

From: *Modus vivendi. Ulay & Marina Abramović. 1980-1985*, exhibition catalog (Eindhoven, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 14 September - 13 October 1985; Cologne, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 20 October - 17 November 1985; Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 18 April - 8 June 1986), Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven 1985, pp. 9-14.

Ethics, Esthetics, and Relation in the work of Marina Abramović and Ulay

Thomas McEvilley

When Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that esthetics and ethics are the same thing he was probably acting in the way that Ulay describes by saying 'We do not necessarily understand what we know.' It was characteristic of Wittgenstein to create formulations that would become basic to later generations though their meaning in his own day may have been opaque and mysterious. For two decades or more now it has been widely felt that esthetics and ethics - art and life - are to a degree meaningless without each other. The point is that in a sense each is the defining characteristic of the other. Art that lacks real connection with life is dead, or, as the phrase has it, merely academic. Life, on the other hand, that does not somehow partake of the motivation that the word art connotes may be seen as less than human.

This doctrine went totally contrary to the Kantian tradition which underlay modern formalism and which held that the concerns of esthetics are irremediably separate from those of cognition on the one hand and ethics on the other. It found its realization first in existentialist or action painting, then, more fully and perfectly, in performance art. Performance art of course has its own variety of formalisms; still, it is always and necessarily bound up with the real space and time of embodied life and the real action and striving of a concrete self in relation to the world. The life-art project is its foundation and its essence.

In the work of Marina Abramović and Ulay the issue of ethics, as they have remarked, long ago took the place of the issue of esthetics. This is not to say their work lacks esthetic sophistication. Their video-tape of 1983, 'City of Angels', for example, finds them investigating the relationship between painterly types of image and surface on the one hand and, on the other, photographic-sculptural three-dimensional presence. Yet the essentially formalist inspection of an interface between two or more art media is not the primary purpose of this work which tries to unify space - East and West - and time - past and present - in an essentially humane transcultural iconography. It is as if the esthetic orientation of their work has become second nature, and since that point the only worthwhile thing to do with it has been to investigate the ethics of its use.

This ethical focus can be seen as the necessary content of the formal situation that is their collaboration; the collaboration, that is, mandates an essentially ethical emphasis. Their artwork since beginning to work together in 1976 has both derived from and spoken about the act of collaboration; the collaboration, in turn, derives from and is about the artwork. Their work together has been and still is what they have called 'relation work' - work which both lives off of and feeds into the investigation of relationship between two humans as they try to relate simultaneously to one another and to the world around them. The works specifically called 'Relation Works' were mostly small highly focused performances in which each of them was thrown back both on his or her own patience and endurance and on the supportive partnership with which they faced the world together.

In one of these works, for example, they sat back to back in an art gallery for eighteen hours, with their long hair braided together between them. If either of them fell the other would be brought down also; if either of them endured, the other would endure also - and this in full view of a world that was outside of and not always friendly to their partnership and the determined ordeals which they underwent as both tests and expressions of it.

The term 'relation works' referred explicitly to performance pieces of 1976-1979. But even the more recent work in video and in life-sized Polaroids remains essentially relation work; he brings his insight and she brings hers, and the essence of the work is that these relate to one another in a mutually constitutive way: neither viewpoint could exist without the other, which has shaped it as both action and reaction. They have described the early work, based on endurance and ordeal, as the activity of warriors. These pieces often gave the inaccurate impression of being aggressive and competitive in spirit, as in the piece where they hit each other alternately until one of them stopped. Works of the next period such as 'Nightsea Crossing', in which they sit motionless opposite one another for seven hours a day for a total of ninety (non-consecutive) days, are more imitations of the activity of saints than of warriors: each artist backgrounds individual expression to a degree where aggression and competition can only be imagined in a really passive way. Currently, the relation work unfolds as an allegorical activity of lovers, both lovers of each other and of the surrounding world. In terms of the world at large, this work is characterised by more openness, more investigation of other cultures and of our ability to receive from them. In terms of their collaboration, it is based on the desire to express what they have called the 'impossibility of escaping one another.' Granted a belief in reincarnation - to which both are inclined - each represents the other's karmic account in its inescapability and its essentially creative torment - creative in that it forces solutions, advances and sublimations.

The present exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum foregrounds the question of formal means in its division into performance, video, and Polaroid. But the formal distinction is not ultimate; these formal means themselves express the contents of instantaneity, immediacy, and simple wholeness, the content of being lifesize, of expressing the basic ratio of embodied experience, the ratio one to one, which is the pure performative non-illusionistic ratio, the ratio which is ethics, the ratio of pure factuality or self-sameness.

A formal element which permeates all three categories and leads inward toward the center of the work in inner consciousness is the *tableaux vivante* style. The video tape 'City of Angels', for example, is made up primarily of five more or less static images, each showing motionless humans arranged against a background of the ruins of the temple complex of Ayutaya in Thailand. The point to emphasize is that these five images are not stills. Each has one moving element in it, such as a dress blowing in the wind, that embodies the passage of time and focuses the relation of change and changelessness. An actual material of the work is living immobility, as in the performance 'Positive Zero', 1983, in which the two artists and a number of collaborators assumed and held a series of motionless tableaux on the stage while musicians playing in the background embodied the flow of time. Living immobility is also the essential material of the ninety day performance 'Nightsea Crossing' and of quite a number of the early Relation Works. It is a material that has not yet been clearly defined in the literature on performance art. The British performance artists Gilbert and George, for example, called themselves living sculptures when performing pieces involving immobility. The designation as sculpture tends to distract attention from the fact of ongoing consciousness within the immobile presence; Ulay and Marina, on the other hand, use immobility so as to direct attention to the fact that consciousness is working away inside while outside the body seems to become part of the architecture. For the immobility of Marina and Ulay, in another of their studied interfaces of media, locates itself in one sense between sculpture and architecture, especially

in 'Nightsea Crossing', where their sculpturesque presence is directly related to the project of enlivening chosen architectural spaces - yet enlivening them passively or backhandedly, with more submission to them than aggression upon them.

The most recent performance work is called 'Modus Vivendi', 'Way of Living'. In it the fact that the essential content of the work is consciousness comes clearly to the surface for the first time. At the same time, the focus of the work overall exhibits a shift away from sameness to difference. In earlier relational performances the roles of the two artists were often complementary in some simple way-sitting back to back, hitting one another alternatively, running away from one another into walls, running around a room and colliding with one another, breathing each other's breath, producing a continuous sound together, standing facing one another in a doorway, and so on. But the Relation Work to which 'Modus vivendi' shows the strongest similarity is not of this type; it is 'Go ... stop ... Back ... stop', 1979, in which Marina sat in a large open space removing bits of swansdown from a pillow and counting them aloud while Ulay moved about the space directed by a tape recording of his own voice randomly ordering 'go ... stop ... back ... stop' and so on. For 'Modus Vivendi' each conceived his or her role. Marina, dressed in a green gown that flows away from her across the floor, stands immobile behind a stage property tree while Ulay moves with extreme slowness across the stage and, after performing certain actions, back to his original position. As he moves, Ulay manifests the presence of consciousness working inside him from moment to moment by a type of elementary verbalizing of present awareness used in the Burmese style of *vipassana* meditation. He is not directed by a tape recording of his own voice but, reversing the order, speaks aloud to the audience each elementary act he is performing: 'Hearing, hearing; moving, moving; touching, touching,' and so on. He represents inner life as flowing consciousness and she represents it as motionless attentive presence. They are, as it were, the two aspects of the mind that are involved in self-awareness, the flow of thoughts and the awareness of the flow from a fixed point of view which seems not to flow but to observe. At the end, Marina's quick gesture is cut off by darkness. 'Modus Vivendi', while still relation work, is more involved with difference than with sameness, as are the lifesize Polaroid self-photographs of 1985 in which she presents archetypes of femaleness, he of maleness, without collusion as to their complementarity. (These works are more interesting together than apart.)

After extremely solipsistic beginnings as individual artists, Marina and Ulay worked through the symbiotic relation works to more open outgoing relation works and finally to an attempt to enclose the world within the embrace of their relation work without enforcing a personal trip on it from outside. The two recent video tapes, one located in a modern village near a temple ruin in Sicily ('Terra degli dea madre', 1984), the other in a modern village near a temple ruin in Thailand ('City of Angels', 1983) encapsulate the past and present of East and West. These video tapes are the first steps of a project to make five tapes, one on each of the world's continents, using pictorial esthetic means to inspect gender relations in each place. This is not anthropology; it is tourism become a medium of art. The ancient sacred sites are approached as in a pilgrimage, yet a pilgrimage which will result in their making something new as a gift to the site and an expansion of themselves from it. In the performance works 'Positive Zero', 1983, and 'Nightsea Crossing/Conjunction', 1983, Tibetan lamas and Australian aborigines functioned as an ethical-esthetic material, or as a set of found sculptures. This is the opposite of exploitation; it focuses the fact that the world's cultures are art forms in relation to one another, and specifically that people in different cultural molds may be regarded from an outside point of view as found art objects of great complexity and profundity. The life-art project, rooted in individual self-consciousness and nourished through personal relationship, has been expanded to a global and transcultural embrace.