model, for example a 'stage one' ASC 'includes geometric, luminous, non-veridical visual percepts, such as undulating lines, grids, and nested curves'. During a 'stage two' ASC 'subjects begin to make sense of the geometric percepts. They may, for instance, say that iridescent undulating lines *are* snakes'. While 'stage three' ASC 'is characterized by "visions" of people, animals and monsters, as well as hallucinations in all the senses'. Stage three is 'frequently reached by seeming to pass through a vortex or tunnel, or by a sensation of flight' (Lewis-Williams, 2004: 107). Although these stages are numbered one to three they are not intended to be seen as sequential; there is blurring between states and an individual might have an experience that combined stages or moved between them in any order. The model is conceived as an interpretative tool that might be used to give some sort of distinguishing structure to experiences of ASC; however, it is clearly not exhaustive. Individual spiritual and religious traditions propose different interpretations of comparable states that reflect the values and culture of their own belief systems.

SPACE AND PLACE

While certain physical practices and/or the consumptions of certain substances may contribute to ASC, other conditions may also promote such experiences; one of these factors is place. A 'charged' performance space, like those generated by Abramović, can usefully be compared with places designated as sacred. This is not done in order to denigrate or question people's experience of sacredness or the divine in such places, but to consider the role that energy plays in people's experiential understanding of space, place and time.

In anthropological circles there are a number of different approaches to defining what constitutes a sacred place. According to the researcher Belden C. Lane, three models dominate. The respected Mircea Eliade takes an ontological approach, using his research in the field to understand how place and time are understood through mythology and tribal wisdom. In this interpretation a sacred place is quite separate from the quotidian; a place of **hierophany** with its own luminosity and power. However, this perspective does not take into account the way in which the worlds of the sacred and the profane inevitably intermingle. In other words, the transcendental experience is still rooted in the particular culture from which it emerged.

Alternatively, a cultural approach, would argue that the sacredness of a place is socially and culturally constructed and that the place has no meaning in and of itself. This perspective ties identity to place. In doing so, this approach draws attention to the way in which the cultural construction of space has led to conflict, as claims and counterclaims over 'sacred space' are made; the holy buildings constructed by different faiths in Jerusalem being an example of this, a site which Christians, Jews and Muslims all consider to be sacred. This approach avoids the possible accusations of supernatural experience because the sacredness of the space depends on how cultural factors and ideology understand the space/place. This approach does not acknowledge the significance of the place itself in the formation of sacredness.

Finally, the phenomenological approach attempts to demonstrate the inter-subjectivity of place and perception. It stresses embodied experience and the way in which both the place and the participant are mutually involved in what is felt; the place feeling the person and the person feeling the place, as it were. This perspective does not take into account the ways in which both transcendence and culture influence how a place is construed as holy. All three perspectives usually come into consideration when sacred places or experiences are discussed, usefully articulating ideas concerning the presence of the sacred, how culture inflects on the sacred and the influence of particular features of a place on people's understandings of its sacredness.

There are parallels to be drawn here between Abramović's conception of performance as an exchange of energies within a space that heightens the connection between performer and participants and her ritual approach to aspects of her performance work. In essence, something akin to a 'sacred space' is generated by the artist's actions so that the place of performance itself resonates with a multitude of energies, palpable to and reciprocated by those present. It is also clear that the presentation of such performance work in designated performance spaces demonstrates the significance of such places in determining how the work may be read and understood and thus reinforces a sense of its social and cultural construction. In common with attempts to understand sacred space, attention to a range of physical, ontological, phenomenological and cultural phenomena is required in order to do justice to both Abramović's understanding of her work, others' experience of it and the way it impacts on space.

CREATIVE CONTRADICTIONS

The importance of the artist's live presence in a work is something that Abramović continues to emphasize. She also encourages the idea of a 'confrontation' with the audience: the artwork should provoke a response. This contrasts with the work of artists who remove themselves from the challenge of live performance and live audiences, preferring the safety of their studios or of filmed/videoed production. It is clear that Abramović will endeavour to continue to perform even when the physical limits of age would seem to prevent her from doing so. In particular, Abramović, who was 60 years old in November 2006, wants to continue to undertake durational performances. This is because she feels durational performances give her time in a way that she lacks in her everyday existence: 'So, actually, I have time in my work, which I don't have in life' (Abramović with Kontova, 2007: 106).

In spite of Abramović's willingness to continue to embrace the remarkable demands of her brand of live performance, she is also very well aware of the contradictions at the centre of her existence; her desire for glamour contrasting with the rigours of her self-imposed austerity. In short, there are times when she needs the ritual and seclusion of a monastery setting, where she might disappear for months at a time; while at other times she will go to New York and indulge herself, eating 'bad things for my body' like chocolate, and watching 'bad movies' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 10) Both these activities are a way for her to maintain an overall balance in her life and artistic practice: 'Now I like to analyze this openly to show others that we all have this problem. The thing is to learn from your own art because it is much farther along than you are' (Abramović with Kaplan, 1999: 10).

The initial shame she associated with her movement between such extremes, subsided when she was able to acknowledge these dual aspects of herself. Part of this process found expression in her newfound enthusiasm for the theatre, a form she once maligned. In particular, she found she enjoyed the way theatre can manipulate and control technology and imagery in ways that intensify the experience of both performer and spectator. Her decision to make *Biography* played an important role in liberating her from her shame at having apparently contradictory elements at the heart of her personality. Ideally, she would like to see *Biography*, a work about her life, staged in traditional plush theatre spaces so that the reality of her live actions is contrasted with the

expectation of a conventional theatre audience who are more used to fake blood and 'acted' emotions. *Biography* moves between moments where her actions are risky and real, and those where she seems to be sending herself up as an object of ridicule. The resulting performance is fast moving and intense as 50 years of her life are told in a mere 80 minutes. In looking back, she considers the whole process she underwent as very helpful for her development, both as a person and as an artist.

VIDEO WORKS

In more recent years Abramović has increasing turned to video. Her use of video is not just to document her performances but enables her to use this medium to give an extra dimension to a piece when she is performing it or as a means of reproducing some of the intensity of her live performance in work or places where she is not able to be present for more than a limited period of time.

Abramović's first solo video installation was made in 1993 and was called *Becoming Visible*. It is also the first video installation in which she herself appears. Five pythons entwine her head and shoulders and a series of instructions are given to the viewer by means of a voiceover. The art historian Chrissie Iles suggests that this is Abramović's way of bringing together an image from an earlier performance *Boat Emptying / Stream Entering* and the idea of instructions to the public used in her transitory objects work, in order to increase the engagement of the viewer (Iles in Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 327).

Image of Happiness (1996) presents a strikingly different aspect of Abramović's personality. It represents a romanticized vision of old-fashioned gendered values and shows Abramović confessing the 'image of happiness' to the camera: the pregnant wife at home awaiting the return of her miner husband for whom she provides a clean white shirt and a cool glass of milk, before he places his protective hand upon her swollen abdomen. The whole image is filmed with Abramović upside down and Abramović's emotional response to the thought of this blissful fantasy is evident as the image abruptly ends, and with it her feelings of fulfilment. *The Onion* (1995), another contrast, focuses on dissatisfaction. Abramović makes statement after statement about the areas of her life that distress her; the Yugoslav war, the endless travelling, the absence of a social life. Each statement is followed by Abramović hungrily biting a section of the onion she is holding, then chewing and swallowing it.

The action causes her eyes to stream, but she continues regardless, as if the discomfort is part of the punishment for her shortcomings, and her disillusionment must be confessed to camera. The third piece, *In Between* (1995), while it is still a video installation, is deliberately screened off from the main space of the gallery. Each person entering the space must sign an agreement to stay for the entire 40 minutes. Signing this contract-to-remain also encourages participants to be complicit with the instructions given to all present.

The aim of the spoken monologue used in this piece is to communicate vocally with the passive participants who sit blindfolded in the space. They are advised to relax and breathe. However, the tactics used to encourage repose do not help participants when they are asked to remove their blindfolds. Now they are faced with close-up images of Abramović's flesh. A needle, pushed against the skin, moves around Abramović's body in a way that creates tension and uncertainty as at any moment the needle could puncture the form it traces. This is particularly the case when Abramović reaches her eye, and the needle seems to move too close to this ever-so fragile organ. The instructions for breathing, however, continue. After a time the images come to an end and participants are asked to remove their headphones and go. As critic Jan Avgikos notes 'Physical ordeal is inherent to Abramović's work and is often the situational ground upon which such abreactive events as cleansing, depletion, and departure – recurrent themes for twenty years or more in her art – are staged' (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 341). Avgikos's reading of Abramović's pieces as 'abreactive' suggests the work functions cathartically, and indeed the works are all, in one way or another, working through highly personal material, some of which draws on fantasy and some on the harsher, less glamorous realities of her existence. In openly drawing attention to what Abramović sees as the frustrations and shortcomings of her life and herself, these works are a departure from most of her live performances, where the concept at the centre of her performance seems to have been distilled far beyond the directly personal. Even in *Biography*, where her own life is the source material and directly represented, less is overtly revealed. This perhaps has something to do with the intimacy created by the camera and the confessional possibilities of the close-up used in these video pieces.

Video installations, set up in isolation, largely rule out the potential for spectator interactivity. From this point of view, they can be seen as separate from her general project for the democratization of art.

The works are all made during live performances. The video record runs in real time; even the sounds of the actions performed during the time of the performance remain as they were in performance. However, this does not mean that the tape is produced in one take. Abramović has, on occasion, performed and re-performed a piece to ensure that the video record reaches her exacting standards. *The Onion* (1995), for example, was recorded several times before Abramović was happy with the results; something that is common practice in film-making but newer to performance art with its conventional ontological emphasis on the transitory, unique and unrepeatable. In this instance, the accumulated effect of repeatedly having to eat onions pushed Abramović to the heights she wanted to achieve. Her throat, burned by her efforts, took some weeks to heal, but the passion and commitment of her action and the words of text she spoke remain intensely visible in the resulting product.

Cleaning the Mirror I, *II*, and *III* (1995) were created especially for an exhibition at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art. The thematic concern of these works is death. Indeed, confronting the idea of death is something that continues to be a preoccupation of Abramović as a recent photographic self-portrait featuring a skeleton testifies. As was mentioned in Chapter 1 of this book, the first of the *Cleaning the Mirror* pieces consists of a stack of monitors, placed one on top of another. Each screen focuses on a portion of the upright body – or rather the skeletal remains of that part of the body – which are scrubbed. In the second piece, Abramović is seen on a single monitor with a skeleton, while in the third piece Abramović explores objects in the Pitts River Museum. The museum allowed Abramović to select a number of objects with each of which she spent time, not handling the object but making herself sensitive to the object's energies by holding her hands above it. The title of this group of video works and elements of the method used to create the work directly relate to the Zen Buddhist idea of 'cleaning the mirror' or preparing for your own death by confronting your fear of death. The work itself can be related to Buddhist exercises that include such things as sleeping with a corpse or dancing with a corpse, holding the tongue of the corpse in your mouth to breathe air into the expired lungs. These practices are described in Alexandra David-Néel's controversial book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (first published in 1929). While a number of David-Néel's accounts of events in the book have been challenged as unreliable or unverifiable, it is a book to which Abramović has referred in a number of her publications, including

Cleaning the House (1995). The book presents itself as the true record of David-Néel's experiences of lamas, magicians and hermits in Tibet, where she lived for 14 years. She left for Tibet in 1923 at the age of 55. She was the first Western woman to travel to this region, undertaking her extraordinary journey at a time when Tibet was a mysterious, closed country. The emphasis of the book is on describing psychic phenomena and monastic training practices, and it is to these things that Abramović has looked for inspiration. In particular, Abramović has clearly been fascinated by Buddhist claims concerning telepathy; a direct communication that does not require intermediary objects. In David-Néel's book the training used to cultivate telepathy is outlined, although it also explains that telepathic communication may take years to perfect: 'First, it is necessary to go through all the practices devised to produce the trance of "one-pointedness", the concentration of thought on one single object and complete oblivion of all other things' (David-Néel: 1971, 232).

Exercises Abramović has undertaken, where a white wall is stared at for seven hours or a primary colour gazed at for three, are the sorts of preparatory exercises used to achieve a state where the mind is emptied and a state of 'complete silence and blankness' is achieved. The novice monk in this condition may then find themselves subject to 'sudden, apparently inexplicable, psychic or even physical sensations or moods of the mind, such as abrupt feelings of joy, of melancholy, of fear, and also sudden memories unconnected with anything going on around one' (David-Néel: 1971, 232). After reporting his findings to his master the novice practices alone in a darkened room. The involuntary sensations must then be observed after the novice ensures that his own mind is emptied of its own thoughts. Once this stage is reached the novice is expected to make himself receptive to the thoughts, images and sensations that his master is mentally suggesting to him. In discussion with his master, the novice can determine his progress. His master will continue to mentally communicate orders to the novice, gradually increasing the distance between the two. Novices then transmit messages to each other as a means of testing their powers. However, David-Néel observed that many of the most respected lamas consider the acquisition of such skills to be childish and a poor use of effort.

Interestingly, during her time performing *The House with an Ocean View* (2002) Abramović has described her experience in terms that suggest that she was picking up the thoughts and emotions of those who came to see her in a manner that recalls something of the telepathic connection

described above (see Chapter 3). While Abramović might not consider her aim to be telepathic communication she is certainly an advocate of non-verbal, non-physical exchanges and the sort of discriminating receptivity designed to heighten the connection between people and the world around them.

EXTENDED RECEPTIVITY

In addition to her work with crystals, metals and other materials, she has explored working with ritual objects selected from diverse cultures. 'At first I did not want to know the purpose of the object. I wanted to know whether, as an artist, I was receptive and capable of perceiving the energy that the objects emitted; I wanted to function as a mirror' (Abramović with Celant, 2001: 27) In 1989, with a group of other artists, she was permitted to enter the galleries of the Louvre in Paris for 24 hours every Tuesday for a period of a month. The idea was that each artist would have the opportunity to find an object or objects that would inspire their art. During this time she was able freely to explore the museum. Instead of reading the labels on the objects she approached, she tried to avoid identifying things. Each night, she found herself drawn to two particular sections; the Somalian and the Egyptian. On her final night in the museum she found that she was strongly drawn to an object and when she touched it she discovered, to her surprise, that it aroused her sexually. Later that night she went back to the object and found that her sense of arousal returned when she handled it. Finally, she decided to look at the label to find out what it was that was having such a powerful effect on her. The object, inscribed with scorpions, was a sacred fertility object from Babylon, several thousand years old. It was used by women who wanted to become pregnant. They would hold or sit on the phallus-shaped object (Abramović *et al.*, 1998: 411). Her subsequent work with objects has not been uneventful. The power or perhaps the danger still present in these objects is alluded to when Abramović mentioned that after working with objects in the Pitts Rivers Museum for a fortnight she became very ill.

Another book that is of clear significance for Abramović is *The Morning of the Magicians* first published in 1960 (Pauwels and Bergier, 2001). The fact that this book was republished early in the twentieth-first century is significant for it suggests that there is a new millennial flavour to the work. This book, like pages from David-Néel's book,

appear in her *Cleaning the House* (1995) publication which is richly illustrated with images of physical and spiritual practices taken from a variety of religious and/or cultural traditions. It is in *The Morning of the Magicians* that connections are made between science, mathematics and spiritual concepts. This book points to a number of recorded instances when parallel observations were made by mathematicians and by those undergoing spiritual experiences. For instance, in this account it is possible to see similarities between a paradoxical example cited by the famous mathematicians Banach and Tarski and the claims of Hindus who are experts in the Samadhi technique. According to Banach and Tarski:

> it is possible to take a sphere of normal dimensions, such as an apple, for example, or a tennis ball, and to cut it up into slices and then to reassemble the slices so as to produce a sphere smaller than an atom or bigger than the Sun.
> (Pauwels and Bergier, 2001: 278)

Compare this description to those of the Yogis: 'The siddhi of the Hindu Yogis are extraordinary, since they include the faculty of being able to make oneself as small as an atom, or as big as the Sun or the whole Universe!'. Pauwels and Bergier are keen to point out that the mathematics key to understanding both these situations is something that was known to ancient civilizations familiar with concepts of what Pauwels and Bergier call the 'Transfinite'. However, real empirical scientific evidence to support these claims is distinctly lacking and as with much 'mystical' literature of this period (1960s and 1970s) ideas and concepts from many faiths and cultures were freely interpreted and used by readers like Abramović for their own purposes. This sort of generalized cultural appropriation of 'exotic' spiritual and mystical practices was dominant in the world of Abramović's youth, but today it appears overbearing or at best naïve. For instance, the recurring dictum of this book seems to be that in looking to the past we are much more likely to have a better understanding of the future, for 'There is nothing new except what has been forgotten' (Pauwels and Bergier: 2001: 37). Abramović, however, continues to look to alternative sources of knowledge in order to better understand the contemporary world, and there may be much of value to be found if the source materials are respected.

Some of Abramović's concern with encouraging an extension of perceived bodily limits and exploring potentialities through performance resonates with further techniques described in *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*,

but also relates to the ascetic disciplines referred to earlier in this chapter. For example, there is a detailed account of the practice of *tumo*, a practice used by monks to keep themselves warm in the freezing cold of snow-clad mountains, even when naked or wearing thin clothes. The word *tumo* means heat or warmth, and as a practice it would qualify as a demonstration of 'mastery of fire'. To perform *tumo* is a test of the powers of the monk or hermit. David-Néel describes three types of *tumo*:

> exoteric *tumo*, which arises spontaneously in the course of peculiar ruptures and gradually folds the mystic in the 'soft, warm mantle of the gods'; esoteric *tumo*, that keeps the hermits comfortable on the snowy hills; mystic *tumo*, which can only claim a distant and quite figurative connection with the term 'warmth', for it is the experience of 'paradisiac bliss' in this world.
>
> (David-Néel, 1971: 217)

In the contemporary Western context there are rare occasions when a particularly determined person manages to exceed the limits of physiological expectation. Lewis Pugh has swum in both Arctic (2005) and Antarctic waters (2007) for around 20 minutes. He trained for his polar swims by swimming four times a week in water a couple of degrees above freezing. His experience can be compared with the monks' experience of *tumo* in spite of the fact that the monks and swimmer have come to the physical experience from differing standpoints. Pugh has said: 'as soon as I see the water, my temperature rockets up to 38° C' (Butcher, 2005: 24). His body immediately responds to the knowledge that it is about to get very cold and his core body temperature rises. While it is easy to be sceptical of this phenomenon, it is apparent from this example that such feats of metabolism are perfectly possible for anyone fit and prepared to train their body to acquire control over their thermo-regulatory system. It is likely that the monks have developed similar skills by sitting outside wrapped in sheets soaked in icy water, gently competing against each other to see who can dry the most sheets in a session. However, for most people in industrialized nations the extreme physical challenge posed by severe or prolonged cold, wet or heat is beyond what is constructed as desirable. Pugh swims to draw attention to global warming; he has an ecological aim beyond himself that motivates him. Other athletes perform for money and/or acclaim. This contrasts with the more esoteric aims of many challenging cultural practices as well as the aims of Abramović's performance work.

Abramović herself has experimented with cold. She lay naked on ice for *Warm Cold* (1975) and for *Lips of Thomas* (1975), which was re-performed in 2005 as part of *Seven Easy Pieces*. Even if she did not undertake any obvious physical training to carry out this action, Abramović's mental preparations for performance are considerable, if understated in most of her accounts. Indeed, it is difficult to pin Abramović down when it comes to discussing what things she does do to prepare for a performance because she claims that she does nothing. However, it would seem that this 'nothing' is a very specific sort of nothing and clearly there are mental processes taking place even if this does not amount to 'doing' anything. Abramović has admitted that three days before a performance she becomes quite agitated and feels both nerves and dizziness. Her ability to communicate with others at this time is also compromised. However, as soon as the public are present in the space and the performance begins she is able to enter into what she calls a 'performance state'; or ASC where her nervousness disappears and she is able to live the present moment. It is the performance itself, and presence of the public, that allows Abramović to create the extraordinary work that she does. The discipline and exactitude of her practice is something that comes from the experience of performance rather than from anything preconceived. The decision to make the work and the commitment that this necessarily implies is what is important, as are intention, willpower, presence and a willingness to see the process of the performance as another learning experience.

RETURN TO THE BALKANS

Since leaving the former Yugoslavia in 1975 Abramović has led a broadly nomadic existence, living in Holland and other parts of Europe before moving to North America. Initially, living and working outside the socialist Yugoslavian system sent her into a state of shock; it took time for her to get used to the much greater freedom of expression afforded Western artists. This freedom was not all positive, in fact she found it difficult to cope with because much of her earlier work had been about pushing against the constraints and limitations of, for example, communism, the family structure and bourgeois attitudes. In order to develop further in this new environment it was necessary for her to focus on much broader issues, that she saw as more universal. Unlike many of her female contemporaries in the West, she was not interested

in making overtly 'issue'-based or autobiographical art. She preferred to work with ideas and concepts that were far removed from the specifics of her early life. Today, she oscillates between Europe and the United States, reluctant to commit entirely to any particular location, preferring to see herself as a citizen of the world.

In the new century, however, there has been a significant shift in the sort of subject matter Abramović has chosen to work with. The Balkan conflict in the 1990s and her sense of grief and impotence at the events it entailed were in some ways responsible for her decision to reconnect to her largely suppressed (or ignored) sense of Serbian/Montenegrin national identity. It was during her performances of *Balkan Baroque* (1997) that she was shocked to discover the intensity of her own feelings, as she had been far more accustomed to a degree of emotional detachment when performing. This experience made it clear to Abramović that there was a need to return to and draw upon her cultural history and confront the issues of concern to people of this region today. This has not been an easy step to take. In common with many people who leave their country of origin for a protracted period of time, Abramović feels like an outsider when she returns. However, her position as an insider/outsider can bring fresh perspectives:

> Only now can I see it, because I am far enough away – only in years, because it's been 35 years since I left – now I can deal with that material and I can really look through the past translated and twisted and understand what's happening.
> (Abramović with Kontova, 2007: 106)

Since returning to visit, Abramović has completed a number of projects in her former homeland; at least one is transparent in its political engagement. *Count on Us* (2003) criticizes the United Nations (UN) with an ironic song of praise sung by children. Abramović worked with groups of schoolchildren to realize this project and achieve her aim of drawing attention to the failure of the UN to provide assistance to the people of the region during the conflict. Furthermore, her decision to work with children brought a new audience into contact with her work.

Other pieces, like the video presentation *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005) came as a surprise to many of the people who consider themselves familiar with her work, including her Yugoslavian friends. The surprise is due to the erotic aspect of the work that draws upon and uses a combination of ancient fertility and protection rites with Abramović's own

Figure 2.4 *Balkan Erotic Epic*, 2005.

interpretative image-making. People unaware of many of the traditional practices of the region that have disappeared over time are shocked by what Abramović reveals. While the image-making is subject to Abramović's own interpretation and augmented by her own ideas, Abramović's reading of early texts provides the authentic bedrock and starting points for the work. Each section of the video is introduced and contextualized by a stern-looking Abramović, dressed in black, who introduces and explains the ideas behind each part before it is viewed. Abramović counters any objections to what she has done with her belief that her viewpoint as a Yugoslavian who had left and returned allows her insight into aspects of Yugoslavian culture that are rarely visible or have been suppressed by modern ideas of propriety.

THE PHYSICAL, THE SPIRITUAL

> … since every creation is a divine work and hence an irruption of the sacred, it at the same time represents an irruption of creative energy into the world. Every creation springs from an abundance. The gods create out of an excess of power, and overflow of energy. Creation is accomplished by a surplus of ontological substance.
> (Eliade, 1987: 97)

Aspects of Abramović's work and its sources of inspiration are often linked to or evoke a sense of performance as a spiritual experience. The generation of energy that plays such a central role in Abramović's form of expression has also, however, been a source of contention. There are those who are quick to dismiss any spiritual dimension to the experience of art as a whimsical product of New Age 'woolly-mindedness'. To speak of higher states of consciousness, 'traces of the soul' and an alternative experience of oneself through performance may provoke anxiety in the broadly secular, rationalist, technologically sophisticated twenty-first century Western individual. However, Abramović's concern with the spiritual dimensions of art is not something new for art or artists; indeed, art as a shamanic or religious practice reinforces a view of art and art-making as a way to capture or represent ideas, beliefs and desires beyond the mundane and tangible.

> 'Illumination' may not be just a metaphor. [It may be correlated with] an actual sensory [i.e. neurological] experience occurring when, in the cognitive act of unification, a liberation of [nervous electrical] energy takes place, or when a resolution of unconscious conflict occurs, permitting the experience of 'peace', 'presence', and the like. Liberated [charges of physical] energy *experienced as light* may be the core sensory experience of mysticism.
>
> (Levin, 1988: 347)

The final section of this chapter takes a step back to consider energy as an electromagnetic force (i.e. at the level of physics) as well as energy interpreted as a manifestation of the 'soul', as it is in a number of religious traditions that Abramović has encountered. This is not done in an effort to provide definitive answers to the question of what happens during a performance when Abramović initiates an 'energy exchange', but is more of a preliminary enquiry into what is meant by this expression when it is used in relation to Abramović's (and sometimes her audience's) experiences.

SPIRITUAL ENERGY

Chakra is a Sanskrit word that means 'wheel'. Within tantric traditions of Hinduism, chakras consist of 'wheels' of energy that circulate around various regions of the body. They energize the region and awaken the function of that part of the body. The higher chakras all radiate from nerves between the spine and the cranium. In a single lifetime, two or three chakras are likely to dominate and influence the way an individual thinks and lives their life. The lower chakras circulate between the coccyx and

the heels, and if energy is predominantly in this region then one's animal nature is more manifest than if this energy were to be in the upper half of the body. If energy and awareness are flowing in the higher chakras, then consciousness is operating within our higher nature (Sundararajan and Mukerji, 1997: 218–21).

Some branches of Hinduism associate chakras with particular colours and tones, and in more recent times the different electromagnetic frequencies generated by each one have been noted (Hover-Kramer, 2002). Individual chakras respond to and transmit, on specific frequencies, the energies stored in the aura; while the chakra system as a whole deals with the complete electro-magnetic (EM) environment of a person. The higher order chakras, broadly speaking, mirror the colours of the rainbow, which are themselves a result of a splitting of light. In other words, light, energy and colour are all inextricably linked. This is something Abramović, as an artist, has not only been aware of, but has explored in many of her works. It is particularly apparent in her *Nightsea Crossing* work because of the way Ulay and Abramović chose to wear shirts and trousers made of a single block of colour: each performer wore a different colour from the other, and each performance used a different combination of colours. For instance, on one occasion Ulay might wear yellow while Abramović at the opposite end of the table wore blue with the aim of experimenting with different energy relationships generated by the performers and the colour. Abramović has even produced coloured clothes for spectators to wear when encountering some of her 'transitory objects'; some of these clothes include magnets designed to interact with a person's energy field or electro-magnetic environment.

THE ELECTRIC BODY AND CHAKRAS

The body produces electrical impulses that are responsible for neural activity throughout the body, including the heart and the brain. The result of this electrical activity can be measured by the amount of heat, magnetism and phosphorescence generated. The presence of magnetite in the brain (discovered in 1992) reinforces the suggestion that human experience and consciousness can be altered by magnetic fields (see Little, 2001: 12). Investigations and research into the electro-magnetic spectrum (EMS) suggest that what is usually not seen by humans under ordinary circumstances, may, under particular conditions, become manifest so that what is normally invisible and inaudible, becomes seen and

Figure 2.5 *Count on Us/Tesla Effect Coil*, 2003.

heard (Tiller, 1999: 41). The ability to see outside the 'normal' range of visible light to the ultra-violet or infra-red ranges may account for the experience of seeing auras around people or objects. According to the scientific writer Gregory Little, through an alteration in consciousness people can access parts of the EMS that are not normally perceived and that sometimes it is possible to focus these energies through the construction of a mound or circle. Little has also suggested that the magnetic field in our brains connecting with electromagnetic energy unconsciously links us to what is, or what is interpreted as, the spiritual world.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the practices Abramović has adopted in order to explore her physical and mental limits induce conditions that deliberately alter customary ways of perceiving the world. There is evidence to suggest that such practices, dismissed by some as 'spiritual mumbo-jumbo' or New Age nonsense, may in fact be tapping into very real physical forces, described above, working at an atomic level on both performer and spectators to create the 'energy exchange' so central to Abramović's approach.

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The future, as far as Abramović is concerned, lies in educating young people to be able to concentrate and meditate and learn about the possibilities of silence and 'emptiness'. Meditation produces a higher frequency wave pattern in the brain, and through the practice of meditation it is possible to experience a pan-dimensional awareness of oneself and one's environment where space and time are surpassed and one has a feeling of 'being-at-one-with-it-all'. Abramović believes such mind training should be taught to young people in school as a matter of routine. She says: 'If the Tibetans can learn, in four years, a technique for sitting in the snow at twenty degrees below zero without freezing, why can't we learn these techniques in school?' (Abramović *et al*., 1998: 49). Abramović would also like to see physical techniques of the body, such as controlling the heartbeat and blood system, prioritized in the general education of youth so that many people have this knowledge. So, while challenging herself remains a core part of Abramović's motivation in making new work, passing on what she has learned to new practitioners has become increasingly important to her. One of the ways she has sought to implement this is through her International Performance Group, which was formed in 2003 and did, for several years, play an important role in disseminating her legacy.

While these emerging artists all work in their own way, they are all connected by their experiences of Abramović's teaching, which, in turn, has informed their working processes (see Chapter 4). However, this alone was not sufficient for Abramović who wanted to have a centre for performance art that remained true to her vision. To realize this project, Abramović sold her home in Amsterdam and bought a large property in Hudson, New York in December 2007, with the aim of transforming the building to provide facilities for performance, workshops and a research archive that would provide a lasting resource and legacy for future generations of artists.