

**IN SEARCH OF THE NUMINOUS:
PERFORMATIVE APPARATUSES OF
EXPERIMENTATION WITH TECHNOLOGIES OF
THE SELF**

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(Theatre and Performance Studies)**

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I Silvia Battista hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

In general terms, this thesis contributes to the on-going debate about the relationship between the religious and the secular in contemporary performance. Specifically it uses the notion of the numinous and its theoretical developments in culture to interpret western, contemporary performance art events characterized by the employment of introspective, meditative, ecstatic, contemplative practices as performance actions. Building on Rudolf Otto's notion of the 'numinous experience' and Michel Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self', I focus on the performance apparatuses and technologies employed in two case studies: *CAT* (1988) by Ansuman Biswas and *The Artist is Present* (2010) by Marina Abramovic.

The methodological approach of this thesis is rooted in post-modern developments of hermeneutics that, viewing interpretation as the on-going project of knowledge, proceeds through interpretative hypothesis. In terms of methods of analysis I focus on the three elements of space, presence and action investigated through the following material: visual, video and written documentation; auto-ethnographic methods of engagement with the technologies of the self employed by the two artists; existing critical material; and a multidisciplinary set of theoretical perspectives from performance, theatre, religious, philosophical and scientific studies.

The hypothesis proposed is that, departing from the assumption that concepts such as the numinous, the 'unknown', the ineffable, the metaphysical and the supernatural depend on ontological relativism; their boundaries are potentially movable and performative. The objective is, therefore, to look at certain performance practices as laboratories of experimentation and interpretations of these boundaries and investigate how, in each specific case the 'other' is categorized, constructed and experienced. The notion of the numinous is interpreted by looking at the specificity of the events explored, their performative and theatrical dynamics in relation to a variety of cultural and historical contexts. Ultimately the numinous emerges in embodied perception and is contextualized within the paradoxical.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction: contexts

This thesis offers an analytical interpretation of the notion of the numinous and the numinous experience in performance to investigate the complex relationship and paradoxical dynamics that certain contemporary performance art practices seem to generate between the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the material. It proposes a hypothetical perspective from which to read performance as generative of paradoxical practices and ways of thinking that blur the codified meanings that binary approaches attach to religious and secular planes of existence. Specifically I am interested in the performer – spectator relationship of performances whose actions consist of staging meditative and contemplative practices within contemporary art galleries and museums. I look at two case studies: *CAT* (1998) by Ansuman Biswas and *The Artist is Present* (2010) by Marina Abramovic, focusing on the three elements of space, presence and action.

The two case studies were chosen after extensive research into various post-modern performance approaches and methods of engagement that offered possible frameworks of interpretation for the notion of the numinous in performance. These included: new shamanic healing practices; the psychomagic rituals conceived by Alejandro Jodorowsky; Michael Harner and core-shamanism; the Panic Theatre of Fernando Arrabal, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Roland Topor; Jerzy Grotowski's para-theatre; environmental theatre in America; the ritualistic practices of Anna Halprin; and various artists such as Joseph Beuys, Marcus Coates, John Cage, Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano, and others. Some of these practices are theatre and performance operations conducive to healing, participation and transformation; others are instrumental in provoking unsettling experiences in their audiences by subverting conventional

cognitive and perceptual patterns. Eventually, I decided to focus my attention on the latter and specifically on a particular kind of art and performance processes that are generally representative of a loose category of performance that I associated with what Susan Sontag in the essay “The Aesthetics of Silence” identified as the *via negativa* in art or a “theology” of art’s absence in art (5).¹ This is a category that resonates with religious and mystical literature and some of the paradoxes this thesis proposes to investigate.

Within this category, artworks and performances devised by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Tehching Hsieh, Marie Cool and Fabrizio Balducci, Wolfgang Laib, Marina Abramovic, and Ansuman Biswas are only a few of the many examples in which artists, each in their own way, have played with the possibility of dancing² or performing without moving or talking,³ of sculpting without making,⁴ of playing a concert without making any sounds,⁵ of painting without brushes and pigments⁶ or even of being an artist without showing any art.⁷

1 I will refer and expand on the negative path in art in subsection 3.4.3. “Philosophical implications of an invisible performer”.

2 I am referring to Marie Cool’s performances where Cool, a trained dancer, minimizes movement so it becomes a very slow and mindful interaction with Fabrizio Balducci’s ephemeral sculptures. She performed at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester during the Manchester International Festival in 2009 and at MoMA in 2012.

3 For example Ansuman Biswas’s piece *CAT* performed at the South London Gallery in 1998 and Marina Abramovic’s performance *The Artist is Present* which occurred at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010. These two performances are also the two case studies chosen for this thesis.

4 Such as Marcel Duchamp’s ‘readymades’. The most famous example is the porcelain urinal that Duchamp presented as the sculpture *Fountain* at the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917.

5 For instance John Cage’s controversial concert *4’33”* (‘Four minutes, Thirty-three seconds’) that consists of a pianist or an ensemble of musicians sitting in stillness without playing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The musician/s is/are given a score to follow in silence so that implicitly the audience is invited to listen to the random sounds that emerge from the hall. The piece was composed in 1952 and performed the same year for the first time by David Tudor at Woodstock in New York.

6 I am referring to Wolfgang Laib’s work with pollen that consists of sifting pollen on the floors of gallery spaces to form rectangular yellow shapes. The public is invited to engage with the fragrance of the pollen rather than with the rectangle of yellow pigments. He presented this work at the Centre Pompidou in 1992. For further details, please view my article “A Posthuman Interpretation of Wolfgang Laib’s Work with Pollen”, published in *Performance Research*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 67-73.

7 I am referring to Tehching Hsieh’s declaration of not showing his works for thirteen years and his intention to interpret this declaration as a performance art piece in itself. He realized this performative intention between December 1986 and December 1999 and presented it as an empty installation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2009.



Figure 1: Marie Cool, *Performance in Gallery One*, 2008

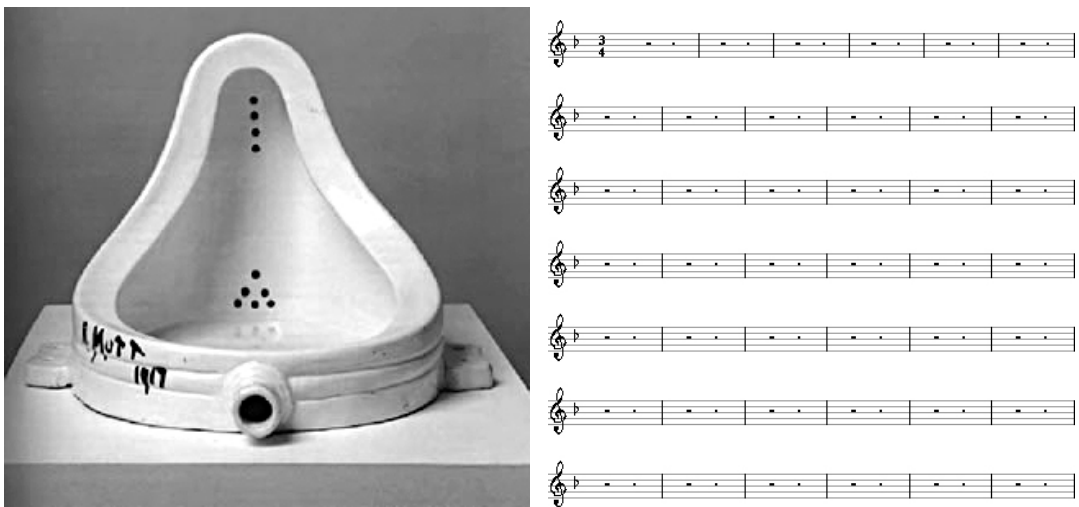


Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

Figure 3: John Cage's music script for the piece *4'33"*, 1952



Figure 4: Wolfgang Laib, *Pollen from Hazelnut*, 2002

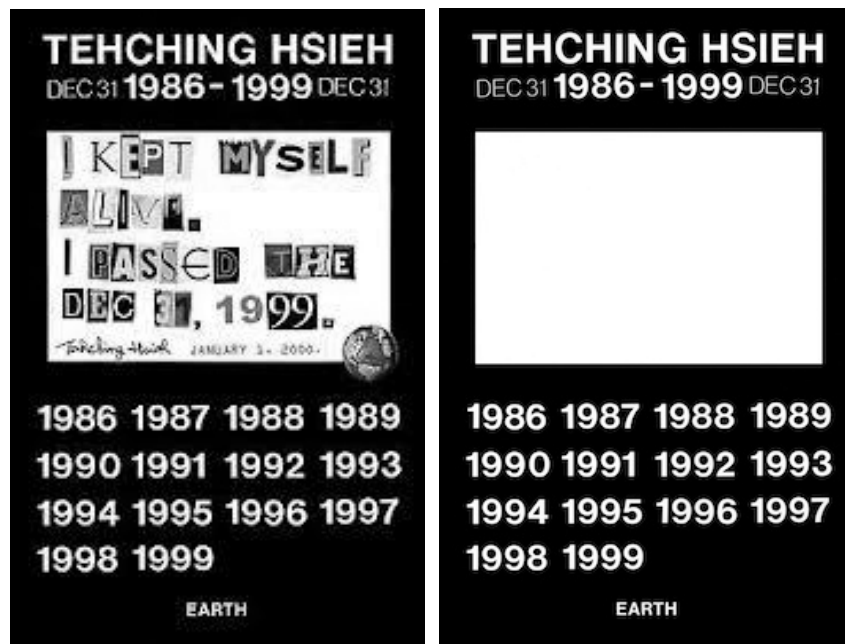


Figure 5: Tehching Hsieh, *Tehching Hsieh 1986-1999*, poster, 2000

What most of these artists have in common is an approach to and engagement with the creative process not as a means of self-expression, but rather, and to different extents, as a means of self-restraint and experimentation. This is an artistic attitude that is particularly productive as framework for interpretation of the notion of the numinous in performance, as it resonates with silence, emptiness, reduction, and looks at ‘sketching out new prescriptions for looking [and] hearing’; at delivering ‘a more sensuous experience of art’; and, more generally, at offering modalities for focusing attention on overlooked aspects of reality (Sontag VI). Hence, in most cases this entails experimenting and discovering new paradigms of containment for creative acts in which the painter, dancer, performer or sculptor restrain themselves from painting, dancing, moving or sculpting. This interrogates and at the same contradicts their initial impulse toward their chosen medium in conventional terms, and also allows unpredictable and previously unthinkable possibilities of engagement to emerge. These are artistic processes within which the artist plays with the paradoxical and the oxymoronic, involving audiences in riddles such as listening to the sound of silence, or looking at the presence of absence, the movement of stillness and the action of non-action. At the

same time, it is a search for what is behind the appearances of things, what Sontag describes as ‘the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech’ (5).

Within this broad category, through my own *via negativa* of selection and refining a focus for the thesis, I further delimited my investigation specifically to performance artists staging meditative and contemplative practices as the only performance action; and the work under scrutiny here – by Marina Abramovic and Ansuman Biswas – offered highly distilled instances of such practices as performance.⁸ This choice allowed me to explore in much greater detail each performance event from a multidisciplinary perspective, and to elaborate on a diversity of possible meanings, as well as on the paradoxical justpositions that the use of meditative and contemplative practices, as the singular performance action employed, may offer.⁹

For example, Case Study A: *CAT*, devised and performed by Biswas, was conceived to stage the Buddhist practice of Vipassana meditation with reference to two images: the Schrödinger’s cat thought experiment created by physicist Erwin Schrödinger and the cell of the hermit. The work consisted of Biswas being locked in a soundproof black box and placed in the middle of the gallery space for ten days while absorbed in Vipassana meditation. Although the audience could access the gallery space it was prevented from seeing, hearing, smelling or touching anything other than the external area of the black box, within which the unseen Biswas was sitting and meditating.

⁸ This point is explicated further in the section 3. ‘CAT, The Artist is Present and the notion of the numinous: rationale’.

⁹ As suggested in section 5. ‘Hypothesis proposed’, the idea of paradox is central to my interpretative approach.

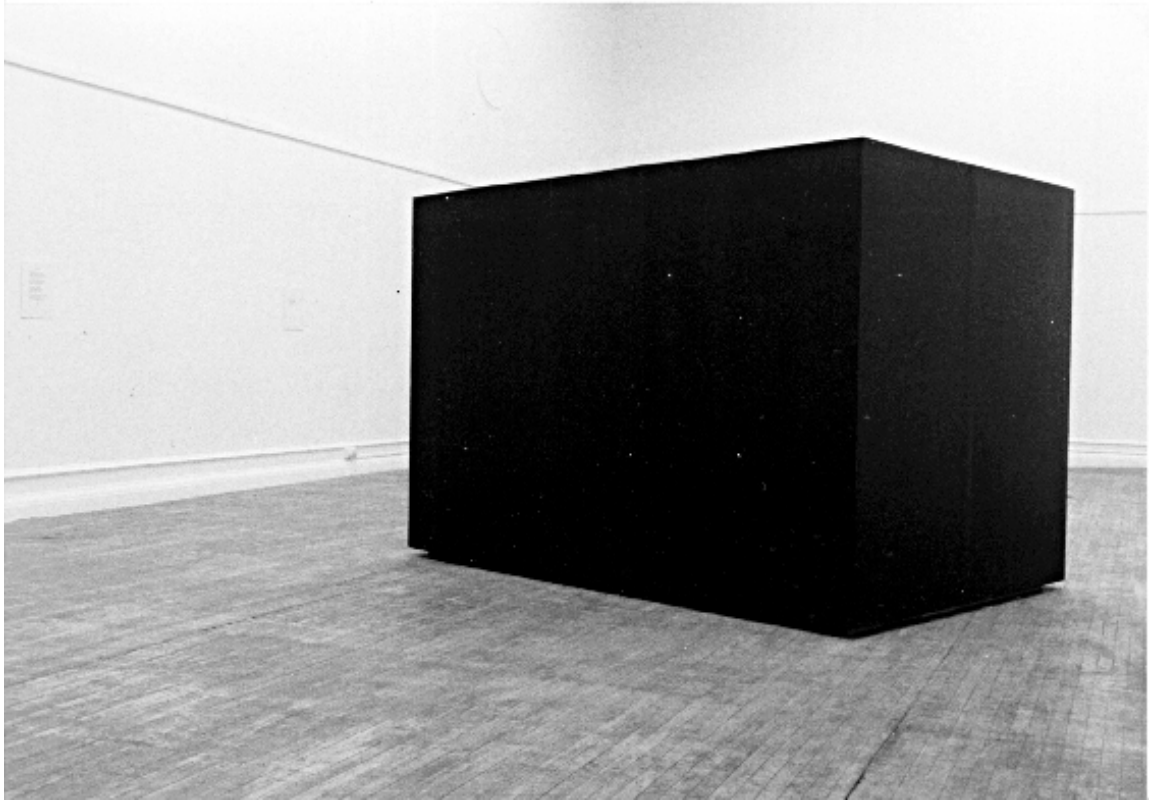


Figure 6: Ansuman Biswas, *CAT*, 1998

Case Study B: *The Artist is Present*, devised and performed by Abramovic, was conceived to stage the practice of reciprocal gazing within the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It consisted of a durational, participative, one-to-one performance art piece devised as a *tableau vivant*. Abramovic sat silently on a chair in the centre of the performance space waiting for members of the public to sit on the chair in front of her and to reciprocate her gaze. Each participant could sit for the duration of their choosing. Abramovic sat there throughout the run of the exhibition for three months and a total of over six hundred hours, arriving every day before opening time and leaving only after the museum's closure.



Figure 7: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present* (May - Day 63), 2010

In both cases the two artists brought into the arena of performance activities that are usually reserved for the segregation of religious retreats, the intimacy of reclusive environments or isolated meditative locations. In doing so they displaced the activities that I identify with the category of ‘technologies of the self’¹⁰ as conceived by Michel Foucault (Foucault, *Technologies* 16), from the retreat and intimacy of spiritual or religious contexts to the public sphere of performance. The re-contextualization of these practices within contemporary art galleries and museums generated a series of significant dynamics of spectatorship that are particularly useful for the analysis of the concept of the numinous in performance. They offered the possibility to interrogate what is culturally considered secular and religious, material and spiritual, within the overarching context of art production and consumption.

¹⁰ The notion of ‘technology of the self’ will be explicated later on in this chapter in sub-section 8.2. ‘Technologies of the self’.

2. The concept of the numinous

This thesis engages with the concept of the numinous; therefore, although it is thoroughly explicated in Chapter 1, “Theoretical Implications of the Notion of the Numinous in Performance Studies and Art: an Overview of some of its Developments” it is worth introducing it briefly at this stage. The term numinous was conceived by the German theologian Rudolf Otto at the beginning of the last century, to identify and isolate the emotional/experiential aspect of the religious experience from theology (Otto 5-6). Otto argued that the numinous experience is *a priori* emotion that is unique to the sphere of the religious, but, at the same time, should be distinguished from the rational interpretation of theology, or the moral codes of religious creeds. According to him, the numinous is an emotion that arises in individuals or collectives when confronted by a presence that he defined as ‘wholly other’ (5-6). It is a term that touches on the issues of selfhood and alterity, on the relation between the self and the other and on the processes through which their reciprocal exclusive boundaries are created.

As will be explained in Chapter 1, since Otto’s conception of the term, the notion of the numinous has been interpreted in various ways, both within and outside religious discourse. It has proved to be useful to a multidisciplinary set of scholarly interpretations of the religious experience in immanence, or better as the experience of ‘apprehend[ing] an immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 40). In emphasizing the emotional quality of the religious experience, Otto opened the way for others to interrogate the sphere of the religious, focusing on the processes through which the self experiments with its own transcendence. This is a productive subject of enquiry in the field of performance studies in particular for the investigation of performances such as *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, which offer elements of reflection and analysis on the religious experience

bringing together a multidisciplinary set of theoretical perspectives such as the religious, the scientific and the theatrical.

3. *CAT, The Artist is Present* and the notion of the numinous: rationale

There are three aspects characterizing the performances *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* that I regard to be useful for the analysis and interpretation of the notion of the numinous in performative terms. They are:

- The performance spaces and the performers' presences acquired a 'special' value in the eyes of the beholders encouraging ritualistic behaviours akin to worshipping in spectators/participants;¹¹
- The relationships between the performers and the spectators were established around practices that originated in religious/spiritual contexts;
- These relationships were negotiated through theatrical apparatuses.

These three aspects are all related to the fact that these performances generated, within the secular contexts of an art gallery and a museum of modern art, dynamics and relationships that recalled religious contexts.¹² This is to say that the roles of both performers were organized around the mediating function of activating and containing experiences that are usually held within the 'safe' boundaries of religious institutions or spiritual communities. However, as both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* happened within cultural environments that were not religious but secular, they stimulated the idea of performance as a laboratory for experimentation with types of experiences that are usually reserved for the sphere of the religious.

¹¹ Here with the term ritualistic I am referring to activities that explicitly express generalized belief in the existence of a type of sacrality that demands a special human response.

¹² The relation between the secular and the religious is central to this thesis and will be extensively explored in Chapter 1.

This suggests that, in both cases, the function of the artist was conceptualized around the role of negotiating that threshold of consciousness often described in religious literature (Bhabha 8) in terms of numinous, mystical or religious experience. However, both artists negotiated this function in secular contexts, as secular ‘intermediaries’. To explain this point further it is useful to highlight that, as argued by the post-colonial studies scholar Homi Bhabha, the:

agency of the intermediary is nothing less than language itself, or that metaphoric and substitutive process of representation that configures the signifying field of the arts more generally (Bhabha 13).

In the specificity of performance, however, it is the performer and her/his live presence that is the means of negotiation which:

articulate[s] (...) differences in space and time, (...) link[s] words and images in new symbolic orders (...) and mediate[s] what may seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities (Bhabha 8).

As introduced above, this was achieved by Biswas and Abramovic respectively in *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* by performing their function within the dynamics of self-restraint from action and speech. Their presence was consequently reduced to silence, stillness and, to a certain extent, invisibility.

In restraining themselves from producing clearly codified communicative sets of actions, they encouraged the spectators/participants to project, on to the materiality of the performers’ presence, personal narratives and associations, cultural biases and prejudices, social conventions and religious symbolism, emotional needs and desires. This created a condition within which both performer and spectators/participants alike found themselves in the position of negotiating an experience that broke through the conventional roles of the performer as the encoder and the spectator as the decoder of meanings (Hall, Questions 128-130). In other words, both performers and spectators/participants alike were involved in narratives that ‘hover[ed] on the edges of

inscription and spectation' (Bhabha 10), collapsed the conventional roles of performer and spectator, placing them:

in the human position of "speaking in between". (...) a subjection in a double sense, as both actor[s] and sufferer[s] of a narrative of which nobody [wa]s the author (Bhabha 15).

Accordingly, it is my contention that the concept of the numinous is a particularly productive framework of investigation for the exploration of this kind of mediation in performance and, vice versa, that these performances are particularly generative as case studies for the exploration of the concept of the numinous in performance.

4. Contribution and scope of this thesis

The originality of this thesis emerges from the fact that an enquiry into the theoretical implications of staging, within contemporary art environments, meditative and contemplative technologies that originated in spiritual/religious contexts, has not yet been carried out comprehensively in the western contexts of performance art.¹³ In addition, although there is an increasing body of scholarly work engaging with the question of spirituality and religion in contemporary performance and art, these terms, as the historian Tomoko Masuzawa points out, are still largely treated within these disciplines as self-evident categories, remaining peculiarly 'essentialized, un-historicized and un-analyzed' (Bordowitz, de Duve, Doniger, Elkins, Groys, Masuzawa, Morgan, Worley 124).¹⁴

13 The proposition of considering meditative and contemplative practices as performance actions was envisaged by David E.R. George in the book: George, David E.R. *Buddhism as/in Performance. Analysis of Meditation and Theatrical Practice*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1999.

14 In the last five years a growing body of scholarship dedicated to the relationship between the religious and the secular in art and performance has emerged together with an increasing interest in related topics. For example, in 2009 the Institute for the Study of Performance and Spirituality was established with its related online journal *Performance and Spirituality*. In the same year the journal of performance and art *PAJ* dedicated an entire section to this subject entitled "Art and the Spiritual"; and in 2011 at the IFTR Osaka conference, the Performance and Religion Working Group had its founding meeting. Examples of recent publications

As Lance Gharavi explains in the introduction to the book *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith* (2012), in performance and theatre studies the question of religion remains an uncomfortable subject of inquiry (7). Although, there is historically an intimate relationship between performance and religion, the same relationship has also been characterized ‘by long stretches of hostility and mutual suspicion’ (Gharavi 7). In performance, theatre and cultural studies, although religion as we know it is a cultural construct that came into being at a certain time and under certain social and political conditions, the study of what constitutes the ‘religious’ in contemporary culture remains a *sui generis* subject of inquiry (Gharavi 15).¹⁵

Therefore, in broad terms, this thesis proposes to contribute to the project of studying the ‘religious’ in contemporary culture, focusing specifically on the context of contemporary, western performance art. The objective is to provide temporary resolutions to an elusive sphere of human endeavour through the study of specific performance praxis. This entails articulating terminologies and developing ideas on certain ways of doing things, certain processes of apprehension and particular attitudes that are often associated with the sphere of the religious. To achieve this I focus specifically on the notion of the numinous which, in the context of this thesis, is ultimately interpreted through and related to the project of creativity that consists, among other things, of the exploration of new territories and ideas, the development of new perspectives and the re-negotiation of given boundaries.

on these subjects include: Morgan, David Ed. *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief*; Gharavi, Lance Ed. *Religion, theatre, and performance: acts of faith*; James Elkins and David Morgan Eds. *Re-Enchantment*; and Plate, S. Brent Ed. *A Cross-cultural Reader Conversations: Religion, Art and Visual Culture*.

¹⁵ Religious studies is the discipline that explores religious phenomena in cultural terms; however, there is little interdisciplinary research and exchange between religious studies and art theories or theatre and performance studies.

This is accomplished through four actions: first, by engaging with the specificity of the historical and cultural contexts of the chosen case studies; second, by drawing on a diverse series of cultural associations related to the technologies of the self employed; third, by investigating the complex relations and paradoxical dynamics between the religious and the secular, the spirit and matter, that the two case studies seemed to generate; and fourth, by making reference to a multidisciplinary network of theoretical sources.

Ultimately the objective of this thesis is to contribute to the collective effort of, using Sontag's words again, reinventing 'the project of "spirituality"' for our era (Sontag 5). My contention is that this project does not imply the rhetoric of total liberation of 'art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations', but rather it involves the possibility that these apparent oppositional conditions or 'locations' are linguistic configurations embodied and embedded in culture. This suggests that a rupture in our ways of thinking and embodying language may lead to knowledge not yet born with all the 'sense of urgency' (Sontag XI) that cultural transformations bring. To blur the distinction between the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the material is, in fact, a complex cultural undertaking with political, ecological and social implications, which, due to the nature of the project, are only partially explored here.¹⁶

5. Hypothesis proposed

Returning to the specificity of the case studies chosen, the hypothesis proposed is that both events encouraged an interpretation of numinosity that is paradoxical and offered a critique to unified, monotheistic approaches to how reality is apprehended and

¹⁶ The question of matter in relation to numinosity is explored in Chapter 3: "Case Study A: CAT by Ansuman Biswas".

perceived. In other words, the thesis suggests that the *via negativa* employed by Biswas and Abramovic was not directed toward the rhetoric of attaining ‘an absolute state of being’ (Sontag 4) usually related to religious, mystical literature but rather their numinosity propelled toward the experience and exploration of the condition of the paradox, understood as a ‘form of speech [or] an element in (...) dialogue’ (Sontag 11) that holds an epistemic value in itself. To explain this point further, when Abramovic performed without moving, offering merely her contemplative gaze to participants; or Biswas performed without being visible, offering only the container of his meditation cell, they appeared to negate some of the quintessential qualities or prerequisites of performance. However, in this act of negation, they called attention toward a different conception, order and practice of performance that could be perceived only in the paradoxical condition of non-performing. In other words, stillness, silence and invisibility, staged within the framework of the performer/audience relationship, created a paradoxical condition of spectatorship that opened a gap in perception. This gap determined a space of attention that ruptured the categories of ordinary perception, enabling the emergence of what was previously not existent because it was imperceptible. In staging silence and stillness within a performance context, they shed light on a performative quality of ‘reality’ that could not be discernible in movement or speech.

From this perspective, it is conceivable to think of a type of performance constructed strategically as theatrical apparatuses resembling both a scientific laboratory and a sacred space within which to experiment with the complex processes of human perception and the multiple layers that the material world seems to reveal to different approaches and instruments of investigation. It is, however, in theatre that Biswas proposed the performative contradiction of an invisible performer and that

Abramovic played a multiplicity of presences that were embodied and at the same time disembodied. It is still in theatre that the technologies of the self, employed by Biswas and Abramovic, potentially disintegrated in perception 'the ancient notions of solid matter and clear and distinct reason' (Paz 15-16), creating space for holding their indeterminacy, and the immanence of something 'other' in the unfolding categories set in our daily life. And it is, again, in theatre that the binary opposition between the spiritual and the material, the religious and the secular was problematized, allowing the possibility of considering a vision of objectivity that is embodied and situated and an idea of transcendence that is immanent and creative.

Thus, the objective is to interpret the notion of the numinous in performativity and theatre, in the space between fiction and reality, chaos and order, the metaphysical and the physical, matter and energies, forces and spirit without feeling compelled to look for a resolution to their apparent contradictions. It is my suggestion that these contradictions are the foundations of the theatrical apparatuses that both Biswas and Abramovic constructed. Both were devised to contain these contradictions, acknowledging the complex processes of entanglements through what we call 'the material world' comes into existence in multiplicity, complexity and numinosity. As the physicist Karen Barad argues, matter, like meaning:

is not an individually articulated or static entity. Matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification; nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories. (...) Matter is not immutable or passive. It does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity (Barad, *Posthumanist* 139).

6. Methodology employed

The question of methodology is foundational to the containment and development of this project; therefore, although it will be extensively explicated in

Chapter 2, “Methodology”, it is worth introducing briefly at this stage. The methodological approach employed in this thesis is rooted in postmodern developments of hermeneutics that, viewing interpretation as the on-going project of knowledge, proceeds through interpretative hypothesis. In particular, I refer to the post-Jungian archetypal psychologist and scholar James Hillman and overall to the philosopher John D. Caputo and his development of hermeneutics, known as radical hermeneutics.

Caputo, building his theories on the work of Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida, defends the idea that there is no unique, stable truth to be discovered, but rather that the project of knowledge continuously reminds us of the impossibility of achieving a singular, definitive answer or reaching a final point of arrival (Caputo, *More* 2-3).¹⁷ Radical hermeneutics opposes, therefore, any form of essentialism, instead endorsing a view of knowledge that resists fixity and permanence and necessarily is embedded in non-knowing (Caputo, *More* 3). However, according to Caputo, it is exactly this sense of impossibility, hovering around the project of knowledge, that renders necessary the application of temporary, shared categorizations of reality, and at the same time maintains the momentum for further engagement, interpretations and revisions (*More* 5). This is to say that, although a certain kind of structural blindness is always at play in radical hermeneutics, it is the same condition of non-knowing that according to Caputo:

keep[s] us open to innumerable mutations and unforeseeable possibilities, to incalculable ways of being and knowing, doing and seeing, exposed to potentialities of which we cannot presently conceive, to things improbable and incomprehensible, unimaginable and unplannable (*More* 6).

This is why, Caputo argues, nothing is left outside the project of radical hermeneutics: ‘nothing is off-limits, nothing banned from discussion, or beyond

¹⁷ For a more detailed understanding of Caputo’s interpretation of Foucault and Derrida’s work in hermeneutics I suggest two books: Caputo, John D. *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000; and Caputo, John D. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

question' (Caputo, More 7). From this perspective knowledge requires an on-going research attitude, a continuous development of previous positions through adjustments, as well as a passion for the impossible and the secret (Caputo, More 7-8).¹⁸

At this point it is worth specifying, in terms of method, that this thesis is working from the perspective of not having witnessed the performances under scrutiny here. Therefore, and inevitably, it is operating from various archival and documentary evidence, and on auto-ethnographical accounts of the technologies of the self used in each case study. To paraphrase Mike Pearson, the fact of not having witnessed the performances gives to this research an 'archeological' quality according to which the interpretation provided operates from a hypothetical 'stratigraphy of layers' (Pearson 24) of meanings entangled within what has remained as documentation, memory and imagination. This also implies that the lack of direct access to the events is also productive of a certain kind of hermeneutic imagination. Additionally, as I also engaged with auto-ethnographic explorations of the meditative and contemplative practices employed by the artists, these first-hand experiences offered the possibility of a further, embodied layer of interpretation and another angle of hermeneutical adjustment.¹⁹

This approach is particularly generative for the analysis of the numinous in performance because it not only problematizes essentialist approaches but also rehabilitates the role that imagination – imaginal life – may have in the project of knowledge (Caputo, Radical 293).²⁰ Such an approach enables the containment of the

18 Here Caputo refers to Derrida's sense of the secret as the irreducibility of 'the other' who always 'sits in the spot we can never occupy, speaks from the point of view we cannot inhabit, presides over a secret we cannot share. (...) [This] means that the absolute secret, the structural not-knowing, enters into and is the condition of the "other"' (Caputo, More 8).

19 For further information on the methods employed in these auto-ethnographic practices, please refer to subsection 2.6. 'How to proceed: methods and practices', 'Appendix I: Descriptions of the Auto-ethnographic Experiments' and sections 3.5. 'Action' and 4.5. 'action'.

20 This suggestion will be thoroughly explicated in subsection 2.2. "Hermeneutics: historical and contemporary developments".

paradoxical qualities of the numinous, the coexistence of presence and absence in performance, deferring the necessity to choose between the two. Furthermore, it encourages multidisciplinary and dialogical approaches that are needed in the analysis of performances such *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*.

The need for such a methodological approach in performance research was initiated by my own practice. In various contexts, in fact, I have experienced as performer the potentiality of performance to invert given categories of reality, to ‘challeng[e] and transgress(...) the relationships, rites and rituals of everyday life’ (Pearson 28), and to break through cultural assumptions and personal expectations. I have been testing how forces²¹ in space may be manipulated by carefully modulating relationships in space between objects and people; and I have played in performance with dynamics occurring in religious contexts in order to produce ruptures in perception. Therefore, it is from these practical experiences as an artist and performer that I decided to engage with the theoretical examination of the processes through which performance becomes something else, ‘special’ in ways that resonate with religious spheres. This is an ongoing project of enquiry and experimentation, which requires a methodological approach capable of containing the paradoxical qualities that spiritual and religious practices acquire in secular contexts.

7. The questions and the objectives

Why do artists employ technologies of the self that originated in religious contexts within the framework of performance? Is it possible for the self to look beyond itself? Are these performances and their apparatuses possible frameworks of interpretation for the notion of the numinous? How can the notion of the numinous be

²¹ ‘Forces’ here should be understood in relation to apparatuses as explicated in subsection 8.4 “Theatrical apparatuses of experimentation”.

framed within the category of performance, theatre and performativity? What meanings can be retrieved from these events that can contribute to the analysis of the relationship between religion and performance in the 21st century? These are the main questions I intend to deal with in this thesis. What follows is a list of its main objectives:

- To consider the numinous in practice through the investigation of technologies of the self deployed outside the framework of religious creeds and within the framework of experimental performances;
- To investigate the numinosity of these practices in relation to the theatrical apparatuses offered by each of the chosen case studies and in relation to performativity;
- To employ a dialogical modality of investigation between the theatrical, the religious and the scientific;
- To problematize the dialectical opposition between the spiritual and the material.

8. Brief definitions of the main terms employed

In the following paragraphs I provide a general outline of the main concepts explored within this thesis. It is not my intention to offer an exhaustive explanation of these concepts as it would be outside the scope of my research, but rather to equip the reader with the necessary theoretical anchors and guidelines. I will therefore introduce the field of performance studies and the notion of performativity, explicate the notions of ‘technologies of the self’ and ‘theatrical apparatuses’, as well as providing a brief overview of the question of the self by introducing the models underpinning the assumptions from which my interpretation develops. The next three subsections approach these topics in turn:

- The notion of performativity in relation to the multidisciplinary field of performance studies;
- The notion of technologies of the self and some models of the self related to my research objectives;
- The notion of theatrical apparatuses within the specificity of this thesis.

8.1. Performance studies and the notion of performativity

Performance studies is the academic field that provides the cultural discourses from which this research departs and within which it dwells.²² It is a discipline that brings together scholars and practitioners interested in reflecting on performance, from canonical theatrical productions to more experimental forms of cultural production. At the same time performance studies is a multidisciplinary field of enquiry within which scholars from different disciplines employ ‘performance’ as a model of analysis to investigate various aspects of social life.

In this context the metaphor of theatre and performance processes are employed as grids to observe and analyse diverse kinds of human and non-human activities. This may include the performance of the self in society, how sport is enacted, how politicians act in the political arena, how professionals act in their workplace, how members of a family perform their familiar belonging, how believers act out their religious beliefs, how animals carry on their daily routine – or even in the most adventurous approaches, how the notion of the performative can be applied to other phenomena such as material configurations.²³ Accordingly ‘performativity is everywhere’ (Schechner 123), opening

²² For an introduction and further insight into the field of Performance Studies, please refer to: Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

²³ Here I am referring to the work of the physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad who applies the notion of performativity to matter. Her theory is introduced later on in subsection 8.1. “Performance studies and the notion of performativity”, and is deployed in section 3.5. “Action”.

up the possibility of problematizing the fixed boundaries separating the stage from ordinary life and other binary systems of categorization.

The term performative, which is both a noun and an adjective, emerges from this cultural discourse and is often loosely used ‘to indicate something that is “like a performance” without actually being a performance in the orthodox or formal sense of the word’ (Schechner 123). Originally the term was employed by the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin to argue the performative nature of certain verbal utterances (in contradistinction to the constative²⁴). In Austin’s words, to utter performative sentences ‘is not to *describe* (...) [but] it is to do’ (Austin 6). For example, the sentence ‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth* – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem’ (Austin 5) is one typical example of a performative utterance.

Most performative utterances enact promises, or stipulate contracts and agreements between two or more individuals, and there is a sense of appropriateness and ritualized²⁵ behaviour linked to their success within the context that they take place (Austin 13). This is given by the truthfulness of the premises within which they are uttered that confirms their ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’ endings (Austin 14). These sentences, for instance the wedding declaration of agreeing to take a person as your spouse, must be uttered following a specific script that validates the action and accordingly brings about a ‘happy ending’. Within this notion of a ‘happy ending’ Austin does not refer to the future development of the wedding, in other words whether the couple will live happily together, but rather to the legal value and status shift that is produced by a specific script performed by specific actors (Austin 14), within a specific system.

24 Austin employs the adjective ‘constative’ to refer to those sentences that are used to describe and constate things as true or false (Austin 6).

25 Here I am referring to ritualized behaviour in terms of formalized practices like ‘following a fixed agenda and repeating that activity at periodic intervals, and so on’ (Bell 92).

The concept of an underlining theatrical script enacted in daily life, outside the context of theatre, has proved to be a powerful metaphor not only to Austin but to a variety of postmodern and poststructuralist theorists interested in bringing forward the idea of culturally constructed identities. Indeed performativity is a term that represents a model of investigation:

covering a whole panoply of possibilities opened up by a world (...) [where] increasingly, social, political, economic, personal, and artistic realities take on the qualities of performance (Schechner 123).

Accordingly performativity concerns the individual self, but also society as a whole, in its forms of representation and reinforcement of its own values and beliefs, as well as in its epistemological apparatuses and ontological belief systems. For example, Michel Foucault focuses on the social apparatuses which configure and perpetuate through specific scripts of individual self-identity and self-judgement, but also collective moral discourses which constitute the binary understanding of what is good or bad, punishable or rewardable, mad or sane (Rux, *An Interview* 10-15), empirical or metaphysical. Foucault attends to the processes through which we embody and are constituted by the discourses that make up our culture, and analyses the apparatuses that this culture has produced to reinforce (and inscribe) its specific scripts on individuals and collectives (Rux, *An Interview* 10-15).

Judith Butler focuses her attention on the question of gender and employs the notion of performativity to argue that gender is performed through the repetition of stylized acts in time (Butler 519). She argues that gender is real only to the extent that it is performed through ‘bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds [that in time] constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’ (Butler 519). She does

not deny the factuality of sexuality in the body's materiality, but she re-conceives it as 'distinct from the process by which the body comes to bear cultural meanings' (Butler 520). To become a 'woman' or a 'man' is, accordingly, to conform to a historical script or idea of what a woman or a man culturally comprises, in doing so sustaining and confirming through embodiment a culturally inherited script.

The question of embodying a cultural script is critical for the logic I am following here as it is directly related to the function that technologies of the self may have in terms of numinosity in disentangling the self from some of these given patterns.

The physicist Karen Barad may help to clarify this point as she embeds the concept of performativity and the metaphor of the script even further into embodiment and more generally into matter. Drawing from Butler and Foucault's discourses on constructed identities, she links these to the theories of the physicist Niels Bohr to conceive the theory of 'agential realism'. In doing so she aims to reinforce the theoretical tool of performativity:

for science studies and feminist theory endeavours alike (...) [to] allow matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming (Barad, Meeting 136).

In this way she challenges the linguistic faith in the power of words to represent pre-existing things and proposes that words are performative in the sense that they do things because they are part of the world with which they engage (Meeting 133). Furthermore, she 'provides an understanding of *how* discursive practices matter' (Meeting 136), contributing to the idea that not only our perception of things as they are, but also our descriptions of them, are specific material configurations of reality. In other words thinking, observing, and theorizing are all 'practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being' (Barad, Meeting 133). This

entails questioning discursive practices that give to language and culture their agency (Barad, Meeting 132) but consider matter to be fixed and unimportant in the world's becoming, arguing therefore that matter, in its complexity, is an active participant (Meeting 136).

Barad's hypothesis is not an isolated research undertaking as other scholars engage with similar issues. For example, the political theorist Jane Bennett argues something similar when she talks about the 'vitality' of matter and things (Bennett viii). Bennett's philosophical account calls for a theory 'of action and responsibility that crosses the human-non human divide' (Bennett 24), opening the idea of human agency to a complexity of other non-human things (23). She envisions a concept of agency 'distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field (...) the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants'²⁶. They include a variety of factors such as personal 'memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar', as well as many other 'actants such as the air in the room, the noises, the things used such as plastic computer keyboards (23), the weather, the clothes worn, the food eaten.

Following this line of logic, possibilities for self-transformation are to be found in subtle, embodied forms of subversive enactments (Butler 520) that by manipulating material elements aim at breaking the script to which the self is subjected; and thereby one encounters what is outside or beneath the culturally known. This suggests not only that the self is something malleable but also that the body, in its complex material

²⁶ An 'actant is neither an object nor a subject but an "intervener" (...). Which by virtue of its particular location (...) makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event.' Actant is a: 'substitute for what in a more [human]subject-centered vocabulary is called agent' (Bennett 9).

constituents, is a ‘super’ or ‘extra’ human tool²⁷ through which the self can manipulate how the self perceives (Petersen 97) others and the surrounding environment, as well as the terms through which these relationships come into place.

Anna Furse in the essay “Being Touched” encourages an engagement with the body to ‘shift, or at least modulate power relations (...), hierarchies of power, ego, strength, gender and other roles’, historically inherited and stored in our bodies (54). This may also entail the project of reconsidering what the body is, where its boundaries are set and how its material configurations are interpreted. The body, therefore, in its broader material manifestations, becomes the starting point through which to invent and discover a new ecology of relations for the self and the ‘other(s)’. In this regard Jane Bennett emphasizes how the cultural assumption of:

an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption [both within and outside our bodies] (ix).

Bennett’s idea of our bodies as assemblages of life forms and forces, and Barad’s theory of agential realism, brought to my attention the fact that, as the Buddhist scholar Alan Wallace argues, introspective traditions such as Buddhism consider ontological relativism to be the fundamental nature of reality and that ‘perceptual objects [and their dividedness] exist only relative to the means by which they are perceived or measured’ (Restoring). The state of *samādhi* is referred to as the state of being self-immersed in the field of indifferenciation where gender, class, nationality lose their meaning and where material distinctiveness dissolves (Wallace, Restoring) in performativity and multiplicity.²⁸ This is the state of self-immersment in the

²⁷ Tracey Warr, quoting the sociologist Marcel Mauss in her book review of *Performance and Technologies: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity* (2006), stresses that ‘the body is our first technology’. (<http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/1no1/TRACEywarr.html>).

²⁸ This point will be explicated in the Chapter 3: “Case Study A: *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas”, specifically in the

proliferation and intricate dance of human and nonhuman contingencies and conglomerations; a process, the numinosity of which this thesis intends to highlight; and a mingling that as Bennett argues has become harder and harder to ignore (31).

Both Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing are types of introspective technologies intended to offer to the practicing self an opening toward this type of undifferentiated and plural sense of self; modifying, through the manipulation of the body, the modalities by which the self orients itself in the world (Csordas 5). In order to understand how these technologies operate within the performative context of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, it is necessary first to examine the category of technologies of the self, secondly to interrogate the notion of the self in post-industrial societies, and finally to refer to other models that may be useful in clarifying the specific interpretation proposed in this thesis.

8.2. Technologies of the self

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, regarding the concept of technologies of the self I call attention to Foucault's theorization of the term. In over twenty-five years of historical enquiry into insanity, deviancy, criminality, and sexuality, Foucault concerned himself with technologies of power and domination, 'whereby the self has been objectified through scientific inquiry (...) and through what he termed "dividing practices"' (Martin, Gutman, Hutton 3). However, toward the end of his life, he turned his attention to a different aspect of the self, that is the process of its own self-subjectification (Martin, Gutman and Hutton 3).

With both technologies of domination and technologies of self-subjectification we are confronted with technological apparatuses and methodologies that do not necessarily imply the employment of machinery, but rather, from the etymological meaning of the Greek term *tekhnologia*, the application of systematic treatments. It is legitimate, therefore, to consider 'technology' in terms of repetitive activities and behaviours; a specific methodical organization and arrangement of activities employed to modify how individuals, and whole societies, perceive themselves.

Foucault identifies four categories of technologies which humanity has historically applied to itself (Foucault, *Technologies* 18):

1. Technologies of production that determine, through the production and the manipulation of things, social order and self-identity;
2. Technologies of sign systems that, through the use of symbols in communicative processes, operate cultural processes of identification;
3. Technologies of power that, through processes of systematic policing, 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to (...) an objectification of the subject';
4. Technologies of the self which allow:

individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves and attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, *Technologies* 18).

Systematic treatments related to meditative practices that can be classified within the category of 'technologies of the self' include engaging for long periods of time in actions such as contemplating the inward and outward movements of the breath, repeating the same mantra or prayer, enduring standing or sitting in stillness, living in isolation and silence, fasting, contemplating the subtle movements of thoughts, and so

on. Foucault focused his attention on tracing these ‘techniques of self-formation from the early Greeks to the Christian age’ (Martin, Gutman, Hutton 5), whereas in the specificity of my research I am looking at techniques originating in religious contexts of various historical periods that are employed by performance artists within the cultural context of contemporary western societies. This implies a need to contextualize these technologies within the discourses of contemporary performance, to examine how they are negotiated in this context, and to take into consideration the cultural impact that they have on a society that is highly informed by its own achievements in technological advancement.²⁹

In the two case studies chosen I consider technologies of the self originating and employed within the Theravada Buddhist tradition, Hinduism, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Sufi mystic tradition in Islam and ‘new age’ contexts. Each of these traditions has specific modalities of apprehension and belief systems that direct the way each technology is used. Therefore, when contextualized within the secularity of contemporary art, in particular British and American contemporary art environments, their dynamics of operation change not only because the context is completely different but also because the conception of the individual self is different. Hence, the value of looking at some of the models available is to interpret how the self is perceived and constituted in the historical and cultural contexts of the case studies chosen.

8.3. The self in post-industrial societies

In philosophical terms, what constitutes the self in post-industrial societies is debated. Some theorists argue that the self is constructed by social structures that determine its identity and perception; others celebrate the authenticity of self creativity

²⁹ In this case I am referring to machinery and electronic equipment.

and agency (Elliott 13). In terms of methodological approaches there is no settled ground to refer to, as some consider the self an object that can be studied without references to the interpretations that individuals make, while others think that it cannot be adequately studied in isolation from these interpretations (Elliott 9). Questions of agency and structure, objectivity and subjectivity, are the main objects of contention in relation to a self that, depending on the models employed, can have its horizon of agentic possibilities expanded or shrunk.

Having said this, one can argue that contemporary, post-industrial societies have contributed to postmodern interpretations of a self shattered in multiple directions and negotiated by the interpersonal demands of a multi-layered everyday life (Elliott 85). The so called ‘postmodern self’ is in fact without fixed identity, being fragmented and in flux, entangled in an endless process of self-creation by new technological transformations, multiple online identities, consumer lifestyles, and global population movements that construct and deconstruct on a daily basis its own sense of identity. It is the product of an endless number of self-reflections that produce fragmentation, multiplicity and discontinuity.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their collaborative book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, defend fragmentation and the metaphoric idea of schizophrenic identities, as forms of resistance to the ‘oedipalized territorialities’ (Deleuze, Guattari xvii) of institutions such as family, church, school, nation, party. They defend processes of randomness, decentred and disconnected identities, positing a ‘multiplicity of selves (...) as possible subjective sources for alternative social arrangements’ (Elliott 148). Furthermore, they argue for a fluctuating condition of existence where ‘the self and non-self, outside and inside, no longer have

any meaning whatsoever' (Deleuze, Guattari 2). In that space of indeterminacy the so-called schizophrenic self penetrates into the realm of deterritorialization (Deleuze, Guattari 35) where representation ceases to be objective and 'becomes subjective, infinite – that is to say, imaginary – [and] effectively los[es] all consistency' (Deleuze, Guattari 305).

Nonetheless, the promotion of a deterritorialized self, disconnected from structures and their ideologies, incapable of sympathizing with the values offered by specific familial, religious, national or political belief systems, is viewed by various scholars as disengaging individuals from political involvement. For example Amelia Jones in her book *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (2012), points out how discourses on 'post' identity have reshaped, undermined and obscured:

50 years of intense struggle on the part of civil rights, feminist, and other activists operating under the premises of twentieth-century identity politics (Jones, *Seeing* xx).

The sociologist Anthony Elliott, in his book *Concepts of the Self* (2010), denounces the fact that postmodern defenders of a multiplicity of selves ignore the emotional damage and psychic pain with which schizophrenia is routinely associated (Elliott 148). He warns that we must be careful in endorsing:

a naïve celebration of the multiplicity of selves, fragmented identities, narcissistic personality disorders and schizophrenia as possible subjective sources for alternative social arrangements (148).

Having said this, it is worth emphasizing that the question of shattered identities, proposed by postmodern discourses, are themselves constitutive of a reaction to the power of language and to political and cultural discourses.

In this regard, the psychologist James Hillman argues that we are still guided by a bias toward the one, by the idea that unity is an advance over multiplicity and diversity (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 38). Hillman points out that, although the post-industrial self is constantly entangled in multiplicity, the underlining myth informing our sense of self is still constrained within the myth of singularity that is represented in Jungian terms by the archetypal, monotheistic symbol of Christ (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 41) or Mohamed, or any other symbolic figure at the root of monotheistic religions. It is the myth of the monotheistic self that, according to Hillman, represents the symbolic script still dominating the conceptions of contemporary self (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 41) and fuels our fears and resistance toward multiplicity. Therefore, he proposes a polytheistic psychology of the self capable of reflecting more accurately:

the illusions and entanglements of the soul, even if it satisfies less the popular vision of individuation from chaos to order, from multiplicity to unity, and where the health of wholeness has come to mean the one dominating the many (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 40).

He goes on to argue that what constitutes the self should not be found in a monotheistic idea of wholeness but in the process of ‘gathering each fragment according to its own principle’ (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 39).

Hillman’s polytheistic self, although resembling the schizophrenic ideal of Deleuze and Guattari, does not aim to deconstruct the myth of Oedipus alone but rather all of the myths underlining monotheistic religions. This is realized, he suggests, by substituting, for example, the archetype of the Virgin Mary with a plurality of mythological figures like Artemis, Persephone, Athena, Aphrodite as more adequate ‘psychological backgrounds to the complexity of human nature’ (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 39). In other words he targets all those symbols that ‘present themselves in descriptions which dominate through unification’ (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 39), and in doing so impede

the emergence of a flexible and plural self, capable of self-transformation and compassionate acts toward others.

Whatever way we look at it, any engagement with the exploration of the notion of the self in post-industrial societies ‘denote[s] a concern with the subjectivity of the individual’ (Elliott 14) and its relation to its social structures and their political and social operations. The self seems to emerge through a two-way movement, from the outside to the inside or, vice versa, from the inside to the outside:

always subject *to* or *of* something (...), [standing] at the intersection of general truth and shared principles (Mansfield 3).

However, the question as to whether the nature and the qualities of these principles and truths determine or are determined by the self will continue to be a contested territory (Mansfield 3). The notion of ‘apparatus’ that is employed in this thesis in relation to theatre is one important aspect of this territory of investigation.

8.4. Theatrical apparatuses of experimentation

With the term ‘theatrical apparatuses’ I am referring to specific strategic means to select certain aspects of the environment and deliver controlled systems within which to carry out experiments. Therefore, theatricality is understood and applied here as a dramatic function of a closed system aimed to contain and manipulate performative occurrences. The interrelation between theatricality and performativity is consequently operative throughout the analysis of the two performances analyzed here, triggering paradoxical tensions, the qualities of which effectively serve the hypothetical objectives pursued in this project. It is worth emphasizing that both Biswas and Abramovic by working in gallery spaces align themselves with performance art or fine art traditions and discourses; at the same time, by employing highly theatrical strategies, paradoxically they also operate as theatrical apparatuses. Therefore, I encourage the

reader, whenever the issue of theatricality is alluded to, to refer to the following paragraphs, which explain further how theatricality and performativity are specifically implicated here with the notion of apparatus. In order to clarify how the idea of a theatrical controlled system applies to *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, I will refer briefly to Foucault's model of 'apparatus'.

According to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Foucault's notion of apparatus (*dispositif*) is related to his concern with 'what he calls "governmentality" or the "government of men"' (Agamben, What 1). The term 'apparatus' is used to refer to the heterogeneous ensemble of 'discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' (Foucault, Power 194) which are employed to govern, direct and control a society. It is possible to summarise Foucault's model in four points: firstly, an apparatus is the network that is established between linguistic and non-linguistic elements (Agamben, What 2-3); secondly, each apparatus has a 'concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation' (Agamben, What 3); thirdly, it 'appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge' (Agamben, What 3); and fourthly, its nature is to have a dominant strategic function (Foucault, Power 195).

What is particularly interesting for the context of this thesis is that, according to Foucault, an apparatus is essentially strategic in manipulating the relations of forces within a specific system (Foucault, Power 196). These relations can be moved in a particular direction, blocked, stabilized or multiplied in order to accomplish specific objectives (Foucault, Power 196) and in accordance with the specific knowledge from which it is constructed. An apparatus is, therefore, always linked to 'certain limits of

knowledge that arise from [the system] and, to an equal degree, conditions it' (Foucault, Power 196). Both knowledge and apparatuses constitute the specificity of the systems in place and, vice versa, the specificity of the systems influences both knowledge and apparatuses. The relation of forces (Foucault, Power 194) that emerges in a system is produced by a reciprocal loop of influence that re-informs and re-enforces, in time, all of the participative constituents.

Applying this model to the specificity of *CAT* and *The Artist Is Present* implies that these performances are interpreted as systems controlled through theatrical apparatuses and strategies that maintain and govern the relation of forces between the performer and the audience within certain boundaries. The elements that constitute their apparatuses are: the performance space, the performer's presence in relation to participants/spectators, the technology of the self employed, the management of time and the performance's rules and regulations. Hence, depending on how these elements have been played out, the relations of forces between the performer and the audience operated differently.

In considering *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* as systems governed through theatrical apparatuses I am suggesting a certain conception of theatre that recalls the scientific laboratory: a highly controlled environment where a certain condition is kept stable in order to experiment, in isolation, with the behaviours of phenomena. As will be extensively explicated in each respective chapter, in their own way, both artists in associating their works with the image of the scientific laboratory propose performance and introspection as modalities of investigation and experimentation. Performance is, in *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, suggested as the locus for experimenting with meditative and contemplative technologies of the self and the types of experiences they provoke.

These experiences are left outside the scientific laboratory because they are deemed to be incompatible with the dominant scientific model.

The experiences that are left outside the scientific paradigm are those subjective aspects of life that cannot be explored through the third person model: emotions, feelings, intuitions and any internal occurrences that resist the subject-object dichotomy and therefore can only be accessed through introspective methods. Neuroscientists are currently employing sophisticated technological apparatuses to explore the effects of meditative practices on the brain, including emotions. However, as neuroscientist Peter Malinowsky argues, to look at images of the brain responding to meditative practices can never be mistaken for the experience itself (Malinowsky).³⁰ He admits that the only way to explore the complexity of the realm of experience as a whole would be a dialogical model comprehensive of introspective methods, experiential approaches and the third person model of conventional science. Nonetheless, introspective methods and experiential approaches are still perceived as too self-referential and therefore outside the limits of what has been established as a rigorous experimental/scientific approach to knowledge (Malinowsky). This is a complex philosophical issue that concerns the discipline of philosophy of science. Without entering into this field of enquiry I offer a brief account of Barad's perspective, which is the one employed in my analysis.

According to Barad, the third person model of western science is not immune to the problem that an apparatus by containing an action within a closed system, always constitutes 'specific reconfigurings of the world that (...) iteratively reconfigure spacetime-matter' (Barad, Meeting 142). Consequently because apparatuses are never neutral the hypothesis proposed is that the primary epistemological unit of the scientific

³⁰ Peter Malinowsky is involved in the Meditation and Mindfulness Research Group at Liverpool John Moores University (<http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/mindfulness/>).

model is not a fixed ontological reality. In other words, the existence of the independent entities of observer/subject and observed/object, on which the third person method is based, is, according to Barad, a constructed condition produced by the particular apparatus devised for the specificity of the experiment undertaken (Barad, *Posthumanist* 133). Barad's main argument suggests that what we understand as reality, with its apparently inherent boundaries and properties, is actually ontologically undetermined. Boundaries between things are temporary and their differences emerge through relation (Barad, *Posthumanist* 133).

One of the main contributions of her theory is the neologism of 'intra-action' which proposes that things, objects and humans do not have pre-existing relations. This differs from the notion of interaction that necessitates existing entities as a precondition of their relation. Intra-action is, therefore, a coming into relation while becoming into being, a performative process wherein separateness emerges together with material configurations and their meanings (Barad, *Posthumanist* 133). Thus objects and subjects emerge in their meaning through relational processes. These processes entail performing local resolutions or differences, the boundaries of which are set according to the specificity of the resolution constituted. Therefore, these specific conditions/relations allow the emergence of agencies capable of performing other functional, local resolutions and differences on what was previously indeterminate.

Returning to Biswas and Abramovic's theatrical apparatuses and the metaphor of the scientific laboratory one can propose that they operated specific, functional, local resolutions within the space in which they were located, constituting specific relational conditions of experimentation between the observer/spectator and the observed/performer. In addition, I propose these as experimental models in

performance, whose apparatuses rendered palpable the indeterminate nature of human perception and its performativity. In other words, both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* operated through processes of concealment and revelation of perceptual possibilities, intra-acted with networks of personal and collective projections, that:

ma[de] visible the invisible, confuse[d] bones with skin, substance with secondary effects (...) violat[ing] the hierarchy of social and corporal spaces distanced into front and back, into illusion and reality (Lyotard 106).

Both Biswas and Abramovic seemed to invite spectators to inhabit and explore the imaginary, the ‘other’, the unknown, the unexpected, what:

interrupts the customary course of events, (...) removes the conditions and obligations of everyday life [and touches on] the uncertain [, the illogical, the paradoxical] (Gadamer, Truth 69).

In this regard Emilia Steuerman, in her book *The Bounds of Reason: Habermas, Lyotard, and Melanie Klein on rationality* (2000), endorses the exploration of these liminal spaces of human experience in order to encourage the expanding and revisitation of our understanding of reason. She argues that:

reason, being situated rationality, can no longer aspire to certainty (...) [and that] the modern defenders of rationality can no longer maintain that truth is an objective idea [applicable without distinction to different contexts] (1).

As Steuerman points out, following the logic of postmodernism, if reason is not a neutral instrument for achieving knowledge and truth, it is worth paying attention to ‘the irrational and the emotional underly[ing] reason’s capacity for self-understanding’ (5). This ‘other’; the emotional background which ‘underlines [our] capacity for self-understanding’ (Steuerman 5) and that continuously shapes and reshapes the ways the self understands itself, resides, however, in our condition of embodiment.³¹ It is, indeed, in embodiment that the exploration of ‘the irrational and the emotional underly reason’s capacity for self-understanding’ (Steuerman 5): an exploration that is undertaken by

³¹ This argument is endorsed by both Barad and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio and will be rearticulated in the analysis of both cases studies undertaken in Chapter 3, “Case Study A, *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas” and in Chapter 4, “Case Study B, *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic”.

both Biswas and Abramovic. At the same time it is through the imaginative power of the audience that both performances really took shape.

As I will explain in detail in Chapter 2, “Methodology”, my intention is not to argue that this is the correct reading of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, but rather I propose this thesis as one of the possible interpretations or hypotheses in a proliferative field of other interpretative possibilities.

9. Descriptions of chapters

Chapter 1, “Theoretical Implications of the Notion of the Numinous in Performance Studies and Art: an Overview of some of its Developments”, provides an overview of the origins, different avenues of interpretation and developments of the notion of the numinous. The chapter is divided into three main sections and three subsections. The first two sections describe Rudolf Otto’s intention in conceiving the term and identify the components of his argument relevant to this thesis. The third section looks at the emotional aspect of the religious experience as emphasized by Otto, the paradoxical structure used to describe the nature of this emotion, and the concept of the ‘wholly other’ to describe the nature of the numinous object. The three subsections offer an overview of other scholars’ engagement with the term and consider some of its most productive multidisciplinary developments for performance studies, particularly in relation to the two chosen case studies.

Chapter 2, “Methodology”, starts with a section that presents the methodological position taken in this thesis and introduces radical hermeneutics. The second section offers a brief overview of the historical developments of hermeneutics from Biblical interpretation to modern hermeneutics and introduces the notion of the hermeneutic

circle. The third section focuses on a specific development of the hermeneutical project that is radical hermeneutics as conceived by the philosopher and theologian Caputo. The fourth section focuses on those elements of radical hermeneutics that are particularly productive to the objectives of this thesis. Finally the fifth section provides an overview of the methods employed in relation to the methodology previously explicated.

Chapter 3, “Case Study A: *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas” is dedicated to the analysis of this performance. The chapter starts with the exploration of the performance space. Here, I focus on the soundproof box, describing Biswas’s intentions using the two referential images of Schrödinger's cat and the hermit cell as starting points. A network of philosophical sources is employed to emphasize the implications that the box raised from scientific, religious and performative perspectives. The second part focuses on the presence of the box in the gallery space, looking at it respectively as a container, a sculpture and a theatre. The third part examines the second performative level opened by the technology of Vipassana meditation and investigates its performative implications using a multidisciplinary set of theoretical sources.

Chapter 4, “Case Study B: *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic” is dedicated to the analytical interpretation of this performance. The first section looks at the modalities and strategies employed by Abramovic in setting up the space. These are explored by analysing Abramovic’s intentions and the philosophical and religious references she employs. The second part of the chapter focuses on the presence of Abramovic sitting in the middle of the performance space. Here, both the artist’s intentions and spectator/participant responses and reactions are acknowledged and investigated. The third part is dedicated to the interpretative project of analysing the

perceptual processes occurring between the performer and the participant engaged in reciprocal gazing.

Finally the Conclusion is structured around the questions listed in the Introduction. Each question is analysed, summing up the hypothesis proposed in the analysis and interpretation of both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* with reference to the methodological approach and methods employed. At the end of the chapter, an idea for the possible developments I foresee for this project is described.

10. Conclusion

This opening chapter has introduced the topic, objectives and questions with which this thesis engages. It has defined the cultural boundaries within which this thesis dwells; and it has provided a brief description of the main structural concepts to which it is anchored. It clarifies that this research project contributes to the emerging debate about the relationship between performance and religion that currently involves scholars from different disciplines. The thesis contributes to this multidisciplinary field of enquiry, focusing on a specific category of artists who, operating through processes of negation of the medium employed, generate particular conditions of spectatorship, selfhood and otherness. In particular, it has been clarified that, within this broad category, I look at performance artists who deploy meditative and contemplative technologies of the self, which originated in religious and spiritual contexts, as performance actions/non actions. Within this category two case studies have been chosen: *CAT*, devised and performed by Ansuman Biswas; and *The Artist is Present*, devised and performed by Marina Abramovic.

It has been explicated that the interpretative analysis carried out in this thesis focuses on the three main elements of space, presence and action. Specifically, it looks at how the space was devised, the performers' presence staged, and at the technologies of the self employed in each case study. The aim is to offer an interpretative hypothesis of the notion of the numinous in secularity by looking at how the relation between the performer and the spectator unfolded in *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* in relation to the three elements mentioned above.

The hypothesis that has been presented proposes that each of the two performance events operated as a laboratory for experimentation in perception through the construction of a theatrical apparatus. Within these apparatuses, perception, emotion and imagination all played an active role in rendering the boundaries between the self and the other, performative, porous and paradoxical. What has been suggested is that the apparatuses in place consigned the central action of the performance to invisibility due to the fact that the technologies of the self employed were rooted in introspective processes. The resulting silence, stillness and invisibility put on hold the dynamics through which conventional spectatorship usually unfolds, opening a gap in perception, a void in the usual interaction between the performer and the spectator. The numinous, it has been proposed, emerges from and dwells within this gap, through paradox and embodiment. Ultimately, this thesis aims to problematize not only conventional spectatorship but also the epistemological privileging of the third person model and, more broadly, the oppositional categorization of reality into fixed boundaries and monotheistic approaches to knowledge.

The objective is therefore to expand the perspective of dialectical proceeding and engage with the complex undertaking of making sense of something by exploring

the gaps left between the oppositional frameworks of apprehension and categorization. In this context imagination loses its negative connotations of being ‘not real’ and becomes part of a complexity of other realities that can and do exist alongside and entangled within what are considered to be primary realities.

In conclusion, this introduction has clearly stated that the notion of the numinous that emerges from the analysis of these two case studies remains open to developments and that, as will be extensively explained in Chapter 2, “Methodology”, what is proposed here represents only one of many possible interpretations.

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical Implications of the Notion of the ‘Numinous’ in Performance Studies and Art: an Overview of some of its Developments

1.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the notion of the numinous from its conception to its various theoretical developments.³² It focuses on those areas of interpretation that are relevant to the context of performance art and, more specifically, to the analysis of the creative processes explored in this context. This is necessary as, although the numinous is a philosophical concept that has been productively employed by scholars from different disciplines engaging with questions around spirituality, religion, art, the self and the other, it has rarely been used within the discourse of performance studies. The writing that follows is structured around two main sections:

- Rudolf Otto’s conception of the term numinous and the main points of his argument;
- A description of other disciplinary approaches and developments;

And three subsections:

- The numinous object;
- How to approach the numinous object;
- The numinous experience and introspective knowledge.

³² For a detailed understanding of Otto’s insights into the experience of the numinous, please refer to: Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy, An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958. For a contemporary, rigorous critical analysis of his thinking, please refer to: Gooch, Todd A. *The Numinous and Modernity. An interpretation of Rudolf Otto’s Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Gruyter, 2000.

1.2. Rudolf Otto's conception of the term 'numinous' and the main points of his argument

The notion of the numinous originated within the field of theology at the beginning of the 20th century when the German theologian Rudolf Otto presented his theories on the religious experience with reference to the Latin term *numen* (divine).³³ The term numinous experience was introduced in his seminal work *Das Heilige* (1917) published six years later in English translation by Oxford University Press. The full title of the English edition was *The Idea of the Holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (1923).

At the time this book was considered innovative in offering a clear and determined defence of religious emotion in its specificity. Otto's main objective was, indeed, to articulate a discourse around religious emotion/feeling understood as something irreducible to other experiences (Otto, Foreword). He sought to define 'the universal structures of the religious experience as "an original category" which cannot be taught, but only awakened' (Luft, Overgaard 478), and as the feeling that 'remains where the *concept* fails' (Otto, Foreword).

Otto was not the first theologian within Christian tradition to acknowledge the distinctive nature of the religious feeling. For example, in the early 19th century the scholar Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher endeavoured to show that religious experience is not a:

theological or metaphysical system, a set of doctrines, theories or morals, an analysis of the nature of an incomprehensible being, but [is about] intuition and feeling. [It is the feeling of someone who] wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions,

³³ Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) was a German Lutheran theologian, professor of systematic theology at Breslau. Belonging to a lineage of theology which had strong ties with phenomenology, he exerted great influence in the field of religious studies (discourse about religion as a cultural-sociological object).

longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity (Schleiermacher 22-23).³⁴

However, although Schleiermacher opened, within Christian theology, the way to the study of religious feeling as an experience prior to rational comprehension, Otto can be considered one 'of the earliest, best-known, and most passionate advocates of understanding the affectivity of religion through one's own affectivity' (Raphael, Rudolf 16).

According to Otto the numinous experience occurs within the relationship between the self and what he considered to be the 'wholly other' (10). He described this *numen praesens* as an object whose nature, transcending the known, breaks the boundaries of the conceivable and provokes, in the individual or collective encountering it, unique types of emotions (10). These are emotional experiences provoked by:

the ineffable (...) [feeling] neither rational nor moral of a creature submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness (Otto 10).³⁵

Otto described this in paradoxical terms. He employed the Latin *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans* to characterize the numinous experience as a feeling-response bringing and holding together contrasting inner responses such as terror and ecstasy (Luft, Overgaard 478).

The *mysterium tremendum* is depicted by Otto with dramatic emphasis, for example as 'the awe-aweful' akin to 'religious dread' (14), the horror of Pan 'with its queer perversion' (14), the reaction to 'something uncanny', the weird, or the 'tremor',

34 Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a German theologian. His great contribution was in the field of hermeneutics.

35 Otto was strongly influenced by Eastern philosophical and religious systems, and in particular by Buddhism from which he borrowed the concept of nothingness.

elicited by the encounter with what is regarded as unfamiliar or ‘wholly other’ (16).³⁶

On the contrary, the *mysterium fascinans* is portrayed as the ‘absolute fascination’ (Otto 38) that William James described as the ‘effect of some great orchestra, when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony’ (66), the bliss, ‘the *wonderfulness* (32), the rapture and the over-abounding’ (38) feelings experienced by participating in something that lies beyond the singular and that the singular cannot fully possess.

The two feelings described above coexist in Otto’s conception of the numinous experience and contribute to his illustration of a gentle tide that:

may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul (...) [or] lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicating frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It may (also) become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of-whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible (13).

These are emotions and feelings that Otto clearly discerned from ‘the natural realm of pleasure and pain, hope and fear’ (Luft, Overgaard 478). He justified this proposition by arguing that, whereas the natural feeling has its:

objects in those things which can satisfy natural needs and desires, non-natural feelings are responses to that which is beyond any such mundane object (Luft, Overgaard 478).

It is, therefore, the object of the numinous experience, the ‘mystery’ or the *numen praesens* that, being completely different from and opposite to ‘everything that is and can be thought’, brings, according to Otto, the experience of encountering it beyond the natural realm into the sphere of the transcendent (Otto 28-29).

Otto used analogies to articulate further the nature and qualities of the numinous experience and its objects. For example he referred to the uncanny feelings that ghost

³⁶ Here Otto acknowledges the mythology of Pan as the pagan roots of the *mysterium tremendum* in western consciousness.

stories evoke in people (29) and argued that the real attraction of these is that they represent something that ‘has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolute different one’ (29).³⁷ Moreover he conceptualized the object of the numinous experience by negation, defining it with what is not, ‘that which is nothing’ (29). This ‘nothing’ is not ‘only that of which nothing can be predicated’ (Otto 29), but also what is so absolutely and intrinsically other as to force the subject to suspend judgement (Otto 29).

The question of the numinous object is the most metaphysical aspect of Otto’s argument; but the topic of his theories that has also proved to be open to further developments. In fact, it is the investigation of what constitutes the object of the numinous experience and its relation to the self that has attracted the attention of scholars from other disciplines.

In conclusion, before proceeding to the examination of other scholars’ interpretations of the relationship between the self and the numinous experience, it is worth summarizing the points of Otto’s analysis that are most pertinent to the objective of this thesis. They are:

- The numinous experience as an emotion prior to morality and rationalization;
- The paradoxical nature of the numinous experience;
- The relationship between the numinous object and the self;
- The numinous object as ‘wholly other’.

³⁷ It is worth mentioning that although Otto employed ghost stories as a useful explanatory metaphor for the numinous, conceptually he does not associate the numinous with the uncanny. In fact he regards the uncanny as the ‘degraded offshoot and travesty of the genuine numinous’ (28).

1.3 A description of other disciplinary approaches and developments

One of the most prolific explorers of the idea of the numinous in secular terms, specifically within psychoanalysis, was Carl Gustav Jung. He envisaged the conceptual and experimental potentialities of the numinous experience as conceived by Otto in the advancement of psychoanalytical understanding of the processes through which individuals and collectives deal with unconscious and conscious contents (Jung, *Collected Works, Psychology 7*). The Jungian studies scholar Susan Rowland points out in her essay “Jung and Derrida: the Numinous, Deconstruction and Myth” that Jung located the numinous in liminality:

a quality denoting disputed regions between consciousness and unconsciousness (...), the ‘inside psyche’ and the ‘exterior’ cosmos, of the distinction between form and matter (Rowland 98).

The numinous was described by Jung as a ‘dynamic agency or effect not caused by an arbitrary act of will that causes a peculiar alteration of consciousness’ in the self (Jung, *Collected Works, Psychology 7*).

Jung’s studies of the concept of the numinous experience were neither directed toward the exploration of the psychological dynamics of believers enacting their faith within religious institutions, nor on their metaphysics. Similarly to Otto, he regarded these phenomena as ‘codified and dogmatized forms of original religious experience’ (Jung, *Collected Works, Psychology 9*). He was more interested in the psychological processes that lead people to take into great consideration, in their daily lives, the influence of certain dynamic factors conceived by him as ‘powers’ (Jung, *Collected Works, Psychology 9*). These powers, Jung suggested, can be named using different words like spirits, demons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals and may be considered invisible, meta-physical, abstract, or embodied, according to the cultural context in which they are experienced (Jung, *Collected Works, Psychology 5*). In other words, Jung conceived of

these powers as emerging and acquiring meaning and value according to the belief system in place in a specific context.

1.3.1. The numinous object

Therefore, although Jung endorsed Otto's conception of the numinous experience, he interpreted it in psychoanalytical terms leaving aside most metaphysical aspects of Otto's theory.³⁸ This distinction was particularly relevant in regard to the object of the numinous experience itself. Whereas Otto considered the numinous object as essentially and metaphysically 'wholly other' from the experiencing self, Jung remained convinced that the source of the numinous experience should be found in the human psyche (Jung, *Collected Works, Civilization* 293): a position that he inductively developed from evidence gathered over years of clinical observation and interaction with patients affected by religious visions and experiences.

So Jung interpreted Otto's concept of the 'wholly other' not as an inherent quality of the object encountered by the subject, but rather as a subjective perceptive reaction of the self to the object (Jung, *The Undiscovered* 63-64). It is in fact the unconscious, according to Jung, that holds numinosity and constitutes 'the medium from which the numinous experience seems to flow' (Jung, *The Undiscovered* 63). At the same time, he specified that the relation between outer objects and inner content is not a one-way process, but rather is constantly informed by a loop of mutual influence between internal and external factors, subjective judgements and cultural constructions, embodied memories, biological processes and apparatuses, unconscious and conscious aspects of the psyche (Jung, *Collected Works, Civilization* 249).

³⁸ Jung was particularly interested in emphasizing the emotional quality of the religious experience.

Following Jung's argument it is possible to suggest that this reciprocal loop of influence determines and is determined by the cultural and biological apparatuses through which the self perceives itself and the other. This is why, when the subject encounters an object that is inconceivable according to her/his framework of understanding of reality, her/his psycho-physical condition and her/his capacity to locate her/himself in the world are affected and altered.

The literature scholar Sabine Coelsch-Foisner in her analysis of the question of the numinous ethos in literature endorses this perspective. She validates the argument that the numinous ethos does not depend on supra-sensible entities but rather on a shift in perception or 'a particular frame of mind and manner of apprehension' (393). In particular she focuses on 'the importance of distinguishing between the transcendent and the transcendental experience' (393).³⁹ In explaining this differentiation, she suggests that contrary to the transcendent, the transcendental experience constitutes a happening that 'of necessity is tied to the objects [or subjects] of this world' (393). Nevertheless, she goes on to argue that the self experiencing something as numinous or 'wholly other' initiates a process of perceptive transformation during which 'the objects of this world' pass from being perceived as something ordinary and contextualised to something transcendent and 'wholly other' (Coelsch-Foisner 393).

I propose to describe this process as a cyclical reflexive movement from the outside (stimulus) to the inside (unconscious content) and to the outside again (the external stimulus is perceived differently): a dynamic process of perceptive alteration that transforms the way the subject perceives the self and the surrounding environment.

³⁹ Transcendent: adj. 'beyond or above the range of normal or physical human experience', 'surpassing the ordinary', 'existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe'. Transcendental: adj. 'relating to the spiritual realm (...)' (in Kantian philosophy) presupposed in and necessary to experience' (Transcendent).

This idea is analogous to what the historian of religion Mircea Eliade designated in the book *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957) as ‘hierophanies’ or ‘the act of manifestation of the sacred’ (Eliade, *The Sacred* 11). He argues that

by manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself* (...). A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality (Eliade, *The Sacred* 12).

The philosopher Drew Dalton, in his book *Longing for the Other, Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (2009), endorses this perspective and provides further insights into the characteristics of the numinous experience, with particular interest in the relationship between the self and the numinous object. Developing further Otto’s discourse around the idea of the numinous object as ‘wholly other’, he points out, as others have done before him, that it is the self who conceives an object of this world as something ‘wholly other’ and transcendental. However, in returning to Otto’s idea that the object is also the carrier of an ‘overplus’ of meaning (230), he aims to emphasize the function of the object. Indeed, he proposes that it is the object that actually carries the overplus of meaning or excess of value, and is thus the initiator of the numinous experience. Therefore, this overplus held by the object expressing ‘too muchness’ (230) explodes the borders and limits of the ordered systems within which the self has set reality.

To clarify this point further, let us refer back to Otto’s words when he says that the numinous object:

falls quite outside the limits of (...) our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’, whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb (Otto 26-28).

Nonetheless, according to Dalton this overplus of meaning should not be interpreted metaphysically, but rather in terms of creativity and within culture (234). He argues that the numinous experience is the locus and the fulcrum of the creative process ‘forged in the fires of the beyond being’ (Dalton 234). Creativity emerges, he suggests, from a:

breach within the phenomenal realm through which a new conception of that realm can be formulated. That is, as the tie within being to that which lies beyond being, the numinous seems to cast the phenomenal realm in a new light (Dalton 234).

In proposing the hypothesis that the numinous experience is the fulcrum of the creative process, Dalton also suggests a potential numinous value to the artistic object/presence (Dalton 230-234). In doing so, he establishes a direct connection between creativity and numinosity, art and religion,⁴⁰ letting the borders of their given categorizations blur, and enabling the possibility for a third dimension of encounter to emerge (Dalton 230).

1.3.2. How to approach the numinous object

How the relation between art and the numinous experience can develop outside the context of religious creeds can be further explained with reference to the religious studies scholar Ann Taves, in particular her book *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building–Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (2009). Taves argues that, within the field of religious studies, over the last twenty years a multi-level interdisciplinary approach to the question of religious experience has been attempted where the old binary opposition between an essentialist idea and reductionist approach⁴¹ has been challenged in favour of theories of emergence, in which:

40 I am not referring to religious creeds but to the religious experience as explicated by Otto and more broadly by Jung.

41 For an overview of the various philosophical interpretations of the religious experience and an accurate outline of essentialist and reductionist approaches, please refer to: Ferrer, Jorge N., and Jacob H. Sherman, eds. *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*. New York Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

emergent properties, such as consciousness (...), are understood to emerge at different levels of analysis (7).

Taves proposes to open the concept of religious experience to the ‘study [of] the wide range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed’ (8), in other words, to what is deemed to be religious within the non-religious rather than what is religious because it has been institutionalised as such. She goes on to argue that:

we need to turn our attention to the processes whereby people sometime ascribe the special characteristics to things that we (scholars) associate with terms such as “religious”, “magical”, “mystical”, “spiritual”, etcetera (8).

It is in this way that, according to Taves, it may be possible to focus on the ‘interaction between psychobiological, social, and cultural-linguistic processes in relation to carefully specified types of experiences sometimes considered religious’ (Taves 8). She proposes, therefore, to invert the paradigm in which the term religious has been applied and to investigate what else within the spectrum of human behaviour can be considered religious. In fact the operation of reframing the concept of religious experience initially as ‘experiences deemed religious’, and then more broadly in terms of things people consider special, allows one ‘to view experiences [...] as a subset of the many special things [...] we think of as religious’ (Taves 8).

Following this logic, the numinous experience is therefore a process of transformation in perception through which the ordinary and its objects become, for the perceiving self, something special and extraordinary, beyond the grasp of reason. Moreover, this occurs in the intersection between the object and the subject, in the relation and cycle of mutual influence between the knower and the known.

This perspective strongly resonates with the main objectives of this thesis which consist of: exploring the roles and strategies employed in mediating ordinary and numinous perception in performance contexts; investigating how this negotiation operated differently in each of the two case studies investigated; and examining the modalities by which the performer/spectator relationship is constituted and destabilized according to the apparatuses in place. The numinosity of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* occurred, in fact, ‘in dialogical relationship’ (Sarbacker 27) not only between the self and the other as performer and spectator/participant, but also in the mediation process – the relationship – between the apparatus constructed and the cultural make-up of each spectator/participant (Sarbacker 28). Therefore, it is in this intimate interaction and negotiation that the numinous experience and its subsequent interpretation emerge.

This perspective is particularly useful as a framework of categorization for the analysis of the case studies investigated in this thesis as it provides a fertile platform from which to understand the processes through which a self/spectator finds her/his sense of place and identification in relation to the other/performer. In fact, applying this perspective to performance, it is plausible to suggest that if the presence or the action of the performer exceeds the boundaries within which the spectator/participant categorizes that role, then they will effect, affect and probably destabilize their relationship. Therefore, the processes by which this relationship is affected and destabilized are necessarily situated and dependent on the cultural and historical backgrounds of the spectators/participants as well as on the apparatuses established by the performer. Within this complex structure of forces, a loop of mutual influence between external presence and internal responses is activated. Therefore, the framework of categorization established by the spectator emerges in relation to a network of tensions that is ultimately ordered according to specific cultural categories of what constitute the

known and the unknown, the physical and the metaphysical, the ordinary and the numinous, the real and the not real (Wallace, Restoring).

This is an interpretation that stems from the ontological assumption that the boundaries assigned to the definitions and categorizations of the real are contingent, mutable and dependent on the perimeters that the self has culturally and socially developed for her/himself (Jung, *The Undiscovered* 4). These boundaries each time determine differently the unfamiliarity that aspects of the real hold for the subject and the ways the self understands and approaches them. For instance, if this discourse is applied to the body and its physiological and anatomical structure it is interesting to notice that:

although [w]e live(...) in it and with it, most of it is totally unknown to the layman, and special scientific knowledge is needed to acquaint consciousness with what is known of the body, not to speak of all that is *not* known, [or not visible] which also exists (Jung, *The Undiscovered* 4).

With this analogy I am suggesting that the numinous experience is intrinsically dependent on knowledge and the models established to achieve it. These models are linked with the apparatuses employed that in turn also determine what self-knowledge is, its boundaries and limitations. It depends on the networks of communication, its cultural and social instruments and technologies of interpretation, whether self-knowledge and its introspective models of investigation have a place in the project of knowing and if the dimension of the numinous has any value and role within it.

1.3.3. The numinous experience and introspective knowledge

To expand this point further I refer to the theologian and religious studies scholar Melissa Raphael, and particularly her book *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness* (1997), which articulates a feminist perspective of Otto's conception of the

numinous and also argues for a feminist approach to the processes by which the world is apprehended. Raphael pays attention to Otto's emphasis on the differentiation between religious morality and the numinous experience (Raphael, Rudolf 8-10). More specifically, she employs an etymological approach to look at the term 'holy' and the meanings it has historically acquired in its various cultural developments and interpretations.

Otto, for example, points out that, although the term holy 'is a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion' (5), it has been applied by transference to the sphere of ethics. In Otto's view, this is an interpretative misunderstanding of the meaning of 'holy', which originally 'in Latin and Greek, in Semitic and other ancient languages, denote[d] first and foremost *only* [an] overplus' (5) of meaning. This overplus of meaning is always and inevitably situated somewhere beyond the rational and moral interpretation of the 'completely good', often associated with the idea of divine (*numen*).

Departing from this aspect of Otto's theory, Raphael reclaims a non-rational, non-discursive, non-linear, non-masculinist sense of the numinous that is different from the fixed, often dogmatic schematization and moralization offered by religious creeds (Raphael, Rudolf 8). She proposes a feminist sense that finds fertile ground in Otto's conception of paradox and its complex and unsettling configurations of meaning-making (Raphael, Theology 34). In doing so she problematizes interpretations tending to corral and order the numinous within defined codes of behaviour informed by controlling, patriarchal, authoritative intentions, proposing instead an intuitive and feminine approach to the numinous and consequently to knowledge. She anchors her argument in the fact that Otto, in isolating the numinous as an emotion prior to

rationality and morality, offered not only the opportunity to explore the nature of this emotion in its specificity, but also to evaluate emotions in general as the fundamental underpinnings of our capacity to make sense of ourselves and of the surrounding environment (Raphael, Rudolf 8-10).

At the same time Raphael's proposition is useful in articulating differences between the numinous and other terms such as, for example, the sublime, which although sharing with the numinous the qualities of 'a concept that is incapable of being unravelled' (Gooch 120) differs from the numinous in relation to ethics.

For example, in this regard the philosopher Todd A. Gooch, in his book *The Numinous and Modernity: An Interpretation of Rudolf Otto's Philosophy of Religion* (2000), refers to Kant's distinction between the mathematical sublime and the dynamically sublime,⁴² and argues that the sublime is what 'makes us aware of our moral vocation as rational being' (Gooch 121), whereas the numinous entails specifically the moment of rapture and overall the consequent emotions that rapture triggers in the self.

The writer and philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797), in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), popularised the term sublime in modern times and explicated its nature, referring to both terror and pleasure (97). For instance, he described it as a powerful feeling that combines astonishment and horror, suspending the individual's capacity to reason (101). However, Burke's interpretation has not proved to be enduring as the term has

⁴² 'Whereas the mathematical sublime is experienced in relation to overwhelming magnitude [not inhibited with ideas of limitations], the dynamically sublime is experienced in relation to natural phenomena that are overwhelming by virtue of their might' (Gooch 121).

been increasingly associated with the Kantian dynamically sublime, or in other words, with the awed reaction of an individual contemplating a natural landscape and its extraordinary manifestations (Robertson, McDaniel 279). This is a sentiment that seems to evoke what in Otto's conception of the numinous experience was described as the *mysterium fascinans* that entails a certain element of contemplative detachment.

Among the meanings that the term *mysterium fascinans* denotes, there is the range of feelings that enhance the capacity of the self to appreciate her/himself and the surrounding environment, enlarge her/his sense of belonging and her/his capacity to appreciate what is other from her/him. For instance Ross McKim, in his article "Numinous Experience, Imaginary and Art in Contemporary Society", refers to the numinous only with regard to its 'sublime', '*fascinans*' qualities (71-72), describing it as follows:

numinosity (...) arises when our existence, or something that is its or the world's essence, is found to be, in a non-ordinary sense, wonderful, awesome, beautiful, worthy of love or filled with a special energy or spirit (McKim, Numinous 72).

However, despite the tendency to emphasize the *mysterium fascinans* quality of the numinous, I suggest that the most intriguing and generative aspect of the numinous experience, as conceived by Otto, lies specifically in the fact that the *mysterium fascinans* contains the *mysterium tremendum* and vice versa. This is a paradoxical emotional state within which contradictory feelings precipitate the self in astonishment, rendering it incapable of recognition or of making sense of its own perception and position in the world as previously known. The question of paradox, which will be explicated in Chapter 3 (subsection 3.4.3), is of central importance for the interpretative analysis proposed in this thesis.

Bhabha, in the essay “Aura and Agora: On Negotiating Rapture and Speaking Between”, effectively describes this condition in terms of a ceasura in everyday life between experience and knowing (8). He emphasizes its paradoxical qualities as the condition of a self experiencing the non-self, an experience that breaks the processes of negotiation that characterize everyday life (10). He goes on to describe it as a state that has:

the capacity to reveal, [manifests in the ordinary] the almost impossible, attenuate limit where aura and agora overlap (...) in the unresolvable “side-by-sideness” of insight and insouciance in that uneasy space and time in *between* birth and death [that] opens a [different, numinous] space of survival (9).

This type of emotion, suspending judgement, disrupts the capacity of the self to orient her/himself through the establishment of the binary opposites of good and bad, right and wrong, inside and outside, sacred and secular, reasonable and unreasonable, self and other.

As suggested earlier, this is a sense of affective totality that occurs in a loop, in cycles of arising perceptual, emotional conditions within which the spectator and their object of reference loses certainty in space and time. In the specific instances of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, this loop occurred and arose over time, as both performances were durational. In time, with every crossing of a threshold, the perceptions of the performers and, in some cases, of the spectator/participant were increasingly altered until the coordinates that are essential for having a sense of self distinguished from the other, were compromised (Benson, *The Cultural* 194). In the deficiency of fixed coordinates something other than the conventional constructs of the performer and spectator/participant’s relationship emerged.

According to the psychologist Ciarán Benson, this phenomenon that I categorize within the framework of the numinous is a new perspective offered by certain attitudes and creative *modus operandi* of contemporary art that are included in the ‘negative path’ undertaken by contemporary performers such as Abramovic and Biswas. Benson refers to this artistic attitude as the perspective of the ‘no points of view’ (Benson, *The Cultural* 192-204). In his book *The Cultural Psychology of Self: Place, Morality and Art in Human Worlds* (2001), Benson argues that the modalities by which our psychological sense of being is located spatially and temporally depend on a series of doubled coordinates, such as:

up/down, front/back, above/below, inside/outside, on/off, here/there, towards/away and now/then, but also I/you, us/them, is/is not, have/not have, yours/mine and for/against (Benson, *The Cultural* 194).

Benson goes on to suggest that the modalities by which the coordinates and boundaries of self and other, and where each begins and ends, are determined and constructed ‘by our use of metaphors based on our language for physical location’ (Benson, *The Cultural* 194). In a similar fashion to Bhabha, Benson regards the arts as one of the core mediators of the perceptual processes through which the self knows and positions the other in relation to itself. According to him, the arts are the most ‘accomplished metaphorical realm created by human beings’ (Benson, *The Cultural* 194) through which the individual self arrives at a mutual agreement with other selves not only about how and where their reciprocal boundaries are set, but also about how alternative perspectives and propositions can be found and created (Benson, *The Cultural* 195).

Benson leads the reader through the fascinating journey of how spatial metaphors, such as the medieval pictorial space or the development of linear perspective in the Renaissance, were coherently grounded in experiences that were

physical, social and cultural (Benson, *The Cultural* 195-197).⁴³ He proposes contemporary developments of the ‘no point of view’ experience, and explains its ‘[cultural] implications’ (Benson, *The Cultural* 195) by looking specifically at the work of the American artist James Turrell who, by exploring sensory deprivation in architecture, shifts the twofoldness of the pictorial to the ‘twofoldness of perception’ (Benson, *The Cultural* 199).⁴⁴ Turrell works with light to bring vision and perception to the foreground of the experience of contemplating an art piece, so that the experience of seeing itself becomes the object of attention. According to Turrell: ‘we live within this reality we create, and we’re quite unaware of how we create this reality’ (Turrell). Consequently the objective of his art is to provide a perceptual experience within which the viewer becomes aware of her/his visual perceptual processes. Viewing his art consists of experiencing and at the same time witnessing the processes through which we see. He encourages the viewer to reflect on:

how we create this world that we inhabit, [to experience visual] koans nudging us into this newer landscape, the landscape without horizon, without left or right, up or down (Turrell).

He creates environments in which perception is amplified, with its only object being light. This is a new paradigm that makes the perceptual process itself the object of attention: potentially a continuous producer of numinosity.

43 In this regard the scholar Robert Wicks reminds the reader that Foucault in his book *The Order of Things* (1973) argued, similarly, that the famous painting ‘Las Meninas’ (1656) by Diego Velazquez clearly displayed the mode of representation that dominated the thought of the 17th and 18th centuries (Wicks 201).

44 James Turrell is an American artist concerned mainly with light, space, architecture and visual perception. His most ambitious project is the work in progress *Roden Crater*, an inactive volcanic crater that Turrell is transforming internally into a chamber to be used as a vast naked-eye observatory of the night sky. It is worth pointing out in this context that Turrell’s inspiration is the Quaker meeting room where the meditators sit in circle to find the ‘divine light’ in introspection (Turrell); Turrell is himself a Quaker follower (Turrell).



Figure 8: James Turrell / Louis Vuitton, *Akhob*, 2013

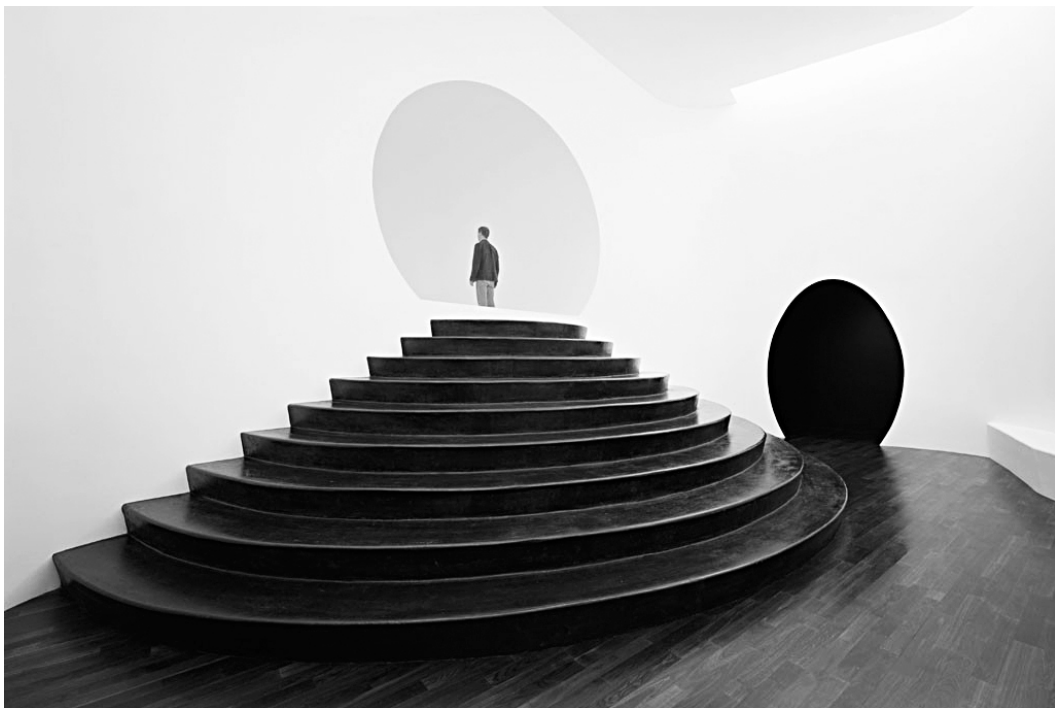


Figure 9: James Turrell / Louis Vuitton, *Akhob*, 2013

The condition of a self becoming conscious of its own perceptive processes, through which objects of this world acquire appearances, forms and eventually meaning, entails a shift in the focus of attention with regard to the coordinates through which the self looks for physical location from the outside to the inside (Benson, *The*

Cultural 193). In other words, in this process the perceptual motor field, by which the self orients itself in a specific context where the dichotomies of the I/you, inside/outside permeate the relationship between the subject and the object, is affected and destabilized. This shift occurs when a self immerses itself in introspective processes aimed at calibrating and manipulating the complex human biological apparatus of perception.

In the context of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* the technologies of the self deployed had precisely the function of shifting, calibrating and manipulating perceptual processes. They were employed within theatrical apparatuses devised around a multiplicity of modalities such as control, endurance, contemplation and projection.⁴⁵ Each of these modalities enabled the possibility of perceptual processes that changed according to the technologies, the apparatuses and each person's reactivity and sensitivity. This resulted in a generative, chaotic network of possibilities that resists univocal, fixed conclusions.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview of the various scholarly interpretations of the notion of the numinous from Otto's conception onward that are considered relevant to the project of this thesis.

The numinous experience, starting from Otto's commitment to identify and isolate the religious emotion prior to its rationalization and moralization, is a concept that started and remains in complexity. However, it is this very complexity, resulting from its paradoxical qualities, that offers a conceptual framework suitable for the

⁴⁵ All these points are analysed in Chapters 3 and 4.

investigation of types of performances that provoke and resonate within contradictory spheres of human endeavour and resist a univocal interpretation. The numinous is therefore an appropriate, generative concept in supporting a project that does not aim to offer a definite interpretation of the performances chosen as case studies, but rather intends to underline and emphasize their irreducibility to singularity.

Otto's conception and conceptualization of the notion of the numinous represents the starting point from which this research trajectory departs, for Otto's ideas contain the fundamental means through which the logic followed is discerned. In the preceding section, parts of his argument have been interrogated, while others have been interpreted in the light of contemporary understandings of the relations between emotion-feeling-reason and of the specificity of the types of experiences under consideration here. Specifically, Otto's metaphysical vision of the numinous object is interpreted in embodied terms by looking at the body-mind processes through which a phenomenon of this world may be transformed perceptually into something so special as to verge on the religious.

From the readings mentioned in this chapter, the numinous experience emerges as ecstatic and disruptive, and at the same time situated in creativity, as a condition and process from within which the new can emerge. The numinous is described as holding the potentiality of a methodology of apprehension that emerges from the pause of dialectic proceedings, the realm where the mutually exclusive dialectic of oppositions collapses, while paradoxically maintaining their differences. The numinous opens a space of multiplicity where contradictory phenomena exist in parallel conditions of co-existence that the self encounters in stupor. It is the realm where the electricity of paradoxes allows the energy of imagination to manifest, bringing with it fear

and uncertainty.

It is a concept that recalls what James Hillman, in his articulation of a 'Psychology of Soul' (Hillman, *Re-visioning xi*), foresees. Hillman interprets the religious term 'soul' through the:

accumulated insight of the Western tradition, extending from the Greeks through the Renaissance and Romantics to Freud and Jung (Hillman, *Re-visioning xi*).

He suggests that soul 'starts neither in the physiology of the brain, the structure of language, the organization of society, nor the analysis of behaviour, but in the process of imagination' (Hillman, *Re-visioning xvi*). In other words he interprets soul as a perspective or 'a viewpoint toward things', a methodology of apprehension rather than a substance or a thing (Hillman, *Re-visioning xvi*).

The meanings that the numinous acquires during the interpretative analysis of the two case studies emerge from the exploration of the possibility for the self to become aware of its own perceptual processes and modalities of apprehension, and possibly encounter what is other from itself. These processes move from the inside to the outside and vice versa, or may even proceed beyond these trajectories toward the dissolution or blurring of their differences. It is a type of perception that does not locate soul and imaginal life exclusively 'out there' in the world, but instead in a relational dynamic that renders porous the purported parameters of the self and the other.

The numinous, like Hillman's 'viewpoint of soul' or Benson's 'no point of view', calls toward the perspective of the 'interior'; the unseen concealed behind the apparent visibility of things where emotions and feelings re-shape the way discourses are formulated, narratives are constructed and explanations of reality are unfolded. This

leads toward the exploration of the numinous as an 'immanent transcendence' where the embodied self transcends its own narratives toward different narratives in a processual cycle of continuous becoming.

CHAPTER 2:

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Engaging in an interpretative analysis of the numinous experience in contemporary performance art is an endeavour that requires a particular approach, a theoretical paradigm capable of: questioning organizations of reality into binary opposites; encouraging a dialogical approach to knowledge; and of contemplating the possibility of accrediting introspection with epistemic value. To my mind, hermeneutics and particularly its postmodern developments offer the methodological framework of interpretation most responsive to these requirements.

Contemporary hermeneutics, broadly understood as the art and science of interpretation, emphasizes its belonging to a tradition of thinking concerned with the notion of understanding itself and with the question of what it means to:

make sense of anything – whether a poem, a legal text, a human action, a language, an alien culture, or oneself (Bruns 1).

It is deeply involved in ‘philosophical disputes over the legitimacy of claims to understanding in the visual and literary arts’ (Davey), and although it does not oppose scientific modes of knowledge, it resists their cultural privileging.

What is certain is that to explore an artwork, from a hermeneutical perspective, invites the employment of a multidisciplinary viewpoint, acknowledging that the artwork will always be ‘in excess of its readings and its meanings (...) always more than its interpretations’ (Davey).

Generally speaking hermeneutics locates the project of knowledge in interpretation and offers, in its more radical expressions, the ontological proposition that the possibility of accessing brute facts or neutral data is considered only within the ‘all-pervasive shared background of understanding’ (Dancy, Steup 412). In what follows, as already mentioned in the Introduction, I refer in particular to the work of the philosopher John Caputo and his theorization of radical hermeneutics, together with the post-Jungian approach of James Hillman.

The objective of this chapter is to offer a brief overview of the historical developments of hermeneutics, highlighting those aspects that specifically inform the methodological framework utilized in this thesis. My intention is not to explicate and contextualize the expansive philosophical terrain of hermeneutics, the complexity of which lies far beyond not only the scope of this thesis, but also my field of expertise. Instead I propose to explicate the ontological position taken in this thesis. This chapter is structured as follows:

- Historical and philosophical developments of hermeneutics, with an emphasis on the figures relevant to the scope of this thesis;
- Introduction to radical hermeneutics;
- Hermeneutics, the performative act and the numinous experience;
- The relationship between the researcher and the subject of research;
- How to proceed: methods and practices of research.

2.2. Hermeneutics: historical and contemporary developments

Historically, hermeneutics can be traced back to medieval practices of Biblical interpretation and for many years it was primarily concerned with the normative and technical issues of laying down a theory and the rules needed to govern the discipline of

interpretation of sacred texts (Grondin 1). At the beginning of the 20th century, however, through the contribution of figures such as Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics started to be concerned more generally with the question of epistemology.

Schleiermacher, for example, was instrumental in pursuing hermeneutics toward the project of theorizing on knowledge generally, focusing on the exploration of the processes through which understanding unfolds (Grondin 71-73). He brought forward the idea that knowledge comprised an ‘endless (...) debate (...) dependent on conversations with one another – and with ourselves’ (Grondin 73). However, despite this innovative contribution, he continued to consider hermeneutics only within ‘the art of understanding spoken and written language’ (Schmidt 6), maintaining its project anchored to these linguistic boundaries. In addition, focusing on the objective of retrieving the ‘creative process of the author [and] discover[ing] the author’s intended meaning’ (Schmidt 6), he remained attached to the objective of traditional hermeneutics that consisted in recovering texts’ sense as originally constituted. His investigation of the processes of understanding, therefore, persisted in being related to the scope of tradition, considering the vital moment of conception, as the ‘germinal decision’ from which composition, organization and meaning develops (Gadamer, Truth 164).

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, on the other hand, is considered one of the main contributors to the project of expanding hermeneutics beyond literature (Gadamer, Truth 157-158) and as ‘primarily responsible for our thinking about hermeneutics today’ (Schmidt 8).⁴⁶ He elaborated an extensive and detailed conception of hermeneutics, taking its project beyond the interpretation of verbal texts to cover

⁴⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher and one of the decisive figures in the development of twentieth century hermeneutics.

other forms of cultural production such as verbal communication, visual arts, music, and theatre (Lavery 9). This is why Gadamer is considered one of the most celebrated advocates of the hermeneutic approach to the study of aesthetic experience.⁴⁷

According to him:

every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired. (...) It is not only the written tradition that is estranged and in need of new and more vital assimilation; everything that is no longer immediately situated in a world – that is, all tradition, whether art or other spiritual creations of the past: law, religion, philosophy, and so forth – is estranged from its original meaning and depends on the unlocking and mediating spirit that we, like the Greeks, name after Hermes: the messenger of the gods (Truth 157-158).

Another characteristic of modern hermeneutics is that it questioned the belief of classical hermeneutics in the possibility of retrieving the original meaning of something, emphasizing the researcher's 'own finitude' (Grondin 124). This meant that the physiological, social and historical factors informing the investigating subject started to be taken into consideration. To explain this point further, it is worth looking at the notion of the hermeneutical circle that is the central element of the hermeneutical project. In fact, the main object of contention not only between classical and modern hermeneutics but also between modern hermeneutics and its postmodern developments has been around the interpretation of the nature and function of the hermeneutic circle.

In conventional terms, the hermeneutic circle represents the structural element through which the methodological process of hermeneutics operates. For example, the interpretation of a written text is related to the question of method, which unfolds through 'coming to understand the meaning of the whole of a text and coming to understand its parts [understood as] always interdependent activities' (Schwandt 133).

⁴⁷ For an overview of Gadamer's hermeneutics of aesthetics, please refer to: Davey Nicholas, "Gadamer's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). (Fall 2008 Edition). Web. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/>

This approach requires that the researcher, when addressing a text, has already developed a sense of the whole and its generic contexts (the text is a novel, a historical narrative, a poetic tragedy, a philosophical essay, etc.). This pre-existent knowledge guides the researcher's understanding of text's specificity that is composed by each particular part and characteristic. Subsequently, the researcher reflects back on her/his pre-existing understanding of the whole and revises it in light of the text's specificity, which in some cases may modify the interpretation of the generic context quite dramatically. This is a circular relationship established between previous understanding(s) and specific reading(s), within which:

neither one's sense of the whole nor one's reading of the parts is an independent variable. X is (at least in part) a function of Y and vice versa (Westphal 418).

The hermeneutic circle is, therefore, constantly active in any interpretation. From a literary text to any form of cultural production, every act of interpretation attributes a specific meaning to something in view of a prior understanding that it is always a codification in language (Westphal 422). This codification, however, can always be reviewed in light of specific variants.

Although modern scholars involved in hermeneutics debated the modalities by which the hermeneutic circle functioned, they all agreed that it concerned method. On the other hand, in contemporary hermeneutics, the circularity of the hermeneutic circle is no longer a principle of method around which the relations between the whole and the parts of a text are played out. Rather it is understood ontologically. To shift the notion of the hermeneutic circle from a question of method to ontology means not only that understanding becomes radically entangled with the social, cultural and biological apparatuses to which the interpreter belongs (Schwandt 134) and through which she/he functions, but also that it is radically implicated in the relationship between the

self/interpreter and the other/interpreted. Bearing this point in mind, the next section will consider contemporary hermeneutics more closely, with particular reference to Caputo's theory of radical hermeneutics.

2.3. Introducing radical hermeneutics

Caputo's theory of radical hermeneutics was developed from Gadamer's theories in view of the critique of post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida (Martinez 1) and Michael Foucault (Caputo, More 17). Departing from Gadamer and influenced by postmodern ideas, Caputo radicalized the epistemological consequences of the hermeneutic circle by opening the project of knowledge toward the processual and the eventful (Caputo, More 2).⁴⁸ In other words, Caputo, like Gadamer, understands interpretation to proceed through adjustments of previous understandings (Caputo, More 7-8), however, he radicalizes this position to a degree that problematized the notion of understanding itself.

The hermeneutic metaphor of the 'horizon' is helpful to explicate this point further, and to clarify the differences between the hermeneutics of Gadamer and radical hermeneutics as conceived by Caputo. A horizon, in Gadamer's hermeneutics, stands for what is 'beyond what is close at hand' (Lavery 10) and for a range of vision that is formed by history, both personal and socio-cultural (Rees 302). Additionally, the horizon stands for what it is possible to see from the position of a specific observer that is not only a location in space but also a position in the cultural and historical apprehension of the world. Gadamer views the notion of the horizon as a temporal characteristic of interpretation that occurs 'in the fusion of horizons where the

⁴⁸ For an overview of the influence of postmodernism on hermeneutics, please refer to: Palmer Richard E. "Postmodernity and Hermeneutics". *Boundary 2*, Vol. 5, No.2 (Winter, 1977): 363-394.

interpreter's horizon is expanded to include the projected horizon of the past [and of tradition]' (Schmidt 106).

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, therefore, to be aware of the multiplicity of horizons entails an acknowledgement of the fact that there is always something 'other' to be known beyond what can be observed from a specific historical viewpoint. This is a consideration that invites the researcher to engage with these 'other' perspectives in history with a view to connecting with what it was. For example, employing the metaphor of vision, an observer looking at a tri-dimensional object will always be able to see only one side of that object and, according to the cognitive processes at work, will make something out of the whole object from the specificity of her/his cultural and historical location. However, if the observer is aware of the limitations of her/his position, her/his perspective can be expanded through dialogue with whoever is situated at a different angle of incidence in relation to the same object.

This proposition is developed significantly in radical hermeneutics as the notion of the horizon is multiplied into a profusion of possible horizons. We are, in fact, confronted by an infinitude of possible horizons that determine a 'structural non-knowing, "blindness", or unreadability by which [any "knower"] is beset' (Caputo, More 2). This radicalization of the ontological condition of 'structural non-knowing' of the 'knower' renders interpretation necessary (More 3), while it also remains radically embedded in impossibility.

In affirming a certain degree of structural blindness to all forms of knowledge Caputo exposes the project of hermeneutics to a perspective that, according to the scholar Nancy J. Moules, renders every story never wholly comprehensive, making:

truth a living event, [ever] changing, not stagnant, expansive and full of possibilities. The truth is [transformed in] what allows the conversation to go on (...). Truth is not a judgment about worth; it is always being worked out and one truth is not intended to reprimand all the others, but to show the eventfulness of a topic. It occurs in keeping something open, in not thinking that something is known, for when we think we already know we stop paying attention to what comes to meet us (Moules 10).

It is the belief in the possibility of reaching a definitive truth that, according to Caputo, undermines the possibility of understanding itself:

the real obstacle to understanding human affairs lies in the tendency to believe that what we do – whether in building scientific theories or in concrete ethical life – admits formulation in hard and irrevocable rules (Caputo, *Radical* 212).

In radicalizing the ontological condition of the not knowing of the knower, he also radicalizes the function of a hermeneutics that manages to encompass every aspect of human experience from the most mundane to the most transcendental, for even religious absolutes and their dogmas are in need of interpretation (More 4).

From this perspective the objective of anyone researching will be to participate in the project of expanding the boundaries of historical and cultural specificity, to engage with the territory of cultural plurality and multidisciplinary methodologies with the awareness that none are exhaustive. This means that the researcher will need to be open to confronting their own position with the positions of others, to engage with elements that ‘do (...) not seem to have a coherent place or ongoing life in [the] present [or local] intellectual culture’ (Bruns 250), and to look for perspectives belonging to different hermeneutic circles. From this perspective the ‘other’ represents the possibility of pushing ever further the infinite project of knowledge, of moving the notion of ‘alterity’ to new territories of exploration and of confronting the finitude and impossibility of the self of ever-knowing in fixed and definite terms.

At this point, it is worth emphasising again that in radical hermeneutics truth is understood as eventful, processual. In fact Caputo uses the metaphor of the event to argue that truth is never ‘precisely what happens, but something going on *in* what happens, something that is being expressed or realized or given shape in what happens’ (Caputo, Spectral 47). An event is not a ‘*thing* but something astir in a thing’ (Caputo, Spectral 48) that is never really present, never finished, realized or completely formed. Therefore, every time someone tries to make sense of something she/he will define a field, create boundaries and stabilize the level of reality with which she/he is concerned. However, according to Caputo, this operation provides merely provisional formulations of events that remain ‘ever restless, on the move, seeking new forms to assume, seeking to get expressed in still unexpressed ways’ (Spectral 47).

If this methodology is chosen, the objective of the researcher is to maintain the hermeneutic project as openly as possible: to approach the subject of investigation in its complexity so as to avoid reductionism, appropriation and absolute assimilation.⁴⁹ The dynamic of dialogue should be maintained with the awareness that the ‘excessiveness of the other[s]’ – their ‘overplus’ (Burns 214) will never be grasped completely and that none of the perspectives taken are universally valid. It is, therefore, through conversation that ‘the experience we have with truth [that is always] embedded in our situation’ (Grondin 141) expands its horizons of possibilities and develops into a process that necessarily occurs within the circular relationship between the known, the knower and history where ‘consciousness is never alone with its object, but is always situated, always historical, contingent’ (Bruns 214).

⁴⁹ In this case, ‘understanding means more something like participation than ceaseless, irremediable appropriation’ (Grondin 136-137).

I consider radical hermeneutics to be particularly pertinent and productive for the scholarly investigation into the notion of the numinous in performance because it is related to the types of experiences and events I am interested in investigating. Performances such as *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* are events embedded in post-modern networks of cultural influences and have contradictory meanings that can hardly ‘be objectified [or] appropriated once and for all in any finite [culturally specific and singular framework of] interpretation’ (Bruns 214). I will further clarify this point by looking at the methodological approach of radical hermeneutics in relation to the performative act and the numinous experience.

2.4. Hermeneutics, the performative act and the numinous experience

In this section I define, within the territory of radical hermeneutics, the specific methodological position taken in this thesis, making reference to the question of the binary opposition between reason and the imaginary. I refer to James Hillman’s interpretative approach to expand on Caputo’s project, specifically in relation to the interpretative analysis of the notion of the numinous and the performance events investigated here. I also draw on Jung’s approach, not only because of his influence on Hillman’s thought and because he was one of the first exponents of the interpretation of numinosity in secularity, but also, in broader terms, because he played an important role in granting epistemological value to religious experience.

Jung’s association with the hermeneutical tradition relates to his interest in developing a hermeneutics of symbols in the interpretation of dreams that could unfold through ‘a constructive and accumulative operation’ within the psychoanalytical framework (Barnaby, D’Acierno Xvii). This did not entail:

the restoration of meaning of the dream text, but rather the opening of a process producing a plurality of meanings without ever coming to a hard and fast decision about the ultimate meaning (Barnaby, D’Acierno Xvii).

For Jung, the psychoanalytical understanding of a symbol was not something unalterable, represented by a ‘fixed and definitive interpretative system’ (Barnaby, D’Acierno Xvi), but rather a wealth of ‘personal, and collective, historical and cultural analogies, correspondents and parallels’ (Barnaby, D’Acierno Xvii) that informed, each time differently, how the symbolic meaning(s) came to be constituted for each patient.

Jung’s hermeneutics is located in the self, in a hermeneutic circle within which imagination ‘relates individual consciousness to its unconscious aspects, via personal associations, [and] more importantly to the larger cultural context’ (Barnaby, D’Acierno Xx). Jung related meaning to the irrational, which connects consciousness to the unconscious, and thus questioned the assumption that the irrational equates to the meaningless (Barnaby, D’Acierno Xxvi).⁵⁰

As anticipated in subsection 8.3 (“The self in post-industrial societies”), the post-Jungian scholar Hillman developed this discourse even further and re-claimed the plural viewpoint of the ‘splinter psyche’ as a mode of apprehension in itself (Hillman, *Re-visioning* 42). Applying the notion of the plural self to knowledge, he deconstructed the interpretative project to a greater degree, transforming and radicalizing every single position (horizon) into a plurality of horizons. The multiplicity of horizons is therefore not only an external phenomenon but also an internal condition that the investigating subject may take into consideration. Accordingly, the researcher approaching her/his object of research engages not only with the various interpretations that other

⁵⁰ See subsection 8.3. “The self in post-industrial societies”, in particular to Emilia Steurman’s approach to the notion of reason.

researchers may offer in history and culture, but also with her/his various internal perspectives, biases and biological limitations.

Hence, rather than looking for an imposed order or unitary viewpoint that would reduce and simplify the plurality of forces and tendencies inhabiting contemporary identity, Hillman looks for a kind of complexity or chaos theory within the self.

He argues that:

by absorbing the plural viewpoint of “splinter psyches” into our consciousness, there would be a new connection with multiplicity and we would no longer need to call it disconnected schizoid fragmentation. Consciousness, and out of consciousness, would reflect a world view that is diverse and unsettled (Hillman, *Re-visioning* 42).

From this perspective, personal experiences, feelings and attitudes, traditional understandings, and contemporary analytical discourses, may all play a role in shaping a particular system of meaning. This, according to Hillman, however hard we try, will always remain another fantasy of our internal collective system. In his view, ‘we do not hear music, touch sculpture, or read stories with meaning in mind, but for the sake of imagination’ (Hillman, *Re-visioning* 39). Therefore, it is imagination that creates meaning. Imagination is the dynamic element that brings together all of the aspects informing a specific event and its interpretations⁵¹.

Caputo takes a stand similar to Hillman’s by favouring an imaginative system of interpretation. However, his approach radicalizes this position even further to the point of actually deconstructing the oppositional notions of reason and unreason, reality and imagination. Caputo completely dismisses the oppositional clefting between reason and unreason, rationality and irrationality, arguing that the notion of reason in itself is limited by the metaphysical prejudices and fixed constructions that have produced its

⁵¹ Refer to subsection 8.4. “Theatrical apparatuses of experimentation”, and specifically Emilia Steuerman’s argument.

meanings (Caputo, Radical 209-212).⁵² Caputo's objectives are to re-describe what reason means and to liberate it from metaphysics and dogmatism, arguing that radical hermeneutics cultivates:

an acute sense of the contingency of all social, historical, linguistic structures [and] an appreciation of their constituted character, their character as effects (Caputo, Radical 209).

To which we may add: 'and as both rational and irrational'. Caputo argues that in destabilising the metaphysics of reason he intends not to undo reason but to emancipate it from what tends to make it something less than it is, and in this way to liberate a more 'reasonable' interpretation of reason (Caputo, Radical 209-213).

Applying to hermeneutics Foucault's analysis of the interpretation of madness in history, Caputo defends the inclusion of the point of view of the irrational, of unreason and 'madness', in the project of knowledge (More 17-40). He argues that:

a reason without unreason is a smooth surface, a superficial transparency; [on the other hand] reason with unreason speaks from the depth, *de profundis* (More 21).

Although Caputo acknowledges the painful consequences of unstable psychophysical conditions, he endorses Foucault's proposition that they should be approached other than from the scientific perspective: the 'heights of science or episteme and (...) the illusion that [we] know what madness is' (More 38). He suggests that 'we have something to learn from [these conditions]' (More 38), and argues that it is from their dimension and specificities, that we fear the most, that other, additional hermeneutical circles can be revealed.

⁵² In this regard, the scholar David Novitz points out how postmodernism is generally critical of 'the idea that there is or could be an unconstructed human nature that is shared by all human beings and that affords them the capacity to be rational. Far from being a natural endowment, rationality is seen as historically and culturally constructed' (Novitz 215).

In this regard the transpersonal psychiatrist Stanislav Grof distinguishes between disorders with psychological manifestations that have organic bases, such as ‘infections, tumors, vitamin deficiencies, and vascular or degenerative diseases of the brain’, and what he calls ‘spiritual emergencies’ (Grof xi).⁵³ He argues that the latter are non-ordinary states of consciousness that should be not suppressed by medication as they are invaluable experiences from which the self may emerge with ‘an increased sense of well-being, and a higher level of functioning in daily life’ (Grof 2). He suggests that ‘spiritual emergencies’ include:

ecstatic trances of shamans, or medicine men and women, [the] revelations of the founders of the great religions, prophets, saints and spiritual teachers (Grof xi).

They include episodes that ordinary people may experience in their life when they feel that their sense of identity is breaking down and that the basis of their existence is radically, chaotically and overwhelmingly shifting. These are experiences that in other cultural and historical contexts may have been regarded with great respect and as holding epistemological value, and they may offer an additional hermeneutical circle to engage with, as Caputo argues.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it is also an interpretation that resonates somewhat with the notion of the numinous experience as viewed in the context of this thesis.⁵⁵

53 Stanislav Grof (1931) is one of the founders of Transpersonal Psychology and a pioneer in the research of non-ordinary states of consciousness in therapeutic contexts.

54 Grof admits that, in therapeutic contexts, this is a slippery territory which requires a great deal of attention. He points out that ‘episodes of nonordinary states of consciousness cover a very wide spectrum, from purely spiritual states without any pathological features to conditions that are clearly biological in nature and require medical treatment. It is extremely important to take a balanced approach and to be able to differentiate spiritual emergencies from genuine psychoses. While traditional [psychiatric] approaches tend to pathologize mystical states, there is the opposite danger of spiritualizing psychotic states and glorifying pathology or, even worse, overlooking an organic problem’ (Grof xiii).

55 I am aware that Grof seems to approach the notion of spirituality according to the binary opposites of spirit and matter, an oppositional clefting that is problematized here with the notion of the numinous. Nonetheless, I believe Grof offers a valuable contribution to the question of cultural interpretations in relation to the reason-unreason interdependence.

I am sympathetic to both Hillman's efforts to rehabilitate the role of imagination and imaginal life within the interpretative project, and in so doing offer 'a new connection with multiplicity' (Hillman, *A Blue Fire* 42); and also to Caputo's determination to pass beyond the received reason/unreason cleftings, and move toward a more sensitive, contoured and 'reasonable notion of reason' (Caputo, *Radical* 209-213). Both positions seem to offer a sensible and generative approach to the contemporary condition of 'anyone who wants to know about something' (Caputo, *Radical* 293), an undertaking that is becoming increasingly complex. What is suggested here is that this is a way to knowledge:

where thinking and acting, science and ethics are to be understood in terms of the agility of one who knows how to cope with shifting and elusive circumstances, which is more like the skill of a good dancer than a heavy-footed German metaphysician (Caputo, *Radical* 293).

I consider both Hillman's and Caputo's theoretical positions to be particularly useful to my interpretative project. They seem productive in giving sense to performative practices that problematically disrupt the lines dividing the secular and the religious, the rational and the irrational, the visible and the invisible, the real and the imaginary. In addition they provide grounds for an understanding of perceptual possibilities that are beyond what is considered reasonable and possible, and offer the potential to provide an interpretative construct within which an artist's intention and a spectator's imagination are both plausible horizons of interpretation.

For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 3 ("Case Study A: *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas") and Chapter 4 ("Case Study B: *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic"), both performances were embedded in a production of images and imaginaries, within which spectators' and performers' perceptions of themselves and the other played a functional role in blurring the fixed boundaries defining sacred and

secular conceptions of spaces, and possible and impossible interpretations of presences. In fact, in Chapters 3 and 4 when we look at the performance spaces and at both Abramovic's and Biswas's respective presences in relation to numinosity, we will be confronted above all by a hermeneutics of symbols; each engaged in and activated a network of hermeneutic circles. Each of these circles will emerge from presences in space that operated through a series of accumulative symbolic reflections (Barnaby, D'Acerno Pp. Xvii) back and forward between the performer and the spectators. Both events generated a double mirror effect that, as will be clarified, disrupted ordinary personal scripts and the modalities by which the performers and each spectator/participant enacted their sense of self in ordinary life, potentially opening space for the manifestation of performative, numinous emergences. These occurrences '*amplify* the symbol-text-script of each personal life adding to it a wealth of personal and collective, historical and cultural analogies, correspondents, and parallels' (Barnaby, D'Acerno Pp. Xvii) embodied through personal, transformative processes of imaginary projections.

Within this complex scenario the main focus of this research is to allow the introspective technologies of the self employed by Abramovic and Biswas to acquire meaning within the context of performance, and to analyse how these events became cultural and personal 'short circuits' in the linear understanding of personal histories. Short circuits, in the context of hermeneutic circles, do not necessarily entail an escape from the circles in which we are entangled, but rather reflect a leaping or arcing movement from one circle to a new one that is implicated in different networks of historical and perceptual relations and reflections. It is here that the numinous experience encounters the hermeneutic circle of radical hermeneutics in performance. In fact, if we apply the concept of the hermeneutic circle to the notion of the performative

and the idea of the script mentioned in the Introduction, the numinous experience acquires meaning in relation to the complex networks of embodied historical, social and cultural discourses that it disrupts.

In conclusion, Hillman's and Caputo's perspectives are functional in providing a theoretical framework of interpretation within which imagination, emotion, reason and embodiment respectively play a role in the production of the networks of meaning that this thesis proposes. However, a clearer insight into the hermeneutical relationship between the researcher and the subject of this research is needed.

2.5. The relationship between the researcher and the subject of research

Having established the cultural and philosophical parameters of the methodological approach taken in this thesis, it is now necessary to clarify how, from this perspective, the relationship between the researcher and the subject of research unfolds in relation to the notion of the numinous. A brief engagement with the mythological figure of Hermes, with whom the hermeneutic approach is associated, may be useful in elucidating how this relationship proceeds and develops in this project.⁵⁶

Hermes, the son of the god Zeus and the lowly earth nymph Maia, represents the very:

essence of between-ness, [and] describes metaphorically the boundaries-crossing nature of hermeneutics 'as a kind of phenomenology of the between' (Bruns 11).

⁵⁶ Although the metaphor of the myth has been extensively used in explicating aspects of hermeneutics, the term 'hermeneutic' does not originate etymologically from the Greek god Hermes (Ferraris 2). For a detailed etymological account of the term 'hermeneutic' please refer to: Ferraris Maurizio. *History of Hermeneutics*. New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1996.

Also referred to as the ‘god of the gaps’ (Palmer 25), Hermes represents the hermeneutical objective of acknowledging the spaces between things, their relationality and alterity. Since Hermes is a double agent, discreetly permeating the boundaries at which the heavens, earth, and underworld meet, he is also capable of bringing messages from one reality to another, constructing bridges of communication between different ‘horizons’. His connective movements across borders allow for unexpected results and relations to emerge. However, he never erases the distance between those areas or reduces the space that renders the dimensions different from each other. They are never left to collapse into the ‘same’, as it is in their differences that the space in between is kept vibrant, alive and full of possibilities.⁵⁷

Hermeneutics, in recognising and being present to the alterity of the other, whatever the other is – a person, a cultural product, the self in its multiple constituents – finds its foundation in the context from which the numinous experience, in a secular context, emerges. To explain this point further, the hub of the numinous experience is the act of being present to something ‘wholly other’ and being overwhelmed by its alterity before reducing it, through judgement, to something familiar. The capacity of the self to remain present to the alterity of the other with its numinous ‘overplus of meaning’ (Otto 5) and its ‘excessiveness’ (Bruns 214) constitutes both the specificity of radical hermeneutics, and the disruptive/productive qualities of the numinous experience. Following Caputo’s logic, it is the self’s capacity to be present to the eventfulness of something, without reducing it wholly to the thing within which it is manifested, that sustains the life of the project of understanding (Caputo, *Spectral* 47-48). In other words, it is the effort of keeping the distance or space in-between open and

⁵⁷ Here I am borrowing Luce Irigaray’s philosophical ideas expounded in the book *Sharing the World* (Luce Irigaray. *Sharing the World*. London: Continuum, 2008). Although she does not refer directly to hermeneutics, her insights on the relation between the self and the other resonate with some aspects of the radical hermeneutical project.

in tension that allows the researcher to maintain an energised curiosity toward the subject of investigation and preserve its ‘eventful’ qualities.

In the case of this thesis, this space is held open through three protocols or acknowledgments: firstly, that the excessiveness of both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* – their ‘overplus’ of meaning – will never be grasped completely (Bruns 214); secondly, a commitment to keep conclusions porous and open to further developments; thirdly, an endeavour to listen to and acknowledge the plurality of the elements involved.

In practical terms this entails considering and attending to a plurality of horizons, for example the horizons of the performer, of the spectator/participant, of my own and even of the reader with her/his multiplicity of internal responses. It also entails taking into consideration symbolic hypotheses, imaginative responses and a plurality of cultural references with which each performance resonates, from religious studies, philosophy of science, literature and art. Therefore, my methodological approach endeavours to listen to this complexity of interpretative voices and acknowledge them as active contributors to the research project. However, at the same time I am aware that none of these are meant to exhaust the infinite horizons that each event produces, and also that I will never be able to acknowledge them all.

Such an endeavour requires the researcher to sustain and maintain sensitivity toward silence, the ‘speaking of the threshold’ (Irigaray, *Sharing* 5), and a willingness to attend to what the other(s) may express. Silence is not only the space within which the numinous in paradox emerges in *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, but it is also an apt metaphor of the hermeneutic attitude where a ‘unique discourse’ is abandoned in favour

of other discourses co-existing together with 'mine'. Gadamer describes the hermeneutically trained consciousness in terms of:

a person [who] is prepared for the other to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to text's alterity. The important thing is [however also] to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness (Gadamer, Truth 271).

The task ahead is far from straightforward and the double nature of the numinous (*fascinans* and *tremendum*) coincides with the double nature of Hermes, the symbolic trickster of the hermeneutical approach. As Bruns suggests:

we know, or by now ought to know, (...) Hermes was never simply our friendly postman but the granddaddy of tricksters, a figure of anarchy or misrule, of thievery, treachery, and deceit, someone always a little out of control, the bringer of truth who doubles as the thief of reason and who therefore leaves you in perpetual hesitation as to what you have just heard or said, written or read; in short a polytropic figure, someone mischievous and untrustworthy, like the language we speak when we try to make sense of anything. This is not Hermes the friendly postman but Hermes the many sided, uncontainable, nocturnal transgressor who, among other things, fathered Pan upon faithless Penelope and then taught the goat boy how to masturbate (215).

It is, in fact, within the nature of the hermeneutic project to struggle to make sense of the meanings emerging from the complex relation between the self and the multiple 'others' which any event implicates and comprises.

As suggested above, the difficulty consists of making sense of a plurality of sources, and of creating narratives that are able to hold contradictory meanings without reducing the generative potentials of each individual component. Therefore it is important to pay attention to the 'particulars' of each element and the voice involved. Also to how each comes to presence in history, legacies, and cultural relationships, and to both (their) hidden and apparent traces which constitute and constantly change the meanings that these performances set in motion. To summarise, the core elements I propose to take into consideration are:

- the diverse cultural formations constituting the specificity of each case study;
- the epistemological value of the technologies of the self that are employed;
- the networks of meaning that both performer and spectator open for each other in relation to space, presence and technology of the self;
- the artist's intentions;
- the spectator/participant's responses;
- my own personal expectations, experiences and biases;
- the reader in her/his specificity.

In conclusion, rather than a unified point of arrival, I intend to provide a container where tensions are allowed to co-exist dynamically in relation to their natures and qualities. Caputo's notion of complex, wavering flux (Caputo, Radical 209) effectively describes the form I envisage for this structure, within which different epistemological positions and multiple realities are negotiated, constantly at play, constructed and altered by their inter-relations. The aim of such a structure is to remind the reader that:

it remains an open question, at least for hermeneutics, of how confined we finally are to our constitutive forms of life and cultural practice, which after all, with due respect to long-running prison-house theories of language, culture, and ideology, may themselves be heterogeneous, porous, and open-ended – not, finally, structured like a language or a system of rules or even as a conceptual scheme, but rather structured like the weather owing to their historicity; in which case we might think of hermeneutics as a kind of chaos theory interested in the historical turbulence of systems (Bruns 250).

Having said that, to be able to deal in a rigorous, scholarly manner with such a methodological proposition requires an acknowledgement and clarification of the methods and practices I intend to deploy. In other words, the fluctuating form I have described above, rather than occurring in infinitude, manifests itself within a container capable of holding the flux within an ordered narrative. By necessity this thesis not only

defines a category but is also organized according to a structure. Nonetheless, keeping in mind the methodological approach chosen, the category and structure employed are not meant to be permanent and immutable, but rather fated, when necessary, to be dismantled and re-constructed in different forms.

2.6. How to proceed: methods and practices

The parameters of the metaphorical container mentioned above are constituted, broadly speaking, by the performer/spectator/participant's relationship and by the structure used to explore it. As already mentioned in the Introduction, the structure employed for each case study is composed of three sections: the first is dedicated to space and how it has been respectively configured; the second to presence and how it has been respectively devised; and the third to action (Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing) and how it has been respectively performed. In other words space, presence and action are the anchors to which the structure of this thesis is moored, and each of these elements are analysed and interpreted in individual sections in the next two chapters (Chapter 3, "Case Study A: *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas" and Chapter 4, "Case Study B: *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic").

Having established this, it is now important to specify that the methods I deploy for each section especially in regard to the parts assigned to action or technologies of the self may differ. For example, space and presence are analysed looking at archival material, spectators/participants' reactions recorded in blogs, articles, interviews, and critical reviews. This material is interpreted through a multidisciplinary set of theoretical sources. In the third section, although the analysis of the performance action (technologies of the self) also relies on data found in archives, journals and other forms of recorded documentation, it also draws on information retrieved through the

deployment of the analytical auto-ethnographic research method. This is a specific ethnographic model of investigation within which subjective experiences are analysed together with data retrieved through the third person model.

This additional research method is required because, as mentioned in the Introduction, in both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* the performer/spectator's relationship is enacted on two performance levels. In *CAT*, the first level occurred between the spectator/participant and the soundproof box containing Biswas. The second performative dimension was activated by the technology of Vipassana meditation, which operated, through a series of specific agential cuts⁵⁸ an internal performative condition within which the self/performer observed through introspection his own somatic movements and occurrences. This performative condition was invisible from the outside. In *The Artist is Present* the first level occurred between the spectators looking at Abramovic from the edges of the performance space and Abramovic, and the second happened between Abramovic and the members of the audience reciprocating their gaze inside the performance space. This second performative introspective exchange created a mirror effect within which the act of reciprocal gazing manipulated, in time, the ways the self perceived both the self and the other, simultaneously opening an alternative performative space of perception that only the practitioners could experience and therefore perceive.

These second performance levels are important factors in the analysis of the numinous in performance. It is, in fact, within the invisible dynamics experienced by the practitioners involved with these technologies of the self that the 'matter' composing both our bodies and the surrounding environment acquired a performative

58 Here I am referring to Barad's theory of 'agential realism'. The notion of 'agential cut' is explicated in subsection 3.5.2. "First instruction: Close the eyes and remain alert".

quality.⁵⁹ This embodied, performative dynamic emerged in networks of signals, movements and tensions that, according to the particular technology of the self deployed and the apparatus in place, mobilised perception differently each time; moving the boundaries of the numinous within different conditions of performativity.

For example, in the case of *CAT* the technology of Vipassana meditation determined a performative condition within which the practitioner/performer was potentially enabled to observe through introspection ‘the performance’ enacted by her/his own fibrous threads (veins, nerves, sinews, tendons, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, contents of the stomach, intestines, mesentery, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, solid fat, tars, fat dissolved, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine) and by the smallest parts composing each enacting the spectacle of matter in its constant process of becoming and fluctuating, vanishing and originating again. In *The Artist is Present* the act of reciprocal gazing created a perceptual condition within which the boundaries dividing the observing self and the observed other were potentially rendered in time fluctuating and inconsistent.

In order for me to have a partial sense of these performative aspects of both performances it was necessary, from the perspective of the methodological position chosen, to engage experientially with the technologies of the self employed and to approach and embody their perceptual dynamics. This entailed, from the analytical auto-ethnographic research method’s viewpoint, engaging with Vipassana meditation, and personally experiencing the body through that explorative lens. It also meant that my own body became a field of exploration where I:

⁵⁹ The notion of performativity in relation to ‘matter’ is an essential feature of Barad’s theory of agential realism introduced in subsection 8.1 of the Introduction. Her theory will be further explicated in section 3.3.4. “An interpretation of the same categories from the perspective of the philosophy of science of Karen Barad”.

look[ed] upon [my]self as both the subject and object of (...) observations, (...) act[ing] simultaneously as author and chief protagonist, [as] both ethnographer and informant (Murphy 3).

The work of the anthropologist Robert F. Murphy is particularly useful in supporting this idea.

Murphy, in his book *The Body Silent* (1990), described his experience with a long-term disease of his spinal cord and how he decided to treat his ill body as a ‘kind of extended anthropological field trip’ (Murphy xi).⁶⁰ He suggests that his lengthy career as academic and anthropologist encouraged him to approach his own deteriorating body as an anthropological environment to be explored and reported on, or as a recess of human experience as remote as the Earth’s antipodes (Murphy xi).

Murphy argued that, just as Claudie Lévi-Strauss used:

his journey across geographical space as a backdrop and source for an inquiry into the structure of human thought, [in the very same way he could employ his own] odyssey in inner space to explore the structure of selfhood and sentiment (Murphy xii).

He used the analytic auto-ethnographic method that combines introspective modalities of investigation with analysis, to explain in scholarly terms his experience with the illness. This method was determined by its usefulness in approaching a highly subjective field of inquiry.

Therefore, analytic auto-ethnography is a method that offers the possibility of putting one’s own experience in dialogue with analytical material in order to explore types of experiences that cannot be accessed other than through personal engagement.⁶¹

60 Robert Murphy was Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. The project which gave rise to the publication of the book *The Body Silent* (2001) was intended as anthropological fieldwork on his degenerating body afflicted by a tumour of the spinal cord. The project was supported by grants from the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke (NINCDS) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (Murphy, xii).

61 For an account of analytical auto-ethnography, please refer to the article: Vryan, Kevin D. “Expanding Analytical Autoethnography and Enhancing Its Potential.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Vol. 35. No. 4 (2006). 405-409.

And just as Murphy was able to consider the inner landscape of his deteriorating body as an anthropological field of investigation, it is my contention that similar operations can be applied to the field of performance studies. This proposition endorses the idea that the subtle movements of the background realities of the body (Jung, *Collected Works*, Civilization 468) and a ‘certain way of using one’s own consciousness’ (Biswas, *CAT*) can be investigated as components of a performative event with a possible narrative, emotional contours and unexpected occurrences.

In addition, the exploration of the inside of the body, through Vipassana meditation, and the exploration of the processes of cyclical perceptual effects produced by reciprocal gazing, are themselves sources for the inquiry into the structure of the numinosity of matter in its infinite somatic possibilities of configuring and reconfiguring itself. Indeed, it is only through personal experience with Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing that I have been able to discover the extent to which these technologies are capable of manipulating and modifying self-perception. Moreover, it is from this additional horizon of interpretation that I am able to offer the hypothesis that these technologies conditioned and constituted, together with the apparatuses constructed by the artists, the relations in place in both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*.

I am aware that the environments in which I engaged with the two technologies necessarily differed from the contexts of both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*. Nonetheless, I propose that, in view of the methodological framework employed, it offers an additional and invaluable perspective from which to look at these two performance propositions that are highly complex and in many ways resistant to more conventional scholarly approaches.

I engaged with the practices of Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing between 2009 and 2011.⁶² In 2009 I attended the workshop offered by Marina Abramovic to visitors of her curated show at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. During the workshop she guided the participants in various meditative techniques including reciprocal gazing. Subsequently I undertook a one-week experiment engaging two hours a day in reciprocal gazing with Terry George.⁶³ In 2010 I attended a ten-day course in Vipassana meditation where I engaged in ten hours of meditation a day. Subsequently in August 2011 I realized a second experiment with the same technology,⁶⁴ living in isolation for one month while engaging with Vipassana meditation for two hours a day, following a specific diet.⁶⁵ The feelings, emotions and perceptual responses of these two experiments are recorded in the two diaries attached to this thesis as appendices.

In conclusion, these experiments are not treated as part of a practice-based research but as supplementary material, an additional hermeneutical horizon intended to further inform my understanding of the technologies of the self employed in *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*. The result, as already suggested in this chapter, is a network of intersecting relations in which the performer, the spectator/participant, the apparatus deployed, the researcher, and secondarily the reader all play a role in determining the type of configuration and meanings that can emerge from this thesis.

62 I am not new to Buddhist introspective practices as I have been actively engaged with the Japanese school of Nichiren Daishonin and the Soka Gakkai International organization since 1988.

63 Terry George is a healer who specializes in the practice of Holotropic Breathing developed by the psychiatrist Stanislav Grof.

64 I regarded this second experiment as necessary because during the Vipassana course I could not write, record or document the experience in any way. The reasons behind this prohibition are explained in section 3.5.1. "Vipassana meditation".

65 During this period I ate very lightly at breakfast and lunch and only fruit at dinner. The diet was strictly vegetarian and was inspired by the dietary regime followed during the ten-day meditation course in Vipassana meditation as taught by Mr. Goenka. For further information on Mr. Goenka's school, please refer to subsection 3.5.1. "Vipassana meditation".

2.7. Conclusion

Hermeneutics and its most radical contemporary developments inspire my methodological position and methods of enquiry. It represents a theoretical framework of exploration capable of containing not only the complexity that the notion of numinosity acquires within the secular context of performance, but also of supporting my argument in relation to self-perception, performativity, introspection and apparatuses. It justifies the necessity for a dialogical approach to the study of performances such as *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*, which not only reference a plurality of cultural perspectives but also generate multiple performative contexts.

The hypothesis of experimental performances as laboratories of enquiry into numinous, introspective perceptions of reality is, therefore, discussed with reference to radical hermeneutics; an approach within which, I contend, it is possible to consider introspection as an epistemological method of enquiry. The hermeneutical project therefore allows me to propose perspectives of introspection as possible additional horizons to be considered in dialogue with more conventional analytical interpretations.

Introspective methods, such as the technologies of the self discussed here, are accordingly suggested not only as performance actions but also as repositories of internal and invisible performative contexts and moreover as research methods. This offers an additional point of view to the already multidisciplinary range of perspectives on offer within the field of performance studies. Moreover, it conveys epistemological value to performance more broadly in the investigation of the elusive and situational nature of our perceptual processes. However, to consider introspection as an additional horizon, not only in the project of understanding, but also in the context of what can and

cannot be considered a performance remains a difficult path to pursue. Therefore, it will be useful for the reader to refer back, from time to time, to what is mentioned in the Introduction concerning the concept of the self within postmodern discourses, the notion of apparatuses and performativity in relation to this project, and the notion of the numinous contextualized within the paradigm of radical hermeneutics.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasizing again that throughout the thesis the hypothesis proposed is not reducible to one vision, but rather opens the interpretative project to the plurality of meanings and values that these performance events generated. The next two chapters are an extensive interpretation of the two performances within which a plurality of horizons are employed to contribute to the dialogical interpretation I offer. Finally, the methodological position taken suggests that what constitutes performance should remain a project ever open to further developments and expansions.

CHAPTER 3:

Case Study A: *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas

3.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the first case study, the performance *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas, reflecting on the three elements of space, presence and action. These elements, as outlined in the Introduction and Chapter 2, “Methodology”, are the starting points from which the investigation, analysis and interpretation of the notion of the numinous in *CAT* begins. At the same time they also define the parameters within which the discourses around numinosity, spectatorship and notions of selfhood that this thesis offers are contained. The objective is, therefore, to provide an interpretative analysis that, by examining how space, presence and action are devised in *CAT*, investigates how the specificity of their arrangement constitutes and informs the numinosity of the piece.

Biswas staged *CAT* for the first time at South London Gallery in 1998 on the occasion of the event *Parallel Universe*, a multidisciplinary exhibition and conference series which aimed to debate western science, creativity and their agency. The event was curated by the art organization *Arts Catalyst*, whose commissions involve contemporary artists who engage experimentally and critically with science. The aim of the organization is to deliver social and thought-provoking experiences and to stimulate encounters and learning opportunities that transcend the traditional boundaries between the disciplines. This is achieved by encouraging exploration and experimentation, and by deepening the understanding of the relationships between science, culture and society at large (*The Arts Catalyst*, Web).

CAT was presented again in 2001 in San Francisco during the *Gateway Project, London to San Francisco: Phase One*. The *Gateway Project* was designed by the art organization *The Lab*. According to the organization's website the aim was to facilitate international dialogue and collaboration between artists and cultural and scientific researchers residing in San Francisco and London. Artists and researchers were invited to cross their respective disciplines and collaborate to envision new conceptual frontiers for what the organization, in the press release, referred to as 'the new millennial culture' (*The Lab, Web*).

In both venues *CAT* consisted of a performance/experiment/demonstration of the famous quantum physics image/paradox of Schrödinger's cat⁶⁶ 'employing as means of investigation the 2,500 years old Indian technology of Vipassana meditation' (Biswas, *CAT* 1998).⁶⁷ As mentioned in the Introduction, the performance piece was devised by Biswas with reference to two images: Schrödinger's cat enclosed in the box, and the devoted and ardent hermit dwelling in her/his meditative cell (*The Arts Catalyst, Press Release*). The two images were juxtaposed to create a:

ten-day live experiment [during which] Biswas [wa]s sealed in a sound and lightproof [black] metallic box and lived in the dark, unaware of the time of day or night, for ten days. No-one [was] able to see him, but during that time he [practiced Vipassana meditation attempting] to maintain close, continuous observation of all physical phenomena' (*The Arts Catalyst, Press Release*).

66 The Schrödinger's cat thought experiment was created by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger at the beginning of the 20th century to demonstrate the complication of 'the notion of probability superposition of quantum states' (McEvoy, Zarate 146). It consisted of 'a bizarre [thought] experiment in which a cat [was] placed in a box with a radioactive source, a Geiger counter, a hammer and a sealed glass flask containing deadly poison fumes' (McEvoy, Zarate 146). The box, in which the hypothetical experiment was supposed to be carried out, was completely sealed, preventing the observer from verifying the outcomes of the experiment.

67 Vipassana meditation is one of India's most ancient meditation techniques. This technology of the self entails sitting in stillness for long periods of time while operating continuous observation of physical sensations by focusing on the movements of breathing passing through the nostrils. Although it is a practice that anyone at any level of expertise can perform, nevertheless it requires a great degree of dedication and commitment.

The event that occurred at the South London Gallery has been chosen as the specific case study for this thesis. Here, Biswas entered the box on 13th March 1998 at 7.00 p.m. accompanied by a special ceremony performed shortly after a talk by the physicist David Peat.⁶⁸ The box was opened at 9.00 p.m. on 22nd March 1998 after another special ceremony.⁶⁹ Between the 13th and 22nd of March the black box with Biswas inside remained in the South London Gallery space to be viewed by visitors during the gallery's opening hours (The Arts Catalyst, *Press Release*).

CAT was a performance conceived and developed around and within the hermetic symbol of the black box placed in the middle of the gallery space. This object encouraged several levels of interpretation; for example, it could have been read as a sculpture, a symbolic presence, a container or a conceptual art piece. Furthermore, it operated as the locus for an intermingling between culturally separated spheres of human endeavour – notably performance, science and religion. It was potentially a theatre space, a scientific laboratory and a meditative cell functioning simultaneously as a space for performance, for scientific experiment, and for religious, meditative and contemplative practices.

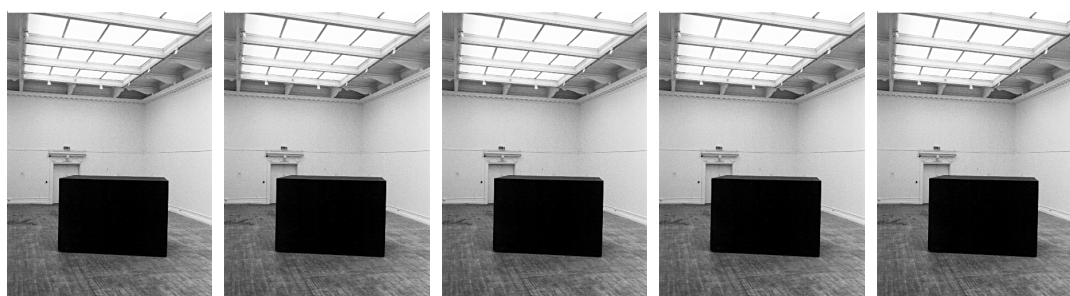


Figure 9: Ansuman Biswas, *CAT*, 1998

68 David Peat (1938) is a physicist interested in interpreting holistically the results of quantum physics. He has engaged in various dialogues with the renowned physicist David Bohm on the relationship between quantum physics and creativity, which was also the topic of the lecture he gave at the South London Gallery on the occasion of *CAT*.

69 The time when Biswas first entered the box is uncertain. The press release refers to 7.00 p.m., whereas the brochure of the gallery suggests it was 9.00 p.m.

As a result, in exploring *CAT* through the lens of radical hermeneutics, one may find that scientific discourses enter into dialogue with narratives related to contemplative traditions or artistic approaches, for example. Paradoxically, the putative test cat of Schrödinger's thought experiment may coincide theoretically with the figure of the performer, and even symbolically represent the figures of hermits or recluses such as the desert fathers of ancient Egypt, early Christianity and medieval anchorites.⁷⁰ Within the black box of *CAT*, the meditational cell of the hermit stood at the same time for the closed system of Schrödinger's scientific laboratory, which the cat inhabited, and for the performance space where the performer performed his action. Ultimately, however, all of these are only hypotheses, partial solutions to an object that remained elusive, ambiguous, indefinable, and entangled with a plurality of heterogeneous symbolic references. The black box, its closure and inaccessibility is, therefore, the main focus and anchor of the analysis and interpretation of the concept of the numinous in *CAT*, and the centre to which all of the hypotheses proposed refer. The objective is to pay attention to the complexity that this object produces; engaging with and investigating its multiplicity without dissolving or reducing its contradictory meanings into a singular interpretative solution. Let us consider Biswas's configuration more closely.

By placing the performer (Biswas himself) in complete isolation and rendering the space of his action completely inaccessible to visitors/spectators, Biswas promoted and at same time negated *CAT* as performance. Indeed the configuration he devised, by denying visual or any other sensory interactions between performer and spectators/visitors, rendered conventional practices of spectatorship impossible in sensory terms. However, the generative qualities of *CAT* in numinous terms lie in this

⁷⁰ These references will be explained in subsection 3.3.3, "An interpretation of the same categories from the perspective of religious studies".

contradictory, paradoxical performance construction. Indeed it is from this space of tension between visibility and invisibility, performance potentials and negations that *CAT*'s numinosity emerges. In other words, as suggested in the Introduction, by generating a possibility and at the same time staging its negation, Biswas created the paradoxical condition that is identified here as numinous.

As it has been introduced in Chapter 1, “Theoretical Implications of the Notion of the Numinous in Performance Studies and Art: an Overview of some of its Developments”, the notion of the numinous is conceptually implicated with issues of self-perception in relation to what is considered as the ‘wholly other’. The numinous experience always involves an experiencing of self and an object of reference whose nature exceeds the boundaries of the culturally known, as set by and to the self. In similar terms, conventional spectatorship in performance is expected to occur between an observing subject and an object of attention that may be a performer, puppet, orchestra, moving installation and so on. In *CAT* this relation is problematized because the relation between the observing/spectating subject and the performing subject/object is hindered by a performance space that is inaccessible. This condition not only challenged theatrical conventions of spectatorship, as has already been challenged in many forms throughout the history of performance, but also placed spectators in a predicament that makes it impossible to fulfil their roles as spectators.

The conceptual framework of numinosity and the methodology of radical hermeneutics enable me to engage with this problem by taking into consideration the plurality of analytical hypotheses that *CAT*'s specific configuration generates. This is to say that: its performative and paradoxical dynamics are acknowledged; the unfamiliar territories of negotiation produced between performer and spectators are considered

together with the multiple performance space contexts produced; and ultimately, internal forms of spectatorship are envisioned and contemplated in the analysis and interpretations proposed.

In other words, the core numinous aspect of *CAT* on which this analysis focuses is that space, presence and action were arranged by Biswas in order to destabilize the absolute separation between performer and spectator through, paradoxically, dramatizing it. This chapter considers the philosophical implications that the performance holds for theoretical developments within the field of performance studies. In fact, ultimately *CAT* is a performance that enables an expansion of the concept of the numinous in embodiment and performativity, allowing me to contemplate an image of the matter composing our bodies and the surrounding environment as performative and interconnected.

The analysis develops in the following sequence: firstly, I engage with space, looking at the gallery space and the box as both containers and contained; secondly, I investigate presence, considering the box in its double performative presence as both an object/sculpture and an enclosed space; and thirdly I explore the box in metaphorical terms in order to examine action. Here I focus on the question of spectatorship in introspection as the inner condition of the self in Vipassana meditation. Each of these aspects are explored through different cultural perspectives that, collectively and each time differently, will conduct and at the same time alter each other's interpretative propositions.

To conclude this introduction, *CAT* is located on a slippery and ambiguous conceptual terrain that invites interpretative approaches rather than argumentative

strategies. The researcher is compelled to proceed through hypotheses and rely on multidisciplinary perspectives. The only starting point offered for observation consists of the black box, a catalyst of narratives and discourses from which to develop (a few of the) many possible interpretations. In this chapter, philosophical reflections on quantum physics, studies on cultures of enclosure, as well as critical studies on the notion of sculpture and Buddhist philosophical accounts, will intermingle and contest each other, generating analogies, parallels, paradoxes and metaphors aimed at expanding on the relation between numinosity and performance. The interpretative analysis is carried out by looking at the various sources of information available, which include:

- The artist's declaration of intent;
- Video and photographic documentation;
- Press release documentation;
- Interviews with Ansuman Biswas;
- Ansuman Biswas's talks;
- Auto-ethnographic material.

As described in Chapter 2, "Methodology", the question of action, discussed here in the final section of this chapter, relies on auto-ethnographic material.

3.2. The artist's contextualization

Ansuman Biswas was born in Calcutta, India in 1965 and trained in the UK where he currently lives. Having studied Music at Dartington College of Arts in Devon, and Drama at Manchester University and the National Theatre Studio, his work maintains a multidisciplinary approach encompassing music, film, performance art, installation, writing and theatre. His work has been exhibited internationally in venues that include the Tate Modern, The Whitechapel Gallery, the Edinburgh Festival, The

Liverpool Biennial, The National Review of Live Art in Glasgow, the NSA Gallery in South Africa and the LAB in San Francisco.

He has a longstanding interest in spiritual traditions and practices, as is demonstrated by his more than twenty year involvement with the Theravada Buddhism tradition, specifically with Vipassana meditation as taught by Mr. Goenka; as well as with other forms of spiritual praxis such as various traditions of shamanism. Every year he attends a ten-day course in Vipassana meditation during which he deepens his understanding of this meditative practice and its philosophical insights (Chamberlain 54). Alongside this he has pursued an interest in science and its methods of enquiry and practices. The relationship between the scientific and the religious, in terms of models of apprehension of reality, is present throughout Biswas's approach to art and the creative process. And it is the desire to intertwine the experimental, the creative and the spiritual that underpins his philosophical approach to art, and, at the same time, connects the disparate range of activities in which he is involved (Biswas, interviewed by Silvia Battista 2010).⁷¹

Due to the extraordinary variety of projects he has engaged with, his biography seems to recall mythological narratives. His website introduces him through an unusual list of disparate activities that construct an extraordinary and multi-directional trajectory. For example he has been:

directing Shakespeare in America, translating Tagore's poetry from the Bengali, making underwater sculptures in the Red Sea, living with wandering minstrels in India, being employed as an ornamental hermit in

⁷¹ To mention just a few of the projects in which he has been involved: Biswas is a trustee of Arts Catalyst, the science-art agency with which he presented CAT; he had a leading role in developing new models of interdisciplinary collaboration at Hewlett-Packard's research lab in Bangalore; he has been artist-in-residence at the National Institute of Medical Research in London; and he has been involved in setting up cultural initiatives with the Indian Space Research Organization and the National Institute of Advanced Studies, India (Biswas, "Artist Talk").

the English countryside, travelling with shamans in the Gobi Desert, working with neuroscientists in Arizona, touring with Björk, spending two days blindfolded on Exmoor, playing with Oasis, co-ordinating grassroots activists in Soweto, being sealed in a box for ten days with no food or light, making a musical in a maximum security prison, holding seminars with monks in a Burmese monastery, and flying on a magic carpet in Russia (Biswas, homepage).

Within this broad range of activities, his interest and fascination with the ‘negative path’ of hermits and mystical figures has been represented throughout and stands out as one of the main cultural threads of his art and philosophical thinking. Although he has never made the decision to dedicate his life only to meditation and contemplation, he has expressed this desire in performance, engaging in projects involving long periods of isolation and self-reflection.

For example, *The Hermit*, realized in 2009 and commissioned by the Manchester Museum, eloquently demonstrates his interest in the significance of the hermit’s solitary life and at the same time the capacity to explore its implications and possibilities in art contexts. For this project he lived in the ‘Victorian Gothic tower [of the Museum] for 40 days and 40 nights alone except for a computer modem connecting him to the virtual world’ (Kennedy).⁷² The residency consisted of gathering some of the objects archived in the tower and reinterpreting their meanings. During the mythological time frame of his reclusive life in the tower, Biswas selected objects from cases of stuffed animals, dried botanical specimens and albums of prints and drawings. On each day of his stay, from the end of June until early August, he conducted an online discussion with the public about the significance and fate of each object (Kennedy).

⁷² Manchester Museum had its inception in 1821 when the Manchester Natural History Society was founded. During the 20th century the collection of the Museum was split into archery, archaeology, botany, Egyptology, entomology, ethnography, mineralogy, palaeontology, numismatics and zoology, as well as live specimens in the aquarium and vivarium. Over time the collection has grown to six million items (Manchester Museum).

Solitude, isolation, meditative practices and their impact on human consciousness are therefore important aspects of Biswas's research as he looks for dialogical frameworks of investigation that can bring together art, science and spirituality. Similarly to the tradition of hermeneutics he does not oppose science, although he has consistently endeavoured to problematize the hierarchical structure within which western science occupies a privileged position over introspective approaches to knowledge (Biswas, interviewed by Silvia Battista 2010).

CAT and *Self/Portrait*, both presented in 2001 at *The Lab* in San Francisco, are examples of this commitment. In both cases he brings together, in a performance context, scientific paradigms such as Schrödinger's thought experiment (*CAT*) or machinery such as ECG (electrocardiograph) technology (*Self/Portrait*) with the introspective technology of the self, Vipassana meditation. *Self/Portrait* was a durational art work prompted by recent neuroscientific research into the investigation of the relationship between emotions and physiological states (Biswas, Web). In this performance Biswas sat in meditation with small electrodes placed on his skin sensing the internal electrical 'weather' of his body and feeding it into a computer. Both the external image of the artist and the internal pictures of his neurophysiologic states were channelled into the computer via a video camera that combined and projected them on to the wall in front of the performer.

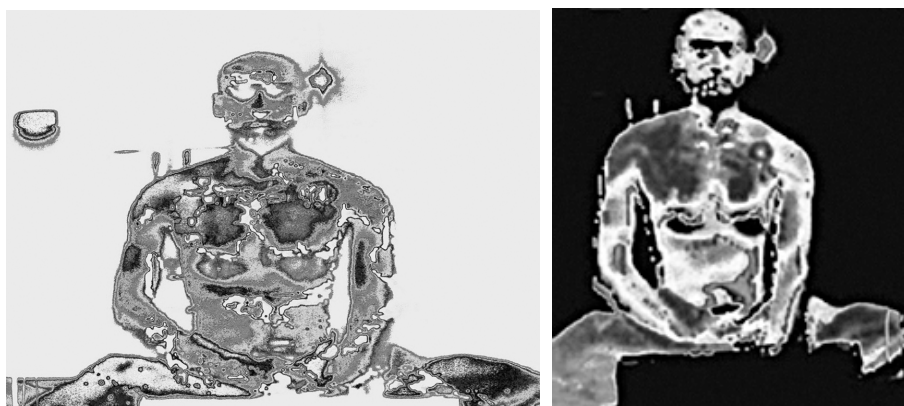


Figure 11: Ansuman Biswas, *Self/Portrait* in Gallery 111, 2005

By employing Vipassana meditation Biswas was cultivating particular states of mind and, as a consequence, he was able to modulate the video portrait of himself projected on to the wall (Biswas, web).

Although *CAT* is complementary to *Self/Portrait*, in my opinion it represents a more radical expression of his thought and praxis in relation to art, science and religion. Indeed *CAT* deconstructs both conventional performance spectatorship and the third person model of modern science, re-proposing their configurations in introspection.⁷³

3.3. Space

This section is dedicated to the investigation of *CAT*'s space and in particular to the relation between the space inside the black box and the gallery space in which it was placed. At the outset, it is important to draw attention toward the difficulty that the project of investigating a performance occurring inside a closed box prompts in terms of a spatial analysis. The main problem consists in the difficulty of establishing the performance space. For example, the inside of the black box hosts the performer Biswas, and therefore it would be legitimate to consider it as the performance space; however, the audience was located in the gallery in a space utterly separated from the inside of the box. There is of course a third possibility available of considering both as part of a composite performance space and, in so doing, momentarily disregarding their apparent separateness. The latter is the interpretative hypothesis I intend to explore in the following sections. This choice is encouraged by the fact that such a proposition enables a discourse around the paradoxical qualities of the black box as *CAT*'s performance space; at the same time it also offers the opportunity to explore the potential numinosity that the box has in relation to the gallery space. This is achieved by

⁷³ This aspect is explored below in subsection 3.3.4, "An interpretation of the same categories from the perspective of the philosophy of science of Karen Barad".

employing a multidisciplinary framework of interpretation. In particular, as mentioned above in the introduction to this chapter, I look at the black box together as the performance space, the cell of the hermit, and the container for Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, making reference to theatre studies, religious studies and the philosophy of science.

The objective is to provide conceptual ground for a spatial performance proposition that, in impeding or deceiving sensory interaction between performer and visitors/spectators, generates alternative hypotheses. According to this objective the section is organized as follows:

- A brief introduction to the South London Gallery where *CAT* took place;
- An exploration of the relations between the internal space of the black box in which Biswas performed Vipassana meditation and the gallery space hosting it, employing the conceptual categories of space and spatiality in performance;
- An exploration of the same relations from the perspective of religious studies;
- An exploration of the same relations from the perspective of Karen Barad's analysis of the Schrödinger's cat thought experiment in quantum physics.
- Conclusion

3.3.1. A brief introduction to the South London Gallery

South London Gallery (SLG), where *CAT* took place in 1998, is located at the heart of South London's art scene near Camberwell College of Art. It is a cultural institution that has developed an international reputation due to its wide range of exhibitions, live art and film programmes and its commitment to explore contemporary fine art practices in their broadest expressions. In terms of performance art, SLG's objective is to approach performance within an expanded field, offering a broad

territory of experimentation through event-based projects involving performance, dance, music, film and video (South London Gallery, homepage). Works presented range in scale from intimate collaborations to large theatre-based performances and music events often created in response to the gallery space. *CAT* was installed and performed in the setting of a high-ceilinged gallery space, a room with white walls and a wooden floor. During the performance *CAT*'s black box, containing Biswas, was presented as the only piece inside the exhibition room.

3.3.2. An exploration of the relation between the black box and the gallery space

In *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* the scholars Paul Allain and Jen Harvie describe the conventional theatre space as divided into three elements: stage space, theatre space and theatre environment (Allain, Harvie 206). According to this model, the stage space is usually referred to as the on-stage scenic area and its scenography; the theatre space is identified as the architecture encompassing stage and audience spaces; and the environment space is understood as the site of theatre in its wider social geography. If we apply this model to *CAT*, the stage space consisted of the inside of the black box; the theatre space was the gallery space (audience space) together with the inside of the black box; and the environment space was the urban, cultural and social context of this area of Camberwell in South London, or even of London itself.

As mentioned in the previous section, the organization of space that is established by applying this model to *CAT* renders palpable, in terms of spatial configuration, the problematic relations between stage space and audience space. The difficulty consists in the fact that the audience was prevented from seeing, hearing, smelling or touching the stage space and therefore was precluded from accessing, in any

way, what Biswas was doing inside the black box. In addition, although the theatre space encompassed both gallery and black box, the stage space was completely impenetrable from the outside, resulting in a 'wholly other' spatial condition from the audience. To explain this point further, the stage space consisted of a dark and isolated environment impermeable to light or sound due to the soundproofed walls of the box. In contrast, the audience space was well lit, lively, and open to all kinds of sensory stimuli from the outside. Therefore, performer and visitors/spectators were not only physically separated, as in conventional theatre, but also inhabiting completely different environmental conditions. They had nothing to share with each other than the walls of the black box dividing the two spaces.

Why devise a performance in an inaccessible stage space? And what are the reasons for impeding an audience's ability to see the performer performing? An attentive look at the meanings of the notion of spatiality may help to explore these questions by engaging with the conceptual implications that they generate within the scope of performance studies.

The Chamber's Dictionary (2003) reads spatiality as denoting four-dimensional spatiotemporal systems, combining the three dimensions of space (width, height and depth) with time ('Spatiality'). According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Phenomenology* (1999), within the category of space-time 'each point is [described as] the location of an event, all of which together represent "the world" through time' ('Space').

Erika Fischer-Lichte, in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), turns to the concept of spatiality to explore the notion of space in performance.

In particular, she employs it to distinguish the transitory and fleeting spatial condition of the stage/performance space that ‘does not exist before, beyond, or after the performance’ (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 107), from the ‘architectural-geometric space’ of buildings hosting performances and their audiences, which is made of ‘a specific ground plan, measures a certain height, breadth, length, volume, and is fixed and stable’ (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 107). She employs the term ‘spatiality’ to describe stage/performance spaces as locations characterized by temporal connotations and by performative, movable, changeable qualities that enable different dynamics of movement and perception between actors and spectators. According to Fischer-Lichte, those qualities are in opposition to the apparently immovable structures of buildings hosting theatre spaces (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 107). Although this argument can be challenged, it is a useful model to employ for understanding the nature of the relationship established in *CAT* between fixed and performative conditions of space. Therefore, before proceeding to the analysis, let us summarise its main points:

- Stage/performance spaces are organized in temporary configurations and opened to arrangements that differ each time according to the event that is performed;
- Their performative qualities enable the occurrence of different dynamics of movement and perception between actors and spectators;
- And in turn they differ from the apparently immutable solidity of the architectural building.

The modalities employed by Biswas to devise *CAT*'s space inverted this correlation as he crystallized the spatiality of the performance/stage space in the structure of the black box, which resembled the fixity and solidity of architectural geometric spaces. Indeed, in its definitive, geometric appearance, the black box not only seemed to deny the possibility of the protean, performative qualities Fischer-Lichte

attributes to stage/performance spaces, but also prevented the occurrence of any dynamic of spectatorship or shared experiences between performer and audience. In other words, the eventfulness and performative qualities that Fischer-Lichte attributes to stage/performance spaces appear to be nullified in *CAT*. The black box establishes a geometrical, solid, enclosed structure, a fixed and immutable construction placed in the middle of the gallery space. The black box filled the gallery space with the tensions of an unfulfilled, withheld performance space, the performativity of which was reduced to an immovable dialectic of here and there, inside and outside that established the stage space and the audience space into two impermeable places. Their dialectic opposition was expressed to such an extent that the black box became a mysterious, symbolic object resonating with an unconditional sense of otherness.

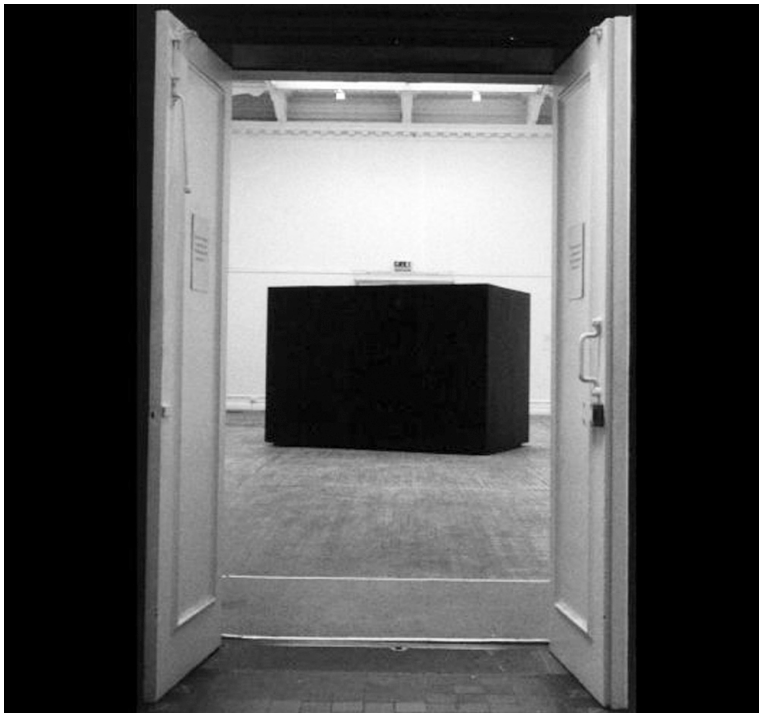


Figure 12: Ansuman Biswas, *CAT*, 1998

The black box was actually the container of a ‘wholly other’ space; a numinous environment radiating into the gallery space the weight of its inaccessibility and inviting a diversity of possible imaginative responses and interpretations.

In order to elaborate this point further, additional horizons of interpretation are required that may, by approaching the notion of spatiality from a different cultural perspective, re-formulate some of its constituents.

3.3.3. An interpretation of the same categories from the perspective of religious studies

In this section I propose to reconsider the relations between space and spatiality from the perspective of religious studies, in particular with reference to the image of the black box as the meditation cell of recluses. It is particularly useful to employ specialist scholarly literature on the tradition of medieval anchorites and studies of their meditative spaces known as ‘anchorholds’.⁷⁴ This perspective offers another frame of reference from which to explore the inaccessibility of the black box in spatial terms and from which to start to engage with the potential paradox that the black box represents as a spatial configuration in performance.

In the introduction to the edited collection *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure* (2008), the religious studies scholar Liz Herbert McAvoy argues that anchorholds, although perceived as architecturally divisive in the geometric opposition established between the open space of the outside world and the enclosed space of the cell, were actually conceived culturally as a continuum spatial condition (McAvoy, *Rhetoric* 8-9). This cultural ontological proposition served a tradition whose sensibilities were embedded in a conception of space that was not limited by external geometries. As McAvoy argues, the function of the enclosed cells of the anchorites represented:

⁷⁴ Literally, anchorite denoted ‘a man or a woman who had withdrawn from the world’ (‘Anchorite’) for religious purposes recalling the figure of the hermit and the recluse. The anchorite is a woman or a man, usually a woman, choosing permanent solitary enclosure normally in a small, purpose-built cell attached to a monastic institution. She/he used to enter the cell (anchorhold) following a rite of enclosure that would formalize the commitment to a life in prayer, contemplation and meditation.

a semiotic non-verbal set of signifiers (...) which allowed for (...) its transformation into the representational space in which the anchorite was produced (McAvoy, Rhetoric 8-9).

McAvoy encourages the reader to look at space as ‘an interrelation between what is perceived, what is conceived and what is lived within human culture’, and drawing on Henri Lefebvre, argues that ‘spatial practices’ determine how space is perceived (McAvoy, Rhetoric 8).⁷⁵ In other words:

[what] people do, how they operate and the ways in which these operations [are carried out], impact upon and transform the meanings of the place in which they are performed (McAvoy, Rhetoric 8).

Such transformation, in the case of anchorholds, was effected not only by the specific ritualistic practices performed inside the cell by the anchorites, such as meditation and prayer, but also by the collective interpretation of society at large (McAvoy, Rhetoric 8).

McAvoy suggests that the culture of the anchorites, which was in fact embedded in Christianity, brought into question the common assumption of a dualistic approach to the body, based on Neoplatonism and inherited by Christianity (McAvoy, Rhetoric 6). The religious studies scholar Anne Savage, for example, in the essay “From Anchorhold to Cell of Self-knowledge: Points along a History of the Human Body”, endorses this hypothesis, arguing that:

English anchoritic texts, even while participating in [the] discourse of [the] antithesis [of body and spirit], show the anchoritic life striving towards a unified understanding of the embodied spirit (157).

The space of the cell was ultimately the place, according to Savage, within which the body could become fully ensouled in the expansive, infinite space of the cosmos. This possibility produces a numinous rupture in perception as it

⁷⁵ Here McAvoy draws specifically on the book: Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space* trans. D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

transforms the division of the apparently divided spaces between the enclosed cell and the outside space into ‘a type of palimpsestic unity within which both synthesis and division [may come] to be simultaneously implicated’ (McAvoy, Rhetoric 6). This interrelated topography disrupts the culture of the binaries inside/outside, soul and body.

A look at the image of the hermit, to which Biswas refers (*CAT* London), may help to explore further the potentially paradoxical qualities of this type of spatial configuration and consequently to envision a similar interpretative narrative of *CAT*'s performance space.

The figure of the hermit is etymologically connected to the image of the desert, as the word ‘hermit’ derives from the ‘Greek *eremites*, literally, person of the desert, from *eremia* desert, solitude, from *eremos* uninhabited’ (‘Hermit’). The physical mode of expression of the lives of the hermits is solitude and enclosure (Davis, Carmel 30), and paradoxically, in the tradition of the early Christian Desert Fathers, the desert acted as a most effective form of enclosure. Their ascetic practices were totally connected and embedded in the ‘religious and theological meanings of the image, idea, and language of the “desert”’ (Klemm xii). This environment and its language were their complex locus of experience and reflection, and the expansiveness of its uninhabited space was ‘the container of their experiences and simultaneously (...) [a] materially real physical barrier to the outside world’ (Davis 30).

Both the enclosed cell of the anchorites and the desert of the early Christian Desert Fathers were representative of a numinous conception of space where the received categories of space and time were radically destabilised. In this cultural

context, the apparent physical opposition of the enclosed cell of the anchorites and the expansive desert of the early fathers were anomalously interconnected. Perplexedly for us the anchorhold and the discourse it generated rendered its place malleable and open to the extensive space of the desert (McAvoy, Rhetoric 6-7); and in turn the space of the desert came to be enclosed by the geometric limitation of a cell. In both cases the result is a dynamic intermediation between presence and absence, a threshold dissolving the boundaries of solidity and geometry that continue to be there but at the same time are not perceived - or on the contrary are not there but are perceived. This is a perceptual spatial condition of extraordinary power that does not recognize either inside or outside, but both at once (Jasper 7). Such a paradoxical location cannot be demonstrated by empirical evidence, but it may emerge when the mind turns inward and reaches the very edges of physical possibility, where the oppositions of the physical and spiritual, the body and soul, collapse into a *coincidencia oppositorum* (Jasper 6): a conjunction of opposites that is at the heart of the interpretation of the numinous experience that this thesis aims to explore. In this conjunction, an exterior place becomes simultaneously and illogically an interior space of the mind, producing an intertextual space generated by the cross-references and entanglements of cultural constructions and embodied experiences (Klemm xii).

Having said all of this, the context in which Biswas's black box was presented was a secular environment, and visitors/spectators will probably have been in a quite different state of mind from the social milieu of anchorites and early Christian Desert Fathers! Nevertheless, it is still possible to suggest that the inaccessibility of the black box, restraining the possibility of visitors/spectators to see the performer, will have frustrated and deceived the expectations of a conventional audience, encouraging a move toward an imaginary theatre. In other words, because the box denied the

establishment of performance in the sensory exchange between performer and visitor/spectator, it stood as a sign of potential, performative spatial landscapes, inaccessible to phenomenal senses alone. It seems to have invited a triggering, for some, of the imaginary perception of a spatial condition that can potentially exist around, within and between the physicality of the gallery space; the tangible and intangible black box and the bodies of performer and visitors alike.⁷⁶ In this way it is possible to represent the performance space of *CAT* as a theatrical configuration of the imagination or a *mise en abîme* formation of the mind: a spatial condition that renders the solid walls of the black box potentially both solid and porous, finite and infinite, implicating spatial arrangements contained in the smallest and largest manifestations of matter, in its performative and solid configurations.

The concept of *mise en abîme* is particularly useful in conceptualising the spatial topography that the black box may have signified in terms of numinosity from a religious studies perspective. In *Mysticism & Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle* (2008), the religious studies scholar Carmer Bendon Davis explains the concept of *mise en abîme* as a figure and metaphor of infinite regress and duplication (21). This is an image that Davis conceives to cover the broad spectrum of matter in all its strata, from the:

“outer” layer of experience in which bodies and material objects exist, social life is enacted, texts are produced and circulated, language exchanged and inscribed and religious practice takes place [to layers of indeterminacy] beyond the edges of the vast universe and into the gaps between the quarks of subatomic physics (21).

Davis suggests a sense of spatiality that is highly subjective and a temporality that is experienced outside language and thought, and beyond deterministic conceptions of time and space.

⁷⁶ This point is further investigated in 3.5, “Action”.

Adrian Heathfield, in his discussion of the work of the performance artist Tehching Hsieh, uses similar terms to endorse this possibility in secularity. He describes such experiences as potentially capable of reducing spatial relations of space and time to ‘sensations, emotions, and prehensions, of qualities (not quantities) in a constant and invisible state of flux’ (Heathfield, Out 21). He also suggests that they are capable of activating, in the self, an imaginary journey ‘accompanied by the spatial sense of expansion, suspension or collapse or by reverential, chaotic or cosmic phenomena’ (Heathfield, Out 22) within which time and space coincide.

3.3.4. An interpretation of the same categories from the perspective of the philosophy of science of Karen Barad

The Schrödinger's Cat's thought experiment offers another useful perspective from which to explore the notion of numinosity in relation to *CAT*'s performance space. As a model of interpretation, the Schrödinger's cat experiment differs from the perspectives of religious studies, although, as the next section clarifies, the two are actually complementary. They both contribute to an expanding of the dialectic of exclusion of synthesis and division, and to an articulation of the notion of the numinous in terms of spatiality.

The association of theatre and quantum physics is not unusual, as a number of scholars have already drawn analogies between the two. For example the theatre studies scholar David George points out in his article “Quantum Theatre – Potential Theatre: A New Paradigm?” that physicists have employed the metaphor of theatre for some time to explain the results of their research (George, Quantum 227). Additionally, in the book *Actors and Onlookers: Theatre and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature* (1990), Natalie Crohn Shmitt records that physicist Niels Bohr often employed terms

such as ‘actors’, ‘stage of life’ and ‘drama of existence’ to explicate the philosophical implications of his revolutionary findings in physics (1).

In a similar manner Erwin Schrödinger’s thought experiment could be interpreted as a theatrical metaphor to describe an imaginary experiment. The thought experiment was originally used by him to explicate problems emerging in quantum physics about the conditions and behaviours of matter at atomic and subatomic levels, which seemed to perform in opposition to classical physical laws and at the same time to coexist with them. This is how Schrödinger described it:

a cat is penned up in a steel chamber along with the following diabolical device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, *so* small that *perhaps* in the course of one hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none. If it happens, the counter tube discharges and through a relay releases a hammer, which scatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for an hour, one would say that the cat still lives *if* meanwhile no atom has decayed. The first atomic decay would have poisoned it. The Ψ -function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and the dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed out in equal parts. (Schrödinger, 157; Fig. 12).

In devising this conceptual and imaginary scientific situation within an inaccessible scientific laboratory, Schrödinger visualized the problem that had emerged in quantum physics where matter, in its various constituents, depending on the scale of the measurement employed to observe it, seemed to operate in ways that were contradictory but coexisting (Marshall, Zohar xiii). In addition, the thought experiment served the purpose of foregrounding another problem that had emerged in quantum physics concerning the nature of the relationship between the observer and the observed.

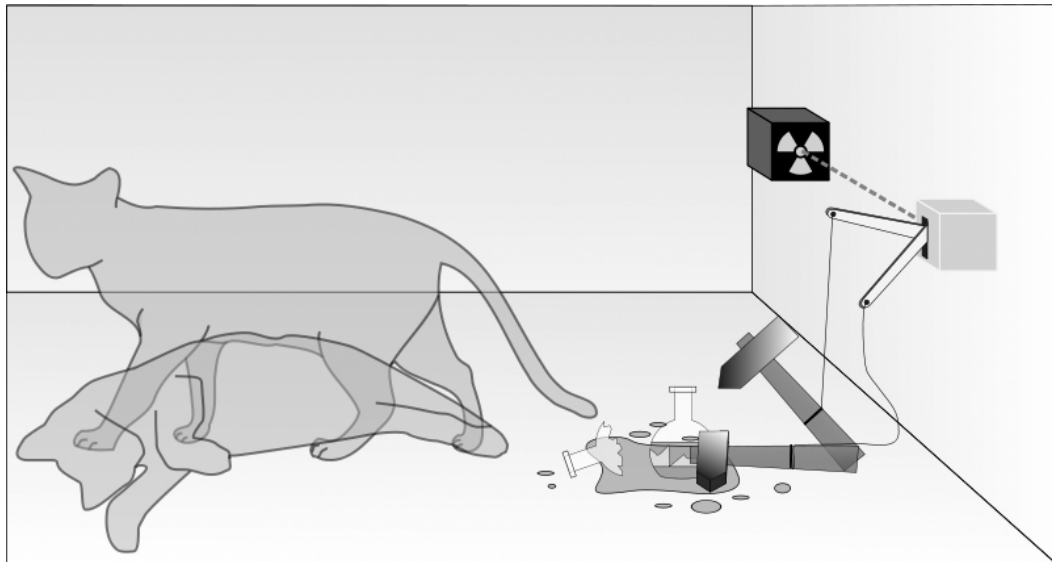


Figure 13: Illustration of the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment

The Schrödinger's cat thought experiment provided an absurd imaginary situation where scientists standing outside the Schrödinger's box could not know if the cat was alive or dead because they were prevented from carrying out their experimental evaluation through observation. The fact that the internal space of the box could not be accessed constituted the basis for the proliferation of diverse imaginary hypotheses, such as the cat being partly alive and partly dead, both alive and dead, neither alive nor dead (Barad, *Living* 169). If the box was opened, however, the symbolic architecture of quantum reality and its multiple possibilities would have collapsed and the cat would have been either dead or alive and therefore only one possible reality established. This configuration suggests, therefore, that it is this condition of inaccessibility that, by hindering visual observation, renders plausible the coexistence of contradictory and apparently mutually exclusive conditions.

Approaching *CAT* as akin to a theatrical representation of the Schrödinger's thought experiment brings to the fore the problem of spectatorship produced by the way *CAT*'s space was arranged. In this context, the theatre stage of the black box became the internal closed and controlled system of the laboratory where the experiment is taking

place. The performer/Biswas represented the cat and the gallery space reflected the laboratory area where the scientists/observers would be located. Despite the different terminology employed, the performer/observed and spectators/observers' relationship is configured in both cases around a condition of visual hindrance and impeded communication. In other words, theoretically, like the spectators of the performance *CAT*, the scientists in Schrödinger's experiment could not access the closed system and therefore were prevented from evaluating what was actually happening inside the box. The impossibility of accessing and establishing what was really happening was therefore, in both cases, the generative aspect of their spatial arrangements in terms of creativity.

Since its conception, this image has spawned a series of scientific and creative interpretations, from the:

anthropocentric hypothesis that human consciousness collapses the superposition into one definitive state [to] the *many worlds* interpretation in which each measurement that is performed splits the world into multiple parallel universes (Barad, Living 169).

For Barad, however, the central and most interesting aspect of the cat experiment is the reasoning that 'the cat and the atom do not "have" separately determinate states of *existence*' (Barad, Living 170). This idea is corroborated by the philosopher Will Johncock, who in the article "The Experimental Flesh: Incarnation in Terms of Quantum Measurement and Phenomenological Perception", problematizes the 'assumption that there is an inherent distinction between subject and object [justifying their dividedness only] in the embodied act of perception' (140).

Following this line of logic, the fact that at 'a certain scale – a scale which is invisible to our senses – things dissolve' (Biswas, *CAT*) and that the boundaries dividing things, people and places lose their certainty, posits an additional valuable

viewpoint to the interpretation of *CAT*' space. This is a perspective, the philosophical implications of which should not be disregarded or overlooked.

To explain this proposition further, what Barad advocates, following Niels Bohr's research, is that at the level of subatomic realities there are not fixed boundaries that can define the words 'cat' or 'box' 'independently of some measurement that resolves the indeterminacy and specifies the appropriate referents of the concept "cat"' (Barad, Living 170). This leads to the hypothesis that our description and perception of things as separate entities with particular attached qualities is a 'specific material configuration' (Barad, Living 170). In turn, this is linked to specific temporary conditions of entanglement between the processes through which matter constantly configures itself and how our biological and cultural apparatuses interact with/in it. For example, it is the way our eyes, as the apparatus of sight, are structured, that generates and determines how the electrical nerve impulses define light in colours, hues, brightness and shapes (Gamwell 57). Further, it is a consequence of our cultural make up whether these qualities acquire special value or not.

In order to add a tangential and complementary horizon of interpretation, it is worth referring to the Buddhist tradition from which the technology of Vipassana meditation, deployed by Biswas inside the box, originates. Theravada Buddhist tradition conceives reality in terms that are not dissimilar from what has been argued so far. For example the last scripture of the Theravada Buddhist canon called *Abhidamma* enumerates and classifies reality in a taxonomy of innumerable phenomena.⁷⁷ Without going into the details of this complex classification it is worth mentioning that phenomena are divided into two main branches: mental phenomena called *nāma* and

⁷⁷ Manuals for the introduction to the Abhidhamma are available in English at the following website address: <http://www.buddhanet.net/ebooks_s.htm>. (10 July 2011. Web. 23 Sept. 2011).

physical phenomena called *rupa*. *Nāma* and *rupa*, in a constant process of entanglement and becoming, manifest what we perceive as objects or people and other temporary configurations of reality. These arrangements of reality are never stable, but on the contrary are forever rising and falling away (Van Gorkon, The Buddhist iii-v). *Rupa* are tangible objects that can be smelled, touched and so on; in addition, *rupa* are also our organs of perception (ears, tongue, eyes, skin). The experience of touching, smelling, seeing is *nāma*, and *nāma* and *rupa* are constantly intertwined in providing our perception of things (Van Gorkon, The Buddhist iii-v). The process of entanglement of *rupa* and *nāma* that gives rise to our perception of things as permanent and solid is *citta*: that is, our mental processes. *Citta* gives rise to concepts and remembrances and allows us to share conventional understandings of reality. However, although we perceive things as permanent and solid, according to the Theravada philosophical system, at a fundamental level reality is not at all the way we perceive it to be on a daily basis. On the contrary, each phenomenon constantly arises and passes away, and what we perceive are in fact merely temporary configurations of *nāma* and *rupa* produced by their complex entanglement in the production of *citta*.

With regard to *CAT*'s black box, from the perspective of Schrödinger's thought experiment it is worth once again returning briefly to the notion of apparatus in relation to what has been proposed so far. Referring back to section 8.4 of the Introduction; apparatuses are practices and technologies that through reiteration inform the way the self relates to itself and the environment. For they are:

neither neutral probes of the natural world nor social structures that deterministically impose some particular outcome (...) [but rather] are the practices through which these divisions are constituted. (Barad, Meeting 169).

Apparatuses are both material and discursive practices, as well as the means through which the ‘differences that matter’ are established (Barad, Meeting 146). They are boundary-making practices that:

are formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced, [and therefore] material configurations/dynamic reconfigurings of the world (Barad, Meeting 146).

If we apply what has been suggested so far to the performance space set up in *CAT*, it emerges that although the theatre/performance stage was physically removed from the audience space, the symbol of the black box hinted at a deeper condition of existence. In this dimension both the stage space inside the black box and the audience space of the gallery were inter-related within a space-time field. This field did not depend on discrete entities but rather on a condition of ‘unimpededness’ (Crohn Shmitt 30) towards which Biswas, through his performance, intended to draw attention (Biswas, interviewed by Silvia Battista 23 Apr 2013).

In other words, although visitors/spectators were confronted with the impossibility of accessing the stage space by the physical, solid obstacle of the black box, Biswas intended to create a visual paradox that would operate:

like a needle against the thin membrane between the conscious and the unconscious [that] pushes from both sides simultaneously, like a black and white optical game of opposing faces and a vase, creating a conceptual crisis, a confusion [in the observer] (Biswas, *CAT*).

The confusion that Biswas intended to generate in his visitors/spectators was directed toward the cultural assumption that sight delivers certainty and toward the consequently privileged position that the biological perceptual apparatus of sight has gained in contemporary society. For it is through the privileging of the apparatus of sight and processes of visibility that we are educated to interpret reality in terms of separation. In this regard Donna Haraway, in the article “Situated Knowledges: The

Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege Partial Perspective”, describes the apparatus of sight as the signifier of:

a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power (Haraway 581).

Sight in western culture contemplates separation and produces the distance that since the Renaissance has privileged objectivity. It is the:

vanishing point in art and the anatomical dissection in medicine [that] elevated a *perspective* on “nature” and the world (Furse, Being 49).⁷⁸

Biswas’s closed system offers a paradoxical critique to this distance and its perspective on the world that informs the third person model of western science. He is interested in questioning the cultural privilege that this model has acquired in the project of knowledge and in expanding the range of methodologies available. This means combining the methodological assumption that a class of phenomena can be isolated from the rest of the environment, extracted and measured (Biswas, *CAT*) alongside other possibilities of investigation, other approaches and perspectives. These include introspection, embodied practices, personal experience, first person engagement, visualization, imagination and so on.

In devising a performance stage that was utterly inaccessible to visitors, Biswas endeavoured to restrain the visual apparatus in favour of alternative possibilities of access, and produce the possibility of alternative visibilities. In limiting any possibility for conventional spectatorship to take place within the framework of visibility, visitors were invited to disengage with it and disrupt its privileged role in defining the reality of the performance they were witnessing. They were invited to envisage a space in which materiality and solidity represented merely one of the many temporary material

⁷⁸ In the original text ‘nature’ is not presented in quotation marks.

conditions/solutions and to find a way to overcome the absolute discreteness and inaccessibility of the performance space. They were prompted to create an aperture toward the landscape of the numinous and its creative potentials. In this way, the spatial configuration of the work was intended to inspire members of the audience to look for the unknowable, to perceive and see what is not there before the senses, and to cross the boundaries of physical limitations through imagination.

The stage space was, therefore, transformed into a symbolic space/container, the boundaries of which were crafted and pervaded by the imaginative capacities of the audience. For example, each visitor/spectator reacted differently to Biswas's setup. Some simply entered the space, walked around the box and left unmoved by its narrative and symbolic presence; others stayed contemplating the box for a long time; and others were emotionally moved by the box and its numinosity to enact personal rituals around it, expanding the performance stage of *CAT* outside the boundaries of the box (Biswas, "Artist Talk"). Each visitor transformed the box into the repository of diverse, personal affective practices; a container of proliferative boxes, as many as the imaginative potentialities of each visitor/spectator. Therefore, what was potentially created was a kind of numinous 'matryoshka' or 'babushka' doll nesting within which to lose oneself, penetrating each layer in a narrative that could theoretically continue in both microscopic and macroscopic directions. This perception could potentially transform *CAT*'s space into an infinite number of containers and contained, from atomic to cosmic realities, from the cell of the hermit and the closed system of Schrödinger's thought experiment to the expansiveness of the desert and the infinite regression of subatomic realities.

In conclusion, due to the nature of the performance investigated, the question of space could be approached only through speculation and interpretation. The performer was invisible and his action was carried out in a space that was completely inaccessible to both audience and researchers. Therefore, any attempt to understand it could only proceed through interpretative hypotheses developed by looking at the relationship between the black box and the gallery space and with reference to the cultural images used by Biswas to devise the piece.

The interpretative analysis offered in this section began with the question of spatiality and space in performance, then moved on to the exploration of space, firstly, through the image of the hermit and anchorites, and secondly, with reference to Schrödinger's thought experiment and the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The conceptual analysis presented here has focused on the issue of inaccessibility, from there suggesting a performative spatial condition akin to that which emerges in numinosity. Such an analysis is rooted in a subjective perceptual experience and a theoretical interpretative hypothesis that, if endorsed, has the potential to confuse conventional spatial categories and transform the solid walls of the black box into a wide array of conceptual, perceptual and imaginative possibilities.

3.4. Presence

The following section focuses on the question of presence: what constituted *CAT*'s presence within the SLG, and how one might interpret its structural and performance elements. As has been already suggested in the Introduction, the performance *CAT* operated on more than one level of apprehension and spectation, a condition of complex multiplicity that informed its presence. Although the core material element of its presence consisted of the solid black box situated in the middle of the

gallery space, the event activated the possibility of another invisible presence comprising Biswas performing Vipassana meditation inside the box. The aim in this section is to highlight the ambiguity of this doubling condition of presence performed by the palpable, solid and visible black box and the ineffable and invisible presence of Biswas. The latter was neither present nor absent but existed in between, in what Otto defined as the ‘mysterious’: a quality to which consciousness reacts with the untiring impulse to expect the miraculous, to invent it, to experience it, prompting the inexhaustible creativity that permeates ritual and forms of worship (Otto 63). Therefore, given that the black box could be seen whereas the performer could only be felt, believed, created, I suggest that two different perceptual and affective experiences and conditions were potentially activated in visitors/spectators.

In order to understand and explicate the theoretical implications of this double presence and its multiple potential narratives in terms of numinosity, I approach the topic in the following order:

- Firstly, a consideration of the relation between seeing and feeling, problematizing their distinct cultural opposition;
- Secondly, an exploration of the black box as a sculptural and symbolic presence;
- And thirdly, an investigation of the philosophical implications of an invisible performer, examining its representative, symbolic, imaginative and performative qualities.

Consequently the objectives of this section are:

- To articulate a discourse around the cultural implications that the notion of the numinous generates when focusing on questions of presence in *CAT*;
- To evaluate the role of imagination;

- To investigate the affective and aesthetic implications of establishing the performer/spectator's relationships in invisibility.

3.4.1. Seeing and feeling in relation to presence

I begin by quoting two different interpretations of the term 'presence' provided by dictionaries published at different historical times. Firstly, the *Chamber's Etymological Dictionary of English Language* (1903) locates presence as a 'situation within sight' ('Presence'), its truth directly associated with the act of seeing; secondly, the ninth edition of the *Chamber's Dictionary* (2003) explains the term presence as the 'state or circumstance of being present' ('Presence'), a definition that includes the possibility of something present that may be felt whether it is seen or not ('Presence'). Between the notion of a presence that is seen and that of one that is felt lies the territory of the numinous: a threshold zone within which empirical proof and visual cognition are suspended, potentially opening the self to intuition and speculation, to imaginary landscapes, as well as to faith and belief.

In order to explore further the relationship between seeing and feeling, I will refer to phenomenology and specifically to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theorization on the question of visibility and invisibility, believing and seeing, faith and truth. In the book *The Visible and the Invisible* [1932] (1997), Merleau-Ponty suggests that the argument that we 'see the things themselves' and that we agree that 'the world is what we see' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 3) is the result of a 'deep-seated set of mute "opinions" implicated in our lives' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 3) and in history. He defines these mute opinions with reference to the term faith, 'that is, an adherence that knows itself to be beyond proofs (...) at each instant menaced by non-faith' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 28). According to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, faith is not

exclusive of feeling, but rather is equally implicated with a 'seeing' that is not a straightforward, neutral mechanism of cognition, but rather the product of complex, intermingled biological and cultural apparatuses. He points out that when seeking to articulate what 'seeing' is, and what the thing or world we see is, it is easy to fall into labyrinthine difficulties and contradictions (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 3). Although seeing something by looking at it seems to promise certainty, it does not exclude the emergence of phantasms belonging to the sphere of feeling. In other words, feeling and seeing are not mutually exclusive and their division into 'two modes of *thinking*' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 29) derives, according to Merleau-Ponty, from cultural biases. Therefore, from his perspective, it is an act of discrimination that intervenes and settles their indeterminacy and their processual dynamics into two orders, stages, or theatres; establishing what is real and which are the phantasms (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 39).

The anthropologist Sven Ouzman, in his article "Seeing is Deceiving: Rock Art and the Non-Visual" may help to clarify this point further. Ouzman argues that our reality is 'largely the product of a world-view' (Ouzman 238) rooted in the sensory faculty of sight through which the cultural assumption that seeing is believing has been established. According to him, sight:

has long enjoyed eminence as the "sense of reason" as it has often served us well in the construction and negotiation of complex external and internal realities (Ouzman 238).

However, Ouzman also points out that our over-reliance on a single mode of sensory perception may have limited our appreciation of the world and greatly reduced the scope of our epistemological potential.

Applying this perspective to the question of presence in *CAT*, the apparatus of vision will have given the sensation to visitors/spectators that the presence of the black box was utterly real, with its visible, solid boundaries. On the other hand, the presence of the performer must have been consigned to or suspended within the realm of phantasms or mere possibilities. In other words, the black box was the real thing, whereas the presence of the performer could only be conceived and thought through an act of faith. This is to say that, in order to feel or visualise Biswas's presence, visitors/spectators were implicitly invited to put judgement on hold and to inhabit the dimension of belief. By locating his presence in invisibility, Biswas required visitors/spectators to hold back what they know through the singularly situated approach given by visibility in favour of what animates and sustains another order of knowledge, other visibilities inhabiting the world of the invisible.

3.4.2. The black box as a sculptural and symbolic presence

Despite what has been argued so far, the black box undeniably constituted a strong visual statement and a powerful presence in space that is worthy of attention for its singularity and sculptural qualities. This interpretative approach should not be overlooked as it offers an additional framework of understanding of *CAT* in its complex promises of presence. However, considering the presence of the black box within the framework of sculpture may be an undertaking that risks, to borrow art theorist Rosalind Krauss's words, reducing anything 'foreign in either time or space, to what we already know' (Krauss 30). This would be an act of diminution and discrimination, an agentic decision aimed at solving the riddle of the black box, exorcising its numinosity and determining, within known parameters, the 'right' mode of engagement.

Krauss's article "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" may help to engage with the sculptural quality of the black box without reducing its ambiguity and ironing out its complexity. Krauss expands the category of sculpture beyond conventional parameters, connoting it within an analytical framework that derives its openness from postmodernist theories. Postmodernism, she suggests, gives access to a systematization of sculpture within 'the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities' (Krauss 38). In this text, Krauss designates sculpture as an expanded field within which landscape, architecture and performance intertwine. She problematizes the set of oppositions between which the modernist category of sculpture has been suspended and established as a given medium (Krauss 38-42), and proposes that sculpture be conceived in relation to a set of cultural axiomatic features played out through conditions of momentary instants of openness and closure to other discourses (Krauss 41). Sculpture, in Krauss's essay, denotes a worldview entangled in complexities which resemble the proliferation of signifiers that the black box produced in *CAT*.

To think of categories in terms of complexities entails thinking in liminality; engaging with the complexities of definitions and their (apparent) opposites, and with the blurring of the undefined territories existing between categories. It involves what Tracey Warr refers to as:

some kind of position outside binary thinking, a state disruptive of unity and closure (...). It performs the operation of creating taxonomic disorder and a perpetual maintenance of potentials (Warr, *The Informe*).

In this regard, Krauss mentions mazes and labyrinths as appropriate symbolic structures that are made of both landscape and architecture and hint at performance. They are the *loci* of the numinous in their structural and anti-structural politics (Krauss 38).

The black box, like labyrinths and mazes, was a highly charged object/landscape/field/presence/symbol, a conceptual maze or a mind riddle, the metaphor of the incomprehensible, an enigmatic thing, that operated as a *koan* for the visitors/spectators entering the SLG (Biswas, *CAT*). Biswas recuperated a hieratic symbol traditionally used to represent and catalyse the not-known and to contain the mysterious and unreachable. The black box of Schrödinger's experiment and the anchorholds are two exemplary instances, but many others could be suggested: the black box in aeroplanes; the black monolith at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey*; or the sacred Kaaba in Mecca.



Figure 14: An aeroplane's digital flight-data recorder, or 'black box'

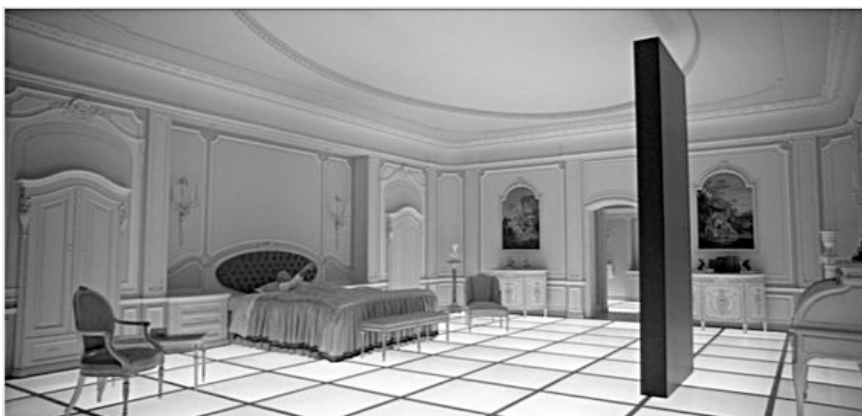


Figure 15: Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) opens with the scene of the apes and the black

monolith

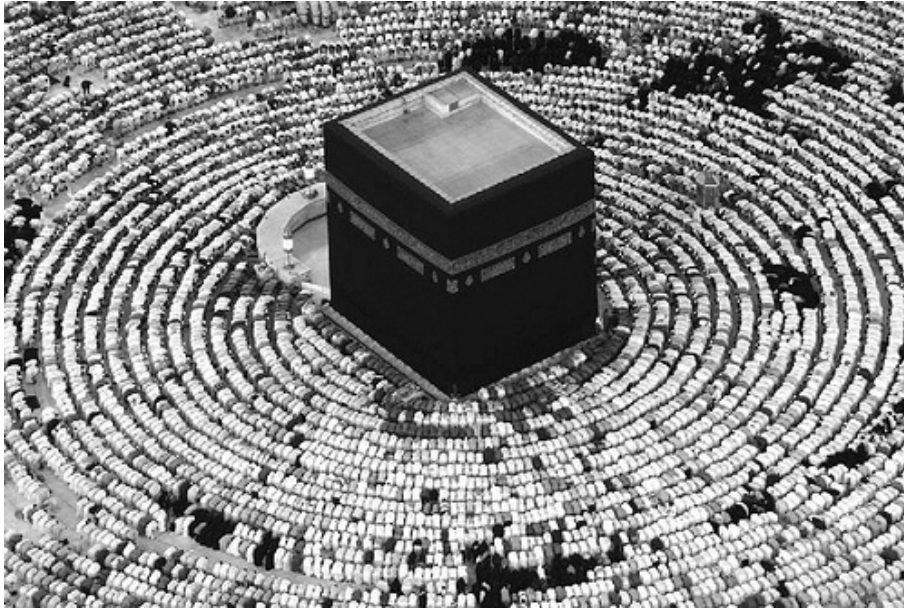


Figure 16: The Kaaba, Makkah, Mecca

Some of these are secular containers of unknown information, others are meant for religious contemplation or veneration, while others are signs of what has not yet found a place in language that challenges possibilities beyond the categories of the already codified.

In this way, the presence of the black box in *CAT* encouraged its visitors/spectators to undertake this leap of imagination and to engage with the creative effort aimed at holding together the paradoxical realities of this highly layered presence, and find meaning from it. The box was like a trace coming from and at the same time leading toward creative landscapes and spatial territories recalling the hallucinatory dimension of the desert.

The desert, as discussed in the previous section 3.3, “Space”, entertains and nurtures the numinous and its creative languages beyond the limits of any specific confession or creed (Jasper 6). The religious studies scholar David Jasper in the book *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (2004) remarks that the

desert, in mystical traditions, constitutes the sign, the door, the symbol for places of terror and haunting, miracles and visions, hell and utopia (Jasper 7) where the impossible becomes possible and the possible is open to multiplicity. It leads those who suspend detached observation and conventional spectatorship to witness ‘the image conjured by the place that is not there, yet is part of the place’ (Jasper 109), a poetic ‘inscape’, the particularity of being of each and every thing (Jasper 113). It is an object, a signifier of that perceptual moment existing:

between seeing and not seeing, between seeing what is there and what is not there – and that instant in which doubt and revelation are equally and maximally present. The beginning of belief and the beginning of unbelief may be one and the same (...) a blindness that is yet visionary and revelatory (Jasper 118-119).

This account recalls what Drew Dalton, in the book *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (2009), depicts in numinous terms as ‘the feeling one has under the sway of [a] kind of presence (...) which lies beyond presence’ (232).

In *CAT*, what lay beyond the presence of the black box was the performer inside the box. His presence existed beyond presence not only because he was not visible, and therefore nobody could prove he was there, but also because for most visitors/spectators the experience of sitting in a dark and completely isolated room for ten days was beyond the parameters culturally set for the reasonable. Indeed the experience that Biswas undertook inside the black box can be construed as ‘wholly other’ from what was probably familiar to most of the visitors/spectators born, raised and educated in contemporary post-industrial societies. Biswas’s endeavour must have appeared to most visitors/spectators as ‘a phenomenal occurrence (...) reach[ing] toward that which exceed[ed] the phenomenal realm’ (Dalton 233). It must have triggered the feeling of an impossible presence and of doubt as much as it inspired belief. Yet the black box and its mysterious content signalled the creative possibility ‘through which a new conception’

(Dalton 234) of performance could be formulated and imagined and through which a sense of spectatorship beyond sight could be established.

3.4.3. Philosophical implications of an invisible performer

Close attention to the conceptual framework of paradox may help to understand the generative aspects of devising a performance in invisibility and to explore some of the philosophical implications of an invisible performer. Furthermore, it may prove significant in the conceptualization of their numinous aspects, as well as in interpreting the many contradictory situations and conditions encountered so far in the investigation of *CAT*'s space(s) and presence(s).

As the German philosopher Dieter Mersch argues in the essay “Imagination, Figurality and Creativity: Conditions of Cultural Innovation”, paradox is a condition which requires reflection and at the same time promotes ‘movements of creative productivity by touching on the event of alterity’ (61). In the self-contradictory propositions of paradox, instabilities and incompatibilities are brought together and held in tension by forces pushing and seeking clarity in separation. Paradoxes enable the occurrence of a secular numinous as they strip it of its metaphysics and set it ‘free from the clutches of theology’ (Mersch 61). They operate ruptures in established belief systems, exposing the limitations of a discourse, medium, system or practice, and of all endeavours to binaries that are then synthesized through a privileging of one term (in a ‘final solution’). Paradoxes evoke:

the insoluble or dissonant, disturbances or collapses, the self-denying or the unplumbable and unclassifiable; they open up singular spaces of experience or perception which deny positive modelling, and show only the *negative* and the *allusive* (Mersch 61).

Therefore the riddles generated by the paradoxical can be held in suspension only by overcoming the believable and representable (Mersch 61), by linking:

words and images in new symbolic orders, to intervene in the forest of signs and mediate what seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities (Bhabha 8).

Paradoxes reveal what exists between and beyond language and its 'ideal world of forms', its categories, abstractions and definitions (George, *On Ambiguity* 74).

They push toward innovation and the creation of new terms, new linguistic forms capable of holding previously unthinkable ideas.

David George points out that performance constantly plays with the ambiguities of paradoxes, as 'all performances create a here which is not 'here', a now which is not 'now' (...) endlessly creating new 'doubles'' (George, *On Ambiguity* 74). It is, however, when the tension between the performer (self) and its double (character) is not resolved completely that, according to George, certain performers express a particularly luminous/numinous quality. They acquire this quality when their contradictions are left 'gapingly to resist any need of their own or others to be a single unitary 'self'' (George, *On Ambiguity* 75).

In *CAT*, however, this ambiguity of performance was radicalized even further by its configuration. Here the paradoxical dynamics of the performer 'being-there-which-is-not-there' (George, *On Ambiguity* 78) were transformed into the physical condition of a double absence. In this context, the inherently contradictory quality of performance, being both material and imaginary, displaced both possibilities in/to invisibility, directing spectatorial attention toward an even more ambiguous situation. From this perspective the black box was a vacuum container embodying an assemblage of affective qualities that enabled visitors/spectators to move the presence of the performer from the stage of the invisible, the unknowable, and the unpredictable into

the stage upon which the imaginative process projects, invents, discovers. In *CAT*, the paradox of the physicality of the performer embodying a character set in motion the imaginative capacity of spectators/visitors to see through the solid barriers of the black box and perceive not a double presence but rather a proliferation of possible realities/embodiments/presences that were not there in front of their eyes. In this way, although the black box represented a barrier to visual/ocular engagement, rather than functioning as prohibition, functionally it operated as a ‘*medi[um]* of *alteration*’ (Schwarte 63) of modalities of spectatorship conventionally established in performance through visible forms of representation.

Ultimately, *CAT* represented a performative proposition that radicalized what is peculiar to all performances: i.e. the capacity of audiences to imagine and construct their own performances according to their individual expectations, desires, histories and memories, traumas and joyful experiences. The strategy employed by Biswas to achieve this is peculiar to the artistic attitude that Sontag identified as the ‘negative path’ in art, which comprises those many and varied artists testing other ways, other modes of thought and possibilities that are necessary when the potential of existing systems is exhausted (Mersch 62). This attitude resonates with what Mersch associates with the notion of paradoxical aesthetics. He suggests a range of artists and practices as exemplary of this artistic inclination: Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square*, a ‘non-picture’ that represents a zero point of arrival – a ‘degree zero’ – in painting;

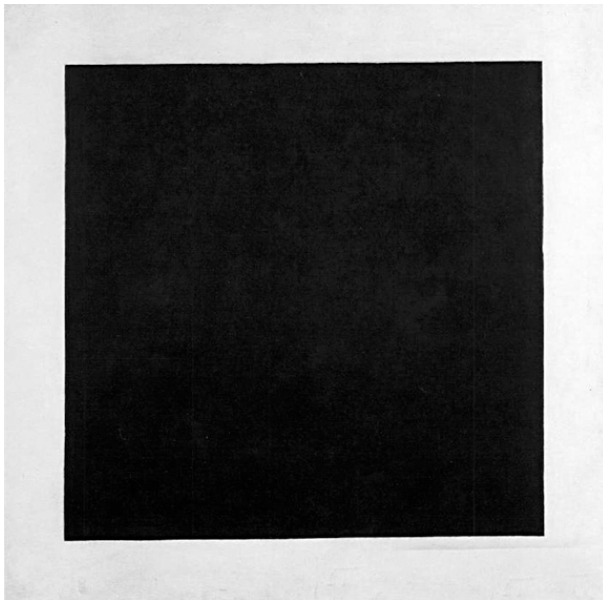


Figure 17: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915

René Magritte's famous picture of a pipe that functioned 'on the border between image and text using codes known from advertising and poster art to confuse the viewer';



Figure 18: René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images (La Trahison Des Images)*, 1928-29

or Jasper Johns's *Flag* that was a picture of a flag:

not a flag that one could salute, but a painting that at the same time is not a painting as it used a patriotic symbol that it caricatures (ibid).

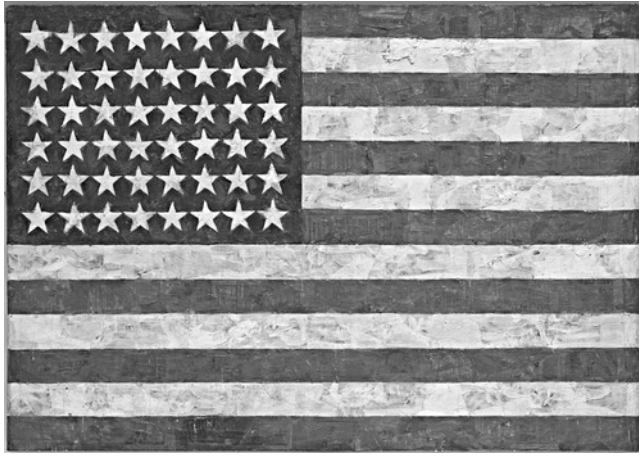


Figure 19: Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954-55

All these examples contain or instantiate the paradoxical; the unthinkable co-existence of absences and presences, erasures and emergences in imagination.

In *CAT* imagination had a primary role in reminding visitors/spectators and researchers alike that:

what we perceive is not simply the material object before our senses, nor something that we simply construct in our brains, but something that appears on a stage pervaded and crafted by imaginative forces. (...) [Forces that] can bring the beholder and the imaginative thing into a stable relation with each other (Schwarte 68).⁷⁹

This type of relation is stable only temporarily in the brief time in which an image emerges to fulfil visitors/spectators' expectations. It stays until the gap of what was not there is filled with what could be there, only to disappear again.

The correlation and consistency between these types of aesthetic experiences and the heterogeneous perceptions and extraordinary qualities of mystic experiences are explored by the philosopher Ludger Schwarte in his article "Intuition and Imagination: How to See Something that is Not There" (Schwarte 70). He mentions, amongst others, the vision of Saint Bernard and of Saint Clara who, 'in a trance like state, had drunk

⁷⁹ In this regard I invite the reader to refer back to the notion of apparatus as described in subsection 8.4. "Theatrical apparatuses of experimentation".

from the breast of Saint Francis (...) or Saint Ludgera who drank blood from the wounds of Jesus' (Schwarte 71). Although none of *CAT*'s visitors/spectators would have been encouraged to perceive the performer with such a dramatic, surreal emphasis, the use of mystical experiences as an interpretative lens or angle of incidence may help to understand some of the perceptual contingencies enabled by the invisible presence of Biswas.

He was the non-present presence of the performance, a performer set apart from the conventional categories established for this role. As performer, he was inexpressible and ineffable 'in the sense that [he] elude[d] apprehension [and description] in terms of concepts' (Dalton 229). The consequences of this were that none of the visitors/spectators who attended *CAT* will have been able to describe to their friends or families what the performer looked like or narrate what the performer did; they will have been obliged to have recourse to talking about what they felt, how they imagined him to be, what they saw (that was not there) or what they read about.⁸⁰ They may have speculated about many things depending on the level of empathy they experienced with the piece; whether Biswas was actually present or not, for example, or what it must be like to live in complete darkness for such a long time without food and no one to talk with. Some may have seen things that were not there; a few may have meditated and felt an extraordinary connection with Biswas; and many others will have had experiences that have not been recorded or documented. Ultimately, however, all that could ever be said would relate to no more than imaginative speculations, intuitions, fantastic associations that cannot be proved or tested in empirical terms.

⁸⁰ The people present at David Peat's lecture witnessed Biswas entering the box.

In conclusion, the presence of the black box appeared to move the attention of the spectator from the comprehensible, signified by its solidity and sculptural presence, to the incomprehensible, suggested by the (absent) presence of Biswas inside the box. This double condition evoked the sensation of a numinous presence, a sense of otherness transpiring from the immutable material surface and appearance of the box. It operated, I suggest, like an insoluble void, a paradoxical double presence passing from what was there (a solid, impenetrable object) to what was meant to be there: a performer to be seen and interacted with. This dynamic traces a circular, perceptual movement, the numinosity of which prevented fixed solutions from taking place and encouraged the imaginary to take precedence. Therefore, the presence of the black box hinted towards something else, deeper and concealed within, but also plural, multiple and infinite. It was a condition that symbolically suggested and potentially animated feelings and possibilities that are usually drowned out, covered by our daily life exchanges, noises, occupations and preoccupations.

Before embarking on the third section of the chapter, a different perspective can be introduced that will represent its leading thread. In his statement of intent, Biswas offered an additional interpretative possibility in regard to the question of presence in *CAT*. He suggested that the black box represented symbolically the boundaries of the body dividing the self from the other (Biswas, *CAT*). In other words, the presence of the black box worked as a metaphor for the impossibility of accessing the inner world of another person and overcoming the parameters of our autonomous, embodied identities. As has been extensively argued in the previous sections of this chapter, *CAT*'s visitors/spectators could only engage with Biswas's presence virtually through the black box. Metaphorically, the same might be said about human relationships and the body, which operate both as bounded container and appearance of the self. This statement,

however, recalls the rhetoric ‘of the divided person’ (Savage 157), the Platonic and Christian doctrine that views the body and the spirit as different things, and the body as the container of the soul. Nevertheless, the significance of Biswas’s statement will be more fully understood when it is investigated in the next and final section of the chapter, which focuses on action in *CAT*, and specifically Vipassana meditation as a technology of the self. This practice will bring back the rhetoric of the anchorhold, the experience of the anchorite and its breach into the culture of the binary body and soul.

3.5. Action

This section explores and interprets the action of *CAT*, enquiring into its specificity and modalities of presentation in respect to numinosity, performativity, and embodiment. Biswas’s action in *CAT* consisted of performing Vipassana meditation for ten consecutive days and nights within the black box placed in the middle of the gallery space. Vipassana meditation is a technology of the self rooted in a radical form of passivity, a self-restraint from any form of apparent activity. In this respect, the religious studies scholar Gavin Flood, writing in reference to the notion of the ascetic self in the book *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition*, offers a glimpse of the nature of Vipassana meditation and denotes it as a (paradoxical) practice that calls for ‘the eradication of will through an act of will’ (212).

As described in the Introduction, technologies of the self, such as Vipassana meditation, operate through processes of self-subjectification to destabilize fixed perceptions of self-identity and to bring conditions of somatic self-formation to the forefront of consciousness. As will be detailed in the following paragraphs, processes of self-formation appear in Vipassana as internal, invisible, physical activities that emerge into consciousness in conditions of passivity and silence. This is to say that Vipassana’s

radical form of passivity enables the emergence of a subtler condition of somatic activities. As a technology of self, this practice functions as an apparatus that isolates the self, as much as is possible, from external stimuli, embedding it in silence, solitude and stillness. This condition allows the self to focus internally until it generates, in introspection, an interior performative condition or a third person construction. The objective is to access an internal perceptual sensitivity toward the somatic until the body emerges no longer as the solid entity to which our identity is attached, but rather as a plural field of movements and activities over which the self has little or no control. The scope is to create a specific internal configuration of indeterminacy that is highly paradoxical and numinous as the self perceives its internal physical state not only as totally foreign, but also as wholly disengaged from personal self-identity and a sense of agency.

In contextualizing Vipassana meditation within a secular, aesthetic and overall performative framework, Biswas fostered the idea that the internal embodied condition of spectatorship that Vipassana generates has aesthetic, artistic, cultural and broadly performative significance (Biswas, interviewed by Silvia Battista 2013). This hypothesis is supported by the fact that he denied the participation of the audience through the basic sensory tenets of conventional spectatorship. Indeed Biswas suggests that *CAT* endeavoured to direct attention towards a performative condition of spectatorship in selfhood and encouraged the idea that self-reflexivity and a ‘certain way of using consciousness’ (Biswas, *CAT*) may be considered an artistic work in itself. In other words, through the modalities by which he activated space and deployed presence in *CAT*, Biswas invoked a body operating ‘as a corporeal component of theatrical praxis (...) a subtle dimension of space[:] the bodily’ (Oztürk 296).

The point of departure for the theoretical exploration of this aesthetic proposition is Biswas's intention to present:

a dramatic, sculptural, imaginative representation of the fact that we are each in a box, the boundaries of which are drawn by the body and its senses (Biswas, *CAT*).

My interpretation engages with the complexity that this hypothesis generates in performance studies, providing the reader with a network of theoretical suggestions aimed at sustaining its specificity. This entails taking Biswas's proposition seriously, and therefore finding the theoretical tools through which to unpack the cultural, philosophical and performative implications that it raises in numinosity, as well as to create the structure and method through which to undertake an analytical interpretation.

Departing from Biswas's declaration that the symbol of the box was representative of the discrete parameters of our bodies, this section aims to engage analytically with the internal processes that in Vipassana meditation focus perception internally. This requires that the introspective condition created by the technology of the self of Vipassana meditation is considered and explored as an introspective configuration of spectatorship constructed by directing self-attention within and therefore sharpening an internal, perceptive sense. The hypothesis proposed here is that of an internal theatre, whose sense of 'agency and historicity' does not entail human agency as the measure of all things (Barad, Meeting 136), but rather is in constant dialogue with a plurality of internal and invisible agentic actors or actants.⁸¹ The objective is to problematize a self inhabiting a body whose materiality is deprived of agency and merely shaped by words, human behaviour and institutions, and encourage

⁸¹ With the term 'actant' I am referring to Jane Bennett's development of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. She suggests that an 'actant is neither an object nor a subject but an "intervener" (...), which by virtue of its particular location (...) makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event.' An actant is a 'substitute for what in a more subject-centered vocabulary is called agent' (Bennett 9).

the thought that it is an active player in the phenomenon of meaning production (Carvalho 8).

Here, I invite the reader to refer back to section 2.6 (“How to proceed: methods and practices”) specifically in relation to action and the method of analytical auto-ethnography. The theoretical and methodological approach explicated in that section enables me to address *CAT*'s experimental performance action, valuing the questions that it generates around issues of self-identity, self-formation, spectatorship, agency and numinosity, from an experiential perspective in conversation with the third person approach. Therefore the proposition provided in this section, which aims to question the passivity of matter and propose its activation in numinosity, encourages a rethinking of how the boundaries between material and cultural phenomena are configured and an evaluation of the relations between materiality, numinosity and performativity.

The following section also employs the discourse on the performativity of matter articulated by Barad in her theory of agential realism in dialogue with a series of other scholarly domains such as the religious, the philosophical and the theatrical. The notion of numinosity, the overarching focus of this thesis, is interrogated by looking at both the cultural and performative implications of staging Vipassana meditation as a performance action.

3.5.1. Vipassana meditation

Vipassana meditation is rooted in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition that, in the history of religions, is regarded as the prime example of mysticism without God (Smart, *The World* 77). The goal of this tradition is purity of life obtained through self-training, meditation and introspection. Without entering into the details of the philosophical

complexity of Theravāda tradition, which is beyond the scope of this thesis and my expertise, I will focus on the specific school followed by Biswas - that of S. N. Goenka, in the lineage of Sayagyi U Ba Khin.⁸² According to this tradition, Vipassana meditation is taught as a technology or apparatus of embodied self-reflectivity that through observation and contemplation ‘of the body in the body internally’ (Soma 2) provides the meditator with an internal view of its physicality as a territory of performative occurrences. Vipassana meditation, as technology of the self, stems from the philosophical premises that the self is malleable and that the body is an ‘extra-human’ tool through which the subject manipulates perception and self-perception. It is a reflexive practice anchored in the body and in bodily sensations (Pagis, Embodied 265), and a method that guides the individual to look inward and become ‘the observing subject and the observed object, a process that includes both self-knowledge and self-monitoring’ (Pagis, Embodied 266).

Biswas learnt the practice through annual attendance over a period of more than twenty years at ten-day courses offered for free⁸³ in various Vipassana centres in the UK and internationally by the S.N. Goenka’s organization. During the courses students learned the technique of Vipassana step by step. All students, from beginners to the most advanced, are asked to follow this list of rules:

- To observe the five precepts of *Sila* (abstain from killing, abstain from stealing, abstain from sexual misconduct, abstain from wrong speech, abstain from intoxicants) (Goenka, Guidelines);
- To accept and comply fully, for the duration of the course, with the teacher’s guidance and instructions (Goenka, Guidelines);

82 S.N. Goenka is a layman and a retired industrialist who, in 1969, was authorized as a teacher of Vipassana meditation by U Ba Khin. Goenka’s Vipassana centres are present all over the world and have attracted thousands of people to date (Hart 1-2). His teaching method is very simple and approachable to anyone committed to a demanding meditative regime.

83 Attendees are invited to leave a donation at the end of each course.

- To discontinue other forms of ritual, meditation or prayer (Goenka, Guidelines);
- To respect the “noble silence” that stands for the silence of the body, speech, and mind, where any form of communication with other fellow students (such as gestures, sign language, written notes) is avoided (Goenka, Introduction 4-6).

Students are initially guided to learn the technology of Anapana practice and after only a few days are directed into the full practice of Vipassana meditation. Anapana consists in focusing the attention on breathing and particularly on the air passing through the ‘area below the nostrils and above the upper lip’ (Goenka, Guidelines). During this time the mind should be kept steadily focused on each inhalation and exhalation, an exercise that is carried out for one or two days, for an average of eight to ten hours a day, in order to calm the mind and increase inner concentration. After two days, Vipassana meditation is started and consists in moving attention ‘systematically from head to feet and from feet to head, observing in order each and every part of the body by feeling all the sensations that come across’ (Goenka, Guidelines). The process must follow an objective observation and should show equanimity to all sensations experienced, ‘whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, by appreciating their impermanent nature’ (Goenka, Guidelines).

The analysis that follows is organized around the four main instructions taught to students during the course. I believe they provide a productive structure and model from which to gradually lead the investigation into the internal performance context that this technology of the self opened and activated within the performative frame of *CAT*. In addition, they represent the four subsections into which this part of the chapter is divided. The instructions are:

- Firstly, close the eyes and remain alert;

- Secondly, focus on the breathing with particular attention to the air passing through the nostrils and touching the upper lip;
- Thirdly, apply the same attention to the whole body (exploring firstly the body, section by section, and then scanning the whole body from head to toes);
- Fourthly, apply equanimous observation.

3.5.2. First instruction: close the eyes and remain alert

The closure of the eyelids is the first instruction that the practitioner of Vipassana meditation is invited to follow. In *CAT* the closure of the eyelids was doubled, in dramatic terms, with the closure of the black box within which Biswas meditated. Both actions, in fact, affect a closure, the temporary exclusion of visual interaction with the external world. In addition to this, the closure of the black box prevented Biswas not only from seeing but also from hearing or interacting in any sensory way with the outside world for the ten-day duration.⁸⁴ The closure of the black box produced a decisive action of separation between the audience and the performer and from that moment onward Biswas was left in complete darkness and solitude. The world outside stopped being perceivable and, as with the closure of the eyelids that hides aspects of reality, the closure of the black box operated like a cut in the gallery, creating a relation of (apparently fixed) interiority and exteriority within the previously undivided space of the gallery. In suggesting that the closure of the black box operated as a cut in the gallery space, I am suggesting a connection to the notion of ‘agential cut’ as conceived by Barad.

⁸⁴ In Vipassana centres there are also enclosed spaces, called meditation cells, which are available for advanced students to use for their retreats. Biswas has confirmed that he has used these cells (Biswas, interviewed by Silvia Battista 2013).

The notion of agential cut is employed by Barad to explicate how things, objects, humans come to be manifested even if they do not pre-exist their relations (Barad, Posthuman 133). She introduces it in relation to the notion of ‘intra-action’, which suggests that things come into relation while ‘becoming into being’ (Barad, Living 133).⁸⁵ Barad differentiates intra-action from the notion of interaction that necessitates already existing entities as precondition of their relation (Barad, Living 133). Thus, intra-action designates reality as a performative process in which separateness and differences emerge as specific and temporary material configurations established in relation (Battista 69). Apparatuses belonging to technologies of the self, such as Vipassana meditation with its set of instructions and regulations, enact specific agential cuts on ‘reality’ through which differences, specific material configurations and particular types of self-perceptive processes are produced.

From this perspective, the closing of the black box enacted a ‘*local* resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherently ontological indeterminacy’ (Barad, Posthuman 133) of the space of the SLG. In devising the performance space within a closed system, Biswas produced a decisive change that forced his attention from being directed outward to being directed, almost exclusively, inward. This abrupt closure of his perceptual landscape consequently determined another happening: if until that moment Biswas was the performer and the visitors of the gallery space his spectators, from that moment onward he became the spectator of himself in processes of self-reflexivity. With this gesture of closure Biswas implicitly invited the spectators/visitors to do the same (Biswas, interviewed by Silvia Battista 2010).

⁸⁵ ‘Becoming into being’ suggests a paradox in its own right as these terms are often located as opposite, mutually exclusive categories of ontology (one dynamic, one static). However, in this context, ‘being’ in its static condition is merely a temporary perceptual construction that emerges in intra-activity and through specific apparatuses that allow relations between distinct entities to occur.

To return to the action of closing the eyelids, one element that is peculiar to meditation is that the closure of the eyelids and the consequent exclusion of the external world is not understood as the prelude to sleepiness or unconsciousness. On the contrary, it is regarded as the preparation for an internal mode of consciousness. This is determined by the fact that after closing their eyes, the meditators are required to remain awake and generally alert, directing awareness towards an internal focus of attention that in Vipassana meditation is represented by bodily sensations. In other words, employing the metaphor of theatre, after the eyelids are closed and the lights of the hall (external world) turned down, the stage of an inner landscape is, in time and with patience, illuminated. The effort of remaining alert with the eyes closed enacts a specific resolution within the phenomenon of self-perception that gives the sensation of accessing a local condition of exteriority within the individual, like a Cartesian construct or a third person perspective occurring within. This possibility is described by Barad in the following way:

it is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material configurations of the world) become meaningful. Intra-actions include the larger material arrangement (i.e., set of material practices) that effects an *agential cut* between “subject” and “object” (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted) (Barad, Meeting 140).

What Barad proposes that seems particularly helpful in the analysis of Vipassana meditation is that rather than rejecting the Cartesian construct completely, she questions its ontology in fixity and situates it in performativity (Barad, Meeting 140). From this perspective, the third person perspective is movable and its borders and possible configurations reproducible in conditions of apparent indeterminacy, each time arranged differently according to the specific intra-activities, agential cuts, apparatuses and technologies in place. In Vipassana it moves in introspection and its construct is

rendered tangible by the emergence of the perceptual phenomenon of separation between the meditator/observer and her/his physical internal functions/performers. This is a condition of exteriority within the self that occurs paradoxically in ‘the absence of [what we classify as the] classical ontological condition of exteriority between observer and observed’ (Barad, Posthumanist 133).

Considered from the viewpoint of performance and its terminology, if alertness is maintained after closing the eyes, a new performance site, with a dynamic constituent of internal performer-spectator relations, is qualified and formalized within the individual self (Oztürk 296). An inner space of observation emerges inside within which colours, forms, images start to appear in front of the ‘internal eye’ of the meditator. However, none of these features are the objects of observation of the Vipassana meditator, who, instead, is guided to select exclusively physical sensations from the proliferation of emerging internal phenomena and to direct her/his attention towards and within their margins.

3.5.3. Second instruction: focus on the breathing with particular attention on the air passing through the nostrils and touching the upper lip

The second instruction guides the attention of the meditator toward the movement of the breath, and specifically towards that particular area of the body below the nostrils and above the upper lip that is touched directly by the passing air. This instruction encourages the meditator to remain attentive toward each breath, the air entering and leaving the nostrils, and toward the physical sensations this causes in the small area below the nostrils.

As mentioned above, the phase initiated by closing one’s eyelids and focusing on the breath touching the upper lip is called Anapana and is used to calm the mind and

familiarize the meditator with bodily sensations. Usually, after two or three hours of engagement with Anapana, even inexperienced meditators start to sense the upper lip as a tangible, spatial territory: ‘tactile and sound reverberating’ (Oztürk 296). It becomes a performative, eventful locus of activities within which numerous agencies and material/somatic forces appear to operate outside of the will of the self. A multiplicity of sensations emerge as if the upper lip was inhabited by living, agentic particles. In this way this small bodily part becomes a complex performance space where myriads of undefined actors/particles materialize, crossing and clashing with each other, moving fast, vibrating, tickling.⁸⁶ During Anapana a parallel, different sense of self starts to emerge within which multiple inner experiences are brought to consciousness.

3.5.4. Third instruction: apply the same attention to the whole body

The third agential cut requires the meditator to expand their attention to their entire body, moving the focus from head to toes until the whole body is subjected to the fragmentation of ontological instability that occurred previously in the area of the upper lip. This instruction invites a constant moving of attention from part to part like an internal scanning machine until sensations start to emerge from all the different areas of the body. At this stage the whole body appears to the internal eye as a stage, with every corner and micro-context perceived as inhabited and moved by a diversity of events. Ultimately an extraordinary sensation of somatic hyperawareness is established (Pagis, Embodied 265). This experience is emotionally complex as our attachment to self-identity and individual agency is deeply rooted. This means that:

struggles of agency between the meditator and his assemblage (...) [start to surface with] narratives of cruel agential choreographies between a multitude of elements that populate [a self that appears to itself as broken and atomised within her/his own territory] (Carvalho 28).

⁸⁶ For further details of my own auto-ethnographic engagement with Vipassana, see Appendix 1.

During my own undertaking of auto-ethnographic research on Vipassana meditation, the process of scanning the body from head to toes resulted in an experience that lay outside conceptualization. After hours of engagement with the technology, a completely unknown territory emerged, other than and beyond any cultural configuration of the body I had previously experienced. It was a spectacle wholly unfamiliar to my everyday self who busily runs from home to work, is engaged on a daily basis with the external world and is constantly immersed in the interactive modes of solid matter and discrete entities. Vipassana meditation produced a sense of self that ‘expresse[d] a too muchness’ (Dalton 229), exceeding the borders and limits I assigned to it through ordinary perception and leaving me in a total stupor, overwhelmed by its paradoxical numinosity.

For example, the experience of perceiving, through my inner sensory apparatus, the complexity of my body’s materiality in its modes of becoming through passages of solidity, cohesion, caloricity, and oscillation (Soma 3), consisted not only in the problematization of the known boundaries dividing me from the surrounding environment, but also in questioning my own individual, personal agency. During the fifth day of the experiment I could perceive my body performing internally following a script that was not ‘mine’. In other words I perceived myself as moved by a series of ‘dynamic agenc[ies] of effect[s] not caused by [my] arbitrary act of will’ (Coelsch-Foisner 393). I felt myself going through a process of transformation from a fixed and solid being into a processual and fluctuating ‘something’: an ‘event’. It was a condition that I could not identify with any image I had previously developed of myself. I became the locus of a spectacle of sensations, a repository of occurrences that my internal eye was able to observe but, at least at that stage, could not control.

The territory I was becoming produced the numinous feeling of acknowledging a sense of otherness within, together with the alarming and simultaneously exhilarating, paradoxical and contradictory feeling of not existing at all.

The sense of numinosity that emerged was not produced by an internal encounter with an external presence, as in an experience of possession, but rather by the unfamiliarity that my physicality expressed at that level of primary experience. This feeling of unfamiliarity was triggered by the novelty of observing the materiality of my body through a technological apparatus aimed at rendering manifest a condition of embodiment that disrupted any previously known sense of self. This disruption was not only disconcerting and at times overwhelming; it also rendered palpable the possibility of experimenting with other ways of being, possible worlds and bodies out of which ‘I’ might be made and might act within (Schmidt 30).

What emerges is an expansion of consciousness toward aggregates like cells, elements, waves, sense fields and their constant processes of becoming. An inner sense is activated beyond the “classical” ones of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, so new realities unfold endlessly’ (Biswas, *CAT*). The flesh becomes an ‘endless process of interaction’ (Biswas, *CAT*), that Barad would refer to in terms of intra-action; a geography of negotiation (Carvalho 28) within which the agency of the ordinary self occupies a relatively small place. Potentially, therefore, Vipassana technology opens a perspective that transforms the way the self perceives itself, enabling it to begin to recognize all those other agencies and elements that: ‘although [they] are interior to humans and their experiences, are non-human, in the sense that they are not *consciously* produced by the meditator’ (Carvalho 29). The outline of what we know as the body that we learn to define in conventional terms as solid, loses its certainty and unfolds

towards the numinous sensation of the infinite in the finitude of the self. As Biswas suggests, our conventional conceptions of the world are constructed according to ‘apparatus[es] of measurement, whether those are bodily senses, mathematical tools or man-made instruments’ (Biswas, *CAT*), that inform us about and seem to confirm the solidity of the real. However, Barad stresses that:

physics tell us that edges or boundaries are not determinate either ontologically or visually. When we come to the “interface” between a coffee mug and a hand, it is not that there are x number of atoms that belong to a hand and y number of atoms that belong to the coffee mug. (...) There are actually no sharp edges visually either: it is a well-recognised fact of physical optics that if one looks closely at an “edge”, what one sees is not a sharp boundary between light and dark but rather a series of light and dark bands – that is, a diffraction pattern (Barad, *Meeting* 156).

Buddhism recognized this problem much earlier than western science, devising sophisticated technologies of the self that aimed at subverting the cognitive process of language and everyday modes of perception in order to ‘return the seeker to the point of experience by re-cognizing Subjects and Objects as mere categories’ (Schmidt 39). These technologies of the self were devised so that the immediate apprehension or ‘the primary contact preceding actual perception and conception’ (Schmidt 39) could erupt into the world of perception and disrupt the known, fixed parameters of discrete realities. This condition opens a liminal and potential space of transformation where the subject contemplates ‘a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations (...) [may] arise’ (Turner, *The Forest* 97).

To return to the specificity of the performance *CAT*, its performance action, consisting of ten days of Vipassana meditation, did not aim at a theatre of the outside or at an exterior object or project. On the contrary, it is plausible to suggest that it had as its objective ‘the constitution of an accomplished interiority that [however] remain[ed] tied and in constant communion with the whole of the world’ (Irigaray, *Between* 39) or

in the case of *CAT* with the SLG's space. This communion occurred for the performer (Biswas) through the dynamics of surrendering to introspection and to breathing, to a breath that was invisibly shared with the visitors walking around the black box. In this project a paradoxical and numinous configuration of self and other emerges within which:

the other [as much as the self, exists] inside *or* outside, not inside *and* outside, being part of [performer and visitors/spectators] interiority while remaining exterior, foreign, other to [them] (Irigaray, *Between* 123).

This is an interrelated geography constituted in 'outside-in/inside-out' (Furse, *Being* 48). A paradoxical 'multiverse' described by the philosopher

Luce Irigaray as an:

extraordinary cosmic manifestation (...) that [was] simultaneously perceptible and imperceptible, knowable and unknowable, visible and invisible (Irigaray, *Between* 122),

It is a manifestation through which to share the breath that resonates at the level of particles and the micro-movements of body and matter.

Before embarking on the next stage of analysis of the performance action, it is worth summarizing what has been said so far. Three aspects have been particularly productive in considering the performance action of Vipassana meditation:

- The self emerges as both the observer and the observed, and a condition of spectatorship or a third person perspective is constituted in introspection;
- The self becomes aware of the many involuntary occurrences happening in the body and questions her/his own agency;
- The self loses the perception of its own boundaries, accessing a level of consciousness within which the self and the other are not longer set in absolute division.

In addition, it has been suggested that, in the practice of Vipassana, the condition of ‘exteriority – within – [the] phenomena’ (Barad, *Posthumanist* 133) of mental and physical occurrences within the individual is achieved through three agential cuts. They consist firstly, of closing the eyes; secondly, of focusing on one’s breath and the small, physical area of the upper lip; and thirdly, of expanding the same attention to the whole body. These three agential cuts open the curtain to one of the many possible performative conditions of the inside, sharpening the capacity of self-attention and sensitivity toward inner physical activities, and disrupting the configuration of the body constructed through received processes of representation. There is, however, a fourth instruction aimed at detaching the subject even further from representation and at reinforcing the experience of sensing the ‘ever-changing mind-matter phenomenon manifesting itself as [inner] sensations’ (Goenka, *Vipassana* 6).

3.5.5. Fourth instruction: apply equanimous observation

The fourth agential cut consists of applying equanimous observation to what is experienced and felt, and is enacted to prevent judgement in the face of pleasant or unpleasant sensations of heat, touch, movement, weight, pressure, free flowing of energy and blockages. Within the Vipassana discourse, this final modulating agential cut is described as: ‘steadfast equanimity in the face of all (...) phenomena’ (Biswas, *CAT* 1998).

Vipassana meditation, as an apparatus ‘through which specific boundaries are enacted’ (Barad, *Living* 173), and which anchors the self in the ‘self-reflexive capacity of bodily sensations’ (Pegis, *Embodied* 265), conveys specific value and significance to embodied introspective processes. Its value is assessed against language as the experience of hyper-awareness of the body that Vipassana meditation produces is, in

fact, primarily directed toward experiences located outside the framework of language. However, as the sociologist Michal Pagis argues in the article “Embodied Self-Reflexivity”, self-reflexivity is a process often associated with language and communication, and with processes of internal conversation and confessions (Pagis, Embodied 266). Vipassana meditation, on the other hand, promotes a self-reflexive practice that ‘is not abstract or discursive – but is anchored in the body’ (Pagis, Embodied 265). Indeed Vipassana meditation practitioners not only do not speak with each other but also avoid inner conversations including internal dialogue, inner evaluation and verbal identification of bodily sensations.

The issue of verbal language in relation to non-discursive, performative and meditative practices such as Vipassana emerges as soon as the practitioner/performer engages with the technology. One of the cardinal disciplinary codes to be enacted, as mentioned in subsection 3.5.1 (“Vipassana meditation”), is called ‘noble silence’ which entails: ‘silence of the body, speech, and mind [and] any form of communication with fellow students, whether by gesture, sign language, written notes etc.’ (Goenka, Introduction 5). In conjunction with other rules that require the practice of silence, this code of discipline strongly shapes the perceptive architecture that Vipassana technology delivers and shapes the type of experience the practitioner, consequently, encounters. In other words, the self is constrained within the boundaries of silence due to the fact that the practice of verbal communication is precluded. Aprioristic judgements are disrupted by the effort of maintaining sensations unnamed and therefore the self is prevented from finding ground in the comfortable, known territory of words. The meditator avoids satisfying ‘the anxious need to find meaning in what has disconcerted [her/him], whether by pain or pleasure’ (Turner, Bruner, *The Anthropology* 36) and enters a zone of consciousness characterized by:

the loss of comforting myth, familiar alliance, and secure identity – all the hooks by which we cling to the idea that we have an eternal, immutable, personal self that will never be washed away from us into the river of life (Fleischman 87).

The activity of giving names to things entails identifying and distinguishing something from something else; creating boundaries, categorizing phenomena and systematizing them outside the chaos of indeterminacy. This anxious need to find and fix meaning through words reveals how difficult it is to bear the unnamed and delay the ‘relief’ of *thingification* – [that] turn[s] relations [and phenomena] into “things,” “entities” [and] “relata” (Barad, Posthumanist 130).

If the code of silence gives voice and visibility to usually unheard, subtle aspects of bodily/somatic/material realities, equanimous observation prevents verbal language from defining sensations within the known categories of pain and pleasure. Indeed, the exclusion of internal language from the self-reflexive process of Vipassana is a strategic choice to trick the modalities by which we protect ourselves from the ‘others’ and to enact a numinous rapture/rupture in the processes through which self-discursive narratives produce meaning. The numinosity of this rapture/rupture is produced by the fact that specific ways of using language, discourses and culture are the means through which representation mediates, negotiates and shapes the world around us. We have learnt to perceive ourselves and others through linguistic representations, words or images, in the belief that ‘grammatical [but also visual] categories reflect the underlying structure of the world’ (Barad, Posthumanist 121).

The function of the fourth instruction is to locate the ‘nothing’ in terms of the senses and acknowledge words not as channels effecting communication but as ‘factories – fabricators’ of fictions masqueraded as facts. Although it is evident that this

argument can be debated and questioned, nonetheless Vipassana meditation is fundamentally a practice that aims to cleanse the mind of its accumulated baggage of objects, absolutes, *a priori*, and unveil the processes through which these come to influence decisions, feelings and emotions.

To further clarify this point it is helpful to refer back to Theravada Buddhist philosophy, a tradition that conceives reality as consisting of changing phenomena that can be directly experienced without the negotiation of language or visual representations. From this perspective, when language is employed to mediate the world it does not stand for what it represents, but rather it stands exclusively to convey ideas. For example, the word ‘tree’ is a concept, as is the idea we form of a tree. Although concepts can be thought, they are not realities that can be directly experienced through participative and experiential modalities of apprehension. The term ‘tree’ and what we experience when we touch or interact with the physicality of a specific tree are two different phenomena that give rise to two different realities, both inherent in what we understand to be a tree (Van Gorkom, Introduction 6-8). In addition, if we use a technological device to look at the particles composing the tree, another phenomenon is created. This on-going process of entanglement producing phenomena does not entail fixed, separated ontological existences, but rather momentary differences, manifesting and disappearing phenomena, intertwined each time differently within the specificity of the apparatuses of measurement employed. In other words, as mentioned earlier, it is:

through specific measurement intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the “measured object” and “measurement instrument” become determined, and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful. (...) Discursive practices are specific material configurations/(re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differently enacted (Barad, Living 171, 173).

Through enacting agential cuts that allow ‘differential boundaries and properties coming to matter’ (Barad, *Living* 173), Vipassana produces a configuration of the real that from our ordinary perspective reverberates with numinosity. When the function of verbal language and image making is excluded, there emerges:

a kind of sensory saturation (...) [and] penetrative insight, (...) [untouched by] the “noise” of visualizations or theoretical constructions (Biswas, *CAT*).

A contemporary self, educated and raised in western post-industrial societies, contemplates this in astonishment.

This consideration situates and contextualizes numinosity in culture within its apparatuses and technologies. The numinous emerges, as extensively explained in Chapter 1, in a self confronted by an object that lies outside the boundaries of what is considered culturally to be known. In Vipassana meditation numinosity emerges from the capacity of the technology to maintain self-perception in performative conditions without providing any secure anchors for the self to moor itself. However, this experience can prove particularly numinous for a self that has never experienced the perspective of introspection that technologies of the self such as Vipassana meditation can offer. I am not suggesting that for an experienced meditator the practice does not hold numinosity, but rather that the degree of numinosity that things and experiences hold for the self is directly related to self-conditioning in culture, society, history and its embodied memories.

To return to the analysis of the fourth agential cut, eventually the meditator may arrive at the point of considering everything – words and images, as well as physical sensations – as phenomena that have neither ‘inherently determined boundaries’ nor ‘inherently determined meaning’ (Barad, *Posthuman* 131). In other words, when equanimous observation is applied for a long time indistinctively to sensations, words

and images, all of them seem to emerge from an undetermined reality with no separate ontological, fixed status, but rather as circumstantial impermanent happenings manifesting due to specific intra-activities in place. This is the result of ‘surrendering human agency’ (Bhabha 8) to processes of self-formation in matter in all its forms, movements, conditions and processes. The self emerges, therefore, constituted within a fluctuating condition where matter is implicated in the on-going formation of both embodied realities and discursive configurations (Barad, Posthumanist 129), of the non-human as well as of the human.

Nevertheless, what has been argued thus far does not necessarily determine that this is the fundamental truth of reality, but rather that this is the spectacle of reality that the technology of Vipassana enables one to access. Each of its instructions, in fact, operates as an apparatus that, through specific parameters and selections, determines the specific area of reality that is attended to and accessed. To borrow a well-known formulation from Donna Haraway, Vipassana meditation offers an ‘embodied objectivity (...) that means quite simply [another] *situated knowledge*’ (581).

Vipassana meditation’s function is to shift perception and acknowledge that ‘what we take for “self”, for “our mind” and for “our body”’ (Van Gorkon, The Buddhist iii) are, at different levels of observation, constituted as changing phenomena without any fundamentally fixed, determined status. This experience should not negate the validity of the measurements we are able to make at the scale of our senses. Indeed, the fact that in everyday life we perceive our bodies as solid and differentiated from objects and other living creatures allows certain interactions to take place. However, as already mentioned, ‘at a certain scale – a scale which is invisible [not only] to our senses – things dissolve into uncertainty and apparent contradiction’ (Biswas, *CAT*).

Ultimately, both configurations are possible and we access either according to different apparatuses and technologies of measurement. Both are situated possibilities that are not mutually exclusive.

In conclusion, by enacting Vipassana meditation within a performance context, Biswas valued performance in epistemological terms. His performance affirmed epistemology in introspection, in the primacy of experience and the reality of the body and matter generally, and located ontology in multiplicity and indeterminacy. By preventing spectators and researchers alike from seeing him while engaging with the technology of Vipassana meditation, Biswas disrupted the received conventions of the performer/spectator relationship and suggested that the same proposition can be moved, producing alternative conditions of spectatorship, that in the specificity of *CAT* and its action resulted in the particular introspective experience of Vipassana. Biswas's strategic choice of suspending sight seems to have encouraged an alternative performance space and presence: one of interiority, a performative journey within the threshold axis between binary relations affirming the generative ambiguity of their axiomatic existence.

3.6. Conclusion

CAT was a complex performance piece to explore as it reduced performance space, presence and action to the conditions and dynamics of (apparent) impossibilities. The exploration of those dynamics in performance represented a productive analytical challenge as it is its imposed sensory limitations that stimulated the production of alternative perceptual and interpretative hypotheses. *CAT* provided no definitive solutions for unravelling its riddles, or its rights and wrongs, but rather provided triggers from which to develop hypotheses. Inevitably, therefore, what has been

proposed in this chapter merely offers tentative and temporary answers, creative leaps, shifts in perspectives, interpretative possibilities in infinite horizons of interpretation. My objective was to emphasize the potential of *CAT*'s limitations as stimulus to generate alternative possibilities of spectatorship and performativity⁸⁷, as well as of interpretative analytical perspectives. Ultimately, the very impossibility of exploring *CAT* through sensory means became a productive value in itself from which to expand the boundaries of performance practices and their interpretations.

For example, the stage-space⁸⁸ where Biswas performed could not be accessed through sensory means (in particular, sight and hearing), and consequently the performance space, presence and action could only be imagined. Nonetheless, Biswas provided a detailed statement of intent offering theoretical reflections on why, and in reference to what, *CAT* was conceived and devised. In the end, three interpretative keys or tools were provided: the Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, the figure of the hermit and Vipassana meditation, all of which became productive points of reference from which the chapter's analysis proceeded.

As a researcher interested in secular, immanent interpretations of the numinous, I considered *CAT* to offer an intriguing opportunity as it represented a generative and innovative example of numinous theatre. At the same time, it created a series of methodological issues that have been only partly resolved by positioning my research within radical hermeneutics and by employing analytical auto-ethnographic methods of engagement. Nonetheless the methodological framework chosen has enabled me to defend the possibility of multiple interpretative choices. Similarly, as a result of my

87 Please refer to subsection 8.4., "Theatrical Apparatuses of Experimentation", when referring to both theatricality and performativity.

88 Here I am referring to the internal space of the box only, those inaccessible to the spectator in sensory terms..

auto-ethnographical engagement with the technique of Vipassana meditation I have been able to realize and acknowledge the performative and numinous potentialities of *CAT* as a performative condition occurring in introspection. The personal engagement with and experience of Vipassana meditation enabled me to ground and explore the hypothesis that *CAT* consisted of the performance of the materiality of the body. From there, I have been able to develop a discourse around the symbolic, numinous and performative implications that the black box held, as both performance space and presence.

Ultimately, matter is the great protagonist, the real performer of the interpretative hypothesis this chapter has offered. Indeed matter gradually emerged as the imaginary player, the deliverer of scripts in a context where materiality and discourses were not played in ‘relationship of externality to one another; rather the material and the discursive [were] mutually implicated in the dynamics’ (Barad, Living 174) of manifesting and disappearing in and out of the performance space(s) of *CAT*.

Matter is agentic. Perhaps we might say “alive” with possibilities. Electrons, dust particles, and rocks, as much as cats, brittle stars, or humans, are complex phenomena – lively configurations of changing possibilities (Barad, Living 174).

In addition, and overall, the core proposition is that matter is numinous, ever changing, paradoxical, and much more complex than we can ever imagine. It encompasses both the material and the spiritual, coexisting without colliding as both are linguistic categorizations whose meanings and realities fluctuate between biology, history and culture.

Within this complex, performative landscape, Biswas played the role of co-director, observer, or better the indicator of a numinous performance that is constantly coming and going, endlessly being performed without us being conscious of it. The

black box, therefore, operated in ways akin to an imaginative door, an invisible solid aperture from which to witness the numinous and its rapture/rupture in the continuum of our certainties. Its unfamiliarity resonated in the space of art's consumption, questioning familiar codifications of spectating and meaning-making. The event's numinosity was, therefore, not produced by unveiling a hidden secret or by the encounter with a hidden, metaphysical entity, but rather by its im/possibility and the absurdity of its configuration in/as performance. This paradoxical perspective was opened by the negative path employed: the journey of negation, restraint, silence and solitude.

CAT did not and does not add anything to what contemporary audiences had already seen; on the contrary, it operated through subtraction, reducing visual stimulus to the point of leaving in space only the skeleton of an already seen container. It was, in fact, precisely through a process of reduction that the taxonomy of reality's (possible) configurations was encouraged and enabled to expand exponentially, like the limited space of the anchorite's cell that explodes into the expansiveness of the desert. From this perspective, the cell, the black box, and the body are understood as performative instruments of cognition; apparatuses of perception from which to multiply the perspectives available and to proliferate our conceptions of what we conceive and define as 'real'. Ultimately, what is suggested is that the larger the number of apparatuses we become familiar with the more possibilities we have to overcome our own subjectification of anything that has in some way:

the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions or discourses of living beings (Agamben, *What* 14).

With *CAT*, Biswas offered a critique not only of the assumed superiority of apparatuses based on visual perception, but also of practices of investigation which

understand division and separateness as ontological givens or facts. Through insisting on division in extremis to the point of hindering access to the performance, he revealed and activated a problem at the heart of spectatorship conceived conventionally in terms of observation and with the division of observers and observed. Biswas invited a(nother) solution that could not be found within the paradigms usually employed by performance's spectators.

The apparatus of Vipassana meditation in which Biswas was immersed inside the box was one of the possibilities suggested for engagement, and it is the one I have employed. As a meditative apparatus, Vipassana opened up for me a wholly different performative landscape; it questioned separateness through internal modes of physical perception and disrupted a fixed and consolidated understanding of matter. As a consequence, I could envisage the conceptual possibility of the black box disintegrated in the oscillation of physical sensations, a specific type of entanglement produced by engaging with the apparatus and technologies of Vipassana meditation.

In conclusion, *CAT* represented a context within which one might reflect on the world and fellow human beings as 'distinct individual[s], the unit of all measure', and at same time experience how reality appears when perceived through an introspective apparatus meant to overcome the separateness and the 'finitude made flesh' of our bodies (Barad, Meeting 134). The objective of my interpretative trajectory was not to deny the value of sight and the apparatuses constructed around visual notions of spectatorship, but rather to bring attention to other possible methodologies of apprehension and emphasize the role that performance may have in this project. I have endeavoured to stress that a plurality of epistemological possibilities are available and to problematize the privileging of any single formation of how it is possible or

impossible to know something about our self and others (Barad, Living166-167). In confronting both audience and researchers with the impossibility of being conventional spectators and processing the performance through external visual observation, Biswas offered the opportunity to imagine and explore what lies behind the curtain of the theatre of visual perception that so strongly informs our instruments of apprehension of the world.

CHAPTER 4:

Case Study B: *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic

4.1. Introduction

This chapter looks at the second case study, the participative performance piece *The Artist is Present*, realized by Marina Abramovic in 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). The performance took place in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron atrium of the Museum during the homonymous exhibition *The Artist is Present*, which represented the first retrospective of Abramovic's long-standing career in performance art. The exhibition as a whole represented the first time in the history of performance art that a museum, such as MoMA, dedicated an entire show to a single performance artist. In addition the show offered a series of interesting points for theoretical reflection, in particular on issues of documentation of historical events and their representation and re-enactment within a museum of visual art. In the context of this thesis, however, I focus specifically on the participative performance piece *The Artist is Present*, and employ the title *The Artist is Present* with reference to the performance rather than the whole show, unless otherwise specified.

The Artist is Present was devised specifically for MoMA and, as has already been explained in the Introduction, consisted of a durational, one-to-one performance art piece conceived as a *tableau vivant*. Abramovic sat silently on a chair at the centre of the performance space waiting for members of the public to sit on another chair in front of her and to reciprocate her gaze. Each participant was free to sit there for the duration of their choosing.



Figure 20: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010

Abramovic sat in her seat daily throughout the run of the exhibition: three months and a total of over six hundred hours, arriving every day before the Museum opened and leaving only after its closure.⁸⁹

As mentioned in the Introduction, despite the apparent simplicity of the performance's structure, *The Artist is Present* produced a performance operating on a double dynamic of spectatorship. The first consisted of the theatrical *tableau vivant* seen by the spectators standing at the edges of the performance space; and the second consisted of the one-to-one practice of reciprocal gazing taking place between the participant and Abramovic. Additionally, this specific arrangement constituted a configuration within which the immediacy that characterized Abramovic's historical

⁸⁹ The exact duration of the piece in hours is contested. I have chosen to use the number given by Abramovic in the monologue provided with the CD attached to the catalogue of the show.

live art pieces was strategically contained within a highly theatrical setting. Ultimately, the arrangement within which both Abramovic's presence and the experience of reciprocal gazing were set triggered profound emotional responses in many participants.

The double condition of spectatorship, the theatrical set up, the performer's presence and the spectators' responses to both witnessing and participating in reciprocal gazing, are the factors that are analysed within the framework of the numinous. However, before beginning to detail the specificity of each section it is helpful to introduce the performance more closely and to contextualize my interpretative hypothesis within existing literature.

Firstly, it is worth noting that *The Artist is Present* was an extremely popular event in New York and internationally. It attracted attention and received press coverage not usually devoted to performance art:

more than 750,000 viewers visited the exhibition and many [others] followed Abramovic's performance via a real-time webfeed. [In addition] the show garnered a storm of critical and popular media coverage (Levine).

Numerous blog posts were made by visitors wanting to share impressions and to comment on the event they experienced. *The Artist is Present* became, according to the curator Klaus Biesenbach:

a phenomenon not only in the media, but also in the everyday life conversation, making the museum's central artery, the atrium, a place with a three-month long gravitational pull over the here and now (Biesenbach, *In the Presence*).

Abramovic's piece resulted in an emotionally charged theatrical configuration as people queued for hours for their turn to enter the heightened focus of the performance space, sit in front of Abramovic and engage with her in reciprocal gazing. Visitors waited without knowing if they would ever enter the performance space as each person

was allowed to stay and sit with the artist for as long as they pleased. In fact, some sat in front of Abramovic for hours, and a few even stayed for an entire day, thereby preventing others from participating. The consequence of this, I propose, was that a few days after the opening what began as a performance audience assumed some of the attributes of a *communitas*⁹⁰ of pilgrims waiting; and while waiting, friendships developed around the shared commitment to sit with Abramovic. A sense of expectation and commitment that was quasi-devotional grew among both the audience and the participants.⁹¹

However, Abigail Levine, in her article “Marina Abramovic’s Time: The Artist is Present at the Museum of Modern Art”, condensed into one question the problem that this performance seemed to raise:

was it a work of humble generosity and sacrifice that opened a space for unique experience for an audience, or was it a literalization of a recent art world tendency to put star power center stage? (Levine).

Levine’s question was provoked by Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s comments in *Art Forum*, which suggested:

I imagine from the inside, there’s only a sincere interest in sharing the special mental and physical states made possible by intense concentration. But I know from out here, it looks like performance art is entering the Museum of Modern Art in the form of unabashed celebrity worship (Lambert-Beatty).

Taking this question as the starting point for my interpretative analysis I hypothesize that, although the two conditions mentioned in the question seem

90 I refer to Victor Turner’s understanding of the term *communitas*. In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*, Turner uses the Latin term *communitas*, instead of community, to distinguish ‘this modality of social relationship from an area of ‘common living’ (82). *Communitas* is what Turner defines as a liminal phenomenon in which differences in status are suspended in favour of momentary conditions of comradeship in which the social structures of ordinary life are set aside (Turner, *The Ritual* 82).

91 This is a productive aspect of the performance *The Artist is Present* for the analysis of the numinous in contemporary performance art, if approached from the perspective suggested by the scholar Ann Taves who, in the book *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building – Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (2009), proposes to explore the processes through which things and events acquire special status. Please refer to subsection 1.3.2. “How to approach the numinous object”.

reciprocally exclusive, they actually had a complementary function in the cyclical processes through which people and things acquire numinosity. In other words the latter, ‘unabashed celebrity worship’ (Lambert-Beatty), contained and at the same time was evoked by the former, ‘a sincere interest in sharing the special mental and physical states made possible by intense concentration’ (Lambert-Beatty).

This hypothesis, as will be extensively discussed in sections 4.4 (“Presence”) and 4.5 (“Action”) of this chapter, can be understood if interpreted through the lenses afforded by a religious studies perspective. This viewpoint allows one to engage with processes and associations that, although resembling what Lambert-Beatty defines as celebrity worship, nevertheless touch on slightly different planes of human experience.

My objective is to propose that the performance space, together with Abramovic’s staging of her presence, were strategic theatrical means aimed at inducing in the public something akin to what the theatre director Peter Brook called the theatre of the ‘Invisible-Made-Visible’ (Brook 47). In addition, as Philip Auslander points out in his book *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (1997), ‘Peter Brook coined the term “holy theatre” to describe performance that aspires to the communication of intangible, universal levels of experience’ (Auslander 13). However, more precisely, it is the term ‘free spaces’ that is poignant here. This term, according to David Williams, was employed by Brook to signify an ‘interactive microcosmos (...), temporary ecosystems’ which function as places of ‘contact and meeting’ (Williams). These are ‘spatial configurations’ that operate as types:

of magnet[s], (...) sympathetic receptacle[s] for simultaneously locating oneself in an immediate environment and a wider cosmic frame, (...) earthing point[s] for transformational activities (...) [spaces that are] porous, dialogical, endlessly in flux (Williams).

This interpretation of how Brook's 'free spaces' are meant to operate resonates closely with the extraordinary types of experiences that *The Artist is Present* seemed to offer to its participants. Not only did Abramovic's presence trigger a series of affective archetypal projections in the spectators, standing at the parameters of the performance space, but also a special inter-subjective connection resonated between her and many of the people sitting in front of her. This occurred, I suggest, due to a strategic use of the processes through which things and people are made 'special' (as in the case of celebrities) together with the delivery of an authentic human exchange. The double narrative that emerged contained the staging's strategies and authenticity, sense of otherness and familiarity, the paradoxical coexistence of which prompted processes and experiences of numinosity within, but also outside, the performance space.

The performance developed in a highly productive experiment within which the boundaries between contested categories such as theatre/live art, representation/presentation, illusion/real blurred to create an unfamiliar, dynamic doubling; a productive dissonance within received discourses of performativity and theatricality. Abramovic achieved this first of all by stating, within the title, that the artist was 'authentically' present, and secondly, by overlaying with the immediacy of the artist being present an apparatus that paradoxically invited the construction of imaginary other presences. In addition, she invited spectators to engage with a technology that if sustained for a certain amount of time could produce two major effects: firstly, transforming both her presence and representations into fluid, performative images; secondly, and most importantly, offering the 'unspoken [intimate] experience of resonance' (Mearns, Cooper 106) between two human beings interacting in silence.

Therefore, my hypothesis is that it is within this complex territory of paradoxical juxtapositions, strategies of separation and intimate resonance that *The Artist is Present* acquired its numinosity. A series of modalities including discipline, endurance, control and self-restraint, were all employed by Abramovic to deliver to her audience an emotionally charged combination of participation and distance, immediacy and detachment, imaginary possibilities and embodied experiences of physical connection. Eventually these elements assumed an additional value, a numinous sense of otherness to both her presence and the experience of reciprocal gazing itself.

Although Abramovic seemed surprised that MoMA's atrium became a site of 'pilgrimage', which one critic suggested was somewhat similar to Lourdes (O'Hagan 2), the performance was clearly elaborated and configured to become a container for emotions of a religious kind.⁹² The responses of the public were, in fact, predictable reactions to the ways in which the space and the performer's presence were constituted to provoke and contain what Mircea Eliade calls the mode of the contemporary *homo religiosus* (Eliade, *The Sacred* 22-23). This attitude does not find its home only in religious creeds but often moves individuals to search for special things and places in which to find serenity, peace of mind, intimacy and reciprocity. They look for contexts in which they can reflect on profound questions about life and death, or simply to connect to something beyond themselves. This is a condition of the soul⁹³ that resonated with what Abramovic's performance offered. It was a space symbolically set apart; a special presence to relate to and engage with; and an intimate, embracing experience in which to surrender the fatigue and worries of daily life.

92 Biesenbach also writes that they 'envisioned the chair [in front of Abramovic] would often remain empty, and didn't know that sitting in this chair across from Marina would become something so desirable that aspiring "sitters" would camp out for hours in the morning in front of the museum before it opened' (Biesenbach, *In the Presence* 9).

93 Here I refer to James Hillman's understanding of the soul as explained in subsection 1.4. "Conclusion".

To conclude this introduction, as argued by Amelia Jones in her article “The Artist is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence”, Abramovic’s desire to manifest an authentic presence in space resulted in the impossibility of securing it in space and time (Jones, *The Artist* 18). Thus her presence, embodied in stillness, emerged paradoxically within a game of moving reflections, emotional projections and performative perceptual conditions. My contention is that it is the tension between Abramovic’s dramatic desire and effort to be authentically present and the impossibility of its authenticity that constituted the potential for numinosity in *The Artist is Present*. I suggest that it is the framework of the numinous experience, and its paradoxical nature, that can allow one to hold theoretically the productive contradictions of this performance and, more generally, to approach a sphere of human experience that, given its apparent proximity to the religious, sits often uncomfortably within more established theoretical frameworks of interpretation.

In terms of structure, as established for the previous case study, my interpretative analysis focuses on the three aspects of space, presence and performance action, and is organized as follows:

- The section “Space” considers the strategies employed to set up the performance space and how the resulting structures affected the dynamics previously in place in the atrium of the museum;
- The section “Presence” considers the ways in which Abramovic performed her presence in space and the processes through which that presence acquired a numinous quality in the eyes of many of the beholders;
- The section “Action” focuses on the performance action that is the technology of reciprocal gazing and on the implications that this numinous practice had within the specific configuration of *The Artist is Present*.

Each section is approached through a multidisciplinary set of theories, bringing together perspectives from religious and performance studies intertwined with neuroscience and philosophical studies, psychoanalysis and literature. The last section also draws on the analytical auto-ethnographic experience I undertook with the technique of reciprocal gazing.

The following section provides a brief introduction to the work of Marina Abramovic, paying particular attention to the historical and cultural contexts that I regard as relevant to the piece *The Artist is Present* and to the interpretative analysis offered here.

4.2. The Artist's contextualization

Marina Abramovic has been a prolific and active protagonist in the field of performance art since the beginning of the 1970s and continues to produce innovative and controversial pieces. Born in 1946 in what is now Serbia but formerly part of Yugoslavia, she lived through the communist era of her country and developed her artistic ambitions within that cultural and political milieu. Her parents were important war heroes, Vojo and Danica Abramovic (born Rosic), who fought alongside Josip Broz Tito and after the war became important figures in his political entourage. The heroic status of her parents is often mentioned and emphasized by Abramovic in interviews and talks, in association with the sense of discipline that most of her performances require.

In her earliest work she engaged in pieces where her body's limits were pushed beyond what was considered reasonable. An example of a performance of this period is *Rhythm 5* realized in 1974, in which:

she set out on the ground a large wooden-framed five pointed star with a hollow inside, big enough to lie in. She then filled the frame with wood chips, poured on gasoline, and set the star on fire. (...) She stepped over the fire and lay down in the empty middle of the star, her arms, legs, and head splayed out into its five points. (...) After a few minutes two members of the audience realized that [she] must have lost consciousness due to the fire consuming all the oxygen (...) and jumped over the flames and hauled [her] to safety (Westcott, 67).



Figure 21: Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 5*, 1974

Around 1976 Abramovic met the German artist Uwe Laysiepen in Amsterdam and they became partners and collaborators. She gradually ceased performing solo pieces and dedicated herself totally to collaborative performances with Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen's artistic diminutive).

She and Ulay lived and worked together for twelve years in a love-work partnership. As both lovers and collaborators they blurred the boundaries between life and art, realizing live art events through which their relationship was explored in demanding physical scores structured in time. For example, in the performance *Light/Dark* realized in Cologne in 1978:

they knelt opposite to each other in a dark space but with strong spotlights pointing at them, and took turns slapping at each other's face. They were both dressed in a white T-shirt, and in their long, dark, tied-back hair looked almost identical. After each slap, gentle and slow at first and gradually gaining aggression and speed, they would slap their hand down on their thigh, creating a rhythm that drove the performance inexorably forward. (...) They both stopped slapping (...) simultaneously after twenty minutes. (Westcott, 129-132).



Figure 22: Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen, *Light/Dark*, 1978

Since their partnership came to an end in the late 1980s, Abramovic has continued to engage with performance art and persisted in exploring the limitations of the body through performance. Gradually she became more interested in the relationship between the performer and the audience and in the last couple of decades she has increasingly focused on the audience itself. She also started involving the audience in types of experiences verging on the spiritual or religious, in which the theatrical and the performative co-mingle to a degree inconceivable years before.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ In her early career as a performer Abramovic famously dismissed theatre as illusion and privileged performance as 'authentic'. This is how she conceived their differences: 'To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre (...) Theatre is fake... The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real' (O'Hagan). Her attitudes were part of an anti-theatrical prejudice widespread in the art world at that time (1970s and 1980s), an oppositional critical disposition that resonated, for instance, in Josette Féral's seminal article "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified" (1982).

Abramovic's interest in religious practices and rituals where the body is employed as a device to trigger transformations in states of consciousness and to generate information otherwise inaccessible has often been articulated in interviews, lectures, and dialogues (Antonio Damasio; Greenfield 28). She has often challenged rationalistic interpretations of realities in favour of possibilities that scientific models regard as inconceivable. For example, during the dialogue with the neuroscientist David Poeppel for the New York radio program *The Brian Lehrer Show* (March 2013), Abramovic defended the possibility that the ancient myths of the Dogan tribe in Africa contain astronomical knowledge of Jupiter's four moons and Saturn's rings, which were not seen by human beings until the invention of the telescope (Abramovic, Poeppel, Dikker 2013). Poeppel refused to endorse such a hypothesis. Another example occurred during dialogue with neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in which Abramovic argued in favour of animal and plants' consciousness, a possibility that Damasio, from a scientific perspective, denied (Antonio Damasio).

She is a passionate researcher of embodied, perceptual technologies that aim to pursue the hypothetical project of conceiving the body as an energetic field and reality as something infinitely malleable. Her interest in numinosity, as an encounter with what lies beyond rational understanding, was in fact evident from her early works. These contained the seeds for Abramovic's vocation for the religious, the numinous, the enchanted (Danto 34). In this regard *The Artist is Present* can be construed not only as the culmination of Abramovic's career but also as the affirmation of Abramovic's commitment to experiment with numinous psychophysical states.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ *The Artist is Present* has intensified collaborations between Abramovic and neuroscientists. One example is the project *Measuring the Magic of Mutual Gaze* (2011) in collaboration with Suzanne Dikker. Here Abramovic engaged in reciprocal gazing while being monitored by a piece of computer software that compared the brain activity of the two individuals. The experiment was hosted at The Watermill Center in New York in the summer of 2010, and supported by the Mortimer D. Sackler Family Foundation.

The foundations of the piece *The Artist Is Present* are to be found in the work *Night Sea Crossing* devised during the 1980s with Ulay and performed internationally twenty-two times over ninety days between 1981 and 1987.



Figure 23: Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1981

Structurally, the work was configured in a similar fashion to *The Artist is Present*, the difference being that Abramovic and Ulay were the permanent performers and there was no participation by members of the public. Like *The Artist is Present*, it consisted of a *tableau vivant* with two chairs placed at the opposite ends of a table and two people (Abramovic and Ulay) sitting opposite each other and engaging in reciprocal gazing throughout the full length of the museum's opening times. *Night Sea Crossing* represented the first work where Abramovic and Ulay made use of meditative and contemplative types of practices in performance settings. This form was inspired by the experience of living for one year, in 1980, with the Pitjantjatjara aboriginal community in Australia. The two artists were awarded a scholarship to join the nomadic desert life of the Pitjantjatjara and were permitted to live with them and retrieve from the

experience a body of performance work. The experience profoundly touched the two artists (Abramovic, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick 3). In fact the overwhelming heat of the desert, the deep connection and knowledge of the land that each member of the tribe demonstrated, and the days spent in silence and stillness (Westcott 159) greatly affected their perception. During this year Abramovic had several experiences of non-ordinary states of consciousness, which she later reflected on as follows:

Presence. Being present, over long stretches of time, until presence rises and falls, from Material to immaterial, from Form to formless, from Instrumental to mental, from Time to timeless (Bhattacharya-Stettler, Belloni 258).

These words resonate profoundly with most of the performance works she and Ulay devised after this experience. From that time, in fact, stillness and silence became the core actions explored in their work and even after their separation, Abramovic continued to pursue related projects and experiments that ultimately led, as already suggested, to her work *The Artist is Present*.

4.3. Space

This section examines the performance space of *The Artist is Present*, looking at the specific strategies employed by Abramovic to stage the practice of reciprocal gazing within the atrium of MoMA. As mentioned above, my proposition is that the modalities by which the space was set up encouraged a multi-layered sensory experience of theatricality and immediacy that rendered the atrium of MoMA the site for a multiplicity of experiences, including types of participation verging on the religious and opening toward the numinous.

The following paragraphs analyse in detail how Abramovic reconfigured the quotidian space of the MoMA atrium through three main strategies:

- Demarcation and separation to divide it;

- Klieg lights reminiscent of a film set to define it;
- Security guards to protect it.

My objectives are:

- Firstly, to investigate the creative process by which Abramovic chose the atrium as the location for installing the performance *The Artist is Present*;
- Secondly, to explore how she demarcated, differentiated and protected the space through marking the floor, making use of specific lighting and employing security guards;
- And thirdly, to explore the analytical implications generated if these modalities are explored with reference to the processes by which sacred, ‘special’ spaces are constituted in religious and performance contexts.

I suggest that the understanding of how sacred places come into being represents a valuable theoretical tool from which to look at the modalities by which the performance space of *The Artist is Present* was constituted. In addition, this perspective will help to unravel the paradoxical, numinous doubling of performativity and theatricality that Abramovic had strategically constructed.

4.3.1. The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium of the Museum of Modern Art

The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), where the performance took place, is a vast space designed in 2004 by the architect Yoshi Taniguchi for the restructuring of the pre-existing museum. Soaring 110 feet above street level is the ‘trophy-space’ Taniguchi designed for the lobby of the new Museum. The lobby interior offers open views of both the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden and the light-filled Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium. It serves as:

the information centre of the Museum, with ticket counters; information about membership, current exhibitions, and programs; and access to the Museum's theatres, restaurant, stores, and Sculpture Garden (MoMA BUILDS).

The atrium, as part of the chaotic atmosphere of the lobby, is described by Abramovic as a space ‘in permanent transition [with] people moving from ground floor to second floor to different types of galleries’ (Abramovic, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick 349); this produces a constant noise increased by the entry to the library and the coffee shop which contribute to the hectic feeling of movement informing the space. With its appearances and the constant passage of people, this space recalls what the sociologist Marc Augé, in his book *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995), identified as non-places:

locations where shared identities such as passengers, customers, [or in this case, museum visitors] transit from one place to another, as in a [constant] locus of transition (Augé 63-65).

The atrium of MoMA is in fact a space designed to serve activities like queuing, transiting, asking for information, meeting with friends and moving on to go and see the exhibitions.

This is the environment where Abramovic chose to stage the performance *The Artist Is Present*, an unusual context for a participative performance entailing stillness, meditation, contemplation, silence and intimacy. The video-documentation of the action *Tornado* (2000-2010), realized by the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, may help to understand Abramovic’s creative approach and the perceptive effect she foresaw in installing *The Artist is Present* in the atrium.

4.3.2. Abramovic's creative process in choosing location

The video *Tornado* shows Alÿs in the highlands of the countryside surrounding Mexico City with a video camera chasing the 'whirls whipped up by the wind in the burnt fields at the end of the dry season' (Alÿs 169).



Figure 24: Francys Alÿs, *Tornado, Milpa Alta* 2000–2010

His intention was to penetrate the epicentre of tornados and film them. The video material shows Alÿs running after the monumental dusty vortices with his video camera in hand, then, after a sudden change of perspective, the frame is filled with what Alÿs was filming while approaching the tornado. As Alÿs enters it the viewer is confronted visually and sonically by a landscape of terrifying immersion and non-differentiation. The wind, the terrible noise and the impenetrable wall of dust blanket any possibility of sight to both the filmmaker and the lens of the video camera, filling the scene viewed by the spectators with overwhelming upheaval and erasure. However, as Alÿs manages to reach the epicentre, a powerful if ephemeral sense of stillness and protection emerge: the fleeting eye of the storm, emphasized by the confused surroundings of the tornado's dynamic, chaotic column.

Alÿs's video provides a powerful visual aid or parallel to understanding Abramovic's decision to stage *The Artist is Present* in the atrium. During the interview with Iwona Blazwick, she herself employed the metaphor of the tornado, describing the atrium as comparable to the circulatory movements of its wind-fuelled column, with the performance space resembling the central, peaceful eye ('I') found inside (Abramovic, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick 349). She suggested that the disordered qualities of the atrium, rather than disturbing the intimate 'still point' of the performance, would reinforce it due to the dialectic of complementary forces that their juxtaposition would generate. Abramovic was attracted by the movement of the atrium because of its potentiality to contain a point of stillness within it. She described it like this:

the atrium is like a tornado. But in every tornado there is a stillness in the middle – the eye of the tornado – so I tried to make this eye of the tornado the stillness of that moment of sitting (Abramovic, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick 349).

However, a still point centre within the atrium akin to Alÿs's tornados did not physically exist, and Abramovic needed to enact specific 'agential cuts'⁹⁶ to construct the spatial context for her intended sitting performance. In doing this she must have been aware that if she merely positioned herself in the middle of the atrium without any framing around her, her presence could easily have been swept away by the hectic passage of people. She recognised the necessity of establishing a perimeter and organising a symbolic 'eye of the tornado' that would separate the performance space and therefore contain, enhance, protect and render visually striking her presence. Such a spatial configuration would make use of the chaotic quality of the atrium through separating off a portion, thereby playing dialectically with stillness and movement, emptiness and plenitude, silence and noise, the individual and the crowd, singularity

⁹⁶ See Karen Barad's theory of agential realism introduced in subsections 8.4. "Theatrical apparatuses of experimentation" and 3.5.2. "First instruction: close the eyes and remain alert".

and multiplicity. This configuration also produced an evident condition of theatricality within the undetermined, free-flowing space of the atrium.

Josette Féral and Ronald P. Bermingham, in the article “The Specificity of Theatrical Language”, argue that the condition of theatricality is a two-way process involving space and gaze (Féral, Bermingham 96). A theatrical space, they suggest, can firstly be identified as such when an inside/stage and an outside/audience is previously established. In this case, the subject, entering the space, perceives the pre-arranged spatial relations of the inside/stage and the outside/audience and categorizes them, through recognition, as theatrical (96). Also the artist when working in a conventional theatre would adjust their creative needs to an already established theatrical configuration.

The second process of theatricalization of a space that Féral and Bermingham propose, occurs through the subject’s gaze that postulates and creates, within an indeterminate space, a distinct, virtual spatial condition allocated to what is perceived as the other (the performer) (97). In this case the artist manipulates an indeterminate space into a theatrical condition within which the relation between the stage and the spectators’ sitting area can be modulated differently. An additional reflection that can be retrieved from their model is that theatricality may occur:

through a performer’s reallocation of the quotidian space that he occupies; [but also] through a spectator’s gaze framing a quotidian space that he does not occupy (Féral, Bermingham 97).

In other words, the first refers to both conventional and unconventional theatrical spaces, whereas the second refers to performative conditions of theatricality, which are not established and categorized as performance or theatre.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Please refer to the discussion of the notion of performativity in subsection 8.1. “Performance studies and the notion

In *The Artist is Present*, Abramovic's process started with the gaze through which she recognised and envisioned the quotidian space of the atrium in theatrical terms and then proceeded to reallocate the same according to her vision. In other words, Abramovic recognized through her own gaze the potentiality of 'another place' to exist within the undetermined space of the atrium and, at the same time, she actualized it by distinguishing it and physically protecting it.

According to the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, the process of recognizing potential creative possibilities of intimacy and protection within undifferentiated spaces, and the consequent activity of separating a portion of that for special purposes, is a practice that relates to the longstanding tradition of establishing sacred places (Tuan, Religion 16). David Wiles considers the constitution of sacred places in his historical analysis of the theatrical space, highlighting the ways in which religious ontologies informed the modalities and processes through which sacred places have been historically recognized and constituted as such. Christianity, for example, originally understood sacredness as an inherent and unique quality of the human soul, whereas paganism viewed sacredness as an inherent quality of specific locations (Wiles 38). According to the former, sacredness is believed to be a product of human agency in its capacity to create, through separation, special places for the divine to dwell; on the contrary, for the latter humanity recognizes, distinguishes and protects places in which inherent sacredness and distinctiveness has been previously recognized (Wiles 38). Also here we find an interrelation between space and gaze, processes of agentic allocation of spaces and processes of recognition through visual determination. Although neither of these processes are universally valid and are always divergent, their differences highlight the

profound consequences that each approach may have on the relationships that individuals and groups establish with their surrounding environment and with what their culture considers the 'other' to be in terms of space.

Applying these ideas to the process employed by Abramovic to set up the space of *The Artist is Present*, one must be mindful that one is not dealing with religious traditions or metaphysical implications, but rather with a creative process. Therefore the recognition and constitution of the special place where the performance would take place occurred due to Abramovic's artistic capacity to play with contrasts and complementary physical forces, and manipulate the space accordingly. In other words, the recognition of the perceptual effect that the atrium, in its chaotic appearances, would constitute in contrast with a place of intimacy and stillness was followed by a focused manipulation of space in terms of creativity, theatricality and representation.

The following sections take into consideration each of the modalities employed by Abramovic to set up the performance space, analysing their practical and theoretical implications. Individual subsections focus on:

- How Abramovic demarcated the performance space;
- How Abramovic differentiated the performance space;
- How Abramovic protected the performance space.

4.3.3. How Abramovic demarcated the performance space

The first action taken into consideration is the demarcation of the performance space and the elements employed by Abramovic to delineate the separation of this from the rest of the atrium space. The demarcation consisted of a line on the floor of the atrium realised by placing a set of white neon lights in a large rectangle shape. This

formal demarcation delineated the space that the artist claimed for the purpose of her performance, situating within the atrium the two spatial conditions of the ‘inside’ of the stage/performance space and the ‘outside’ of the audience space.⁹⁸ This meant that the space within the white rectangular line was assigned to the activity of reciprocal gazing and therefore declared not available to the ordinary passage of people in the atrium: only accessible under the specific circumstances of the performance. On the other hand, the space left on the edges of the rectangular line remained open for the museum’s visitors and the performance’s spectators alike. This new spatial configuration operated a clear division within the atrium and in so doing established a clear condition of theatricality.

As suggested above, the practice of separating, distinguishing and contrasting is strongly linked to the establishment of sacred spaces. Additionally it is etymologically rooted in the notion of sacredness. For example, *Sacer*, from which the term sacred derives, means an area that stands apart (Tuan, Religion 16); the Hebrew term *k-d-sh* ‘which is usually translated as “holy”, is (...) based on the idea of separation’ (Tuan, Religion 16); and the Latin word *templum* ‘is derived from the Greek *templos*, [of which the] root *tem* means “to cut out”’ (Tuan, Religion 16). According to Tuan the activity of differentiating the undifferentiated space through the establishment of sacred places is an operation analogous to the geographer’s cartographic activity of mapping a territory (Tuan, Religion 5). Furthermore, he proposes that geography is the activity through which ‘humans have tried to make themselves comfortable on Earth, and the story of how, in that very effort, they have produced sacred places’ (Tuan, Religion 5). Both are, according to him, attempts at confining nature within demarcated bounds ‘so

98 I am referring to the analysis of conventional theatre space as described by Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, mentioned in subsection 3.3.2, “An exploration of the relation between the black box and the gallery space”.

that it can be addressed and appeased, with the end that its powers yield more benefit than harm' (Tuan, Religion 5).

The activity of appeasing or placating the chaotic forces of nature when applied to *The Artist is Present* implicates a set of dynamics that are specifically human. For the forces that Abramovic aimed to placate, by drawing the white line on the floor and symbolically cutting out a framed area for the performance of reciprocal gazing, were all specifically human related. They were connected to a humanity that, according to Abramovic, is too fast and noisy, constantly distracted by its technological equipment and hypnotized by its 'magics' (Abramovic, interviewed by Adrian Searle). Therefore, her objectives were to appease and control the human movements of the atrium and, by cutting these movements off from the performance space, to reclaim that space for stillness.⁹⁹

Although this symbolic act interrupted both the continuum of the space and its ordinary routines and behaviours, the division was not physically invasive as the portion of the space inside the white line remained sensorially accessible from all four sides of the framed rectangle and from the balconies above.

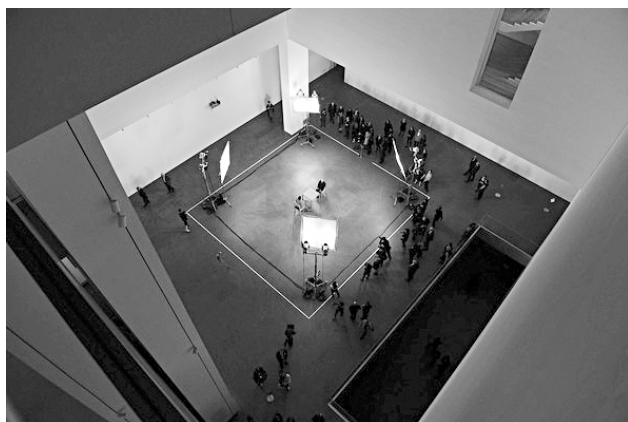


Figure 25: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010

⁹⁹ It is worth pointing out that stillness and silence are relative conditions as they both depend on the scale of reality one is looking at, the lenses employed to interpret them and the apparatuses through which they are measured.

In this way the separation established by the white line was porous rather than absolute, as everything that was going on inside the performance space could be heard, seen and smelled from the outside and vice-versa.

4.3.4. How Abramovic differentiated the performance space

The second section looks at how the space delineated by the white line was differentiated from its surroundings, without using solid impediments. The spatial element employed by Abramovic to achieve this was the strategic use of four film studio lamps placed on high stands at the four corners of the drawn rectangle. Usually employed in mainstream cinema sets, these lights were able to produce an intensely bright light. All four were directed toward the centre of the rectangle pointing toward where Abramovic and the participant would be sitting and engaging in reciprocal gazing. The result was that the space, within the perimeter of the white line, appeared glaringly bright from the outside and when one entered this heightened space it would probably have given the sensation of coming into a space where a different sense of time and space ruled (Abramovic, interviewed by Daniela Stigh). Passing through the given threshold would have been like entering through walls of lights onto a cinema set; a kind of amplified, otherworldly location where the only point of reference was the seated woman towards whom the participant was drawn.

From the outside this bright zone may have had the effect of a mirage.

Physically present in the middle of the atrium its strong presence may have appeared like a fantastical, magical, hyper-real¹⁰⁰ environment attracting visitors' attention from

¹⁰⁰ I am referring broadly to the postmodernist employment of the term hyperrealism to designate the difficulty consciousness has in distinguishing between reality and reproduction. In this case, however, I am particularly interested in interpreting it as 'something like [the] mutual fulfilment and overflowing [of reality and art] into one another through an exchange at the level of simulation of their respective foundational privileges and prejudices' (Baudrillard, 1050).

all sides of the museum's atrium. The powerful light enhanced the function of the performance space acting as a strong point of reference within the undifferentiated space of the atrium. Within the performance space a similar function was fulfilled by the table and two chairs, on one of which Abramovic was sitting. This operated as a fixed point of orientation to the participant entering the performance space.



Figure 26: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present* (Marina Abramovic and Tehching Hsieh), 2010

Stability, centrality, balance and symmetry are all qualities that, as the historian of religion Mircea Eliade argues, characterize sacred locations (Eliade, *The Sacred* 20). This is to say that sacred locations, alongside appeasing chaotic forces, traditionally function as fixed points of orientation to people (Eliade, *The Sacred* 20) offering stable positions, providing psychophysical balance and a sense of belonging. This is valid for both the outside territory and also for the interior space of sacred places where the modalities by which the space is organized and manipulated are invariably around notions of symmetry, balance of compositional weight and centrality. For instance, churches are traditionally structured around the central nave and the two symmetrically sized lateral aisles; the altar at the end of the nave and the circular space behind it are the focus of the space. Most of the architectonic characteristics of sacred places reveal a

‘tactical control over the perception of one’s surrounding environment’ (Helm II 103), a strategic form of restraint, order and focusing through which the surrounding environment is forced outside to create a particular condition of clarity and organised attention inside.

This is how a participant describes her perception on entering the performance zone of *The Artist is Present* and sitting down in front of Abramovic:

when finally I sat down before Abramovic, the bright lights blocked out the crowd, the hall’s boisterous chatter seemed to recede into the background, and time became elastic. (I have no idea how long I was there). (...) And for the first time in two days, I had absolutely no trouble focusing (Miranda).

However, not everyone experienced emotionally or energetically charged feelings. For example, Amelia Jones describes the performance space as a:

boxing ring [barrier] itself surrounded by dozens of staring visitors, cameras and lit by klieg lights [as a] simulation of relational exchange with others (Jones, *The Artist*, 18).

She depicts the experience of entering and sitting in front of Abramovic as a ‘parody of the structure of authentic expression and reception of “true” emotional resonance that modernist art discourses (...) so long claimed’ (Jones, *The Artist* 18).

The hypothesis presented in this thesis is that *The Artist is Present* was actually an experiment in perception rooted in the postmodernist notion of selfhood,¹⁰¹ in multiplicity and in emotional resonances occurring within a game of reflections and paradoxical coexistences. This was a condition that the specific set up of the performance space encouraged. For example, although the title of the piece suggested that the artist was truly, authentically there, the experiment, as already mentioned, was established in a highly theatrical context and in an environment that was at times perceived as hyper-real. This is to say that the modalities by which Abramovic

101 Please refer to subsection 8.3. “The self in post-industrial societies”.

manipulated the atrium space certainly did not question the authentic presence of the artist Abramovic, although, as will be extensively discussed in the “Presence” section of this chapter, it contributed to the production and reproduction of a series of other presences, representations and projections.

In addition, the fact that Abramovic chose to keep the performance space open to the chaotic qualities of the atrium while producing a separation within it also generated a proliferation of relationalities. In other words, *The Artist is Present*'s performance space invited a sense of stability, order, symmetry, while disrupting it. This was realised by making visible not only the contingencies of different conditions of spectatorship, but also by bringing into the apparent order of the performance space all of the instabilities coming from the movements of the atrium. This resulted in the complex, paradoxical and contradictory coexistence of intimate encounters and mundane spectacle that this thesis aims to hold together, while exploring the tensions that they produce in numinosity.

4.3.5. How Abramovic protected the performance space

The third action considered here is the protection of the performance space. This aspect brings to light a series of interesting issues about the process of rendering undifferentiated spaces significant through the establishment of separated places. The main issue is that anyone claiming parts of an area for special purposes ends up interrupting the usual movements of that place and imposing upon it a different dynamic. For example, with regard to the establishment of sacred places, in his book *The Production of Space* (1991) Henri Lefebvre suggests that separating and making portions of spaces ‘special’ is an operation driven by and functional to power, and only obtainable through control (Lefebvre 287).

If we look at the spatial set up of *The Artist is Present*, it is evident that control was not extraneous to Abramovic's management of the performance space. The performance space was not, in fact, maintained as sacred, isolated and secured by the spontaneous decision of the public, but rather by guarded surveillance. Security guards watched the perimeter of the empty space on all sides, preventing people from crossing the line, taking photographs or 'behaving inappropriately'. Control was extended to the threshold through which individual members of the audience entered the space and gained access to the performance space itself. Two security guards controlled the entry point to make sure that each participant entering the performance place complied with the rules established by Abramovic. They explained to each participant the rules before letting the person enter the heightened central space. These rules consisted primarily of requirements such as the need to respect silence, to sit without moving, and to avoid placing things on the table or touching the artist (Berg).

With reference to religious studies Paul Bouissac argues, in his semiotic studies on clowns and circuses, that as soon as a space is made special, separated from its surroundings and rules established, it starts to invite profanation (Bouissac 196). In other words, when a portion of an undifferentiated space is set apart because it is recognised as or rendered special through the establishment of boundaries and rules, the desire to disrupt and undo its orderliness emerges (Bouissac 196). Indeed, according to Bouissac, the desire to profane a location is precisely what defines and differentiates the sacred from the profane (Bouissac 196) and it is my contention that *The Artist is Present* did not represent an exception to Bouissac's argument.

Profanation is related to the adjective and verb 'profane' that originates from the Latin *profanus* which means, in its religious signification, 'outside the temple' ('Profane'). It entails actions usually performed beyond the parameters of the temple but prohibited inside because they are deemed disrespectful to the set of rules decided by the community that established the temple (Bouissac 196). Some examples of profanation that Bouissac identifies are: the handling of special objects inappropriately; the handling of such objects by people not assigned to that task; performing the special symbolic patterned behaviour of a ritual in front of the wrong person or object; manipulation of religious space without following the order prescribed; or entering a closed protected space without permission (Bouissac 196).

Some of these occurrences happened during the three-month duration of *The Artist is Present*. Many of the most striking episodes are narrated in the various blogs created by the visitors, or are recorded in the documentary *The Artist is Present* by filmmaker Matthew Akers and in the many videos uploaded to YouTube. For example, one person, eluding the attention of the guards, entered the demarcated space without passing through the threshold and vomited a substantial amount of liquid inside the space (O'Hagan 2):

a young man (...) in a red Marina-like dress sat at the table and offered to marry her body of work.¹⁰² When she remained silent, he started dancing and chanting and placed a notebook and other objects on the table. He repeatedly challenged her with his words and actions (...) eventually the guards threw him out (Berg).

In addition Ulay (Abramovic's historical collaborator and partner) sat in front of her and after a while reached out to take her hands in his (Kottke).

102 Amir Baradaran. Act III: Other Trance, On Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*. Web. 10 May 2012. <http://vimeo.com/10588194>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A172FAOQdbw>.

Some of the many profanations that occurred during the performance were almost encouraged, others were tolerated, while others were strictly prohibited. For example, when Ulay moved to touch Abramovic's hand for obvious reasons nobody intervened. This micro-encounter-event gave an additional emotional and historical value to the event as a whole. It represented a moment of reintegration, rather than profanation, in the (troubled/ruptured) narrative of Marina and Ulay. It was a re-connective action that, as recorded in the documentary film, was applauded (Akers).



Figure 27-28: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present* (Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen), 2010

A closer look at the question of controlling profanation from the perspective of how the perception of sacred, special spaces operate in secular and broadly experimental contexts is imperative together with an analysis of how this perspective applies to *The Artist is Present*. My proposition is that in such contexts profanation is any act that changes the specific configuration that has been given to a specific context or shifts the relations put into place and accordingly the expected results. The prohibition of profanation, therefore, is not related to a moral set of rules but to practical and functional concerns. For example, if the specialness of the event *The Artist is Present* is understood as an experimental proposition rather than from a conventional religious creed's perspective, rules and control become functional to the process and the success of the experiment itself. A surgery procedure, for instance, would be terribly jeopardized if the surgery room was to be profaned by a person entering wearing ordinary clothes and touching sterilized instruments. This would also be the case,

although with less grave implications, not only for the experiment of reciprocal gazing but also for the double spatial configuration explained above. When considered from this perspective the modalities by which Abramovic has devised the space are strategic procedures that aim to maintain the experiment within certain controllable boundaries. If the elements and the set of rules at play were changed, the experience, losing the specificity of its configuration, would necessarily have become something else. The fact that Abramovic made her performance unavailable to structural changes by prescribing certain organising parameters is consistent with the inherently experimental nature of her artistic and performance processes.

To conclude this section, the modalities by which the space had been set up by Abramovic produced within the atrium a powerful theatrical proposition. The elements employed rendered the performance space heightened like a film set, and its particular qualities of framing and illumination attracted people to participate. Its configuration resulted in a complicated intersection of artistic languages that can be synthesized in its description as a film set, theatrically staged, inside the Museum of Modern Art. This is to say that from the perspective of space, *The Artist is Present* interweaved an array of cultural references to produce a magical box of postmodern tricks containing the vision and utopian dream of true engagement and authentic human exchange, and the conditions for their potential activation. However, in this configuration, although the luminous arena of intersecting gazes is devised to produce maximum visibility, the ‘action’ of reciprocal gazing (its content: the events/perceptions it enables) is paradoxically withheld from the gaze of those observing.¹⁰³

103 This aspect of the performance is examined in the section 4.5. “Action”.

4.4. Presence

So far I have established that Abramovic protected and rendered a portion of the atrium's space 'special' through separation, while also leaving it open to sensory engagement and general visibility. In fact, there were no solid impediments preventing anyone in the atrium from seeing Abramovic sitting in the middle of the performance space. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this particularity of the performance space generated a double performer-spectator dynamic. To remind the reader, the first consisted of her presence viewed from the edges of the performance space by both the visitors queuing to participate in the piece *The Artist is Present* and those entering the atrium; and the second consisted of the one-to-one action of reciprocal gazing where Abramovic and the participant were both performer and spectator in relation to each other. This second performer-spectator dynamic was partly inaccessible to the spectators outside the performance space.

This part of the chapter looks specifically at Abramovic's presence seen from the outside and therefore at the first spectator/performer relationship. Specifically, I propose to explore how the phenomenological presence of the artist potentially embodied a series of imaginative semiotic representations that each spectator projected on to her according to their own personal and cultural histories. The suggested hypothesis is that Abramovic created the theatrical and performative conditions not only to enable spectators to project on to her a multiplicity of other imaginary co-presences, but also to embody a presence that was at once phenomenological, energetic and semiotic. This is to say that her presence became so special in the eyes of many of the beholders as to encourage types of experiential responses and perceptual processes that I analyse within the framework of the numinous. The elements she employed to achieve this condition were:

- Use of costume and make-up;
- Preparation and training;
- Endurance and stillness;
- Engaging with pain.

I start this part of the chapter by providing information about Abramovic's appearance and how she prepared herself for this performance. After this the questions of pain and endurance are analysed to describe further the type of presence she constructed in space. This is followed by an analysis of the special qualities that Abramovic's presence seemed to acquire in time, an analysis that considers the paradoxical coexistence of both processes of embodiment and disembodiment. Ultimately, the notion of incarnation is explored using performance, theatre and religious studies intertwined with philosophical and scientific reflections. Here the presence of Abramovic is interpreted in numinosity to propose its creative potentialities in secularity.

4.4.1. Abramovic's appearances and training

Abramovic's appearance to her audience was as follows: her face was heavily made up with a thick layer of white foundation cream, the brightness of which was amplified by the light from the four lamps. Her black hair was plaited on one side and worn over one of her shoulders. For the duration of the performance she wore 'long and grave robes' (Aull 13) with a long sculptural tail covering her feet and trailing on the floor to form a circular shape around her. Although the style of the dress stayed the same for the duration of the performance, the colour changed each month. During the first month it was blue, the second red, and the third white. To Abramovic the choice of

each colour was related to energy. For instance, at the beginning of the performance she told Iwona Blazwick that she:

really needed to calm down to get into the piece with the blue. By the middle of the piece in April the energy level was so low that [she] had to get the energy back, and so it was red. White was very much to do with a complete purifying feeling at the end of the performance (Abramovic, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick 6).

The three colours were the only reference to a narrative or developmental arc, which, as Abramovic suggests, refers to the personal journey she went through in enduring her presence for the three months of the performance (Abramovic, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick 6).

Apart from the change in colour of her dress, Abramovic's presence stayed the same for the entire performance, giving the impression that she was sitting there day and night. This perception was strategically emphasized by two main factors: the first was the fact that every day, for the three months of the exhibition, she positioned herself on the chair in the middle of the performance space before the opening of the museum and left only after all of the museum's visitors were gone. Nobody ever saw her entering the space or leaving it. The second was achieved by her sitting in position throughout the daily opening time of the museum without moving to eat, drink or go to the toilet for eight or even ten hours a day. This capacity to resist or override physiological needs and to endure her stillness for such a long time was achieved through rigorous training.

Her training started a few months before the beginning of the performance and continued until the end of the three-month period. It was especially designed to enable Abramovic to endure stillness for many hours without satisfying her bodily functions. For example, in the months leading to the performance she became vegetarian, engaged

daily in deep meditation, cleansed herself through several means, learnt to eat certain food so as to be able to avoid going to the toilet for up to ten hour, and learnt to sleep in short bursts at night (O'Hagan 3). This is how she describes the regime she undertook during the performance:

I take my last pee at 8 in the morning. In the evening when I sleep, this was very difficult to train, I have to take water every 45 minutes and sleep, and 45 minutes and sleep, because not to dehydrate during the night. But then during the day I didn't [have to pee]. And then I had this very strict diet with very light food and only eating in the morning very certain things and in the evening I did not engage in any social events (Abramovic, interviewed by Daniela Stigh and Zoë Jackson).

Through these procedures she managed to endure her performance to the point of triggering, paradoxically, a double perceptual process of embodiment and disembodiment. However, before exploring this aspect I propose to consider another factor that I regard as important for understanding how Abramovic's presence acquired numinosity: her capacity to endure pain.

4.4.2. Enduring pain

Pain in Abramovic's practice was an important factor (and a material actively at play in her work from the very beginning), informing almost all of her performances. She engaged with pain by pushing the threshold of her physical and mental limits to the extreme in order to manipulate self-perception, challenge audiences and conventional approaches to spectatorship and to acquire experiential knowledge about the boundaries between the self and its environment. *The Artist is Present* was no exception to this and indeed, as explained in the following paragraphs, pain was identified and employed in this work as a threshold of consciousness.

The philosopher Elaine Scarry in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) designates pain by employing two categories. She

identifies a deconstructive aspect of pain which humans suffer under extreme immoral conditions such as torture or war, and a constructive function, which she relates to creation (Scarry, *The Body* 22). Ariel Glucklich in his book *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (2001) also draws on the double distinctive qualities in the nature of pain, emphasizing the difference:

between the unwanted pain of a cancer patient and the voluntary and modulated self-hurting of a religious practitioner (Glucklich 6).

Leaving aside the former, which does not concern the topic of this thesis, the specificity of the latter is determined by the intentionality of the sufferer to subject her/himself to pain but also by her/his objectives in doing so. These are questions that are greatly related to technologies of the self and their religious practitioners. For example, according to Glucklich the task of religious practitioners is to transform suffering into psychological mechanisms of reintegration ‘within a more deeply valued level of reality than individual existence’ (Glucklich 6). In religious contexts¹⁰⁴ pain is, therefore, understood as sacred because of its capacity to produce states of consciousness and cognitive-emotional changes that, affecting the identity and perception of the practitioners, allows them to access what each tradition differently identifies as the ‘wholly other’.

Abramovic describes the pain she felt in enduring stillness for so long during the performance *The Artist is Present* in ways that resonate with the tone and attitude explained above. Pain is depicted as a tool for understanding and self-discovery, for example she said:

I have learnt that in your body you have so much space and you can actually move inside that. There is a space between organs, there is space between atom and cell, so you can actually start training to breathe a kind of air into that space. And then I understood that the pain is actually not having space,

¹⁰⁴ Although I am referring to a general category it is worth mentioning that each religious context has its own relationship and specific theologies through which pain is encountered and understood. Therefore, contexts can differ greatly each other.

it's when organs and everything press inside, so by breathing air you can make the pain just disappear. (...) [by the end] of this piece I actually had less pain than in the beginning (Abramovic, interviewed by Daniela Stigh and Zoë Jackson).

Pain is therefore associated with space and what Elaine Scarry terms 'the most contracted of spaces' (Scarry, *The Body* 22), as well as with the 'invisible geograph[ies]' (Scarry, *The Body* 3) of the inside that language finds difficult to describe.

Having said that, pain happens in the body, in its physicality, in that subtle body-mind condition we refer to as embodiment. Therefore, it may become visible and emerge from the depths of the hidden to the surface so as to touch the sensibility of another person capable of reading the subtle signs of changes in human physicality. In this regard the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in his book *Descartes' Error* (2006), argues that the relation between inner states and physical appearances are in fact 'particular body landscape[s]' that are not invisible but actually reflected by the skin (Damasio, *Descartes* 230). He points out that the skin is the first key player in homeostatic regulation and therefore regulates metabolism by changing colour from being pale to blushing and through perspiration, expansion or inflammation phenomena. This is an aspect that is particularly important in performances such as *The Artist is Present* where the spectators had the time and possibility to really observe attentively the smallest changes in the appearance of a performer who was there in stillness for hours.¹⁰⁵ Over time Abramovic's inner states, including pain, transformed her physicality; changing her appearance and expressions, and consequently affecting her relationship with the audience.

¹⁰⁵ It might also be argued that these subtle physical changes could be categorized as micro-performances.

In other words, despite Abramovic's make-up and her still, focused expression, her external appearance was modulated and altered in ways relating to Damasio's account and indeed she was visibly communicating her inner journey through her visible epidermal surfaces. Looking at the visual documentation it is noticeable that her face was sometimes heavily perspiring, at other times disturbingly pale, drawn or swollen (Akers, Anelli).



Figure 29-30-31: Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010

These phenomena acquired meaning in performance. Indeed rather than compromising the strength of her presence in space, they contributed to give it more allure, in part also through association with the mythological significance that Christian societies have culturally and historically attributed to pain. This was evident in some of the mythological connections and associations people started to make.

4.4.3. The paradoxical coexistence of both embodiment and disembodiment

Partly as a result of the visibility of her pain, some spectators and critics associated Abramovic's presence to Christian figures such as Christ or the Virgin Mary. For example, Felicitas Aull, in her seminar paper "The Performance of the artist Marina Abramovic in the MoMA-Museum of Modern Art, N.Y. as a Mirror of Zeitgeist", suggested that:

she is sitting like a Madonna on her chair, wearing long and grave robes seeming anachronistically of another century or fallen out of the paintings of ancient Italian painters (...). I also recognize in her (...) the figure of Jesus [who] takes the pain of his death, of the crucifixion, to release us (13-14).

However, although these associations were plausible interpretative possibilities, Abramovic's presence was not semiotically devised according to these narratives.

Abramovic's presence was in fact highly elusive and had performative, shifting and mobilising meanings among possibilities of interpretation that, despite the individual strength of each, could not focus and resolve the signification of her presence into any one of these singular representations. She staged her presence as a canvas on to which spectators could project their own significations and narratives. While each association was certainly not arbitrary, each semiotic body she came to represent in the eyes of the beholders was a projection rather than a particular attribute or character devised by the performer. What she actually activated, with her theatrical apparatus and

her presence, was the circular process between the presentation of herself as Marina Abramovic and what she potentially became in the mind of each spectator. This resulted in a presence from which a plurality of liminal spaces of negotiation between processes of presentation and representation emerged, that over time rendered her presence numinous.

Erika Fisher-Lichte in the article “Appearing as Embodied Mind – Defining a Weak, a Strong and a Radical Concept of Presence” defines these types of performance presences using the notion of a ‘radical concept of presence’ (112). She identifies those processes through which the performer is able to recreate their:

phenomenal body as an energetic body and thus produce presence in the strong sense of the concept, *without* representing any figure or anything else (Fisher-Lichte, *Appearing* 112).

The production of an energetic body which is capable of resonating differently according to each spectator’s needs and desires, without providing a definite/singular reading or character, closely coheres with what Abramovic suggested through her presence. As implied in the title *The Artist is Present*, Abramovic presented herself as a palpable being made of flesh and blood. At the same time, because she endured stillness for the whole day, every day for three months, ultimately she also embodied a presence oddly uninterrupted by quotidian bodily functions such as eating, drinking, sleeping or defecating. In her (apparently) omnipresent presence, Abramovic appeared to occupy a place that did not really belong to the world outside the delimited space of the performance, as nobody ever saw her leaving it. This strategy not only gave spectators the feeling that the performance was running continuously for three months, but also offered glimpses of an impossible physical realm manifested in the everyday life of the museum. She appeared to be there in perpetuity, sitting and belonging forever to that

theatrical dimension, an effect that was emphasized by her make-up, the lighting reflecting on her skin and her face transmuted by pain. All these elements contributed to her otherworldly, never-ending theatrical presence.

Obviously she was not representing a ‘ghost, as in *Hamlet*, which means a body (...) which requires that a phantom, replica, or simulacrum of itself be sent back to tidy up its affairs’ (Caputo, *Bodies* 96). Rather, she was what the philosopher and theologian Caputo in the essay “Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid: A Hermeneutic of Bodies without Flesh” calls a ‘risen body’; a kind of completion or perfection of a body/presence that ‘breaks the tension between the possible and the impossible (...) [and exposes] a simply impossible body’ (Caputo, *Bodies* 96-97).

This double dynamic of presenting herself and at the same time representing a non-established ‘other’, rendered the title *The Artist is Present* ambiguous as the term ‘artist’ seemed to stand for much more than the presence of Marina Abramovic. It is my contention that it stood for the infinite numbers of possible reflections that the imaginative capacity of each spectator could create entangled in the processes of disembodiment and embodiment strategically constructed by Abramovic. It stood for the presence of each of them and their faculty to create and manipulate a presence that pushed and blurred ‘the limits of representation-ability’ (Reinelt 201), and presentation-ability.

In order to clarify this point further, there follows a short parenthesis on how both processes of disembodiment and embodiment have been employed in theatre and their relation to notions of representation and presentation.

As Fischer-Lichte points out in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), the idea of disembodying the body of the performer is a longstanding tradition rooted in the history of theatre and in the philosophical understanding of mind-body dualism. For example, when theatre was mainly concerned with the representation of a text, the body of the actor, in order to be employed in the art of acting, had to undergo a process of disembodiment (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 78-79). The idea behind this notion was that:

any reference to the actor bodily being-in-the-world must be exorcised from his material body in order to produce an entirely semiotic body (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 79).

In other words, ‘only a “purely” semiotic body could communicate the text’s meanings “truthfully” and perceptibly to the audience’ (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 79). Even when the actor was allowed to engage with literature through her/his own physicality, the embodiment of a character still presupposed a previous process of disembodiment from her/his own individual specificities. In both cases what was requested from the actor was to undergo the appropriate training that would allow them to separate or displace themselves from their present identity in order to deliver, firstly, a pure semiotic experience, and secondly, the embodiment of a different personality.

On the other hand the theatre director Jerzy Grotowski viewed disembodiment not as a process of separation from the everyday individuality of the actor but as an operation of discovery through which the actor would learn to surrender to the agency of the body itself (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 92)¹⁰⁶. Embodiment, in this case, was actualized by Grotowski’s performers as an ‘act of revelation’ within which the body emerged as a field of possibilities. According to Fischer-Lichte, this was a field of exploration of the significance of ‘being a body’, a living organism:

¹⁰⁶ Here the body of the actor is understood in relation to performativity, and to the discourses around scripts and embodiment investigated in subsection 8.1, “Performance studies and the notion of performativity”.

constantly engaged in the process of becoming, of permanent transformation. [A] body that knows no state of being; it exists only in a state of becoming (Fisher-Lichte, *The Transformative* 92).

Grotowski's approach recalls Abramovic's employment of the *via negativa* in performance 'as a means by which (...) [to] achieve [both] self-exposure and revelation' (Auslander 22).

4.4.4. Embodying the numinous

Thinking about Abramovic's longstanding engagement with technologies of the self, I would suggest that her 'act of revelation' (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative* 92) aimed to reveal conditions of embodiment that challenged not only cultural discourses, but also the biological limitations within which the human condition is constrained. Indeed, it is an on-going project of Abramovic's to imagine and manifest, through the employment of technologies of the self, an embodied mind capable of manipulating its cultural and biological existence. This is a fascinating project in which ethical, political and aesthetic boundaries and limitations are far from settled. Abramovic's contribution to it remains within the artistic domain as, according to her, it is art that it is capable of collapsing the differences between imagination and reality ("Antonio Damasio and Marina Abramovic"), making manifest what is regarded as culturally and biologically inconceivable.

Approaching the concept of an embodied mind will help to contextualize Abramovic's vision further in relation to numinosity. It is understood with the notion of the embodied mind that human cognition, even the most abstract reasoning and emotions, depends on the sensorimotor system of the body (Vásquez 152). In other words, the nature of human understanding and cognition is largely determined by the way the human body is biologically made. On the other hand, social constructivist and

post-structuralist philosophical accounts point out that the sensorimotor systems of the body do not function neutrally. In other words, referring back to subsection 8.2 (“Technologies of the self”), our biological set up functions according to cultural discourses in history, race and gender that constrain our bodies within given confines (Vásquez 152). Accordingly, some of the limitations that we believe to be absolutes are shaped by cultural discourses.

On the other hand, the physicist Barad questions, in her feminist post human interpretation, the absoluteness that cultural discourses have acquired with regard to matter and argues for an ‘agency’ of material processes (Barad, Meeting 133-134). Barad brings together cultural and biological material processes into dialogically, intra-active, evolutive systems within which both acquire agentive power in shaping what is understood as ‘the real’ (Barad, Meeting 133-134). This logic regards the territory of what can possibly be made manifest to be an open landscape defined each time differently according to the type of intra-actions in place between cultural discourses and processes of mattering.¹⁰⁷

In addition, according to Damasio the organism, comprising the brain-body partnership, interacts with the environment as an ensemble generating internal responses, some of which are images (Damasio, Descartes 89). Therefore, having an embodied mind means, following Damasio’s logic, having the capacity ‘to form neural representations which can become images, and eventually influence behaviour’ (Damasio, Descartes 90).

¹⁰⁷ I am referring to Barad’s conception of matter as explicated in subsection 8.1. “Performance studies and the notion of performativity”.

In this respect Abramovic's presence within the performance *The Artist is Present* offered an image of a human body capable of disengaging from the 'need to eat and sleep' (Vásquez 153), and embodied the possibility of resisting such delimitations and of opening another realm of consciousness. Abramovic's presence in *The Artist is Present* may therefore also be interpreted as a declaration to challenge cultural limitations and to expand, through the presentation of an impossible image, the boundaries of what can be achieved through our condition of embodiment. She opened space for experimentation with the fantastic, the religious, the paradoxical and the numinous, and in so doing, in the middle of an internationally recognized museum of modern art, she confused and co-mingled the religious and ritualistic spheres with the secular context that such a cultural institution represents. This is a project that is not necessarily in contrast to secularity but rather aims to renegotiate its boundaries. In this respect Damasio envisions, for example, that future neurobiological understanding of the embodied mind will 'not relinquish its most refined levels of operation, those constituting its soul and spirit' (Damasio, Descartes 252). He goes on to state that they may be interpreted as 'complex and unique states of an organism', and that this interpretation should not take away the dignity and fundamental functions that these states have always had for human existence (Damasio, Descartes 252).

Abramovic aspires to expand this project in art and offer others possibilities of interaction that a human organism has with its environment, where their specific boundaries are set and how their specific limitations can be altered, broken or manipulated. Nevertheless, whereas in her earlier work she pushed these boundaries to the point of risking her own life, her mature work demonstrates how mediated languages entered her repertoire allowing imagination to envisage what could not yet be experienced.

In addition to the theatrical strategies employed in *The Artist is Present*, another example is offered by the photographic project *The Kitchen, Homage To Saint Therese* (2009), made just before *The Artist is Present*. In the photos realized by Marco Anelli in the orphanage kitchens of La Laboral, a sprawling arts complex in Gijón, Spain, Abramovic appears to achieve levitation through illusionist procedures that she would have fiercely refused in her early professional life.



Figure 32: Marina Abramovic, *The Kitchen, Homage To Saint Therese* (2009)

These images are visual references to and a celebration of the experiences recorded in Saint Thérèse d'Avila's diary where, according to Abramovic, she complains about the problems she has with cooking while levitating uncontrollably (Marina Abramovic, *The Kitchen, Homage To Saint Thérèse*).

Given the tone of her diary entries, some of the events registered in Saint Thérèse d'Avila's writings can be read as humorous or hallucinatory experiences. However, if negotiated from a perspective that is able to value irrationality,¹⁰⁸ they could also be interpreted as the recordings of categories of experience that lie outside what is considered possible. If her writings are taken seriously a cultural dimension of

108 I am referring here to Caputo's radical hermeneutics as explained in subsection 2.2 above, "Hermeneutics: historical and contemporary developments".

religious beliefs and numinous perceptions becomes available to the reader. From this perspective the body has the potential to become as light as ‘sheer energy [and] always in the process of flowing and becoming’ (Vásquez 154), a body capable of overcoming the needs of the flesh and defeating gravity.

This is a realm of consciousness that cannot be fully apprehended through the quantitative, positivist evidence of the conventional western scientific model: it is a subjective perceptual condition that resists objectification. It is a condition within which mythological bodies die and resuscitate, and are capable of enduring excruciating pain and renewing themselves in miraculous revelations. These are the bodies of the saints and mystics who blur the confines of the possible and the impossible, madness and normality, the subject and the object, the self and environment; shocking the bewildered non-believer who lives outside the sphere of the miraculous. These are bodies that incarnate the numinous through their physical presence.

4.4.5. Incarnation, an interpretation of its numinous qualities in performance

Some of the philosophical reflections raised by Simone Weil in her book *Gravity and Grace* (1947) may help to elucidate further the hypothesis suggested above. Weil argued that our life is rooted in impossibility (Weil 95):

Everything we want contradicts the conditions or the consequences attached to it, every affirmation, all our feelings are mixed up with their opposites (Weil 95).

This is a condition that can be exorcised, according to her, by touching on ‘the impossible’ (95). She mentions the mystery of incarnation as the most concrete way of touching ‘the impossible’ as it plays the function of paradoxes (Weil 95), of riddles capable of exploding the space between the ‘wholly other’ and the self, and their reciprocal unintelligibility. Weil points out that the myth of incarnation indicates a limit

of a certain logic that belongs to the plane of consciousness of reason; but also drives at the necessity for a change of plane of consciousness, calling for what she metaphorically defines as ‘a break in the ceiling’ (96) of cultural assumptions and given rationalities.

The etymological meaning of incarnation is related to the Late Latin ‘*incarnatûs*, past participle of *incarnâre*, to make flesh (...) make incarnate; embody’ (‘Incarnation’). The notion of incarnation is also used in the discourse of cultural studies to signify, similarly to the notion of embodiment:

the constitution of human identity and subjectivity as a process of disciplination of the body (...) to the discursive order of society (Mulder 5).

This implication recognizes identity, gender and subjectivity as a form of intersection of different discourses embodied and performed by the singular or collective body-matter. At the same time, in the field of theological and religious studies the notion of incarnation refers particularly to the process of embodiment of symbolic discourses, such as for instance the biblical idea of ‘the word made flesh’, the expression indicating the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth (Mulder 6); or in pantheist Hinduism, for example, Krishna as Vishnu’s embodied avatar.

Feminist theorists in the field of theology and religious studies have endeavoured to deconstruct the Christian theological interpretation of both incarnation and revelation into the figure of Jesus Christ, and to open its interpretations to an ongoing project of possibilities of both embodiments and movements. This project, proposed by feminist scholars including Luce Irigaray, Katherine Keller, and Anne-Claire Mulder, opens the theological reading of the notion of incarnation to conceptualizations of its symbolic value in the movement between transcendence and immanence (Mulder 6). These theorists engage with this project in an ethical and

epistemological effort to problematize the ‘relation between the human subject and the other, be it the other human being’ or the other as the divine (Mulder 3).

Although Abramovic has never shown any interest in feminist discourses, such an endeavour seems to resonate with *The Artist is Present* where Abramovic’s presence, as a woman, is able to reveal and incarnate a spiritual, numinous, ‘other’ discourse. However, as suggested above, what she incarnated was not a recognisable symbol but an ideal potentiality left open by the declaration of *The Artist is Present*. What was present, therefore, was a presence that spoke:

to the imagination (...) as it holds (...) the promise, as well as a program and horizon (...) that [something other] (can) become manifest, revealed, embodied [and experienced] (Mulder 1).

She incarnated what potentially she (and we) could become, another possibility of being in the world, which, despite it not being manifested and its negation by the scientific model, may be rendered possible by art and imagination. Her presence therefore spoke, through feeling, presentiment, and longing, to the:

inward voice of conscience (...) [,] the ‘still, small voice’ of the (...) heart [that looks for] *signs* to attest to the idea that the [other] as an active operative reality, intervening in the phenomenal world’, *may* exist (Otto 143).

Such a presence is ‘revealed in persons and displayed in actions’ (ibid) in a process of becoming that has a double movement involving an inner revelation operated by the ‘inward conscience’ of each spectator and an outward revelation actualized by Abramovic.

It is possible that, for some people, she may have embodied that salvific extra value that they recognized and designed according to their symbolic belief systems and needs: a numinous presence realised and completed in its signification through the

imaginings of individual spectators. This is how one visitor commented on

Abramovic's presence:

I feel that everyone in the atrium is participating in the performance, the question is how? Abramovic is sitting in silence, with openness & grace but how one responds to this is a personal choice: will it be with connection, impatience, respect, disdain, by photographing/tweeting/writing etc. or simply by "being"? (Meladandri)

Therefore it is this insurmountable ambiguity, with its many possibilities of becoming, that I propose moved so many visitors, some to the point of worship, and set in motion a chain of reactions in consciousness like spontaneous overflows of emotion, blank wonder, astonishment – or simply moved people to be there, day after day.

To conclude this part of the chapter: Abramovic's presence, due to the modalities by which the space was set up, contributed to a double level of spectatorship. The first occurred between her and members of the audience standing at the edges of the performance space; and the second between her and the person engaging in reciprocal gazing. Thus far the focus has been on her presence from the perspective of the spectators standing outside the performance space. From this perspective, her presence activated a series of possible interpretations that I have examined, engaging with the question of pain, processes of embodiment and disembodiment in theatre, and notions of incarnation from a philosophical, cultural and feminist perspective. In analysing her presence from these perspectives the meaning of the title *The Artist is Present* is interrogated, rendering it ambiguous and potentially capable of including within the notion of the 'artist' all the spectators and their capacity to create images. Finally, the potential numinosity that her presence acquired was introduced.

4.5. Action

This section engages with the second performance level and in particular with the performance action and technology of the self of reciprocal gazing. This, as introduced at the beginning of the previous section, was contextualized and configured within the particular setting of a double dynamic of performance/spectatorship. It was produced by the people queuing outside the performance space who could witness Abramovic and the participant engaging in reciprocal gazing. Evidently this factor not only informed and influenced what was going on inside the performance space, but also activated a reflective and circular process of reciprocal influence between the outside and the inside.

This particular theatrical configuration is analysed in this section primarily in relation to the technology of reciprocal gazing. The hypothesis proposed here is that, within this setting, the practice was performed within a particularly uneven relationship that, in my opinion, contributed to an activation of types of behaviour that recalled forms of worship. I suggest that this occurred because of the special qualities that the performance space and Abramovic's presence acquired and embodied for the spectators outside. Each participant engaging with Abramovic in reciprocal gazing queued for a long time outside the perimeters of the performance space engaging perceptively with the sense of specialness hovering around both space and presence.

As has been explored in the previous section, due to the modalities by which Abramovic's presence was staged in space, her 'original presence' was altered in perception into a series of representations of projected 'others'. This phenomenon affected visitors entering the performance space to engage with Abramovic in reciprocal gazing. So that when sitting in front of her, each visitor reciprocated her gaze from an

already emotionally and imaginably charged perspective, informing and influencing their engagement with the technology of the self in place.

In the following paragraphs I analyse and interpret reciprocal gazing, considering the specific apparatus in context. I do this by employing theories from religious studies and literature, and philosophical and scientific perspectives that expand the hypothesis proposed here. The multidisciplinary approach suggested helps to elucidate the multi-layered qualities of the practice of reciprocal gazing carried out within the theatrical apparatus of *The Artist is Present*. In addition, it highlights how performance, religion, philosophy and science are all useful tools to interpret the notion of the numinous within the specific configuration offered by the performance. The section is structured into six subsections, following this order:

- The practice of reciprocal gazing;
- An exploration of the action of gazing;
- What happens when the gaze is reciprocated?;
- An analysis of how the extraordinary presence of Abramovic influenced the practice of reciprocal gazing;
- An investigation of worship in relation to *The Artist is Present*;
- Reciprocal gazing and visual perception in the context of *The Artist is Present*.

The last part will compare the process through which human visual perception occurs in ordinary contexts with the numinosity that the same process acquires during the practice of reciprocal gazing. As specified in Chapter 2 (“Methodology”), the analysis will be informed in part by my personal engagement with the practice.

4.5.1. The practice of reciprocal gazing

In broad terms, the activity of reciprocal gazing consists of two people looking into each other's eyes for a given period of time so that a particular experiential dynamic of transformation of the visual perception is achieved. The longer the two people engage in the practice, the more effective it becomes. The gaze can be directed alternatively toward each singular eye or focused toward the space in between the two eyes. In general terms, reciprocal gazing is an intimate encounter with another human being. It is an activity that, if sustained for a long time, may trigger a substantial change in visual perception and in the emotional state of the gazer to the point that, in particular contexts, this experience is interpreted as an encounter with the divine.

Although rigorous research on this practice has not yet been undertaken there are religious traditions that regard the exchanging of gazes as an important aspect of their devotion toward the divine. For example, Greek Orthodox believers pray while gazing with great veneration into the eyes of their chosen sacred icon for long periods (Johnson 2). In this tradition seeing the deity in its sacred representation is understood as the experience of touching and being touched by the divine (Pentcheva 631). The Hindu practice of *darshan* also consists of beholding the image of the divine 'with one's own eyes, to see and to be seen by the deity' (Eck 3). *Darshan* may apply to places regarded as special, such as Himālayan peaks, as well as to persons considered holy such as *sants* (saints), *sādhus* (holy men) and *sannyāsins* (renouncers) (Eck 5). In the book *The Spiritual Practice of Rumi* (2003), Will Johnson suggests the hypothesis that the Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi had engaged in long retreats of reciprocal gazing with the 'wondering seeker' Shams-I Tabriz (Johnson 12-28), and argues that his poetry has been inspired by such practice. In addition, reciprocal gazing is largely employed in new, emerging spiritual groups and movements where traditional spiritual teachings are

mixed with other practices. For example, new age western versions of the Tantric Buddhist tradition include periods of eye gazing, as do some western Zen teachers in their sessions (Johnson 6).

4.5.2. An exploration of the action of gazing

To gaze at something entails looking for a consistent period of time at a specific point of attention. This practice narrows down the field of vision and the range of what is visible and thus diminishes the brain's aptitude 'to look at things as briskly and efficiently as possible' (Elkins, How IX). Therefore, when the objective of being efficient loosens its grasp on vision, the eyes are left to wonder on the reduced space of observation, enabling information previously unnoticed or overlooked to reach consciousness. Such a practice is related to slowing down as a potential tool for encountering what would otherwise go unobserved. It is a process that shifts both spatial and temporal parameters of perception and paradoxically allows a range of other information or perceptual events to manifest and be apprehended. Therefore there is 'an epistemology of/in slowness, [whose] propositions are informative' and, at the same time, provocative for both the doer and the witness (deLahunta, Ginot, van Imschoot, *et al* 63).

In his book *39 Microlectures in Proximity of Performance* (2001), the artist and writer Matthew Goulish¹⁰⁹ reflects on the generative qualities of slowness and 'slow thinking', suggesting that any experience deserves respect 'in the sense of the word's original Latin meaning, "to look twice" (...) [to] "Look and Look again"' (82). The repetitive action of looking and looking again entails an immersion into the present, a letting go of both planning for the future and revisiting the past in thought. It requires a

¹⁰⁹ Matthew Goulish is one of the founders of the Chicago-based Goat Island performance group, and of his current company Every House Has A Door.

surrendering to inner processes within which the self loses part of her/his agency on the unfolding rhythms of her/his existence. This condition necessitates trust and the courage to face ‘the possibility that if we succeed we might find that in fact nothing is happening’ (Goulish 82) in the here and now. Furthermore, it is a process that may also produce ‘a dissident friction among the complex layered polyrhythms of (...) [other] conceptions and practices of mobility’ (Williams, Allsopp 1) constituting our daily life. In fact, although Goulish assures his readers that ‘something is always happening’ (82) underneath the surface of things, the simple meditative action of looking again and again remains a phenomenon layered with fear for many people.

The action of seeing is in itself a complex biological phenomenon and also an experience ‘that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices’ (Morgan, *The Sacred* 3) that constantly inform the way we see, what we see and what we overlook. Therefore the rhythms, modalities and qualities of seeing are not neutral activities, but rather are constantly informed by the way we move in the world, by the tasks we need to fulfil, as well as by what we have learnt about the world, how we have learnt it, and how functional what we have learnt in relation to the task we have to fulfil is. Each time we see something, the way we see it derives from a projection of conventions that enables certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience and certain relations to emerge (Morgan, *The Sacred* 3) or disappear. Slowing down and looking at something for a long time is a powerful undertaking that may affect the complex apparatuses constituting the self, its identity and network of relations established with the surrounding environment.

Exercising our sight, fixing its gaze on a specific point of attention, is one aspect of reciprocal gazing. However, the fact that in reciprocal gazing the point of attention is reduced to another person's eyes adds a relational aspect, a double dynamic that brings the gaze into the circular movement of seeing and being seen. This is to say that, if *The Artist is Present* is a piece about stillness, visibility, vision and the visionary, about what we see and what we do not see, it is also about being seen, and the sentiments and emotions that the gaze of another human triggers when encountering ours. This is the core aspect of reciprocal gazing that in the context of *The Artist is Present* is interplayed by:

the viewer, [the] fellow viewer, [the eyes as] the subject of their viewing, the context or setting [where the experience occurs], and the rules that govern the particular relationship between the viewers (Morgan, *The Sacred* 3).

The word 'theatre' has its etymological roots in the Greek words *theatron-theaomai*, 'to see' ('Theatre') and thus has associations with visibility, being seen, seeing and the intersecting field of gazes that it produces. In *The Artist is Present* each dynamic of visibility potentially informed the theatre of the imagination that each spectator constructed and made manifest, and brought to the foreground the etymological origins of theatre.

4.5.3. What happens when the gaze is reciprocated?

To return to the action of reciprocal gazing occurring within the performer-spectator relationship of *The Artist is Present*, the main rule to follow was that as soon as the participant entered the space and approached the chair, they were to sit in front of Abramovic and agree to turn their gaze exclusively toward Abramovic's eyes. This action consisted not only in the powerful operation of limiting the range of the visible toward one fixed point of attention, but also in that this fixed point of attention was

reciprocated by the same organ of visibility through which the participant was seeing: the eyes of another person.

The eyes are not merely neutral biological organs; they are actually aspects of our body that are culturally charged with special, numinous qualities. For example, there are several proverbs, maxims and familiar phrases celebrating the eyes as the mirror of the soul or as the centre from which the qualities and nature of an individual reverberate. For example, a maxim from the 16th century states that the eyes are like ‘lovely lamps (...) the windowes of the soule’ (‘Eye’ Def. 11); and Théophile Gautier in the book *Two Beautiful Eyes* (1860) talks of ‘eyes so transparent that they permit your soul to be seen’ (‘Eye’ Def. 11). This is a poetic vision imbued with 19th century hypothesis of mesmerism, vitalism or the so-called ‘*magnétisme animal*’ coined by the physician Franz Mesmer. Mesmer’s theories and practices envisaged animal magnetism as:

a physical force or fluid, something akin to gravity, which permeates the universe and to which the human nervous system is somehow attuned (Gregory 592).

Although discredited scientifically, these are ideas that underline certain approaches to hypnotism for example, and are also recognisable in other cultural contexts such as theatre.

For example, the theatre director Thomas Richards, in his book *Heart of Practice: Within the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards* (2008), refers to what Jerzy Grotowski called the phenomenon of ‘induction’ to explain the inner/energetic communication between the performer (doer) and the spectator (witness) that may happen in special theatrical circumstances (13). He describes it as follows:

If you have an electrical wire with current flowing through it and you take another wire without current in it and put it nearby, traces of an electrical

current may appear in this second wire (...) [this] can also happen when someone is witnessing the performing structure in which the doers are approaching (...) this transformation of energy (13).

The question of energetic exchange and transformation informs most of Abramovic's work and is clearly manifested in works such as *Transitory Objects* or *Energy Clothes*,¹¹⁰ as well as in *The Artist is Present* and its staging of the practice of reciprocal gazing.

To investigate this aspect further and explain how it applies specifically to the performance *The Artist is Present* and the technology of the self employed, it is worth looking again at the meaning of the word 'gaze' that, as has already been suggested, implies a 'particular kind of looking – a steady, intense or absorbed form of vision' (Morgan, *The Sacred* 4). When reciprocated, this 'particular kind of looking' mirrors the same intensity in a circular movement that leads the two participants into a deep level of intimacy. This condition often triggers deep emotional states in the persons involved.

The literal meaning of the term 'emotion' is 'the body moving inside' ('Emotion'), which suggests that emotional states are embodied and that when a person experiences a deep emotional state, their body is increasingly 'mobilised' internally. Damasio adds that even the act of seeing something involves the entire organism as it actively participates in the interaction between the self and the surrounding environment (Damasio, *Descartes* 224). This emphasizes the fact that even if the:

idea that [it] is the entire organism rather than (...) the brain alone that interacts with the environment is often discounted (Damasio, *Descartes* 224).

¹¹⁰ These are wearable sculptures meant to be worn by members of the audience or to interact with in order to change or manipulate the energy level of the subject. For further reference, please see the book: Celant, Germano. *Marina Abramovic: Public Body: Installation and Objects*. 1965-2001. Milano: Charta, 2001.

Our perception of things and our emotional reactions to them seem to occur in embodiment and to involve the organism as a brain-mind-body whole. If one applies this perspective to the technology of reciprocal gazing there is a cyclical emotional movement that affects, through a reflective process of seeing and being seen, the life states of the two persons involved. This process will inevitably increase emotionally the internal activities of each individual to such an extent that it may disrupt determined self-boundaries and potentially open up the self to the emergence of particular types of emotions that may verge toward the numinous.

According to Otto, the numinous experience is ultimately an emotional state. Therefore we can suggest, following Damasio's rationale, that the numinous experience is a body moving internally with sufficient energy to provoke a substantial change in perception and disrupt the boundaries constructed by the self in its effort to survive her/his environment. In the specificity of reciprocal gazing, the numinosity of this process lies in the unfamiliarity that the process of looking into someone else's eyes for an extended period of time holds for most of us. In other words, to experience this level of intimacy reveals and activates inner territories so charged emotionally that the self can become disoriented or even lost.

As the scholar Cieran Benson proposes in his book *The Cultural Psychology of Self* (2001), disorientation occurs because the navigation systems through which we move in the world, and that operate according to 'the infinitely rich symbolic worlds of meaning collectively created by ourselves [and] our cultures' (Benson 103), are unable to function in such highly emotional contexts. In other words, we operate according to codified internal maps that follow a certain logic, and when this logic is disrupted by

unfamiliar levels of intimacy, the self is unable to follow its maps, loses its bearings, and is unable to function normally.

Art historian Robert Baldwin offers an additional perspective from which to analyse the level of intimacy that reciprocal gazing produces, offering a historical view of the mutual gaze as an amatory motif in western literature and art. He argues, for example, that the mutuality of gazing brings the lovers to a different plane from the love described using mythological metaphors such as ‘the darts, arrows, wounds’ (Baldwin 1). These are all ‘metaphors of [the] one-sided devastation and surrender’ that occurs when a loving gaze goes only in one direction and is never reciprocated (Baldwin 1). Instead, the endeavour of reciprocal gazing brings the two lovers into a plane where the amorous becomes numinous in a process that Baldwin describes as a ‘stream of love particles radiating out from the eyes of the lover to those of the beloved, reflecting back to the lover again’ (Baldwin 1). This proposition, as Baldwin reminds the reader, is similarly argued by Plato in *Phaedrus* when he says that:

a flowing stream pours down on the lover in such great quantity that while some of it sinks into him, the rest flows off outside (...) [and] as a gust of wind or an echo rebounds from smooth, hard objects and returns to where it came from (...) through his eyes, which is its natural route into the soul (...) [and] he is seeing himself in his lover as in a mirror (40).

Plato’s description attributes a subtle sense of materiality to the space in between the subjects sharing their gaze; a liminal landscape of occurrences (elemental, meteorological, sonic, etc.) which, although invisible, are shared and physically felt by the two individuals.

This poetic description of the experience of the two lovers gazing into each other’s eyes is certainly a pertinent image for the performance *Night Sea Crossing*

where the two lovers Abramovic and Ulay sat for days gazing into each other's eyes.¹¹¹ This performance was in fact conceived and performed from a condition of equality enhanced by the fact that the two lovers shared the same commitment and status in the work. However, something very similar within the configuration in place for *The Artist is Present* resulted in a quite different type of dynamic. This point is explicated in the next subsection.

4.5.4. An analysis of how the presence of Abramovic influenced the practice of reciprocal gazing

Before proceeding further with the analysis and interpretation of the dynamic of reciprocal gazing occurring within *The Artist is Present*, it is worth reminding the reader that Abramovic was the sole director and deviser of the piece, and therefore each participant entering the performance space was actually entering Abramovic's performance piece. In addition, as mentioned in the introduction to this section, Abramovic's presence was perceptively and symbolically enhanced by the specific modalities employed to devise and perform it within the special configuration of performance space. As a consequence of this, in *The Artist is Present* although the gaze ran in both directions, Abramovic's presence asserted a more substantial influence over those who accepted to reciprocate her gaze.

In other words, as Abramovic was the only one who stayed for the duration of the performance offering her gaze to '1,565 pair of eyes' (Abramovic, interviewed by Daniela Stigh and Zoë Jackson), not only was she the permanent host and occupier of the performance space, but also having engaged with the technology of reciprocal gazing for a longer period of time than any other participant, she undertook a profound

¹¹¹ The performance *Night Sea Crossing* was mentioned earlier in subsection 4.2, "The artist's contextualization".

transformation in her perception and level of attention.¹¹² On the other hand, the condition of the participants was quite different: they queued, waited and stood for hours in order to look at Abramovic's unique pair of eyes. While waiting, their perception of the presence inside the performance space will have been marked and layered with a range of personal projections.

As discussed in section 4.4. ("Presence"), within this configuration Abramovic appeared as a presence that evoked special meaning(s) and to whom an added significance was attached by each participant entering the performance space.

She was elevated:

in theatre above the limitations of space and time, illness, weariness, frailty, aging, injury (...) from which all real risk and vulnerability have been removed (Caputo, *Bodies* 99).

This produced an additional level of emotional engagement for the participants, triggering in many of them types of behaviour more associated with worshippers than with museum or gallery visitors. Rather than witnessing or participating in a performance, some acted as if they were paying respect to the artist and, in doing so, receiving her gaze in exchange. Many of the participants in *The Artist is Present* were, in fact, involved in an experience that verged on the religious within which the emotional circuit of reciprocal gazing became a 'construct[ed] operation that look[ed] for, [and] ma[de] room for, the transcendent in daily life' (Morgan, *The Sacred* 6).

In the next section I look at this aspect of the performance from the perspective of religious studies, looking at the meanings that seeing acquires in the eyes of the believer. The specificity of this interpretative viewpoint is a perspective that carries with it:

¹¹² Please refer to earlier accounts of Abramovic's experience of pain in subsection 4.4.2. "Enduring pain".

particular assumptions about what is visible, the conditions under which the visible is visible, the rules of visibility and the credibility of images, and what power an image may assert over those who see it (Morgan, *The Sacred* 5).

The action and process of seeing, from a religious perspective, allows the believer to abandon both criticality and certain cultural assumptions as to what is possible and impossible,¹¹³ and to immerse her/himself in territories of fluid perceptions and sudden cognitive raptures. I encourage the reader to conceive of religion according to what the philosopher Williams James called ‘personal religion’ (James 29): special human dispositions and relations that go ‘from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man [and what is wholly other]’ (James 29), and are connected to the centre of ‘[her]/his conscience, [her]/his deserts, [her]/his helplessness, [her]/his incompleteness’ (James 29).

Hence, seeing and being seen as a religious act is a specific structure and operation of vision that comprises a specific way of seeing, ‘that constitutes the visual medium of belief’ (Morgan, *The Sacred* 6). This is ‘not a proposition or a claim or an act of will prior to what people see or do as believers’ (Morgan, *The Sacred* 6), but what actually *is* seen, felt and experienced. One participant recalled the experience of reciprocally gazing with Abramovic as follows:

I think Marina’s piece has a very strong magnetism. It’s hard to explain but it’s almost like you feel this force, it draws you in, like a magnet. Sitting with her is a transformative experience – it’s luminous, it’s uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being present. (...) She almost acts as a catalyst. She presses the button that makes you feel all these emotions and feelings. I think through the concentration and the focus, plus the energy of the audience, it creates this movement (Kaganskyi).

113 I am not suggesting that the believer is free from cultural assumptions but rather that she/he will be involved with assumptions belonging to a different hermeneutic circle (the religious). Please refer to the notion of the hermeneutical circle as detailed in subsections 2.2. “Hermeneutics: historical and contemporary developments” and 2.3. “Introducing radical hermeneutics”.

The notion of magnetism¹¹⁴ that many visitors attached to the presence of Abramovic when reciprocating her gaze is an experience that may be attributed to three factors: the charismatic amplification of the theatrical situation; the capacity of Abramovic to endure her presence in time; and Abramovic's mythologized status as artist. Having said this, they are all hypotheses interpreting a sphere of human behaviour and emotional condition that remain open to interpretation. However if this process is investigated through the notion and practice of worship it emerges as a complex phenomenon that includes all of those processes through which individuals, places and objects acquire special meaning.

4.5.5. An investigation of worship in relation to the performance *The Artist is Present*

Looking at the question of worship from the perspective of religious studies and in particular from the Hindu tradition of *darshan* will help to elucidate further the complexity of reciprocal gazing as staged within the apparatuses of *The Artist is Present*.

The term 'worship', as well as signifying the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity, also stands for great admiration and particular honour given in recognition of merit ('Worship'). The practice of *darshan*, for example, is often addressed in Hindu tradition to the *sannyāsin* figures regarded as extraordinary, held in high esteem as living symbols of the lives dedicated to renunciation (Eck 6). For Hindus, to see and be seen by these people is to encounter and to be touched inside by the divine that is manifested in all aspects of reality, and the act of seeing, in this tradition, is equal to touch and knowing (Eck 9). This type of experience entails the numinous beholding or visionary experiencing that breaks the confines of individuality

¹¹⁴ The notion of magnetism was mentioned earlier in this chapter in subsection 4.5.3. "What happens when the gaze is reciprocated?".

and opens the possibility of encountering the ‘other’. The ‘other’ in the tradition of the *sannyāsin* figures denotes the carrier of the divine spark and when encountered, such a figure sets light to the divine ‘fire’ in the worshipper.

Abramovic seems to have been invested with similar extraordinary qualities to those attributed to the *sannyāsin* figures, perhaps in recognition of the genuine act of renunciation of being there for everyone who wanted to see and be seen by her for the whole duration of the event. Abramovic’s urge to ‘sacrifice her personal life, all kinds of wishes for this kind of high purpose’ (Abramovic, interviewed by Daniel Miller 4) that is art, seemed to have been for many a living symbol of lives dedicated to renunciation. A parallel can be drawn with figures like the Indian Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devī, known as Amma (Mother), who is widely respected as the ‘hugging saint’ because of her enduring and unshakable commitment to offer her embrace to her followers (Warrier 27)¹¹⁵.



Figure 33: Amṛtānandamayī Devī, known as Amma (Mother) hugging one of her followers

Similarly, within the limited context of her exhibition, Abramovic offered her gaze. Although gazing and hugging are two different orders of tactility, this parallel helps to clarify some of the dynamics that were activated in the MoMA atrium during the

¹¹⁵ Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Devī is a Hindu spiritual leader revered as a saint by her followers for her energizing embracing that she has offered untiringly to millions of people since the 1970s. Part of her offering is always to be there for people, to be present and open to physically hugging people.

performance. In fact, as Mata's devotees usually experience her embrace as a moment of emotional upheaval and catharsis (Warrier 29), many visitors participating in Abramovic's performance experienced a related sudden rush of feelings, as has been recorded in various blogs, on the MoMA website and in the documentary *The Artist is Present*.

For example, when looking at the portraits of the hundreds of participants sitting in front of Abramovic made by the photographer Marco Anelli,¹¹⁶ most of them appeared to be deeply touched, experiencing strong feelings and emotions, smiling with wonder, or bursting into tears.



Figure 34: Portraits of *The Artist is Present* participants

In many of these photos people cry or express an otherwise inexpressible joy, which some of them sought to recapture in subsequent meetings, coming back day after day. During the last month of the performance people camped outside the MoMA entrance

¹¹⁶ The photos are part of the multimedia documentation published on MoMA's website, available at the following address: <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/marinaabramovic/> – and in the catalogue *In the Presence of Marina Abramovic* (2012).

in order to be able to participate (*The Artist Is Present* documentary). Rumours about the power of the experience of reciprocating Abramovic's gaze spread by word-of-mouth and online, creating an overheated atmosphere which security guards started to view with apprehension (Akers). Indeed, the usual crowd of visitors visiting MoMA seemed to be transformed into a gathering of spiritual seekers searching for liberation.

In his article on "Darshan as a Mode of Perception", the scholar Francis Sanzaro talks about liberation in relation to seeing, arguing that the practice of reciprocal gazing is an aid to liberation that should not be relegated to the Hindu religious devotional mode of seeing (Sanzaro 3). 'Seeing' offers a specific way of understanding that is in opposition to the idea that seeing is a 'passive product of sensory data originating in the outer world' (Babb 396). Furthermore, the anthropologist Lawrence Babb argues that *darshan* stands for a process of vision that is acquisitive, which makes it possible to see the flow:

that emanates from the inner person outward through the eyes, to engage directly with objects seen and to bring something of those objects back to the seer (396).

Such a mode of perception tends to eradicate the radical line separating the human self as subject from the world as object, and produces a holistic dimension where the external world is animated by the same resonant realities that the human being experiences within.

Following this line of logic, liberation is understood as the holistic experience of recognizing the other within, of blurring perceptually the fixed boundaries dividing the self and the other, as well as of problematizing ordinary perception and vision and disentangling oneself from the already seen in order to witness the world and oneself with renewed wonder and enthusiasm. In the next subsection I explore this point further

with reference to the analytical auto-ethnographic research I have undertaken with the practice of reciprocal gazing.

4.5.6. Reciprocal gazing and visual perception in the context of *The Artist is Present*

When experimenting with reciprocal gazing for two hours a day with Terry George, I noticed that after thirty minutes to an hour, Terry's face stopped being fixed and started to change its morphology. The features that I knew as defining Terry's face loosened their determinacy and the solidity of her physiognomy seemed to melt into shifting, changing forms. Many faces emerged from her single recognisable visage. In addition to this, after a while the wall behind her stopped being separated from her figure, and colours and lights started to appear and fluctuate around her head¹¹⁷.

Surprisingly, the experience I had with reciprocal gazing echoes the records that Babb gathered during his research among devotees of the modern religious movement Brahma Kumaris in urban Northern India. Followers of this religious movement engage in the practice of reciprocal gazing with the master on a daily basis and most of them recall hallucinatory experiences, such as:

lights seem to appear on or around the teacher's face and body (...), reddish halo[s] (...) appear around the master's face, sometimes followed by an undulating red brightness overspreading his features (Babb 396).

What is fascinating about this technique is that it challenges the way our eyes render daily interaction with other people a subject of normal human vision that is understood to occur among solid entities. When someone engages in a sustained period of reciprocal gazing it is a process that subverts this perception and opens a field of visibility that is utterly 'other' from the ordinary. It enters the realm of the visionaries, a space where distinctions between things and people loosen their grip and weight, and

¹¹⁷ For further details of my own auto-ethnographic engagement with Vipassana, see Appendix 1.

enables what the author Aldous Huxley called the ‘the obscure knowledge’ reality (Huxley 31), or what Otto described as the ‘*mysterium fascinans* and *mysterium tremendum*’ (Otto 25-30) of reality to emerge. Both authors attempted to describe and communicate, from different backgrounds and frameworks of interpretation, the emotions felt when things appear differently from what is understood as the norm. Personally, I felt incredibly disorientated and at the same time bewildered and excited when eventually there was nothing left to see of Terry other than nebulous blobs and unrecognisable appearances that bore no resemblance at all to what I knew her to be like.

The art theorist James Elkins elegantly explains how seeing is a complex and paradoxical process of contradictory occurrences. He describes seeing as:

irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious (...). Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love (...). Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism (Elkins, *When The Objects* 11-12).

Following this logic, although we can see a great variety of material things: tables, chairs, other people, flowers, mountains, stars, holes, paintings, shadows; and the properties of those things: colour, shape, orientation, and so on; these are only a limited portion of what can be seen and of the range of possibilities in which they can be seen (Jacob, *Jeannerod* xi).

According to the psychologist James Gibson, for example, the action of seeing is based on two contradictory assertions that ‘nothing can be seen, properly speaking but light; and light, properly speaking, can never be seen’ (54). According to him it is not possible for us to see surfaces or objects directly, but only the light that stimulates the eyes (54). However, although ‘the verb to *see*, properly used, means to have one or

more sensations of lights' (54), in reality we do not see rays of light either. This perspective seems to confirm what Sanzaro argues about the practice of *darshan*:

as it operates within the Hindu tradition is not just a mode of perception but a critique of ordinary perception, the latter understood as an active subject observing a passive object (1).

Neuroscientists Eugene G. D'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg add another dimension to this perspective, arguing that the modalities by which we see and know the world comprise a specific state called the baseline state that 'involves the perception of discrete entities comprising the world that are related to each other in regular and predictable ways' (D'Aquili and Newberg, *The Neuropsychology* 42). Nonetheless, this is what we understand the world or reality to be, and although most people 'consider this state as the *only* reality and the *only* valid epistemic state [this is not the case]' (D'Aquili and Newberg, *The Neuropsychology* 42).

However, this does not mean that the sense of numinosity provoked by the epistemic perspective afforded by seeing Terry's face as blobs and colours was any more real than the face I usually identify as Terry. The numinosity that I am proposing in this thesis is not an epistemic conclusion, or necessarily a revelation of a more substantial or profound reality than the previous, consensual, every day one. On the contrary, I am suggesting a critique of a unified theorization of the world, with multiplicity located as a more reasonable approach. And multiplicity, when perceived in its performative qualities, leaves the self in astonishment because we are educated to see the world through a monodimensional/monotheistic approach. The numinous experience, therefore, may be articulated as the emotion that emerges when one engages with the complexity, plurality, and performativity of what we call 'real' and surrenders to the infinite mirror effect that it reveals. The numinous invites abandonment of those

defences established by securing specific boundaries to reality and embraces the indeterminacy and multifaceted qualities of a performative world.

In conclusion, the practice of reciprocal gazing performed within the context of *The Artist is Present*, consisted of different levels of engagement and types of experiences, including: visitors sharing the gaze with the artist for a few minutes and leaving; participants moved by Abramovic's act of endurance and paying respect to it in different forms, some of them recalling processes of worship; and participants deeply engaging with the technology of the self of reciprocal gazing and experiencing a profound shift in visual perception. The technology of reciprocal gazing as employed in Abramovic's apparatus of experimentation offered different things to different people: a motherly embrace, the gaze of the mythologized artist/other, an available door to a space of perception within which the visual spectrum was changed and where the numinous could be encountered and made manifest in performativity. Again, I am not claiming that this is the 'right' interpretation of what occurred in MoMA, but rather that this is the interpretation and perspective on which I have chosen to focus my attention. The resulting landscape constitutes a field situation within which Abramovic's gaze activated a wide range of modes of seeing and being seen, in amongst and through which different orders of reality, different worlds, may have been imagined by the participants.

4.6. Conclusion

With this chapter I have proposed that Abramovic's work *The Artist is Present* was a complex operation aimed at generating the possibility of the numinous existing and being experienced in immanence. The performance has been analysed through a series of elements:

- The strategic theatrical means employed by the artist to set up the space of the atrium;
- Abramovic's determination to endure her presence in time;
- The imaginative capacity of each participant to project and construct possibilities of co-presences and inhabitants of space;
- The participation of members of the public in the practice of reciprocal gazing.

It has been proposed that the way Abramovic framed the technology of the self of reciprocal gazing in space recalled processes by which locations are given a heightened status in both theatrical and religious contexts. I have suggested that, in realising this, she created conditions that encouraged each participant to engage individually with the presence of the artist, developing the creative faculty of each of them to generate, from the encounter-event, a multiplicity of personal meanings. Each spectator standing outside the performance space and each participant engaging with the more intimate interaction of reciprocal gazing will have had their own individual experiences. More broadly, I endeavoured to explore the numinous aspects of the work and, therefore, in the second and third sections of the chapter I have focused specifically on two of its aspects: firstly, on the phenomenon of worship and the special qualities that people started to associate with Abramovic's commitment to be present for everybody; and secondly, on the experiment in visual perception that reciprocal gazing represented for those that managed to endure the practice for longer periods of time.

Generally speaking the performance suggested the double proposition of the actuality of Abramovic the artist and its/her immanent transcendence. In other words, although her presence did not operate through the staging of a specific 'character' she still functioned through a double process of presentation and representation. The term

representation ‘entails that an original “presence” is in turn “re-presented” in another realm’ (Plate 21); however, in the case of *The Artist is Present*, the original coexisted in the same place and time as her representations, creating a mutual dynamic of dependence between the two that paradoxically reinforced both.

This condition presented and actualized what the very title of the performance seemed to envisage. The phrase *The Artist is Present* seemed to suggest that Abramovic was present in the gallery space, but also that she represented the experimental project to encounter each participant’s creative and imaginative faculty. The artist was actually present in all of the projections, understandings, interpretations that each member of the public constructed for her. She was the trigger point from which to imagine ways in which the ‘other’:

may live, exist, dwell among human beings, women and men; each different manifestations or shapes in which [it] may be embodied, projected, disappear’ (Mulder 1)

Therefore Abramovic’s presence, moving between disembodiment and embodiment, presentation and representation, actualized the possibility of incarnation in its secular and religious implications of something ‘other’ becoming manifest and bearing as many faces as the number of people engaging with her.

The activity of reciprocal gazing created the event. As a technology of the self it was the practice that charged the space with its particular performative and energetic qualities. Indeed, it offered the possibility to feel and experience spectatorship in its most minimal form and engage with it through an embodied practice. In addition the participants that reciprocated Abramovic’s gaze for a longer time may well have experienced the level of intimacy that the technology generates as well as a transformation in the perception of what they were seeing.

I have suggested that the technology of reciprocal gazing, as staged in *The Artist is Present*, produced an uneven relationship. Two main factors were attributed to this: firstly, that Abramovic was the only one who was always present in the space whereas each participant was merely invited to share that space for a little while; secondly, that Abramovic spent many hours a day for three months motionless, gazing into thousands of eyes, and thus she went through a great deal of pain and discomfort as well as through a transformation of her own consciousness and appearances. Both factors eventually rendered her presence particularly extraordinary in the eyes of the participants. This occurrence moved people emotionally: some felt like they were being embraced by a cosmic mother, some projected associations with religious icons, and others felt a deep level of human interaction which had therapeutic effects (Akers). None of these experiences are numinous in any singular and conclusive way, but rather their numinosity was generated by the exclusive emotional quality that the experience held for each individual participant. Each of them had their own sense of where the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the possible and the impossible, were set.

Therefore, it was proposed that the numinous, in the context of this performance, emerged when the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary that each individual set for her/himself were displaced or reconfigured, even if only minimally for a moment. This movement in perception is capable of opening vast spaces for the 'not known' to reciprocate, for once, our gaze. Perhaps these are rare moments of astonishment that seem to give a 'sense of the *presence* of our life' (Fisher-Lichte, *Appearing* 115) in this world.

CHAPTER 5:

Conclusion

1. Introduction

This last and concluding chapter reviews what I have analysed in this thesis, summing up the hypotheses of interpretation proposed and foreseeing future developments. In broad terms, this thesis has looked at performance as a context of experimentation with the complexity, extraordinariness and numinosity of human perception; it has emphasized and developed its potential to contain processes of apprehension and particular attitudes that are often associated with the religious; it has articulated a discourse on how technologies of the self employed within a performance context can operate epistemologically and ecologically; and it has proposed to consider the materiality of our bodies and the surrounding environment as the repository of numinosity.

These aspects have been interrogated and a series of interpretative hypotheses, in response to the five questions listed in the Introduction, have been suggested. These questions are:

- Why do artists employ technologies of the self that originated in religious contexts within the framework of performance?
- Is it possible for the self to look beyond itself?
- Are these performances and their apparatuses possible frameworks of interpretation for the notion of the numinous?
- How can the notion of the numinous be framed within the category of performance, theatre and performativity?

- What meanings can be retrieved from these events that can contribute to the analysis of the relationship between religion and performance in the 21st century?

Each question is addressed by summarizing what has been discussed in relation to the notion of the numinous through the analysis and interpretation of the two case studies: *CAT* by Ansuman Biswas and *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramovic. However, it is worth acknowledging that the analysis and interpretations retrieved from the particularities of the modalities employed by Biswas and Abramovic refer to the two specific works investigated here. Therefore, it is not my intention to generalize, or apply indiscriminately, what is proposed here to the other artists or performances mentioned in the Introduction; but rather to suggest a methodological approach and method of research that could, theoretically, be applied to these other case studies and eventually define a territory of investigation.

2. Why do artists employ technologies of the self that originated in religious contexts within the framework of performance?

This question was the first I asked myself at the beginning of this research. It was the central point from which all the other questions and the research itself developed. This question deals with the fact that both Biswas and Abramovic, in performing respectively Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing within a fine art gallery space and a museum of modern art, confronted both spectators/participants and researchers alike with a destabilizing cultural practice. Both of them provoked a leakage within the cultural boundaries set between what is regarded as secular and religious, spiritual and material, ordinary and extraordinary, reasonable and unreasonable.

I proposed three main reasons/hypotheses behind both Biswas's and Abramovic's decision to devise *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* respectively around Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing: the first is to interrogate the ontology and epistemology of the third person model by symbolically and systematically questioning the ontological fixity of conventional spectatorship; the second is to accredit introspection with epistemological value; and the third is to offer a critique of the epistemological privilege that the sense of sight has acquired in our society. I will look at each of these points in separate subsections entitled:

- Problematizing the third person model;
- Accrediting introspection with epistemological value;
- Problematizing visibility.

2.1. Problematizing the third person model

Both Biswas and Abramovic are interested in the experimental quality of performance and in its epistemological potentialities. They have often placed performance in dialogue with others modalities and frameworks of investigation from religious/spiritual approaches to science and its models. For example, in section 3.2 it has been specified that Biswas contributed to several multidisciplinary projects in which art, spiritual practices and science have been intertwined aiming at eroding their reciprocal differences. In *CAT*, the connection to science was literally suggested by the allusion to the Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, a core trigger for Biswas in devising the piece. In the case of Abramovic, although she has always been concerned with the experimental qualities of performance art, it is only recently that her interest in science and its models have entered her practice, thinking and vocabulary. As mentioned in subsection 4.2, she has only recently engaged in dialogues and collaborations with scientists such as David Poeppel, Antonio Damasio and, in

particular, Susan Dikker.¹¹⁸ In addition to this, during many of her most recent performances/events she has symbolically referred to the model of western science by wearing the white coat conventionally employed by lab scientists, asking members of the audience to do the same.¹¹⁹ In addition, she is in the process of opening the Marina Abramovic Institute (MAI) whose objective is, according to the website, a productive exchange between arts, science, technology, spirituality and education.¹²⁰

Biswas's and Abramovic's references to and engagements with science have the common objective of encouraging an experimental approach to science in performance, but at the same time of challenging the idea that the third person model is based on the fixed ontological division between observer and observed. In both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* this was achieved by destabilizing conventional spectatorship and by reconfiguring the received binary opposition of inside and outside, self and other, performer and spectator, in performativity. This meant that the assumed condition of externality and fixed division between the performer and the spectators were moved, hindered, coupled, blurred, multiplied into dynamics of reciprocal containment and movable boundaries. These were performances in which performers and spectators shared a game of moving reflections, within which the solidity of things and bodies appeared and disappeared in perception, allowing a plurality of perceptual realities to emerge and coexist outside and within themselves.

118 I am referring to the project: *Measuring the Magic of Mutual Gaze* (2011). This project is mentioned in footnote 10 of section 4.2.

119 Here I refer to the work Abramovic curated at the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2009 where spectators had to wear white coats to enter the show. She delivered a workshop for each group of visitors (which I attended), and both she and her assistants wore white coats to emphasize its experimental aspects. Another example is the *Silence Is Golden* party for the HBO presentation of the documentary *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present*. During the party all guests had to wear white coats and headphones, and maintain silent interactions with each other.

120 For more information about the Institute, please refer to: <http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/>

For example, while spectators may have been wondering about the impossibility of accessing the performance space of *CAT*, Biswas could have been entering a perceptual dimension within which the discrete solidity of its individual physicality was transformed into ‘an heterogeneous compound of wonderfully (...) vibrant matter’ (Bennett 13). And while the spectators residing outside the performance space of *The Artist is Present* were perceiving Abramovic and themselves as separated entities, concurrently Abramovic and some of the participants, engaging in reciprocal gazing, were probably perceiving each other as becoming increasingly fluid, losing solidity. Both performances allowed a multiplicity of possible conditions of spectatorship to occur both within and outside the internal space of the performance area and the external space of the audience.

Barad’s theory of agential realism has been crucial in the exploration, analysis and interpretation of this performative and perceptual phenomenon. Barad’s core proposition is that the condition of division between the discrete, solid, external entities of the observer and the observed is a temporary state rather than an ontologically fixed condition. Her theoretical perspective was instrumental in explaining how the theatrical apparatuses and conditions of spectatorship of the two performances makes plausible the hypothesis that the Cartesian construct or the convention of the performer/spectator relationship can also occur in conditions of apparent indivisibility and indeterminacy such as the individual self. This theoretical perspective offered a proliferation of ecological and epistemological reflections in performance and performativity in which ‘all bodies are (...) inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of [different] relations’ (Bennett 13).

In this regard and with specific attention to the question of ecology, I wrote in 2012 the article “A Posthuman Interpretation of Wolfgang Laib’s Work with Pollen as an Ecological Proposition”, which was published in the journal *Performance Research*. In this text I interrogate the ecological configuration of distinctiveness between the self/Laib and its environment/meadow by looking at the meditative processes by which means the artist Wolfgang Laib collects the pollen.¹²¹ Here I employed Barad’s theory to emphasize how the technology employed by Laib to collect and present pollen produces particular forms of engagement between the artist, the material and the environment. Ecology, in this context, is interpreted in the light of its entanglement with perception and the practices that define the way we perceive things and ourselves each time differently.

This is the hypothesis that I endorsed when looking at *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* as embodied, and at the same time, conceptual demonstrations of how one’s perception is always partial and limited to one’s practices and technologies. Therefore it is plausible to conclude that both Biswas and Abramovic staged stillness, silence and enclosure to encourage the spectator to re-imagine their relationship with themselves and other ‘materialities’ by employing meditative, contemplative and introspective technologies. Introspection was proposed in performance as an additional perspective from which to engage epistemologically with the world, another way from which to turn ‘the gaze from being *on* us, [from the outside], to considering our own gaze on ourselves’ (Furse, *Performing* 158), and to imagine our gazes intertwined and connected with each other. As Anna Furse underlines, this is now:

a matter of necessity if we are to grapple with systems of control, not just in the media and politics but in science, technology and medicine. The gaze [of the external observer] has now successfully penetrated [through

¹²¹ Please refer to Appendix II.

sophisticated technologies]¹²² our inside (...). [Therefore] we surely owe it to ourselves to see with our own eyes, understand with our own flesh and know with our own bones (Furse, Performing 158).

This is an inclusive ecological sensitivity toward an understanding that may include the materiality of flesh and bones in the epistemological processes through which we understand and therefore constitute things, our human and non-human relationships, and ourselves.

2.2. Accrediting introspection with epistemological value

The technologies of the self of Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing are practices concerned with and occurring in introspection; and according to their particularities they establish differently the terms and boundaries within which perception operates. As interpreted in section 3.5, Vipassana meditation is a practice that activates, within the self, an internal performative condition within which the self perceives itself internally and is enabled to observe the processes through which the body constantly configures and re-configures itself. By undertaking this practice the self arrives at a capacity to perceive its own physicality as a field of activities over which she/he appears to have little or no control.

Vipassana is a technology that is practiced by the singular individual self, in isolation and in conditions of sensory deprivation. It is, however, from this place of apparent solitude and separateness that, paradoxically, the individual practitioner (performer in the case of *CAT*) can reach a place of indeterminacy within which dividedness is no longer perceived. This hypothesis is endorsed in section 3.3 by exploring religious narratives, by drawing analogies with the religious practice of enclosure of medieval anchorites, and by engaging with the metaphorical meaning of

122 Here I employ the term 'technology' to refer to technological devices and machinery, rather than in the sense in which it is used elsewhere in this thesis in relation to the notion of 'technologies of the self'.

the desert in early Christianity. These parallels retrieved from religious studies literature were useful in interpreting Biswas's reference to the black box as the cell of the hermit and in analysing how, according to this cultural perspective, the box could also become the means through which the meditator/performer (Biswas) could potentially connect with the visitors/spectators standing outside the box.

This imaginary hypothesis implied a performative spatial condition that through introspection could enter in 'communion with the whole of the world' (Irigaray, *Between* 39), operating both centripetally and centrifugally. This is a highly evocative imaginative construction, a thought experiment that rendered plausible the proposition that spectators could, metaphorically, 'encounter' Biswas at the microscopic level of matter where the contours of our body lose their fixity and merge into numinosity. This vision, which resonates with the experiences narrated by mystics, reflects a pilgrimage into areas of consciousness that we strenuously try to make sense of but that remain nonetheless impenetrable to our rational understanding.

In Abramovic's performance, introspection occurred according to a different technology and therefore influenced the perception of the artist and of the participants through different means. If Vipassana meditation functioned through sensory deprivation and individual attention on inner bodily sensations, reciprocal gazing operated within the circular, enclosed relationship established between two human beings looking steadily into each other's eyes. Here introspection – literally, a looking inside in 'the observation and analysis of the processes of one's own mind' ('Introspection') – happened from the outset within a shared space.

Despite their differences, however, both Vipassana meditation and reciprocal gazing potentially produced a perceptual experience that, overflowing singularity, questioned the absoluteness of separation through which we interact with each other on a daily basis. This is a hypothesis of great power with political, social and ecological implications. For example, if we become capable of envisaging the possibility that what we perceive as discrete entities are actually rooted and connected in a continuity of the physical landscape, a new geography may emerge that requires a shared sense of responsibility for ourselves and ‘others’. Such a physical configuration calls for a rethinking of the meanings attributed to terms such as ‘freedom’, ‘self-expression’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘individualism’ in view of our shared indeterminacy and of a renewed, responsible interpretation as to what constitutes matter, its boundaries and what we call our ‘selves’.

A similar ethical/ecological concern is predicated by Bennett in her theory of vital materialism. She argues that:

a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers (...) can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself (Bennett 13).

It also resonates with the notion of the new sublime written about by the editor of *e-flux* journal Brian Huan Wood in his article “We Are the Weather”. In his reading of the notion of the sublime, Wood uses the metaphor of the weather to describe an existential condition where we have become both:

wanderer and mist, landscape and traveler, doctor and patient, cause and effect, artist and artwork simultaneously. We [have] become the weather (Wood).

Although his view is certainly apocalyptic, near the end of his article he hints at a possible, shared weather-like ethics:

as a figure of rapture, the instability of weather is both a planetary absolute and a shared condition (...) it brings people together, whether for pleasure or for horror. It is a collective mood swing that arrives as disaster and homelessness, but also as a day at the beach. Funnily enough, as a shared condition in the most extreme sense the weather can even be read as a kind of geopoetic revenge of the public sphere. It actually works as an axis of commonality, which is to say that, if we're all becoming insane, at least we'll be insane together (Wood).

2.3. Problematizing visibility

To become like the weather, like the wind, the rain, the sun, or simply to feel that we share something with everything, maybe even bits of rocks, trees, buildings, or, more unsettling, other people's flesh, I need to close my eyes. These are imaginary propositions, visualizations that I can envisage and embody only if I close my eyes. This is to say that these visions imply an ontology that requires a radical rethinking of the privileged position that the sense of sight has acquired in contemporary western culture; a sense that divides the world into things and people, I and you.

In Chapters 3 and 4 this issue has been explored by looking at the meanings that visibility and invisibility acquired within the two performance apparatuses of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* in relation to feeling, emotions, believing and faith. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's perspectives, it was proposed that seeing is as much as feeling the result of a 'deep-seated set of mute "opinions" implicated in our lives' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible* 3), and that both somehow 'invent' the world.

Visibility was explored in Chapter 4 in relation to the technology of the self of reciprocal gazing that, by locking the act of seeing within the two individuals gazing steadily at each other's eyes, modifies its functioning. I have reflected on the effects that the activities of slowing down and looking at something for a long period of time bring about and how they affect the complex biological and cultural phenomenon of sight.

The process of seeing, as we perform it on a daily basis, has been interrogated, leading to an endorsement of the idea that it ‘relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices’ (Morgan, *The Sacred* 3) that constantly inform the way we see, and what we do and do not see. These aspects were radicalized in *CAT* as visibility was negated to the point that the performer could only be imagined, invented, ‘created’.

During Biswas’s performance, sight, as we familiarly know it, was redundant as the performer resided in invisibility. However, it was through this condition of impeded visibility that other, internal possibilities of seeing could occur. Therefore, it was through the action of negating sight that the *theatron-theaomai* of theatre was re-affirmed by Biswas in imagination, introspection and embodiment.

Both performances displayed how ‘seeing is an intricate, culturally-constructed human activity with vital repercussions’ (Plate 9) on our personal and collective lives, and that we should by no means consider it as a universal experience (Plate 11). I have in this context interrogated and explored ‘numinous seeing’, a mode of perception produced by practices employed in religious or spiritual contexts that offered the possibility to reflect on the different kinds of visibility that may exist ‘from culture to culture, religion to religion, gender to gender, ethnicity to ethnicity’ (Plate 11), and how each context/practice/condition/apparatus/technology may trigger different configurations of the world. I have proposed that Vipassana meditation establishes a different order of ‘sight’ within the individual performer, and that reciprocal gazing mobilises, enlarges, expands or contracts the image of the persons staring at each other.

These perceptual experiences potentially open a huge field of investigation involving a multidisciplinary set of perspectives. Within the specific context of this thesis this has been only partly touched upon. Such a project would involve ‘the strange world of the eye’ (Plate 22) and the processes by which images acquire meaning. Centrally, it triggers questions as to how vision, i.e. the biological process of the eyes, can become seeing, i.e. the moment in which we recognize the world (Plate 23). This is a perspective that can be applied to the modalities by which the self sees and recognizes itself and consequently the processes through which its own boundaries are established.

3. Is it possible for the self to look beyond itself?

One of the many questions I remember asking myself during my teenage years was: why does this ‘I’ that can imagine, think and dream with such an active inner landscape have to have a body? This question bothered me for a long time until I started travelling and encountering other ways of living and of looking at the world. By being exposed to other cultures I realized that only a person who was born and raised in a western catholic cultural milieu such as Italy could perceive herself in such a dualistic manner and view her body as an impediment. I became aware that there were people conceiving reality and themselves from a completely different ontological position, but also that each of us is a unique blend of cultural and biological ingredients and a unique lens from which to look at the world. The original question as to why this ‘I’ that can imagine, think and dream has to have a body emerged in all its complexity as a field of enquiry strongly related to questions of selfhood and otherness, and to how the boundaries between the two are culturally and biologically set.

I see this thesis as related to the lineage of thoughts and practices initiated by this early question that, over time, has developed into an enquiry into the exploration of

the boundaries of selfhood, of the limits and possibilities of embodiment in the shamanic practices of the artist Alejandro Jodorowsky,¹²³ and eventually into the investigation of the ecological implications of technologies of self employed in performance explored in this thesis.

As the title of this thesis suggests *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* have been explored as performative apparatuses of experimentation that employ technologies devised to manipulate in perception and introspection the boundaries defining selfhood. This thesis has been concerned with the possibility of transformation, the ecologies that may emerge by modifying perception, the terminologies necessary to talk and think about them, and the methodologies and methods of investigation required to explore them. In this regard the notion of the numinous, together with the methodology of radical hermeneutics and the method of analytical auto-ethnography, have represented useful means for theoretical and practical engagement. Furthermore, the notion of the hermeneutical circle has been particularly helpful in emphasizing the parameters within which the explored technologies of the self operated.

As explained in Chapter 2 (“Methodology”), the hermeneutic circle represents the structural element through which the methodological process of hermeneutics operates. It is traditionally related to the question of method through which the meaning of a text or any other cultural production is understood in its specificity; along with the context in which it takes place in history. However, in contemporary hermeneutics, and in particular in radical hermeneutics, the circular, reciprocal process of influence between the specific and the general of the hermeneutic circle is no longer a principle of

¹²³ I am referring to my MA thesis: ‘The Reconstruction of the Body: Alejandro Jodorowsky and the Medicine Man’, submitted in 2006 to the Department of Communication Art of the Royal College of Art.

method but rather has become the ontological condition of whoever engages with the processes of understanding. This suggests that each individual understands themselves and the other according to the hermeneutical circle(s) to which she/he belongs and in which she/he dwells.

According to what has been proposed in this thesis, the answer to the question ‘Is it possible for the self to look beyond itself?’ is affirmative; although only within the overarching notion of the hermeneutic circle. In other words, the self can look beyond itself only in relation to its hermeneutic circle, and when it does so it is not in any absolute sense but always in relation to the specificity and delimitations of cultural perspective. The self can look beyond itself but only to enter another, hopefully broader, more functional hermeneutic circle. This should not be regarded as a cynical proposition or a hopeless existential condition, but rather as an ontology that situates the possibility of the self looking beyond itself in infinitude, or better within the endless project of creativity and the unbound cultural configurations that human perception can take. Ultimately it is in the space/time between the old and the new hermeneutic circles that the notion of the numinous in performance and creativity is interpreted and contextualized in this thesis.

4. Are these performances and their apparatuses possible frameworks of interpretation of the notion of the numinous?

As described in Chapter 1, the notion of the numinous as conceived by Otto originated as a theological term to articulate the specificity of the religious experience as an emotion irreducible to other experiences (Otto, Foreword). Otto defined this emotion in paradoxical terms to characterize the feeling-response of a self confronted by something ‘wholly other’. The relation between the self and the object holding such

special qualities was the central point of Otto's discourse on numinosity and its experiences. References have been made to scholars who engage with the question of the 'wholly other' quality of the numinous object, offering significant hypotheses of interpretation.

It has been my contention within this thesis that both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* represented productive examples for the analysis of the processes through which space and presence may acquire special value. In turn, the numinous as a category of investigation has provided a useful framework of interpretation for performance events that were unusually involved with religious discourses and for holding the conceptual, experiential and emotional contradictions that both generated on many levels.

These contradictions were the focus of my analysis and interpretation as the sense of numinosity and 'specialness' that *CAT*'s space, presence and action expressed due to the many paradoxes that an impossible theatre, situated in invisibility, was able to generate. The black box, it has been suggested, stood respectively as a symbol of a theatre space, a scientific laboratory and a meditative cell. In addition, it drew attention toward a performative, microscopic dimension where the solidity of our body and the walls of the box merged into an undetermined net of moving material congregations. At the same time, the separation between the inside of the black box and the outside, the gallery in which it was located, were expressed so dramatically as to render the box a mysterious object radiating the weight of its inaccessibility into the space of the SLG.

The Artist is Present offered another context and other strategies of intervention from which to reflect on numinosity within the context of performance. It was noted

how carefully Abramovic calibrated the spatial relationships between the performance space and the rest of the atrium; how special the performance space appeared from the outside, like a bright, magical, everlasting film set in the middle of a space usually characterized by the hectic movement of people; and how this special zone was maintained and protected by security guards. These and other elements contributed to emphasize a sense of permanence and continuity that this heightened luminous zone seemed to reverberate with in the atrium. Theoretical parallels with the processes through which sacred places have been historically established revealed how separation and stability are two of the many qualities characterizing places considered to be charged with a sense of specialness. In this context separateness becomes a requirement for numinosity and detachment a cultural means from which to build upon it.

Abramovic devised her presence in space through theatrical means such as costume and make-up, preparation and training, but also by enduring her own continuing presence for many hours a day over a period of three months. It was suggested that in enduring stillness and silence for such a long time, Abramovic undertook a transformative experience that not only changed her perception but also affected her physicality. Pain was physically visible on Abramovic's skin and her expression, at times, contrasted with her strong capacity to endure her sitting position for such a long time. Additionally, her presence was staged so that no one could see her arriving and sitting on the chair or leaving. All of these elements contributed to rendering her appearance both physically present and ethereal, both embodied and disembodied, both sensible to physical discomfort and at the same time capable of overcoming biological needs. This paradoxical quality of presence encouraged visitors to project on to her all kinds of personal and cultural imaginary, producing a multi-

dimensional proliferation of archetypical icons as numerous as the imaginative capacity and affective needs of each spectator.

Another reason why these two performances were particularly pertinent in negotiating the notion of the numinous in performance was the performance action that in both cases consisted of staging practices devised to touch, encounter and feel the numinous through methods rooted in contemplative and meditative traditions. This undertaking was treated by both Biswas and Abramovic as a cultural event in its own right. In doing this they called attention toward a theatrical perspective emerging from a performative aspect of human experience that, to my knowledge, has never been considered in its theatrical and performance potentialities. Both artists configured a theatrical condition within which the feeling of the numinous and the numinous experience became central to a cultural process involving feeling, believing, faith, pain, ecstasy, the mysterious, the sublime, the uncanny, the marvellous and the material. All of these emotions, feelings and conditions potentially hovered in space; triggered by the subtle vibrations that these two technologies of the self provoked in the performers and some of the visitors/spectators/participants.

With their sophisticated theatrical apparatuses they revealed how subtle and uncertain our conceptions of the known and consequently of the unknown are, and how our perception of reality is constantly manipulated by the way it is set up and presented. In revealing this they suggested that the numinous is actually embedded in our ordinary life, but is also dependent upon our perception; in turn, this is informed not only by the apparatuses configured outside ourselves but also by our internal biological apparatuses and the cultural technologies employed to make them function within a specific context. The numinous experience is, therefore, potentially everywhere all of the time. It haunts

us and conditions our life from beneath or behind the known because the known and the unknown are constantly related, informing each other; complementary and mutually influenced.

Hence the numinous changes forms and appearances and is always on the move. Regardless of whether we are in a land considered holy or in the most secular and mundane of situations, the unknown invariably lingers on the edges of our perception. Both artists, by situating meditative and contemplative technologies of the self in the midst of a mundane situation such as a contemporary art event, invited visitors to listen to silence, to become aware of what moves in stillness, how our bodies vibrate when touched by the gaze of another human being, and to feel how noisy, busy and inhabited our apparently silent body is inside. This is why both *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* were particularly generative in interpreting the notion of the numinous in performance. Both revealed the numinosity of the theatricality of the ordinary. Both suggested through theatre and performance that culture and material configurations are entangled in multiple manifestations and that is what allows our ordinary existence to shimmer, sometimes, in numinosity.

5. How can the notion of the numinous be framed within the category of performance, theatre and performativity?

With this proposition I do not intend to reduce numinous/religious experience to what it is not, but rather to expand it into other cultural practices. This is a pursuit that deals with the ethics of engaging with religion and its absolutes within the framework of culture, and specifically theatre and performance. In addition, it involves the contradictions inherent in the project of exploring, analysing and interpreting an aspect of human experience that seems to resist and escape both analytical frameworks and verbal communication. Therefore, this is a question that is deeply related to

methodological issues, entangled with the ontological position taken in this thesis, and consequently dependent on how the project of knowledge itself is understood here.

This is to say that it is the chosen methodological approach that has enabled and justified the conceptual leap of moving the numinous from Otto's metaphysical interpretation into culture without eradicating its connection with its theological origins. In fact, one of the reasons why I have chosen the notion of numinous rather than the notion of uncanny or of the sublime relates to the fact that the numinous is associated with the religious, and this is an association that this thesis, paradoxically, seeks to maintain. This commitment stems from the desire to retain the religious dimension in its capacity to connect the self with whatever exists inside, outside, within and beyond itself. This attitude searches for that sense of the numinous that sometimes vibrates in religious contexts but that more often has been so terribly severed by the politics of religious creeds (Dourley 189). The aim is to expand the numinous into other spheres of human endeavour, knowing that it never fits exactly into anything specific but is merely 'expressed or realized or given shape' by it. At the same time the numinous is constantly seeking 'to make itself felt in what is present' (Caputo, Spectral 47).

In its theatrical configuration, *CAT* represented this conceptual possibility almost literally. The performer (Biswas), performing within the solid boundaries of the black box, was a presence that was not precisely itself what happened, but had what happened going on within him. This was something that sought to make itself present through the imaginative capacity of the visitor, as it was not there before their eyes. Something similar can be said about *The Artist is Present* in which the numinosity of the performer (Abramovic) was not directly furnished by her presence, but by all of those events seeking to make themselves felt; all those imaginary projections that she potentially

activated and embodied in theatre. Both Biswas's and Abramovic's presences were simmering potentialities intermingling with their presences but never completely revealed and resolved by them in the form of a 'character', for example. They embodied and contained a quality that we may sometimes feel coming, 'signalling us from afar, [sometimes] provoking, [or] inviting' (Caputo, *Spectral* 51-52) us to wonder in that other, beyond the familiar, *mise en abîme* of event-like coming-into-presences and dissolutions.

This lingering mystery constantly permeates reality and our lives, and each time we think we have grasped it, it has already moved, occupying a different space, taking a different name. Therefore, for me to frame the numinous in theatre and performance has meant situating it in cultural nomadism: in the restless journeys across physical and metaphorical barren deserts of the matter that composes the seen and the unseen, the cosmic and the microscopic (Caputo, *Spectral* 53); and in the infinite possibilities that artists and people more generally can open up by approaching reality again and again from new perspectives, with attention, courage and patience.

6. What meanings can be retrieved from these events that can contribute to the analysis of the relationship between religion and performance in the 21st century?

CG Jung preferred the interpretation of the term 'religious' as originating etymologically from the term *relegere*, 'to go through' or 'gather together', rather than from *religāre*, 'to place an obligation on [someone]'.¹²⁴ Otto, in conceiving of the numinous experience, identified religious experience with the ecstatic and terrifying emotion of a human being confronted by the unknown, and with the processes of self-disruption that this encounter provokes.

¹²⁴ The correct Latin derivation of the term 'religion' was in dispute even among ancient writers: Cicero derived it from *relegere* (...) while Servius and Augustine derived *religiōnem* from *religāre*. (Robert K. Barnhart and Sol Steinmetz eds. *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*. New York: Chambers, 1988).

Through the enquiry into the notion of the numinous in performance this thesis has emphasized these aspects of the religious experience, and has left aside the processes through which a specific morality is often imposed on people by religious creeds. In particular the focus has been on the disruptive but overall creative, generative, healing aspects of religious technologies used in performance, suggesting a religion whose practices are meant to help people to 'gather together' the necessary inner strength to be able to 'go through' the fear of facing an unknown situation and find a new sense of orientation within it. This is an experience where the objective is not the unification of the self with a hypothetical ideal self; but rather with the inner capacity of a self to be present to its own alterity, plurality and multiplicity, and to learn to play with these like a skilled musician would do with a plurality of instruments.

The primary concern of this thesis has been the technological aspects of religion and the capacity of these technologies to operate as bridges for the self to move across and forward within the proliferation of selves available. With the intent of interpreting their values in culture, I have looked at aspects of religious studies literature as a productive interpretative lens through which to start to understand how these technologies may operate in performance or more generally in culture. What has emerged from this research is a more focused sense of an intimate relationship between theatre, imagination, faith, belief, technologies and apparatuses; and this thesis has endeavoured to encourage theoretical and participative methods of engagement with and investigation of these relationships.

It is my contention that performance, if taken as a 'realm in its own right' (George, *On Ambiguity* 71), can offer a context of investigation and experimentation

with introspective, meditative and ecstatic practices, bringing light to these territories of the human soul, which conventional scientific models alone cannot fully interrogate. Performance offers a prolific theoretical, experimental and methodological territory of investigation from micro and macro contexts; from inner and emotional landscapes to uncharted visibilities; performative forms of embodiments and imaginative, intuitive dimensions that are often not accessible. Performance and the performative connect the religious, the performative, the theatrical, the creative and the material in a communicative web of invisible threads, which, in their complexity, represent possible, additional, and invaluable epistemological perspectives in the processes through which humans acquire knowledge.

It has been suggested that the numinous experience is the door, the threshold, for encountering the ‘other’, whatever the ‘other’ is. It could be another biological species, another human being, or anything we perceive as outside or different from us. The numinous experience is the rapture and rupture that changes the order in which things are organized and perceived, and disrupts established hierarchies and power relations. In conclusion it may be said that what this thesis envisages is:

a religionless religion, if you will, stripped of myth, superstition, and narrow dogmatism, and focused on the practical work of transforming human behavior. [A religion that] incorporate[s] the insights of the hard sciences as well as psychology, philosophy, [performance, theatre] and sociology into a broad-based new discipline to address our current (...) crisis (Shiffman).

This is an idea of religion that ‘would no longer be a divine imposition on the human mind but a reconnection of the human mind’ (Dourley 191) to its shared condition; and we are all responsible for its wellbeing.

In this regard the analysis of the apparatuses of *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* has shed light on how the subtlety of human consciousness, the extraordinary landscape

of human perception, the vast complexity of what we call the ‘real’, the multi-dimensionality of our identity, all have something to do with the numinous, the religious, the theatrical and the performative. This thesis has suggested that *CAT* and *The Artist is Present* rendered palpable the sense that a religious attitude is not merely an object of creeds but rather belongs to the inner selves of each human being, to her/his capacity to vibrate and resonate with the depth of her/his own mind-body landscape. This territory of investigation touches not only on the field of religious studies and performance studies, but also involves, in the context of this thesis, post-humanist reflections on science and its models of investigation, neuroscience, anthropological methods, feminist perspectives and the arts in general. What emerges is a complex territory of exploration within which the religious enters into dialogues with contemporary neuroscientific interpretation of the field of emotions, with post-humanist accounts of the notion of matter and with innovative political theories on ecology.

7. Conclusion: further developments

To conclude, I would like to describe briefly how I foresee the future development of this thesis and more specifically how the methodology, method and theoretical framework employed here could inform three trajectories equally relevant for my work. They are: to formalize a broader territory of scholarly investigation; to apply some of the elements explored here to my teaching; and to inspire and explore further artistic projects.

In regard to the development of a broader territory of scholarly investigation my intention is to formalize a category of performance actions as ‘technologies of the numinous’ and to examine their practical and philosophical implications. This is an endeavour that I started to engage with by writing the paper “Mapping a Territory:

Technologies of the Numinous in Performance Art”, presented at the FIRT/IFTR conference in Barcelona for the international Performance and Religion Working Group.¹²⁵ The table below, although incomplete, was inserted in the paper mentioned above as an initial taxonomy of performances, artists and actions that I regarded as valid case studies for the study of technologies of the numinous in performance. My ambition is to formalize this list further and analyse each action hermeneutically by looking at how each context and action change the relations in place between performer and spectator. This consists in formalizing a territory of investigation in which theatricality, performativity and conceptual art approaches are all involved in a perspective of performance aimed to test human perception and cognition through the analysis of introspective modalities of investigation.

Each of the elements listed in the table are potential subjects of enquiry of practice-based research projects in which performance establishes itself as a research model. In this context autoethnographic methods, analytical and philosophical approaches intertwine to produce rigorous art documentations of numinous, introspective experiences through a hermeneutical approach. Some of the works listed in the table are exemplary in this sense, such as: *Take Care of Yourself* by Sophie Calle, or the *One Year Performances* by Tehching Hsieh.

The field of technology of the numinous in performance, suggested in the table below, also represents a field of study useful to students interested in practice-based research projects and in conceptual approaches to performance practice.¹²⁶ Additionally

¹²⁵ I became a member of this group in January 2013 as part of the Performance and Philosophy network.

¹²⁶ Conceptual approaches to performance is a field of study that has often been overlooked in theatre and performance departments and only recently is starting to be regarded with a certain degree of attention.

it provides practical, strategic means to be explored and applied when devising group productions, solo pieces, site-specific and participatory events. This is given by the fact

	Silence	Isolation	Enclosure	Repetition	Self-restraint	Slowness	Trance	Visualization	Mindfulness	Instructions	Pain	Duration
M. Cool F. Balducci <i>Performance 12</i>	X			X	X	X	X	X	X			X
A. Biswas <i>CAT</i>	X	X	X		X		X		X	X		X
M. Abramovic <i>The Artist is Present</i>	X			X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
K. O'Reilly <i>Stair Falling</i>	X				X	X	X		X	X	X	X
T. Hsieh <i>1978-1979</i>	X	X	X		X				X	X		X
T. Koh <i>Nothingtoodoo</i>	X			X	X	X	X		X		X	X
M. Coates <i>Journey to Lower World</i>				X	X		X	X	X	X		
F. Alys <i>When Faith Moves Mountains</i>				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
J. Beuys <i>I like America and America Likes Me</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X			X
A. Piper <i>Food for the Spirits</i>		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
L. Montano <i>Seven Years of Living Art</i>				X	X			X	X	X		X
S. Calle <i>Take Care of Yourself</i>				X	X				X	X		X

Figure 36: Table of technologies of the numinous in performance

that the focus would be on developing students' awareness of the subtle relations between forces that are established in performance between performers and spectators, space and objects, how these forces can be manipulated theatrically and how to mobilise them in relation to their visions and conceptual ideas. It is an awareness that informs not only conventional approaches to theatrical productions but also the broad field of performance and photography and/or video as forms of mediation of the performative act and of spectatorship.

With regard to my personal artistic and research work, this thesis represents an invaluable foundation from which to explore through my practice some of the ideas investigated here. From the very beginning my work has been concerned with the question of selfhood in relation to notions and conditions of alterity and has focused on creating bridges of communication between aspects of reality that are usually separated.

For example, an early project was *A Message Before Leaving* (1997-1999) in collaboration with Jeffery Doughtie, a death row inmate of the maximum security prison in Huntsville, Texas. The project's objective was to allow Doughtie, through performative strategies of intervention, to leave his messages around the urban landscapes of European and American cities.¹²⁷ I aimed to reflect on the function of the creative process and visual communication operating as riddles capable of disrupting social orders of visibilities to render perceptible aspects of social life which are hidden, invisible, cancelled. To give to Jeffery Doughtie the imaginary possibility of writing on the walls of cities in Europe and USA, and documenting this impossible action as something that really happened, resulted in a numinous contradiction that confused

¹²⁷ The project was supported by the Italian association "Hands Off Cain" and Washington University, and consisted of various urban interventions, a collection of ethnographic research materials, and photographic and video documentation that has been presented and published in Italy and UK.

spectators and at the same time encouraged imaginary solutions¹²⁸.



Figure 38: Silvia Battista, *A Message Before Leaving*, 19997-1999

To my great satisfaction this work is currently part of the project Cred/Ability – Art in Prison Pilot Training,¹²⁹ developed by the artist Hannah Hull¹³⁰ who is using it as a model of intervention for artists working in rehabilitation contexts within Europe.

An example of a late project is *You Whisper, I Listen, He Speaks* (2006, 2011) that consisted of a short film, a book and a performance in which participants were involved by speaking with a mute and blind performer embodying the mythological figure of Icarus.¹³¹ Here I started to engage directly with meditative technologies as performance action. My performance consisted merely of sitting silently and completely

128 I encountered Jeffery Doughtie nine times during which time he decided on a series of sentences that he wanted to communicate. We created from them shorter versions and worked together on the forms he envisaged them to take. After these nine visits I was invited by the photographic department of Washington University to realize a series of images, by employing Adobe Photoshop, that would simulate Jeffery's graffiti. In addition I performed a series of graffiti/actions in Rome and Seattle.

129 Cred/Ability - Art in Prison Pilot Training is the first internationally accredited training course for delivering arts programmes in prisons. To have an idea of why and how my project *A Message Before Leaving* will be used, please refer to this website: <http://www.artspromotional.co.uk/magazine/265/article/think-critical>

130 Hannah Hull is a social research artist. Her practice focuses on creating spaces for dialogue on art projects engaging with socially-excluded and at-risk groups. She planned and co-ordinated the project ART vs REHAB: 'a platform for people working in art and rehabilitation' (<http://artvsrehab.com>). For this project I wrote the article "The Deceptive Loving Power of Words" in response to the meeting entitled *Criticality and Evaluation in a Culture of Optimism*; see artvsrehab.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/silvia-battista.pdf

131 I performed this piece in 2005 at the Crypt Gallery in St. Pancras Church and in 2011 at the Nightingale Theatre in Brighton, in both cases the performance was durational.

blind for more than three hours waiting for spectators/participants to tell me something. Many people, encouraged by a recorded voice at the entrance to the performance space, talked to me, told me stories of various kinds and shared with me personal and very intimate experiences of their life. Some of them spent a long time with me, taking care of a figure on which they projected all kinds of affective feelings.



Figure 38: Silvia Battista, *You Whisper, I Listen, He Speaks*, 2006-2012

I mention these two works because they raised most of the questions this PhD project engaged with. Somehow in both cases, although unconsciously, I had negotiated space, presence and action in ways that influenced types of behaviour and experiences that touched on the numinous sphere of human condition that I have analysed through *CAT* and *The Artist is Present*. As a consequence of the research undertaken in this thesis my intention is to continue to engage with performance artistically, however, to frame my projects within a clearer practice-based research structure in which the epistemology of numinous affects/effects in performance and visual and conceptual practices are more clearly set.

There are two projects I am elaborating on currently. The first is *Queering Prayers*, a series of ethnographic re-enactments of prayers based on repetitive structures from different religious and cultural traditions. The objective is to explore the perceptive affects that emerge by performing the structure, performativity and theatricality of a specific prayer outside its religious context.



Figure 39: Silvia Battista, *Queering the Rosary*, ongoing

The second project is *Dialogues with the Elders of London* that consists of a series of performative engagements with the centenarian trees of London through meditative technologies of the numinous.



Figure 40: Silvia Battista, *Dialogues with the Elders of London*, ongoing

The project should engage with a multidisciplinary method of enquiry to produce a multiperspective event including documentation, from botanical and biological interpretations to shamanic approaches, on the meanings that these trees have for the city and the people of London. Both projects will involve performance/lectures, rigorous photographic and video documentation, installation and diaristic accounts.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing that we are living in a very complex world which seems to require a certain level of individual and collective flexibility. It appears that if we want to avoid the re-emergences of dangerously dividing forms of nationalisms and the reinvention of insular and claustrophobic traditions, a cultural

transformation is required. This is a matter involving various levels of human life from consciousness, perception and cognitive processes to belief systems and the mythological narratives informing the cultural framework through which individuals and collectives understand each other. We are in need of a culture that can form individuals capable of negotiating and renegotiating these relations and hierarchies, to rethink their privileged positions and to construct bridges of communication with the ‘other’, whoever the other is. This is a flexible culture(s), porous, agile, inclusive, multiple, capable of acknowledging life and liveness in everything, vibrating with energy, and celebrating a world pushed and pulled by contradictory forces and inhabited by a multiplicity of invisible, lively micro and macro components.

I would like to leave you with a quote from the article written by the writer Esther Leslie on the work of artist Mark Leckey that poetically narrates a story of animated universes:

animation shudders through the universe. It is the principle of life and life is a quality held not just by those who can name it. “Nature”¹³² is animated: animals chatter, leaves give out signals, petals recoil, crystals reproduce. Even inorganic matter is animate, if not alive, though it was surely, once upon a time, the kick-start ingredient of life (Leslie 57).

¹³² Nature is not in quotation marks in the original text.

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APPENDIX

BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS OF THE TWO AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENTS UNDERTAKEN

Experiment I:

An auto-ethnographic experiment with Vipassana Meditation¹³³

The experiment was carried out by Silvia Battista and consisted of thirty sessions of Vipassana meditation for two hours each day.

She lived in isolation for thirty days and a specific diet was followed.

She was not allowed to speak or share the experience with anyone during the experiment; however, after each session she recorded feelings and reflections on the experience in a diary.

Brief summary of the information produced by the experiment

During the experiment with the technology of the self of Vipassana meditation, I perceived my own body as a material landscape that was highly chaotic and constantly in search of homeostatic equilibrium; a materiality composed of a multiplicity of agencies negotiating their existence within a system that was dynamic, fluid, pulsing, morphic and radiating, but also, at times, solid, blocked, pressurized. This internal perception of dynamic mattering offered by the privileged perspective of Vipassana meditation triggered in me the coexistence of opposite feelings, which proved to be particularly productive for the analysis of the notion of the numinous.

The two lists provided below briefly summarize the sensations/perceptions and the feelings/emotions relevant to section '3.5. Action'.

Perceptions/Sensations:

- Masses of adipose tissues move in aggregates;
- Tingles all over the body from the superficial level of the epidermis to the deeper tissues;
- Solidity, dullness;
- Eruptions of particles flowing, vibrating, moving from head to toes - from the head, shoulders, hands, chest, belly, hips, buttocks, thighs, calves, feet, toes and back again to the toes, feet, calves, thighs, buttocks, hips, belly, chest, hands, shoulders, throat, head;
- Shaking;
- Physical boundaries dissolve into the surrounding environment.

Feelings/Emotions:

- Terrifying fear of losing agency and contact with my known sense of self;
- Pain, discomfort and restlessness;
- Excitement, extreme joy;
- A profound sense of calmness and expansiveness.

¹³³ For a detailed discussion of Vipassana, and of its effects, see the main body of the thesis, sections 3.5.1-5, pp. 153-171.

Experiment II: An auto-ethnographic experiment with Reciprocal Gazing¹³⁴

The experiment was carried out by Silvia Battista and Terri George and consisted of eight sessions of reciprocal gazing for two hours each day.

Neither of the participants were allowed to speak or share the experience other than through writing, and after each session both Silvia and Terry recorded feelings and reflections on the experience in two separate diaries.

The experiment was not completed, and was terminated on the third day.

During the experiment with the technology of the self of reciprocal gazing both Terri and I perceived the transformation of the space in between us into a place of perceptual emergence. Lights of various colors appeared to move around each other faces, the changing features of which were dissolving and arising again, into and from an undefined background. At the same time a power relation between Terri and I was established, triggering respectively different feelings and emotional reactions, which charged the space in between us with unpredictable tensions. Both sensations and emotions proved to be particularly productive for the analysis of the notion of the numinous.

The lists provided below briefly summarize the sensations/perceptions and the feelings/emotions relevant to section '4.5. Action'.

Terri's perceptions/sensations:

- Flowing, striking yellow strands of light emitted from Silvia's head;
- Silvia's face moving and shifting; changing appearances (she 'became' a nun, a Buddhist monk, a teenage girl with blue eyes and blonde hair, a beast).

Terri's feelings/emotions:

- Hot flushes;
- Paranoia, nausea and fatigue;
- Fleeting feelings of panic;
- Peace.

Silvia's perceptions/sensations:

- Terri changing appearances (sometimes she looked dysfunctional, sometimes loving and beautiful - the two faces were coming and going);
- Undefined shapes and lights dancing between Terri and I;
- Lights moving around Terri's face;
- One side of Terri's face dissolving; Terri dissolving into the background.

Silvia's feelings/emotions:

- Discomfort;
- Claustrophobia;
- Enhanced feeling of inner strength;
- Feeling peaceful.

¹³⁴ For a detailed discussion of reciprocal gazing, and of its effects, see the main body of the thesis, sections 4.5.1-5, pp. 229-246.

