

I want to be vulnerable to you. I want you to *read* me through everything I do; every little detail of my thoughts, my opinions, what I make, what I compose, how much I admire you. I want you to read how many times I have been hurt. But I am not telling you. You do not get to read any of me.

I am engulfed in shame over mundane things.¹ The things that you consider insignificant are scars on my memory. Mundane things define my protective shield. My protective shield divides myself in two: where *I* am and where *you* are.

Where I am is the vulnerable me. It is where I face my mundane embarrassments in a fearless way.² Where you are is the side of me you do get to see. It is the regular me, the social me. Where you are is so much bigger than where I am that sometimes I think it is the only side I have.

My life falls within what is considered normal. And I think yours, too. We all carry shields that hide our truths because we are embarrassed. We fear rejection. I fear being rejected by you while you fear being rejected by me.

I am just beginning to understand that I am worthy. All my life I have failed to understand that I am just as *good enough* as you. On the other hand, I have always understood that you are good enough.³ I always thought that expecting three times more from myself than you was normal.⁴ I am just

1 I get self-conscious when sleeping with my mouth open on the train.

2 I fart in front of my boyfriend.

3 You are not fat. Being soft suits you.

4 I am fat.

beginning to understand that it does not have to be that way.

I want to be courageous. I want courage to define me. I want to create work where I am unconcerned with what you think of the outcome. The outcome should be authentic and real. I want to make myself vulnerable to you, to be able to connect with you authentically.

„Are you the favourite person of anybody?“

„What?“

„Are you anyone’s favourite person?“

„Oh. I... no, no.“

„It’s just a survey.“

„Yeah, but... I don’t vote.“

„But, it’s not political.“

„Yes. I understand, but I’m not interested in these kind of things.“

„What sort of things?“

„These things... The free love and all that.“

„What? No, that’s not what it’s about.“⁵

Many people may connect the word vulnerability with weakness. Achilles heel, between wind and water, caught with one’s pants down, living in a glass house, out on a limb are all prime examples of idioms that many connect with being vulnerable. An easy target. Open season. Cornered, trapped, up a tree. And, according to the dictionary, they are not entirely wrong.⁶ But that is not the connection that I am looking for. The Icelandic word for being vulnerable is *berskjaldaður*. The literal meaning in English would be *without a shield*. It means being courageous enough to put your shield down and still face your fears.

Contrary to what the commonly used idioms above imply, vulnerability is not weakness. It is accepting the uncertainty of whether or not you will be rejected. It means telling a joke that may not be funny. It means presenting your work to the public. It means asserting an opinion that may offend others. It means being all in.⁷ Being vulnerable is being unprotected by others and yourself, by taking off your shield and standing courageously in front of everybody that might judge harshly. Letting people see parts of you that

5 July, M. 2005. Are You the Favorite Person of Anybody?

6 Vulnerability. The Free Dictionary.

7 Brown, B. 2012. Daring Greatly. p. 38,

you would normally keep hidden. Vulnerability can mean to feel extremely uncomfortable while doing something completely new. Vulnerability may lead you to experience failure. But despite the discomfort and possible disappointments, being vulnerable makes us push our boundaries, brings us courage, and takes us places we would not otherwise have thought of. It means, in fact, strength.

The excerpt above is from the short film *Are you the Favorite Person of Anybody?* (2005). It was written by Miranda July on a Saturday and directed by Miguel Arteta the following Tuesday. The film presents a man with a survey board that stops passersby and asks them, „Are you anybody’s favorite person?“ followed by the options „Very certain, Confident, You think so, Not so sure, Could be“. The viewer gets to witness the unexpected beauty in people opening up to strangers. A connection is instantly forced and people are pressed to be vulnerable. The question compels passersby to step out of their comfort zone momentarily, while they review whether they are anyone’s number one. However, in the particular case of the excerpt above, the passerby rejected the offer to be vulnerable, perhaps because he relates vulnerability with weakness. That reminds us that one cannot be forced to be vulnerable, it is always a choice.

Watching from a safe distance, the viewer’s attention is immediately captured when experiencing the magic moment of spontaneous vulnerability. The vulnerable moment catches our attention because “we have a profound proclivity towards trying to understand the thoughts and feelings bouncing around inside the skulls of people we interact with, characters on television, and even animated shapes moving around a computer screen.”⁸

Although we are far from being good at gleaning the actual mental state of others, Miranda July is giving us an opportunity to relate. When we relate to others, we are looking for whether they are experiencing something we ourselves might experience. Most of us are capable of handling ourselves when things are going well. “Throw in some sort of disaster, conflict, roadblock and we find out who we truly are. This same principle applies in stories. The viewer wants to participate in dramatic stories to learn how characters respond emotionally when things turn messy, challenging, and stressful.”⁹ That applies to the simple four minute film which leaves us with

the poignant question directed at ourselves. Are you the favorite person of anybody and why?

We cannot be vulnerable without exposing our interiors to the outside. This exposure invites anybody to see the real stuff that is normally hidden, and relate to or connect with it. Vulnerability requires connection. A connection is any interaction, be it between people; within a romantic relationship, or between a survey man and a passerby; or even within ourselves.

Connections are a major ingredient in performance artist Marina Abramović's oeuvre. Through her works she depicts different forms of vulnerability by using herself as a medium. In the piece *Rest Energy* (1980) she collaborates with her partner Ulay where they exemplify vulnerability. She explains:

„I was not in charge. In *Rest Energy* we actually held an arrow on the weight of our bodies, and the arrow is pointed right into my heart. We had two small microphones near our hearts, so we could hear our heartbeats. As our performance was progressing, heartbeats were becoming more and more intense, and though it lasted just four minutes and ten seconds, I'm telling you, for me it was forever. It was a performance about the complete and total trust.“¹⁰

Vulnerability also requires risk. And in order to take a risk we need to trust ourselves and others. The more we trust, the easier it becomes to open up and be vulnerable. Marina and Ulay placed immense trust in each other and without it the result could have been disastrous. The trust they had, formed a very strong and vulnerable bond between them. During the life and death situation they put themselves in, Marina and Ulay maintained a calm, but captivating eye contact. This vulnerable tension is what keeps the viewer enticed.¹¹

Marina Abramović does not only show the viewer vulnerability through her trust relationship with her (then) partner. She also creates a relationship

10 Abramović, M. "Works With Ulay".
11 *Rest Energy*. li-ma.nl.



with the audience by inviting the audience to take part in the performance. *Rhythm 0* (1974) involves Abramović taking a passive role while she invited the audience to do whatever they wanted to her, using one of the 72 objects she had placed on a table. The objects, that had a broad range of purpose, included scissors, a feather, honey, a scalpel, a rose, a gun and a single bullet. The table also presented the audience with instructions:

Instructions: There are 72 objects on the table
that one can use on me as desired.

Performance: I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.

Duration: 6 hours (8 pm – 2 am)

Studio Morra, Naples¹²

Some of the objects on the table opened the possibility of a violent outcome due to their nature. But one would not necessarily expect the participants to take advantage of that. While Abramović did not do anything but stand still in *Rhythm 0*, she created an environment where she could possibly become the victim of violence. The performance started innocently, but the participants quickly went far away from their normal behaviour and started aggressively violating Abramović with the various tools, even to the point that Abramović felt afraid for her life. “What I learned was that... if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you.”¹³ After the performance, Abramović started walking towards the participants. Ensuing six hours of being treated like an object she became a person again. The participants could not face her as a person so they all made a quick exit to escape the consequences of their actions.

The big difference between *Rest Energy* and *Rhythm 0* is that in the former Abramović took an enormous risk with her partner who she already knew and trusted, while in the latter she took an enormous risk with a group of strangers. While she was utterly and completely vulnerable during both of the performances, the unfamiliar participants in *Rhythm 0* were not. The absurdity of the situation was unmasked when the participants became entirely immunized from ethical responsibility.¹⁴ By running away at the end of the performance they showed that they were presumably experiencing a

12 Ward, F. 2012. No innocent bystanders. p. 119.

13 Lasane, A. 2014. Marina Abramovic Reflects on Her Important “Rhythm 0” Performance

14 Schjeldahl, P. 2007. Performance - The New Yorker.



close opposite of vulnerability, shame.¹⁵ Abramovic's performance brought out a darker side of human nature in the participants, by offering herself vulnerably to them. She truly shows us that being vulnerable is a serious risk.

When we decide to be brave and show vulnerability in front of our circle of trustworthy people, we trust them to respond with openness and understanding. When we decide to be extra brave and show vulnerability in front of people that have not yet earned the title of being trustworthy, we are taking a risk of them responding apathetically, or even taking advantage of our vulnerable condition. One may reason that Abramovic went too far in risking her own safety whilst performing *Rhythm 0*, but the danger was self-inflicted. She put herself intentionally in that position, even though she could not know the outcome. Her courage resulted in a compelling performance, that has proven to be one of the most important pieces of the time. The risk was worth it.

Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010) was the centerpiece in her retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

„All day, everyday, from early March until the end of May, 2010, she will sit at a table in the museum's atrium, in what she describes as a „square of light“. Members of the audience will be invited to join her, one at a time, at the opposite end of the table. There will be no talking, no touching, no overt communication of any kind. Her objective is to achieve a luminous state of being and then transmit it - to engage in what she calls „an energy dialogue“ with the audience.“¹⁶

Marina Abramović performed for 736 hours and 30 minutes while a touching series of encounters happened. “You have to be in a state in which you are completely secure about your ability to create this kind of charismatic space“¹⁷, she says. Although physically demanding, in this performance she did not offer herself physically to the viewers; she did so mentally. The simple, long-durational piece is about exploring vulnerability. “I become a

15 Brown, B. 2012. *Daring Greatly*. p. 68.

16 Marina Film Project. 2012.

17 Brockes, E. 2014. Performance artist Marina Abramović: 'I was ready to die'.



mirror for them of their own emotions. One big Hell's Angel with tattoos everywhere stared at me fiercely, but after 10 minutes was collapsing into tears and weeping like a baby."¹⁸ Abramović uses herself to make the audience vulnerable, simply by making eye contact and transmitting the energy with her presence. "Here, everything was about stillness and about literally doing nothing and being in the present."¹⁹

The overwhelming popularity of the performance was surprising for Abramović herself. „The curator was just telling me, „you have to be ready that in front of you will be an empty chair most of the time“, because nobody could imagine, in New York, the most busy place in the world, that anybody would take time to sit and just engage in a mutual gaze with me. So, it was a complete surprise, for myself, for the entire staff of MoMA, and to everybody else."²⁰ Attracting more than 850 thousand visitors,¹⁸ some that waited for days for their turn; what was it that they got out of the experience? Apart from the possibility that because Marina Abramović had become somewhat of a celebrity artist, and being up close to a celebrity is an emotional experience for many, the participants felt an immediate connection with the artist. "Perfect strangers experience an intense emotional bond with the artist for the time that they sit opposite her, and many are brought to tears; so many, in fact, that a Tumblr blog was created called *Marina Abramović Made Me Cry*."²¹

One visitor who returned to sit with Abramović a number of times described his experience: "Sitting with her is a transforming experience—it's luminous, it's uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being present, breathing, maintaining eye contact. It's an amazing journey to be able to experience and participate in the piece."¹⁹ Another one explained: "It was kind of like being out of time. Just really interesting and filled with different emotions that change the longer you sit there."²² And yet another one: "I'm always looking for performance that reveals who we are as humans, and this is such a different take. This struck me as so difficult... there was a revelation on a very deep level that I wasn't expecting when I came in. I'm almost fatigued after seeing it. You're drawn in by watching people stand or sit or do things to themselves or each other, and after a period of time I found myself going to

18 O'Hagan, S. 2010. Interview: Marina Abramović.

19 MoMA Learning: The Artist is Present.

20 Marina Abramovic Institute. 2014. Marina Abramovic on The Artist Is Present (2010).

21 Bourne, C. 2012. Review: Marina Abramović The Artist Is Present.

22 Kaganskiy, J. 2010. Visitor viewpoint: Marina Abramović.

a subconscious place, rather than being able to analyze it intellectually. I feel like, even in describing it now, my words are not sufficient.”²²

The blogger and photographer Brandon Stanton is another expert on vulnerability that deals with New York citizens. He posts street photographic portraits of ordinary people on Facebook, where he has over 17 million followers.²³ With each portrait, he posts fractions of intimate conversations with the portrayed person. Those glimpses of intimacy are the pivotal detail of his work. What he has mastered, is „taking the atmosphere of fear, strangeness and uncomfortableness, and turning that into an atmosphere of intimacy, where people feel comfortable to disclose in a very short amount of time.“²⁴ Here is an example of a post that shows a fraction of an intimate conversation with a stranger:

“I knew a girl in high school that always complained about having anxiety. I used to make fun of her a little bit. It looked like nothing to me. So I assumed it was nothing. And I dealt with it by trying to convince her that it was nothing. I called her recently to apologize. I’ve had really bad anxiety ever since my father died. And it’s definitely not nothing. It’s the indescribable fear of nothing.”²³

Stanton started his career in 2010 when he set himself a mission to document 10.000 strangers in New York City. Stepping out on the street, and immediately out of his comfort zone, he built up his knowledge from scratch. Initially he did not know how to create this immediate intimacy with strangers. „The way I figured this out is just by doing it ten thousand times and just getting beaten down, beaten down, beaten down, beaten down. Just through getting yelled at, making people very nervous and getting uncomfortable.“²⁴ Soon enough, he realised that how he approached people didn’t have anything to do with what he said or did, but „it’s all about the energy that you’re giving off. That is just one hundred percent energy.“²⁴ The only way to become confidently vulnerable is through trial and error, by slowly getting better at giving off the right energy.

His ability to create a safe atmosphere in a busy New York City street is what makes his work powerful. His 17 million Facebook followers prove it. They wait eagerly for each new stranger to open up and show their vulnerable selves. Remarkably, it does not end there. The Facebook comment section has become a part of the work, where random followers comment to tell their personal vulnerable story, related to the one Stanton posted. One follower of the page opened up by commenting on the post above:

“This post must be a sign. My little sister texted me last night because she was having an anxiety attack and I almost got annoyed because we both didn’t know what was wrong or how to fix it. I learned a good lesson today reading HONY. I’ll have to find ways to help her instead of getting mad - because there’s really no way to fix it, I can only help her through it.”²⁵

Stanton’s initial spark of energy reaches through the internet, enabling even more strangers to be vulnerable, by showing empathy. His work functions as a catalyst for more vulnerability. When comparing Brandon Stanton’s work with Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0*, the reactions in the comment section show to be opposite to the apathetic responses of the participants’ in *Rhythm 0*. Another commenter explains how she connects with the post above by empathising:

“I’m so awed by his choice to call to apologize. I haven’t known a day without crippling anxiety since I was 14. I don’t always look like it but it’s there and I’ve definitely been told it is in my head and I should realize there isn’t anything wrong. I hope he gets a chance to break the cycle of anxiety in his life.”²⁵

That commenter’s hope that the man in the initial post breaks his cycle of anxiety is empathetic, because she knows from experience what he is going through. Empathy means: I have been there, you are not alone. She goes out of her way to leave a thoughtful comment on the internet, along with

thousands of other followers. Stanton's ability to make strangers open up have enabled followers, apart from the initial conversations that happen on the street, to feel the power of vulnerability through an internet comment section, which is highly uncommon.²⁶

Yet another artist that uses vulnerability as a subject matter in her works is the musician Björk. She uses herself as a subject in her newest album, *Vulnicura* (2015). „The album outlines the dissolution of her relationship with her longtime partner, the artist Matthew Barney.“²⁷ She tells the emotionally laden story through the album with complete honesty, all the while confessing that being vulnerable is terrifying and requires much courage. „She details her struggle to keep her family intact, limning distance, rejection, and the death of their covenant. The blunt force of her words is striking.“²⁷

who is open chested
and who has coagulated
who can share
and who has shut down the chances

show me emotional respect
i have emotional needs
i wish to synchronize our feelings²⁸

Björk takes an enormous risk by revealing her most difficult struggles to a large audience. But she did it out of necessity, due to realising she can use vulnerability as a healing tool. „I'm hoping the album will document the journey through. It is liberation in the end. It comes out as a healing process, because that's how I experienced it myself". To allow oneself to be vulnerable is to allow oneself to grow. "Don't remove my pain / It is my chance to heal"²⁹. She explains: „When I say that, it might come across that I'm incredibly wise. But it's the other way around. I'm fucked and I'm trying to talk myself into it, like, "Go, girl! You can do it!" It's me advising myself. It's not me knowing it all—not at all. It's just a certain route you just have to go; I went through it.“²⁷

At some point it was difficult for her to accept that she would be releasing

26 Manson, M. 2013. Why People Are Such Assholes on the Internet.
27 Hopper, J. 2015. The Invisible Woman: A Conversation With Björk.
28 Björk. 2015. Stonemilker.
29 Björk. 2015. Notget.



an album full of heartbreak songs, but eventually she embraced her process of grief as a major quality of the album. “With the new album, I sat down and was like, ‘Oh my god, I have six heartbreak songs, in chronological order.’”³⁰ Björk unintentionally documents the whole breakup process, and in hindsight has recognised the quality of having the heartbreak documented. “For me as a musicologist – the David Attenborough part in me, if you will – I was like ‘whoa’. I had this document. That was the most interesting part of it all.”³⁰ She even goes as far as publishing the exact time that her songs were written in relation to the breakup, beneath the song titles on the album sleeve.

black lake
2 months after

our love was my womb
but our bond has broken
my shield is gone
my protection is taken
i am one wound
my pulsating body
suffering being

Björk’s vulnerable state was the force that set her in motion to compose the music, as well as constituting the material of her songs. The vulnerability in *Vulnicura* worked both as a personal healing tool, as well as connecting with large crowds by letting herself being read through her vulnerable authenticity.

As mentioned earlier, being vulnerable means accepting the risk of experiencing failure. Being well known for innovations in music, Björk is well aware of this, she definitely accepts the risk of failure in favour of going all in. She says: “Maybe some things won’t be immaculate, but it will push you out of the comfort zone.”³¹

By releasing this album, she reveals her struggles to the world. Björk displays that she is not ashamed of her personal struggles; she has the courage to not hide her feelings. Without that courage and excruciating honesty, the album would not have been authentic. By realising the worth of the album as a personal healing tool and documentation, she has separated her own

self-worth from the value of her art. When people do not manage to separate their self-worth from their artistic output, they become absolutely dependent on the reception of the audience. “In simple terms, if they love it, you’re worthy; if they don’t, you’re worthless. One of two things happens at this point in the process:

1. Once you realize that your self-worth is hitched to what you’ve produced or created, it’s unlikely that you’ll share it, or if you do, you’ll strip away a layer or two of the juiciest creativity and innovation to make the revealing less risky. There’s too much on the line to just put your wildest creations out there.
2. If you do share it in its most creative form and the reception doesn’t meet your expectations, you’re crushed. Your offering is no good and you’re no good. The chances of soliciting feedback, reengaging, and going back to the drawing board are slim. You shut down. Shame tells you that you shouldn’t have even tried. Shame tells you that you’re not good enough and you should have known better.”³²

It is clear that neither of these cases apply to Björk; her self-worth is not on the line. She has built up courage and confidence to be able to expose herself and be vulnerable in situations where others, with less sense of self-worth, would experience shame.

The mysterious Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader uses emotions as a theme. He represented himself as an artistic persona, casting “himself a handsome, mute, vulnerable presence”.³³ His performances were often presented as films and photographs, with a metaphoric, poetic character. Ader takes the role of the director and actor in his productions, being both the subject and the object of a story. Living in California at the time, he often played with Hollywood’s techniques of generating an emotional response of the viewer. Many of his works depict him looking vulnerable in various circumstances, such as falling down from a tree or trying to lift a heavy stone. One such work, *I’m too*

32 Brown, B. 2012. *Daring greatly*, p. 63

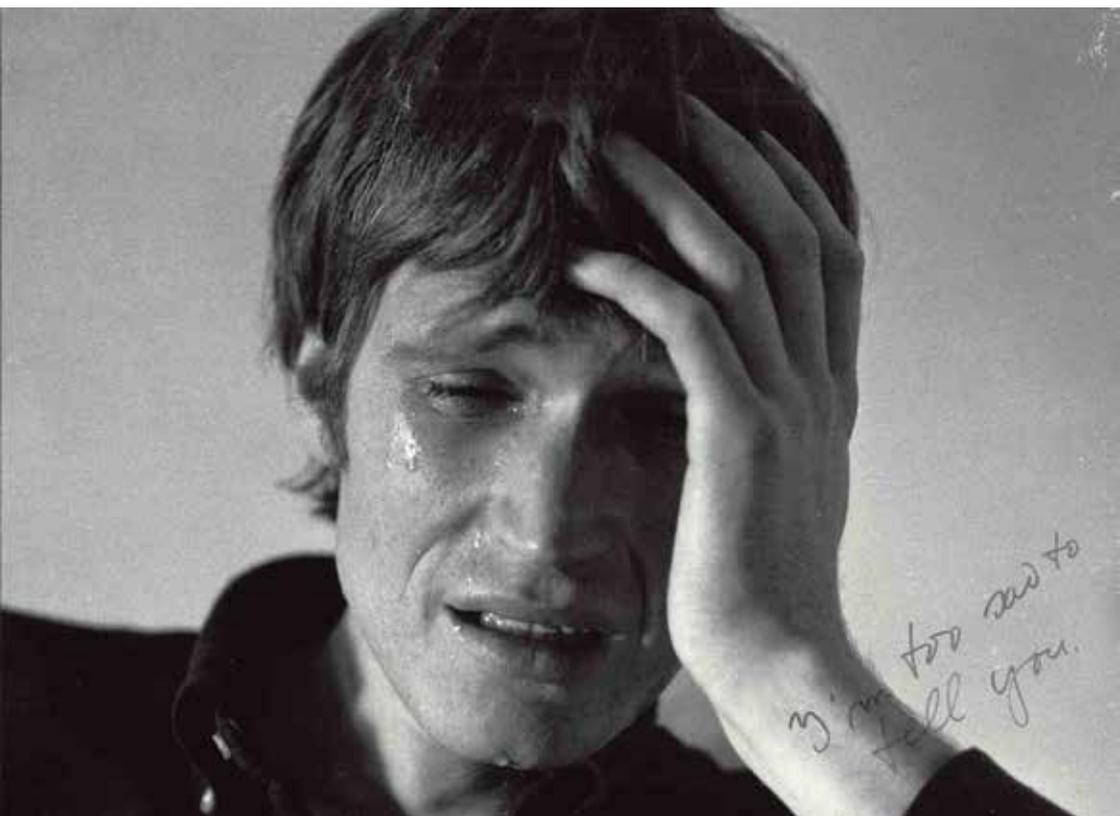
33 Spence, B. 2000. *The Case of Bas Jan Ader*.

Sad to Tell you (1970-71), documents Ader crying for the camera. “This trope of Hollywood melodrama, the teary close-up, becomes a rather convincing display of emotion. Here again, he isolates the action from any narrative context, which the Hollywood counterpart depends upon for effect.”³⁴

The deeply melodramatic video of him crying, leaves the viewer touched, providing neither prologue, nor explanation. This compelling imagery shows the artist displaying emotions that represent his artistic persona, which in real life may or may not exist. Ader’s recurrent melodramatic theme leads the viewer to question the authenticity of the displayed emotions. “In one version of this piece, Ader reproduced a tearful still as a postcard writing the title on verso and sending copies to art world denizens. Thus “the artist’s” personal misery is converted into a consumable souvenir.”³⁴ Ader’s postcard intentionally conveys a contradicting message. The medium of postcards is meant to be used for writing a message, however his message is that his sadness cannot be told in words. This gives the strong impression of despair, that paints the picture of him being miserable, yet maintaining a cynical undertone. “Ader purposefully lends this scene of despair to a storyline of the romantic, miserable artist, however trivialized in the translation.”³⁴

Ader played with his own image, giving his audience a mysterious version of himself. Ader was aware that the public’s perception of art was often dominated by the common conception of the tragic artist. That may explain Ader’s self-cast role of the troubled genius. “The following notebook entry provides a clue to his degree of self-consciousness: “Write an article regarding Van Gogh’s genius and pre-eminence as modernist through the price of the cutting off of an ear (public always recognized implicitly his real achievement as an artist was this act.)””³⁴

Bas Jan Ader created a vulnerable persona, which he expressed himself through. Just like all of the artists above, Ader implements strong emotional elements that allow the audience to relate with him. The previously discussed artists were all openly vulnerable, whereas Ader’s real emotions are covered by a mysterious yet vulnerable persona. It seems therefore that vulnerability can be used as a tool to produce an emotional response from the viewer, even by putting on a show of contextless emotions, using the techniques of Hollywood melodrama.



“Perhaps a parallel could be drawn between Ader’s creation of an artistic persona cast adrift in the currents of public reception and *In Search of the Miraculous*, in which he put himself at the mercy of the sea.” As the cherry on top of his Hollywood stories, he ended his short career with a mysterious disappearance during his last performance where he planned to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. “His deserted vessel was found off the coast of Ireland on 18 April 1976, offering few clues as to his fate.”³⁵

So far all the artists above have used vulnerability, in many different ways, as a subject matter in their works. Most of them have also allowed themselves to be vulnerable during the process, or while they were making their works. They know the subject of vulnerability through personal experience. There are also artists that allow themselves to be vulnerable during the making of their works, although the subject matter is something entirely different.

Yayoi Kusama is a Japanese artist most famous for her notorious dots, or *Infinity Nets*, as she in some cases refers to them herself. Since childhood, she has suffered from severe mental illness, including hallucinations and obsessive neuroses. From early on, she found a way to channel her mental illness into a positive creative force.³⁶ She recalls that during a childhood period of depression and suicide attempts, a spatial hallucination was the principal motivation behind her works.³⁷ “One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space.”³⁸

„I don’t consider myself an artist,“ she declared; „I am pursuing art in order to correct the disability which began in my childhood.“³⁹ Her dotted, repetitive, neurotic works do indeed give the impression that she has an obsession. „When watching her make them, one feels the presence of a rare, autism-like intensity. Kusama seems to be incapable of hesitation. Her hand really does just move forward on its own.“³⁹ In fact, she never seems to make note of the public knowing about her personal struggles. It seems as if she either likes the attention, or realises that it is a necessary sacrifice to keep a bit

35 Bas Jan Ader. In Wikipedia.
36 Sundberg, K. 2015. Kusama’s Infinity Nets Channel the Creative Power of Mental Illness.
37 Kusama, Y. 1975. *Odyssey of My Struggling Soul*.
38 Lee, P.M. 2004. *Chronophobia: On time in the art of the 1960’s*. p. 199
39 Worth, A. 2008. *Kusama Dot Com*.

of her sanity. She uses her artistic expression as an outlet for her obsessive behaviour. Kusama's main concern is to use her art as medicine. At times, it even seems like her autism-like, intensity driven work progresses without effort: „Kusama can seem like a grandmaster who claims not to play chess but who just happens to feel like moving his pieces into winning positions.”⁴⁰

Kusama's way of using art as medicine is a vulnerable act. While most of us swallow our medicine in private, she bravely does so in public. Her sickness drives her to create, and her refuge and solace in art is public.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Kusama does not use vulnerability as a subject matter. There is indeed no blunt direct way to interpret the dotted worlds as a vulnerable expression. However, when one knows the story of the mentally ill artist, the perspective does change. Her obsessive, aggressive works mirror herself, and are in some indirect way her self-portraits. She exposes her innermost troubles to the public through her dotted art, inviting the audience to explore her strange world. Being vulnerable and open while maintaining a sense of worthiness brings an exciting factor to the art for the viewer, regardless that vulnerability is not present on the surface. When entering her work, the viewer is invited into Kusama's lifelong sense of disconnection from our world while exploring her own personal one.

Many of artist Chris Burden's performances include himself in physically dangerous circumstances. In *Shoot* (1971), Burden invites his friend to shoot him in the arm with a .22 rifle from a 4.5 meter distance, in front of a small audience. It is questionable whether the situation that Burden puts himself in is a vulnerable one. His act may resemble a foolhardy stunt, as if he were putting on a phony layer, showing off his superhuman ability to withstand pain.

He intentionally puts himself in physical danger. He actually encourages his friend to violate his body with a metal bullet. He is most likely leaving his comfort zone and pushing his limits by doing so. That takes courage. Courage is “the ability to do something that frightens one.”⁴² Physical danger may not automatically imply vulnerability, but indeed it can be frightening to strip away one's shield, which suggests that Burden was being mentally vulnerable as well as physically. But the impact of the performance is not the vulnerability of it. It was also not to let the audience feel vulnerable.

40 Worth, A. 2008. *Kusama Dot Com*.

41 Kupper, O. M. 2014. *A Million Dots: An Interview with Yayoi Kusama*.

42 Definition of courage in English. *Oxford Dictionaries*.



At that time, images of the Vietnam war had been particularly visible in the news and gun violence was very present in the media. What Burden wanted to do was to re-sensitise the viewer to the violence that the media had normalised. It was very politically relevant at the time to shock the audience by having a gun shot at a human being right in front of them. Outside the context of art, if two men would casually announce to a group of strangers that one of them is going to shoot the other in the arm, people would protest and someone would call the police. He was putting a strong emphasis on the reality of being shot with a gun. To do this he showed that he was very dedicated to his art.

Much of Burden's other work comments on artists' identities and how they are perceived by the public, sometimes even to a cynical level. So perhaps as a comment on exhibitionism, he also mentioned that he performed *Shoot*, so that he would be taken seriously as an artist.⁴³

In point of fact, Chris Burden's performances have a lot in common with those of Marina Abramović. „Burden's performances often put his life in danger, testing the boundaries of what was acceptable as art and the role of the audience as observer.“⁴⁴ The same could be said about many of Abramović's performances. Burden's *Shoot* and Abramović's *Rhythm 0* are both key works in forming the genre of performance art of the seventies. They were dangerous, shocking and made a point of forcing the audience to question its ethical responsibility during the performance. Yet, they are fundamentally different. Abramović uses the means of disrupting the audience's safe distance, even forcing the audience excruciatingly close, while striving to create intimate and vulnerable circumstances. Chris Burden may have been vulnerable by having himself shot, but his piece is not about the subject of vulnerability, or making a vulnerable connection between the artist and the audience. Instead he describes: „I think a lot of this performance work was an attempt to control fate or something, or giving you the illusion that you can control fate“.⁴⁴

Chris Burden is certainly not the only artist that goes *all in*, without using the theme of vulnerability as a subject matter. In fact, all of us who create things and put them out there have to deal with vulnerability, to various extents. Artists all have to present something to somebody at some point, and those

43 Schjeldahl, P. 2007. *Performance - The New Yorker*.

44 Kutner, E. 2015. 'Shot in the Name of Art'.



who want to be outstanding artists have to go *all in*. For that, you need to be able to be vulnerable.

An artist presenting authentic work to an audience is being vulnerable, no matter the content of the work. A musician on stage who opens up authentically to the audience is being vulnerable, even though the song is the birthday song. Whether it being Andy Warhol breaking through with his unprecedented pop art, Vincent van Gogh with his iconic brush strokes, or Bas Jan Ader getting lost at sea, they went *all in*.

To be able to go all in, or in other words be vulnerable, one needs to build up a great deal of skills that are intertwined. One skill will not work without the other. Trust is one. Trust can mean handing responsibility over to someone else, but can also, and more importantly, mean trusting yourself. Trusting yourself to be good enough is the fundamental ground from where we can stand vulnerable and invite people to look in. Trust needs to be built up with a lot of practice, with trial and error. Error and disappointments are bound to happen when we take risks. Just as Brandon Stanton explained, he had to go through a steep learning curve to master the skill of gaining the trust of strangers, so they would open up to millions of people. By thousands of repeated attempts, getting uncomfortable and yelled at by nervous people, he learned to confidently approach strangers, with a lot of trust in himself.

Another important skill to accomplish in order to be able to be vulnerable, is to maintain a sense of self-worth, and detaching it from one's creative output. If the artist's self-worth is hitched to his art, disappointing results may cause the artist to feel as if he is not good enough. Björk showed the ability to detach her self-worth from her art when releasing *Vulnicura*. "When our self-worth isn't on the line, we are far more willing to be courageous and risk sharing our raw talents and gifts."⁴⁵

It take guts to go all in. Björk showed a lot of courage by releasing her heartbreak album. Marina Abramović was very courageous to offer herself to total strangers in *Rhythm 0*. All of the aforementioned artists showed courage and allowed themselves to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is a tool, up for grabs for everyone. Being vulnerable is not a quality that some chosen artists have the privilege to use. Everyone has the choice to be vulnerable,

but even though one easily understands the meaning behind the word, it does not make it is easy to put to use.

It is actually very fucking hard.

While trying to understand vulnerability and looking at what it takes to become more vulnerable, I have been encouraged to try harder. But it is not like I see everything clearly now the rain has gone. I have not mastered the trade. The subject of vulnerability is only better structured in my head. I know what it takes, I am one step closer, and I will get there eventually. There is still a long way ahead. I still care whether I am the favorite person of anybody. I still worry about what you think of me.⁴⁶

I want to be courageous. I want courage to define me. I want to make work where I am unconcerned with what you think of the outcome. The outcome should be authentic and real. I want to make myself vulnerable to you to be able to connect with you authentically.

I want to keep trying. I want to keep the fetus sized sense of worthiness within me until it becomes a rigid part of me. I will fail a lot. I will punish myself for having failed. But maybe once in awhile I remember to forgive myself. And then maybe a little more frequently than that.

„When you are on your deathbed, how important is it going to be that something didn't quite work? I do think, artistically, you have got to keep trying things.“⁴⁷ Trial and error. Again and again. In the end, failure does not matter as long as I do not put myself down for failing. I will put myself down for failing.⁴⁸ But I want to remind myself to be courageous again, after each self-castigation, again and again, after each perceived failure. I want to realise that there is no such thing as failure, because whenever I will stumble, I will learn.

„It is not the critic who counts; not the man
who points out how the strong man stumbles,
or where the doer of deeds could have done
them better.

46 I clean my house before I invite you over.

47 Merry, J. 2016. The Full Interview: Björk and Julia Davis.

48 I eat chocolate to punish myself for eating too much chocolate.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,

because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;

who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly...⁴⁹

But it is still just so hard. I want to realise the importance of being vulnerable. I want to feel the importance of it. I want to hardwire the importance of vulnerability to my system. But I am not sure I can, yet. Because I do not always choose to strive valiantly.⁵⁰

I want to realise the importance of practicing. Because I forget that practicing means not doing it just once, it means doing it *repeatedly*. Again and again. I want to create a practicing routine of self-love and learning from failure. I want to practice not caring about what you think about me. I want to practice trusting you. I want to practice stripping away my shield. I want to practice being vulnerable. I want to have practised enough to internalise what Marina Abramović knows: „My body is now beginning to be falling apart, but I will do it to the end. I don't care. With me it is about whatever it takes.“⁵¹

I want to tell you a joke that may not be funny. I want that when I present you something, I do not expect a positive response. I will hope for it, but I want to not count on it. I want to hope for everything and expect nothing. I will realise things that are unknown to me now. There will be hindrances I cannot yet fathom. I welcome the unknown.

49 Roosevelt, T. 1910. The Man in the Arena - from Citizenship In A Republic.

50 Sometimes I get stuck on Facebook. Sometimes I eat too much chocolate. Sometimes I sleep in instead of exercising.

51 O'Hagan, S. 2010. Interview: Marina Abramović.

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