Touching the Body: The Living and the Dead in Osteoarchaeology and the Performance Art of Marina Abramović

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To cite this article: Joanna Sofaer (2012) Touching the Body: The Living and the Dead in Osteoarchaeology and the Performance Art of Marina Abramović, Norwegian Archaeological Review, 45:2, 135-150, DOI: 10.1080/00293652.2012.703686

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00293652.2012.703686

Published online: 08 Aug 2012.

Article views: 778

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
Osteoarchaeology and arts practice are two disciplines that work with the human skeleton. In both cases, this interest arises from curiosity regarding the materiality of the body. In the process of coming to understand that materiality, both disciplines create relationships between living and dead bodies through touch. This paper examines the interaction between different kinds of bodies – the living and the dead, the fleshed and the skeletal – in osteoarchaeology and in the performance art of pioneering artist Marina Abramović. The ways that osteoarchaeologists and performance artist engage and enrol the physicality of skeletal bodies present different kinds of possibilities and potentials for intercorporeal relationships than those arising between living bodies. Although osteoarchaeology is frequently understood as a branch of science, the intercorporeality created by touching the body in osteoarchaeological practice does not sit easily within conventional descriptions of scientific method. The performance art of Marina Abramović offers a provocative challenge to conventional ways of thinking about the nature of osteoarchaeological practice by explicitly valuing the importance of touch as a way of understanding the human body.

Keywords: Osteoarchaeology, performance art, human body, touch

INTRODUCTION
In her well-known work Cleaning the Mirror I (1995), the pioneering performance artist Marina Abramović can be seen carefully scrubbing a grime-covered human skeleton on her lap (Fig. 1). Recorded in real time over three hours, the video installation shows a series of close ups and camera angles over five stacked colour screens. The viewer hears the bristles of the brush and the movement of the artist as she cleans the skeleton with soapy water. Her fingers gently but firmly explore every crevice. Dirty water runs down the vertebrae. As Abramović (1998) herself has described her work, in this piece the body is subject, object, and medium.

Abramović originally conceived this installation to highlight the endurance and labour involved in the artist’s action: a self-purification which alludes to Tibetan death rites that prepare disciples to become one with their own mortality (Biesenbach 2010, p. 16). Gallery-goers watching the video appear to be simultaneously fascinated, moved and disturbed. Yet to the human osteoarchaeologist, what might be striking about the piece is its very familiarity. Human osteoarchaeology,
Fig. 1. Marina Abramović. Cleaning the Mirror # I, 1995. Five-channel video installation with stacked monitors, with sound. Edition 2/3, 24 1/2 x 19 inches (284.48 x 62.23 x 48.26 cm) overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Purchased with funds contributed by the International Director’s Council and Executive Committee Members: Edythe Broad, Elaine Terner Cooper, Linda Fischbach, Ronnie Heyman, J. Tomilson Hill, Dakis Joannou, Barbara Lane, Peter Norton, Willem Peppler, Alain-Dominique Perrin, David Teiger, Ginny Williams, and Elliot K. Wolk. 98.4626.
also known as bioarchaeology or physical anthropology, is the study of the skeletal remains of past people from archaeological contexts; bones and teeth are frequently the only aspects of the body that are preserved. Abramovic’s video plays a scene common in many post-excavation labs (albeit in an exaggerated manner) where bones are washed by hand to remove dirt, and skeletons prepared for study and storage. In the laboratory osteoarchaeologists engage with skeletal human remains in a close and tactile manner.

The interaction between different kinds of bodies – the living and the dead, the fleshed and the skeletal – presents different kinds of possibilities and potentials for an intercorporeal relationship from those arising between living bodies. This poses an intriguing question: if, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) suggests, flesh is the enabling condition for being and for intercorporeality, what kind of relationship is engendered by touching the body of another who lacks flesh? This paper explores how skeletal bodies are engaged and enrolled in osteoarchaeological practice. Its intention is to foreground how practitioners interact physically with the skeletal body, rather than how they interpret its meaning (cf. Mol 2002, p. 12) or the ethics of working with skeletons (e.g. Scarre 2003, Walker 2008, Weiss 2008). Although osteoarchaeology is frequently understood as a branch of science, the intercorporeality created by touching the body in osteoarchaeological practice does not sit easily within conventional descriptions of scientific method. The performance art of Marina Abramovic offers a provocative challenge to conventional ways of thinking about the nature of osteoarchaeological practice.

THE FIELD OF HUMAN OSTEOARCHAEOLOGY

Human osteoarchaeology is a field of archaeological enquiry which aims to find out about the lives of ancient people by directly examining their physical remains. Themes tackled by osteoarchaeologists include the determination of sex and age, human variation, biological distance, disease, injury, diet, migration, mortuary practices, lifeways and activity patterns (Larsen 1997, Knudson and Stojanowski 2008, Mays 2010). Human osteoarchaeology is therefore largely concerned with who people were and how they lived. In other words, it is about the reconstruction of life and identity from the human skeleton. This reconstruction is necessary because not only are skeletons without flesh, but most of the skeletons found by archaeologists are un-named and unknown.

Although there are several national traditions of osteoarchaeology (Sofaer 2006), as a whole the discipline forms part of the anatomical legacy of the 19th century where an interest in the dead body created intersections between antiquarian, ethnological and physiological interests (Crossland 2009, p. 70). In the United States, early 20th-century developments saw a move towards emphasizing the effect of cultural and environmental influences on the human body with the development of the so-called fourfold approach incorporating archaeology, biological anthropology, social anthropology and linguistics (Stocking 1968, Sofaer 2006). By contrast, in Britain and much of Europe, the overtly medical status of osteoarchaeology has persisted until quite recently; provision of human osteoarchaeological training within archaeology departments (rather than medical schools) first began in the 1990s and the study of the skeletal body has historically been the province of scholars with medical backgrounds (Roberts and Manchester 1995, Mays 1997). This has had a strong influence on the development of the field, particularly in an emphasis on palaeopathology and diagnosis-orientated case studies analogous to the case histories of living patients (Bennike and Bond 1992, Mays 1997).

In line with its origins in the study of human anatomy, osteoarchaeology is most frequently identified as a science (Sofaer 2006, p. 9). Within archaeology the specialized and high-defined knowledge base of
Osteoarchaeologists can lead to separation of osteoarchaeology from other aspects of archaeological practice, and understandings of osteological methods may function in Latour’s (1993) terms as a ‘black box’ (Sofaer 2006). Among the public, recent archaeology television programmes, such as those presented by anatomist Dr Alice Roberts, promote perceptions of osteoarchaeologists as scientists in white coats. This is augmented by fictional accounts of osteological work such as the books by forensic anthropologist Dr Kathy Reichs (e.g. 2003, 2009) and the so-called ‘CSI effect’ (Kruse 2010) where forensic science, often closely allied to osteoarchaeology (Crossland 2009), is perceived to deliver an idealized science of absolute truths (Kruse 2010). Although most osteoarchaeologists situate themselves within a scientific paradigm (Sofaer 2006, Schutkowski 2008, Leighton 2010), few would claim that their interpretations have the certainty expressed in fiction; osteoarchaeological work relies on the generation of comparative data since researchers cannot go back into the past and check their understandings with deceased individuals.

The work of the osteoarchaeologist begins with the excavation of a skeleton on an archaeological site. Following cleaning of the bones, assessment of the completeness of the body is often a necessary first stage of analysis and takes place through identifying and recording which skeletal elements are present and in what state of preservation (see White and Folkens 2005). Skeletons are usually made up of 206 separate bones, each with its own form and function. Following the decay of soft tissue, these are no longer held together by ligaments or muscles and can be either removed or reunited with other bones from the same body. Skeletons are not therefore sealed or joined wholes but are divisible and frequently fragmented (Sofaer 2006, Krmpotich et al. 2010). Skeletons need not be interred as single inhumations; indeed in some periods of human history multiple or corporate burial is the norm. If necessary, co-mingled remains are separated out into individuals through investigation of the number and type of bones present and comparison between them. In order to assess the skeleton, bones may be positioned anatomically. This process involves the literal reassembly of the body through the (re)organization of an anatomized body (cf. Wegenstein 2006, Hallam 2010), where body parts come to represent a single whole person (Krmpotich et al. 2010). Since the skeleton is what gives the body its shape, even when fragmented it is clearly recognizable as a body, particularly in a ‘post-facial era’ where it is not necessarily through faces that the person is revealed and any body part can be understood to represent the whole (Wegenstein 2006, p. 89).

The next stage of osteological practice typically involves investigation of the sex and age of the individual, metric studies, examination of pathology (disease and trauma) and identification of skeletal modifications, the latter two providing insights into past lifeways (Larsen 1997, Sofaer 2006). Once these have been explored, bone chemistry may be investigated in order to examine diet and human migration. In contrast to forensic studies, cause of death is not usually a focus. This is frequently difficult to evaluate using osteological methods, except for cases of severe trauma, since indications of sudden and severe illness may be confined to soft tissue or body fluids and leave no trace in the human skeleton (Wood et al. 1992). Instead, the possibilities and limitations of osteoarchaeological investigation arise from an appreciation of the particular material qualities of human bone (see Sofaer 2006). In particular, human bone constantly turns over and the human skeleton responds in a plastic manner to stresses placed upon the body through bone remodelling (Sofaer 2006). Osteoarchaeological analysis thus employs a reconstructive approach from ‘trace to function’ (Dutour 1993, p. 59) to investigate the effects of life on the skeleton. While this cannot produce a perfect reflection of a person’s past, it nonetheless provides a framework for relating human experience and the human body; experiences become explanatory
causal constructs in their own right (Sperry 1982). Osteoarchaeology is thus a descriptive practice that leads to individual and group categorization of people through their bodies (Sofaer 2006, p. 24).

Given the close historical link to medicine, it is not surprising that the analytical process of osteoarchaeology has been characterized following Foucault (1973) in terms of a semiotic reading of the signs of the body of the same kind that has been described for medical practice (Stocking 1987, cf. Ginzburg 1989, Crossland 2009). Following Foucault (1973), the dead body is understood to be a privileged site for knowing the living and the ‘clinical gaze’ enables the reading of symptom-signs that are fundamental to the evidentiary paradigm. Because symptom/signs are of the body they simultaneously tell of it and constitute it (Crossland 2009, p. 71).

This textual metaphor of ‘reading the body’ is often situated within an understanding of osteoarchaeology as visual practice: eyes are needed to read the text and make present the absent person. Indeed Crossland (2009) goes so far as to suggest that visual readings of photographs and of corpses work within a similar semiotic field. An emphasis on semiotics, however, seems to imply the discursive rather than the ‘real’ physical nature of the body. The body cannot be dissolved into discourse (Shilling 2005) and an emphasis on the body as text takes little account of how osteoarchaeological practice is actually carried out. While visual inspection is important to osteological practice, much of the basic work is done using the hands. Osteoarchaeologists engage, explore and understand the physicality of the skeletal body through touch (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Osteoarchaeologist at work. Photo: J. Sofaer.
TOUCHING THE BODY IN HUMAN OSTEOARCHAEOLOGY

In common with many other disciplines, a focus on the visual rather than other senses is a common bias in archaeology (Hamilakis 2002, Hurcombe 2007). Touch has frequently been relegated to a secondary position compared to sight (Stewart 1999). Indeed, when documenting their analytical methods, many osteoarchaeologists refer to ‘visual inspection’ and omit the reference to touch. Nonetheless, touch forms an important part of tacit or craft knowledge (Allison-Bunnell 1998) and practical study of human remains is widely acknowledged as vital to osteoarchaeological training (Mays 2008). Touch plays a crucial role in generating data in osteological practice, particularly in terms of how to understand and discriminate salient information. Touching the skeleton involves dynamic touching of skeletal elements (hand-held manipulation of bones to gain an impression of spatial dimensions) and feeling their surface (hands moving over the surface of bones) (Turvey 1996); both shape and texture are important to the osteoarchaeologist. To ask questions of the skeleton requires that osteoarchaeologists touch the skeletal body. It is notoriously difficult for osteoarchaeologists to work from photographs alone.

Osteoarchaeologists typically begin their analyses by laying out the bones on a table or lab bench, picking them up and turning them by hand in order to identify each element as a three-dimensional entity and to gain an impression of its surfaces. Touch is particularly important when it comes to sexing the skeleton – one of the first, and most fundamental, procedures carried out by osteoarchaeologists. Male and female skeletons show sexual dimorphism (differences in form), particularly in the pelvis and skull. The female pelvis is generally broader than in the male, manifested in a wider, more U-shaped sub-pubic angle of the pubic bone at the front part of the pelvis, whereas in males this is a narrower V-shape (Mays 2010). To assess this requires that the osteoarchaeologist manipulates the innominate bones that form the two halves of the pelvis, where possible holding them together such that they form the angle. Another manifestation of the broader female pelvis is the greater sciatic notch (Hager 1996) which is wider and shallower in females (Mays 2010). Some osteoarchaeologists place their thumb or finger inside the sciatic notch in order to assess relative dimensions and depth, while some others may hold the bone against a diagram (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994, p. 18). Other features of the pelvis used to determine sex include the vertical arc, described in one of the most widely used osteoarchaeological textbooks as a ‘ridge of bone which sweeps down the surface of the pubic bone to merge with the border of the inferior pubic ramus’ (Mays 2010, p. 40), the sub-pubic concavity (present in females) and the medial (inner) border of the inferior pubic ramus which ‘generally shows a ridge in females but is blunter in males’ (Mays 2010, p. 43). The language of these descriptions guides not only the eyes, but also the hands in determining sex. Similarly, for the skull, among a range of features used to determine sex relating to relative size (more prominent brow ridges, larger mastoid processes and more pronounced mental eminence in males), descriptions use overtly tactile terms. In order to assess the nuchal crest at the back of the head, osteoarchaeologists are instructed to, ‘Feel the surface of the occipital with your hand and note any surface rugosity, ignoring the contour of the underlying bone’ (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994, p. 19); the nuchal crest is ‘smoother’ in females and a ‘bony ledge’ in males (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994, p. 19). The upper edge of the eye orbits are described as ‘sharp’ in females and ‘thick and rounded’ in males (White and Folkens 2000, pp. 364–365).

Touch is not just of importance for sexing. It is also critical when it comes to ageing and differential diagnosis of palaeopathology (disease and trauma) on the human skeleton. For instance, assessment of age may be carried out through recording surface changes to the pubic symphysis or auricular surface of the os coxae. Bone infections that occurred some
time before death are distinguishable from those that took place at around the time of death not only by their distinctive appearance but also by their particular feel. In the case of osteomyelitis, whereas healed lesions have smooth, remodelled bone, active lesions have finely pitted woven bone (Ortner 2008, Mays 2010). Assessment of the relative expression of robusticity and muscle markings also involves touch; markings at the site of musculoskeletal attachment have been described as ‘rugged’ and at their ‘most extreme expression as sharp ridges or crests of bone’ (Hawkey and Merbs 1995, p. 328). Thus, in addition to visual inspection, touch plays an important role; the ‘feel’ of the bone is critical to understanding the characteristics of each individual skeleton.

The practice of osteoarchaeology is therefore about creating a sensual geography of the body (cf. Rodaway 1994). It requires an understanding of the materiality of the body through the ways that the contours and distinctive qualities of bone literally embody human experience, allowing meaning to be created through touch. As part of their training, osteoarchaeologists are taught to understand the geometry of the body, as well as similarities and differences between skeletons, in a haptic manner. They are taught to run their fingers over the skeleton in order to assess presence, absence, relative size, shape, volume, weight, curvature, depth, hardness, sharpness and texture of parts of the skeleton. Each skeleton is individual and different from the next. Learning to become an osteoarchaeologist requires the accumulation of experience that comes not only from seeing, but also from the practice of touching as many different skeletons as possible (cf. Mol 2002). It is about honing the analyst’s skills of sensory perception (Knappett 2005, Hurcombe 2007).

THE CREATION OF AN INTERCORPOREAL RELATIONSHIP IN OSTEAOARCHEOLOGY: THE BODY AS SUBJET, OBJECT AND MEDIUM

Whereas other professions dealing with the dead body, such as pathologists and undertakers, cover their hands to protect against infections transmitted through body fluids, osteoarchaeologists typically work without any barrier between their own bodies and the skeletal body of the deceased. Once flesh has decomposed and the bones are dry there is no risk of pathogens. Gloves therefore become unnecessary and bare fingers allow osteoarchaeologists to fully exploit the sense of touch. This physical interaction between the osteoarchaeologist and the skeletal body creates a particularly intimate intercorporeal connection.

This is further developed since osteoarchaeologists are not constrained by the same issues of permission that arise between living persons. For living people, touch is socially regulated because of the familiarity it creates with the body of another. This regulation takes place through negotiated notions of body space and conventions regarding what parts of the body can be touched (Rossmanith 2008). For example, in contemporary British society shaking hands is an acceptable form of greeting but touching the genitals or buttocks is inappropriate and constitutes harassment. Even in professional settings where touching necessarily takes place, such as in medical consultations, consent (implicit or explicit) is required. Osteoarchaeologists, however, freely touch the whole body. Indeed, it is often said that it is unwise to draw conclusions from a single bone and that osteoarchaeologists ought to investigate the whole body to draw conclusions (Roberts and Manchester 1995, Mays 2010).

The nature of the intercorporeal connection between the osteoarchaeologist and the skeleton, however, goes further than relations of surface created through touching the exterior of the body as is frequently the case between living persons. The skeleton lacks a singular physical boundary in the way that skin acts to create the boundary of living bodies (Benthien 2002). The point at which the skeletal body ends is therefore indistinct. It is an ‘inside out’ body that extends into the world in a manner analogous to that described for grotesque bodies (Porter 2001, Benthien 2002, Shildrick 2002). The tactile nature of osteological practice constitutes a delving
into the inside of the body – a literal intercorporeality – which creates an intermingling of bodies and body parts as the osteoarchaeologist intervenes within the body of another. Such an intimate relationship questions historically emergent Enlightenment notions of a clear dichotomy between inside and outside, visible and invisible (Hallam et al. 1999, Sofaer 2006).

If touching the skeletal body creates a particularly close inter-corporeal relationship, the analytical positioning of the bodies that form the two sides of this relationship is complex and sometimes contradictory. Touch is the principal sense through which we assume and express the parameters of a bodily existence in relation to others. Merleau-Ponty (1968) refers to touch as the sense that defies subject/object distinctions, an ontological argument that is premised on the metaphor of one hand reaching out to touch another that touches back, imbricating the body in the midst of the thing perceived, not independent of it (Springgay 2003). Stewart (1999, p. 31) reiterates this theme, arguing that the act of touching inverts the subject-object relationship, conflating the boundaries between self and other since ‘the pressure involved in touch is a pressure on ourselves as well as upon objects’. In the case of osteoarchaeology, while the hand of the osteoarchaeologist is literally inside the body of another, the phenomenological relationship between the two bodies is necessarily different because the deceased body neither actively touches the living body back nor senses being touched. Yet, at the same time, touch necessarily requires two meeting surfaces and is therefore reciprocal; if I touch you then the very fact that I feel you implies that you (even involuntarily) touch me back. The skeleton must therefore also be understood as touching the living body because it is a body with a material presence. The difference between the touch of the living and the dead lies in the affective qualities that it produces. Whereas the skeletal body has the potential to produce an affective response in the osteoarchaeologist and therefore has human agency (Flohr Sørensen 2009, Krmpotich et al. 2010), the inability of the skeletal body to respond to touch lends it the static qualities of an object. Agency is not, however, the sole province of people as both objects and people can be said to have agency (Gell 1998, Knappett and Malafouris 2008). Indeed, some archaeologists have argued that the agency of the dead body resides in its very objectness (Crossland 2009, Flohr Sørensen 2009), its ability to ‘object’ (Latour 2000, p. 115). Agency alone cannot therefore be used to define the notion of the subject. In the words of Grosz, ‘The body is a most peculiar “thing”, for it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it ever quite manage to rise above the status of thing’ (1994, p. xi).

This simultaneous nature of the body as subject and object also exists within the osteoarchaeological investigative process. Since osteoarchaeology is about recreating the life history of individual deceased persons, it is fundamentally about the revelation and recreation of the subject. Subjectivity is embedded in the materiality of the body (Westley 2008) through the impact of lifeways and individual experiences on the human skeleton. The osteoarchaeological method of identity (re)construction – the ‘making’ of people from the skeleton that is brought about through an inter-corporeal relationship with the bodies of long deceased others – means that, although ancient skeletons are frequently nameless, the character of the research process tends to refute anonymity and to encourage the development of reflection on individual experiences and narratives.1 In this sense, skeletons are unnamed but are not anonymous (Flohr Sørensen 2009).

Yet during the process of (re)creating subjects skeletal bodies are turned into objects. They are things manipulated in analytical practices (Mol 2002, p. 4). The nature of the osteoarchaeologist’s touch is not empathetic or philanthropic in the manner that affirms a relationship of intersubjectivity that morally distinguishes people from objects (Gadow 1984), but is rather an instrumental handling of the body where bones are manipulated, scrutinized and examined.
Here the body moves from individual to evidence (Crossland 2009). There is a constant tension in terms of how to ‘attend to the “objectness” of people without reducing them to the moral status of objects’ (Gadow 1985, p. 34). This tension is reflected in differing and sometimes contradictory attitudes of osteoarchaeologists to the skeletal body. Some practitioners may deliberately distance themselves from the deceased by deliberately focusing on the object nature of the skeleton while others embrace the notion of the skeleton as person (Leighton 2010). Osteoarchaeological labs (including the one in which I work and teach) have strict rules regarding access to, and the handling of, human remains. The British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology states in its ethical guidelines that human remains should be ‘treated with dignity, sensitivity and respect’ and that, ‘prior to handling remains, students should be reminded of the relevant ethical and legal obligations, and taught correct handling procedures to minimise wear and tear’ (Mays 2008). Such ethical notions, however, neither demand, nor necessarily engender, empathy.

Such tensions may be particularly profound because, in touching the body, the osteoarchaeologist’s body itself becomes a medium for understanding the body of another. As Stewart (1999, p. 31) argues in her account of the sensory experience of touch, tactile perception is not simply the body’s interaction with matter, but ‘involves perception of our own bodily state as we take in that which is outside of that state’. Osteoarchaeology is an embodied practice in which learning about the bodies of others is a haptic experience. Despite a proliferation of lavishly illustrated manuals and textbooks, each human body is unique. Learning their shapes and textures – what is part of a normal range of variation and what is different – is a training that relies upon the accumulation of sensory knowledge. In other words, it requires handling as many bones as possible. Students are encouraged to visualize and palpate their own bones in order to understand the way that individual skeletal elements might ‘plug into’ their own body, as well as to hold bones against their own body to assist with identification and siding (see White and Folkens 2000, p. 12). Becoming an osteoarchaeologist is therefore about shaping one’s own body practices in order to sense like an osteoarchaeologist (cf. Geurts 2002). For the osteoarchaeologist, both knowing and being are informed through generative understandings of touch (Springgay 2003).

The personal sensory perception of the material qualities of the skeletal body and subjective experience of the analyst therefore form strong elements of osteological practice. Although touch forms part of an enlightenment legacy of science (Candlin 2008), recognizing the osteoarchaeologist’s body as a medium for understanding is difficult to reconcile with stereotypical understandings of contemporary scientific practice. Despite some scepticism that science is essentially different from other forms of cultural and social activity (Woolgar 1988, Longino 1990), scientific modes of enquiry are frequently held to provide quantitative, objective, replicable and predictive data where any input based on the personal experience of the analyst is deemed to engender bias (Chalmers 1982, Macdonald 1998). In this context, the experience of touch is difficult to present for independent assessment and there is no comfortable place for an analysis which stresses sensory perceptions (Knappett 2005, Hurcombe 2007). Although osteoarchaeologists are increasingly using machines in, for example, isotopic and DNA analyses, much of the basic work must be done by people. In osteoarchaeology, as elsewhere, science cannot be easily formalized (Longino 1990, Fox Keller 2000).

**BODIES AND BONES IN THE PERFORMANCE ART OF MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ. ANOTHER KIND OF RELATIONSHIP**

Notions of the body as medium, as well as shifting and sophisticated understandings of the body as object and subject, are familiar to
performance art (Warr and Jones 2000). The body – its physicality, boundaries and permeability – are key focuses as the artist’s own body acts as material and as medium of investigation through performative acts, as well as through relationships created between bodies (Abramović 1998, Badovinac 1998, Warr and Jones 2000, Volk 2006, Biesenbach 2007).

The materiality of the body – its physical and psychological limits – is critical to the work of pioneering performance artist Marina Abramović (McEvilley 1998, Danto 2010). During performances her body has been disciplined, controlled, exposed, incised, beaten, whipped and suspended in order to emphasize the body, rather than deny it (cf. Scarry 1985). During the course of her long career Abramović has explicitly referred to her body in different ways. In the 1970s she talked about it as ‘material’ (Pejić 1998, p. 37). During her work with Ulay, the artists, as Ulay once stated, did not think of themselves as man and woman ‘We talk about each other as bodies’ (Pejić 1998, p. 37). Later Abramović described her body as a ‘boat’, in other words a kind of container. In more recent meditative and endurance works she has considered the body as mind itself, deliberately dissolving distinctions between the two (Pejić 1998, p. 38). Touch forms an important way of exploring this materiality. For example, in Rhythm 0 (1974) she famously stated in the instructions to the audience ‘I am the object’ (Abramović 1998, p. 80). Committed to remaining passive for six hours she offered herself up to the audience, becoming subject to whatever they chose to do with an array of 72 objects which she placed on a table including a pistol, bullet, needle, saw, hammer, honey, scissors, grapes, rose and a scalpel (Biesenbach 2010). In Impondenability (1977) she confronted issues of permission in relation to touching the body. Here Abramović and Ulay stood naked on either side of a doorway. In order to pass through, visitors had to squeeze between them, inevitably touching the naked, motionless bodies of the performers.

Abramović also has an interest in ethnography, archaeology and museums as sources of inspiration (Iles 2001). Indeed, she has sometimes explicitly described her work in archaeological terms, creating an ‘object book’ for her work Private Archaeology, an exposing and revealing of self. Running alongside this is a persistent concern with time, duration and ritual, all themes that are integral to archaeology. An overt interest in the archaeological imperative has lent inspiration to her practice both as metaphor and as context of performance, particularly through the materialization of history in performance pieces (Biesenbach 2010). In her 1994 work Balkan Baroque, Abramović sat for six hours a day for four days scrubbing and scraping the meat off 6000 pounds of blood-stained cow bones while life-size images of the artist with her parents played on three screens around her. This performance evoked the bloodshed of modern Serbian history but also echoes a deeper archaeological past, referencing Chinese oracle bones that date back to the 14th century BC made smooth by almost ritualistic cleaning and rubbing (Biesenbach 2010, p. 16). In her recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010), Abramović performed a new work, The Artist is Present, in which she sat motionless every day for three months during the period of the retrospective, a total of 600 hours. This piece, along with other solo and collaborative works she created with the artist Ulay, draws on a long cultural history of the act of sitting (Biesenbach 2010).

The use of human skeletons in performance links Abramović’s interest in the materiality of the body and the archaeological metaphor. It can be seen as part of a long tradition of artists interested in anatomy and death which continues today (see Cazort et al. 1996, Ingham 2009, Brocklehurst and Watt 2010). For example, the artist Gabriel Orozco has decorated both human and animal skeletons with black graphite drawings to emphasize the topography of the body (Fer 2006). In For the Love of God (2007) Damien Hurst cast a human skull in platinum and encrusted it with
diamonds, setting the human teeth back into the jaw. Juan Manuel Echavarría has made human bones into flowers as a comment on the violence in Colombia (Taussig 2006). Such work, however, is frequently concerned with securing the status of the skeletal body as an object through its elaboration, as an objet d’art. In contrast, for Abramović the starkness of the body is important. For her, the skeleton can be understood not only as a metaphor for the vulnerability of the human body (an allegory between the human body and the body of the planet) (Celant and Abramović 2001, p. 26) and a confrontation with death, but more literally as a reduction of the body, the stage beyond nakedness. It is the body stripped bare. Much of her work is about the reduction of the body in various ways, requiring a bodily sensory training Abramović has called ‘more and more of less and less’ (Abramović 1996). Performers in her recent retrospective and in her workshops enter a strict regime of fasting and sensory alteration that prepares the artist for the physical and sensory rigours of performance (Whitehead 1996, Biesenbach 2010).

Abramović’s work also stands out in its specific incorporation of the skeleton into performance with the use of the skeleton as a ‘performance object’ (Celant 2001, Iles 2001). She has played with the qualities of different kinds of bodies by juxtaposing living and skeletal bodies, notably in Nude with Skeleton (2002–2005) and Carrying the Skeleton (2008), creating a dynamic that, like osteoarchaeology, transforms the skeleton as object into skeleton as subject through inter-corporeality generated by touching the body. In Nude with Skeleton she lies naked on her side, a skeleton draped on her body yet echoing her position gently animated through the rise and fall of the artist’s breathing. Abramović gives her breath to animate the skeleton but the attempt to bring it to life is ultimately doomed to failure. Here the relationship between the living and the dead body offers specific possibilities that lend particular drama and potency. In Carrying the Skeleton she is dressed in black, carrying the skeleton over her back. In both cases, Abramović has created a piece in which touching the skeletal body creates a unique possibility for intimacy between the body of the performer and a deceased person.

In Abramović’s work, performance is itself a form of practice-based research into the human condition in which process, rather than outcome, is the focus. Abramović deliberately choreographs or sets up possibilities for particular kinds of physical experiences through sets of instructions to herself as the performer and/or to the audience which act like a kind of manual. This differs from theatre or acting in as much as it is about a real, rather than an acted or superficial experience (Abramović 2010). For her, Russian roulette is a metaphor for the difference between performance and acting: a performance artist uses a loaded gun and risks death; an actor uses a fake gun and feigns death (Biesenbach 2010, p. 19). The power of the performance lies in knowing the corporeal reality of the performer’s experience even if we as the audience cannot, or would not want to, experience it ourselves. In other words, it is an authentic sensory experience lived by Abramović in which the body is literally altered or made to behave in particular ways rather than its theatrical representation. As she explains it, performance brings her ‘to the moment’ (Abramović 2010, p. 211); the process of performance brings the subject into being. In this regard it is useful to consider the etymology of the word ‘aesthetics’, derived from aisthitikos meaning ‘perceptive by feeling’, suggesting not art but corporeal experience since it is through the body that we come to understand the world (Irving 2006, p. 392). By subjecting the body to a range of deliberately selected and choreographed experiences performance art offers a means of critical engagement with sensory modes of investigation (Schneider and Wright 2005). Indeed, performance art has been described as a search for body knowledge (Warr 2000, p. 14).
OSTEOARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PROVOCATION OF PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Osteoarchaeology and arts practice are, almost uniquely, two disciplines that work with the human skeleton. In both cases, this interest arises from curiosity regarding the materiality of the body and, in the process of coming to understand that materiality, both disciplines create relationships between living and dead bodies through touch. While touch forms the basis for rational empiricism in osteoarchaeological practice, it also offers ‘imaginative, speculative and emotional ways of knowing material objects’ (Candlin 2008, p. 278) which are critical to the construction of subjectivity (see also Krmpotich et al. 2010). The latter rise to the surface in the performance art of Marina Abramović but are also of relevance to osteoarchaeology. The reconstruction of life from the skeleton requires an interpretative jump that turns object data into subject person and this cannot be done without the element of imagination that is also part of art. In other words, in order to recognize skeletons as subjects, we need to imagine them as persons. As a result, in both osteoarchaeology and in the performance art of Marina Abramović complex relations between living and dead bodies are created in which the skeletal object body is reconfigured as a subject body through the investigative process. Touch also works as a form of choreography for both disciplines, although it is deployed on different levels. In performance art it is used by Abramović to question the artist’s body which stands for the body in general (her body might as well be anyone’s body, not just that of the artist), whereas in osteoarchaeology it is deployed to generate data about a particular body.

Yet, although there are several points of contact between osteoarchaeology and performance art, there are also substantial differences. The relationship between living and dead bodies generated in osteoarchaeology is contextually different and not necessarily equivalent to that in the performance art of Marina Abramović, because of the important role of the audience in performance art (Abramović 2010, Phelan 2010). Nor are the outcomes of the working with the skeletal body the same since the aims of osteoarchaeological and artistic knowledge construction are different. Most importantly in the context of this paper, despite the crucial role of touch within osteoarchaeological practice, osteoarchaeologists tend to downplay its importance because of worries over how to place touch as a subjective experience within understandings of contemporary scientific practice. They have therefore tended to prioritize the visual as more easily scientific. By contrast, performance art, and the work of Marina Abramović in particular, explicitly articulates the importance of touch and celebrates it as an authentic and critical means of understanding the human body.

In this last difference the performance art of Abramović offers a provocative model through which to reconsider the nature of osteoarchaeological practice. If a focus on the construction of osteoarchaeological knowledge through touch challenges established, predominantly visual, models of scientific practice, performance art offers a means of thinking through the role and value of sensory modes of investigation. It gives legitimacy and power to touch as a means of experiencing the body.

Taking on the provocation offered by a performance art model might lead us to ask whether osteoarchaeology can be understood as a performance-based experiential research process in which tactile investigation of the skeleton follows a script (what we might otherwise call manuals or methods) to (re)create elements of past identity. Since skeletons are frequently anonymous, they have no pre-existing fixed or given identities but these gradually come into being through osteological practice. In other words, what are studied are the identities a skeleton may have when it is handled and performed (see Mol 2002). Such an understanding need not devalue osteoarchaeology as a form of science; as Latour and Woolgar (1979) famously and succinctly put it, ‘scientific activity is not “about nature” but
is a fierce fight to construct nature. Nor does it turn osteoarchaeologists into artists. In this sense, the encounter with the work of Abramović does not advocate change in osteoarchaeological practice. Rather, it provides a means of understanding the intimate connection between bodies created during osteoarchaeological endeavour and of perceiving it differently. It suggests value in the osteological process, as well as in its outcome, by recognizing how touching the body has meaning as a form of investigative practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A version of this article was originally given as a lecture at the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of Berkeley in 2011. I would like to thank Sabrina Agarwal for the invitation to speak, and Sarah Inskip, Joshua Sofaer and Ellie Williams for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

NOTE

1 Although there are rare occasions when skeletons are given names (particularly when they are displayed for the public), on the whole osteoarchaeologists tend to refrain from this (Leighton 2010).

REFERENCES


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