

‘Individual Mythologist’:

Vulnerability, Generosity, and Relationality in Ulay’s Self-Imaging

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The career project of Ulay, as I understand his work, has been to explore and expand in the most generous way upon his sense of vulnerability as, in his words, “a loner by nature... an orphan since I was fifteen years old,” born in 1943 into the complexities of a Germany in the midst of World War II.¹ “I am,” he has written to me, an “individual mythologist (all included) the more so [in that] I’m self taught, an autodidact.”² His extensive performance and photographic project as an “individual mythologist” has been aimed at enacting himself for us as a fluid and mutable subject, while creating community by activating relational bonds and opening us to our own fluidity. We are all mythologists of the self.

Wandering throughout the world, Ulay has continually given himself to a lifelong creative project of examining the limits of the individual self, as well as the permeability of the gendered/sexed body to otherness, pointing to the failure of gendered identity to attain its ideal state. Continuing his e-mail to me, he asserts: “I perhaps was never a ‘good man - man’ neither a ‘good woman - woman’ neither did I manage to ephemerate....” His coined word, “ephemerate,” typifies his generous, brave, and savage approach to elements of the self, which (whether his or ours) is never anything but mutable and open-ended. His work is an offering; thus for him, his project is about “an exchange of gifts,” and these gifts include aspects of himself as conveyed through his performances and self-images.³

Ulay achieves this exchange through the medium of his body and the medium of photography. Projects are either singular live events or performances for the camera, often a Polaroid camera, which takes unique images that themselves become objects of exchange (“bodies” to be fondled). Often produced in the early days in collaboration with a single other artist, Ulay’s performative and photographic work engages later viewers as collaborators as well, by opening his body/image to the relationality of interpretation and identification. Ulay allows us later viewers—or, more accurately, given the physicality of his work, *experiencers*—to “complete” the meaning of his offering, opening him

through the embodied image to the vicissitudes of our desires. Just as he is “ephemeral,” so are we (we are never complete within ourselves).

A Queer Feminist Gesture

The gift Ulay gives is to encourage us to embrace, or at least acknowledge, rather than disavow this condition of openness and incompleteness. This is a profoundly queer and feminist gesture, which surprises us in that it comes from a man who became most famous for his intense collaboration and publicly conflicted love affair with a female artist. In this way, Ulay proves to us that an astute and critical politics of sexual and gender difference—one that is generous and open rather than critical and admonishing—can attach to the body of a putatively heterosexual male artist.⁴ This is an extremely important message in our age of reiterated essentialisms, where even radical trans political discourse sometimes reverts to essentializing claims to substantiate its assertions of “authentic” psychological gender, to which an “authentic” body must be matched. Thus, while Caitlyn Jenner, formerly the United States Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner, and probably the most famous trans woman in the world, makes repeated statements about her lifelong need to become the “authentic” woman she feels “inside,” Ulay’s practice (and his lived experience as he conveys it to us) aims, in contrast, to detach gender and sexuality from internal or external cues or “origins.”⁵ His is clearly an anatomically “male” body, but his mode of creativity is open, generous, vulnerable.

As much is made clear in recent performative works of Ulay’s, such as the 2015 *Anagrammatic Bodies* in Berlin, a special collaboration with *Zoo Magazine* (comprising performative photographs for an article in the magazine on his “Exchange of Identity” series and overall strategy of cross-gendered self-imaging, and a video, “behind-the-scenes”), and *Pink Pain*, an extraordinarily moving performance devised specifically for “Live Artists Live,” an event I organized and that took place on January 29, 2016, at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.⁶

In *Anagrammatic Bodies*, as the behind-the-scenes video shows, Ulay photographed himself and a series of female models—for example, an extremely young pouting, waifish, childlike woman in jeans and a work shirt, holding a baby doll, is counterposed to Ulay dressed in the same outfit and holding presumably the same doll; fragmented shots of women’s body parts are counterposed to fragmented pictures of Ulay’s aging flesh; images of a woman in an extremely revealing body suit and fishnet stockings are intercut with those of Ulay’s body in the same outfit; a photograph of Ulay in a drapery white dress, face unadorned and beard evident, is laid next to one of a beautiful middle-aged woman in the same dress, her face caught in a cage-like jeweled mask.⁷ The magazine layout, accordingly, includes images of women of all ages (the same women evident in the video) wearing high fashion. They range from the nubile young woman seemingly in her teens (though probably older) to a gorgeous, tattooed woman with gray hair, probably in her seventies. The images are collaged from

multiple photographs, the fragments made “whole” again in the fashion layout.

Ulay is unafraid to call out the fetishizing capacity of fashion photography, but not through “critique”; rather, through the collage strategy, he foregrounds the way in which holistic images of a woman’s body, as well as cropped, fragmentary, and isolated images of body parts, read differently when a range of bodies are supplied for the camera’s gaze.

Recombining the fragments in the final layouts, he nonetheless leaves all of the hinges and overlaps visible—we become aware of the fact that any image of the body is always constructed and partial; no image can ever fully reveal a living body.

It is striking, too, watching the video, how radically differently the pictures of prototypical white, young, thin female bodies read from those of older women’s bodies, not to mention those of Ulay’s rangy, seventy-something frame. He comes across as completely unafraid of seeing what happens when he subjects his body to the clothing and photographic techniques of (women’s) fashion photography, an industry relentlessly obsessed with youth and certain unhealthy bodily ideals. Through his sly gaze (he confronts us not aggressively, but as if to say, “How do I look?”) and his almost louche, relaxed and yet regal demeanor, he exposes the particularity of the camera’s capacity to fetishize. He seems to be challenging in a friendly, almost conspiratorial, way the feminist dictum that this fetishizing process only works when applied to female bodies that to some degree follow the reigning cultural ideal, most often in the patriarchal cultures of the West: thin, white, young, and female. By offering his aging body (apparently Caucasian, but less buff and youthful than the usual male model in fashion images or gay pornography) to a camera gaze fully controlled by him, Ulay turns a fashion shoot into a creative extension of his career, producing cross-gendered performances and performative images of himself.

This point is reinforced by the inclusion in the magazine spread of images from *S/He*, his series from the early 1970s showing himself as half-male, half-female. In an echo of such earlier projects, Ulay now gives himself to us, with a sense of humor that seems to question our relationship to bodies of any gender and any age.

Ulay carries this sharp yet relaxed attitude forward in *Pink Pain*—which was at once harrowing, sweet, and profoundly moving—another act of extreme generosity from a man who, at seventy-two, is unafraid to offer himself to audiences around the world in highly vulnerable ways. Staged at the very end of the panel discussions of the “Live Artists Live” symposium, *Pink Pain* was a moving performance of the all too human suffering over erotically and psychologically binding love relationships, in his case with women.

Unaffected and warm, Ulay had been in the audience of the event all day, engaging with other participants of the day’s dialogues about performance art in history (including Harry Gamboa Jr., from Asco, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Cassils, and Ron Athey). He already had our affections and attention.

The piece begins when I announce Ulay only by name. He walks casually to a small riser set up as a stage; wearing khakis, a white shirt, and sneakers, he sits on a plain chair, facing a small pedestal holding a fat cactus with huge spines. Sitting calmly and silently, he commences to paint the spines of the cactus a cloying Barbie doll shade of pink. As he comes to the end of the painting process, he signals for a soundtrack to be started: the husky voice of Anne Sexton reads her poem, “Her Kind”, from 1959, over and over again. Ulay begins laboriously to clip the spines from the cactus. The scene is mesmerizing: Sexton intones—“A woman like that is not a woman quite./ I have been her kind.... A woman like that is misunderstood./ I have been her kind.... A woman like that is not ashamed to die./ I have been her kind”—while Ulay clips, over and over again.⁸ The paint-covered spines pop in all directions, lancing the air (and spectators on the front row) with their wet pink spikey-ness. I note some adhering to my clothing.

After clipping for around ten minutes to multiple readings of the poem, Ulay drops the clippers and embraces the cactus. If Sexton knows the impossibility of retaining a consistent and coherent womanliness, describing herself as variously “a possessed witch,” “whining, rearranging the disaligned,” and as “waving my nude arms at villages going by... [a] survivor,” whose “ribs crack where your wheels wind,” Ulay seemingly seeks to access this profoundly moving state of yearning and complexity in relation to being female, articulated by the writer of feminist poems—subjecting his fragile body to the remaining spines and the stumps of those that are clipped.⁹

By using this Sexton reading of her poem, Ulay allows himself to be “spoken” by her—aligning his actions with Sexton’s dry, yet resonant parsing of the experience of being a woman. But at the same time, through the title and his calm, yet sad affect, he emotionally conveys sorrow for his brutally wounded psyche in relation to his love for a nameless woman—perhaps every woman he has ever loved (as we will see below, the *Retouching Bruises* series went down this path to lament a breakup in the mid-1970s). And yet, talking afterwards, some in the audience asked ourselves: Is it a coincidence that the color of the pink paint exactly mimics that of the pink rectangles that he and the editorial team for the book, *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* (2015; the first full book-length project on the artist’s entire oeuvre to date), decided to sprinkle throughout to replace the iconic and hugely influential images of his performances with Marina Abramović? This is described in the book as an action the editors took due to her refusal to allow permission to reproduce the photographs.¹⁰

It appears that Abramović and her New York dealer, Sean Kelly, have effectively worked to rebrand the jointly produced 1976–77 *Relation Works* of Ulay/Abramović—epically important pieces in the history of performance art—as “Abramović performances.” They are, for example, cited on the Museum of Modern Art website as “Marina Abramović” works (with Ulay listed in small print, presumably only as a minor contributor).¹¹ Ulay has publicly admitted that he was “very hurt” by Abramović’s subsumption of their joint work into her oeuvre alone—as well he might be.¹²



Fig. 1 Ulay, *Retouching Bruises*, 1997. Courtesy of the artist.

This reading of the pink paint as an allusion to Ulay's now shattered relationality with a woman who has willed herself into global performance celebrity, wooing the art marketplace such that she is now arguably the most famous performance artist in the world, voraciously consuming and erasing other careers in the process, was reinforced by a third Ulay performance, *A Skeleton in the Closet*.¹³ I witnessed *Skeleton* in January 2015 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Here, dressed in pink cap and skirt with chest bare, as vulnerable as a half-swaddled baby, Ulay marked a series of numbers on the walls of the museum—numbers that referred to the pages of the missing images and substituted pink rectangles in the *Whispers* book. The performance was moving and elegiac, a paean to lost trust and a bond that could never be renewed.

Becoming a Woman, or Failed Femininity¹⁴

At the same time, as noted, by using Sexton's voice and poetry, Ulay makes it clear in *Pink Pain* (and reasserted this in the public dialogue he did with me for "Live Artists Live," which took place just after the performance) that he is also enacting his desire *to become a woman*—the same desire evident in his *S/He* series of the early 1970s, where he documented his performative adoption of feminine hairdo and makeup on one side of his face, in the myriad other gender-bending performative images from that period, and in the willingness to cross-gender himself in the very recent *Anagrammatic Bodies*. With one exception, I have never before witnessed a performance by a man identifying as heterosexual (i.e., in the sense of being an anatomically male person who makes it clear he is attracted primarily to anatomically female persons) where the man makes himself excruciatingly vulnerable.¹⁵ As Ulay insisted several times in our dialogue, he seeks to embrace his feminine "anima."

In citing Carl Jung's concept of anima, Ulay starts from a position of admitting his privilege as a man who desires to be a woman—he is not unself-reflexively appropriating the state of womanhood as something he can fully "be." Jung's anima refers to the femininity always lurking in the unconscious of male subjects, expressing the man's participation in a collective unconscious. The anima, in Jung's extremely essentializing 1950s model (where women are closer to "soul" or "eros" and men closer to "logic" and rationality), is a disavowed part of the man, expressed largely in conventional societies by his projection of these symbolic qualities onto women. Considering that I probably qualify as an example of the woman whose "animus," or male qualities, are too strong according to Jung's model, thus making me stubborn and aggressive and a "regrettable accident," it is not surprising that Ulay's desire to perform his anima openly resonates strongly for me.¹⁶

Leaving Jung's dated and binarizing views on gender roles aside, what is interesting about Ulay's stated desires is that he *reverses* the projection, taking femininity onto himself rather than, as Jung theorized normative men would do, projecting beliefs and anxieties about femininity outward onto female bodies. He looks, thinks, relates to, and enacts

elements of femininity. He is willing to explore the always failed attempt of women to achieve proper femininity, even as he performatively enacts his failure to perform or inhabit femininity himself, as well as his failure as a man to adopt the “sword of power” Jung attaches to the masculine animus.¹⁷

At any rate, for Jung, as apparently for Ulay, the anima allows the male-identified subject access to unbridled creativity. Rather than ratifying any essentializing sense that femininity or women are inherently creative, I would argue, rather, that Ulay’s embrace of anima works this way because to loosen the binds of normative masculinity (or femininity) in a heteronormative, patriarchal culture, in fact, is to free oneself to live gender creatively in relation to one’s art. Thus, while male-identified men in this kind of culture must ceaselessly orient themselves towards the shoring up of the boundaries of conventional masculinity in order to maintain their privilege, Ulay to the contrary fully activates an element of himself he identifies with a femininity he yearns to be and to have and to know—he opens himself willingly to the failure of masculinity to cohere to phallic authority, while also indirectly asserting the failure of femininity to adhere to its normative contours, as presumably attached to a “female” body.

Jung’s model still assumes a strong underlying binary, albeit one compromised by the fluidity afforded by the possibility for men of activating the anima (and for women of tapping into our “masculine” animus). It is this fluidity that Ulay takes on, throwing in question gendered embodiment through his performative self-imaging. In *Pink Pain*, Ulay takes the risk of continually troubling the binarization of gender. Through the evocation of Sexton’s lush and mannish voice, and her words describing the range of possibilities of being a wildly unconventional woman, Ulay essentially enacts the impossibility of ever *becoming female*, for a man or a woman. *Pink Pain* thus sustains the work he began with his early self-images and lived gender duality and ambiguity; in fact, he lived as female or as half-man and half-woman for several years in Amsterdam while making *S/He* and other gender-bending images.

This openness to gender fluidity has long been a driver of Ulay’s creative process. As he has recently noted of his explicit cross-dressing works from the early to mid-1970s:

*I lived as a transvestite for a little less than two years, around 1973–75. There were two kinds of people I spent time with in that period, transvestites and transsexuals. [...] They were mostly hookers.... Being in this group of people, I explored my female anima. It brought me to the point that I dressed as a woman in public, and in the bar, and adopted a female persona as my natural appearance... I made myself into a beautiful girl.... [I took a lot of photos of myself.] It was fascinating. Thrilling, actually.*¹⁸

Ulay’s lifelong project, culminating in these three recent performative works described here (*The Skeleton in the Closet*, *Anagrammatic Bodies*, and *Pink Pain*), has been to explore the capacity of the live and the photographic, to articulate a range of gender positionalities and sexual

identifications as “mythologies”—relational, contingent on self-other bonds, projections, identifications, and repulsions, and as such, always mutable in relation to others. If by “queer” we mean, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically,” then Ulay’s practice is queering the very male body he openly admits to possessing.¹⁹ In this way, while still acknowledging binary models, Ulay has long flirted with what I would now identify as a queer feminist realm of self-articulation, an effect furthered by the insistent relationality of his self-articulations.²⁰

Not only are Ulay’s performative actions arguably queer and feminist. In fact, Ulay’s very mode of living and enacting himself in relation to the worlds of art, performance, and photography is against the grain of normative art world behavior. As a nomad who makes few claims on the art world (he rarely puts himself forward, has no Facebook page, and only recently gained a consistent agent and a dealer to promote his work²¹), Ulay lives and creates in a queer feminist way. Rather than asserting his identity as coherent origin of his work and of a public identity as an artist—promoting his works as objects to be sold—Ulay performs, photographs, and keeps a continually morphing and growing archive. Ulay recedes from the structures of the marketplace, giving us the work freely when asked (via e-mail or other means) and allowing us to engage, project, reject, or otherwise interpret it in relation to our own desires and fixations. The generosity of his performances extends to this broader relationship with his audience.

Ulay’s life work seems clearly to be a project of opening the interval between self and expression through relational engagements—again, rather than asserting an identity, his performative projects offer his embodiments to us, but refuse to fix what they mean, allowing each receiver to engage in her/his own way. In this fashion Ulay’s practice also illustrates what Sedgwick and Andrew Parker argue to be a key element of queer performativity, the foregrounding of “how contingent and radically *heterogeneous*, as well as how contestable... the relations [must be] between any subject and any utterance.”²² Ulay opens the gap between himself as speaking/articulating/making subject and the images and modes of embodiment we connect to as his audience. We have room to move there, and so to discover our own boundaries (or lack thereof) and our own modes of gendered/sexed embodiment.

Vulnerability and Self-Articulation

As I have suggested, this project has been lifelong for the artist, and the vulnerability, generosity, and reciprocity have functioned as key activating factors for the work since the beginning of his career. Among Ulay’s early works that most directly comment on the vulnerability of the self in relation to an other (and/or future others) is his evocative series of one hundred Polaroid photographs from 1975, *Retouching Bruises*, which features a prolonged series of performative

interrelations of hands and flesh between Ulay and his female lover. These photographs are extensions of Ulay's vast series of what he called "Auto-Polaroids," hundreds of performative self-images taken from the late 1960s, when he first discovered the Polaroid camera, into the early 1970s.²³

In each picture of the *Retouching Bruises* series, the flesh is marked by fingerprints, or shown to be in the grip of this act of marking, which is also a touching or holding or gripping or pinching. We see a male hand on a woman's body and a female hand on a man's body—there is an explicit eroticism as the bodies are naked, malleable, even shown as sensitive to touch and temperature, with hairs raised. The skin of each photograph—its thick emulsion surface—is also tattooed by fingerprints, which touch again: skin, surface, touch are doubled in an abyss of performative action and representation.

I am seeing these images in reproduction (as digital JPEGs and printed in the 2014 book, *Whispers*) but even so, remembering my father's Polaroid photographs of our family from the early 1970s, I imaginatively experience their complexity as things: being Polaroids, their emulsion weighs them down, giving them a density and a chemical smell that turns them into objects in their own right. As Ulay said himself of this situation, "I think of a photograph as an emulsion, as a microscopically thin, light sensitive skin, adhered to a sheet of paper and wanting to show something. [Also, for me a photograph is an intimate object, an image on paper that can fit in your hand and can be passed around."²⁴ Even as miniatures in the early modern period were produced to be exchanged from hand to hand, even as nineteenth-century cartes de visites were manufactured to be circulated and pasted in individuals' albums, so through these Polaroids Ulay gives of himself. But in Ulay's case, he never completes the exchange. We never feel we "have" him as an object of our curiosity, aesthetic interest, or desire.

The *Retouching Bruises* photographs, even as reproductions, evoke relations of what Laura U. Marks, in her influential 2000 book entitled *The Skin of the Film*, described as "haptic visuality": the tactile qualities of skin suggested through the visual texture and depth of photographic imagery.²⁵ In Marks's case, she is exploring what she calls "intercultural cinema" and the photographic imagery is also cinematic and projected, giving it a pellucid quality not found in the surfaces of Polaroids. But as Ulay suggests, the Polaroids have another dimension of tactility—that of their objecthood—what I want to play out here as their quality of begging to be held, smelled, and experienced through our own operations of touching and feeling, which are inexorably attached to our ability to see what they render. We engage with them as enfleshing things, as performative, embodied artworks, and as renderings of the artist's own embodiment in relation to that of his lover, and in relation to us as we "hold" them in our visual field. His and her fingerprints speak to us through our hands/eyes, making us want to touch bodies (photographs) in return.

If, as Marks (controversially) argues, haptic visuality affects the works themselves in a circuit of material interaction—"the media arts cannot be conceived of separately from the

sets of viewers that give them meaning. Traces of other viewings, of differently seeing audiences, adhere to the skin of these works”—then this should be all the more compellingly the case with Ulay’s Auto-Polaroids, including his *Retouching Bruises*.²⁶ Through photographic and finger-imprinted indexicality, the images document and attest to a relationship in the past, and create new relationships with every present or future experiencer. As one of these latter figures, I “touch” them with my processes of haptic visuality, loading them with my own desires and melancholic feelings of love and loss. At the same time, rather than reassuring me by allowing me to dominate the images and the bodies within and of them, Ulay’s *Retouching Bruises* pictures remind me of the inexorable alterity of the past, and of other bodies, even those so rendered available to me as visually tactile.²⁷

Drawing on the phenomenological models of Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Marks elaborates her concept of haptic visuality as a visuality that “yields to the thing seen,” evoking not only cognitive results in the mind of the person experiencing the work (thoughts about the content of the image) but “acknowledge[ing]... its location in the body,” opening up “tactile epistemologies” that are in turn conveyed through the flesh of the image to future experiencers of the work.²⁸ Ulay’s strategy of composing the *Retouching Bruises* images seems explicitly to illustrate haptic visuality a good twenty-five years before Marks articulated her theory. The individual photographs in the series depict flesh with black fingerprint “bruises” on it; at the same time, most of them show the “flesh” of the Polaroid (its surface) to be marked, as noted, by purple fingerprint “bruises” as well. The images comment on the way emotions mark or bruise our very flesh, even as our aggressive haptic visual engagement with the pictures decades later impresses them with our interpretive desires. The pictures hurt. But they also sing of possible love, of a love that marks and potentially harms, while also stroking, soothing, adoring. The love imprints but also grasps (the beloved body, the surface of the Polaroid).

Ulay touches the body of his female lover, just as she, in other images, touches his body. The fingers and palms of their hands in each case make sensual dents in flesh: in one, his fingers press directly into her buttocks; in another, his hand pushes her buttocks forcefully downward, the black imprint of an earlier, possessive holding visible above his energetic palm and fingers. In one picture, her hand reaches sensually up his hairy male thigh, which seems to tingle to her touch; in another, his hand reaches up her creamy hairless leg towards her visible pubic hair and vulva. With these pictures, the French word for thigh (*cuisse*) comes to my mind, a sibilant reminder of the texture of flesh and its increasing softness closer to the pubic area, towards the ultimate velvet of the clitoris or head of the penis. But none of this is explicit here. Stoked by the pulsating surfaces and variegated skin of these pictures, my imagination is running wild. The flesh of the image—its haptic visuality—is calling forth for me entire elaborated fantasies of a body tingling with sensual appreciation. I find myself definitively less interested in the images of her face touched by his fingerprints or held by his hands—her face reminds me of a

specific person, and one I have never met; I prefer to dwell in abstractions of the flesh.

In one Polaroid, his forefinger and thumb pinch her breast around the nipple and previously made black fingerprints are visible on her skin towards her breastbone. Another image shows the results of his pinching action, black “bruises” overlaid (on the skin of the photo, the surface of its bright emulsion) with larger purple fingerprints. It is in images that are this close up that I fancy I see goose bumps depicted in the skin (reminding me with a shiver of the luscious intimacy of a lover’s touch). In this, I have to admit my favorite image of all is of Ulay’s abdomen and crotch, his lover’s hand gently resting on his upper left thigh (*cuisse*), ever so gently pressing in his flesh right at the joining of his leg and his torso—that erotic hinge between the ambulatory, engaged upper self and the secret, hidden power of what some Eastern philosophies call the Muladhara, or root chakra. The whirl of dark hair moving towards Ulay’s crotch visibly draws our attention in parallel to our interest in her hand; both are haptically visual, encouraging an engagement that is fully embodied—bringing forth fully sensorial experiences from each viewer’s own past moments of being stroked in such normally hidden crevices of flesh.

Marks argues that such haptically visual experiences imply a mourning of an absent or lost object, in contrast to optical visuality, which presents the visual image as a way of resuscitating what is lost by making it appear to be whole. She notes that “[w]hat is erotic about haptic visuality... may be described as a respect of difference, and concomitant loss of self, in the presence of the other.... [a] giving-over to the other.”²⁹ Ulay’s generosity, as I suggested above, gives over to the other (both his collaborators and us, his later experiencers). Ulay’s vulnerability and fearlessness is in exploring what we might imagine to be his own radical sense of loss and alterity—his vulnerability in the face of the assaults, large and small, that characterize contemporary existence, including our chosen erotic relationships. No matter who we are, as long as we love fiercely, these relationships are never static, completely balanced, or free of the potential for devastating hurt and loss.

Images of Loss, Images of Anima

These qualities of haptic visuality are as much a part of how the works *work* on and for us as is the “content” of the hundreds of gender-bending or erotically charged self-images by Ulay. My interpretations of Ulay’s Auto-Polaroids are meant to open up the images beyond a simple structural analysis of how they function as *images* (i.e., in terms of their putative “content”). The fact that the images are pictures but also objects (as the fingerprints on the surface of the emulsion make clear) assists in this project. To argue that Ulay’s *Retouching Bruises* project uses the capacity of the Polaroid (as an instant and unique image/object) to question the relationship between the skin of the body and the skin of the photograph (its representational screen), then, might be perceived as leaving out the most important dimension of how these works function through a resolute attention to *embodiment*—both in a literal sense and in the sense of his

works composing a “body” of work tied together by threads that nonetheless never fully cohere.

Ulay claims he is an “urban nomad,” and defines his concept of identity as existing only through change (never static or determinable in other than momentary ways through brief engagements): “My body, my biography, my way of looking at the world: they are the thread.”³⁰ Ulay’s works in general—and *Retouching Bruises* in particular—pose an intensive relation to modes of embodiment and the feelings, beliefs, and anxieties that circulate around the human body (in this case, Ulay’s or that of his chosen collaborator, or that of the interpreter of the images/objects). His performative works inscribe this relationship to feelings into his flesh and into *our* skin and psyche in a relational loop.

Like *Retouching Bruises*, the other works of Ulay that wound me, touch me, attach to me, and change me the most from this early period are performative images addressing psychic and fleshy wounding and transformation. With pieces such as *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)* (1974), for example, he uses the camera to document himself cutting his own feet to explore and express his grief over another breakup—this time with Paula Françoise-Piso; he is “cutting his feet in order to fit into Paula’s shoes, attempting to evoke her presence.”³¹ And in *GEN.E.T.RATION ULTIMA RATIO* (1972), Ulay cut himself and documented the process in Polaroid and with a literal chunk of flesh, inscribed with writing. Here is a person willing to slice into his own flesh to interrogate the fact that, as he puts it, “inside, outside, are inseparable.”³² Thirty years before Marks articulated the idea of haptic visuality, Ulay produces his skin literally as image/object, extending his photographic investigation of the coextensive physicality and representationality of human embodiment.

The hurts of the world (which Ulay has explored and lived across his career)—from personal agony through relationship trauma to genetic modification, to racism and the hatred spawned by nationalism to environmental devastation—are his hurts, inscribed in his flesh and then inscribed in the flesh of the photographic image. Genetic modification or enhancement courts the danger of racist, fascist annihilation of “unwanted” genetic materials; a terrible, even horrific, danger to be confronted by a German born during the Holocaust (in 1943), the child of a father who fought in the German army in World War I and World War II. By cutting into himself, and offering a piece of flesh, Ulay marks out his body as material terrain, open to pain and suffering, rather than simply as the expression of genetic code or a “representation” of internal “identity.” He is not redeeming himself, or god forbid, “German-ness,” by performing this act. Rather, we feel he is literalizing the agony he feels in the face of these histories, perhaps attempting to identify himself with the millions of lives eradicated by unspeakable brutalities driven by fascism’s racism, anti-semitism, homophobia, and xenophobia.

Of course, this identification will fail, as will my identification with Ulay, pointing to the fact that engaging with his work is to be encouraged, to face the impossibility of knowing or being the other. Ulay’s entire oeuvre could be thought of as a

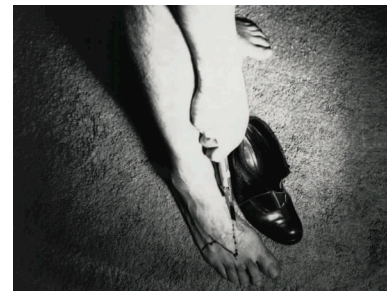


Fig. 2 Ulay, *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)*, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.

courageous and relentless exploration of this impossibility; courageous because he *takes it on*, without reservation. This failure, in the end, is a sign of the tragic impasse not only between self and other (in romantic or even platonic or casual relationships) but *within the self*.

This impasse has been consistently explored across Ulay's career. In fact, Ulay and Marina Abramović's collaborative performance works were activated, in his view, by his interest in transvestism and the tensions in our relational bonds with others. While Abramović has resolutely denied that the *Relation Works* they performed together in 1976–77 had anything to do with gender relations, Ulay strongly suggests otherwise.³³ The meaning of the works is not about which artist's word we believe. The meaning of the works, and their effect and affect, lies in their inexorable reiteration of the conflicted and traumatic staging of male versus female in the heteronormative patriarchal context. To this extent, Ulay's claims resonate strongly with our experience of the works, and his attitudes strikingly align with the politics of what we would in the 2000s call queer feminist goals:

*Ours was a male/female collaboration, but from the beginning we venerated the figure of the hermaphrodite and the union of male and female... my experience with transvestism had a great influence on our collaboration in the Relation Works.... From the beginning, the general title of the series was Relation Works, so this emphasized the question of relationality. We worked with, and demonstrated, traumatic fears about relations. I think every relationship—male/female, male/male, female/female—will resemble a traumatic experience. We were thinking about this and we wanted to explore the anxieties and difficulties that come with relationality, and especially those that usually do not get represented.*³⁴

One of these works, *Talking about Similarity* (produced in 1976 in Amsterdam), exemplifies the failure to articulate fully oppositional gendered subjects I noted above, which I have argued is also extensively played out in the *Retouching Bruises* series. As Ulay has described his role in the work, "In a selected site I sit in front of my visitors with my mouth opened wide. The sound of saliva being sucked away can be heard. The sound fades, I close my mouth. I sew up my mouth, and keep sitting. I depart." And, in turn, as Abramović notes, "I take Ulay's place. I answer the visitors' questions for him, until I make a mistake by answering for myself. I depart."³⁵ The ego can only ever fail to "speak" itself clearly, and this failure is marked in the passage of the speech through the other.

Ulay's Auto-Polaroids, the *Retouching Bruises* series, and also clearly his explicitly collaborative works such as *Talking about Similarity*, are poignant and moving because they enact the passionate love and the forever distance between selves as intimately related to the muteness, stuttering, confusion, and mutability of the so-called individual "self" or, more accurately put, the momentary illusion of self we inhabit, experience, and project at any moment in relation to the others around us. Even in (perhaps especially in?) the apparently heterosexual relationship, the "man" may not be

fully masculine, the “woman” (possibly grasping, authoritarian in her desire for power, or for the “sword” of power attached to the animus) improperly feminine.

Vulnerability as Strength

The body for Ulay and for me, as I interpret these works, is a continually shifting, lived experience of cobbled-together identifications and shatterings and recombinations. As someone who has used the phrase “identity through change,”³⁶ Ulay seems to understand on the deepest level the way in which art can be marked and driven by the motivation to explore the instability of the self rather than to cohere this self: the “auto” or “self” to which he has also referred can only ever occur “through change,” in process, never ending, even after death. For if our images—and our “self”—remain stubbornly beyond us, the embodied memories of those we have touched (as in the marks, fingerprints, and grasping hands of the *Retouching Bruises* series) are surely also impossible to know, to have, to grip into motionless acquiescence as well.

Ulay’s body is an endlessly cracked, marked, cut, and touched surface of skin and depth of feeling that enacts its own vulnerability ceaselessly through performance and image making. But it is a body that, in performing and imaging itself, still (to this day) survives.³⁷ Similarly, the Polaroids in *Retouching Bruises* are marked both inside and on the surface of, or outside, the original photographic scene, but because of that continue to work as flesh, and as evocations of flesh, in the world. Our body is the most vulnerable and the most powerful vehicle we have, as we enact ourselves as *flesh of the world* (in the phenomenological words of Merleau-Ponty³⁸). As Ulay has stated, summing up the paradoxical fragility and power of the embodied subject, “I am vulnerable and cannot hide this aspect of myself.... [M]y power [resides in the fact that]... I am completely open-hearted, which of course makes me vulnerable. But vulnerability is a great strength.”³⁹ If vulnerability is strength, it is not the phallic assertion of authority. It is strength through giving.

I will conclude with this statement of vulnerability as strength, which pricks and moves me in relation to Ulay’s *body of work* in every sense of that phrase. To admit in public to vulnerability is already a radical act for a person identified as a white German male, born in the midst of World War II. To enact this vulnerability through repetitive rupturings of flesh, openings to otherness, self-enactments across gender, sex, and class signifiers is perhaps beyond what the world can comfortably accommodate. Ulay asks us, nonetheless, to try.

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currently spearheading the planning of a 2015 component of Performance Studies International to be called "Trans-Montréal," including sections on "Trans-Media," "Translation," "Transidentification," "Transmedia," and "Transformation."

1. Ulay in Alessandro Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Early Works: Ephemeral, Intimate Actions, with No Audience, Ulay, e-mail to the author, July 22, 2015.
2. Ulay in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Polaroid and Photography as a Second Skin," *Whispers*, 124. Ulay's expressed attitudes towards his vast Polaroid archive are poignantly contradictory. The photographs are both to be given to us and to be guarded from public view: stressing the "process" over the images, he has stated explicitly: "My archive is in Amsterdam and is untouchable for anyone but myself," *Ibid.*, 126. And yet, as the *Whispers* book and recent Ulay exhibitions instantiate, the Polaroids have now been reproduced and exhibited. Otherwise I would have no access to their "flesh."
4. Ulay has recently asserted, "I'm not a political artist. I never was. But the kind of art I have done—and still do—lends itself to political critique." See Dominic Johnson, "The Escape Artist: An Interview with Ulay," *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art*, ed. Dominic Johnson (London: Palgrave/McMillan, 2015), 21. It is precisely the opening of the work (and his body/self within it) to a politics of sexual and gender difference that I am stepping into. I feel strongly the work has these political effects, whatever Ulay's conscious intentions may have been and may still be.
5. Caitlyn Jenner makes numerous comments about her authentic femininity in *I am Cait*, the reality television show that debuted in 2015. I discuss this show at greater length, and the essentialisms in some trans discourse, in "Essentialism, Feminism, and Art: Spaces where Woman 'Oozes Away,'" in *Companion to Feminist Art*, eds. Hilary Robinson and Martha Buszek (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).
6. See "Exchange of Identity," *Zoo Magazine*, no. 47 (2015).
7. This woman appears to be Lena Pislak, the celebrated Slovenian designer, who is Ulay's wife.
8. The text of the poem is available online, accessed February 4, 2016, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/her-kind>. A video version of Sexton reading the poem in 1966 is also available, accessed February 4, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btz8RZHSQ2Q>.
9. Sexton's poems have been important for feminist literary theorists and readers, but she is not considered an explicitly feminist poet. See Jane McCabe, "'A Woman Who Writes': A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton," in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), available online, accessed February 12, 2016, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm.
10. Abramović contested the reproduction of the images of the joint Ulay/Abramović works in the book, and tried to prevent publication of the interview she did with the editors. Accordingly, the editors pulled all of the photographs of the joint performances and replaced them with pink rectangles, most apparently in the dimensions of the missing performance documents. See Bojan and Cassin, *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, 534. In 2016, Ulay launched a lawsuit to regain the joint authorship of the works and these images; see Noah Charney, "Ulay v Marina: How Art's Power Couple Went to War," *The Guardian* (November 11, 2015), available online, accessed February 4, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/1>

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- [1/marina-abramovic-ulyay-performance-art-sued-lawsuit](#).
11. This is evident on the “MoMAMultimedia” website, accessed February 4, 2016, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1964>.
 12. See Charney, “Ulay v. Marina.”
 13. I extensively analyze Abramović’s tendency to subsume other practices into her own in my article, “‘The Artist is Present’: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 16–45. The shattered relationality of Ulay/Abramović was poignantly and arduously enacted through their final joint work, *The Lovers/The Great Wall Walk*, 1988, where they each walked hundreds of miles from opposite ends of the Great Wall in China, only to meet and confirm their already pending breakup at the middle point.
 14. The reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion, “One is not born, but becomes a woman,” which has been generative for queer feminist theories of gender performance, is intentional here. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 249.
 15. Paul McCarthy’s 1970s works sometimes verged on exposing vulnerability, but the edges of masculine vulnerability he exposed were always tinged with violence, albeit often self-imposed (see the videotaped performance of *Rocky* of 1976, where, in homage to the popular movie of the same name, he beats himself up for the camera). The exception is the January 2016 performance by Paul C. Donald that was part of his *Endymion Project* at CB1 Gallery in Los Angeles. See Joanna Roche’s review, “Paul Donald,” in *Artillery* (February 3, 2016), <http://artillerymag.com/paul-donald/>. Donald is my husband, and we have long been in dialogue about the problem of white male heteronormative artistic authority and the question of whether a “normative” male body or subject can be rendered vulnerable for spectators.
 16. See Carl Jung, “The Syzygy: Anima and Animus” (1951), section 28, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 2nd edition, vol. 9, part II; see also “Aion,” and “Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self,” eds. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C. Hull (digitized in 2013), accessed February 5, 2016, https://archive.org/stream/collectedworksof92cgju/collectedworksof92cgju_djvu.txt.
 17. *Ibid.*, section 29. Perhaps, to sustain the point about my animus made above, it is not irrelevant here to note that I was a fencer in college.
 18. Ulay in Johnson, “The Escape Artist: An Interview with Ulay,” 36.
 19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
 20. Ulay’s openness relates to a broader, if mainly underground, shift towards exploring sexuality as an open field of performative potentiality, which burgeoned in creative circles both in Europe and North America in the early 1970s. As far as I know Ulay’s experimentation went farther and his self-imaging was more extensive than those of any of the other artists known to be associated with this interesting movement (with the possible exception of Urs Lüthi; see also the work of Michel Journiac). Works by other European artists working in this vein by 1974 were included in the exhibition *Transformer: Aspekte der Travestie*, with a catalogue by the same title (Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1974). The show included images of or by Andy Warhol, David Bowie, and Jürgen Klauke (with whom Ulay was creative collaborative performative photographic works [1971–75]) as well as Urs Lüthi, Pierre Molinier, and The Cockettes. As far as I can tell only one of the artists included was female, Katharina Sieverding, and the show did not include the cross-dressing

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- work of American feminists such as Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, and Eleanor Antin.
21. Maria Rus Bojan, the art historian who co-produced *Whispers*, through her MB Art Agency now acts as Ulay's agent, and MOTinternational Gallery (London and Brussels) has recently taken on the role of acting as his dealer.
 22. Eve Sedgwick and Andrew Parker, "Introduction," in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Parker and Sedgwick (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 14.
 23. In a fantastic 1972 graphic rendering of his life biography, Ulay notes his early contact with Polaroid Europe in 1969 and his discovery of their instant photography products in 1970; see *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, 55. Elsewhere in the book, he explicitly describes the "performative elements" of his Auto-Polaroids: "I performed in front of the camera. These were intimate actions, carried out in the absence of a live audience, ephemeral in nature, yet arrested in time through the Polaroid," in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Early Works: Ephemeral, Intimate Actions, with No Audience, Arrested in Time through the Polaroid," 88.
 24. Ulay in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Polaroid and Photography as a Second Skin," in *Whispers*, 124.
 25. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), xi-xvii.
 26. *Ibid.*, 20.
 27. Maria Rus Bojan has argued that Ulay pursues "a manner of representation that does justice to alterity"; her argument informs my thoughts here. See Bojan, "Breaking the Norms: Poetics of Provocation," in *Whispers*, 23.
 28. Marks, *Skin of the Film*, 132, 138.
 29. *Ibid.*, 192–3.
 30. See Ulay in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Relation Work: Symbiosis Creates 'The Third,'" in *Whispers*, 116.
 31. Caption to the images of the project in *Whispers*, 138.
 32. Ulay in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: On Water: We are 70% Water, Our Brains are 90% Water!," in *Whispers*, 87.
 33. He has made this clear in multiple interviews. Abramović is on record repudiating feminism and denying that the *Relation Works* were linked to the movement; I discuss her relationship to feminism in "'The Artist is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," 33, note 27.
 34. Ulay in Johnson, "The Escape Artist: An Interview with Ulay," 36.
 35. These descriptions, used as captions for the work, can be found online, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/talking-about-similarity/>.
 36. Ulay in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Relation Work: Symbiosis Creates 'the Third,'" *Whispers*, 119.
 37. On Ulay's enduring survival, see the recent film that was made by Damjan Kozole documenting Ulay's triumph over cancer in 2013: *Project Cancer*.
 38. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," *Visible and the Invisible* (1964), eds. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 144.
 39. Ulay in Cassin and Ulay, "Ulay on Ulay: Early Works," 88.