SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT

ULAY LIFE-SIZED

13 OKTOBER, 2016 – 8 JANUARY, 2017

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle is the first retrospective exhibition of Ulay's extensive artistic oeuvre spanning more than forty-five years. At its center is a unique and to date still highly influential performative practice, which has always been profoundly connected to the possibilities of fine-art photography. A large number of works, which have so far been withheld from the public due to Ulay's imperative need for presence and his rejection of institutions, are exhibited here for the first time.

Frank Uwe Laysiepen, better known as Ulay, self-deprecatingly describes himself as "the most known unknown artist." Born 1943 in Solingen, Germany, Ulay studied at the Kölner Werkschulen (Cologne Academy of Fine and Applied Arts) from 1968 to 1971. Already at the time, he was working for the US company Polaroid at its Amsterdam branch. In the role of a kind of artistic ambassador for Polaroid, Ulay traveled around the world to take photographs for the company's portfolio. Polaroid photography thus became an essential part of Ulay's artistic practice, its earliest evidence dating back to 1970. Around 1969, attracted by the political actions of the Dutch Provo movement, Ulay moved to Amsterdam, where he lived for many years, before recently relocating to Ljubljana.

Life-Sized is the title of a work by Ulay in the shape of a book and the size of the artist. Ulay thus reveals his affinity for language and literature, as well as his desire to embody the identity of the actual and the photographed object. The possibilities of photography, and Polaroid photography in particular, have significantly impacted Ulay's central question of identity; there is hardly another artistic oeuvre where its manifestations come into play in such powerful ways. Sometimes this question refers to proportions, for instance when Ulay achieves a one-to-one reproduction of the photographed object using special Polaroid cameras. At other times, he challenges the notion of sexual and gender identity by combining male and female attributes, or by creating queer self-portrayals. And in some instances, it is all about the dissolution of identity and the creation of a plural form, where two or more people create one unit.

As much as Ulay's work is about the self, he considers this self to be a topic of research, where his self-awareness goes beyond the individual limits of his own self to effectively seek a collective self. Ulay does not shy away from self-harm to achieve this objective—neither mental nor physical. His artistic medium of photography represents an actual extension or rather analogy of his body. Both are influenced and altered simultaneously and remain part of a never-ending process. In 1976, Ulay demonstrated in striking fashion the illusory nature of photography by allowing chemically unfixed motifs to disappear after exposing the photographic paper to light. In other words, with his action *FOTOTOT*, Ulay has delivered evidence of the autonomy of photography and, like a magician, asks: Where does the image go when it vanishes?

The formative chapter for both Ulay and the performance artist Marina Abramović followed in 1976. Until the year of their separation in 1988, Ulay and Abramović examined every facet of a couple's relationship. The pair created eighty performances that turned intimacy into a public act.

Eroticism remained a central theme, as well as the conflicting perceptions of the singular or communal self, physical violence, and ecstasy. In his collaborations with Marina Abramović, Ulay intensified his method of creating ever-new identities through further transformations, thus forcing the fragility of gender identity by continually challenging one another.

The dialectic of materiality and immateriality in the process of becoming and transforming is also reflected in the technical method of photography, which Ulay has pursued, effectively like a scientist, during his entire artistic career. Instant photography, irrefutably connected to the Polaroid Corporation and now mimicked by digital photography, has remained for decades the material of Ulay's research, including the entire range of photography, while constantly searching to represent life. As his favorite research subject, Ulay has his own persona, or rather his body, at his disposal. Ulay considers his body a kind of canvas, revealing manifestations of various influences. He always positions himself in relation to something—the camera, the space he is occupying, or another body. Ulay even examines architecture as if it were a human body.

Near the end of the millennium, Ulay explicitly addressed communal aspects and the possibilities of artistic participation and collaboration. In 1992, he retreated with some fellow artists to a building to live in tents there, to discuss and develop alternative forms of life, drink beer, and then trace the outlines of European countries with beer bottles. In a psychiatric hospital in the Netherlands, he worked with patients. He invited them to create self-portraits, for which they could use objects made as part of their art therapy. Ulay traveled to many countries to develop communal projects with local people, such as a group of Aborigines in Australia. In Palestine, he initiated a large-scale water project that ultimately led him to the glaciers of Patagonia.

In 2011, Ulay was diagnosed with cancer and documented its course in the impressive film *Project Cancer*. After successful treatment, Ulay began a new creative phase in 2013 that, with radical performances, focuses on his identity, his sexuality, and his aging body.

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LABEL PANELS *(SELECTION OF ARTWORKS)*

Aphorisms, 1970–1973
Mixed media, typewriting, handwriting on paper
Courtesy the artist
From 1969, Ulay lived in Amsterdam. Having left his bourgeois life in Germany behind—and using a typewriter—he began to compose short poems and aphorisms. In appearance, they are reminiscent of Concrete Poetry, where text and image aim to combine both visually and in terms of content. The entire collection of 220 pages is shown here for the first time.

Visual Poetry, 1971–1972
From the series *Renais sense*
Polaroid type 57 with Polaroid passport camera
Courtesy the artist
The series *Visual Poetry* with image sequences of six photographs each was created using a portable Polaroid passport photo camera. Short photo stories feature everyday objects and the artist in his home at the time. Marked by a certain banality and his view of the supposedly insignificant, these early photographs were a continuation of Ulay's text art by other means.

Soliloquy, 1972
Diptych
From the series *Renais sense*
Courtesy the artist
A "soliloquy" is a dramatic monologue. Ulay used this title for several Polaroid series that, in the absence of other people, represent his actions in front of the camera as a form of soliloquy. They are mostly about painful, emotional experiences, such as being left by a partner, or about the longing for one's beloved wife.

GEN.E.T.RATION ULTIMA RATIO, 1972
Polaroid type 107 and tattooed piece of skin
Courtesy the artist
With this work, Ulay entered the canon of Body Art. It was an early artistic examination of both Western tattoo culture and biopolitical materialism, which found a promising partner in genetics. "Ultima ratio" signifies the "last resort" after all other solutions have failed. Ulay sought such a solution with his own body, thus excoriating scientific hubris. The Polaroid photographs were taken during the transplantation process, which was done without an anesthetic.

The Metamorphosis of a Canal House, 1972
Performance documentation
Video, black and white, sound
12 min.
Courtesy the artist
This action represents Ulay's first visual and ecological intervention within the city of Amsterdam. He covered the façade of his studio on Herengracht 532 with the blown-up image of a running refinery located on the outskirts of Amsterdam. The billboard—the biggest ever displayed in the Netherlands at that time—was presented for three days. Through multiple TV appearances, interviews, and discussions with local residents, Ulay called attention to environmental issues and the high risk of massive industrialization in the vicinity of Amsterdam.

Renais sense Aphorism, 1972–1975
From the series *Renais sense*
Collage made of original Polaroids type 107/108, montage, text
Courtesy the artist
"Renais sense" is a neologism, on the one hand referring to rebirth (Renaissance) and on the other to a kind of "countersense," or rather nonsense. Ulay uses the term here as a logo, a trademark of the paper on which the Polaroid photos are mounted. The photos feature parts of his body and cutouts of other bodies assembled into fragmentary units.

Anagrammatic Body Aphorism, 1974
Auto-Polaroid Typ / type 107
Courtesy the artist
Specifically conceived as illustrations for *Avenue*, a Dutch glossy monthly magazine, this series of "anagrammatic" Polaroid collages questions the socially constructed norms of identity. By presenting himself as half man, half woman, Ulay was attempting to destabilize the very concepts of gender and sexuality, challenging the viewer to rethink gender categories and to reconsider the normative ideal of identity.

Exchange of Identity, 1975
Performance documentation, Galerie Het Venster, Rotterdam
Video, black and white, sound
Courtesy the artist
For this action, Ulay treated the canvas with a light-sensitive layer and invited the visitors to a gallery to present themselves in front of the canvas. On one of the canvas photos, the body of a woman merges with a larger, masked person. This is Ulay himself, who appears wearing a white face mask and white jumpsuit. This kind of camera-free photography is testimony to Ulay's interest in the process of image creation and, in this particular case, his interest in the examination of the limits of identity and the possibility of an interchangeability of two or more identities.

There is a Criminal Touch to Art, 1976
Performance documentation
Video, black and white, sound
25 min.
Courtesy the artist
This action emphasizes the artist's struggle with his own German origins and the Nazi legacy, pointing out the problematic situation of minorities within postwar German society. Ulay removed Carl Spitzweg's famous painting *Der arme Poet* (The Poor Poet, 1839) from the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin (a symbol of German national identity and supposedly the favorite artwork of Adolf Hitler). He relocated it to the house of a Turkish immigrant family in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin. He photographed the work in its new surroundings and shortly thereafter called the museum director to come and take a look at the new display of the artwork. Both Marina Abramović and Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein, the former cameraman of Werner Herzog, recorded the action inside the museum and from a vehicle that followed Ulay.

FOTOTOT I, 1976
Original photographs of *FOTOTOT I* performance at De Appel Amsterdam, 1976
Black and white photographs
Zagreb Museum of Contemporary Art
The two consecutive actions FOTOTOT I and II were experiments that sought to dismantle the myth of photographic objectivity. Eight preprinted, black-and-white photographs were hung on the walls of the gallery, processed but not fixed. Once all the guests were inside, the dimmed lights were turned on. As a consequence, the images turned into black surfaces in less than thirty seconds, emphasizing that the photographic image is a mere illusion.

FOTOTOT III, 1976
Performance documentation Bayer Kulturhaus, Wuppertal
Video, black and white, sound
8 min.
Courtesy the artist
In a regular garage space (beside the gallery), Ulay was standing as a mirroring figure: a chrome helmet, his face covered with a chrome mask, and a large mirror cut to the proportions of his body. On the floor in front of him lay another mirror. Bright halogen lights lit the area where the spectators were to gather. They saw themselves in the mirrored figure, while Ulay sometimes moved slightly to the left or right, back and forth, to cover all of the spectators, when all of a sudden he let himself fall forward, sandwiching the mirrored spectators between the two mirrors.

Ulay / Marina Abramović
Imponderabilia, 1977
Performance, 90 min.
Channel video projection, black and white, sound
52 min.
Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives and LIMA
In this performance, the two artists were standing naked and opposite one another in a doorway. It was the entrance to the exhibition space of a gallery in Bologna, Italy, and the visitors were left with only limited space to pass between the two naked bodies. A wall text offered the following information: “Imponderable. Such imponderable human factors as one’s aesthetic sensitivity / the overriding importance of imponderables in determining human conduct.” Imponderables are uncertainties or unpredictablilities that inevitably play a part in contact with other people, and which are actually constitutive of social communication. In this performance, they could be experienced in a physical manner.

Ulay / Marina Abramović
Relation in Movement, 1977
Single channel video projection, black and white
35 min.
Courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives and LIMA
The Xe Biennale de Paris took place in September 1977. Ulay and Marina Abramović had just given up their respective residences and had moved into a Citroën van, which became their home for a few years. With this vehicle, they drove around in circles for sixteen hours in an empty fountain in front of the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris until, after 2,226 rounds, the engine eventually gave up. Ulay’s role was that of the driver, while Abramović sat in the passenger seat and, using a megaphone, announced the laps through the open window.

Polagram, 1993
Polagram (Polaroid, light exposure with torch and color filters directly onto the negative)
Private collection
The so-called Polagrams are Polaroid photographs that are created directly in the camera by the artist. The production process is similar to a performance, with movements by a flashlight that Ulay acts out in the dark chamber of the camera. The life-sized formats reinforce the notion of an image of external reality. Yet the Polagrams actually represent their production and result from the torch light on the photo paper.

Water for the Dead, 1992
Polaroid, Polacolor
Courtesy the artist
This series of Polaroid images shows shadows of large glass vases and black paper cutouts with diverse fabrics hanging in the negative space.

Can't Beat the Feeling – Long Playing Record
Polaroid, Polacolor, Boston Studio
240 x 111 cm
These large-format Polaroids from the series *Can't Beat the Feeling – Long Playing Record*, inspired by Jean Genet's play *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, examine the theme of conflict. Genet posed the provocative question: What is white and what is black? Ulay offers a similar perspective in his work *White Candle Black Candle*, where the large white candle eclipses the smaller candle, making it appear black. You see what you read, even if it might not actually exist, or rather, even if the image merely lays claim to the illusion of a suchlike setting.

Berlin Afterimages, 1994–1996
Skin of the City; EU Flags; Siegessäule; Eagles Shall Hunt Dogs
Photo animation
Courtesy the artist
In these photographic experiments, Ulay reenacted the negative retinal phenomenon of forming afterimages, playing with the idea of familiarity induced by visual convention, while at the same time magnifying the indexical aspect of photographic representation. Presenting the images as negatives, Ulay has upset the conventional perception of various symbols of national identities, such as flags and historical buildings in Berlin. The entire series functions as a unified discourse, investigating in a thorough manner the haptic dimension of the negative image and proposing a reading of the city from a tactile-poetic perspective.

Who's Afraid of Cyan, Magenta and Yellow?, 1997
Triptych
C-type print (unique pieces)
Courtesy the artist
This triptych appropriates the magnified image of the slash in the famous Barnett Newman painting *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967), which was vandalized while on display at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Experimenting with the disturbing power of primary colors in the same manner as Newman, Ulay attempted to obtain a stereoscopic effect of the cut in the painting, including the perception of an open wound in the red "flesh" of the canvas.

Drop Shadow, 1999
In collaboration with students from Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design
Gelatin silver prints on baryte paper
Courtesy the artist
An installation by Andreas Siefert for the group exhibition at Montevideo, Amsterdam, with thirteen of Ulay's students from Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design. The installation projected a large field of light onto a big screen. When persons entered the light projection, their shadow appeared life-sized on the screen and was held for a couple of seconds before disappearing. Any subsequent movement was cast as another shadow. These images show Ulay's auto-shadow portraits.

What Is That Thing Called Photography, 2000
Selection of pages from the eponymous book
Courtesy the artist
This artist's book, published on the occasion of two exhibitions in Sittard and Amsterdam in 2000, includes sketches and considerations on photography by Ulay. The artist sees this book as his theory of photography; he primarily examines the relationship between eye, camera, and object.

Sweet Water Salt Water, 2012
Original Polaroids, Polaroid Studio, New York
Courtesy the artist
This work is a series of seven Polaroids that aim to present a different portrait of the artist. The liquid in the glasses suggests the amount of water from different parts of the body, while the tear, which is visible in the self-portrait, alludes to salty seawater.

A Skeleton in the Closet, 2015
Performance Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Painting from performance
Plywood, lacquer
Courtesy the artist
This performance marks the beginning of Ulay's pink phase. Pink is the color of his soul, and pink is the color of a thick hat and short silk skirt that Ulay was wearing on his otherwise naked body. The reason for this performance was Marina Abramović's refusal to allow photos of joint performances to be printed in a catalogue raisonné that Ulay co-published in 2014. During the performance, Ulay wrote, among other elements, a series of numbers using white paint on a pink square canvas. The numbers referred to the pages in the book, where pink areas replaced the missing images.

Pink Pain, 2016
Performance documentation, University of Southern California (USC), Los Angeles
Video, sound
18 min.
This performance took place in Los Angeles and, as the title suggests, is about pain and the color pink. During the first phase of the performance, the spines of a cactus were painted pink. Ulay then clipped parts of the spines, while simultaneously listening to a recording of American poet Anne Sexton reading her poem *Her Kind*. In the poem, Sexton expresses her sense of doubt and alienation at being a woman. At the end of her recital, Ulay embraces the half-shaved cactus with its remaining pink spines.

Invisible Opponent, 2016
Performance documentation, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva
Video, sound
Circa 34 min.
Courtesy the artist
The "invisible enemy" confronting him in this performance is Ulay himself. Everyone, according to Ulay, is their own opponent; any relationship with oneself is always both romance and conflict at once. During the performance, the artist was lying and writhing on a mirror coated in white paint. He used his fingernails to scratch the paint off and wrote one title of a text by Samuel Beckett in each of the four corners ("Nowness," "Suchness," "Enough," and "Not I"), only to then vigorously cross them out. The unnerving scratching noises and auto-aggressive actions underscore his surrender to the impenetrability of the surface.

Men, 98, 1988–1989/2016
Aluminum, powder-coated
Courtesy the artist
Retrospect and new beginnings characterize Ulay and Marina Abramović's 1989 exhibition The Lovers. Central to the exhibition was the spectacular, expensive, and last joint performance during which each artist walked toward the other for ninety days—each from a different end of the Great Wall of China, around 4,000 kilometers in length—to then bid a final farewell to one another. In addition, each of the two artists had incorporated their own work into the exhibition, including Ulay's three large, black sculptures suspended from the ceiling, reminiscent of Japanese entrance gates, so-called "torii." The word "Men" used in the title means humans in English, while in Japanese it might refer to both the mask and the face. In Chinese, "Men" is the word for door.