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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THROUGH A MIRROR OF MODERNITY:
THE REFLECTION OF INDIGENOUS RITUAL IN
THE PERFORMANCES OF ULAY AND MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ.

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BY

JENNIFER MOONAN

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LIST OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS	PAGE
List of Illustrations	-4-
Introduction	-6-
<u>Chapter One</u>	-9-
Antiquated Art and the Appropriation Process	
Footnotes	-16-
<u>Chapter Two</u>	-18-
Physical and Psychological violence: transcending censorship.	
Illustrations	-23-, -24-
Footnotes	-25-
<u>Chapter Three</u>	-27-
Ritual Silence and Collective Passivity: acknowledging the position of the audience	
Illustrations	-33-, -35-
Footnotes	-36-
<u>Chapter Four</u>	-38-
Personal Histories: deconstructing the old, adopting the new	
Illustrations	-43-, -45-
Footnotes	-46-
Conclusion	-47-
Illustrations	-48-, -49-
Bibliography	-51-, -52-
Articles	-53-, -54-

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

1. 'Relation in Space.'
Performance by Ulay and Abramovic
Venice Biennale, 1976. -23-

2. 'Rest/Energy.'
Performance by Ulay and Abramovic.
Rosc Exhibition, Dublin, 1980 -24-

3. 'Nightsea Crossing'
Performance by Ulay/Abramovic
Documenta 7, Germany, 1982 -33-

4. 'The Observer'
Performance by Ulay/Abramovic with Remy Zaug
Forum, Middleburg, 1984 -34-

5. Objects used in 'Nightsea Crossing' -35-

6. Ulay on the Western side of the Great Wall
of China, 1988 -43-

7. Abramovic on the Eastern side of the Great Wall
of China, 1988 -44-

8. Meeting on the Great Wall, July, 1988 -45-

9. 'The Lovers'
Coloured polyester, 1988-89
Marina Abramovic -48-

10. 'Men, 98.'
Painted aluminium, 1988-89
Ulay -49-

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous populations throughout the world, have had to contend with the forces of technological 'progress' and a destiny dominated, by Western capitalist ideologies. Yielding to modernity, the distinct histories of these traditional cultures can quickly vanish. In light of this cultural 'desecration', the lamenters of these plundered exotics, have resigned themselves, to the recognition that these cultures' local traditions and inherited practices, have been completely extirpated. Recognising that many languages, ceremonies and rituals have been lost or calcified, my thesis proposes the necessity to identify, that much has also been invented and revived. A complex historical situation has arisen, which requires us to perceive simultaneously, the dying sparks of a given culture, and the nucleus of a new one.

As European contemporary artists, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, believe that cross-breeding of cultural backgrounds, when handled delicately, does not result in an uprooted authenticity, but marks an evolution towards a new hybrid society. Investing their performances, with ritual practices appropriated from regularised cultures, their art provides a vehicle for a reassertion of the values and perspectives that have been progressively lost from modern experience. Standing in opposition to the increasing sense of fragmentation in the West, Ulay and Abramovic's mythical dream of integrated harmony, underlies their work as a whole.

Chapter one of my thesis focuses on how this background of an instable, fragmented society, some 35 years ago, led to the universalization of the art category. Disillusioned with established forms of expression, artists felt the boundaries of modern art to be antiquated. Performance art, drawing on the indigenous ritual practices of traditional, often tribal societies, provided a means of reinvesting order and regularity within the individual. Outlining the unique form of ritual appropriation particular to Ulay and Abramovic, I consider how, through a self-reflexive vision, their art overcomes the misrepresentations inherent in the appropriation process. Involving the audience/public in a directly analogous way, their early works before collaboration provided the basis for the shamanic and ritualistic techniques that pervade their art.

In chapter two, I discuss their 'Relation Works', being the first products of their collaboration, again highlighting the distinct parallels to shamanic activity. Seeking to destroy superficiality, these performances ignored the established societal taboos, and publicly exposed high levels of bodily aggression and violence. I will discuss how the moral codes and practices of a particular culture must be adhered to, so as not to alienate the audience. Though these violent impulses may be essential, I point towards other forms of expression, that keep within the boundaries of our society's morality and do not trespass the more certain ground of the shaman.

Chapter three concentrates on Ulay and Abramovic's next body of work, 'Nightsea Crossing'. Again, their opposition to a fragmented society embodies these performances, seeking to create feelings of mutuality and commonality. Drawing symbols from indigenous cultures, their ritual silence supercedes complexity, returning our minds to the original primacy of the cave. 'Nightsea Crossing' becomes a vehicle in which the sense of loss and separation in the Western world can be mended, provoking the audience to challenge disconnectedness and emerge into a collective experience. Amalgamating objects from indigenous and modern cultures into a single model, they also warn of the particular dangers of communal identity in a modern context.

In chapter four, I focus on Ulay and Abramovic's walk of 'The Great Wall of China', simultaneously their first separately performed piece and their last piece of collaborative work. This, art as 'tourism', and their obsessive quest to free themselves from their respective pasts, resulted in a pervasive sense of disillusionment during the project. Their once intense symbiosis, now in dissolution, forced them into a situation of rediscovering their own true identities - identities that had become permeated by relationships with foreign cultures and each other. In the context of this highly regularised communal culture, one they had exalted previously, each discovered, in their lives, as they had in their art, that they could either resist or yield to this exotic other, but could never reproduce it.

CHAPTER ONE
ANTIQUATED ART AND THE APPROPRIATION PROCESS

Intervening in an interconnected world one is always to varying degrees 'inauthentic': caught between cultures, implicated in others. Because discourse in global power systems is elaborated vis-a-vis, a sense of difference or distinctness can never be located solely in the continuity of a culture or tradition. Identity is conjunctural, not essential. (1)

In these lines, from The Predicament of Culture, James Clifford identifies the complex cultural problem of self identity, where the individual finds himself 'off center among scattered traditions,' confronting this condition of 'rootlessness and mobility.' (2) As contemporary belief invests more and more authority in the rationally comprehensible and the scientifically proven, the explicit rejection of ritual and tradition becomes increasingly widespread. Our limiting concept of chronologically ordered time separates us from our past so much so, that the values held by one generation are considered redundant by the next. This results in severed links with our roots, history being conceived as an irrelevant past gone forever.

The concepts of continuous tradition and the unified self that provide a sense of harmony in so called primitive societies, are substituted in our society, by rational constructs that promise a sort of artificial sense of order and security. Throughout the 20th century these constructs collapsed, exposing their tautological connection to destruction, yielding world wars, revolutions and a varying assortment of distress symptoms. As order crumbled, the arts repeatedly surrendered the art object to the power of the 'act.' This signified a new authority being placed on the life of the individual amidst, even in spite of, the collapse of societal values.

In essence, it was performance art that rose to confront this situation. Its primal, formal medium, being the self in its body, posed an ethical challenge to the social body's attempt to destroy itself. A testimonial to the human being as the single most important value at the centre of existence, was reflected in the evolution of this post World War Two performance art genre.

Expression became primarily concerned with the exploration of the self in space, time and action. Stuart Brisley, when asked what the main source of ideas for performances replied, 'the sense of the figure in space, movement, the sense of oneself the human.' (3) In a society that posed a constant threat to mankind's endurance, performance artists rummaged through their own personal histories, groping for an explanation or direction in life. Performance, with its lack of clear and determined boundaries, provided artists with a limitless vehicle for expression. Liberated from the immobility of the art object, artists began to articulate their ideas in action and motion.

Jack Burnham, recognised this situation, when he wrote of 'the erosion of the plastic arts toward theatre,' and that, 'for a century the artist has chosen to be not only his best subject matter, but in many cases his only legitimate subject.' (4) With the emphasis on action and movement, the artist was suddenly in the public eye, emerging from behind art, which had previously been his/her veil. From the mid 1950's to the early 1970's, visual artists joined themselves to poets, dancers and musicians. What linked them together was a belief in primary, often collective, experience and action. They sought to draw the spectator deeper into their art, seeking to engage them in some kind of heightened participation. Jackson Pollock's painting process helped to direct our minds toward the origins of our art, creating forms that signify our dark taboos. Performed 'Happenings' sought to bring the public 'face to face,' sometimes in satire, 'with the unreasonable demands of life in the form of chaos, confronting them with the most absurd and repugnant scenes of horror, to awaken consciousness.. (5)

This mood of experimentation in performance, until the mid 1970's, continued to reflect the performing artists scepticism of rational forms of expression to alter conditions of existence. They sought to reinstate an internal stability, rather than the external sense of order that had repeatedly failed them before. This self-regulating pattern, manifested itself in an appropriation of ritualism in their work, and proved to be one of the most significant strategies of post-war performance art.

The views of the public and critics alike, were divided on the appropriation of a different semantic category into the art realm. Some looked on it as an abuse of ritual, a glorification of the artist and a demand for more faith in his/her work. The question of authenticity arose. If ritual in native societies was a part of everyday life, then who had the right to copy a fragment of this reality and call it art? The traditional boundaries of art became dissolved and art began to function like a kind of 'universal awareness practice.' (6) As Alain Robbe-Grillet insisted in the late 1950's 'if art is going to be anything it has to be everything.' (7)

This universalization of the art context originated at least as far back as 1915. Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades,' demonstrate the category shift involved in the appropriation process. Here, the artist appropriates an object outside the art realm and turns it into the property of art. The emphasis then, must be placed on the fact that '... art is not a set of objects, but an attitude toward objects...' (8) It is possible therefore, that two visually indistinguishable objects exist, where one is a work of art and the other not.

In understanding this appropriation, we can perhaps come to a fuller understanding of Marina Abramovic and Ulay's appropriation of ritualistic and shamanic techniques in their work. But first, it is necessary to state, that I have always viewed appropriation by artists as suspect. This is not so much a condemnation of copying or plagiarism, but a comment on the questionable practice of subtracting elements of other semantic categories, that selectively happen to conform or corroborate with the artists own thoughts and ideas. By removing something out of its true context, the artist can manipulate it in any way preferred. Yielding to 'promiscuity and aimlessness,' (9) the authenticity of a culture's inherited traditions, can quickly vanish and their real meanings can be lost.

Marina Abramovic and Ulay do use aspects of ritual drawn from indigenous cultures in their work. What I want to establish is

the success of their appropriation process and the justification for their employment of ritual in their work. When appropriating a given category into the art realm, a trace of the original categories meaning will always be retained, in a kind of shadow-real existence. Instead of expanding or modifying native ritual practices, Ulay and Abramovic shift our existing focus on it. The way they use ritual in their work is by reflection or implication. What could be looked on as the great limit of appropriation - the impossibility of creating a whole new reality - becomes the strength of their art. They do not claim to know or understand this distanced culture. Ulay stated that he cannot function in what he is doing within those ethnic groups. (10) Realising there is no place for European contemporary art in those indigenous cultures, they come to the conclusion that there is no place for their native ritual practices in ours. They tend not to use performance as a transference mechanism for exporting the culture's inherent traditions. What their work seems to present can in fact be paralleled to Segalen's discovery, that the new traveller expresses, 'not simply his vision, but through an instantaneous, constant transfer, the echo of his presence.' (11) Their work becomes an allegorical mirror where the culture's inherited structures are reflected and the artists' own history finds meaning within them. Not in fact an autobiography but an act of portraying their existence in the context of someone else's.

SEPARATE EXPLORATIONS

Using repetition, simultaneity and chance, ritualism offered Ulay and Abramovic a way of attempting to rationalise the uncertainties and irregularities of life. The reality of an unstable, fragmented society, identifies the fact that their early performances appear as an irritant or weapon, used to create an acceptance of man's fragility and dependence on forces beyond his control. The foundations for these explorations were grounded in their separate works, relying heavily on chance, and providing situations that posed immediate physical and psychological dangers. Both artists before their fated meeting in Amsterdam in 1976, had explored methods of cutting away the conventional shapes of the self to confront the problem of true personal identity.

Abramovic's early work concentrated on the fears that surface from identification of the self with the body. 'Rhythm 0,' performed in Naples in 1974 presented Abramovic seated beside a table laden with objects of 'pleasure and pain.' The audience were told that she would remain completely passive for six hours and would not react in any way to their provocation. The piece began tamely. People used the petals to rub against her skin and painted her face and clothes with the colours provided. After a few hours the audience became more aggressively involved with the artist's abdication of will. Three hours into the piece, her clothes were torn from her body with razors. Then her body was cut so someone could suck her blood. Abramovic remained unflinchingly still. A loaded gun was thrust to her head and her finger was being worked around the trigger when a fight broke out between audience factions and her impending death was halted. The six hours were completed.

The piece, interestingly echoed one of the leading themes of art at the time, but twisted it around in an ironic way. In this theme, the artist is the work of art, as when Ben exhibited himself as a living sculpture and as Gilbert and George in Britain, moved around on a pedestal in a gallery, heads painted gold. These artists appear as on a stage, the centre of attraction, like royal or sacred beings on public display. Abramovic's 'twist,' denied the projection of this unique personality to her audience. Faced with what seemed like a 'collapse of human psychology' (12) Abramovic becomes less of a God or idol, and more like a ritual scapegoat or village idiot, where the reaction is to taunt or assault rather than adore. Roland Barthes, in his Critical Essays, may have come directly to the point of her piece stating that;

The avant-garde artist is something like the witch doctor of so called primitive societies: he concentrates irregularity the better to purge it from society as a whole. (13)

Ulay's work, prior to their collaboration, was in an uncanny way parallel to Abramovic's explorations of self-identity. He manipulated his own self image, dressing as a female for two years and mingling with transvestites and transexuals. Another year of his life was spent projecting himself as a mental defective, seeking

the company of people with extreme physical and mental abnormalities. What both artists carried out in these early performances, could be related to what Hans Sedlmayr called 'the rotting away of individual cells' (14) an ordeal similar in many respects to the shaman's initiation rite. This parallel implies that Ulay and Abramovic had reached a 'crisis point' in their art, a state of confusion and disorder, when existing forms of representation could no longer provide a viable means of expression for their ideas. Realising their inherited position of isolation as artists, and that the ideas they were dealing with called for a reciprocal communication between artist and audience, they attempted to deconstruct their established, segregated position in Western society. Their rhetoric, imparted through ancient ritual practices, offered the public a means of integrating or becoming more involved in an art scene, that had previously been viewed as almost sacrosanct.

Recognition of the restrictive limitations and barriers in appropriating indigenous ritual into a modern context, needs also to be outlined. As a European contemporary artist of diverse background and experience, Ulay identified the problem of reflecting a practice derived from a culturally stable and consistent environment. (15) Abramovic also notes that art has a very strong function in primitive societies,

... but it is not art in the European sense. Art is part of the culture and there are very strict rules, it is to explain religion or spiritual ways and everything outside it is not necessary. (16)

It is then important to recognise the situation where Ulay and Abramovic's reflection of indigenous ritual, will be seen through the eyes of Western capitalist society. And as a subject for local reappropriation, will these practices lose their 'essence' and become merely nostalgia? Or will they pass something on; become a vehicle for constructing a better society?

It is a commonly held notion, that when authentic traditions are brought into a context that has been defined by Western imagination they become endangered and ultimately lost. Ulay and Abramovic's art seems to have found a specific path for indigenous ritual,

through modernity, that is inventive and creative rather than destructive. Their performances from 1976 - 1989, not only appear as eloquent examples of ritualistic art, but also show how the dangers and pitfalls of presenting ancient ritual today can take effect. They cannot be completely acquitted from a degree of 'blinkered irrelevance' to modern ideologies, that was common to artists working in a similar vein, but these problems were progressively eradicated in future performances. It is because of their commitment to purism and perfection of idea and practice, that their works appear as an important landmark in performance history.

1. CLIFFORD, James, 1988, p.11.
2. Ibid., p.3.
3. Quoted in BATTOCK, Gregory and NICKAS, Robert, 1984, p.xv.
4. BURNHAM, Jack, 1974, p.152.
5. GOLDBERG, RoseLee, 1979, p.86.
6. McEVILLEY, Thomas, Summer 1983, vol. 21, no. 10. p.63.
7. Quoted in Ibid., p.63.
8. Ibid., p.63.
9. CLIFFORD, op. cit., p.4.
10. Quoted in an interview with ILES, Chrissie, April - May 1988, p.15.
11. Quoted in CLIFFORD, op. cit., p.14.
12. McEVILLEY, Thomas, Sept. 1983, p.52.
13. BARTHES, Roland, 1972, p.68.
14. Quoted in BURNHAM, op. cit., p.139.
15. In an interview with ILES, op. cit., p.15.
16. ABRAMOVIC, Marina, in Ibid., p.15.

CHAPTER TWO
PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE:
TRANSCENDING CENSORSHIP

Starting in 1976, Abramovic and Ulay began a collaboration that would last until 1989. For the first five years together they performed what they now refer to as 'Relation Works.' This title encompasses 25 different performances in total, linked by the theme of relation. Mostly, the pieces are aggressive and severe, involving levels of mental and physical exhaustion. In 1976, they performed 'Relation in Space' in the Venice Biennale. The two naked artists repeatedly pass each other. As they gather speed, they touch each other and at higher speeds they collide. In 1977, they performed 'Light/Dark' in Cologne, a piece in which the two artists knelt face to face, alternatively slapping each other until one stopped. In 1980, 'Rest Energy' was performed in the Rosc exhibition, Dublin. Abramovic held a bow, Ulay the arrow, aimed at her heart; both leaned back in a comfortable tension and stood motionless.

These series of performances seemed like a natural progression from their separate work of exploring self, identity and art. Believing that 'aesthetics without ethics becomes cosmetic,' (1) their personal relationship, although a theme (or focus) of their art, should be read as a fragment, a necessary component, which in context, directs us toward its main intention. Their art then is not an illustration of their lives, but more importantly, their lives are the fixed rooting place of their art. Drawing on their own personal history, I see their goal as connecting our minds to a somewhat different level of reality.

Hans Sedlmayr, in the postscript to his book, Art in Crisis could almost have been speaking of Abramovic and Ulay's 'Relation Works,' when he stated;

The whole diagnosis of our time, can indeed only yield results if it is used to refer back to ourselves, so that we may see what manner of men we are - and become different from these. We must not fail in our trust that the individual by healing himself will contribute to the healing of the whole; for there is such a thing as solidarity in suffering. Moreover, the diseased condition of the whole had its starting point in the rotting away of individual cells. It will only

be overcome by men who have within themselves mastered this radical disturbance and have thus renewed themselves. (2)

I spoke earlier of a different reality to which Abramovic and Ulay sought to direct our minds. What I see this different reality as being, is an effort made by both artists to heal themselves through suffering, and in overcoming mental and physical pain they hope to be renewed. In doing this, they wish to communicate its potential to all. This indeed, seems like an idealistic vision but not one altogether beyond our reach. In different cultures, and in different times, this 'potential' has been achieved. The Buddhists achieve 'it', and so too do the Aboriginal tribes of Australia. The 'it' is simply an ordered sense of wholeness, a dissolving of human barriers or, as Ulay refers to it, 'a unity embracing polarities.' (3)

The shamanistic qualities of their performances at this time, cannot be overlooked. Ulay and Abramovic's ideologies and goals corroborated more or less exactly with his. Dr. Joan Halifax observes in her book Shamanic Voices, A Survey of Visionary Narratives;

The shaman's journey... signifies that a connection still exists between the familiar world of ordinary human existence and a paradoxical realm free of suffering, a mythological world that existed before primordial divisions emerged, destroying a harmonious and divine past. Since the rupture, morality is a condition characterized by separation and loss. This situation is symbolically mended when the shaman undertakes magical flights. (4)

The way in which the shaman attained his powers was by overcoming long periods of psychological and physical sickness. Needing no doctor or medicine man he cures himself, by drawing deeper and deeper towards the origin of his suffering. Having gone through a kind of psychic 'death' and 'rebirth,' the shaman was looked on as a sacred being in his community, responsible for keeping all aspects of existence, cultural, political and spiritual in balance. When any of these various domains were out of balance, the shaman through his use of ritual, restored the lost harmony. Using ritual

as a tool to evoke a state of equilibrium of existence, to suppress fear, reduce anxiety and to establish within the individual a sense of security (5), Ulay and Abramovic try to break through the moral and social taboos that pose barriers to successful integration, hoping to free man from his position of isolation.

Just as the shaman 'does not limit himself to reproducing or miming certain events...' 'but actually relives them in all their vividness, originality and violence,' (6) so too does Abramovic and Ulay. They place their emphasis on enactment rather than imitation - as when they clash forcefully again and again against two moveable pillars, or when they breath into each others mouths until no oxygen is left. All these works deal aggressively with the body, indicating that it is the most stubborn taboo. They seem to imply that it is our bodies that prohibit us from successful integration with each other. By censoring our true emotions in public, be they violent, intimate or otherwise, we deny our true selves.

Paul Schindler agrees with this in The Image of the Body, and offers an insight into the effect of publicly exposing our inner taboos;

Moral laws cannot be applied to human beings but through their bodies. So that moral phenomena are also tightly associated with the images of the body. To say that one never suffers alone is not a simple cliché. The laws of identification of communication between images of the body makes one's suffering and pain everybody's concern. (7)

So when Abramovic and Ulay perform physically or mentally painful acts then a type of vicarious suffering is experienced by their audience. Not a physical suffering but a mental one where all emotions are dammed up, unable to act. Their intention seems to provoke just such a crisis. Their underlying theme of aggressively breaking through appearances, of destroying superficiality, supposedly arouses in the spectator essential and animalistic impulses - impulses that are suppressed in our society. They wish to make us see our authentic selves and rediscover our true relationship with the world.

Abramovic and Ulay's belief in the extreme nature of these performances to achieve a profound catharsis as these impulses are vented, leaves them on far less certain ground than that of the shaman. Because the shaman's authority was established within his community, his rituals, even painful ones, were accepted much more readily than we can today. Moreover, his audience was not defined as audience. Members of his community participated actively in his rituals. The shocking nature of Abramovic and Ulay's 'Relation Works,' could not duplicate such a response. Because art is viewed today, as inviolable the audience's capacity to sustain the aesthetic frame becomes overwhelmed. Our society is not the same as the shamans, this has to be understood. As Victor Burgin rightly states;

No art activity can be understood apart from the codes and practices of the society which contains it; art in use is bracketed ineluctably within ideology. (8)

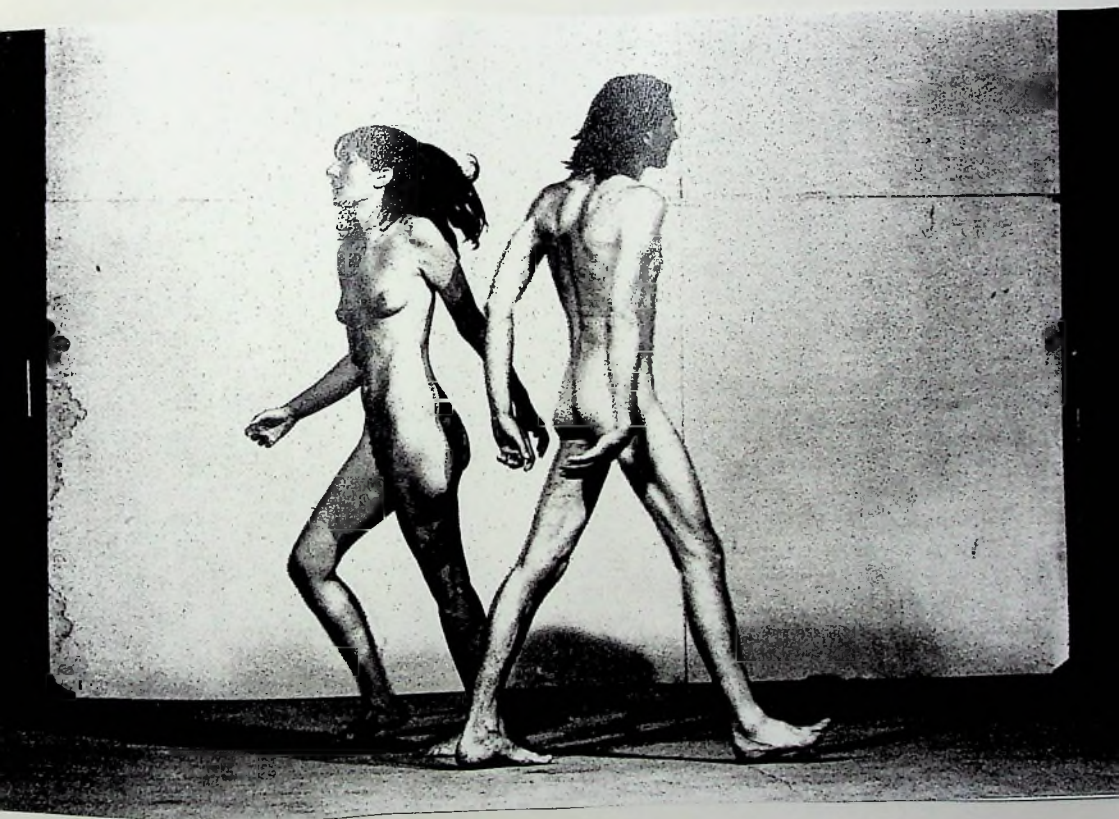
Ulay and Abramovic's use of bodily aggression, reveals a basic misunderstanding of the cathartic response. This may have been the reason their audience behaved aggressively in Kassel in June 1977, during their performance of 'Expansion in Space,' where the artists run in opposite directions, repeatedly clashing against two walls. The critic, Mike Parr, concluded that the audience,

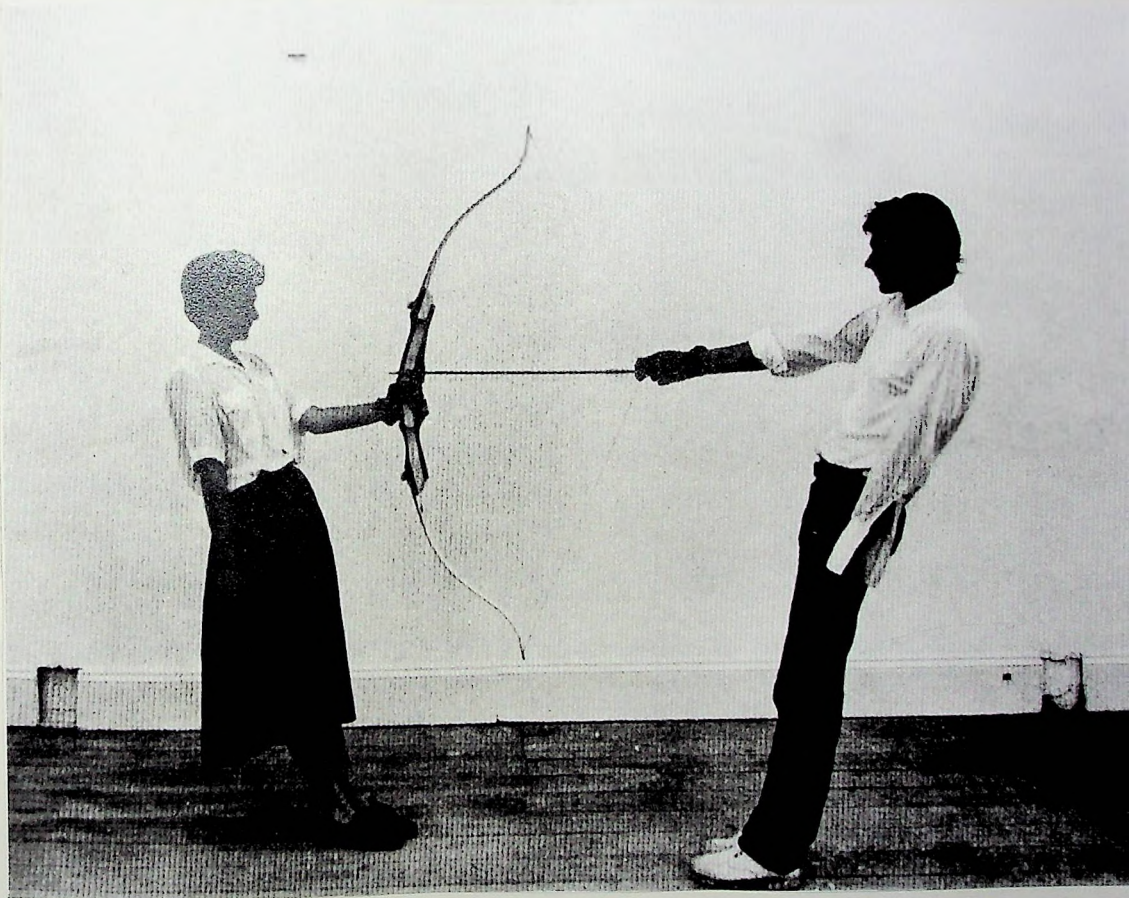
...felt denuded (words and emotions are turned into bare elements), powerless to intervene - if this had been a "real-life drama" the audience would have stopped it, or the police would have humanized the situation by beating someone up... (9)

I disagree with the notion that the body is our most stubborn taboo and view bodily censorship as a mere physical manifestation of mentally inbred taboos. It then follows that we must first deconstruct these mental barriers, so as to find an answer to the fragmentation within our society. Abramovic and Ulay may also have come around to this point of view, as their next body of work, 'Nightsea Crossing,' though its central aim remained consistent with their 'Relation Works,' completely eliminated any kind of physical destruction.

In summing up this body of work, it would appear that through their use of ritual, Ulay and Abramovic sought to fell the barriers evident in our society but in essence served mainly to strengthen them. The provocation of a crisis through physical and violent action is understood in native societies but proves to be misunderstood in ours. Francois Pluchart in the conclusion to his essay, Risk as a Practice of Thought, asks if there is an answer 'to so much suffering, violence and risk' in performance art? (10) In his commentary on Aristotle's Poetics, S.H. Butcher provides the most substantial solution in pointing toward the theatre;

Tragic fear, though it may send an inward shudder through the blood, does not paralyse the mind or stun the sense as does the direct vision of some impending calamity. And the reason is that this fear unlike the fear of common reality is based on the imaginative unity with another's life. The spectator is lifted out of himself. He becomes one with the tragic sufferer, and through him with humanity at large. (11)





1. Quoted in an interview with ILES, Chrissie, April - May 1988, p.18.
2. Quoted in BURNHAM, Jack, 1974, p.152.
3. Quoted in KAYE, Nick, Winter 89/90, p.43.
4. HALIFAX, Dr. Joan, 1979, p.20.
5. BURNHAM, Jack, 1974, p.159.
6. LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude, 1963, pp.180-181.
7. Quoted in BATTOCK, Gregory and NICKAS, Robert, 1984, pp.131-132.
8. Quoted in PARR, Mike, 1979, pp.177-178.
9. Ibid., p.182.
10. PLUCHART, Francois in BATTOCK and NICKAS, op. cit., p.132.
11. Quoted in KAYE, Nick, Dec. 1988 - Feb. 1989, pp.23-24.

CHAPTER THREE
RITUAL SILENCE AND COLLECTIVE PASSIVITY:
ACKNOWLEDGING THE POSITION OF THE AUDIENCE.

Though assertion violence in our society is destructive and frightening, it nevertheless conveys a wish by the individual to be significant in and for his social world. As opposed to this, Ulay and Abramovic's ritualized violence, reflects the culmination of the loss of social connectedness. Their 'Relation Works' were a refined display of self-consciously undertaken and staged aggression, reminiscent of the 'ultraviolence' portrayed in Anthony Burgess's novel, A Clockwork Orange. Because of the art audiences' long established non-active role, it placed them in a position of voyeurism and alienation. Ulay and Abramovic's next body of work, while not violating their audience's role of passivity, offered a path for shared action, responsivity and reciprocity.

The transformation of Ulay and Abramovic's work occurred after six months of privation in the Australian outback. Consciously, they followed in the path of the shaman, investing a belief in 'all true wisdom,' being learned, 'far from the dwellings of men, out in the great solitudes.' (1) Abramovic emphasised that;

... there physically we could not move. The heat was enormous, like fifty-five degrees celsius, so it was such circumstances that actually only our minds start functioning (sic). And then we completely open (ed up) another world for us... its almost physical, the mind... and many performances had been taken to the point where they could go no further with the body and now we had this whole other part to do with the mind. (2)

The result of their desert experience was manifested in 'Nightsea Crossing,' a simply executed but intensely focused 'tableau vivant,' which was performed in various locations around the world. Surrounded by objects of both tribal and modern relevance, Abramovic and Ulay sit facing each other across a table. Each part of the piece lasts seven hours, and the piece as a whole is made up of 90 such performances. The critic Richard Flood described the performance of 'Nightsea Crossing' at 'Documenta 7,' Kassel, in June, August and September of 1982:

At documenta... they occupied the cupola of the Orangerie, a lovely high-ceilinged octagon punctuated by French windows with views of the manicured lawn and blue skies. Centered in the room they sat at each end of a long polished table at some remove from the spectators, who watched from behind a delicate rope cordon. On the spectators' side of the cordon was a water cooler in which floated a sediment of gold leaf. A note invited us to drink because of the gold "if taken purifies the body." Just beyond the corner on the left, stood a bound sheaf of gold rods. In the distance, at the table, Marina Abramovic and Ulay sat impassive and transfixed, facing each other for a day (for a succession of days.) (3)

This piece provides an excellent example of ritualistic performance which the spectator can meet directly. Their use of silence, can I think be paralleled to Kurt Schwitters's recognition of the futility of language to communicate essential life. (4) By suppressing language, Abramovic and Ulay free their spectators' imaginative powers from the limitations imposed by word meanings. The audience may then explore unrestricted, a whole new vocabulary of emotional, inarticulate substance to which words later approximate. According to Abramovic it is the fact that 'Nightsea Crossing,' though motionless and silent, is nevertheless an act, that compels the viewer to attend the piece throughout its duration. It is on this specific ground that the viewer can find an engagement which meets that of the performers and so a contact with the core of the piece. According to Abramovic;

... when you come to see (a) performance you always expect (that) something will happen... So people always wait for something to happen, but when they find, they come to the point, they don't wait and they realize that that's the reality of the thing, then they actually start having contact with the piece itself. (5)

As the audience unself-consciously observe the performers' self-conscious observation of each other, they come to the realization that the performers are simply mirroring their own act. They then become self-conscious, turning their observation and attention to themselves and the fact of their presence. Here according to Ulay:

... You have direct contact with us, because (you are)... taking the reality as it is without any different projections. (6)

In certain performances of 'Nightsea Crossing,' Remy Zaug was seated between the artists and the audience and acts as an observer. He too watches the artists, as the audience do. In his account, he described this gradual reflection upon his act of looking and how his observation gradually transformed itself into a meditation on the awareness of his own being. He also spoke of consciousness surrounding him, exposing him. (7)

Zaug's experience, must in fact be similar to that of the audience, but for one important fact. The audience act as one body or group, they are infinitely aware of each other. Their consciousness in fact may even be heightened through the awareness of their participation within a mutual action. Such a sensation seems to be confirmed in Richard Flood's perception of the 'collective respiration' of the audience at Kassel. (8)

This idea of collectiveness is obviously an important aspect of the performance. The artists connect their prolonged stillness to the use of masks in indigenous cultures. Abramovic notes that in their ritual practices, '... they use masks, so they leave the person behind and become the element itself. (9) This depersonalization is echoed in the artists motionless anonymity, giving the impression that they are elements or symbols rather than individuals. The aim of this, Abramovic argues is, '... not to be the "I" or his "I," but just to actually be a part of the natural principle.' (10)

Thus, they try to stimulate a sense of wholeness through the shared action of themselves and their audience. Just as the shaman, as Halifax notes, seeks first of all,

to bring back to an original state that which was in primordial times whole and is now broken and dismembered. (11)

It is this wholeness, a 'unity embracing polarities,' (12) that Abramovic and Ulay suggest modern man has lost but is still evident in some native cultures. Abramovic tells us that,

... the natives are completely connected with the earth's energy and the flow of nature and from that they generate the whole thing and we are disconnected. (13)

'Nightsea Crossing' appears as a clear reaction against the increasing sense of fragmentation that is evident in the Western World today. At the same time it would be naive to simply see it as a critical recognition of society's disconnectedness. Through their ritualistic performance, Ulay and Abramovic acknowledge our condition of separation and loss, but also attempt to create a vehicle through which this sense of loss may be symbolically mended. This piece provokes the audience to challenge and confront their fragmentation and to invest a belief in the primary, collective experiences that may in fact halt the process. Abramovic and Ulay seek to create frameworks and languages through which these experiences of commonality and unity may be found.

But there is an important difference between ritual in 'native' societies and how it works, and ritual in our society. For ritual in the former society was essentially an interface between nature and culture, a tool used by tribal societies to evoke a state of equilibrium of existence. As a veneration to their life support systems, it began as attempts to placate their many Gods and ward off any devils that threatened their survival. But power in the latter society has devolved from Gods to man, and this warrants a completely different analysis of the effects or results of ritual practice. This aspect is researched by Stuart Brisley and Ken McMullen in their documentary film Being and Doing. Here the origins of performance art in ritual are highlighted and compared with recent art history. The parallels appear dangerous. In an interview in Performance Magazine, Brisley, states his position:

to suggest that there was, or there could be or there might be, a desire, whether conscious desire, or unconscious desire, toward reasserting a notion of ritual; and that the former reaches out from a position of isolation and alienation and attempts to create something which is common. But that commonality or submersion of the individual into the mass or the raising of the mass to the level of an art experience within certain social contexts is very rarely achieved, if ever. (14)

This loss of individuality, being submerged into a collective identity to become mere symbol, thus appears as quite a dangerous aspect in Abramovic and Ulay's work. In the same way that a Nazi

manipulating a crowd is dangerous. For indeed Abramovic states that,

during the sitting we completely lose our personalities. I am not presenting Marina, he is not presenting Ulay, we are transformed...

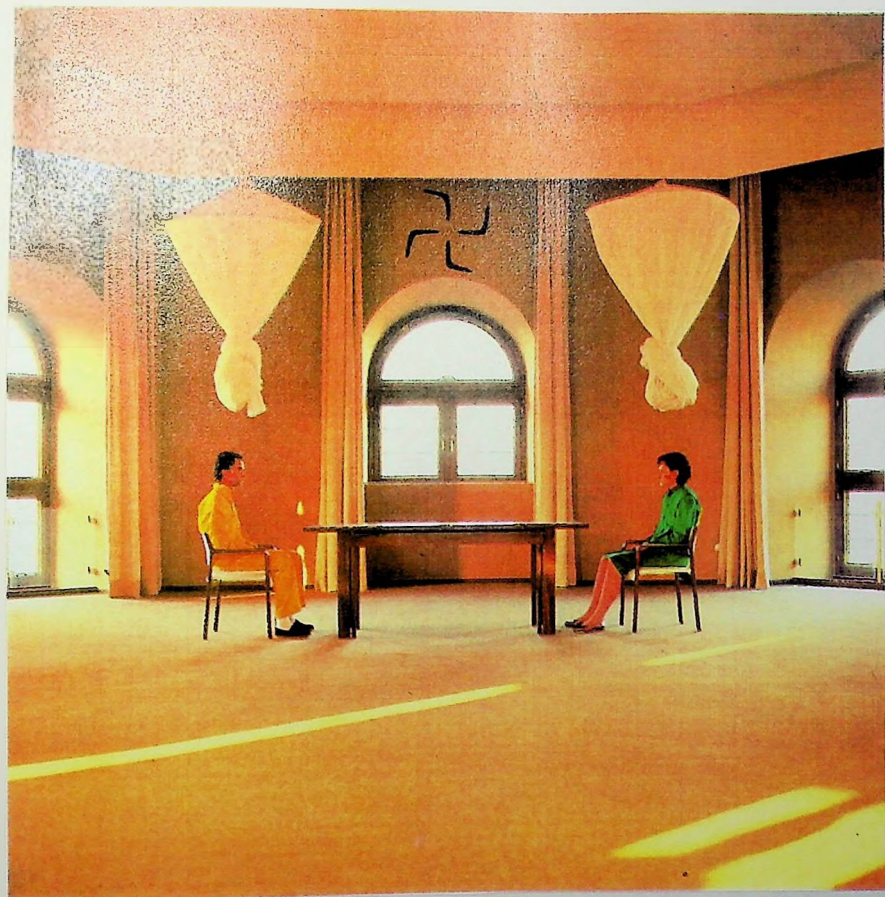
Ulay continues:

into a model. (15)

The danger of this type of presentation arises because of the way our society, from an early age, has pitted one individual against the other, in the struggle to survive. Through our most formative years we are moulded in an essentially Western definition of individualism - instilled with ideas of competition, personal profit and material wealth. As opposed to this, the native tribe member neither sought nor needed any personal profit, for all material wealth was considered collective. He was therefore more integrated within his society. Even when we look at our Christian Law, 'Do unto others as you would they should do unto you,' as opposed to Hope Indian (tribal) Law, 'Cultivate the Hope Law and you and the whole people will have peace, property and happiness,' (16) we can see how the former doctrine places the individual in context with but also against the individual, whereas in the latter the individual is placed in the context of society.

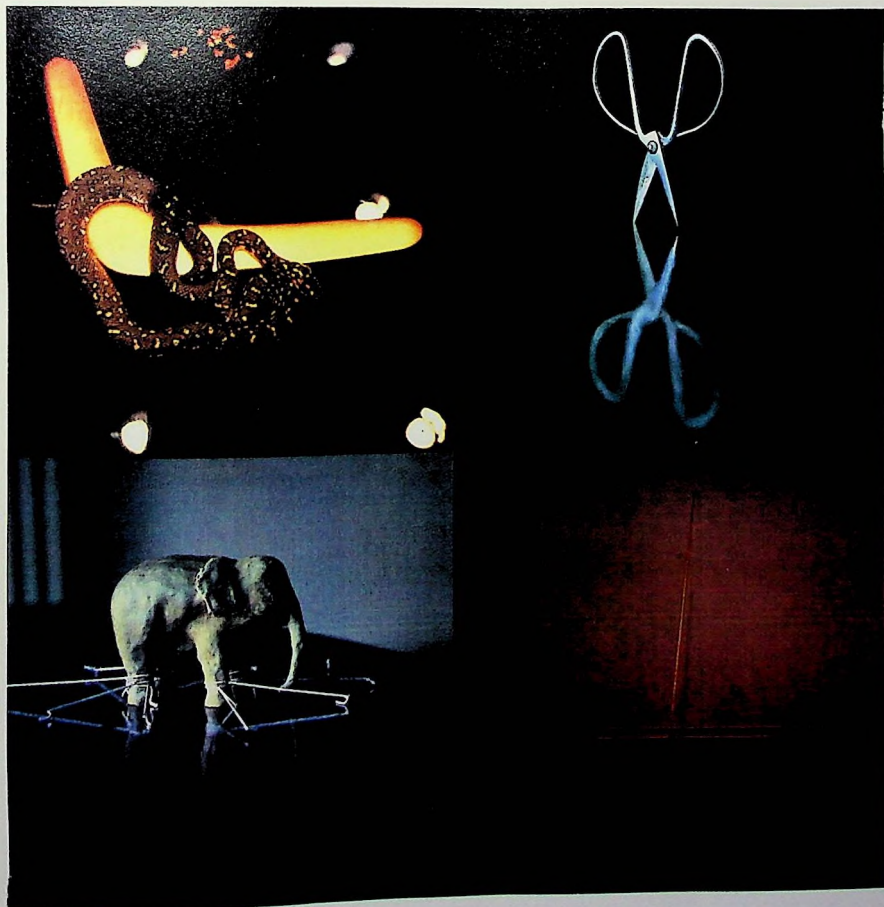
Ritual as a 'homage to our life-support systems,' (17) has then changed from the hands of Gods into the hands of man. And in the hands of man manipulation of the individual who has been subsumed into one collective, bracketed identity can have dangerous consequences. Abramovic and Ulay have obviously recognised this, for a second glance at the various objects with which they surround themselves in Kassel, distinguishes their meanings - an inverted swastika made up of four boomerangs adorns the rear wall and a sheaf of gold rods, the ancient Roman symbol of magisterial power, adopted as an emblem by the Italian Fascist Party, sits to the side. They present their audience with archaic relics of spirit, peace and justice, which in the modern world have become symbols of

materialism and fascism. But they do not seek to deconstruct our most recent histories in favour of others. Moreover, in acknowledging and incorporating these symbols within their work they seek to stimulate a recollection of our pasts, and emphasise the importance of combining our own particular histories as Europeans, within our present identities.





Forum, Middelburg, Nightsea Crossing 'The Observer' with Rémy Zaugg, October 1984, 1 day



Objects used in Nightsea Crossing
performances

1. Told by the Caribou shaman IGJUGARJUK to the artic explorer Knud Rasmussen and quoted in HALIFAX, Dr. Joan, 1979, p.6.
2. Quoted in KAYE, Nick, Winter 89/90, p.38.
3. FLOOD, Richard, Oct. 1982, p.85.
4. Quoted in STILES, Kristine, 1985, p.34.
5. Quoted in KAYE, op. cit., p.39.
6. ULAY, quoted in Ibid., p.39.
7. ZAUG, Remy, in ABRAMOVIC, Marina and ULAY, 1985, p.50.
8. FLOOD, op. cit., p.85.
9. Quoted in KAYE, op. cit., p.42.
10. Quoted in Ibid., p.42.
11. HALIFAX, op. cit., p.22.
12. Quoted in KAYE, op. cit., p.43.
13. Quoted in Ibid., pp.43-44.
14. BRISLEY, Stuart in an interview with COURTNEY, Cathy.
15. ABRAMOVIC, Marina and ULAY in an interview with MARTINS, Kirsten, p.19.
16. CAREY, James W., 1989, p.64.
17. BURNHAM, Jack, 1974, p.164.

CHAPTER FOUR
PERSONAL HISTORIES: DECONSTRUCTING THE OLD,
ADOPTING THE NEW.

Whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter... the imagination builds "walls" of impalpable shadows, comforts itself with the illusion of protection or, just the contrary, trembles behind thick walls, mistrusts the staunchest ramparts.

- Gaston Bachelard (1)

Love one another, but not make a bond of love: let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls... And stand together but not too near together: for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grove not in each others shadow.

- Kahlil Gibran (2)

When Ulay and Abramovic performed 'The Brink' in 1979, it was simultaneously a piece symbolizing the protectiveness of their relationship and a prophetic vision of their future separation. As Ulay walked back and forth on the top of a wall, his cast shadow provided the direction for Abramovic's course. As the sun sank and his shadow receded, both went out of synchronization, their respective walking paces varying also. This piece implied that each, as it were, lived in the others shadow, taking refuge in the others containment. Indeed, this was the case.

Ulay was born in capitalist Germany during the war, whereas Abramovic's native Yugoslavia was under a communist regime. Each being very much disillusioned with their pasts and the societies they had grown up in, responded with passionate recognition to the desperation in each other. Their collaboration provided an opportunity to liberate them both from their roots, living in a van around Europe for the duration of their 'Relation Works,' existing as restless nomads in the Australian outback. Their rejection of any settled territory further freed them from their pasts. But now both, following the dissolution of their relationship in 1988/89, would have to find their own particular pace and their identities as separate individuals would have to be rediscovered.

That Ulay and Abramovic should choose to walk the Great Wall, as their last piece of collaborative work is ironic, as China had,

just like them, a long history of isolationism and fear of the outside world. But now after thousands of years of insulation, China was on the brink of it's historic 'Opening to the West.' For two foreigners to walk the Wall from end to end, to appropriate it into the contemporary discourse of Western art, would make of it a gesture of international opening and breaking of boundaries.

The 'Great Wall Walk' began on the 30th of March 1988. Abramovic started in the east, where the Wall comes down to the Gulf of Bohai on the Yellow Sea. In China this is considered the male side of the Wall. Ulay began in the west, in the Gobi desert - the Wall's female side. They each walked 2000km. until they met in the middle. What was originally conceived as the coming together of two lovers was now the symbolic end to their 12 year symbiosis. Abramovic had said only half jokingly that they should 'start in the middle and walk away from one another.' (3)

Ulay's Western Wall had a compound attraction for him. In it's ambiguous state of decay, it seemed to be both nature and culture. Walking on this cultural object was like conversing with the earth. His daily ritual attained wholeness, 'a oneness for that time. Completion throughout without destruction, confusion or doubt.' (4) Walking, in its true sense, was a means of bonding with the landscape, exalting the earth that gives life. He stated;

And yet even when I have found that pace which brings me into a state of contentment, nothing but nothing emerges from that state of walking. No accumulations no emotional/rational sculpturing art from within, nothing simply for the state of art. (5)

All Abramovic and Ulay's work together since 1976 had searched through ritual for an end to the fragmentation in the West. China was, for Ulay, this idealized communal vision. The doctrines of the Cultural Revolution insisted that the communal reality was to supercede the individual reality in all things. As Mao Tse Tung wrote:

At no time and in no circumstance should a communist place his personal interests first; he should subordinate them to the interests of the nation and the masses. (6)

Ulay responded to the sense of communality in the Chinese peasant lifestyle with a degree of romanticism that blinkered out the often bleak and depressive reality of a socialist controlled society. He wanted to show his solidarity with China, but ironically, the misunderstandings between these representatives of different cultures, was staggeringly out of control. Without meaning to, the slightest thing Ulay said or did could interfere with social structures he didn't even know of. Even to go beyond such deep problems of communication, the trouble with a western bourgeois trying to integrate with the communal, is that this is, for the western bourgeois, just another act of individualism. Ulay's uniqueness, his striving self-ambition, his stoic determination to proceed to the ascribed destination, was the antithesis of the communal. Ironically, because Ulay was driven on by his greed for authenticity in art, the authenticity he hungered for in life, was pushed further and further away. He noted:

They own their land now. Or rather the land owns them and they have surrendered to it, to become the land... On my way walking, passing through their land, I have learned to admire these people, Maybe because they are what I never can be, not anymore. (7)

Abramovic's Eastern Wall was in an area more deeply touched by socialism than Ulay's West. It was more rigidly controlled because it was much closer to governing Beijing. As opposed to Ulay's Western vision of villages that radiated an atmosphere of wholeness or totality, Abramovic's Eastern villages were dominated by architectural repetition. Buildings were grey and spiritless without a trace of irregularity or variation. Nothing was essentially Chinese, except the unusual rejection of all indigenous ancient tradition. The striking similarity to Abramovic's native Yugoslavia was not something she had expected, and in fact, repelled her. Now again all she saw was dismal bleakness and she spoke of the 'ugliness, the ugliness' of it all. (8) A decade earlier Ulay and Abramovic had performed a piece called 'Communist body, Capitalist body.' Hers was the communist, his the capitalist. The piece had implied that the body remains the same, regardless of ideology. But recently they had begun to interchange these identities. Abramovic had begun to carry the flag of her adopted culture - capitalist Western Europe.

Ulay on the other hand had become a kind of romantic socialist. He now desired to incorporate within himself the communist body, as she desired the capitalist. Each of them seemed to have been reborn of each other.

Juliet Mitchell writes in Women: The Longest Revolution;

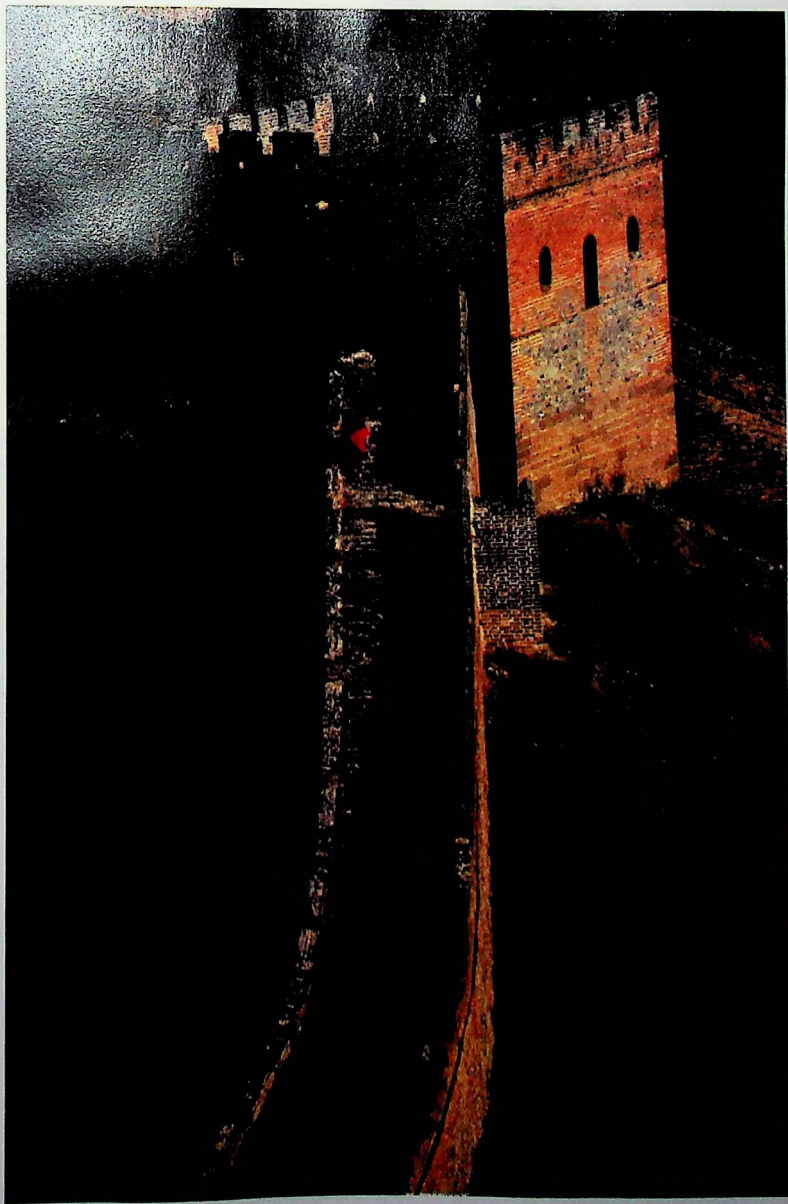
I do not think that we can live as human subjects without in some sense taking on a history; for us it is mainly the history of being men or women under bourgeois capitalism. In deconstructing this history, we can only construct other histories. (9)

In deconstructing their own histories, Ulay and Abramovic, have attempted to construct new identities. They focus the fact that cultural homogenization effects both modern and traditional societies identically. When either culture attempts to incorporate itself in the other, it will not result in a vanishing of distinctions, but moreover will always retain something of its origins. The dream of a communal Western world is then, a deceptive fantasy. The 'allegorical mirror' of Ulay and Abramovic's art, used for reflecting indigenous practices and cultural 'otherness' into modernity, cannot be successful in life, because life has no 'allegorical mirror' to offer. And art, literature and poetry can only provide temporal space for this cultural appropriation process. Thus, for the capitalist, life will always be influenced by capitalism and likewise for the communist, tribal and Buddhist. Even Ulay and Abramovic's dissimulation of their pasts, is an affirmation of the significant influence it has had, on their present.

On June 27th 1988, after walking 2000 miles each, taking 90 days, Abramovic and Ulay met in a mountain pass in Shaanxi Province. What was originally conceived of as an appropriate setting for a wedding, now provided the stage for a separation. Whereas their interest in qualities fading from Western civilization - such as natural attachment to the earth and each other, knowledge of the forces of nature and magic, the experience of cosmic consciousness through meditation, the unifying power of meditation and ritual - had been a reciprocal concern, they now seemed to relate individually to different elements in other cultures. The appropriative aspect

of this is unavoidable, but above all, it is not exploitative. For within life (being different from art), our histories as bourgeois capitalists are inherent within us, and the experience of an exotic 'other' will always be viewed through a 'self-reflexive vision' of modernity.







Meeting on the Great Wall at Er Lang Shan, Shenmu in Shaanxi province,
June 27, 1988.

After walking 90 days each, over a distance of 2000 km.

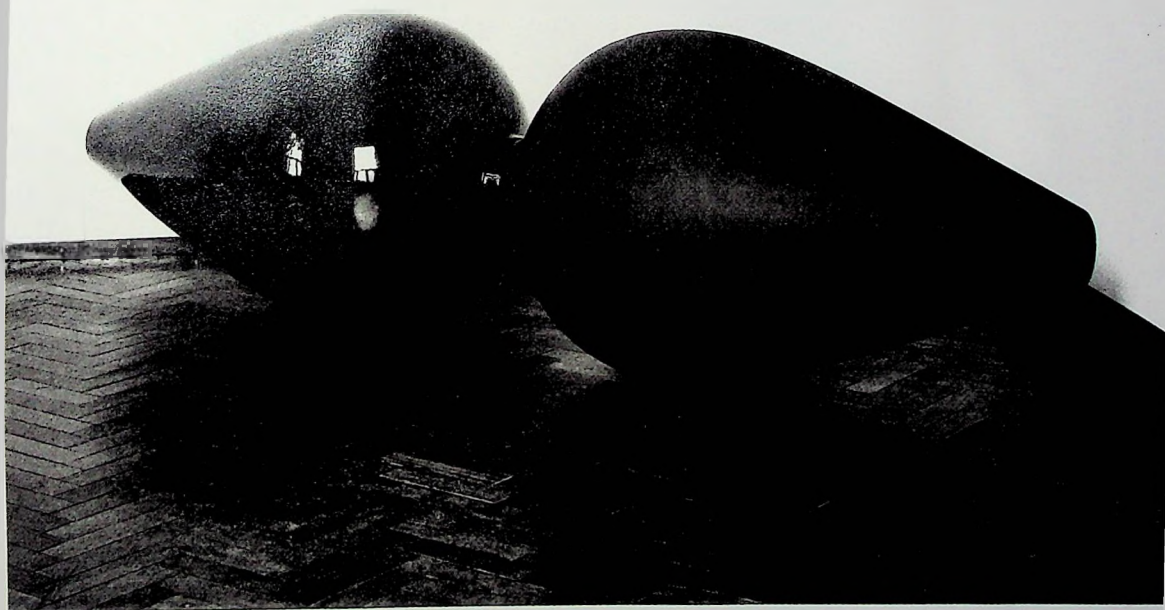
FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER FOUR

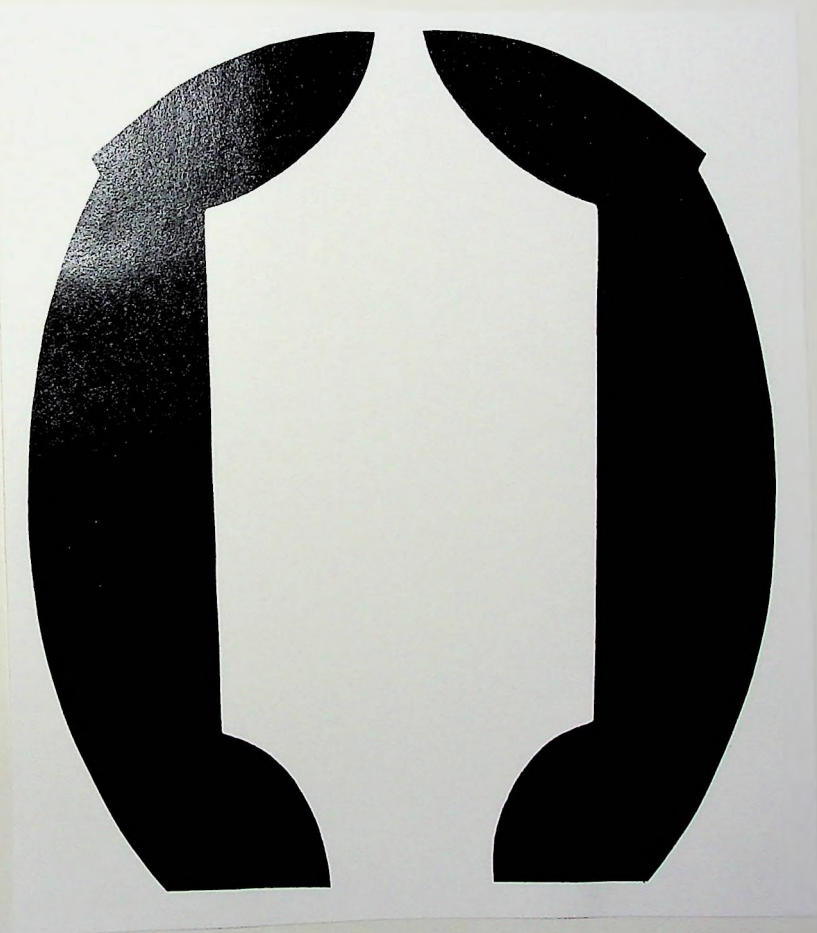
1. BACHELARD, Gaston. 1982, p.34.
2. GIBRAN, Kahlil. 1980, p.16-19.
3. Quoted in the Stedelijk Museum, 1989, p.78.
4. Quoted in Ibid., p.45.
5. Ibid.,
6. TUNG, Mao Tse quoted in Ibid., p.96.
7. Quoted in Ibid., p.59.
8. Quoted in Ibid., p.106.
9. Quoted in CLIFFORD, James. 1988 p.7.

CONCLUSION

On returning to Europe, Ulay and Marina Abramovic held an exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Here, no performance took place and only 'objects' were exhibited. Each piece upheld their original commitment to communality and conjunction. Bridging a gap between our present, fragmented society and the 'wholeness' of our remote pasts, each piece communicated in a Western defined way the pre-eminence of the substance of unity. Without advocating the abandonment of our established identities, they conveyed to the spectator the relevance of other histories to our own.

Western art is moulded, in a way in which it will never allow the structure of Western society or the ideologies it supports, to be uprooted - it's basic truth is, that it's temporality can only be an accompaniment to, and not a force in life. Art then, in the Western world exists, just as ritual does in traditional societies, to uphold and preserve the basic foundations of the culture into time continuum. Ulay and Abramovic's art is then justified in being a mirror for reflecting indigenous ritual, for it constantly places the audience in the context of their own society.





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