

Marina Abramovic by Laurie Anderson



Marina Abramovic, *Victory*, 1997, framed color photograph mounted on aluminium, 50 1/2 x 50 1/2". Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery.

In the middle of March Marina Abramovic and I sat around in my studio and talked—or riffed, since it was more like making music than talking. We went jumping from subject to subject: the future of objects, falling apart, teachers, picking up threads, audiences, nonattachment. Marina's voice is breathless. She purrs, rolls a lot of syllables, leaves out articles. Laughs a lot. Talking with her is as intimate as being in a steam room.

I first met Marina in 1977 when she and Ulay, her then partner in art and life, had wedged themselves into a doorway at the entrance to the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bologna during its performance festival. If you wanted to enter the exhibition you had to squeeze between them, pressing against their nude bodies. Each visitor had to choose whether to face him or her. I loved it! To me it was by far the

most challenging performance in the exhibition. I hung around the entrance, and after the police put a stop to their piece I got the chance to meet them.

Since then I have seen many of Marina's performances. In the late '70s I ran into Marina and Ulay here and there in Europe on the art circuit. I remember trotting around after them while they drove their car in endless circles in front of a museum in Paris in a 16-hour performance titled *Relation in Movement*. Around that time Marina and I became friends, and although there were sometimes long gaps between our meetings, we could always quickly reconnect.

I've always loved Marina's sense of adventure. She also has the rare ability to be in the present and to pay perfect attention to her surroundings. In 1980 we spent some time together in the South Pacific on the island of Ponape. We were part of a group of artists—among them John Cage, Chris Burden, Brice Marden, Bryan Hunt and Joan Jonas—invited to make a record there called *Word of Mouth*. The day we arrived, a shocking thing happened: the island's first murder. For some reason the local chief invited us to the funeral. Marina and I were the only ones from our group who attended the ceremony, and it was then that I realized we also shared a fascination with death and strange customs, the stranger the better.

Recently I saw the truly transformative *House with the Ocean View* at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. The spirituality that has driven much of Marina's work was now central. Confrontation with the audience no longer had any props. For 12 days she lived in full view on a shelf in the gallery. She showered, drank water, sat on a toilet, brushed her hair, but mostly sat and looked at the people who came to see the show. It was about as direct as it gets. She was fasting for the duration and said later that this increased her sensitivity and connection to the audience. When I went to see her there I had a very powerful wordless encounter. I also was able to experience the passage of time in a unique way—at a tempo somewhere between music and meditation.

The *House with the Ocean View* reminded me that Marina can actually transform and direct thoughts. She understands and uses the ecstatic. And she creates transformation out of the simplest materials, featuring her own body. An intensely physical person, she combines it with the spiritual in a completely unique way.

Laurie Anderson: I've been trying to find a picture I took of you floating in the ocean in 1980. It was a beautiful thing.

Marina Abramovic: Was it the ocean or was I under a waterfall?

LA: It was the ocean, with beaches that go slowly down to the water. There is no cliff, so I don't know how I got up in the air looking down at you. Maybe when I find the photograph you can tell me.

MA: Okay, if I can remember. So let's start with simple questions and then we'll come to art. When you were a child, did you have some experiences that you can't explain rationally?

LA: I made them up. I tried to invent situations that were irrational, that had never happened before.

MA: Such as?

LA: A man is walking down the road. A Canadian goose falls right on his head; at the same moment there's a triple rainbow and the guy has a heart attack.

MA: That's a fantastic image. Have you ever done something with it?

LA: Occasionally I use it to snap myself out of trances. What about you?

MA: I have very strange dreams now from which I wake up in complete horror. They repeat during different periods of my life. I can't explain them. They have



Maarina Abramovic, Ponape, Micronesia, 1980. Photo: Laurie Anderson.

something to do with the disturbance of an order that is not supposed to be disturbed. I come from a military family—maybe that's why I have these sorts of dreams. I have one where I'm in front of a huge army of five thousand soldiers in perfectly pressed uniforms. I'm inspecting them, and I go up to every soldier and take one button from each uniform and throw it away. I destroy the symmetry, and that is not allowed. Then I wake up in a panic.

LA: It's interesting that you use symmetry as an example of order, because to me symmetry is both dangerous and dull. It's rhyming pictures. Maybe it's because the two sides of our brains need things to match. In your dream, did you take a different button from each person?

MA: No, always the same.

LA: So weren't you creating just another orderly situation?



Marina Abramovic, *The House with the Ocean View*, 2002-2003. Performance view. Photo: Steven P. Harris. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery.

MA: (laughter) The thing is, I'm interested in this idea that we organize everything and then at the last minute, everything changes, takes a different turn. I like that so much. I learned about that from the Tibetans.

LA: Remember the mandala the monks created in the Museum of Natural History in the late '80s? It took them six weeks to make it, dropping the colored sand grain by grain. I was there when two kids came by and scuffed the whole thing up.

MA: And then?

LA: The monks laughed.

MA: Of course.

LA: Because it's about changing. It didn't matter how much work they had put into it—they were going to destroy it in the end anyway.

MA: To me this is so fascinating about the Tibetans. Did I ever tell you the story about the pyramid? The Dalai Lama wanted to have a concert, with sacred music from the five different Buddhist traditions around the world, all on one stage, singing one song, which had never happened before. It was to take place in the music center in Bangalore, in southern India. They do this deep chanting. It's fantastic. I was invited to choreograph them. So I went to the monastery with a megaphone. There were 106 monks.

LA: When was this?

MA: This was exactly four years ago. So I was thinking that the form could be a human pyramid. It took five weeks to build these steps of wood on wheels—it had to roll on and off the stage, and they had one minute and 10 seconds to get all 106 monks standing in position onstage. We had to rehearse a lot; they weren't used to this kind of stage presence. And when it was finished—I had been in the monastery for more than a month—the chief monk came and said, "It's so nice, but we can't use this pyramid." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Because in the Buddhist tradition there is no hierarchy."

LA: I was wondering who would be on top.

MA: You know, I couldn't understand how they could let me work all this time, every single day, for five weeks and not tell me it wouldn't do. They told me that they hadn't wanted to offend me. I was crying. And they said this simple thing: "Let it go." Then at the concert they sat anywhere they wanted to and sang and it was perfect.

In the performance you have to be in control. Maria Callas once said, "When you perform, half of the brain has to be in complete control and the other half of the brain has to be at a complete loss." That is the essence of what I want to say. You have to balance these two. How is it with you when you perform?

LA: Exactly the same. But let's talk about the audience for a minute. How do you see the audience? When I was working with actors I learned about the audience through them. They would ask about the motivations of their characters and this really drove me crazy. I kept thinking of that great series of essays called "True and False" that David Mamet wrote about talking to actors. He said that directors should just tell the actors to speak loudly and clearly and forget about their motivations, forget about their "pasts." They don't have any pasts! Anyway, there was one actor I was working with who kept asking me, "Who are you when you perform? Who is your audience?" And I kept saying, "I don't know, I don't know." Then I realized—I had never put this into words before because it seemed too stupid—I'm talking to a sadder version of *myself*, sitting in the middle of the theater. I'm trying to cheer her up, or say something inspiring or funny or sad. That sounds narcissistic, but I don't know who other people are, and I don't like it when they assume they know who I am. It's a very tricky thing when you're giving somebody something; how open are you to them and how open are they to you?

MA: It's such an important question, because the relation to the audience is the essence of performance. In my case, the need to be completely open and vulnerable, to give everything I can, 100 percent, is extremely strong. Every single person in the audience is important. I don't have this kind of feeling in real life, but in performance I have this enormous love, this heart that literally hurts me with how much I love them. In the last performance, when I lived for 12 days, totally exposed, in the Sean Kelly Gallery, almost nothing happened. But just being there, with this openness—there is just skin and bones; there's nothing else but being there for them. I was there to be projected on. The whole thing has to be almost an invisible exchange. You asked what the connection was like in that performance. I really looked at the people in the gallery. To me the eyes are a door for something else, and whatever is happening in their lives, I pick it up. You can't imagine how much I



Marina Abramovic, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artists Must Be Beautiful*, 1975, framed black-and-white photograph, 29 3/4 x 39 1/2", with framed letterpress text panel, 10 1/4 x 7 1/4".
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery.

cried in that piece. This sadness comes because they project their own sadness onto me and I reflect it back. And I cry out in the saddest way, so they are free. People would come like drunks—instead of a shot of vodka they came to have a shot of this connection with the eyes. They came in the morning; at quarter to nine they were there waiting, in business suits. The gallery would open at nine, and they would come in, look at me for 20 minutes and go away. A lot of them told me later that they are not even connected to art. I was thinking that people usually don't look at them in this intimate way, so maybe they just needed to be looked at in that way before going to work.

LA: It reminds me how much of a defense language is. And how distancing it is—it's called communicating, but often it's not. Sometimes it's just these clever things that we set up, and often they actually get in the way of what we mean.

MA: But it's different when you have dialogue. In performance, it's a monologue, and in this monologue you create so many spaces that we can project onto, so many images, one after another. What's also special is that the sound of the voice will create certain vibrations. Sometimes it's not even the word but the space in between the words, a long pause that works magic. A monologue becomes something beyond language; it becomes so strong. The moment it becomes a conversation, I think, we try to be clever, we try to construct things, and then everything falls apart again. But with the monologue, emotions come in a different way. There are two people whose voices that I can listen to for a long time, you and Acconci.

LA: Oh, Vito!

MA: **It has to do with the vibration. You have to be in a certain state to have such a vibration. You can't just learn it. In performance you get into the state of mind that generates that voice. With Vito it was in his home movies, when he was alone, with just the camera. I think he is shy in public.**

LA: I wrote a film script once, just for fun, when I was stuck at an airport. Vito was the star. For the first 15 minutes you see him from the back.

MA: **The script was written for Vito?**

LA: Yeah, it was one of those art films. I was writing stuff for him to say. He's so mysterious. He is very open, but I feel like he is always turning away.

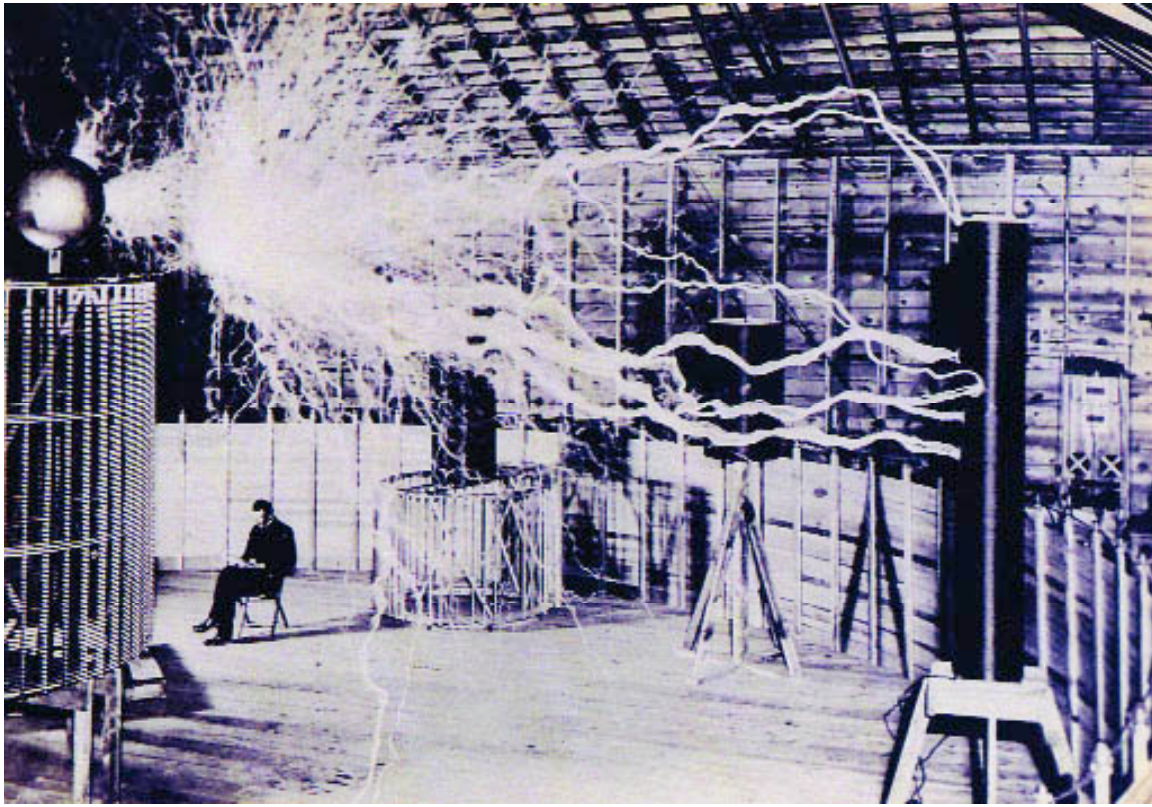
MA: **That's very funny, because I also have Vito in one of my scripts. Tell me about yours, and I'll tell you about mine.**

LA: Mine was a mystery story, *Neuwelt 2000*, about a European performance festival that was happening on a train going through the former East Germany. The promoter of this festival was a toy-train fanatic named Rolf. It was going to star Vito and Arto Lindsay. I made up other characters, performance artists who were also on the train. A very pale brother and sister from Norway who sing Nordic folk songs together. Michel Waisvisz had a role in it too.

MA: **But what was Vito doing? It sounds very mysterious, to see him only from the back.**

LA: Well, Rolf—Vito—couldn't get a ticket to fly directly from New York because of the East German government. So he had to be routed through Cuba and then through Poland and then take a train into East Germany. It ends almost like Rolf's toy-train fetish—with Vito on a train that was literally going nowhere—like in a loop around a Christmas tree, a child's toy train that won't stop. Vito's going through the renamed towns of the former East Germany and they can't be found on the map anymore because of their new names. He has no idea where he is. He is getting more and more lost.

MA: **My story is a Beckett short story that was not meant to be a play, called *Mal Vi/Mal Di (Bad Seen/Bad Said)*. The story is about an old woman—I would play her—sitting on a chair in a completely empty space. There is a little window and a ray of light coming in just in front of her feet, but not touching them. In Beckett stories, a monologue goes on in the character's head and as a consequence, in your head, constantly. She is thinking about things; it's words and words and words. She wants to stand up, to take the chair and put it in front of the light and sit again, so that the sunlight will reach her. This takes about 45 minutes because she is very old and very sick and can't walk. And all this time she is talking of what's in her head, about her life, past and future, and old conflicts. She takes the chair very slowly, very slowly, very slowly away and she is lifting the chair, almost putting it in the sun, when she changes her mind and takes another 45 minutes to go back. I wanted to play this woman, but I wanted the voice in my head to be Vito's voice. I like this idea very much.**



Tesla Coil. Courtesy of Marina Abramovic

LA: Why don't you do that? It's a great idea.

MA: **I've never done it.**

LA: So do it!

When you talk to yourself, do you hear a voice or do you just think thoughts?

MA: **I think it's a voice.**

LA: What does it sound like? Is it like, "You should really go get that done." Or "I'm running out of time, I should get a cab." Does it have a texture or a sound? I'm using accusatory examples because my voice, when I hear it, is always nagging me.

MA: **I don't hear much of my voice. I heard it clearly after I didn't talk for 12 days, when I came down from *The House with the Ocean View* and gave a talk for the public. This was the first time I really heard my voice clearly, and it was so strange to me because I had this distance from it, and could really hear it.**

Tell me, is it important for you to go to some geographical place—I call them power places—where you feel there is a certain energy you can use? Volcanoes, waterfalls, the sea—

LA: They don't have to be dramatic, but one place that I really enjoyed going to a few weeks ago was Green Gulch in California. It's a monastery with a group of artists, people from museums and places like that, who have an interest in Buddhism. I was giving a paper called "Time and Beauty." A modest title. I wrote it when I was in Athens. It keeps going back to belief and beauty and aesthetics.

MA: I find that beauty hurts.

LA: For me sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. One of my favorite baffling quotes comes from Lenin: "Ethics is the aesthetics of the future." I guess it means that sometime in the future we'll all be good to each other and communicate so clearly that we won't need those things that we put in the beauty category. They'll just be fetishes, relics. In my paper I talked about how belief and beauty rub up against each other to make something, and how uneasily they rest together. I used the Parthenon as an example. When the Parthenon was a place of worship, everybody brought their beautiful statues to dedicate to the gods, their *kouri*, to celebrate their victories, their dedications and their prayers. They propped them up all around the Parthenon, which quickly came to look like a museum, there was so much stuff there. So they all went back to the caves and the woods and the rivers where they could find the gods, because they couldn't find them in the Parthenon anymore.

MA: You know, there was a very interesting breakfast in the '70s, which a friend of mine, Lutz Becker, invited me to. This old man was sitting there, and I didn't realize for half of the breakfast that he was Albert Speer, Hitler's architect. He was just out of prison and he was helping with the maquettes for a movie about Hitler that Lutz was making, called *Double Headed Eagle*.

LA: Lots of symmetry in that, by the way.

MA: And I asked Speer a question: "Why did you use concrete for all those buildings?" I'll never forget his answer. He said, "When they get destroyed, they still look good." The concrete collapse looks better than bricks: there is more momentum; they fall into big pieces. That an architect, who builds his stuff for forever, was thinking of destruction as part of the process! The other funny thing about worshipping—I was in Thailand, in one of their fantastic old temples where you can go outside and buy a little piece of gold leaf to put on a sculpture. I was looking through this huge place, and in a dusty corner was a big fuse box with all the electrical wires, which somebody had covered in gold leaf. I loved the idea of worshipping electricity as a mystery. And why not?

LA: I wonder what happens with gold and copper—you know, as a conductor.

MA: The fuse box didn't work—it was broken.

Laurie, what is *emptiness* for you? That's such a heavy word.

LA: To me it's an ecstatic term. Emptiness is as ecstatic as I can imagine being. Emptiness to me is expansive. And I don't have to be there. I *can't* exist in it. I like imagining places where I don't exist.

MA: I don't. (laughter) But at the same time, like with Buddhism—

LA: Do you have a practice?

MA: I am unable to do anything regularly. I always do things as part of a project. If I have in my mind that I have to do something, then I generate an enormous discipline and willpower and I get into the space I have to enter to make the performance. But it is impossible for me to do something like wake up every morning at six to run, as people do. I like to make rules and change them all the time. Even when I buy the milk in Amsterdam, I find new ways to go around the canal. The idea of habits, of discipline—there is something within me that can't function that way.

LA: That's a wonderful thing, to do it differently every time.

MA: I like unpredictability. I tell my students, "Go to the train and don't look to see where it's going, just sit inside and find yourself in a new situation, and then from this situation see what's going to happen." Put yourself in unpredictable situations. If it is not a possibility in life, then I try to do it in performance. I set up rules and I have no idea how difficult this will be or how I will manage, but then it happens. When you make a performance, do you know exactly how it is going to happen? Or is it always open?

LA: Oh, it's always open. The last performance I did, *Happiness*, was about expectation. I had gotten bored with my own style, my way of doing things. I was just experiencing what I expected. So I put myself in situations in which I didn't know what to do, what to say or how to act, just to see what would happen. But you know, no matter how hard you try to escape your style, it still looks an awful lot like what you've made before. That's okay, I guess, that there are threads going through everything.

MA: It is so difficult to change. Radical change can only happen with some kind of tragedy that totally shakes your life. The only changes I can expect are from my own performance. I don't learn in life otherwise.

LA: Who are your teachers?

MA: Not really anybody. I don't see it that way. There was only one person in my life who I thought could be my teacher, but he died. Just when I found him, he died.

LA: Who was this?

MA: This was in '82 in Bodhgaya, a pilgrimage site, with the Bohdi tree. I arrived on a full-moon night. It was the most auspicious moment. And they said to me, in our town is a very important Lama who is the teacher of the Dalai Lama. I didn't know at the time anything of Buddhism, nothing. I went because everybody was going to see this special teacher. He was sitting in a Tibetan monastery. He looked like the full moon, a big baby, with a wonderfully shiny bald head, aged somewhere between 80 and 100. You couldn't tell. And I went to greet him, and he took his little finger and just flicked his finger at my head. And that was it. I looked into his eyes and then I went back to sit. Five minutes later I had a temperature of 102. I was red like a strawberry. I started crying and crying and I had to leave the monastery. I cried for about four hours, just enormously. And I was thinking, Why am I crying? Nothing happened to me; I am not sad. I was just touched by his innocence in the

way of the old man and the child at the same time. Something opened to me. If he had told me to jump out the window, I would have done it. I had never felt this before, what must be close to how one feels about a great teacher, the ideal of complete trust. And then one month later he died.

But then I found him again. It was three years later, I was going again to India, to another monastery for a retreat. And in the forest I lost the way and found myself in front of a house, with an old Lama sitting outside washing some dishes. It was dark, and he said, "Come in, come in, have a tea." I went into the room and there he was, embalmed this time. He was sitting in the room, embalmed in salt. Now he is in the Dalai Lama's living room in Dharmasala. His name is Ling Rinpoche. The Dalai Lama wanted to have him all to himself.

LA: In salt? Can you see him?

MA: They put him in a special preparation and he looks completely alive. He's dressed and sitting; monks die in a sitting position. It was incredible. This is exactly what we have to do, it is so important, losing roads, it's how you find something else. When I was a really young artist, I was getting ideas for different works. And I was thinking, God, how should I do this, this has nothing to do with what I've done before. I don't see any line, there is no continuation. I was obsessed with the idea of continuation, that one work had to lead to another and another, that you have to make a *body* of work. But after 20 years you see that the continuation is so logical. You couldn't have done anything else, and there is a thread in it, everything is connected. We are the connections.

LA: Can you imagine being embalmed and sitting in somebody's house?

MA: I like it so much. I am all for this eternity. I'd hate to be burned. I wouldn't like to be eaten by worms. Maybe a tree can grow out of me. That's it. But embalming is a very nice idea. I like this forever thing. You?

LA: I would like to be burned. (*laughter*)

MA: So this is a big difference!

LA: I don't like the idea of flames so much as particles. I'd like to become many, many particles.

MA: I want to live a very long time. This is my obsession. I want to live to be over 100. My grandmother died at 103 and the mother of my grandmother was 116 when she died. I have this idea that after 100 something else happens. When we are young and even now, though I am not that young, there is this idea of emotions and always some kind of suffering involved. I'd like so much to reach the point of nonattachment, of nonsuffering, when you really know things are happening because they have already happened to you hundreds of times before. You can laugh about it all. To have this wisdom and distance and peace!

LA: How do you think you can get there?

MA: Oh—lots of goat yogurt!

LA: *(laughter)* I mean to detachment?

MA: **You don't take things personally. Even if you love someone, you let them be. And if they leave you, still you love them, because attachment creates such a suffering. This is basic.**

LA: Buddhism 101.

MA: **Theoretically we can deal with it, but when it comes to your own life, it is so hurtful. Attachment in my case is always about people. I really don't care about things. I can leave them, change them.**

LA: You had a partner-lover and art collaborator in Ulay. Have you seen him since you split up 10 years ago?

MA: **Yes, for seven years we didn't talk at all, not one word, and then I decided that I'd invite his wife and kids over, give them all presents and lunch. We did that, and it's fine now.**

LA: Where does he live?

MA: **He lives in Amsterdam. He invites me over sometimes, grills a little steak for me, but there is still a lot of pain from my side. It didn't really finish well. When he left he took all the artwork we did together. I had to buy back from him old negatives, images, everything.**

LA: You had to buy things back from him?

MA: **Yes. Actually, I'm still paying. *(laughter)***

LA: Why did he decide that he owned what you had done together?

MA: **It was very difficult. I found out so many things. Like he was being unfaithful at a time when I thought we were happy. I don't know, I got disappointed. And now I haven't talked to my brother for the last two years. After the bombing of Belgrade he came and stayed with me in Amsterdam for two years. So many things happened, it's complicated, but for him, not talking to me is not having to admit his failure to stay in the Western world. He has completely another state of mind. It is so difficult for him to function in this world.**

LA: Why is that?

MA: **In the Balkans, the relation of the mother to the son is very different from that to the female child. Female children have to work. The male will stay home and the mother does everything for him—she irons his shirts, cooks for him, for all his life. When my brother came to Amsterdam, it didn't even cross his mind that he could do something. For two years he was watching CNN, complaining about Yugoslavia, writing his philosophical text and complaining that I work too much. His little daughter went to school in Amsterdam, and I took care of both of them for two years. I'd had it.**

LA: And where's his wife?

MA: She was in Belgrade. She is the director of the Nikola Tesla Museum there, Marija Sesic. She showed me the guest book, with your signature.

LA: I was very proud to be there.

MA: They are trying to rebuild the museum. I told them, "Please don't, it's so good as it is."

LA: It makes a good ruin.

MA: They should really not do anything. It's old and it's falling apart. But it has a special feeling about it. Oh, by the way, she was asking if you or I have any idea, before they rebuild, if we want to do something there.

LA: Great!

MA: Any of this experimental work, she can make it possible.

LA: How about if you sit in a chair reading a book, waiting for the ray of electricity to shoot out from the Tesla Coil. With the Vito Acconci voice. We could combine the whole thing.

MA: But then you have to do something. What do you do?

LA: Um . . . I can make the shoes that will protect you from being electrocuted.
(*laughter*) You'd have to trust me.

MA: We could put Vito somewhere else. What if we use *your* voice, and I'm sitting there.

LA: That would be great! Wouldn't it be fun to do something together!

MA: The Nikola Tesla Museum would be fantastic.

LA: Tesla died in New York, I think on 23rd Street; there's no marker though.

MA: There's a Tesla Society in New York. Marija showed me all of Tesla's clothes, a complete wardrobe. He was such a dandy—he wore all these wonderful old suits, crocodile shoes and things like that.

LA: Maybe we could just borrow some of his suits.

MA: And walk around pretending to be Tesla! (*laughter*) That could really be something. You know, I'm supposed to have quite a big show in 2005, in Belgrade.

LA: It's the perfect opportunity then.

MA: Why do you like Tesla? Because I love him.

LA: He wanted to plug into the ground. Free electricity for all. He really believed that would work. Anybody who thinks that, I want to be his disciple.

MA: He had mental pictures of his inventions. He was so sure they would work that he didn't need to try them.

LA: I love confidence.

MA: And they said he was an alien. And he was in love with a pigeon, a female pigeon. This was his love affair. When the pigeon died, she released some strange sort of light from her eyes, in front of him.

What kind of image could we use for our piece?

LA: How about the picture of you floating, if I can find it. And maybe a picture of Tesla? And one of Vito?

MA: Where is that image of you standing on an ice cube? It's one of my favorites— it's like the beginning of everything. You have the image of ice, which is water. And I have the image of floating, which is water. Then we have the image of Tesla, which is electricity. We are fine.

LA: Perfect. Fire and water.

MA: And Tesla reading his book.