

The Artist is Present (2010): A Psychoanalytical Performance Study

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ABSTRACT

Marina Abramović was engaged in an extended performance called *The Artist is Present* in 2010 at The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The work was inspired by her belief that stretching the length of a performance beyond expectations serves to alter the audience's perception of time and foster a deeper engagement in the theatrical experience. The objective of the study is to examine both the psychological and theatrical aspects of *The Artist is Present* by applying Freudian defense mechanism, Alfred Adler's Compensation Theory, Brené Brown's Vulnerability and the Power of Connection Theory, and Schechner's Make Believe/Make Belief Performance Theory on *The Artist is Present*. By dissecting the psychological aspects manifested in the show, light is shed on the inevitable impact of trauma and pain on the human psyche and the effect of forgiveness and its healing power. The results showed that Marina faces her trauma, embraces pain, and decides to heal her broken parts by forgiving herself and her parents. The study has also manifested that pain can never heal pain, and trauma cannot be surpassed through repression or any other defense mechanism. Pain heals through embracing the whole grieving process and reconciling with one's suffering. Only then does trauma stop reenacting itself, and the traumatized embark on a lifetime journey of self-healing. Pain and trauma are inescapable, but Marina managed to turn her pain into a universal piece of art: *The Artist is Present*.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Healing, Pain, Performance Art, Psychoanalysis, Trauma, Defense Mechanism, Suppression, Grief.

1. INTRODUCTION

Trauma is a psychological disorder that could be caused by experiences that overwhelm people's ability to cope (Herman 2015). Trauma is a central theme in Marina Abramović's performance, *The Artist is Present*, which was held at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 2010. It offered an exploration of trauma, pain, and healing through Marina's personal history. The research paper mainly focuses on the traumatized Marina and how she manages to find her voice in *The Artist is Present*. The study examines *The Artist is Present* performance through Freud's defense mechanisms, Alfred Adler's theory of compensation, and Brené Brown's vulnerability and the power of connection, in addition to Schechner's Make Believe/Make Belief performance theory.

Marina Abramović, a renowned performance artist born in Yugoslav in 1946 to strictly communist parents, has explored art firsthand since her twenties only to realize that true art has to break all set boundaries and go against society's most sanctified conventions. Once the artist breaks free, he/she can create from the heart. Since the early 1970s, Abramović has been pushing past the perceived limits of the body and mind. She has been exploring the complex relationship between artist and audience through performances that challenge both herself and, in many instances, participants emotionally, intellectually, and physically. The concepts inspiring her works are crucial, such as using her body to convey her ideas. She has been making art since childhood and has early realized that

art does not have to be produced in a studio or take a concrete form of MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) Learning.

Abramović has used her body to deliver a universal message to the audience. In every single performance, she chose to defy her body's limits and conquer uncharted territories:

"I understood that...I could make art with everything...and the most important [thing] is the concept," she relates. "And this was the beginning of my performance art. And the first time I put my body in front of [an] audience, I understood: this is my media" (MOMA Learning).

Accordingly, Abramović has acted as a legendary performance artist for years. Her art techniques are being taught, and her pain has turned into stories of survival. Artists can only produce from the heart once they are liberated. Abramović frequently conveys a global message to the audience by using her body. Every time she performed, she decided to push the boundaries of her body and explore realms that none of the other modern artists of the period would have dared to explore. Abramović has thrown *The Artist is Present* performance to connect with the audience, then herself. She lost all connection with herself long ago, lost her voice since childhood, and managed to roam around as an apparition without a soul for years. *The Artist is Present* performance was Abramović's wake-up call to reconnect with her disintegrated parts, embrace her pains, and heal her trauma through performance.

The study examines the reasons behind *The Artist is Present* performance and its influence on the audience involved. Ulay, Abramović's ex-lover, had shown up as an unexpected visitor on the inauguration night, which altered the show's performative course a great deal. Accordingly, the reasons why Ulay's presence brought Abramović to tears as well as her body language and facial expressions the moment she met him after a twenty-four-year separation are examined through Freud's defense mechanisms, Alfred Adler's theory of compensation, and Brené Brown's vulnerability and the power of connection, in addition to Schechner's Make Believe/Make Belief performance theory to gain insight into her work's deeper psychological motivations and implications. The research paper concludes with Abramović's journey to self-healing after long years of being unable to reconcile with her soul and body.

Freud's defense mechanism offers a lens through which we can examine the unconscious desires,

emotions, and conflicts that may be at play within Abramović's performance (Forrester 1974). As such, Abramović's performance can be interpreted as an expression of repressed desires or traumas, and how the effect of presence and the reciprocal gaze can be seen as a way for her to confront and work through these repressed aspects of her psyche (Abella 2016).

Alfred Adler's Compensation Theory offers a compelling framework for understanding Abramović's performance. Adler's theory emphasizes the importance of social interest and the individual's pursuit of superiority and significance. In *The Artist is Present*, Abramović's unwavering presence and willingness to confront discomfort and pain can be seen as a quest for superiority over physical and emotional limitations. Thus, Abramović's powerful exploration of human connection, vulnerability, and endurance invites the audience to engage in a deeply personal and intimate experience through her unflinching gaze and unwavering presence (Fisher 2012).

Since Abramović's performance blurs the lines between reality and fiction and performer and audience, Schechner's performance theory offers a window through which we could examine its transformational impact. The experiential nature of *The Artist is Present* dissolves the lines between art and life while offering the audience a room to imagine themselves in the present. Through the application of Schechner's Make Believe/Make Belief Performance Theory to Abramović's artistic work, a more profound comprehension of how performance art may challenge our assumptions is acquired which generates significant collective experiences. This examination adds to a more comprehensive dialogue on the relevance and influence of Abramović's creations on modern performance art.

Finally, the rationale behind using Brené Brown's vulnerability and power theories in Marina Abramović's performance *The Artist is Present* lies in the profound exploration of human connection and authenticity (2015). Through Brown's vulnerability theory, the performance aims to create a space where participants feel safe enough to let their guard down and fully engage in the present moment (Ciccione 2020). Additionally, incorporating Brown's power theory allows the examination of the power dynamics at play within the artist-participant interaction. By leveraging vulnerability as a relational tool, Abramović's performance seeks to dismantle societal norms and challenge conventional notions of power.

Based on previous research, this study investigates *The Artist is Present* by using the Freudian defense

mechanism, Adlerian compensation theory, Brené Brown's theory of vulnerability, and Schechner's performance theory. *The Artist is Present* is Abramović's first human performance. She lets go of all sorts of violence occasionally employed in her art, where we can see the real Abramović, her bare human side with no pretense. She looked too vulnerable, and she embraced her vulnerability in the presence of every single soul she had laid eyes on that night. The gap in the analysis lies in the following: Abramović reaching the peak of her self-actualization upon the arrival of her ex-partner Ulay, whom she held hands with, unlike the nature of the show, in a trial of healing. She shed tears, and they did not sound like grief but rather joy as she finally managed to heal her shattered soul. This study casts light on that moment of self-realization, self-love, and self-forgiveness that Abramović seemed to anticipate, as shown in Figures 9, 10, and 11. Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* is not just a show but rather an act of salvation where Abramović finally liberates herself from any pains and embraces her destiny. Although countless research studies have been conducted on The MOMA show and performance theory, none touched upon how that show was not just meant to heal the audience who took their seats before Abramović but rather Abramović herself, see Figure 3.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the defining characteristics of Abramović's performance art in *The Artist is Present*?
2. What specific emotional responses did *The Artist is Present* evoke in its audience?
3. How did Schechner's performance theory influence Abramović's show compared to other contemporary performance art theories?
4. How did Brené Brown's vulnerability theory manifest itself in *The Artist is Present* and Marina's reactions to the audience?
5. What are Abramović's stated goals for staging *The Artist is Present*?
6. Through which specific actions and interactions in *The Artist is Present* did Abramović express or achieve self-actualization?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Marina Abramovic, a renowned performance artist, has played a significant role in exploring the boundaries

of bodily presence and the relationship between art and audience. Through her groundbreaking work, particularly in her performance piece *The Artist is Present*, Abramovic challenges traditional notions of presence and immerses her audience in a deeply transformative and profound experience (Saurisse 2022). In *The Artist is Present*, Marina Abramovic creates a deeply transformative and profound experience by immersing her audience in a unique exploration of presence and human connection. In this seminal performance piece, Abramovic sits silently and motionless in a chair for hours, inviting audience members to sit across from her one at a time.

However, Amelia Jones, a Professor and Grierson Chair in Visual Culture at McGill University in Montréal, argues over the paradoxical nature of Abramović's recent practice and the reliance of both Abramović and MoMA on documentation—preceding, during, and following the exhibition's actual duration—to disseminate information about her "presence". The show's transformative impact highlights stark inconsistencies in the current preoccupation with live art, its histories, and its documentation and reenactments (Jones 2011, 18). Jones looks profoundly into such paradoxical allegation:

Abramovic's recent practice, in its desire to manifest presence, points to the very fact that the live act itself destroys presence (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident). The live act marks the body, understood as an expression of the self, as representational. Thus, as someone who sat across from Abramovic; in the atrium of MoMA, surrounded by a barrier like a boxing ring, itself surrounded by dozens of staring visitors, cameras, and lit by klieg lights, I can say personally I found the exchange to be anything but energizing, personal, or transformative (Jones 2011, 18).

Jones's interpretation of *The Artist is Present* foregrounds Marina's failure to maintain the so-called presence amid the show's chaos and noise. Thus, Jones refutes the performative practice and deems it as non-representational after all.

'If the Tibetans can learn, in four years, a technique for sitting in the snow at twenty degrees below zero without freezing, why can't we learn these techniques in school?' (Abramović et al. 1998, 49). Such sophisticated human nature as Abramović's with a complex psyche must have developed a meditative vision of the future of performance art. Mary Richards has managed to explore Abramović's artistic vision in her book *Marina Abramović*. According

to Abramović, teaching young people how to focus, meditate, and discover the potential of stillness and "emptiness" is the way to the future. Through the practice of meditation, it is possible to experience a pan-dimensional awareness of oneself and one's environment when space and time are exceeded, and one experiences a feeling of "being-at-one-with-it-all." Meditation causes a higher frequency wave pattern in the brain. Such mind training, in the opinion of Abramovic, ought to be routinely taught to children in schools (Richards 2009, 82).

Margolin (2016) paints a sophisticated human picture in her heartfelt description of the MoMA show. Abramović sat for eight hours daily for three months as spectators waited in line to sit across from her. Nobody was allowed to talk. Some persons remained in the visual embrace for a few seconds, while others did so for several minutes or even hours. Each person who sat at the table was photographed by the museum's photographer, who captured something incredible: They all had a raw, painful vulnerability attached to their faces that was unlike anything else. These spectators tended to think that Abramović could see right into their souls. Abramović claims that this response occurred due to her ability to give each person her undivided attention and love.

Eventually, Richards (2018) relates Abramović journey with appalling physical performances in her *Marina Abramović* in the following statement, "So even as a young artist, Abramović's desires in art-making were radical, uncompromising." She soon came to feel that "art was a kind of question between life and death" (Abramović et al. 1998, 15). She even proposed to several institutions a performance piece that had death as a possible outcome.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research follows a qualitative methodology. Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* is examined through the lens of Sigmund Freud's defense mechanism, Alfred Adler's compensation theory, Brené Brown's theory of vulnerability, and Schechner's performance theory. The following subsections include the theoretical and theatrical frameworks of the study.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The research paper is mainly focused on Abramović's trauma and pains reflected in her performance; *The Artist is Present*. The performance is analyzed from two aspects: theoretical and theatrical. From

a theoretical perspective, Abramović's art cannot be explored without employing Freud's defense mechanisms, Alfred Adler's theory of compensation, Brené Brown's vulnerability and the power of connection, and Schechner's Make Believe/Make Belief performance theory. The theatrical aspects in Abramović's non-verbal cues were the loudest in the show, especially at the moment Ulay arrived unexpectedly at the inauguration night.

3.1.2 Freud's Psychoanalysis Defense Mechanisms

Saul MacLeod looks into psychoanalysis and the tremendous role Freud played as a founding father of the field in his article "Sigmund Freud: Personality Development." He elaborates on Freud's contributions to psychoanalysis: the case of Anna O, the typographical model of the mind, divisions of the psyche, and defense mechanisms where repression works as a focal interest for the study (Macleod 2013). The following research underlines Freud's significant contribution to psychoanalysis, "Three Contributions to the Field of Human Development and How It Relates to My Teaching Experiences," with MacLeod's ideas on *The Artist is Present*. Sigmund Freud highlights that human psychology is divided into the unconscious mind, the psyche, and defense mechanisms. Each plays a separate role in shaping one's psychology. Those are not physical organs but more or less hypothetical conceptualizations of essential mental functions (Macleod 2013). Freud would encourage his patients to lie down on his famous couch, talk freely about their symptoms, and let out their very thoughts. Only then did he believe they would ultimately find their solace (Macleod 2013).

However, to a tormented soul like Abramović's, who had it rough as a child and then became torn between love and farewell as an adult, Abramović has not truly experienced such a self-healing process. It seems that she has always been on the run from her trauma, whether as a child or an adult. She never dared to encounter it face to face. Abramović has mastered the art of repression as a defense mechanism against her excruciating childhood traumas. She has repressed her agony, and pain instead of confronting it all in her performances. Abramović discovered that the most effective mechanism to overcome her fears and heal childhood wounds was to fight her past demons. Thus, Abramović made that resolution of facing the world's unkindness with an act of kindness; *The Artist is Present* was her gesture of kindness towards her unkind world of pains. Abramović is a genuine artist who ventilates her pains of trauma through harsh channels only to reflect the cruelty of her world. This

world she has always depicted is molded into softness and loving-kindness.

3.1.3 Compensation Theory

According to Alfred Adler, there is always a reason behind any sense of inferiority that grows in a child over the years. Applying Adler's Theory of Compensation to the female Marina Abramovic, the study comes down to a set of findings. According to Deutsch and Kadis (2005), psychological compensation for a particular phenomenon might occur due to the presence of inferiority experienced by the lack of some indispensable life aspect. Applying the theory to Abramović simply projects her psychological failures back at her homeland, Yugoslavia, where self-deprivation and a sense of rejection accompanied her throughout childhood. Marina never developed a sense of belonging to family or homeland due to her parents' cruelty and Belgrade's tough economic conditions at the time. Therefore, Abramović in *The Artist is Present* is a live embodiment of need, a need for care, love, and fulfillment. As an artist, she shares a compelling need for psychological compensation after years of oppression and denial.

3.1.4 Schechner's Performance Theory

The theoretical part would not be whole without referring to performance studies and applying Schechner's Make Belief/Make Believe performance theory, which is widely tackled in his book *Performance Theory* (2013) to Abramović's *The Artist is Present*. According to Schechner, the Make Belief/Make Believe Theory is all about pretending who you are, as if you are putting on "a Halloween mask" and you are fully aware you are masked. A quite demonstrative example Schechner underlines is political elections and how politicians give "costumed and tightly tailored" promises to the public in the election arena, something they know might not be down-to-earth or even doable (Schechner 2012). The influence of Schechner in Drama and Modern Theatre is discussed in Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, where he clearly states that performativity is found everywhere: in daily conduct, diverse careers, and even in disciplines like arts and languages (Schechner 2013, 110).

Performance in the Schechner universe is inseparable from reality, following post-modernism notions where rationality, universal truth, and objectivity are constantly defied. Accordingly, all the previous boundaries that separate reality from the performance have been "wrenched away," proving both Plato's and Aristotle's notions of artistic representation and how art is a mere representation of nature were proven right in Schechner's world.

Schechner (2013) claims that performing onstage is similar to social situations, such as public ceremonies, and is considered a continuum. Performance is taking a different form in Schechner's world of drama. In today's "surveillance societies" of the West, where there are closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras everywhere, acting often resembles role-playing, and the opportunity for performance as an extension of being has never been greater (Schechner 2012).

Schechner (2012) illustrates that individuals are performers, and life is like a 'reality show,' with every member playing a particular role in this show. Such a role-play concept takes us to a new notion in Schechner's universe. Even though its goals are different from those of drama improvisation classes, role-playing in many contexts, such as psychotherapy sessions and teacher training exercises, uses similar strategies. This is because both the self-conscious and unconscious impulses that underlie performance are addressed. It depicts the ingrained routines, rituals, and customs of daily living that are ingrained from birth and through early life experience.

Schechner (2013) explicated that performativity has several facets, including relying on 'improvisation.' This is clearly reflected in how he underlines "Performativity [as taking place] everywhere – in daily behavior, in the professions, on the internet and media, in the arts, and in the language" (123). The question lies in whether individuals are being true to themselves or are just showing off. Traditional rules of conduct have developed for several occupations and professions, some of which have manifested as distinctive personality traits, behavioral patterns, and vocal tones. These have then been stylized into conventional depictions, such as the roles of the serious court judge, impassioned reporter, and stately cleric. They typically follow tradition, yet they have developed into performing modes. The implication is that many people going about their "daily business" are not always being who they truly are. In certain circumstances, they are performing roles that have been prearranged and even programmed.

Abramović wholeheartedly adopted Schechner's performance theory in her show. She has woven a "Make-Believe" world of her own where she let her audience in, let them sit before her across the table, battled with them through their agonies and fragmented memories, and had them believe in the very existence of that world of a dream of hers. Abramović made that fragile, vulnerable world of hers theirs, too. That belief of hers is the reason why the performance was a great success.

3.1.5 Brené Brown's Psychological Theory

Brené Brown, a sociologist and research professor who called herself a storyteller, investigated in her long research on human nature the power of vulnerability and connection in human lives. In Berne's "Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead," she introduces us to the concept of vulnerability in the following statement, "Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness." Then, she takes us on a journey of self-revelation to highlight how vulnerability develops a sense of belonging in us, as clearly reflected in another statement, "because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance" (Brown 2017).

This vulnerability is a dilemma we all struggle with in our daily lives; Brown elaborates in her TED talk "The Power of Vulnerability" on the concept of Shame and how it is another agonizing sense that might haunt us and hinder our social development. This sense of not being enough hinders the process of connection. For connection to happen, according to Brené, we have to allow ourselves to be seen and deconstruct that very sense of shame (Brown 2017). Brown reveals the devastating effect of both trauma and repressed emotions on human nature. It seems like repressed emotions never really die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways. With reference to Sigmund Freud, unexpressed emotions of love, fear, loss, pain, agony, failure, or even need are all merely a set of repressed emotions that pile up in the human mind and never die by time as mistakenly perceived. They are buried down in the darkest abyss of the human soul and, when not surfaced, grow more ferocious until they detonate when most unexpected. In light of this, Marina never embraced nor forgot about her traumatized childhood.

By applying various psychological frameworks, such as theories of compensation, vulnerability, and repression as defense mechanisms, the study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological underpinnings of Abramović's work and its experiential impact on both the artist and the audience. Through this endeavor, the complex interplay between art and psychology will be illuminated to provide new insights into how performance art can both engage and challenge the human psyche (Garza 2022).

The Artist is Present performance offers a rich and complex terrain for psychological analysis, inviting us to examine how art can shape our perceptions

of ourselves and others, and the potential for profound human connection through the medium of performance art. Thus, the prolonged act of sitting and making eye contact with visitors creates a unique space for exploring the dynamics of human interaction and the impact of sustained attention. Moreover, the performance also raises questions about the role of the artist in shaping the emotional and psychological experiences of the audience, as well as the potential for art to elicit deep and personal responses (Garza 2022).

Gibellini (2014) reveals the nature of the performance to her readers and its theatrical aspects, which makes people believe and feel that this is their actual social-political reality. Gibellini starts her article with a manifest of the human nature of the performance by stating, "It is not just a matter of Abramović being present 'in body and soul' in the museum's atrium—the realization of the performance which lends the show its title" (Gibellini 2010). Gibellini expands her analysis to show the reader how Abramović herself plays a pivotal role in the show. The show would not be whole without her artistic and human contributions. She identified herself with the audience's pain and agony only to heal herself through healing them. Gibellini successfully managed to crystalize Abramović's artistic ideas and prove how such aesthetic performance is a means of documenting her liberating art. For Abramović, the significance of the performance lies in the instant when the artist, conscious of herself, enters her own physical and mental constructed world before an audience over a time that is always emphatically present, turning her presence, the passing of time, and silence—as well as her physical, mental, and emotional resilience—into a constant in her work. Abramović must, therefore, "be present" for the whole duration of the performance, which will last more than 700 hours.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Abramović commented on her performance *The Artist is Present*: "It was [a] complete surprise... this enormous need of humans to have contact" (Abramović 2010). She eventually understands, after countless years of giving blatantly cruel performances, that one's need for connection goes beyond any other. Art does not heal through re-living physical and mental pain, but it instead heals by understanding the pain, growing empathetic, and embracing it. That peace of mind Abramović has been seeking for decades and never managed to find presented itself in *The Artist is Present*. Abramović could not see beyond

her pains until she faced others' bare pains in the performance. In every eye she looked into during the whole three months of her performance, she could see unspeakable suffering, lost love, suffocated forgiveness, hatred, belief, doubt, and peace.

Trauma is an indispensable component of Abramović's performance art. This is clearly reflected in how "she has been traumatized as a child by her parents, the daughter of partisan parents who fought the Nazis and then became national Communist heroes under Marshal Tito's regime, where they were rewarded with plum jobs and a beautiful home" (Margolin 2016). Despite being raised in such patriotic family, her parent's marriage was "explosive," which reflected on her childhood. Abramović was frequently locked in a closet after being severely beaten by her mother. Initially scared of the dark, Abramović soon discovered it to be a soothing place where she felt surrounded by "ghosts, spiritual presences – glowing beings, shapeless and quiet but not at all terrifying" (Margolin 2016).

One of the significant findings of the study is learning about the strong impact of repressed emotions on human nature through researching repression as a defense mechanism for trauma, in addition to connection, shame, and the power of vulnerability. It is reasonable to say that suppressed emotions rarely fade away. They are buried alive and eventually reappear in more repulsive ways. More than any other psychologist at the time, Sigmund Freud was able to decipher the innermost workings of human nature. He was able to explain that repressed feelings of need, love, fear, loss, pain, and agony are all simply a collection of emotions that accumulate within the human mind and never actually go away as is commonly believed. To apply this, Marina sits on a chair at one end of the table while guests sit in silence on the chair facing her on the opposite side of the table and observe the activity, see Figure 1. Therefore, it is crucial to "reproduce" some of her most well-known practices since, if performance is connected to the present, documentation is insufficient to express its intensity (Gibellini 2010).

Given that repressed emotions are nothing but an inevitable product of an act of trauma, the question lies in defining trauma and how far it can affect the human mind. Paul Valent unraveled trauma and its hidden hazards in a paper he wrote on "Trauma and Psychoanalysis" (2003). Valent (2003) introduced it as follows: "Trauma derives from the Greek meaning penetration and wounding. It can be defined as a state where a previous equilibrium favoring life is irrevocably altered. If death does not occur, a compromised

equilibrium is established. It is like bone fracturing after being bent and stressed and then repaired, leaving a permanent vulnerability or a wound, which will leave a scar and sensitivity."

It has been disclosed that Abramović had been hiding her vulnerability for years, even attempting to numb it with her grievous artistic performances and giving her sense of disgrace the upper hand. Abramović believed that by doing this, she would be able to mend her broken pieces and regain her lost identity. Her soul grew weaker, and her heart became more bitter. Abramović could only truly heal what she had believed to be beyond healing when she decided to embrace her shame and vulnerability through *The Artist is Present*.

Examining the semiotics of theatre and performance in *The Artist is Present* reveals that tables have a particular significance. Only two people are seated at *The Artist is Present*'s little wooden table, placed in the middle of the room: Abramović, who is serving as the host on one side, and her guest on the other. From a semiotic perspective, this denotes a welcoming, friendly, private, and safe environment. Wooden kitchen tables are typically used for smaller, more private gatherings rather than round tables, which may accommodate more people. The presence of the table also alludes to the connection that Abramović hoped to establish with every member of the audience. She wanted to foster this understanding by keeping a fixed gaze on her visitors, who had traveled so far to reveal their wounds and begin to mend them. By encouraging them to sit across that table, Abramović nurtures her audience's soul. Such a symbolic setting signifies the solemnity of the incident shared by Abramović and her guests at that large table.

For Abramović's costumes in *The Artists is Present* and their significance, she wore a wide variety of basic garments in the hues red, dark blue, and white. Each color has a special meaning. Over the three months, Abramović shifts between the three colors based on the energy and mood that each dress brings at a certain point of the show. The dresses Abramović chose suggest a pressing desire to present a particular image at each moment of the performance. The inaugural brilliant red outfit denotes strength, vitality, and vivacity as a new beginning for the performance. Later, Abramović chooses the dark, contemplative blue outfit that gives the show a profound meaning because of its meditative quality. She ultimately chooses the white one on the finale night because it represents the final stage the performance has reached—illumination, freedom, and purity. It also evokes the feeling of reaping the harvest after many

months of labor. There is nothing accidental about Abramović's subdued decisions since she was well aware of the significance each dress held for the viewer and the crucial part it played in realizing the primary purpose of the performance.

When Ulay arrived at the inauguration night, Abramović extended her arms to hold his hands, and it was a moment that will always be remembered. By reaching out to hold Ulay's hands, Abramović signifies warmth, a release of strain, empathy, reconciliation, and ultimately healing. After a brief period of holding hands, Abramović lets go of Ulay's hand. This does not mean that she no longer loves him; instead, she chooses to love him while letting him go. Reaching the pinnacle of self-realization, self-love, and self-healing is symbolized by her letting go of Ulay's hands at that precise moment.

Only when she saw it all could Abramović finally fathom that her inner peace lingers in letting go of her childhood pains, adulthood lost dreams and failures. By the arrival of her ex-lover and partner Ulay that night, that moment she laid eyes on him after twenty-four years of separation, she could finally restore her inner peace. Whatever sense of guilt, fear, or regret she held towards Ulay deep down for the past years just healed itself the moment she shed tears in his presence, extended hands across the table to reach his in a moment of reconciliation, and finally left her in peace at his kind departure. Her reenacted trauma and lack of self-love healed themselves as well every single time she looked one of her visitors in the eye in an attempt to see through herself.

With respect to Freud's analysis of repression and how it acts as an effective defense mechanism in the presence of trauma, he underlines that the human mind is divided into main parts in perceiving the world: the conscious and unconscious. The unconscious mind is where all rejected, most feared, and painful emotions are kept locked away, and that is what we call repression (McLeod 2013). Repression acts as a defense mechanism among trauma patients, as they tend to keep in detention whatever is unacceptable to the conscious mind or would if recalled, arouse anxiety. This is reflected in the following statement made by Abramović "I had experienced absolute freedom—I had felt that my body was without boundaries, limitless; that pain didn't matter, that nothing mattered at all—and it intoxicated me" (2016).

Abramović believes in the power of fear, and it is instilled into our innocent souls by others. She commences her memoir, *Walk Through Walls: A*

Memoir, with a story from her dull childhood:

I was walking into the forest with my grandmother one morning. It was so beautiful and peaceful. I was only four years old, a tiny little one. And I saw something very strange, a straight line across the road. I was so curious that I went over it; I just wanted to touch it. Then my grandmother screamed so loud. I remember it so strongly. It was a huge snake. That was the first moment in my life that I felt fear- but I had no idea what I should be afraid of. It was my grandmother's voice that frightened me. And then the snake slithered away fast. It is incredible how fear is built into you by your parents and others surrounding you. You're so innocent in the beginning; you don't know (Abramović 2016).

Thus, fear has always been a close friend of Marina's since childhood and she learned how to tame it, even suppress it by repressing her worst fears whenever encountered by one. Marina never developed a healthy mechanism to deal with her persistent fears whenever they emerged and this explains her brutal physical performance which was her way of self-expression.

The work that Abramović is doing is creative insofar as anyone can sit in a chair; nearly anyone can decide to do what she has chosen to do, which is to reflect, impose boredom on oneself, and analyze the events of her life thus far. Her skill lies in seeing the holiness of everyday existence and doing what, to most of us, appears implausible to do. She does this by contextualizing the action and adding a touch of the grandiose to the ordinary (Kaganskiy 2022).

Adler believed that any inferiority complex that develops in a child over time always has a cause. According to the study's application of Adler's theory of compensation to Abramović, a series of insights could be drawn. It is asserted that psychological compensation for a particular situation may happen when inferiority brought on by the absence of a necessary life component is present (Deutsch & Kadis 2005). Marina missed a necessary life component; emotional affection. Having compensated for the sense of inferiority that accompanied her entire life through her love for Ulay, Abramović managed to fill in such a gap and make up for her childhood longing for affection. Eventually, the moment Abramović held hands with Ulay upon his arrival at the inauguration night was highly significant. The gesture of Abramović's extending hands to hold Ulay's signifies warmth, pain

release, empathy, reconciliation, and finally, healing. It signifies finding her other half after so many years of being stranded and scarred; see Figures 13 and 14. Upon holding hands for a while, Abramović lets go of Ulay; it is not like she holds no love for him anymore, but she instead chooses to love him, yet let him go. Thus, letting go of Ulay's hands signifies reaching the ultimate phase of self-realization, self-love, and self-healing, see Figure 15.

5. CONCLUSION

When discussing the power of vulnerability and shame, it is essential to note that repressed emotions have a devastating effect on human nature, as unexpressed emotions never actually die. They are buried and will come forth later in uglier ways. Sigmund Freud could tell those unexpressed emotions of love, fear, loss, pain, agony, failure, or even need are all merely a set of repressed emotions that pile up in the human mind and never die by time as mistakenly perceived. They are utterly buried down in the darkest abyss of the human soul and, when not ventilated, grow more ferocious until they detonate when most unexpected.

Applying Freud's defense mechanisms and looking

deeper into Abramović's "unexpressed emotions," one can tell how far Abramović has long repressed her emotions of anger, pain, and loss since childhood. It must have been quite relieving to discharge those repressed emotions through *The Artist is Present* show after a long time suppressing them. On top of that, the research looks into the nature of vulnerability and how it can never be detached from trauma through Brené Brown's vulnerability theory.

In the end, the study fills the gap in analyzing *The Artist is Present* by using psychoanalytic and performance theories. Abramović was able to heal her fragmented soul and troubled psyche through her performance, which aroused a sense of reconciliation with her unresolved past traumas. Another gap this study fills is how female voices rise against oppressive societal conditions. Each female figure can liberate her voiceless identity, voice out her affliction, and break free from the shackles of norms imposed on her. As such, Abramović realized that her power lies in her muffled voice, and the only way to restore that voice is by fighting for her right to live, not just to exist. She fought her unthinkable battles bravely and never stepped down; she lost some rounds and won others, but eventually emerged victorious as she found her genuine voice.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1. Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* Inauguration, MOMA, 2010.



Figure 2. *The Artist is Present* Setup at MOMA, 2010.



Figure 3. MOMA audience's emotional reactions to Marina's presence in *The Artist is Present*.



Figure 4. Marina and Ulay as performance partners in the 1970s.



Figure 5. One of Marina and Ulay's bizarre performances was when they had their hair tangled together with slight chances of untying it as a representation of unity.



Figure 6. Marina and Ulay, in another performance, holding arrows against one another in an attempt not to get one another shot.



Figure 7. Marina and Ulay, walking in the Great Wall of China to bid each other farewell.



Figure 8. Marina and Ulay's farewell moments before a twenty-four-year separation.



Figure 9. Marina is sitting across the small wooden table, waiting for her next guest.



Figure 10. Marina is wearing a bright red dress to *The Artist is Present*.



Figure 11. Marina is wearing the dark, meditative blue dress to *The Artist is Present*.



Figure 12. A moment of standing ovation on the finale of *The Artist is Present*, to which Marina chose a plain white dress.



Figure 13. Ulay's arrival at The Artist is Present inauguration night in MOMA, 2010.



Figure 14. Marina and Ulay's reunion after a twenty-four separation in The Artist are Present, 2010.



Figure 15. Marina and Ulay in a moment of reconnection and reconciliation, The Artist is Present, MOMA, 2010.