

**A
blue
period
of
obsession**

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The Left corner



Figure 1 - Audience reaction to Marina Abramović performance

is stuck

IN A MOMENT OF LIMBO

between a macabre smile and absolute disgust. Both emotions suspended in formaldehyde creating an unknown stillness and tranquillity that even she can't decipher.

The remnants of a sharp intake of breath that calmly escaped with not even her neighbour noticing.

A shadow builds underneath her lower lip as it slowly protrudes to begin to form a word. The round letters filling her mouth but yet to transpire.

Focused yet blurring.

A flurry of formaldehyde creating unformed thoughts, half sharp intake spent reactions, brand new neighbour noticing emotions yet a shadow builds stuck stationary.

A flurry of unformed thoughts, half spent reactions, brand new emotions yet stuck. Stationary.

Focused yet blurring. Transfixed in this state of something but nothing.

An intangible moment

moment intangible

An intangible moment fired by an excess of human emotion that even she can't decipher.

TRANSFIXED IN THIS STATE OF SOMETHING BUT
NOTHING. AN INTANGIBLE MOMENT FIRED BY AN
EXCESS OF HUMAN EMOTION.

**And so I fell in love with a colour— in this case, the
colour blue— as if falling under a spell, a spell I
fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns.¹
Maggie Nelson**

*And so I fell in love with an energy transfer – in this
case, a work of art – as if falling under a spell, a spell I
fought to stay under and get out from under. All in the
space of just a two second inbreath:*

0.00 seconds

The Punctum- ‘As Barthes says, it is that which
pricks me, but also bruises me and is poignant for
me.’²

0.05 seconds

In that moment the obsession is born, the fixation
begins. It is as if I am hurt, stuck in the headlights,
awaiting my fate. I have chosen to remain but I
don’t quite know why. But yet still I remain. They
remain. We remain.

0.10 seconds

The punctum is the tiny detail that I

zoom in on.

Disrupting.

The smooth surface of the performance. The soft
aura that hangs in the air that feels so live for
me in that moment. Felt so differently by others
around me, but acknowledged by all in the room.
In whichever way they see fit. My punctum is

my impending obsession with the space in-
between, the cause and effect and the way that the
temperature of the entire room can feel as if it has
changed. An ephemeral feeling that will always be
mine to house within my body. My own Archive. An
energy,

that I have gained.

0.15 seconds

‘Marina Abramović’s work is characterised by
her unflinching ability to face and encounter
elemental dynamics of human existence.’³ She is
unashamedly human during her performances and
tests the limits of our face to face connections.
What is the potential of a relationship that can be
made in a gallery space...even between strangers?
What emotions can be surfaced? What sensations
do we remember?

0.20 seconds

‘The punctum also works retrospectively. It is
not something that can be staged or placed in the
photograph, but rather is the detail we recall’⁴ once
we are no longer within or with the artwork, and
then proceed to think back upon it. Deciphering the
ephemerality.

¹Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 1.

²Sean Homer, Jacques Lacan (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), ProQuest Ebook central, 92.

³Adrian Heathfield, “‘Marina Abramovic: Elevating the Public. In Conversation with Adrian Heathfield,’” in *Live: Art and Performance* (TATE Publishing, 2014), 145.

⁴Sean Homer, Jacques Lacan (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), ProQuest Ebook central, 92.

0.25 seconds

When thinking about desire and a need to keep watching it is academically desirable to think about Lacan's objet petit a.

For it is the space.

The moment.

The unavoidable.

The unexplained.

The lack.

The void that is momentarily filled.

'It is not the object itself but the function of masking the lack.'⁵

0.30 seconds



But

what goes on in you when you talk about colour as if it were a cure, when you have not yet stated your disease.'⁶

Maggie Nelson

Figure 2 - Rothko Room at Tate Modern

0.35 seconds

When entering the gallery space are we waiting to be cured of something that we do not yet understand? Is the action of looking and experiencing art to fill the lack that we desire? To tempt and satisfy? Is the disease we hold just the innate emotions of being human? Yearning for experience, gratification, energy and attention.

0.40 seconds

One of my favourite places in London is the Rothko room at the Tate Modern. I stand in front

of the vast expanse of colour - it looms over me. Transcending the space with depth and darkness. Yet there is something romantic about the red based tones and I feel comforted. In retrospect I ponder on whether I am going there to be cured of something? If I feel comforted when shrouded in Rothko then there must have been something missing before. I had to be uncomfortable in some way to then find a comfort. I choose to go to a space that doesn't change. A permanent fixture that I can predict but nonetheless be taken on a different live excursion each time. The void is momentarily filled

⁵Sean Homer, Jacques Lacan (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), ProQuest Ebook central, 88.

⁶Maggie Nelson, Bluets (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 7.

*and objet petit a is
found.
My desire.*

0.45 seconds An abstract romanticism.

0.50 seconds

Marina Abramovic:

But to me the future of performance is really when the object is removed between the viewer and the performer, so there's just a direct transmission of energy.⁷

she has formed a certain kind of lack. A lack in what we traditionally physically believe as art or a commodity. But in this lack she has filled a void and in turn illuminated an objet petit a that arguably the audience didn't even know they were looking for.

0.55 seconds

Mark Rothko:

Look, what I'm trying to do with my works of art is... you've got sadness in you, I've got sadness in me, and my works of art are places where the two sadnesses can meet and therefore both of us need to feel less sad.⁸

0.65 seconds

Abramović's performance, *The House with the Ocean View* (2002), does not exist without a public. The premise of the performance is that she is watching the public and they are watching her. It is as simple as watching. Performed in New York for twelve days, the stairs that allowed her to leave were made of knives, meaning that she was confined to that space. The public could freely move yet they chose to not leave, emulating Abramović's situation. 'Suddenly they wouldn't go away. People started coming in, spending one hour, three hours, coming in over and over again; there were people

0.60 seconds

Abramović's removal of the object is arguably the finding of Lanca's objet petit a. In her ability to remove the excess and simply create an energy transfer between performer and viewer,

⁷Adrian Heathfield, "'Marina Abramovic: Elevating the Public. In Conversation with Adrian Heathfield,'" in *Live: Art and Performance* (TATE Publishing, 2014), 146.

⁸Tate. "You've got sadness in you, I've got Sadness in me." *Facebook*, May 19, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/tategallery/photos/a.117432718992/10157356388488993>

who looked in every single day, or before work, almost addicted to the gaze.⁹ Could they be addicted to the isolation that Abramović is experiencing, as they embody that feeling too? Like Rothko; when describing his work above, could this meeting of two isolated people create a lesser isolation for both? There is now a connection and a gaze formed within the space that was previously unconnected. A new relationship that counters isolation.

0.70 seconds – An addiction to gaze

0.75 seconds – An addiction to gaze

0.80 seconds – No longer Isolated

0.85 seconds

But what is it about live performance that creates this energy field of desire that results in an innate need to keep watching, to find out what happens next, to remain engaged, dedicated, submerged, consumed, obsessed, immersed, devoted, betrothed, engrossed, captivated, absorbed, addicted,

0.90 seconds

Walter Benjamin referred to an artworks presence in time and space as its aura¹⁰. Questioning whether reproductions can hold this existence in its new manifestation. Could the aura of the art work; the punctum, objet petit a and energy transfer all be the factors that build a magnetic force of obsession? Forming a constellation and framework of attention. Benjamin argues the weakened possibilities of this within reproduction, therefore is it that liveness of experience that provide us with the need to not look away? Our physical presence being the breaks that do not let us turn over the page, continue to scroll, open another webpage and give in to a distraction or tangent thought.

**Must we be there
to be obsessed?**

**0.95
SECONDS**

⁹Adrian Heathfield, “Marina Abramovic: Elevating the Public. In Conversation with Adrian Heathfield,” in *Live: Art and Performance* (TATE Publishing, 2014), 146.

¹⁰Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2008).

1.00 second

I really believe the future of art is not with the object, but between the artist and the public. Everything now is immaterial. Feeling and emotional states have to be transformed in public without anything in-between¹¹

Marina Abramović

1.05 seconds

For just because one loves blue does not mean that one wants to spend one's life in a world made of it. "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus," wrote Emerson. To find oneself trapped in any one bead, no matter what its hue, can be deadly¹²
Maggie Nelson



Figure 3 – Marina Abramović, 'The House with the Ocean View' 2002

1.10 seconds

When a live performance is steeped in the relationship with the viewer, the reception and the actions of the audience; then it is the combination of the many different responses, learned emotions, empathies and retrospective experiences that form the artwork. And in turn form the aura. In Tim Etchell's 'A six-thousand-and-forty-seven-word manifesto on liveness in three parts with three interludes' he encourages the performer to let the moment be nothing or everything. Allow all the possibilities of the moment¹³.

For some audience members this could be the pivotal moment of their day, for others a soon forgotten memory. Relinquishing control of the received product and encouraging the agency of the spectator could be the ingredient to ensure an ownership of an immaterial artwork. An artwork or experience that continues to live within the lack of the viewer's emotional landscape, to be told again and again. A passing bead.

IMMATERIAL - EPHEMERAL - FOREVER

¹¹Adrian Heathfield, "Marina Abramović: Elevating the Public. In Conversation with Adrian Heathfield," in Live: Art and Performance (TATE Publishing, 2014), 151.

¹²Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 30–31.

¹³Etchell, Tim, "Manifesto on Liveness" in Live: Art and Performance (TATE Publishing, 2014)

1.20 seconds

Eventually I confess to a friend some details about my weeping— its intensity, its frequency. She says (kindly) that she thinks we sometimes weep in front of a mirror not to inflame self-pity, but because we want to feel witnessed in our despair. (Can a reflection be a witness? Can one pass oneself the sponge wet with vinegar from a reed?)¹⁵

Maggie Nelson

Is this shamed need to be witnessed in heightened moments of emotion the reason so many sat in front of Abramović and wept? The simplicity of an unbroken eye contact, the act of being seen, really seen, places us in our most vulnerable state. A tear forming is not a way to physically blur the eye contact or a weakness, but in this moment a sign of true trust. And who would want to look away when witnessing such a connection? The punctum is formed in the failure of the façade and the reveal of one's true self,

VULNERABILITY

and strength.

1.25 seconds

Ironically for someone who is self-confessed obsessed with the aura that art can create I do often lack

¹⁵Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 35.

An attention span
An attention span

1.30 seconds

Baader-Meinhof phenomenon is when you notice something new and then suddenly you are aware of that thing all of the time. There is no numerical increase in occurrence, you have just started to register it more often. Maggie Nelson's awareness of the colour blue increases, along with the many people in her life, whom are now also hyper aware of the colour blue. I have also become overly sensitive to anything that I cannot stop looking at. I notice it in myself all of the time, I notice it in others and I over analyse every artistic experience that I encounter:

When you're exposed to brand new information, especially if you find it interesting, your brain takes notice. These details are potentially destined for the permanent file, so they're going to be front and centre for a while.

Ann Pietrangelo¹⁶

Therefore we become bias, consumed by our own desire and obsession at the forefront of our brains. I assume that everyone can't bear to look away and is equally obsessed with the possibility of an energy transfer created during a performance, or standing in front of an artwork. Maggie Nelson's attention is constantly pulled toward anything relating to blue and she assumes that it consumes others too. They mention it to her, divulging the obsession, becoming a victim of bias.

We are all slaves to our own bias.
Our obsessions.

And to those within our sphere.

1.35 seconds

At 5:15 p.m. an announcement over the loudspeaker informed them the gallery would be closing in fifteen minutes. The suddenness of it made Levin jump. People leaned away from walls and looked about. Men and women rose from the floor, stretching out knees and hips and calves. Gathering their belongings, they smiled at one another, lifting their eyebrows in looks of mutual curiosity. Others shook their heads almost imperceptibly, as if they had quite forgotten where they were and how late was the hour. Soon there was just a smattering of onlookers keen for the last moment.

Heather Rose¹⁷

1.40 seconds

For Abramović's work, *The artist is present* (2010), she sat in MoMA for three months inviting the audience to sit in front of her. Just simply holding eye contact in silence, vulnerable yet self-initiated. Ann Bogart discusses this vulnerability in terms of a shared humanity between performer and audience, she believes that this vulnerability allows the audience to carry out self-reflection as they experience a commonality within the performance; with Abramović¹⁸. Abramović's silent eye contact therefore acts as the mirror of witnessing that we are looking for to enable self-reflection, to allow the emotion to flow. She has created a simple human connection that in turn provides a timeless escape.

¹⁶Ann Pietrangelo, "Understanding the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon," Healthline, December 17, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/baader-meinhof-phenomenon>.

¹⁷Heather Rose, "Locking Eyes with Marina Abramovic in 'the Artist Is Present' Inspired This Author to Write a Novel—Read an Excerpt Here," *artnet News* (artnet News, December 26, 2018), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/marina-abramovic-inspired-novel-1425469>.

¹⁸Ann Bogart cited in Ryan Lader, "The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic's Performance Art" » Writing Program » Boston University, www.bu.edu, 2013, <https://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/is-sue-6/lader/>.

1.45 seconds

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Figure 4 - Audience responses captured at MoMA during Abramović's performance 'The Artist is Present' 2010

1.50 seconds

Walter Benjamin began his discussion of aura in the 1930's and although I am an advocate for live performance and the astounding feeling of being in front of an original artwork, not a replication. I have to admit that watching Abramović's, 'The Artist is Present' (2010) online still made me weep. Fully formed tears rolled down my cheeks in glee for the pure, human emotion that I had felt. If this work can hold such power even when I am not involved with the original experience; then the command of documentation is not to be underestimated. Nor to hold the performance art world back in being presented in the same playing field as canonical artworks that can be recorded, archived and presented so easily again and again. The feeling of an unexpected tear is second to none. It wasn't because I am sad, or lacking something, or angry, or exceptionally happy, or provoked – It was simply the witnessing of another human's expression of emotion.

– My body automatically created a reflection of emotion as I witnessed.

– Empathy for a stranger and myself was formed.

I shared the video.

1.55 seconds

“Oh my- it makes your heart explode, your throat constrict and your eyes leak – beautiful, thank you for sharing”

– My mother in response on 16.01.2021 to 'The artist is present' (2010)¹⁹ when Ulay arrives.

1.60 seconds

I still gained the endorphins post cry, I felt an overwhelming warmth, an appreciation and it

added to my adoring respect and fascination with Abramović's work. I felt that through a reproduction that has been played over 699,000 times¹⁹. A powerful objet petit a; born from unfiltered vulnerability and silence.

1.65 seconds

In his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis tells the story of a medieval troubadour who sees a little blue flower— perhaps a bluet— in a dream. Afterward he longs to see the blue flower in “real life.” “I can't get rid of the idea,” he says. “It haunts me.” (Mallarmé, too: “Je suis hanté. L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!”) Heinrich knows his obsession is a little singular: “For who would be so concerned about a flower in this world? And I've never heard of anyone being in love with a flower.” Nonetheless, he devotes his life to searching for it: thus begins the adventure, the high romance, the romance of seeking.²⁰

Maggie Nelson

1.70 seconds

If obsessed with something without the lived experience of it, is this a true devotion? If one is seeking something, the lack of something, could this be the ultimate romance as it is unconditional, even if physically not ever touched or experienced.

1.75 seconds

Obsession could simply be

¹⁹Eduardo Guillermo, “Marina Abramovic in the MoMA and Ulay,” YouTube Video, YouTube, July 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TlZjFGriLw>.

²⁰Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 45.

An unexplained, unconditional love

1.80 seconds

I'm so obsessed with love and being in love. And I am so obsessed with people. So you know if I photograph a guy that I think is amazing, I'm in love. If I photograph a woman that I think is amazing, I'm in love. And I protect them forever because they are my muses.²¹ Autumn de Wilde

1.85 seconds

The last three thoughts of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*:

238. I want you to know, if you ever read this, there was a time when I would rather have had you by my side than any of these words; I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world

239. But now you are talking as if love were a consolation. Simone Weil warned otherwise. "Love is not consolation," she wrote. "It is light."

240. All right then, let me try to rephrase. When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light²²

1.90 seconds

I am beginning to believe that an unavoidable attention is an obsession which in turn is seeking love. Or maybe is already love. A blooming **romance**

1.95 seconds

As soon as I cannot stop thinking about something or someone or a situation I consider my attention to be beginning to flourish into an obsession. Obsession may have negative connotations however I do not consider it to be so; It evokes a passion and an intensified enquiry. Without this we may not ever experience the extent of our emotions. It allows us to project focus outside of ourselves, influences others, notice points of interest around us and create unquivering human connections.

2.00 seconds

'I realised how important it was to be obsessed with something outside yourself.'²³

²¹Autumn de Wilde, *Obsessions: Autumn de Wilde On What Being Obsessed Taught Her About Herself*, interview by Iona Gamble, *The Polyester Podcast*, January 11, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-polyester-podcast/id1451311975>.

²²Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 95.

²³Autumn de Wilde, *Obsessions: Autumn de Wilde On What Being Obsessed Taught Her About Herself*, interview by Iona Gamble, *The Polyester Podcast*, January 11, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-polyester-podcast/id1451311975>.

An intake of



Figure 5

that
silently

escaped

AS SHE PREPARED TO TAKE ANOTHER.

Spent reaction.
STILL THERE.

And within two seconds I am obsessed. A desire that will forever be lacking in the most positive way. Always wanting more, experiencing more, finding more and becoming more.

Ironically in the process of writing about obsession I have become further obsessed.

It is all I can think about

Still

(Last Accessed: 2 Seconds ago)

N.B During the writing of this essay I gained an out of control obsession with The Slits and am now yearning to be in a female punk band.

It was the noise that balanced out the silence of looking.

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Figure 1 & 5:

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Figure 2:

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Figure 3:

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Figure 4:

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