, act violently, present her with gifts, or disrobe, and this is seen to by the museum guards. The experience of being present before an other is in this way suspended, confined to a moment (even if that moment lasts several hours) of looking, before touch, before verbal communication, before the exchange of objects. What, then, is finally communicated in this moment? What does one recognize in the other? And why is it, at least for some, an affective/effective experience?

Butler explains that “the Hegelian tradition links desire with recognition, claiming that desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings.” However, what Hegel doesn't address is that “the terms by which we are recognized as humans are socially articulated and changeable.”<sup>44</sup> The desire for recognition is obviously at work in cases where spectator-participants used the opportunity to sit before Abramović as a way to garner attention for their own performances (which included stripping, holding up signs, attempting to give her flowers, and so forth). These actions were met by Abramović with the same silent gaze that she presented to less boisterous participants. If participants felt any recognition in this act of looking, one must wonder at the character of a recognition that merely sees, that registers the subject before the

gaze as an object in its field of vision—an object from which the seer has pledged not to look away. Does this mode of recognition demonstrate the other of biopolitics, the mute power that holds us in its gaze and thereby activates us as productive subjects? Is this what recognition has become in the age of biopolitics? And if we are to read this interaction dialectically, how do we describe its synthesis, the jumping-off point into another set of relations?

The momentary undoing of the subjects sitting across from Abramović—whether chalked up to the self-shattering of masochistic *jouissance* (as in Bersani), the ego chastised by the internalized authority figures of the superego (as in Freud), or the punishment of the father within the self (as in Deleuze)—seems to suggest another aspect of this recognition. The labor of waiting comes to an end when participants are afforded the opportunity to be in Abramović’s presence, but at this moment, labor begins anew as they must commit to returning her gaze. What they are confronted with in this other is a fragile human body that has committed itself to being present for each individual participant and that has summoned, as Abramović says, “the willpower to keep your word, no matter how difficult.”<sup>45</sup> In embodying the coldness of the biopolitical gaze, Abramović demonstrates fidelity to her own project and to each of the participants who have chosen to be part of it. Perhaps the third term that emerges from this self-other encounter is the recognition of the subject’s capability to appropriate the ever-present power of biopolitics. Rather than a straightforward recognition *by* the other, the participants are invited to recognize *in* the other the fixed gaze of the state and the possibility that exists in themselves to commit, if only for a moment, to a practice of presence and fidelity in service of something beyond capital.<sup>46</sup>

What shape this “something beyond” takes is yet to be articulated. The performance brings us to a moment of crisis, wherein the subject is confronted, reacts, and then resolves (or

merely escapes) the crisis by exiting. This is why I do not cast *The Artist Is Present* as a solution to the problem of biopolitics. Rather, the performance is just that: a performance that takes place within the terrain of the biopolitical. What it does provide is a momentary space in which to dwell on the conditions of presence in the age of biopower, where a sustained face-to-face presence with an other can inspire acts of intense labor, provoke resistance or acting out, and move people to tears. These momentary breakdowns in the everyday order of things offer fleeting glimpses of that which capital may not be able to fully contain. The performance marks an encounter in which “the passage of time is . . . a personal construction” that produces an immaterial effect: the momentary estrangement from the self through the encounter with an other whose presence and affect feel all too familiar.<sup>47</sup> If we follow Butler’s assertion that estrangement from what constitutes our subjectivity is a necessary step toward “remaking” subjectivity, then *The Artist Is Present* may well perform an instance of collective reinvention.<sup>48</sup>

## Notes

I would like to thank Dr. Roland Végső and Dr. Marissa Vigneault for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Ken Johnson, “A Gallery Show, Site Unseen,” *New York Times*, 6 November 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/07/arts/design/at-marina-Abramovićs-generator-blindfolds-are-required.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/07/arts/design/at-marina-Abramovićs-generator-blindfolds-are-required.html).

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Searle, “Marina Abramović Review—‘Who knows what might happen?’” *Guardian*, 11 June 2014, [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/11/marina-Abramović-review-512-hours-serpentine-gallery](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/11/marina-Abramović-review-512-hours-serpentine-gallery).

<sup>3</sup> Judith Thurman, “Walking through Walls: Marina Abramović’s Performance Art,” *New Yorker*, 8 March 2010, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/08/walking-through-walls](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/08/walking-through-walls).

<sup>4</sup> Marina Abramović, interview by Karlyn De Jongh and Sarah Gold, “Profile: Marina Abramović,” *ArtUS* 1, no. 28 (2010): 4.

<sup>5</sup> See Mary Richards, *Marina Abramović* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Thurman, “Walking through Walls.”

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 245.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 141

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 253.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty,” in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Fisher, “Proprioceptive Friction: Waiting in Line to Sit with Marina Abramović,” *Senses and Society* 7, no. 2 (2012): 167; “Marina Abramović Made Me Cry,” Tumblr, last modified 10 June 2010, [marinaAbramovićmademecry.tumblr.com](http://marinaAbramovićmademecry.tumblr.com).

<sup>16</sup> Fisher, “Proprioceptive Friction,” 168.

<sup>17</sup> Many of Abramović's works have been documented, and *The Artist Is Present* is not the first of her works to be the subject of a documentary project in which the artist also participates as an interviewee. See *Marina Abramović de martes a viernes (Marina Abramović from Tuesday to Friday)*, dir. Ximena Cuevas, Mexico, 2011). Here, Abramović is similarly forthcoming about her own physical and psychological struggles in relation to her work.

<sup>18</sup> While Abramović was the first person to call herself the “grandmother of performance art,” she now prefers the term “pioneer” instead. See Slava Mogutin, “The Legend of Marina Abramović,” *Whitewall Magazine*, Summer 2010, available at [slavamogutin.com/marina-abramovic/](http://slavamogutin.com/marina-abramovic/).

<sup>19</sup> Abramović, “Profile,” 9.

<sup>20</sup> Richards, *Marina Abramović*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, “*Poetics*,” in *Aristotle: Selections*, trans. Terrence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 544.

<sup>22</sup> Abramović, “Profile,” 6.

<sup>23</sup> Abramović, “Profile,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 145.

<sup>25</sup> Yvonne Rainer, Douglas Crimp, and Taisha Paggett, letter to Jeffrey Deitch, “Yvonne Rainer Blasts Abramović and MOCA LA,” *Performance Club* (blog), 11 November 2011, [theperformanceclub.org/2011/11/yvonne-rainer-douglas-crimp-and-taisha-paggett-blast-marina-abramovic-and-moca-la/](http://theperformanceclub.org/2011/11/yvonne-rainer-douglas-crimp-and-taisha-paggett-blast-marina-abramovic-and-moca-la/).

<sup>26</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 146.

- <sup>27</sup> Maureen Turim, "Marina Abramović's Performance: Stresses on the Body and Psyche in Installation Art," *Camera Obscura*, no. 54 (2003): 102.
- <sup>28</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1962), 19:161. See also Turim, "Marina Abramović's Performance," 103.
- <sup>29</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism," 165.
- <sup>30</sup> Turim, "Marina Abramović's Performance," 103.
- <sup>31</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism," 167.
- <sup>32</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism," 168.
- <sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in Strachey, *Works of Sigmund Freud*, 19:37.
- <sup>34</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism," 170.
- <sup>35</sup> Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 54.
- <sup>36</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism," 170.
- <sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 103.
- <sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 38.
- <sup>39</sup> Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 109, 71, 76.
- <sup>40</sup> Donald Pease, discussion at the Dartmouth College Futures of American Studies Institute, 26 June 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 89.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," 101.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Abramović, "Profile," 6.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, it could also be argued that the spectator-participants are motivated by the desire to be part of the artwork. This desire for the minor fame of appearing before an audience (in person and in the documentary film, photographs, the Tumblr site, etc.) in the presence of Abramović is no doubt at work here. In this sense, the master in this dialectic could also be read as the museum as institution and/or the accompanying media that promote the museum's (and Abramović's) validity and financial success. These two motivations (and surely others as well) exist simultaneously in the performance.

<sup>47</sup> Abramović, "Profile," 6.

<sup>48</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 4.