Performance

Review Colloquy: *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Live stream from the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich, September 2020

Film Actor and Live performance: Marina Abramović
Film Actor: Willem Dafoe
Violetta Valéry: Emily Pogorelc
Floria Tosca: Selene Zanetti
Desdemona: Leah Hawkins
Cio-Cio-San: Kiandra Howarth
Carmen: Nadezhda Karyazina
Lucia Ashton: Adela Zaharia
Norma: Lauren Fagan
Director and sets: Marina Abramović
Co-Director: Lynsey Peisinger
Conductor of the Bayerisches Staatsorchester: Yoel Gamzou
Music: Marko Nikodijević
Written by Marina Abramović and Petter Skavlan
Film Director: Nabil Elderkin
Visual Intermezzos: Marco Brambilla
Sound Design: Luka Kozlovacki
Costumes: Riccardo Tisci for Burberry
Conception of the Stage Design: Anna Schöttl
Lighting: Urs Schönebaum
Dramaturgy: Benedikt Stampfli
Conductor of the Bayerische Staatsoper Choruses: Stellario Fagone

Introduction

In December 2019, *Vulture* reported that "our modern-day Puccini" was "singlehandedly trying to bring back a beloved trend of the 19th century: the opera."[1] Performers and fans fumed over this framing in online responses, objecting to a familiar depiction of opera as something dormant, absent from contemporary life, the music-theatrical equivalent of omnibuses trundling over gaslit cobbles. Its comparison of the composer at hand to Mozart as well as Puccini also raised hackles, for said musician was the perennially controversial rapper and producer Kanye West.

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Reviewing West's *Nebuchadnezzar* (2019) and *Mary* (2019), critics noted resemblances to the Handelian oratorio, with *tableaux vivants* by multidisciplinary artist Vanessa Beecroft likewise recalling the eighteenth century more than the nineteenth.[2] As *Mary* made its debut on a beach at Art Basel in Miami, the mystery around West and Beecroft's embrace of "opera" lingered. How did the term serve their mergers of *haute couture* runway shows, celebrity, performance art, and quasi-sacred ritual? Was opera so dead to the creators and public, as well as this journalist, that it connoted little more than grandiose archaism? The authors who review the Bayerische Staatsoper premiere of Marina Abramović's *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* in this colloquy arrive at similar questions.

Indeed, such questions are familiar to readers of *Opera Quarterly*. In review colloquia devoted to DVDs, writers have followed the development of opera filmed for the home viewer; another 2018 colloquy acknowledged the rise of the cinecast through the Metropolitan Opera's transmission of Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel*.[3] This journal has from its early issues attended to mass-cultural views and (re)mediations of opera; for example, in 2009, guest-editor Heather Wiebe and other contributors contemplated the genre's obsolescence.[4] More recent issues have examined live-transmission technologies, relationships between opera and film, scissions of voice from performing body, and the eternal problem of the work concept.

These concerns all bear on *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, an "opera-project" by Marina Abramović with arias by Bellini, Bizet, Donizetti, Puccini, and Verdi, as well as original music by composer Marko Nikodijević. As the writers in this colloquy concur, the "project" has less to do with opera per se than with one of its greatest stars, another recurring figure in this journal: Maria Callas. Yet as many observe, even Callas seems a mere shadow cast over the proceedings relative to Abramović, the performance-art *doyenne* who lays prone, gestures, and acts onstage, and who also stars in interstitial films. Contributor Michal Grover-Friedlander notes the event's resemblance to a funeral, and indeed, as Abramović drops the needle on Callas's "Casta diva" in the final scene, death feels all-consuming, claiming the artist, the opera singer, the recording (abruptly halted), and opera itself—along with thousands outside.

West and Beecroft's works, perhaps best understood as images of opera refracted by the glitz of contemporary art's festival and gallery scenes, took place as COVID-19 made its leap to human bodies in 2019. *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* is likewise a multidisciplinary artist's personal filtering and remediation of her idea of opera, though the question of whether the piece counts as *an* opera divides the reviewers; only two consider it so. It made its debut in September 2020 after lockdowns rendered a scheduled April debut impossible. Performances proceeded with limited audiences and a live stream via the Staatsoper's website, the latter a chance for those interested in Callas, opera, performance art, and mediation to watch as Abramović

realized a vision that, as the scholar Sozita Goudouna has noted, was already coalescing in 2014—but as film, not opera.[5]

Building on work by Benjamin Piekut and Jason Stanyek, opera scholar Carlo Cenciarelli has examined posthumous remediations of Callas as case studies in operatic liveness—a prized quality for the art form, promising presence and immediacy—and deadness, the reanimation of canonic pasts.[6] In *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Abramović, long fascinated with reperformance and staging her own mortality, elevates the deadness of Callas and, almost incidentally, opera to the level of subsuming, saturating theme. Can live opera survive the pandemic? And as contributor T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko asks, can the genre afford to seem so past- and personality-oriented, aloof from societal struggles, as the world burns? In an era of frequent crossings between opera and its medial and formal others (film, performance art, etc.), can "opera" mean more than deadness enlivened ever anew?

Nicholas Stevens, Colloquy Curator

Nicholas Stevens is Visiting Assistant Professor of Musicology at Wichita State University. His monograph Crisis Mode: Opera as Form and Medium After the End of History *is under contract with the University of Michigan Press, as is* Opera in Flux, *the collaborative volume he is co-editing with Yayoi Uno Everett. He co-organized a symposium around the latter in 2020 and has presented at conferences across Europe and North America. His writing has appeared in* German Studies Review *and the* Journal of the Society for American Music, *and he is a contributor to the forthcoming volume* Thomas Adès Studies *(Cambridge, 2021).*

7 Deaths of Maria Callas, or, The Day Opera Didn't Die

Introduction

What does it take to breathe new life into an ancient art form? How much friction is needed to spark fire in a soggy avant-garde? Where is the line between art and the life of an artist? How can we recover humanity from an icon? When the Bayerische Staatsoper announced performance artist Marina Abramović's opera *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, one of the authors of this piece, mezzo-soprano and musicologist Nina Eidsheim, excitedly texted her longtime friend and collaborator, soprano and performance artist Juliana Snapper. We were hopeful that the promised Abramovićian treatment would offer a fresh experience as well as a fresh understanding of opera and the Maria Callas myth.

Part of the draw of both performance art and opera is the potential for audience members to connect with the heightened sense of life and aliveness that an artist(s) brings through the transformation of their own body into an expressive work of art. Abramović's work has been lauded for its conceptual elegance. It makes common human experiences spectacular by framing and prolonging simple acts, and then

inviting audiences to witness, and even to enter into and take action within the performance space. Opera singers' art, too, exists in a state of perpetual tension between the lived body and the body in performance. "A Voice" is often imagined as something one is born with, but the truth is messier. Perhaps more than any other artist, an opera singer's life is lived in constant and lifelong relation to the cultivation and maintenance of her instrument. She cannot leave her instrument behind in the studio or tuck it safely away in its case. What she eats, how she speaks—the ordinary decisions of day-to-day life—are all made in relation to the vocal body within her. Opera's simultaneous intimacy and remove arise in part from audiences' awe that mortal bodies can be trained to create such otherworldly sounds. Soprano Maria Callas maintained a certain distance from her audience, and she was infamously less than gentle when coaching young singers. At the same time, the press and her biographers continually intruded on the most private matters such as her body weight, body image, and love life. As an artist, Callas conveyed a vulnerability that rendered her at once untouchable and deeply touching.

It is their uncanny ability to immortalize human moments that has distinguished the work of both Callas and Abramović. Callas transformed operatic clichés/inevitabilities—heroines' deaths—into emotional high wire acts. Abramović advanced conversations about gender, body, and memory, using her own body in acts that pushed her physical limits, through events that were operatic in scale and emotional range. When making art with and through the human body, what is required to effect its transformation from the everyday to the exceptional, from beautiful to sublime?

Reflections

7 Deaths of Maria Callas is billed as "directed" by Abramović. And while Abramović does not sing in this performance, she is unquestionably the diva. Whereas in traditional opera a director's creative input largely plays out behind the scenes, in performance art the artist may be considered an auteur director, conceiving and structuring every aspect of her performance and its context or mise-en-scène. When positioned across disciplines, performance art not only critiques sedimented social practices, but also challenges the assumptions implicit in cultural institutions. For example, in Yoko Ono's 1964 *Cut Piece*, the score was given to a concert audience to render and the music drama emerged from the sounds of scissors on cloth as individual audience members walked onstage and cut a piece from her dress. In recent years, opera directors have increasingly re-staged repertory opera in radical ways and have worked with visual artists and living composers to push the genre's boundaries. Most *OQ* readers will be familiar with painter David Hockney's set designs and video artist Bill Viola's imagery for the *Tristan Project*, which transposed Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* from opera stage to art museum in 2005. British and European opera companies have long restaged repertory work outside the opera

house, and, in the United States, the Los Angeles-based opera company The Industry is devoted solely to site-specific original work. Performance artist Ron Athey has made opera an extension of his extreme body art practice, training and collaborating with Juliana Snapper, one of the authors of this piece.

While an opera company's commissioning an artist is far from radical, the news of Abramović's engagement nonetheless generated rare excitement. Is the premise of this production that Abramović could bring presence and relevance to a dead art form? Is this premise correctly assumed? And, if so, is it fulfilled?

The performance is structured around the tragic heroines of seven popular operas: *Carmen*, *Tosca*, *Otello*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Norma*, *Madame Butterfly*, and *La traviata*. Signature arias of each doomed protagonist are performed by a sequence of singers with very different voice types—symbolic, perhaps, of Callas's identity as a voice beyond fach: La Callas, Soprano Assoluta! (This is one more reason Callas remains a favorite topic of contention among opera geeks.) The physical presence of the soloists justifies the venue of the Opera House; but, beyond this, the living presence of the singers is minimized to such a degree that they appear as stage props in both scale and importance within the mise-en-scène. Imagine blurry, thumb-sized figures, each dressed oddly in an identical greyish dress and apron, standing downstage right. An enormous screen fills the proscenium, dominating the evening with a series of huge, color-saturated movies. These "music videos," as Abramović calls them,[7] dwarf the lone bed stage left, where she lies silently without moving for the first two-thirds of the evening.

Callas's Paris death bedroom is re-created in detail onstage for the final scene. A voice-over with text written by Abramović and Petter Skavlan plays while Abramović carries out various actions, including lying in Callas's bed. Rather than anything relevant to Callas's life, she rambles about the thread count of the sheets as she dies. When Abramović is gone, the living singers enter the bedroom to clean up after her. In their wake, Abramović reappears in Burberry gold lamé, her projection dwarfing everyone onstage, in the pit and in the house. She is striking, indeed larger than life. And yet, when the needle drops on a recording of Callas singing "Casta diva," Callas is, even disembodied, somehow the epitome of liveness.

If the seven dwarves could wake Snow White from death, could not Abramović, with her seven sopranos, give life to this performance? What is required to bring relevance and vitality to a character, the Diva, and to an art form, opera?

Why Doesn't the Character "Callas" Die in This Opera?

In interviews, Abramović reminisces. Once, in her teens, she was moved by Callas's voice; she has felt a kinship with the diva because of a slight resemblance, a shared star sign, and a near-lethal brush with heartbreak. But this work does not suggest that the artist held any deeper interest in Callas or her art. Does she consider Callas an artist? Or just an interpretive vessel? Or a celebrity phenomenon? Had

Abramović wondered, for example, what "Vissi d'arte" meant, would it not have resonated with her, a woman who lives her art? Perhaps, then, it is a basic lack of curiosity that renders her unable to forge any meaningful connection with her subject or with the medium of opera. Instead, Abramović, who once declared herself a "mirror" for her audiences, now seems content to gaze on her own reflection.[8] Rallying the powers of Hollywood—cinematography, hair, makeup, and famous co-star—to re-create a mixture of elements or scenes from her previous performance works as operatic death scenes, e.g., a snake from *Dragon Heads* (1990) as murder weapon in *Otello*, Abramović has created a supercharged ninety-minute reflection of herself. As a result, Callas is eclipsed as its subject, and even Abramović's own bodily presence on the stage becomes incidental.

There are seven deaths within this performance, and yet nobody dies. Abramović does not allow the singers to transform. In order to transform, they would need to have lived—to have been given oxygen and some space to themselves. Instead, the production and performances of *7 Deaths* slowly enact an embalming. But unlike traditional embalming, which is intended to preserve a dead body's form in the afterlife, celluloid embalms the living. As we learn from her biographer James Westcott, Abramović is preoccupied with the dilemma of what happens to her work when the object, stage, energy, and condition for it, indeed her own presence, is snuffed out by death.[9] While some of performance art's radicalism is precisely its ephemeral and uncontrollable nature, the question of its afterlife looms large for Abramović; it might even be an obsession. Westcott, whose biography is born of an "exceptionally close relation between biographer and subject," titled his 2010 book *When Abramović Dies*.[10]

As in the title of one of her most celebrated pieces, *The Artist Is Present*, we know that Abramović's body is present in *7 Deaths*: it is projected onto the screen, and she also lies in the bed onstage. But is she truly present? What is *presence* in a piece that is performed to exist as its own documentation, as an archive of visual objects to be reproduced and distributed after the fact? Each moment is given a price, packaged and sold as a unit. While it may seem that Abramović gives of her own body to her audience and to art, and that, in contrast, Callas's formalized training removed her offering from what we might think of as her quotidian vocal body, it is not clear whether Abramović or Callas is more present in this piece.

Callas did not control her legacy in life or in death. Though she sought privacy to the point of reclusiveness, her mortal flesh—not just her voice but her body weight and love and sex lives—was arguably the most discussed and debated in all of opera, and perhaps still is. After her death, her personal belongings, sold by her estranged family, became holy fetishes: "the tape recorder Callas used to practice music . . slips, stockings, a black girdle, two brassieres and an embroidered blue corset, and . . . three plaits of the diva's hair, all in slightly different tones of brunette." Four hundred of Callas's possessions were last auctioned in 2000 at an event characterized

by journalist, biographer, and then-owner of this part of the Callas collection Nicolas Petsalis-Diomidis as "an auction in the spirit of the Marilyn Monroe auction . . an intimate, private affair. . . ." He justified the sale by asserting that, "Perhaps the Callas myth is better served by dispersing her last personal belongings. . . After all, who will buy these objects if not people who truly love and admire Callas, who respect her memory and cultivate her legend? I said to myself, why a museum and not 100, 150 or 1,000 ardent defenders of her glory who can perpetuate her memory?"[11]

"Callas is dying every time she is singing," Abramović complained in a webinar discussing the piece with composer Marko Nikodijević, who deftly wrote music to tie the arias together.[12] Even when someone else controls the needle that plays her voice, as in countless homes around the world and in the final scene of *7 Deaths*, Callas's recorded voice has a visceral presence, a fragility within virtuosity that offers the most human moment in the live work.

If *dying* is the dissolution of form, a transformation from the quotidian to the sublime, then Abramović, seventy-four years old at the time of the performance, has already died several times. But she did not allow for that during *7 Deaths*. If Callas teaches Abramović only one thing about the life and afterlife of a diva, it is that control is not possible. Perhaps Abramović's myth and legacy are better served by relinquishing the illusion of control. A legacy, as Callas shows, is not built on the kind of iconic perfection that only Hollywood's celluloid can provide. Instead, when a fraught, suffering, aging, everyday body—a body we've all experienced—has the ability to transport us long after it expires, we're brought to our knees, we expire . . and we are resurrected.

Juliana Snapper and Nina Sun Eidsheim

Coloratura-in-exilio Juliana Snapper is best known for developing radical operatic vocal techniques like using inversion to initiate internal gravitational shifts to the vocal mechanism; "Bouche a l'eau" (mouth to water), allowing her to sing underwater; and a "listening vocality," re-routing cycles of transmission and reception between audience and performer. Snapper's solo and large-scale works have been staged across the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, and North America. She is currently based in Izmir, Turkey.

Nina Sun Eidsheim has written books about voice, race, and materiality and is Professor of Musicology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is also a vocalist and the founder and director of the UCLA Practice-based Experimental Epistemology (PEER) Lab, an experimental research lab dedicated to decolonializing data, methodology, and analysis, in and through multisensory creative practices.

Thoughts on Marina Abramović's *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*

1. Seven arias stand at the core of Marina Abramović's opera *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. The seventh is followed by two additional scenes, not counted in the title—scenes that are different from the first seven, though each can be called a death scene of Maria Callas. The seven arias chosen are among the most famous sung by Callas and number among the most frequently performed in opera. Since Callas's death, recordings of some of these arias have been repeatedly remastered and reissued as "new" Callas discs. In Abramović's opera, a different singer is cast to perform each aria and each character, though all are dressed in the same maid's attire. The heroines in all these operas die; however, not all the scenes chosen by Abramović are death scenes. Of course, every opera fan knows the heroine will end up dead, even if we are not listening to a death scene. So the title *7 Deaths* might initially be taken to refer to Callas dying onstage as a heroine in each of these seven roles. The title, then, taps into a frequent trope that identifies Callas's roles with Callas the woman.

2. The title *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* resonates with the title of an earlier opera, a joint project of Abramović and Robert Wilson from 2011, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*. She has been quoted saying to Wilson that, "I want you to stage my funeral."[13] The operas share stylistic traits such as accentuated stillness, slow stylized motion and gestures, and a repetitive structure, as well as the appearances in both of Abramović and actor Willem Dafoe. The associations drawn between the two operas encourage the identification of Abramović with Callas, an identification the former fosters time and again in her interviews.

3. Abramović also plays the role of Callas in *7 Deaths*. During the seven scenes, Abramović lies in bed on the far side of the stage, motionless, her eyes shut. Sooner or later, each of the singers advances toward the bed, some sitting on it, or singing beside her, or addressing her. She does not respond. Is she dead? And would the seven dead heroines then return to haunt her while she is playing dead? This is different from other performances in which Abramović is known to have put herself in actual life-and-death situations, e.g., *Rhythm 0* (1974).

4. Preceding each aria is an interlude in which Abramović's speaking voice resounds over the music composed for the opera by Marko Nikodijević. An image of clouds is screened above the entire stage, engulfing the bed in which the immobile Abramović lies. With each interlude, the clouds become progressively darker, stormier, and more hellish. During the arias themselves, Abramović and Dafoe are screened mutely playing roles that echo the plots of the operas from which the arias are drawn, such as Desdemona being strangled (by snakes), and Tosca falling (from a skyscraper). Throughout the opera, then, Abramović is with us vocally (recorded) or visually (screened and live) or both. She is either onstage—in the bed, her body

motionless, her eyes and mouth closed, her voiceover loud and clear—or on screen in projected close-ups; or, as in the final scenes I will refer to below, rising from the bed to perform, "live," Callas's death.

5. An interlude with a spoken voiceover precedes each sung aria; their content changes in relation to the aria about to be heard. Here, in these interludes, Abramović speaks in aphorisms, uttering short texts that are, it would seem, Abramović's or Callas's or the heroine's internal speech. They are interpretative, imparting a different view on the aria. Take, for example, what she says in the interlude preceding Floria's aria from *Tosca*:

> It is not dangerous to jump / It is not dangerous to fall. / The rush of air / Of your blood through the veins. / Suspended, yet falling, / Space. / You have time to feel, / time to love. / Forever. / You just fly, fly, fly, / No, it is not dangerous to fall / It's when you land / It gets dangerous.

Then, on screen, accompanying Floria's singing, are images of Abramović flying in slow motion just after she has jumped off a building. Her flight looks pleasurable. She is providing an alternative understanding of the suicide. My immediate association was with Catherine Clément's seminal book, written early in the history of feminist musicology, *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*.[14] Clément provides readers with alternative synopses for all those repeatedly consumed operas and their repeated killings of women. Abramović, similarly, places a string of scenes from these death-dealing operas before the audience. The arias are beautiful, pleasurable, and do not evoke death. The images on screen paired with them, however, are always images of death.

6. What is especially conspicuous visually in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* is the disparity in size between the live singers onstage and the virtual performers, Abramović and Dafoe, screened behind them. The onstage singers are miniscule in comparison with the overbearing close-up images projected on screen. And yet, the voices of the opera singers are large, while the voices of the performers onscreen are unheard. Contrast is also introduced between the traditionally poised, nearly motionless, totally undramatic, and under-acting live singers, and what goes on behind them on screen, as though Abramović and Dafoe, in their overly dramatic, emphatic, and slow-motion onscreen presences, were taken from a Robert Wilson opera. Moreover, the repeated appearances of Abramović and Dafoe stand out: they change costumes for each scene, whereas all the singers are identically dressed—that is, *under*dressed—in assuredly non-diva attire, wearing their gray maid's uniforms. Is the discrepancy between what is seen and heard a comment on the medium of opera?

7. Upon the arrival of what could be numbered the eighth death, the screen is removed and the depth of the stage reveals Callas's Paris apartment, familiar from

photographs and famous through its meticulous reconstruction in Zeffirelli's film *Callas Forever* (2002). Abramović now lies in bed in Callas's apartment, adopting a posture not unlike the onstage position she has taken throughout the piece. I can imagine myself eavesdropping on Callas on her deathbed. If Abramović has been making Callas present in bed, then this might have been her deathbed scene all along. And now we are simply adjusting the focus, closing in on the scene where Callas plays the role of her own death in, as it were, an ultra-realistic environment, starkly contrasting with the fantastical screenings.

This death scene, then, the eighth, is different: there is no screen image, no aria, and no singer as there had been in the previous seven. Instead, Abramović's voice-over that we have heard in the interludes has become Callas's inner voice (was it always?). We are presented with a Callas dissociated from her living self. Instead of feeling, she reports in the third person on what she hears and smells, how she is experiencing her bodily sensations and her immediate surroundings. She is unsure where she is, what day it is, and whether her friends have deserted her. The voice-over is accompanied by Nikodijević's music; text fragments from the operas are sung but in Dafoe's male voice, together with the sounds of heavy breathing. I hear Abramović's voiceover as a spoken aria. No longer moving unconsciously, she orders the body to perform its basic functions:

> Breathe. / Breathe. / Breathe. / Breathe. / Swallow. / Throat feels velvet. / The weight of my feet / against the soft mattress. / ankles, calves, back, shoulders, arms, neck and head. . . . / Heavy. / Breathe. / Retinas seeing light, / . . . Scent of my hair / Lavender. / Metallic taste of unbrushed teeth. / 600-thread Egyptian cotton sheets. / . . . / Silk night dress—also damp. / Am I sleeping? Morning? / . . . Breathe. / . . ./

Then, her words become instructions to move the body, as though the body is not her own but rather an object to be moved:

> "Open your eyes!" She opens her eyes.
> "Yes. / Crystal water glass. / Two-thirds drunk. / . . . / Where are you all now?"
> "Push the duvet aside!" twice. She does exactly that.
> "Turn!" She turns.
> "Legs over the side of the bed." The body obeys.

At one point, unexpectedly, her body stops obeying and takes up movements of its own. Although the voice continues to deliver specific instructions about what and how to move, her body does other things, no longer under her voice's command. This eighth death ends not with Abramović returning to bed to play dead, but with her walking offstage.

The singers, all dressed as Callas's maid Bruna (we now realize), enter the scene. They clean, vacuum, and dust, empty out and shut down the apartment, covering it entirely in black fabric. It is a moment I like: the all-black stage echoes the orchestra's musicians all dressed in black, the black music stands, the black orchestra chairs—it has all been one huge funeral.

8. The singer-maids leave the scene, but one returns to put a record on the record player. As if the record were scratched and skips, the same music segment repeats over and over again. The music that is then heard does not emanate from the record player but is rather a live-electronic synthesis. To that looping music, the black stage curtain goes down, just the way it would at the end of an opera performance. Abramović emerges in front of the curtain. When she reaches center stage, the music of "Casta diva" replaces the looped music. This I count as the ninth death. A singer puts on a record, there are the sounds of an orchestra, a chorus, and suddenly Callas's voice (so recognizable!) sounds for the first time. Finally!

In Fellini's *E la nave va* (And the Ship Sails On, 1983) there is a similar moment. It occurs during the ceremony when the ashes of the prima donna are scattered. With all military pomp, the needle is placed on the record player. For the first and only time in the film, the actual voice of the prima donna is staged to be heard.

Back to *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. Abramović positions herself in front of the closed curtain, and we see that she is barefoot (why, though, I am not sure; her shoes seemed very present in some of the screened scenes). Her feet peek out from beneath a long, glittering gold gown, the same gown worn by Dafoe in the earlier screened "Casta diva" scene. Abramović gestures with her hands, barely expressing emotions in the eyes and in a slight tilting of the head. Otherwise, her body is stationary. The posture, pose, and gestures are all familiarly Callas's. They make up the Callas-in-concert body language. To my knowledge, there exist two video clips of concert performances of Callas singing "Casta diva," and in both she barely moves, even her hands. It would even seem that she is deliberately holding herself back in order to keep still and project an inward, concentrated presence. In the clip from 1958, Callas's hands are for the most part caressing herself, and in the 1964 clip she crosses her hands over her chest, only gesturing toward the end of the aria, and even then, only briefly. From what I can tell, Abramović's gestures are not Callas's own for "Casta diva," but rather generic Callas gestures. Conspicuously, Abramović is not lip-syncing. Her mouth is closed; she abstains from impersonating the act of singing. Is the voice of the dead Callas, then, taking over her body, as if it were haunting her?

9. This final "Casta diva" is incomparable, even if one is tempted to interpret it by relating it to the earlier performance by Fagan, a singer who is not-Callas. *7 Deaths*, in fact, calls for this comparison: "Casta diva" is the seventh and last sung scene; that is, the two "Casta divas" are not so far apart from each other. Abramović links them visually in several ways, most obviously through her appearing in the

golden gown worn by Dafoe in the earlier "Casta diva" scene. And yet Callas's voice, I admit, takes over and erases all the other voices. It has always done so for me. It is the unrivalled moment. Callas is finally singing "Casta diva"—and Abramović's opera ends, stops all at once, before the aria concludes, in fact even before we get to the cadence, brutally killing off Callas. For me, this is the only time Callas really dies in the opera.

10. The camera transmitting the performance draws back in a final long shot. From afar, a small, glittering Abramović looks like a floating hologram. Her image is live but looks technologically mediated. I am reminded of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's opera *QM.15* (2016), in which she embodies Maria Callas. During the entire work, Gonzalez-Foerster is projected as a hologram of Callas floating in the dark. She is dressed, made up, gesturing and lip-syncing to Callas's arias. What also comes to mind is *Callas in Concert* (2018), that strange Callas undertaking consisting of a full-length performance by a Callas-hologram, accompanied by a live orchestra.

11. Abramović is famous for performances in which she puts herself in real danger. These are built around or include genuinely life-threatening situations in which she often depends on the audience for the outcome. In *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Abramović takes no risks, puts herself in no real danger, pushes no limits, and is not in close contact with an audience. Something else is going on here.

Is this opera radical, as one would expect a work of Abramović to be? Is it radical, I ask myself, in taking the ritual of opera to the extreme? She has done something to similar effect in *Goldberg* (2015), taking the classical concert ritual to a place where its utmost potential can be revealed. In that performance, artificially induced silence preempts the onset of the music. For thirty minutes prior to the first sounds of Bach's music, the audience experiences this silence by wearing noise-cancelling headphones. In addition, the piano very slowly moves in a 360-degree rotation throughout the concert to provide the audience with a spatial perspective on the music.

12. This is the first opera conceived and directed by Abramović. Is this evident in the treatment of the singing and the singers during the arias? Is it apparent in her refraining from "touching" the voice? Is it obvious in that singers retain for the most part a conventional stationary pose, falling back on default gestures? Do the singers give the impression of not having been directed while singing—of performing not in an opera but rather of performing outside one? All these considerations are important, but in no way fully account for the strangeness associated with the presence of opera in this work.

Abramović asserts her longtime affinity and identification, indeed infatuation, with the singer Maria Callas, but not with opera. What is staged in *7 Deaths* is perhaps a caesura between "Opera" and "Callas," between what each respectively holds

for Abramović. For her, opera appears above all to be traditional, conventional, and stagnant, while Callas is electrifying.

Michal Grover-Friedlander

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Operatic Biographies, Reperformance, and Feminist Potential in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*

In the past few decades, there has been a notable pattern of new operas addressing quintessentially "transgressive" women, fictional and real, alongside productions of works that critically re-evaluate flawed heroines of the canon. Rooted typically in tropes of femininity surrounding motherhood, sexuality, and vice, opera holds enormous potential for contemporary artists to interrogate these themes and stories. Throughout *7 Deaths of Maria Callas,* there is a tension between Marina Abramović's aesthetic attraction to reimagining operatic women's deaths, and her desire to engage deeply with Maria Callas's life and art. *7 Deaths* does not materialize as straightforward biography, even though Abramović's inclination toward such a narrative is clearly expressed: "for thirty-one years, I have wanted to make a work dedicated to the life and art of Maria Callas. I have read all of her biographies, listened to her extraordinary voice and watched her on film."[15] Earlier works have demonstrated this impulse in the artist's continuous engagement with her own life story, such as the ongoing project *The Biography* (1989–), and especially the 2011 "quasi-opera" *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović,* created with Robert Wilson. *7 Deaths* struck me as a second iteration of the latter project, offering Abramović the opportunity to continue exploring operatic potential in her art through the framework of "life and death" (and working again with Willem Dafoe). Yet *7 Deaths* presents something different again: it is a patchwork quilt of operatic big hits, tenuously held together by new multimedia objects (spoken interludes, videos, and newly created sound), and guided by Abramović herself as her narrating voice, physically present body, and on-screen body merge in many combinations.

Commentary on Abramović's art has often focused on the theme of *re*performance, which Klaus Biesenbach, in discussing the 2010 show *The Artist Is Present* at

New York's Museum of Modern Art, summarizes as "reperforming, reinterpreting, co-opting, and translating preexisting performance works."[16] The reference here is to her integration of canonic works of performance art from the 1970s and 1980s into her installations, shows, and performances, a process Jessica Santone analyzes as an example of "documentation" in contemporary art when discussing Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* (Guggenheim, New York, 2005).[17] Abramović deploys similar strategies in *7 Deaths*, asserting, "I want to reenact the death scenes from seven operas—seven deaths that Maria Callas has died before me."[18] This "reenactment" or reperformance impulse is diluted in *7 Deaths* due to what I felt was a palpable lack of any real connection to Callas as either opera singer or woman, except in the final scene. The assembled cast of characters resembles a repertoire most sopranos trained in the mid-twentieth century would be expected to have sung at some point. Tosca is inescapably Callas, and Norma and Lucia are both figures that speak to Callas's role in what Robert E. Seletsky calls the "revitalization of bel canto operas" in 1950s Italy.[19] London Green argues that Callas "shocked the operatic world into a reevaluation" of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.[20] However, Callas never sang either Desdemona or Carmen on the stage, and she sang in only one set of performances of *Butterfly* (at the Chicago Lyric Opera in 1955).[21]

Callas's starry presence thus shines through *7 Deaths* unevenly. Abramović's emphasis is on re-creating and reperforming the deaths Callas has "died before," but with the singer's legacy bound up in recordings, it is unclear what is being reenacted here. Santone argues that in *Seven Easy Pieces*, Abramović "sought to recapture the essence of the original performance" of the earlier works she used, and while there's no need for this approach to be identical in *7 Deaths*, I do see a failure here in how the biographical impulse has been realized, particularly in relation to Callas's actual career.[22] Including Medea, the formidable heroine of Luigi Cherubini's 1797 *Médée*, might have provided an opportunity to interrogate operatic women's transgressions critically through a role that Callas singled out for revival. Being not as well known, however, Medea would have sacrificed the operatic currency Abramović trades in for *7 Deaths*. There's also little in any of the aria performances that hints at Callas's artistry specifically, until we hear her recorded voice (as Norma) in the final scene. None of the peripheral choreography or videos draw on elements identifiably related to Callas. Moreover, as we watch the transformations in each scene, the effect ends up being that it is *Abramović* experiencing and reperforming each role, not Abramović-as-Callas doing so.

7 Deaths suggests missed opportunities throughout. Neither Abramović nor composer Marko Nikodijević appear constrained by operatic conventions (quite rightly). This makes it all the more vexing that much of the work presents uncomplicated representations of operatic classics, with experimentation almost exclusively limited to the newly created visual media. Nikodijević's eerie pastiche of the *La traviata* prelude aside, it is only in the interludes that the potential for sonic

exploration is opened. The simultaneous unfolding of video and onstage action is captivating, presenting multiple narrative threads that can continually be read through and framed against the other. As a format, I think it has great potential, but the interludes often felt to run not in counterpoint but in completely different directions. Abramović described the various media constituting the piece as "mixed up in one tissue," which is an attractive way of conceptualizing the overlaps and connections in a piece like this, but which I think overstates the matter.[23] The stage/screen divide feels quite a bit more rigid than the translucent, fluid separating veil she implies. In the *Carmen* scene, the disjunction between the singing Carmen, who exudes control, power, and seduction (as per usual), and the video Abramović-as-Carmen, bound and dragged by rope, conversely works well to symbolize the problems of power in the opera. Yet sound and action often diverge: the musical climax in the *Tosca* scene of "Vissi d'arte" (*perché, perché, Signore*), for instance, does not coincide with any change in the video—Abramović, having already leapt from the roof, just continues to fall in slow motion amid gray skyscrapers.

The most significant absence, I argue, is a mostly untapped potential to use biographical audio-visual material here: Abramović has considerable precedent for such practices, and again, when we consider that the format of *7 Deaths* pays little heed to operatic convention (nor should it!), there is no reason not to go further. Nikodijević's use of recorded sounds from Belgrade streets, as well as Abramović's own voice, already opens the door to using and manipulating sound alongside the "live" orchestra. Especially in light of Abramović's considerable precedent for using prior recorded "documents," the absence of images or more recordings of Callas's voice—spoken or sung—struck me as another missed opportunity.

It is in the videos, however, that I found the strongest potential for the feminist commentary that is woven into *7 Deaths*. Although she has disavowed the "feminist" label, there is a significant value in how deeply invested Abramović is in addressing women's trauma by absorbing, performing, and reperforming it, even if the work's representations of each opera read as a rather superficial enacting of a Catherine Clément-inspired critique.[24] Regarding Callas, she asserts that, "it is really life and death for her: she dies constantly onstage, day after day, night after night, and she sort of traumatizes herself with this endless death. . . she brought herself to a state of expressing such extreme emotion through her body."[25] I certainly felt this vividly in some of the more stunning parts of the videos: for example, with Abramović as Desdemona, slowly enrobed with enormous snakes, there is a twisted eroticism, particularly when red lipstick merges with red blood; as Tosca, the shock of seeing the body on the ground in the style of a crime scene; as Lucia, the raw energy and rage of smashing mirrors, destroying, bursting out of the wedding dress.[26] When Abramović appears in a "naked dress"—sheer, netted, beaded—I saw a satisfying gesture to the roster of powerful female celebrities who have popularized the look, from Cher in 1974 to Beyoncé, Rihanna, Kim Kardashian West, and many others in

the 2010s (particularly popular at Met Galas).[27] Similar evocations of strength emerged in the spoken interludes, such as when Abramović declaims, "Her beauty and her body are hers and hers alone" prior to the Carmen scene. Associations made between nuclear warfare and Cio-Cio-San's struggles in the *Butterfly* scene, however, were a tad ham-fisted, particularly given what I found to be problematic comments from Abramović on how she conceived of the seven "types" of women onstage. Affirming that "we are all dying from the same disease—broken heart," she went on to list the "strong and nomadic, passionate and Spanish, fragile and Asian, heroic black wom[e]n" that are presented.[28] This demonstrates a vexing lack of attention to the entrenched exoticist stereotyping in opera, straying into unnecessary essentialism while trying to make a point about universal experiences of women's pain.

7 Deaths is a roll call of wronged women, but even in this final scene, Callas's likeness and body are always mediated through Abramović. While the overlap between the two women is fascinating, Callas's presence throughout feels ironically muted.[29] Even though it is mostly the live singers' voices we hear in each aria, the sonic implication is that they are imitating Callas—though not adopting her vocal idiosyncrasies. An uncanny ventriloquism is established, particularly when Abramović half-mimes or has an open mouth in the videos, as if she is summoning Callas's voice through the bodies of the other singing women in each scene, who act only as intermediaries. The body-voice relationships throughout *7 Deaths*, then, are layered and more complex than I can address here, but they merit considerable reflection on the role of the voice and sound in Abramović's works more generally, in light of her recent interest in opera.[30] In the last scene, when we finally hear Callas's voice and the onstage action turns its attention to the singer's final years in Paris, these bodily overlaps are strongest—the likeness between Abramović and Callas is truly remarkable, with scraped-back black hair, striking facial structures, and dark eyes. We seem to step through the iconic photograph of Callas, near the end of her life, gazing through the netted curtains of her Parisian apartment (on the now-named *Allée Maria Callas*). This isn't the fetishizing of women's pain for public entertainment that is often put forward by opera, and if anything, I think we could have had more of the shattering energy perceptible from the videos in this ending.

Ultimately, I had the overriding impression that the intended subtext lay just out of perceptible reach, wherein a spectator might experience the visual, textual, and sonic symbolism of each scene as intimately interwoven with Callas's life and art, but those connections rarely felt materially present. Abramović's notion of opera seems rooted in the past—a dusty, elitist art form—seemingly unaware of the genre's mammoth expansion in recent decades. A work that brought Callas more explicitly to the forefront might be helped along by removing the need to create a "much more complex world" than she believes opera to be. For Abramović, opera is lengthy ("four, five hours"), while *7 Deaths* lasts only ninety minutes.[31] Yet even discounting

that little canonic repertoire falls into the former category, *the* classic format of contemporary operas in Europe and North America today is circa ninety minutes, no intermission. I have no interest in assessing the merits of claims to the status of opera per se in *7 Deaths*, but rather in examining this reasoning, because Abramović's concept of what opera "is" furnishes insights into the disjunctions I've noted surrounding the presence of Callas within the piece. If by intention *7 Deaths* is "more opera installation than opera itself," this intriguing suggestion might have more weight if it were taken out of the opera house and its tangibly operatic objects (arias and characters) were more compellingly manipulated to serve the aim of reperforming Callas.[32] I don't believe that Abramović does her a disservice, and while uneven, the piece opens a door to look again at Callas, and at all singers who have left a considerable legacy. While I would be uncomfortable advocating for a voyeuristic, overly glamorized staging of the singer's life, her story is obviously attractive as a narrative. Biesenbach observes of Abramović that, "like urban myths, these stories of her life circulate widely in many media, multiplying and evolving in their retelling," a statement that could apply identically to Callas, who has been the subject of so much mythologizing and celebrity speculating in the popular imagination.[33] Whether in future productions or successors, works like *7 Deaths* could explore this extensively, digging past the detritus of celebrity mythology to investigate the potential of staging feminist counter-narratives for the twenty-first-century operatic stage.

Jane Forner

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Five Attempts at Writing about *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*

The pictures that Marina Abramović is looking at here, are both pictures of Maria Callas but also pictures of her own life. Abramović is not playing the role of Maria Callas. Marina/Maria, there is supposed to be no clear distinction.
—"#BSO7deaths," Bayerische Staatsoper Twitter feed[34]

In this way, I see body art as a complex extension of portraiture in general . . . as well as an obvious negotiation of the trajectory of performance art that emerged from early twentieth-century European avant-gardes. —Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*[35]

I

As difficult as it is to attend opera this many months into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is almost more difficult to attend *to* it. Between the split screen of livestream and live Tweets and my split attention to artistic and safety protocols (Is no one wearing a mask? What are the numbers in Bavaria right now?), I am finding it difficult to focus. But Serbian performance artist-*cum*-art world celebrity Marina Abramović, known for many things, is not known for creating work made for easy viewing—no matter its title.

Seven is some kind of sacred number to the performance art *materfamilias*. In 2005, Abramović's epic performance *Seven Easy Pieces*, the seven performances taking place over seven nights for seven hours each at New York City's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, rocked the theater and performance studies worlds. Suddenly, an artist who had touted the basic tenet that performance art was to be predicated on non-linearity and non-repeatability was *re*performing now-canonical pieces by other artists, with permission from them or their estates: Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973), Joseph Beuy's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), Abramović's own *Lips of Thomas* (1975), and her own new piece, *Entering the Other Side* (2005). Five years later, her retrospective *The Artist Is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) comprised documentation of her career, spanning almost half a century at that point: (re)performances by other artists of solo pieces and those she performed with her once-artistic and -life partner of twelve years, Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen); and the eponymous new piece *The Artist Is Present*, a nearly three-month-long durational performance wherein, for eight hours a day, Abramović, garbed in a high-necked, long-sleeved, floor-length crimson dress, invited audience members to sit across from her amid a circle of onlookers. In her 2013 installation *Prototype* at Toronto's annual Luminato festival, guests were invited to don stiff white lab coats, headphones, and boots (that, presumably, someone else had just been wearing), and proceed through seven appropriately heptagonal pavilions of meditative performance art experience.[36]

At the conclusion of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, premiered at the Bayerische Staatsoper on September 1, 2020 for five live performances and one livestreamed performance on September 5, Abramović stands, wearing a gown by Burberry's Riccardo Tisci, with a similar cut to that from *The Artist Is Present* but in a much more extravagant gold lamé.[37] It is a pose evocative of Abramović's final piece in *Seven Easy Pieces*; it is a gaze with which those of us who have been watching her through much of her career have become almost intimate. And, though this project was a massive collaborative effort, featuring music both from the seven arias signifying key roles in Callas's brief but intense career as well as new music by Marko Nikodijević, films by Nabil Elderkin (of Willem Dafoe killing Abramović repeatedly),

and seven sopranos and mezzo-sopranos performing these arias, the opera is—as *Vogue* headlines their story on Tisci's costuming—solely *Marina's*.[38] The artist, here and as always, is Abramović.

II

The Artist Is Present may have been the first time Abramović had allowed audience members into such close proximity (at least in a solo performance) since her 1974 performance *Rhythm 0*, one of a five-piece *Rhythm Series* Abramović performed between 1973 and 1974. *Rhythm 10* (1973), Abramović's first performance art piece, was an adaptation of the Slavic knife game "five finger fillet"; *Rhythm 5* (1973) involved Abramović ultimately losing consciousness within a burning five-point communist star; in *Rhythm 2* (1974), Abramović ingested two medications, one for catatonia and, then, three and a half hours later, one for schizophrenia; and in *Rhythm 4* (1974), Abramović "attempted to breathe in as much air as possible from a high-power industrial fan" until she, again, lost consciousness.[39]

While each of the previous four *Rhythm* pieces were challenges posed against her own body—physically, psychologically, and emotionally—in *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramović allowed audience members to choose from seventy-two objects, including perfume, sugar, and lipstick, as well as a thorny rose, a razor, and a gun and single bullet, to employ upon her body as they wished. The six-hour performance ended when an audience member loaded the gun, placed it in Abramović's hand, and held it to her chest. *Rhythm 0* was the last of the Rhythm Series, and about it Abramović has said, "the experience I drew from this work was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed."[40]

Death, however, is neither a deterrent nor is it unmotivating to Abramović. Instead, it rather becomes her. Her collaboration from 2011 with director Robert Wilson, Dafoe (again), and singer and composer Anohni was a "reimagining of . . Abramović's extraordinary life" titled *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, as the documentary about the making of this music-theater piece is also titled.[41] James Westcott's 2008 biography of Abramović is titled *When Marina Abramović Dies*. The seven deaths here, too, are a reimagining of Abramović's life (or death?) through her art, as each operatic death recalls, more and less explicitly, performances from Abramović's repertoire. "If the piece is a medley of Callas's greatest hits," writes Matthew Anderson in the *New York Times*, "it also features some of Ms. Abramović's." He explains: "Each of the arias is accompanied by a short film, in which Ms. Abramović plays opposite the Hollywood actor Willem Dafoe. These feature symbols that recur in Ms. Abramović's work—knives, snakes, fire, clouds—and by the opera's climax, the identities of the two women have become so confused, it's hard to know which diva it's really about."[42] Or, as Heidi Waleson writes in the *Wall*

Street Journal, "Opera fans steeped in the tragedies of Violetta, Cio-Cio-San and their ilk, as well as the doomed Callas-Aristotle Onassis romance, will get the references as Ms. Abramović represents all of these women but chiefly herself."[43]

III

Each death, then, in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*—"CONSUMPTION La Traviata/ JUMPING Tosca/STRANGULATION Otello/HARA-KIRI Madame Butterfly/ KNIFING Carmen/MADNESS Lucia di Lammermoor/BURNING Norma"—is indicative both of Callas and of Abramović.[44] As Abramović has spoken of quite frequently, there are likenesses between the two, including their physical resemblance; for example, "A Sagittarius, like me, I have always been fascinated by her personality, her life—and her death… I want to reenact the death scenes from seven operas—seven deaths that Maria Callas has died before me," notes Abramović on the Marina Abramović Institute (MAI) website.[45] Similarly, in the *New York Times*, Abramović comments, "[Callas] actually died for love . . and I almost died for love, so I understand what it means."[46]

After separating from her partner Ulay (not the love affair Abramović almost died over, but perhaps the better story), Abramović's first piece was one of a series titled *Dragon Heads* that she performed repeatedly over four years (1990–1994). As described in the LIMA catalogue:

> In all versions [of *Dragon Heads*], Abramović sits motionless with a snake slithering around her body. According to Abramović, the starting point for this work was the following observation: "Snakes can follow the energy of the planet, wherever you put them." Thus, the snakes in the performances would actually never go into the audience because they do not slither over ice, which surrounded Abramović and the snakes. The snakes were to follow the lines of warmth and energy on Abramović's head and body.[47]

In *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, as Abramović-as-Callas remains motionless in bed, we watch giant films of Dafoe and Abramović reenacting, with increasing violence, these seven operatic deaths. They are sitting across from each other (not unlike Abramović sitting across from audience-participants in *The Artist Is Present*) until a giant yellow snake, previously slithering over Dafoe, strangles Abramović-as-Callas-as-Desdemona to death in Verdi's *Otello*. They traipse through a dystopic landscape in hazmat suits until Abramović-as-Callas-as-Madama Butterfly removes her helmet; they race toward a fire in a genderbending "Casta diva" as Dafoe wears the gold lamé gown, and Abramović-as-Callas-as-Norma a disheveled tux.

Abramović met Ulay in Amsterdam in 1976. For twelve years the two performed works, including *Relation in Space* (1976), wherein they ran at each other repeatedly

for an hour; *Relation in Time* (1977), in which they sat, back-to-back, with their ponytails entwined together for sixteen hours; and *AAA-AAA* (1978) in which they essentially yelled, closer and closer, into each other's mouths for nearly an hour. These culminated in their final piece, *Lovers* (1988), in which, after each walked 2,500 kilometers from opposite sides of the Great Wall of China, they met in the middle to conclude both their career together and their relationship.

Since, and despite having achieved the art-world and pop-cultural renown as a solo artist that she has in the past twenty years, Abramović's work has often involved one or more collaborators in her work, often men: Robert Wilson and Willem Dafoe in her biopic; Dafoe again in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*; and, too, at various times, Lady Gaga, James Franco, and even Jay-Z—although the latter relationship ended especially poorly, if still making for a good story. While Anderson emphasizes in the *New York Times*'s lead-up article for the opera that, "'7 Deaths of Maria Callas' asks the audience to think about the ubiquity of the dying diva," he amends that, "Ms. Abramović . . . did not want it to be seen as a critique of misogyny in opera. 'I'm not a feminist, to start with,' she said; a woman's death onstage was simply 'more dramatic' and 'more beautiful' than a man's."[48]

For an artist who once proclaimed a tenet of performance art as "no rehearsal," what does it mean that she cannot help herself from constantly rehearsing her own, presumably more dramatic and more beautiful, death? And, more pragmatically, what does it mean for her to rehearse it, now, repeatedly, when we are all watching the tally of actual deaths globally from this pandemic?

IV

It was Abramović's pieces from the first decade of the twenty-first century—*The House with the Ocean View* (2002), *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), and *The Artist Is Present* (2010)—that not only garnered Abramović art-world celebrity but also sensationalized and commercialized the genre of performance art into pop-cultural notoriety. By the time of *The Artist Is Present* in 2010, Abramović was not merely present, she was ubiquitous. *The House with the Ocean View* was, in Abramović's intentions, a gift to the city of New York following the September 11 terrorist attacks; *Seven Easy Pieces* threw performance art and performance studies scholars and critics into a tizzy in its reshaping of not only our fields but of how we think and write about them; and *The Artist Is Present* went viral before viral meant quite what it does in 2020.[49]

In each of these pieces, the set and the technologies of documenting the performance became very much a part of the performance itself. I recall stepping over the many wires covering the floor of the Guggenheim during *Seven Easy Pieces*, and Amelia Jones describes MoMA's "web documentation (paralleled by dozens of spontaneous websites put up during the show to document personal experiences and/or photographs of other 'visitors')" in a review of *The Artist Is Present*.[50] The technology,

too, of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* overwhelmed the live elements of the production. The seven "other Callases" (the in-the-flesh singers) were little match in their vocal performance to Abramović's and Dafoe's much larger-than-life screen images, especially as the sopranos and mezzo-sopranos were all doubly representative of Callas's iconic roles (with exceptions noted by Jane Forner above) *and* of *La Divina*'s beloved maid Bruna, costumed, as they were, in French maid uniforms. Abramović's prerecorded voice-over, in English, narrating each aria, did little to minimize the significance of this artist herself.

The final third of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* shifts away from Callas's performed deaths and to her own, in her Paris apartment in 1977. Abramović lies in bed, counting. "How embarrassing," tweets @LividBallerina, "if she was supposed to get up and do something and just fell asleep by accident."[51] Whether Abramović was counting days, hours, or minutes, this was the first moment, for me, in the opera that felt real. ("Real" being another tenet of performance art we learned from Abramović, Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and numerous other [feminist] performance artists of the mid- to late twentieth century.) The inability to get out of bed; counting the days of the pandemic; counting the deaths. Counting the number of hospital beds in ICU wards in our cities and around the world. We follow Abramović-as-Callas around the room. She is doing very little, as so many of us are—but not front-line workers, nor parents: I have three children, aged seven and under. The sopranos, wearing their maid costumes, move through the room, masked. I am uncomfortable with the time the camera spends on the Black soprano, in her maid uniform, in her mask; I do not know if this is intentional or if my focus has shifted in the past so many months.

V

In "The Phonographic *Mise-en-Scène*," Black scholar and poet Fred Moten reads Black soprano Jessye Norman's 1993 recording of Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909) through and against white scholar Theodor Adorno's essays on phonography, in particular "The Curve of the Needle" (1927) and "The Form of the Phonographic Record" (1934). For Moten, Norman's performance reveals, and is a revelation of, a Blackness intrinsic to Schoenberg's story of a "screaming servant girl" that, while latent, could only be realized through Norman's vocal presence.[52] Norman's performance brings forth a dissonance contingent to the structural dissonance of Schoenberg's composition, through the contingency of Norman's own person to the history of Black enslavement, re-evoked through her voice: "Norman sings with the knowledge of an object in search of something, with a trouble in the voice that theatricality lets us see, a trouble that is at once of and before the extended encounter that structures the historical drama we now inhabit."[53]

Much like *7 Deaths of Maria Callas,* this review is less about "Marina's opera" than it is about Marina Abramović. Perhaps that is because, in all honesty (and, really, isn't honesty something we all needed more of in 2020?), I do not have much to say about the opera. And, honestly, I am tired of so many words being devoted to Marina Abramović, rather than, say, Navajo composer Raven Chacon and Chinese-born American composer Du Yun's collaboration *Sweet Land* (2020), which prematurely closed because of COVID-19. Perhaps this is because opera, despite its histories of elitism and classism, its misogyny and racism, still maintains the possibility of doing something in the world beyond its own disciplinary limitations. It maintains the possibility; but the possibility cannot be realized when the only object is the subject herself.

T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko

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NOTES

1. Justin Curto, "Kanye West, Our Modern-Day Puccini, Announces Second Opera, *Mary*," *Vulture*, December 6, 2019, www.vulture.com/2019/12/kanye-west-second-opera-mary.html.

2. Zachary Woolfe, "Kanye West Is Operatic. His Opera Isn't," *New York Times*, November 25, 2019.

3. Christopher Morris, ed., "Review Colloquy: *The Exterminating Angel*," *Opera Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (autumn 2019): 355–72.

4. See Heather Wiebe, "A Note from the Guest Editor," *Opera Quarterly* 25, nos. 1–2 (winter-spring 2009): 3–5.

5. Sozita Goudouna, "Death as Desire: Performing Spaces of Antiquity in Marina Abramović's *Seven Deaths*," in *Dramatic Architectures: Places of Drama—Drama for Places* [Conference Proceedings], ed. Maria Helena Maia and Jorge Palinhos (Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo, Escola Superior do Porto, 2014), 6–20.

6. Carlo Cenciarelli, "The Limits of Operatic Deadness: Bizet, 'Habanera' (Carmen), *Carmen*, Act I," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 28 no. 2 (September 2016): 221–26.

7. Marina Abramović and Marko Nikodijević, "Conversation about *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*," interview by Jelena Novak, *Resvés Opera #1*, Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, October 15, 2020.

8. Marina Abramović, "I am a Mirror for the Public," video interview, *Telegraph*, October 18, 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJeU9fVoEgA, last accessed March 17, 2021.

9. James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

10. Ibid.

11. Alan Riding, "Once Again Callas's Fans Can Bid Her Farewell," *New York Times*, July 11, 2000.

12. Abramović and Nikodijević, "Conversation about *7 Deaths*" [interview by Novak].

13. James C. Taylor, "Matters of Life and Death Explored by Marina Abramović, Robert Wilson," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2013.

14. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

15. Marina Abramović, "*7 Deaths of Maria Callas*" [webpage], mai.art/7deaths.

16. Klaus Biesenbach, "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present. The Artist Was Present. The Artist Will Be Present," in *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present*, ed. Mary Christian (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 18.

17. Jessica Santone, "Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces*: Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History," *Leonardo* 41, no. 2 (2008): 147–52.

18. Abramović, "*7 Deaths*."

19. Robert E. Seletsky, "The Performance Practice of Maria Callas: Interpretation and Instinct," *Opera Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2004): 589.

20. London Green, "Callas and Lucia," *Opera Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1998): 66.

21. For instance, Renata Tebaldi, Callas's peer and more of a Verdi soprano in general, was better known for singing Desdemona throughout her career. Callas recorded two arias from *Otello* in Paris in 1963 under Nicola Rescigno, and a full *Carmen* in 1964 under Georges Prêtre.

22. Santone, "Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces*," 148.

23. Abramović and Nikodijević, "Conversation about *7 Deaths*."

24. Matthew Anderson, "The Coronavirus Derails Marina Abramović's Maria Callas Opera," *New York Times*, April 9, 2020.

25. Abramović and Nikodijević, "Conversation about *7 Deaths*."

26. This scene also recalled those used in *The Biography Remix* (2004), in which Abramović was suspended, bare-breasted, with a snake in each hand.

27. The costumes for *7 Deaths* were created by Riccardo Tisci, Burberry's CCO, suggesting that this correlation is perhaps not accidental.

28. Abramović and Nikodijević, "Conversation about *7 Deaths*."

29. See, for instance, the cover image used on the webpage for *7 Deaths*, in which Abramović's and Callas's faces are overlaid in black and white, merging into one another. Abramović, "*7 Deaths*."

30. Jelena Novak's work on ventriloquism and the voice-body relationship addresses this topic extensively: Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).

31. Abramović and Nikodijević, "Conversation about *7 Deaths*."

32. Ibid. Abramović has said that she intends the aesthetic, dramaturgical, and other aspects of the production to remain the same for upcoming performances, at least for the foreseeable future.

33. Biesenbach, "Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present," 12.

34. "#BSO7deaths," Twitter post, September 5, 2020, 2:24 pm EST, twitter.com/bay_staatsoper/status/1302311642273906689.

35. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13.

36. See T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko, *Learning How to Fall: Art and Culture after September 11* (London: Routledge, 2014).

37. Alice Cary, "Riccardo Tisci's Costumes for Marina Abramović's Opera Are Nothing Short of Dazzling," *Vogue*, September 2, 2020.

38. Ibid.

39. "Rhythm Series (1973–74)" [webpage], University of Oregon, last modified February 10, 2015, blogs.uoregon.edu/marinaabramovic/category/rhythm-series/.

40. Quoted in Frazer Ward, "Marina Abramović: Approaching Zero," in *The "Do-it-Yourself" Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*, ed. Anna Dezeuze (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009), 132–44.

41. Robert Wilson and Marina Abramović, *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, performance, Manchester International Festival, The Lowry, Manchester, UK, 2011.

42. Anderson, "Coronavirus Derails Abramović's Opera."

43. Heidi Waleson, "'The 7 Deaths of Maria Callas' and 'Joyce DiDonato Live in Concert' Reviews: Divas Past and Present," *Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2020.

44. Abramović, "*7 Deaths*."

45. Ibid.

46. Quoted in Anderson, "Coronavirus Derails Abramović's Opera."

47. "Dragon Heads" [webpage], *LIMA*, www.lima.nl/lima/catalogue/art/marina-abramovic/dragon-heads/9371.

48. Anderson, "Coronavirus Derails Abramović's Opera."

49. Steven Henry Madoff, "Reflecting on an Ordeal That Was Also Art," *New York Times*, November 28, 2002.

50. Amelia Jones, "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Reenactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *TDR* 55, no. 1 (2011): 16–45.

51. Caity Rose (@LividBallerina), "How embarrassing . . . ," Twitter post, September 5, 2020, 2:15pm EST, twitter.com/LividBallerina/status/1302309471230648320.

52. Fred Moten, "The Phonographic *Mise-en-Scène*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 274.

53. Ibid., 280.