

**Publication Reference:**

**Senior, A. and Kelly, S. (2016) 'On the Dialectics of Charisma in Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*'. *Performance Research: A journal of the performing arts*, 21(3): 74-83.**

**On the Dialectics of Charisma in Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present***

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**Abstract**

While 'charisma' can be found in dramatic and theatrical parlance, the term enjoys only minimal critical attention in theatre and performance studies, with scholarly work on presence and actor training methods taking the lead in defining charisma's supposed 'undefinable' quality. Within this context, the article examines the appearance of the term 'charismatic space' in relation to Marina Abramović's retrospective *The Artist is Present* at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010. Here Abramović uses this term to describe the shared space in which performer and spectator connect bodily, psychically, and spiritually through a shared sense of presence and energy in the moment of performance. Yet this is a space arguably constituted through a number of dialectical tensions and contradictions which, in dialogue with existing theatre scholarship on charisma, can be further understood by drawing on insights into charismatic leaders and charismatic authority in leadership studies. By examining the performance and its documentary traces in terms of dialectics we consider the political and ethical implications for how we think about power relations between artist/spectator in a neoliberal, market-driven art context. Here an alternative approach to conceiving of and facilitating a charismatic space is proposed which instead foregrounds what Bracha L. Ettinger calls a 'matrixial encounter-event': A relation of coexistence and compassion rather than dominance of self over other; performer over spectator; leader over follower. By illustrating the dialectical tensions in *The Artist is Present*, we consider the potential of the charismatic space not as generated through the seductive power or charm of an individual whose authority is tied to his/her 'presence', but as something co-produced within an ethical and relational space of trans-subjectivity.

She did create a charismatic space, a little rent in the fabric of the universe that was wholly her own that she occupied. And she did it in a room filled with many, many people. And many, many people felt that charismatic space as a reality. That's an extraordinary achievement.

Sean Kelly (in Akers et al 2012: n.p.)

Charisma is an expression of shared needs. It is a libidinous category with both an aura of wonder and a frisson of transgression about it, a mutual attraction precariously balanced on the thin edge of resentment, neither always reducible to, nor even separable from, the real or the imaginary flesh of the prodigy.

Joseph Roach (2007: 183)

Is charisma a mutual shared transaction as Joseph Roach so elegantly suggests, or is it something *owned* by one person and exerted onto another? Sean Kelly's phrasing suggests that charisma is something caught in the tension between ownership and occupation. Yet what is at stake if one side of this mutual libidinal attraction claims ownership over, or occupies the creation of a so called participative 'charismatic space' between artist and spectator? As we (the authors) sat watching the documentary film *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (Akers et al 2012) these ethically inflected questions about ownership, occupation, and thus relations of power became apparent, prompting us to reconsider charisma beyond the familiar and often taken-for-granted debates in our separate disciplinary fields of performance studies (Senior) and leadership studies (Kelly). Whereas theatre and performance scholarship conceptualises charisma as the dialectical and productive synthesis of strength/vulnerability and magnetism/radiance, leadership studies privileges an understanding of charisma as influence over an other: strong over weak, active over passive, and leader over follower. Whilst these dialectically organised notions of charisma shed light on the antagonistic and hierarchical aspects of charisma as they manifest in Abramović's work, we began to reimagine the idea of a charismatic space beyond its prodigious ability to rent, transgress, dominate, and synthetically create.

In the documentary film, gallery owner Sean Kelly attests to Abramović's own ability to generate such a charismatic space in her now famous piece *The Artist is Present* (2010) at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). In this work, Serbian performance artist Abramović sits at a wooden table whilst individual spectators are invited to sit across from her, establish eye contact, and leave whenever they wish. This was a durational piece that Abramović undertook over the course of nearly three months, between 14th March and 31st May 2010. For Kelly, whose gallery also represents the artist, the charismatic space is fully created, authorized and owned by Abramović herself in this work. Contrary to the emphasis that Roach places on charisma as a shared and mutual experience, the spectator in Kelly's account only ever 'feels' the charismatic space as something the artist alone generates and so the opportunity for the co-production and co-authorship of charisma in this space is arguably denied to the spectator of *The Artist is Present*.

Kelly is not alone in his conceptualization of a charismatic space as a space which is both created and owned by the artist. Abramović herself uses the term at the beginning of the documentary to discuss the primary aim of a three day workshop she is leading with artists who are preparing to perform re-enactments of her earlier work as part of the retrospective at MoMA, which ran parallel to *The Artist is Present*. Explaining the process the artists were expected to undertake during the workshop, she says:

[T]hey have to *create their own charismatic space* and for that you, you have to consider some training. The proposition here is just empty yourself. Be able to be in a present time. Put your mind here and now. And then something emotional open[s]. And that's what we are looking for in this work. In performance, you have to have [an] emotional approach. It's a kind of direct energy dialogue with the public and the performer (Abramović in Akers et al 2012: n.p. Emphasis added).

Like Kelly, Abramović hierarchises the artist as the creator of a space in which charisma is realized. However, paradoxically, she also places emphasis on the dialogic aspects of this space by framing it in terms of the artist/spectator relationship. For Abramović the exchange of energy, emotion, and the 'present' moment thus emerges as part of a 'dialogue' between artist/spectator. Nevertheless,

this claim is potentially undermined by the very proposition that one can 'own' this charismatic space and teach others how to create it. The discourse of energy, emotion, dialogue, presence, emptiness, and the giving over of oneself that constitutes the notion of a charismatic space arguably veils a founding set of antagonistic relations between artist/spectator, teacher/student, innate/learned which this article will suggest are (unintentionally) contingent on and contained by the phallogocentrism of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic.

Working from our own seemingly dialectically opposed positions as authors – as a performance scholar on the one hand and a leadership scholar on the other, as woman and man, as mother and father, and as wife and husband – we will tease out some of the tensions and contradictions at work in the notion of a charismatic space as it is framed and conceptualised in relation to *The Artist is Present*. Where performance and theatre can shed light on the productive antagonistic qualities that inform the discourse of charisma surrounding this work, leadership studies reminds us of the dangers of charisma and the hierarchical operation of power and authority that underpins the notion of a charismatic space. We propose that examining the documentary traces of *The Artist is Present* in terms of dialectics has specific political and ethical implications for how we think about accepted power relations between artist/spectator in a neoliberal, market-driven art context. However, by privileging charisma as something that is predominantly embodied and/or belonging to someone, both fields paradoxically reiterate the mystification of charisma and tend to overlook the potential for charisma to emerge from a space that is shared, co-constituted and co-owned. Instead, we offer an alternative articulation of the charismatic space through what Bracha L. Ettinger calls a 'matrixial encounter-event' (2006a; 2006b): a relation founded on coexistence and compassion through which otherness is preserved. Here, the charismatic as shared space has the potential to be experienced beyond the dialectical domination of artist over spectator; leader over follower; producer over consumer.

### **Charisma in Theatre and Performance**

While 'charisma' can be readily found in dramatic and theatrical parlance, the term enjoys only minimal critical attention in theatre and performance studies, with scholarly work on presence (Auslander 1997, Goodall 2008, Power 2008, Roach 2007) and actor training methods (Deer and Dal Vera 2016, O'Dell 2010) taking the

lead in defining charisma. Within the latter attempts to pin down charisma as 'stage presence, vitality, magnetism, charm, appeal, allure, confidence, virility, sexiness, danger' there is also an assumption that charisma is paradoxically undefinable, which contributes to the general mystification surrounding this concept. At the same time, the proposed difficulty of articulating what constitutes charisma is bypassed in these theoretical models by subsequent claims that echo a phrase regularly heard on popular Saturday night talent shows: 'everyone knows it when they see it' (Deer and Dal Vera 2016: 308).

Given the theatrical context within which the term charisma is often used and discussed, the framing of *The Artist is Present* as enabling a 'charismatic space' seems at odds with the anti-theatrical stance which Abramović observes when claiming that 'To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre' (Abramović in O'Hagan 2010: n.p). The use of this term charismatic space by both Abramović and her gallerist Kelly inevitably, if unintentionally, inherits the mystifying quality of its theatrical precursors, particularly when Kelly and Abramović attribute the charismatic space to the artist's 'extraordinariness' and her ability to be 'in the present moment'.<sup>1</sup> These qualities of uniqueness and having (stage) presence are often found in descriptions of the charismatic actor and, although some of these traits are available to be read as emerging from Abramović's own training, the qualities themselves and their relation to the charismatic space remain largely mysterious to the viewer of the documentary. In addition to these qualities, Abramović's 'magnetism' is highlighted by personal assistant Davide Balliano who describes the process by which Abramović bows her head in *The Artist is Present* as each spectator comes to sit down across from her and then lifts her head to establish eye contact: 'So each and every one had like a clean, unique, and personal contact with Marina... Boom. Like a magnet' (in Akers et al 2012: n.p.). Research on actor training regularly associates charisma with magnetism (Deer and Dal Vera 2016, Rea 2014) and magnetism is often discussed in relation to charisma or 'It' more widely (Allsopp and Williams 2006, Cummings 2011, Roach 2007). Whilst it is unlikely that Balliano set out to create a connection between this theatrical context and Abramović's action in *The Artist is Present*, the idea of magnetism as elaborated by Roach sheds further light on charisma as containing within itself antagonistic qualities.

In his book *It*, Roach suggests that charisma is an embodied series of contradictions such as 'strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience,

singularity *and* typicality among them' (2007: 8). Mapping the history of what he calls It, that mysterious quality of the charismatic person, Roach suggests that:

For adherents of science, It was captured by the metaphoric terms of *magnetism* and *radiance*, which, taken together neatly express the opposite motions instigated by the contradictory forces of It: drawing toward the charismatic figure as *attraction*; radiating away from him or her as broadcast *aura* (2007: 7).

Abramović's magnetism is indexed in the documentary through the emotional response she seems to draw from some spectators, many of whom are brought to tears by the simple act of establishing eye contact with her. Whilst there is potential for a complex psychoanalytic reading of these moments, as Giesbrecht and Levin have demonstrated (2012), a critique of the charismatic space demands that we observe the tension between Abramović's supposed magnetism – as that which is explicitly staged through accounts such as those offered by Balliano, Kelly and spectators of the work – and her apparent ability to radiate an aura, which is even cited in the very literature that seeks a critical reflection of the play of narcissism within the piece:

Her dark hair, alabaster skin, and voluptuous red gown are so vivid that they seem to turn the MoMA inside out, making this spacious atrium in which she is seated seem a rather smallish place in comparison to her presence.

Marina's motionless silence somehow fills the great hall... (Giesbrecht and Levin 2012: 16).

As Roach's historical mapping suggests, the magnetism and radiance in this piece is not *of* the charismatic space but *of Abramović herself*: enabled through *her* silence, *her* presence despite the dominant discourse on this piece attempting to frame charisma as a quality of the space rather than the person.

To examine how the framing of the charismatic space in relation Abramović's performance suggests an auratic quality, we can turn to Cormac Power's notion of charisma as a form of 'auratic presence' (Power 2008: 47). By this, he means the quality of *having* presence rather than the process of '*making-present* fictional

phenomena' or 'being present' (ibid). The term 'auratic' in this sense derives from aura and thus articulates a quality that is extraordinary and which belongs not only to a person but also to objects, people, places and other phenomena. Power argues that aura emerges in two ways, on the one hand, as a result of an actor's or artwork's already established celebrity status or fame and, on the other hand, as something which is 'constructed *in the act* of performance' (ibid.: 49). This distinction between aura as charisma that arises either from the spectator's prior knowledge of an actor/artwork's reputation or from within the performance itself, is particularly pertinent to *The Artist is Present* where the notion of a 'charismatic space' is contingent on both of these conditions whilst seeming to appear only from the latter.

Abramović's self-proclaimed status as the 'grandmother' of performance art, for example, undoubtedly attracts spectators that see her not only in relation to her previous body of work but also potentially as a celebrity figure. This is emphasised in the film documentary, which includes footage of gallery visitors camping outside MoMA overnight to sit across from her in *The Artist is Present* along with the emotional outpouring of 'love' and admiration during interview soundbites which is suggestive of a fan culture and disciple-like behaviour among some of her spectators. Furthermore, Kelly's claim that a charismatic space is created, occupied and realised in the performance itself rather than through reference to Abramović's fame or celebrity, seems to echo Power's conceptualisation of auratic presence as an expression of charisma that is realised in the very act of performing. However, Kelly's account veils the constructedness of Abramović's own auratic presence by framing her 'extraordinary' ability as something that she is able to generate in the performance rather than as a consequence of her already established fame. This highlights the significant role that these documentary traces of the work play in performing and constructing Abramović's auratic presence guaranteeing her 'aura' through the messianic iconography of her promotional photographs and the artist's own discourse of stillness, energy, and spirituality:

I give people a space to simply sit in silence and communicate with me deeply but non-verbally. I did almost nothing, but they take this religious experience from it. Art had lost that power, but for a while MoMA was like Lourdes (Abramović in O'Hagan 2010: n.p.).

The use of eye contact, silence and potential associations to the divine and the sacred in the staging of the piece itself also inevitably contributes to a reading of Abramović's presence as 'auratic', and builds on an already established connection between these physical elements and charisma in both performance (Rea 2014; Shepherd 1999) and leadership studies (Harding et al 2011, Sinclair 2011). Although Power is specifically interested in theatrical modes of presence, when the category of auratic presence is applied to Abramović's *The Artist is Present*, it reveals the antagonistic relation between, on the one hand, the assumption that one can 'have' and 'construct' this presence and, on the other hand, the necessity and importance of a spectator to bear witness to this presence as charismatic/auratic. For Amelia Jones, for example, her experience of sitting across from Abramović was 'not an emotionally or energetically charged interpersonal relation' as promised by the charismatic space (2011: 18). Rather than confirming the artist's 'presence', for Jones this work was 'a *simulation* of relational exchange with others' (ibid, emphasis added), which she suggests made her participation in the piece more of a spectacle than an experiential engagement with the artist. The spectacularization of the spectator's body in this event and the associated violence of objectification contained within that act, was also confirmed by a separate instance during the exhibition where a male participant sitting across from Abramović was greeted with agitated spectators who, waiting in line to see Abramović, felt that he had sat across from her for too long and begin to whisper: 'the man is angry . . . he is resentful . . . you can see that he is a brute . . . he dislikes art . . . he looks like a body-builder . . . he is trying to prove himself superior to Marina' (anon in Giesbrecht and Levin 2012: 17). The power to confirm Abramović's charisma is, therefore, with the spectator themselves whilst the dominant discourse of charisma in relation to the piece is predominantly regulated and managed through the texts (the interviews in the documentary, the catalogue descriptions, journalistic accounts of the work etc.) that surround *The Artist is Present*.

The reciprocal nature of charisma has largely remained implicit in existing discussions of charisma in theatre and performance studies. However, Lindsay B. Cummings' proposal that charismatic figures have 'the capacity to empathize with us *and* are available for us to empathize with' (2011: 84) begins to articulate the importance of the spectator's role in recognising and acknowledging 'charisma' and therefore its relational aspects. Cummings builds on Roach's assertion that those

who have charisma possess a 'strangely empathic presence' (2007: 34). This begs the question: to what extent does *The Artist is Present* allow for an empathetic dialogue between artist and spectator to emerge? Does the performance enable Abramović to empathize with the spectator and in turn does it make Abramović available for the spectator to empathize with? Whilst the performance has the appearance of a democratic space within which Abramović gives her time and attention to the individual spectator who is offered the option to choose how long she spends in the space with the artist, the potential for an empathetic exchange is undermined by the rules and regulations of the space. These rules serve to support a reading of Abramović as 'charismatic', especially since they confirm her celebrity status, but also (perhaps unintentionally) these same rules function to silence those modes of engagement that might generate an empathetic response. For example, a female spectator is quickly and physically ushered out of the space by the gallery guards when, taking her turn to sit across from Abramović, she removes her dress to reveal her naked body. Reflecting on the incident in the film documentary, the spectator says:

And I thought in that space, in that square, like, you get your own, you know, it's like the audience is part of the art. You know, and we bring to it... and I just wanted to be as vulnerable to her as she makes herself to everyone else (anon, in Akers et al 2012: n.p.).

Whilst this spectator was making herself available to Abramović by empathising with what she reads as Abramović's previous artistic attempts to make herself vulnerable, for example in works such as *Rhythm 0* where she relinquishes control to the spectator, the 'charismatic space' of *The Artist is Present* does not seem to allow for the spectator to participate in an empathetic response.

The relation between charisma and the highly regulated and disciplined space that emerges in *The Artist is Present*, echoes Philip Auslander's assertion that presence-as-charisma is associated with authoritarian and 'repressive power structures' that attempt to reinforce the status quo (1997: 63). The staging of Abramović's work, for example, inherits the rigid 'look, don't touch' convention of museum experience, creating a physical demarcation of the performance space through the use of lighting and tape on the floor and thus reiterating the divide

between artwork/audience, performer/spectator and spectator/participant. For Auslander, who cites Adolf Hitler's use of projection and presence to illustrate the collusion of presence with authority, charismatic performance can avoid these authoritarian pitfalls by being 'accompanied by its own deconstruction' (ibid.: 67). However, the so-called charismatic space of *The Artist is Present* does not contain within itself its own deconstruction and only serves to reiterate the authoritarian power of the museum space to regulate visibility for the spectator. Both Cummings' conceptualisation of charisma as an empathetic exchange and Auslander's deconstructed charisma are thus more ethically desirable, we suggest, than a charisma that veils the constructedness of the artist's 'auratic presence'. In particular, these perspectives remind us that charismatic performances are co-authored and can potentially belong to both spectator and artist. However, the emphasis on charisma as emerging from someone (the actor or the performer) in these theories overlooks the potential for charisma to be articulated through/as a spatial component of artistic, performative, or theatrical practice.

### **Charisma and the Dialectics of Leadership**

The study of leadership has similarly concerned itself with the relationship between extraordinary people and ordinary followers - from Plato's discussion of the philosopher king in *Republic*, to stories of the mysterious Yellow Emperor in the Taoist philosophies of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the military strategies and tactics of Sun Tzu, and the moral and political lessons imparted in the writings of Confucius, Machiavelli, and Tolstoy, to contemporary studies of the exploits of transformational and authentic business leaders (Goffee and Jones, 2005; Grint 1997). Indeed, the template for this notion of the extraordinary individual that somehow both embodies and emanates leadership was arguably solidified by philosopher and social commentator Thomas Carlyle as part of his published series of lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (2007[1840]). Take the following famous opening passage in which Carlyle presents what later became known as the 'Great Man' theory of leadership:

We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of

the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness... (Carlyle 2007[1840]: 4).

This highly romanticised account provided early trait theorists with their model of what makes a great man and therefore a great leader (Taylor 2015). The heroic masculine whose company is both pleasant and transformational, and whose body and soul emanate a luminary shining; the embodiment of a 'living light-fountain, which is good and pleasant to be near'. As with earlier discussions of charisma in theatre, the leader as great man is similarly endowed with the phallic power to both attract and radiate, mesmerize and dazzle - most notably through Carlyle's notion of embodying and expressing a 'gift of heaven'. So where the classical texts tended to impart philosophical, moral and political lessons to the would-be-leader, the birth and development of a twentieth-century science of leadership is founded upon this notion of the great man and the potential of his divine gift of grace.

Echoes of Carlyle's vision of the great man can also, of course, be found in the foundational writings on charisma and leadership by sociologist Max Weber in his *Economy and Society* (1968 [1925]). However, whereas Carlyle celebrates the great man, Weber is more cautious in his analysis. By examining the charismatic in relation to other traditional and contemporary forms of authority such as the religious and the rational/legal structures of his time, Weber suggests that unlike the priest, prophet, or bureaucrat, charismatic authority cannot easily be challenged or toppled and so presents a particular set of dangers. For unlike the priest whose connection with God can be questioned or usurped, or the bureaucrat who can be sacked and removed from office, the charismatic is not gifted their authority from another external source. Instead, *they* are the source of their own authority (both giver and receiver of the gift) through their extraordinary character and seemingly magical powers to charm, attract and transform. Indeed, it is this transgressive quality that marks out the charismatic for Weber as a unique form of authority and leadership (Rieff 2007). And yet there are limits to this gift of grace in that for charismatic authority to sustain itself the leader must nurture a charismatic community of devoted followers. It is here that the dialectical and potentially disruptive nature of charisma is revealed. As Weber stated:

The bearer of charisma enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission believed to be embodied in him; this mission has not necessarily and not always been revolutionary, but in its most charismatic forms it has inverted all value hierarchies and overthrown custom, law, and tradition (Weber, 1968 [1925]: 1117).

Following Weber, contemporary studies of leadership have similarly demonstrated that an ability to 'bear' charisma and sustain a charismatic community requires a subtle understanding of the dialectical at play in leader/follower relations. As such the 'mission' or organising force that sustains a group and its leader must be supplemented by physical, symbolic, ritualistic, and routinized ingredients (Bryman 1992). Here something as simple as eye contact can have a profound affective force as evidenced in Willner's (1984) study of Castro and Lindholm's (1990) analysis of the cult of the Manson family and Jim Jones' People's Temple. In each case the leader figure was described in terms of their physical attraction and the intensity of their eyes and hypnotic gaze. Also in each case the charismatic community was bound by a powerful collective identity; an identity further refined through the careful organisation of space and an observance to certain rules, regulations, symbols, and routines that would limit contact by those considered 'outsiders' and so strengthen the charismatic bond between leader and follower.

Among leadership scholars, the potential danger of charismatic authority is similarly captured by concerns around leaders who can fake charisma and vision such as Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) concept of 'pseudo-transformational leadership', or in the destruction and misery resulting from unchecked and corrupted charismatic authority as evidenced in the collapse of Enron (Tourish 2013). As such, the dangers expressed by Weber a century ago are still with us today as this is a form of authority not reducible to the will of the individual over the collective, but one produced in the dialectical space between leader and follower. This is a space in which powerful and seductive visions and desires are articulated and consumed, and through which bodies are produced and reconfigured to embody and express a shared charismatic vision. So where charisma in theatre and performance studies is examined in terms of its productive and libidinal potential to connect with the other, the study of leadership reminds us of the risks involved in courting the charismatic.

One such risk in *The Artist is Present* is the tension between artist and spectator captured in what Abramović described as a kind of reward granted to spectators who are prepared to give themselves over to the experience that is offered to them. Yet this reward of experiencing presence is arguably the reward for conforming to the artist's will, for the artist can only be present to you if you are willing to give yourself over, to sacrifice your own consciousness to allow the other to enter and take hold. This tense moment of undecidability caught in the space between hospitality and hostility (Caputo 1996) is captured by Amelia Jones' (2011) description of *The Artist is Present* as a *simulated* relational exchange between artist and spectator. Something about the supposed mutual sense of giving over to the other feels somehow 'off', forced, contrived, as if this is not an equal coming together of subjects. Instead it feels as if there is something at stake, something that might be threatened and potentially lost if either the artist or spectator allows oneself to fully experience otherness. Arguably what is at stake here is exactly that which also visits the leader and follower as described above. For if one truly wishes to experience the other in the present moment, then one must put at risk the status of 'artist' and 'leader', and for a time embrace the possibility of becoming spectator/follower, or something else entirely. Not only does some recognition of this intersubjective exchange reveal the power at play in both relationships (artist and leader), it also makes visible the passionate (and yet co-dependent) attachment that the subject on the more dominant side of this relation has for their hard won status and identity. The 'leader' was undoubtedly once 'follower', the artist will at some point have been 'spectator', and so both will resist undoing all of the effort expended and rewards and compensations received to achieve this lofty position by allowing the follower/spectator to glimpse and potentially occupy this higher status. This perhaps gives us another possible reading of Abramović's earlier instructions to her fellow artists compared with the later commentary offered by her assistant. As Abramović instructs her artists in training, they must 'create their own charismatic space', and yet at the same time 'just empty [themselves]' and '[b]e able to be in a present time' (Abramović in Akers et al 2012: n.p). Yet for Abramović-as-artist to be present she must take care not to empty *too* much and so give up the status as artist. Instead, she must empty just enough to still occupy the more powerful side of this supposed intersubjective encounter. The necessary distancing created between artist and spectator then allows for observers and supporters like Davide Balliano to still be

able to recognise the extraordinary power of the artist to deliver ‘a clean, unique and personal contact with Marina... Boom. Like a magnet’. As we have argued, however, the cost to the artist is the negation of one’s own ability to fully experience empathy, emptiness, presence, and otherness.

### **From Charisma to the Potentialities of a Matrixial Borderspace**

The dialectical tension between artist/spectator and leader/follower explored in this article follows the mythical scene of the master/slave or ‘lord and bondsman’ as described by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977[1807]).<sup>2</sup> Here two subjects - the lord and the bondsman - are caught in the same dilemma in that they both require recognition by the other in order to be realised as conscious subjects. However, with this potential for recognition comes the requirement to give over one’s consciousness to this other and risk one’s subjectivity being absorbed and so destroyed. For Hegel this threat is resolved not through destruction of one or both, but through the establishment of an asymmetrical relationship in which power is redistributed in favour of the lord. Here, although it is the lord that appears at first to hold power and authority (authorial power to write upon and so shape the other and the world through hierarchical position, divine or legal/rational status, the ownership of the land and so forth), it is actually the bondsman in Hegel’s mythical scene that maintains and bolsters this power relation through their ability to produce the lord’s will. For as this scene unfolds it becomes apparent that the lord’s power over the bondsman is contingent upon the bondsman accepting and repeatedly revitalising this relation. Through participation (coerced or otherwise), the bondsman begins to internalise the lord and so becomes an embodiment and expression of the lord’s power. The lord on the other hand is in a weakened position as their power and fate is utterly dependent upon the labour and production of the bondsman.

Just as the leader of a group or organization must go to great lengths to construct and hold on to their power (whilst hiding the exertions and fragility involved in this), Abramović and her supporters were at pains to demonstrate again and again that it is the *artist* that is present; the artist is the source of this charismatic relationship. Yet, like all charismatic leaders there is also effort made to ensure that those who form the charismatic community are enveloped by this power and so feel a deep sense of ownership over this attraction. Just as with the lord/bondsman and

leader/follower, the artist's presence is intimately tied to and dependent on the spectator and the viewing public and so it is here that an alternative notion of the dialectical and the charismatic might be necessary: a notion based not on lord/bondsman (master/slave) but on the potential of the *matrixial*.

The matrixial is not a challenge to or replacement of the Hegelian dialectic, but rather a means of rethinking the relation between subjects that both Abramović's charismatic space and charismatic leadership are founded upon. Drawing on the work of Ettinger (2006a, 2006b) and the recent influence her ethical and feminist writings have had on rethinking subjectivities – particularly in the fields of leadership and organisation studies (see Kenny and Fotaki 2015) – we conclude this article by suggesting a rethinking of charisma and the charismatic space, not as the result of an antagonistic force created between subjects, but as a *matrixial borderspace* in which otherness and difference are intimately connected through the creation of a compassionate relational space. This is a move away from the phallic struggle of the master/slave and towards a dialectical yet shared space of the maternal that follows something of the ambiguous relation between pregnancy and birth, mother and child, carer and cared for. Ettinger's writings explore the potential for a feminist ethics based on compassion, relationality, and co-emergence in which the matrixial runs parallel to the possibilities and potentialities of the Hegelian dialectic. As Griselda Pollock remarks '...the matrixial surfs beneath/beside the phallic' (cited in Ettinger, 2006b: 6).

The notion of the matrixial provides a valuable means of reimagining the charismatic space and the potential co-subjectivities at play in *The Artist is Present*. As we have argued, the commentaries on, reactions to, and analyses of Abramović's work draw on a rich and yet limited discourse in which the oppositional relations between artist and spectator, performer and public are privileged and yet often veiled. Instead, we might draw on the matrixial to create our own mythical scene by asking what might have happened if the long line of people patiently queuing for hours in and around MoMA had decided to bypass the artist and sit down on the floor to perform their own version of the piece with each other. By setting aside the celebrity status and 'auratic' presence of the artist, could this matrixial encounter with the other paradoxically realise Abramović's charismatic space? Or might this collective action be seen as a failure of the artwork as a commercial product; a potential disruption to the 'proper' functioning of the museum space; and a threat to

health, safety and security? Let us add to this matrixial mythical scene the possibility of a compassionate acknowledgement of the female spectator who was physically ejected from the performance for removing her clothing as she approached Abramović. The matrixial encourages us to see this moment as an empathetic and tender act where the spectator makes herself as vulnerable as she perceives the artist to be. In contrast, the springing to life of a security protocol in *The Artist is Present* reveals a different kind of 'rent' in the fabric of reality to that described by Sean Kelly in the opening of this article. This is not a rent that marks the extraordinariness of the artist, but one that reveals the limits of this charismatic space to tolerate otherness, difference, and co-emergence. For if we can imagine a charismatic space that is based on an ethics of care and compassion we will never forget the potentiality performance shares with the matrixial: 'that which is woven and touches me behind the visible and the audible borders of the thinkable, a knowledge with the other and in the other, and the other's knowledge with-in me' (Ettinger 2006a: 222).

## Footnotes

1. Indeed, during the filming of the documentary Abramović herself seems to flirt with the charismatic allure of the mysterious and extraordinary potential of stage presence when in conversation with magician David Blaine they consider closing her final performance with an elaborate magical stunt involving Blaine appearing to violently murder the artist with an axe - an idea quickly dismissed by Abramović's gallerist.
2. Here we draw in particular on Nancy Harding's (2014) innovative reading of Hegel for rethinking the dynamics of power between leaders and followers.

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