

Marina Abramović's universe: universalising the particular in *Balkan Epic*

Louisa Avgita

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the conceptualisation of the Balkans in the work of performance artist Marina Abramović. I focus on her exhibition *Balkan Epic* (2006), which included works produced between 1997 and 2005 that addressed the concept of the Balkans. I examine the systematisation of Balkan ambiguity and the transformation of the personal into the universal that takes place in the process of Abramović's performances, as well as within the exhibition space. Abramović's representations designate the artist as a mediator between the personal and the universal and suggest the spatialisation of the past. In this environment, history is substantiated in the body of the artist; it becomes universalised and naturalised and confirms the dominant ideology of globalised capitalism through a process of complete depoliticisation.

KEY WORDS

Marina Abramović, Balkans, universality, capitalism, ideology, exhibition

An artist should look deep inside themselves for inspiration
—*The deeper they look inside themselves, the more universal they become*
—*The artist is universe*
—*The artist is universe*
—*The artist is universe*

Marina Abramović, *Manifesto* (2009)

INTRODUCTION

In this article I discuss Marina Abramović's narration of the Balkans as was developed in the exhibition *Balkan Epic*,¹ staged in Milan in 2006. My aim is to examine Abramović's universalisation of Balkan ambiguous particularity, to explore the transformation of her own personal experiences into universal images and to discuss her Balkan representations as ideological manifestations of contemporary globalised capitalism. In my view, ideology expresses universality and indicates the subject position from which the universal is conceived. In globalised capitalism, cultural particularity and ideological constructions of otherness do not constitute reactions to the levelling forces of a culturally unified globalised world; rather, they are its own by-products, poised to support the globalised economic structures of late capitalism. As Mari Carmen Ramirez (1996: 25) notes in regard to cultural representations in identity exhibitions,

[c]ontrary to a generalised fallacy, late consumer capitalism does not operate through cultural homogenisation, but through the marketing of the appearance of 'difference' and particularity.

Within this framework, I examine Abramović's marketisation of Balkan particular ambiguity which constitutes an ideological manifestation and cultural product of contemporary capitalist structures. I consider

the exhibition as an ideal field for the expression of prevailing political and ideological conceptions. According to Bruce W. Ferguson (1996: 180), 'the exhibition's representivity [...] is an exemplary identification of the direct political tendencies (democratic, nationalistic, feminist, regionalistic, postcolonial or whatever) on offer'. Therefore, the curatorial discourse is analysed as a political and ideological determinant of the concept of the Balkans in contemporary globalised capitalism.

In the first section of this paper I address the question of the universal in performance art and the turn of the personal into the universal as an ideological act. I also examine how Balkan in-between, ambiguous particularity emerged in the 1990s and was concretised in Abramović's work, contributing thus to the articulation of the ideology of globalised capitalism. In the second section I explore Abramović's exhibition *Balkan Epic* and her production of Balkan works in order to identify the ideological patterns permeating her work's discourse and the transformation of her personal experiences into catholic representations of Balkan ambiguity. In the third section I focus on the spatialisation of history and the essentialisation of historical time in Abramović's ritualistic performances. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of Abramović's representations as part of contemporary capitalist structures and neoliberal ideology.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE BODY: WHEN THE PARTICULAR BECOMES UNIVERSAL

The idea that the artist mediates between the personal and the universal has often been reproduced in various contexts within the art discourse. The universalisation of the artist's subjectivity has certainly been claimed as proof of being an artist, insofar as it designates the communicative role of art and its ability to transcend barriers through the indisputable particularity of the artist. For example, consider how the 'spicy' details of Tracey Emin's personal life are exposed in her works and discussed in

her presentation on the Saatchi Gallery website: ‘Tracey Emin reveals intimate details from her life to engage the viewer with her expressions of universal emotions’ (saatchi-gallery.co.uk). The claimed transformation of Emin’s personal life into something that appeals to universality reflects an attempt to confirm Emin’s pop voyeuristic works as art.

The presumed convergence of the personal and the universal in the very body of the artist – particularly in the case of performance art – makes the artist relevant not only to the public but also to potential buyers and sponsors: the artist activates the space around a performative action, embodies universal values, undermines, questions or confirms common beliefs and indicates a unique moment of experience that is shared by the audience. The ritualistic engagement of the public in performance art turns the latter into a field for the reproduction of ideology, insofar as the artist is him/herself transformed into a powerful universalised representation. The feminist scholar Peggy Phelan (1996: 148) claims that performance art is ontologically nonreproductive and therefore opposes the logic of capitalism: ‘Performance clogs the smooth machine of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital’. In contrast to Phelan, I argue that in performance art the artist him/herself *is* a reproductive representation insofar as his/her body is universalised through the act of performance. The reproduction of the universal through the personal in the art of performance turns the body of the performer into an ideological body, whether it engages with the ideology of capitalism or opposes it.

The powerful reproductive representation of performance art is manifest in the work of Marina Abramović. In recent years, the over-promotion of Abramović as a cult figure of performance art in the USA has been accomplished through various paths, from the performance *House with the Ocean View* (2002) presented at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York and reproduced in an episode of the popular television series *Sex and the City*, to MoMA’s *The Artist is Present* (2010) which instigated the expression of fervent admiration by the American pop

singer Lady Gaga. The recent popularisation of Abramović has appeared almost a decade after the high priestess of performance art rebranded herself as Balkan through various works from 1997 to 2005, which were either new (*Balkan Baroque*, *Count on Us*, *Balkan Erotic Epic*) or restaged older pieces (*Rhythm 5*, *Tomas Lips*). The advancement of her cultural particularity as the main constituent of her work during those years provides yet another field for the universalisation of the particular through art, turning Balkan ambiguity into a universal value and Abramović's own body and registered experiences into conveyors of 'History' and 'Culture'.

In my argumentation, *Balkan Epic's* conceptualisation of the Balkans as an ambiguous particularity corresponds to the image of the Balkans as systematised by the critique of Balkanism that was elaborated in the 1990s and 2000s. The discourse of Balkanism and its critical deconstruction in the work of historians and theorists, such as Maria Todorova (1997) and Vesna Goldsworthy (1998), have led to the construction of new spaces of Balkan otherness based on poststructural and postcolonial reconsideration of the other's space. These theorists describe Balkanism as an in-between discourse, in contrast to Orientalism which is the discourse of opposition. According to them, the Balkans, due to its geographical and historical position in relation to 'advanced' Europe, can be described as liminal, lowermost, marginal, ambiguous, intermediate and transitional. Todorova (1997: 11) insists on the idea that the Balkans does not constitute the opposite of the West. Being part of Europe and lacking the colonial legacy of the East, the Balkans stands in the area between the two incompatible worlds, bridging different races, religions and stages of development. As she notes, 'Unlike orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, Balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity' (Todorova 1997: 17). Todorova's statement summarises the concretisation of Balkanism as an independent discourse and the systematisation of Balkan otherness as an ambiguous representation.

The exhibition *Balkan Epic* was organised in the period after the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the nationalistic wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, when the negative stereotypes about the Balkans revived. In the period that followed an intense interest in both undermining and reversing these images was expressed within the context of European and American cultural and academic institutions (Goldsworthy 2002). At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, many exhibitions, conferences, symposia and publications critically discussed the revitalised arguments against the Balkans and considered issues of Balkan culture and identity, the relationship between centre and periphery and the ‘re-invention’ of the Balkan Peninsula after the wars in Yugoslavia.²

Reconsideration of the negative concept of the Balkans in this context and the reformulated representations that this entails have contributed to the repositioning of the Balkans within the structures of globalised capitalism in the period after the disintegration of socialist regimes. The repositioning is achieved at the political, social, cultural and economic levels through systematic international interventions, including those launched by military action, NGOs, political organisations such as the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and cultural institutions such as the Soros Open Society. The supposedly ‘humanitarian’ profile of all these activities, from the bombardments of Yugoslavia by NATO forces in 1999 to various cultural initiatives, facilitates the fast and violent introduction of neoliberal politics and free market economics to the Balkans.

Under this perspective, Balkan ambiguity systematises a space of fluidity that aims to positivise the Balkans and accustom it to the flexible environment of globalised capitalism. As shown below, Abramović substantiates in the exhibition *Balkan Epic* the Balkans’ ambiguous position between oppositional concepts such as brutalism and eroticism, aggressiveness and naivety, war and peace. In her works, Balkan particularity of in-betweenness is validated as a universal

quality. Her personal experiences and family history are universalised through rituals and images that articulate the Balkans' eternal ahistorical character. By doing so, Abramović transforms the historical and political Balkans into essentialist representations that obscure the political environment in which Balkan exoticisation and universalisation takes place.

BALKAN EPIC AND THE REPRESENTATION OF BALKAN AMBIGUITY

Balkan Epic was Abramović's solo exhibition curated by Adelina von Fürstenberg and held from 20 January to 23 April 2006 at the exhibition space Hangar Bicocca in Milan. The aim of the show was to present a series of Abramović's works about the Balkans, made between 1997 and 2005, on the occasion of her last major project *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005). The exhibition included one of the most discussed works about the Balkans, *Balkan Baroque*, which refers to the wars in Yugoslavia and was presented at the 47th Venice Biennial in 1997. In that performance, Abramović washes with a brush a huge pile of large animal bones, as a symbolisation of ethnic cleansing and a ritual of purification (Figure 1). The exhibition also included *The Hero* (2001), a piece dedicated to Abramović's father who was one of Tito's partisans fighting against German occupation forces during World War II; *Count on Us* (2003), which refers to the unsuccessful intervention of the international community in the Balkans during the wars in Yugoslavia; the video *Tesla Urn* (2003), an homage to the Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla; and *Nude With Skeleton* (2003), a self-portrait which shows Abramović's nude body covered by a skeleton.

In these works, Abramović uses motifs similar to those that we see in her first performances from the mid 1970s, in which she attempts the disavowal of her traumatic past in Tito's Yugoslavia. Among the first performances that Abramović made while still in Yugoslavia were



Figure 1. Marina Abramović. *Balkan Baroque*. Performance-installation (detail). Venice Biennale, June 1997. Photograph by Attilio Maranzano. Reprinted with permission, courtesy of Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Rhythm 5 (1974), which *Count on Us* is based on, and *Tomas Lips* (1975). Both performances involve her emotional understanding of her native country—Tito's Yugoslavia—symbolised in Abramović's use of the five-pointed star, which was on the Partisan flag and then the flag of Yugoslavia. In *Rhythm 5* Abramović lays in the middle of a blazing star and is removed by the public when they realise she has lost consciousness due to the lack of oxygen. In *Tomas Lips*, having eaten one kilo of honey and drunk one litre of wine,

she cuts a five-pointed star into her stomach with a razor blade, breaks a glass with her right hand, whips herself and then she lays on a cross made of ice blocks, while a radiator makes the wounds in her stomach bleed; people from the audience carry her away 30 minutes later.

After these works, in 1976, Abramović left Yugoslavia and moved to Amsterdam where she pursued an international career and was acknowledged as one of the most prominent performance artists in the world. It is in the period of the wars in Yugoslavia, the dissolution of the country and the violent transition from socialism to capitalism that

Abramović gradually returns to the themes related to her 'homeland'. In 1993, the performance *Tomas Lips* was repeated in various venues in Europe and the USA as part of her work *Biography* – and then repeated again in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 1997, with *Balkan Baroque*, Abramović turns her attention back to her native country, though this time in different terms. She now becomes not Serbian or Yugoslavian, as in her 1970s works, but Balkan. In this context, she uses the concept of the Balkans to address the barbarism of the war, but also the purity of primitivism. All the works in the exhibition *Balkan Epic* are made during this period.

The exhibition opened and closed with Abramović's two major works, *Balkan Baroque* (1997) and *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005). These determined the concept of the exhibition and summarised the artist's definition of the Balkans. The two edges of the exhibition signify the two edges of Balkan mentality, as stereotyped in Balkanism. On the one hand, the brutality of war, tragedy, nationalism, insanity and hostility and on the other, the purity of nature and love, paganism, humour and community. Rituals, traditions and centuries-old customs related to the human body, sexuality and eroticism are revived in *Balkan Erotic Epic*.

The oppositional poles of anger and tenderness are embodied and performed by the artist – they are substantiated in the double role that Abramović takes up in the two works. She assumes the position of the distant narrator of Balkan otherness, in a role that suggests neutrality and detached objectivity, identified with the Western observer; alternatively she enacts passionately the Balkan myth, using her own body. Thus, in *Balkan Baroque*, she is shown on a screen dressed as a scientist with a white medical robe, narrating the story of the wolf-rat, which is about how people kill the rats in the Balkans by prompting them to eat each other. This story symbolises Balkan brutality and the 'natural' instinct of killing each other. After her narration she changes into a passionate folk singer, performing songs from Serbia and Croatia.

Her Balkan self is dramatically completed in her performance atop a pile of bones, where she acts out national and personal traumas.

In *Balkan Erotic Epic* she appears in the sober outfit of an academic folklorist (Figure 2). Dressed in black and wearing glasses, Abramović narrates Balkan customs that subsequently are dramatised on screen and indicate the naturalness and purity of eroticism and the human body, long lost in advanced societies, but preserved in the Balkan essence (Figure 3).³ In opposition to the distant role of the neutral narrator, there is the performed role of the Balkan soul played by actors or by Abramović herself who appears half-naked hitting a skull repeatedly on her stomach, in a dramatic gesture which reveals again her suffering Balkan self. Abramović becomes what Hal Foster (1996: 174) calls ‘the artist-ethnographer’, indigenous and an outside information giver, at the same time. These two works correspond to Balkan in-betweenness, the

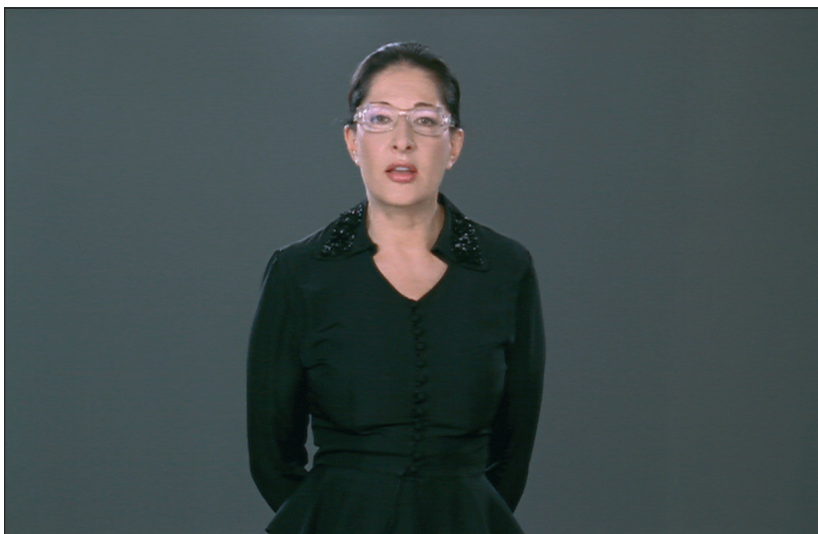


Figure 2. Marina Abramović. *Balkan Erotic Epic (The Professor)*. Video still. Belgrade, 2005. Photograph by Milan Dakov. Reprinted with permission, courtesy of Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



Figure 3. Marina Abramović. *Balkan Erotic Epic (Women in the Rain)*. Video still. Belgrade, 2005. Photograph by Milan Dakov. Reprinted with permission, courtesy of Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

double nature of the Balkans, which oscillates between aggressiveness and tenderness, blood and honey, and represents the Balkan ambiguity that Todorova (1997: 18) refers to when she describes the Balkans as ‘incomplete self’. In that sense, the Abramović exhibition is among the most accurate contemporary representations of the stereotyped images of Balkanism in the visual arts field.

Apart from Balkan in-betweenness, the works *Balkan Baroque* and *Balkan Erotic Epic* also represent Abramović's ambiguous identity, her double gaze and twofold position. She is the artist who left her country to become one of the world's most acclaimed performance artists. She is also a Balkan artist who reproduces ‘Balkan’ self-destructiveness in most of her performances. This double character is suggested in the two roles she plays in these two works. Thus, the detached observer is both the voice of the ‘neutral’ Western – or international – community

which analyses and objectively describes Balkan reality, and the voice of the detached Abramović, who, after decades spent living away from the Balkans, can see her native country through the 'objective' eyes of the West. On the other hand, there is the artist who experiences, suffers, enjoys and acts in passion like 'all Balkan people'. In Abramović's works the distant narrator is identified with the objective and naturalised West of globalised (universal) capitalism, whereas the suffering self is equated with the postsocialist intimate (personal) Balkans of violent subjectivity.

Abramović's double identity, in its Western and Balkan projections, is interpreted and represented in a stereotypical manner: the West which observes and the Balkans which destroys itself. Abramović is herself the bridge between the international art scene and the Balkans, and, therefore, is the most appropriate person for introducing Balkan identity to the international art market. As she mentions in an interview in the *Balkan Epic* exhibition catalogue (Abramović, 2006a: 66), after she left her native country in 1976, she only came back three times to work there, always on commissioned projects: the first time for *Balkan Baroque*, a work made for the Venice Biennale; the second for *Count on Us*, a project sponsored by a Japanese Museum on the condition that it was related to her birthplace; and the third time for *Balkan Erotic Epic* which was made after an invitation by Neville Wakefield for the collection *Destricted*, which includes short films of sexual and pornographic content by various artists. After a long denial of her Balkan self, Abramović returns to the region as a mediator in the period when the Balkans is at the foreground as a new artistic product.

In the following section I explore the role of Abramović's rituals in the deconstruction of historical time and therefore in the standardisation of Balkan particularity as yet another ahistorical identity. There, I discuss how the essentialisation of the Balkans as an in-between entity is achieved through the spatialisation and ritualisation of time in the exhibition space.

THE SPATIALISATION AND RITUALISATION OF THE PAST IN *BALKAN EPIC*

Abramović's exhibition constructs new narratives which deny linearity and progressivity. These narratives dissolve clear distinction between the past, present and future, and instead put forward a space of simultaneity. After all, the exhibition space is a space of synchronicity, a construction that transforms successive time into simultaneous space. The viewer experiences everything concurrently as the narrative develops in the rooms. This experience makes the exhibition the ideal manifestation of Foucault's (1986: 22) heterotopia: 'We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed'.

The substitution of modern linear historiography with plural histories is sustained by the very rationale of temporary art exhibitions, which construct multiple and often contradictory meanings about a topic, all substantiated by the curator or the institution. Art theorist Boris Groys (2007: 54) argues that 'instead of narrating the canon of art history, independent curators are beginning to tell each other their own contradictory stories'. Even within the context of a single exhibition the stories that the curator tells may be contradictory. Significantly, all of these stories appear equally relevant and plausible.

The deconstruction of authoritative historiography justifies the role of the curator/artist as the subject which curates histories, and strengthens his/her position as the interpreter of ideas and the mediator between the past and the present, the artist and the viewer. Here, we pass in the field of art from the authority of Art History to the authority of the subject-curator/artist, and from fact to belief. In this sense, Abramović's own body instantiates History, she becomes History, and by universalising her historic body through the rituals of performance art she obstructs the possibility of politicising the past. Her body is not a means for protest or political struggle but a naturalised field of compromise and consent.

The transition from fact to belief is evident in Abramović's exhibition *Balkan Epic*. There, the reconsideration of history is achieved through 'exotic' Balkan images. These images refer to the Balkans of authenticity and long-standing traditions and rituals, which not only designate the essence of the Balkans but transform the latter into the fundamental nature of the human. Seen as part of the narrative about the new postsocialist (and post-nationalist?) Balkans of multiplicity and flexibility, images of recent Balkan cruelty and violence become rather exotic representations which add to the Balkan particularity. Besides, these images not only exoticise the Balkans but also exoticise the concept of the West, which becomes the saviour – although sometimes inefficient in its role – and the provider of a neutral, 'civilised' space for Balkan democratic invention and negotiation. The West becomes the field on which Balkan democracy blossoms.

Even when Abramović's works are critical of the presence and actions of international institutions (for example in *Count on Us*), they still present these organisations (the UN, the EU, the USA) as neutral powers entitled to intervene and to sort out what Balkan people are themselves not capable or willing to do. The failure of the West to act efficiently or properly confirms and justifies in Abramović's discourse the regulating role of Western institutions in the Balkans. What would the position of the artist have been if the UN had not sent expired medicine and food, as Abramović (2006b: 45) alleges, and the EU and the USA had kept their promises to help? The artist blames the West for not fulfilling its humanitarian role. By saying this, Abramović engages with the meta-political discourses of globalised capitalism and transnational governance, which justify military interventions around the world via a depoliticised defence of human rights.

Balkan Epic constructs a space beyond history. In these works history is personalised and transformed into memory. As the art critic Steven Henry Madoff (2006: 21) states in the exhibition catalogue:

these works are memory objects, places evoked that are always about the pastness of the past.... These performance pieces are not mirrors of place and time as much as they are mirrors of lostness. The performances are images that reflect no actual historical event; they are not imitations of a specific geographical reality nor, taken as a series, are they historically regimented. They are in fact historically diffused, almost ahistorical in their casual relation to any linear historical narrative.

In this ahistorical space, Abramović transforms history into fragments of memory. Thus, in *Balkan Baroque* her parents appear on screen, reinforcing her personal involvement in the suffering and catharsis of the Balkans, whereas in *Hero* she refers to her father's heroic past. The wars in Yugoslavia become the Balkan wars in Abramović's ahistorical and apolitical time. History is transformed into the distant past and the Balkans is naturalised and aestheticised in the playful images of eternal truth encountered in *Balkan Erotic Epic*; in this way, the Balkans becomes forever attached to tradition in a work that bears no resemblance to contemporary life in the region.

In *Balkan Epic*, apart from references to personal memory and Balkan history and identity, Abramović also focuses on the essence of the Balkans through tradition and ritual, and in this way completes the unification of the past and the present. The claimed authenticity of the rituals and customs presented, their origins in the depth of time and their approach to the human body and sexuality, turn the Balkans into a space of diachronic purity and truth in which the human is reunited with nature.

In the work *Balkan Erotic Epic*—the highlight of the exhibition—Abramović stages rituals, traditional practices and customs that refer to Balkan eroticism and sexuality and the artist returns to her own country in order to find 'pure' and 'authentic' eroticism. In an interview in *Flash Art*, Abramović (2005: 89) says about *Balkan Erotic Epic*:

I wanted to present things that were both truly ritual and erotic. It seems like we have made ugly everything that is erotic. We have lost a sense of

our sexual awareness for things from social history, practices that were used in totally different ways but we are not used to reading them – such rituals are de-eroticised to us because they are unfamiliar. You see this man with an erection becoming the energy for a different purpose and it puts a new meaning (which is actually the old meaning) back into this gesture. There is no vulgarity – it is something else completely.

The Balkans of the innocent gaze and primordial knowledge brings back to contemporary societies what is presumably lost and forgotten in Western civilisation. The exhibition curator, Adalina von Fürstenberg (2006: 11), explains in the catalogue:

The nudity in *Balkan Erotic Epic* may seem offensive to our modern, Western sensibilities but these images are amply compensated by the innocence and spontaneity characteristic of a primitive and pagan civilisation that no longer exists. The images talk to us about something buried deep in our consciousness – which is why they may seem scandalous – something primordial, archaic. In a certain way, this last work sheds light on everything Abramović produced earlier by revealing the mystical value inherent in the nude body.

In the same mode, the art critic and curator Fulvio Salvadori (2006: 15) writes in the catalogue that ‘today the body is disoriented because it has lost contact with the nature in which orientation is embedded’, whereas in antiquity ‘the display of nudity in ritual orgies and dances acted as an outlet for erotic energy and as a reconnection with the body of the universe at the moment of mystical ecstasy’. This ‘mystical ecstasy’ is what the Balkans can offer contemporary disoriented humans.

The ritual plays an important role in Abramović’s work – indeed, her performances can be seen as rituals aiming at salvation, relief, even punishment. In *Balkan Erotic Epic*, Abramović’s ritualistic art seems to find its origin in distant Balkan culture. The ritual is also important in *Balkan Baroque*, in which Abramović cleans big animal bones for hours, as a means of catharsis from the Balkans of war and aggression. The narrative of rituals and tradition shapes the Balkans as a place of

postmodern nostalgia: Balkan backwardness and parochialism become the alternatives to contemporary 'over-civilised' societies that have lost contact with the essence of life. In this narrative, however, the Balkans is forever trapped in its backwardness and parochialism. Under this perspective, rituality dispenses with history as a political reading of the past by turning the latter into a universalising process of salvation and personal experience. The discourse of the universalised Balkans of eternal subjectivity aims to positivise representations of aggressiveness, fierce nationalism and authoritarianism derived from the threatening Balkan 'reality'.

The works presented in *Balkan Epic* refer to the past by deploying symbols of national identity. Abramović pays homage to Nikola Tesla, the Serb scientist and inventor who is regarded as one of the greatest figures of Yugoslavian culture. In *Count on Us*, Abramović repeats one of his experiments with wireless electricity, and in the video installation *Tesla Urn*, the artist is shown holding an urn with his ashes. The video *The Hero* is another work in the Balkan series. There, the artist is shown sitting on a white horse, holding a white banner. It is a tribute to Abramović's father, who was a celebrated partisan war hero during World War II. The video's soundtrack is the Tito-era Yugoslavian national anthem. The artist identifies here her family's history with the history of her nation and the Balkans, as she also does in *Balkan Baroque*. In these works, Abramović does not deny or deconstruct but exorcises the Balkan past of nationalism and authoritarianism in the rituals of her performances, using her own body: her body is a space of accumulated Balkanism and a means for discarding its negative burden.

CONCLUSIONS: ABRAMOVIĆ'S UNIVERSE AND THE NATURALISATION OF CAPITALISM

In conclusion, through her works, Abramović systematises a concept of Balkan universality that denies a political reading of the region's current

postsocialist, triumphantly neoliberal context. In Abramović's works the recent turbulent history of the Balkans becomes part of her suffering rituals and is then transposed through art into the dehistoricised universal entity of Balkan ambiguity that can in turn be personalised by the viewers as a 'Balkan experience'. Everyone can see in Abramović's Balkans part of his/her self.

Universalising the personal, however, through the mystifying powers of art is turned into a process of complete depoliticisation when seen in reverse, that is to say, as a process of personalising history. Under this perspective, the personal represents an idealised universal History which can be experienced by everybody. In contrast, following Jacques Rancière's (1998: 36) understanding of politics, the political reading of the past involves a subjective reading of 'the part of those who have no part', a reading which substantiates the Universal and prompts a shift of perspective. According to Rancière (2010: 35), 'Political struggle is not a conflict between well defined interest groups; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways'. The subjective reading of 'the part of those who have no part' is the Universal, seen from a different point of view; if the dominant perspective naturalises the Universal, then the 'part of those who have no part' confirms the reversed Universal by advocating its subjectivity.⁴ In this sense, by conforming to the logic of the dominant ideologies that systematised the Balkans as a coherent entity of either old-fashioned evil aggressiveness or neo-postmodern ambiguity and relativity, Abramović's work offers a naturalised space for an essentialised, apolitical Balkan suffering.

The essentialised Balkan ambiguous identity has become part of Abramović's own 'mysterious' profile and branding strategy. In November 2011, she organised the Gala at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles, and in July 2011, she performed in the production *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, directed by the American director Robert Wilson and staged at Manchester Interna-

tional Festival. In both events, Balkan 'essence' was an integral part of the performances. In *Life and Death*, the Balkans forms the historical setting of Abramović's biographical narration, whereas in the glamorous MOCA event the Serbian folk singer Svetlana Spajic, who also appeared in *Balkan Erotic Epic*, provides an additional snapshot of cultural identity. After reducing the Balkans to an apolitical and ahistorical entity, Abramović has incorporated it into her own public profile, as the queen of performance who organises high-class galas for the elite of the American art establishment. In her video presentation at the MOCA event (YouTube.com 2011), Abramović opposes the European system of state subsidised arts and claims to favour the American framework of business and bank sponsorship. These private funders, according to her, have replaced kings, aristocrats and governments as the new art patrons. In this historical moment of economic crisis Abramović's ahistorical Balkanness contributes to the naturalisation and depoliticisation of the harsh neoliberal attack against the welfare state. The artist is universe, as Abramović claims in her manifesto, only, *this* universe happens to identify with violent capitalism.

NOTES

1. In the text I refer both to the exhibition *Balkan Epic* and to the work *Balkan Erotic Epic*, the last of Abramović's works dedicated to the Balkans. *Balkan Erotic Epic* was included in the *Balkan Epic* exhibition.
2. *Balkan Epic* was one among many exhibitions and art events which rebranded the Balkans in positive terms as a concept of relativised cultural ambiguity. Other exhibitions included *In Search of Balkania* (2002), *Blood and Honey: the Future's in the Balkans!* (2003) and *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* (2003); all of these were organised by famous international curators.
3. Abramović (2006a: 66) not only appears as a researcher on screen; she also conducted research in library archives and examined old manuscripts in order to find the stories she narrates.

4. The incommensurability between the two perspectives is analysed by Slavoj Žižek through the scheme of the 'parallax view'. In his analysis of the Hegelian concept of parallax, Žižek (2006: 42) points out that there are no binary symmetrical signifiers that constitute the One. Instead, one of the two parts can stand by itself, while the other represents nothing more than the gap which separates the two – the second part stands for the asymmetrical shift of perspective. Along this line, there is no common ground between the two perspectives; that is to say, there is no neutral universality (Žižek 2006: 30).

REFERENCES

- Abramović, M. (2005) Interviewed by Aaron Moulton, *Flash Art*, XXXVIII (244), October 2005.
- Abramović, M. (2006a) Interview by Fredrik Carlström 'A conversation on Balkan Erotic Epic', in A. Fürstenberg (2006) *Balkan Epic: Marina Abramović*. Milano: Skira Editore, pp. 65–69.
- Abramović, M. (2006b) 'Count on Us', in A. Fürstenberg (2006) *Balkan Epic: Marina Abramović*. Milano: Skira Editore, pp. 44–59.
- Abramović, M. (2010) 'Marina Abramović. An Artist's Life Manifesto'. Available from <<http://grandevetro.blogspot.com/2010/09/marina-abramovic-artists-life-manifesto.html>>, accessed 14 February 2012.
- Ferguson, B. W. (1996) 'Exhibition rhetorics', in R. Greenberg, Ferguson, B. W. and S. Nairne (eds.) (1996) *Thinking About Exhibition*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 175–190.
- Foster, H. (1996) *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1986) 'Of other spaces', *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22–27.
- Fürstenberg, A. von (2006) 'Introduction', in A. Fürstenberg (2006) *Balkan Epic: Marina Abramović*. Milano: Skira Editore, pp. 10–11.
- Goldsworthy, V. (1998) *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Goldsworthy, V. (2002) 'Invention and in(ter)vention: the rhetoric of Balkanization', in D. Bjelić and O. Savić (eds) (2002) *Balkan as*

- Metaphor: Between Globalisation and Fragmentation*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, pp. 25–38.
- Groys, B. (2007) 'The curator as iconoclast', in S Rand and H. Kouris (eds.) (2007) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*. New York: Apexart.
- Madoff, S. H. (2006) 'The Balkans unbound', in A. Fürstenberg (2006) *Balkan Epic: Marina Abramović*. Milano: Skira Editore, pp. 18–24.
- Phelan, P. (1996) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ramirez, M. C. (1996) 'Brokering identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation', in R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson, and S. Nairne (eds.) (1996) *Thinking About Exhibitions*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 21–38.
- Rancière, J. (1998) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière, J. (2010) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Edited and trans. S. Corcoran. London and New York: Continuum.
- Saatchi-gallery.co.uk, 'Tracey Emin exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery'. Available from <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/tracey_emin.htm>, accessed 14 February 2012.
- Salvadori, F. (2006) 'The erotic body', in A. Fürstenberg (2006) *Balkan Epic: Marina Abramović*. Milano: Skira Editore, pp. 12–17.
- Todorova, M. (1997) *Imagining the Balkan*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- YouTube.com (2011), 'Marina Abramović: An Artist's Life Manifesto. MOCA Gala 2011'. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltF3Hcj_F38>, accessed 14 February 2012.
- Zizek, S. (2006) *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.

Louisa Avgita is an art historian and art theorist based in Thessaloniki, Greece. She holds a PhD in Arts Criticism from City University London; an MA in Art History from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; and an MA in Art Criticism and Management from City University London. Her research centres on the criticism of multiculturalism and the discourse on cultural identity, particularly within the Balkans context, with special emphasis on issues of globalised capitalism, ideology and the politics of representation and display in the visual arts. She organised the series of events (comprising lectures, exhibitions and discussion panels) *Art Under Construction: the Balkans in Context* in London, in 2006, and co-edited a special issue of the journal *Third Text*, entitled Balkans, in 2007. She has contributed papers to many international conferences and workshops, and has published articles, book chapters and exhibition texts on contemporary art. *Email: lavgita@gmail.com*