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ART, LOVE, FRIENDSHIP

MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY
TOGETHER & APART

THOMAS McEVILLEY

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PREFACE

I met Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay) together in 1983. Ingrid Sischy, editor of *Artforum* at the time, had asked me to go to Amsterdam to see their piece *Positive Zero* and write an article about it if I wanted to. That was the beginning (as the saying goes) of an enduring friendship. Now at last the book is coming out which tells that story and which the three of us, and the publisher Bruce McPherson, have planned for several years.

The texts that follow arose out of the fabric of our lives over a period of twenty-seven years, but especially the first five years from 1983 to 1988. This was the most intensely close period of their collaboration, when their work seemed to come from some entity called Marina-and-Ulay. As the years went by, the experience of writing about their work became different from any other art critical writing I had done. Already in 1985, when Marina and Ulay were selecting the artists who would be invited for the annual sculpture fest in Middelburg, Holland, I found that I was being invited as an artist, not as a critic. The roles merged into each other and for several years we saw each other

frequently on one side of the ocean or the other, stayed in each other's homes, and continued to make works together and to enjoy the sense of giving form to life. The pleasure of this friendship was especially strong in connection with the *Great Wall Walk* in 1988. So the texts collected in this book tell the story of the artists and their work from the multiple point of view of a friend, a critic and a collaborator.

The book opens with "The Romance: A Paradox," which I wrote in 1987, but not for or about Marina and Ulay. Rather, this little conundrum was written for an exhibition called "The Simultaneity of the Other," at the Kunsthalle in Bern, Switzerland—an exhibition in which Marina and Ulay also participated, presenting themselves as two more-than-human-size vases side by side. "The Romance" approaches the theme of the relationship between the self and the other as if it were a continuum in which the weight shifts back and forth continually from one end to the other without getting out of balance. Self enters other and other enters self. Their identities are defined in part through this process of entering into one another and experiencing their boundaries as porous. I include this piece at the specific request of Ulay as an entranceway or presiding archetype through which the pieces written directly about them may be seen.

The title of this book—*Art, Love, Friendship*—relates to the fact that in the twelve years of their collaboration Marina and Ulay made art in part through their love for one another and also through my role as a friend to both of them. But their relationship was not just a matter of a romance or a love affair. They were aware that they were probing into issues of identity and transformation which are more or less universal conditions for any living entities.

The first section considers their collaborative work and begins with "Marina and Ulay/Ulay and Marina," which is substantially the essay I wrote about them after our

first meeting in 1983 on the occasion of *Positive Zero* in Amsterdam. It appeared in *Artforum* in September of that year, and was more or less their presentation to the world outside Holland. It provides an overview of their oeuvres, emphasizing the Relation Works, which had dominated the first few years of their collaboration. In fact, if one thinks of the genre of Relation Works in a slightly loose sense—so that *Nightsea Crossing* and *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* can both fit into the genre—then “Relation Work” covers the whole twelve years of their collaboration.

Next comes a series of small texts which Marina and Ulay had written about the Relation Works before I met them. These little texts combine their sensibilities in the one super-being Marina-and-Ulay; in reading them inwardly you can hear either of their accents, or the combined voice of both speaking a special performance-talk kind of language. (“Ulay: I am driving the car for an indefinite time in a circle. Marina Abramovic: I am sitting in the car, moving for an indefinite time in a circle.”)

“Ethics, Aesthetics and Relation” is the essay I wrote for their exhibition two years later at the Vanabbe Museum in Eindhoven, Holland. With this exhibition, and its catalogue, they were feeling their way into multiculturalism through the idea of tourism as an intercultural matrix—which is represented in a reverential way in the long filmic tableaux that were part of this exhibition. By this time the conceptual purpose of their work was becoming clear in its theoretical detail, and also acquiring a tinge of heroic feeling. This was still an early period for Performance Art, and during the years of the Relation Works Marina and Ulay seemed to be exploring the limits of human activity, sometimes dangerously. They also seemed to assume that this was the point of their work and their dedication to it.

Increasingly their performance art embraced cultures, traditions and genres beyond their own, leading finally to

the other side of the world, to the Great Wall of China for *The Great Wall Walk*. In the essay called “Great Walk Talk” I present this adventure of almost cosmic scale as, among much else, the culminating Relation Work that completed their collaboration and brought it to an end in 1989.

The second section deals with Ulay’s work apart from Marina, both before and after their collaboration. Ulay’s “Flags for the European Community” describes a piece that is rigorous in its iconographic presentation of ideas. In that work Ulay’s long-standing interest in issues of identity assumes a more polished form, becoming elevated beyond personal to transpersonal nationalism.

The Spitzweg *Aktion* described in the longest essay, “The First Act,” is a classic analysis of performance art’s overlap, through its frequent use of guerilla tactics, with illegal activity (or, as Ulay put it, “There is a criminal touch to art”). This is one of those works that has to do with self-discovery or self-knowledge, and might be described as the work in which Ulay dared fate and came through it, emerging as a larger and at the same time more human figure.

In “Ulay and Photography” I begin an investigation of the undercurrent of photographic meaning that flows beneath all of Ulay’s work. Photography’s position in the *gradus ad Parnassum* of art has always seemed somehow deceptive or tricky. Does it or does it not belong, and if so, how and where? Photography has been the perfect medium to represent both the fragmentation of post-Modernism and its tremendous ability to multiply the lenses through which any meaning might be seen and considered. Today photography, acting out the drama of the sacrificial body long associated with art from its ancient connection with religion and ritual, occupies the terrain of meaning in a shifting, broken, multiple and fragmented way. This medium has become useful for expressing such broken mean-

ings as identity, nationality, gender, name, and form, which all lie scattered in the wake of Modernism, fragments from shattered matrices. Ulay's work questions whether they will come together again with some conviction of wholeness—or is that perhaps an outcome to be dreaded?

Four essays on Marina's work apart from Ulay follow in the last section. “The Serpent in the Stone” attempts to make an art historical breakdown of the phases of Marina's work, giving special attention to the “New Age” sculpture which for a while occupied her after the end of the collaboration with Ulay. Almost like a medium, Marina was seeking communication with physical substances through her crystal works.

“Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero” employs the interview format to explore the periods of Abramovic's life as an artist, again seeking places to attach the threads of art history. She and I considered examples from the early phases of her oeuvre in which the therapeutic impulse that underlies much of her performance work tries to locate itself in certain images and traditions. “Waiting for an idea” is a basic theme in her work: she confronts the world with her healthy receptiveness and asks it to tell her what to do. Marina finds it easy to open herself as a receptor for energy from any source, animal, serpent, stone, crystal.

“Speaking Silences, Carrying Water” describes a piece based on a type of meditation retreat that she and I have both experienced and have discussed with each other. The piece was carried out with extreme simplicity and emerged into the light with a degree of perfection that was almost hard to believe. I saw it as a kind of culmination for her, but she, without pausing, has hurried right on to other works.

Finally, in “Marina's New Life, or The Next Age of Performance Art,” I contemplate the changes that the medi-

um is undergoing. Performance was rather new when they began and seems about to enter a time when art, scholarship, and the future of the medium will become multilayered and deep—much deeper than at its beginning—but at the same time with the possibility of a loss of innocence.

THE ROMANCE: A PARADOX

The self is created by its apprehension of an other. The other is created by its distinction from a self. They create each other and sustain each other's existence. Each makes the other what it is.

The self cannot be itself unless it stands against what is not-self. Not-self is needed to make self self. Therefore not-self is in self. It is its necessary condition and its negative essence.

The other is not other except in its difference from self. It is brought into existence by the self's apprehension of that difference. The other and the self are simultaneous. They come into existence at the same instant and recreate each other at each succeeding instant.

There cannot be self without other; there cannot be other without self. They exist only and always in a secret embrace. They are a mutually dependent, eternally interlinked pair.

Self and other are two; the relation of difference between them is a third; the difference of each of them from the relation of difference constitutes a fourth and a fifth; and so on ad infinitum. Thus the gaps that separate the self from the other are infinite.

The bonds that join the self and the other are also infinite. Their reciprocal necessity flashes endlessly back and forth between them, like the caresses of their embrace.

Each, in its selfsameness, knows itself and is unknown to the other. Each, in its difference, is known to the other and unknown to itself.

Insofar as the other is unknown it is known; insofar as it is known it is unknown. The other is other because it is unknown. The other is known because it is known to be other. It is known by negative implications of the self.

Insofar as self is unknown it is known. It is known as self only by its distinction from the other, which as other is unknown. It is known insofar as it is different from an unknown. It is known by an unknowable difference. It is unknowably known.

It is not merely that the other is a mystery to the self; it is that the other is a mystery of the self.

Sameness is self without other and hence without self. Difference is not-self, with otherness and hence with self. Sameness is sleep, nonentity, abyss, bliss. Difference is awakeness, entity, form, anxiety.

Sameness is made sameness by its difference from difference, as self is made self by its separation from an other. Sameness contains difference as its hidden essence as the self contains the other as its unknowable known.

Sameness is unutterable. If two things are the same then any predication between them is tautologous. Difference is unutterable. If two things are different then any predication between them is meaningless.

If a thing is itself by reason of selfsameness it is not a self since it is not defined by a difference. If a thing is itself by reason of

difference it is different from itself and the same as not-self.

If a thing is both the same and different then it is two things. If a thing is two things then each of these two things, also both the same as itself and different from an other, is two more things. And so on ad infinitum.

Sameness lies at the heart of difference. Difference is the irrevocable condition of sameness.

The self fears the other, thinking that otherness will overwhelm it and cause it to cease being itself. Yet it is the other alone that compels the self always to be itself.

If it wishes to escape the other, the self can only sink into it, fusing with it so that neither self nor other remains to be seen. If it wishes to absorb the other into itself and enrich itself through otherness, the self, drawn out of its limits, can only force the other into new forms of otherness.

The self can never reach the other and can never do without it.

The self's love of and need for the other is matched only by its hatred of and repulsion from it. The other is the eternally elusive beloved and the eternally pursuing enemy.

The self reaches for the veil of the other trembling to see itself. The other slips beneath the skin of the self and becomes its desire and its terror.

Pursued by the other, the self flees it through all nature, begetting in its flight the infinite forms of selfhood and of otherness.

Yearning for the other, the self pursues it through all nature, annihilating the countless forms in its desire to leap into the abyss.

Change is the procreation of the self and the other. The infinite is begotten through their sameness and their difference.

ONE

TOGETHER



MARINA AND ULAY / ULAY AND MARINA

(1983)

In 1975 Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen met in Amsterdam and recognized each other as Tantric collaborators. In Tibetan Buddhist lore, which along with theosophy and alchemy has influenced them both, the recognition of a karmic acquaintance is a natural experience, not something unlikely or bizarre. Born on the same date (though he is three years older), Marina and Ulay, as they are usually referred to, exhibit remarkable similarities of physiognomy, personal style, and life-purpose. Since that meeting they have entered an artistic collaboration that has emphasized mediations and balancings of the male and female principles. Previously, each of them had done work that cut away the conventional shapes of the self; painfully at times, they had created the inner openness through which Tantric processes are said to operate.

Marina Abramovic's early work had publicly confronted the fears that arise from identification of the self with the body. She bears the scars of premeditated self-investigation with the knife. One early work, *Rhythm 0*, attained extraordinary clarity. It was in Naples, 1974. At an evening

performance Marina was presented to an audience as a totally passive object. Near her was a table covered with instruments of pleasure and pain. For six hours, the audience was told, Marina would not exert her own will. The piece was a classic of passive provocation. It began tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arm into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan



Rhythm 0, 1974

night began to heat up. In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder. Faced with her abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina's head and her own finger was being worked around

the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions. Perilously, Marina completed the six hours.

The piece synthesized, in a form as simple and dynamic as, say, the lighting of a match, the leading themes and questions of the time: the use of the art event as an instrument of both social and psychological criticism, the breaching of the proscenium arch to force the audience to relate to the work in extra-aesthetic ways, the expression of a life-and-death commitment to a process out of one's own control, the substitution of the artist's person for his or her work, and so on.

Ulay's work prior to their collaboration was, if anything, even more uncompromising in its confrontation with the problem of selfhood and personal identity; his own self-image was the art material he manipulated. For two years he dressed continuously as a female and entered the social milieu of transvestites and transsexuals. For another year he presented himself as mentally defective and sought out the company of people with extreme physical abnormalities, miming their self-image to erode his own. The photo-documentation of these activities was both rigorously carried out and permanently withheld from exhibition, as part of the piece.

Ulay's first public exhibition, at De Appel Foundation in Amsterdam in 1975, shortly before he met Marina, synthesized these years of self-study in the theme he calls "photo-death." Nine photographs of Ulay in a wooded environment were prepared. In the first he was foregrounded and the environment was not seen. For each of the following eight, he retreated nine paces from the camera, at last disappearing totally into the environment. Unfixed prints of these photographs, each one meter square, were hung in the darkened gallery. When the visitors at the opening had been admitted to the darkened space a bright halogen lamp was switched on. As the viewers gazed at them, the photographs of Ulay