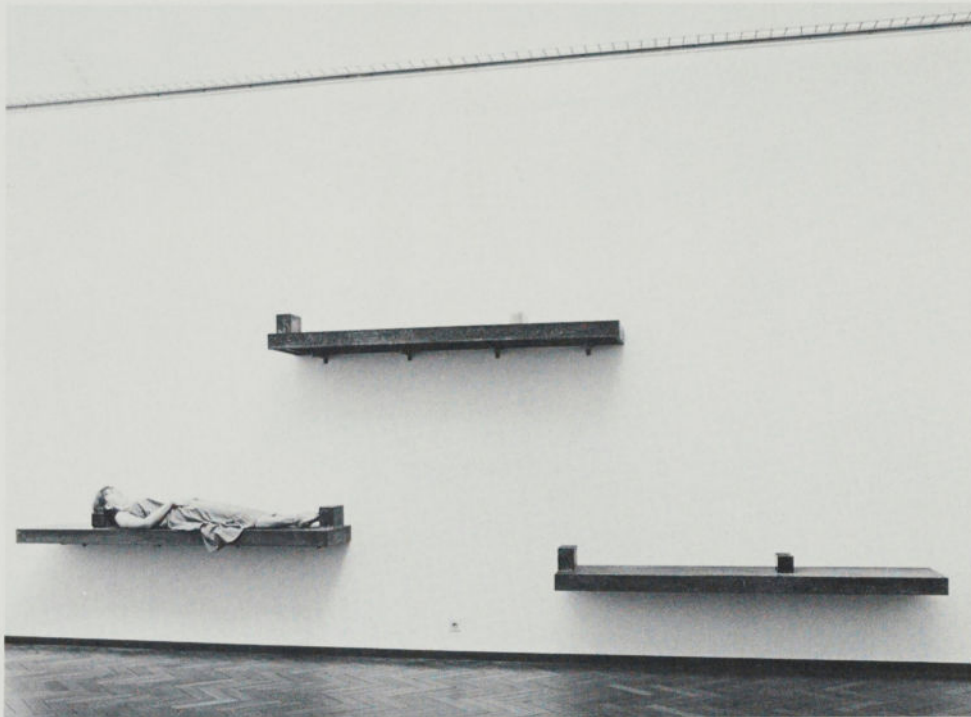


Marina Abramović

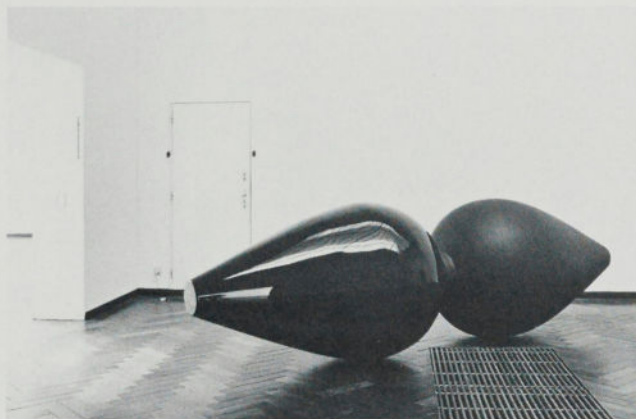
Ulay

THE LOVERS : THE GREAT WALL WALK

Marina Abramović
GREEN DRAGON, Lying, 1988-89
3 of 8 components, copper and quartz



THE LOVERS: THE GREAT WALL WALK



Marina Abramović, THE LOVERS, 1988-89
2 components, coloured polyester

From March 30 to June 27, 1988, Marina Abramović and Ulay walked along the imposing, fortified, hostile pathway of the Great Wall of China. Their long, solitary march through “terra incognita” — with Marina Abramović starting in the east, from the shore of the China Sea, and Ulay in the west, from the Gobi desert — brought to a masterly conclusion a joint body of work developed over twelve years of a relationship in which art, life, ethics and aesthetics were intertwined. “We each take [a] 2,000 km march to say goodbye.”¹

This vast undertaking is both appealing and disconcerting. It very clearly fits in with the pursuit of a unique existential and aesthetic quest that attempts to merge east and west, past and present, as well as the age-old experience possessed by other cultures. The resulting pieces, some produced by Marina Abramović, some by Ulay, arise out of a rigorous economy of means and the same brilliant simplicity of argument that strongly marked their previous work — primarily performance, but also photography, video and installation art. After long making their bodies the subject of their presentations, the artists created objects that

moved closer to and away from their own physicality at the same time. Thomas McEvilley recalls this, in writing about their exhibition entitled *THE SIMULTANEITY OF THE OTHER*, presented at the Kunstmuseum in Berne in 1987: "They had represented themselves as two vases of human scale, standing silently side by side, but separate. Now it really was as if each one of them was a vessel of his or her own waiting to be filled up with a new life, a new meaning."²

This comment prefigures the artists' later works and applies quite literally to the works produced at the conclusion of the walk. For ninety days, Marina Abramović and Ulay made their respective ways over different soils, experienced diverse geographies, mingled with Chinese peasants and contemplated unique landscapes. In individual ways, their works are nurtured by these many, different experiences and offer convincing evidence of them. They call upon the great archetypes and propose a universal formal language.

Marina Abramović gave the title *BOAT EMPTYING/STREAM ENTERING* to the whole of her works brought together in the exhibition. (Freeing, liberating oneself from oneself and from the other, in order to capture and assimilate new sensations and energies.) This is also the title applied to both the performance she executes in the exhibition and the video installation on her experience of the Great Wall walk.

Although this is very likely their last performance before they go their separate ways, the Chinese journey, whatever

physical discipline and inner strength it demanded, is no longer strictly performance art, according to Marina Abramović: "I don't consider the Great Wall walk a performance but, rather, a being in the condition of creating a work of art."³ She goes on to say: "Along my walk over different soils, I noticed that I was in different states of mind, depending on the various mineral and metal contents of the soil. At night, in the villages, before falling asleep, I called over the oldest man or woman in the village and asked them to tell me legends of the Wall. The legends always related to the different dragons... I saw a direct connection between the legend of the Wall, the consistency of the minerals and metals contained in the soil and my state of mind."⁴

Referring to the postures of the human figure (horizontal, vertical and perpendicular) which the couple reiterated in their earlier actions — lying down in the Australian desert, 1980-1981, seated during the *NIGHTSEA CROSSING* performance, 1981-1986, and upright in the walk — Marina Abramović also remembers the gigantic dragon lying, the legend goes, beneath the Wall. She uses materials which she has chosen for their different degrees of conductivity, and presents orthogonal wall sculptures of copper and quartz which constitute "transient objects" designed to convey currents of energy, aesthetics and spirituality.

In *THE LOVERS*, two black vases, at once antithetical and complementary, laid on their side, join at the neck, in a peaceful metaphor for the final meeting on the Great Wall. "The function of *Lovers in the Concept of Conjunction*: the union of heaven and earth in primitive astrobiological religions is a symbol of conjunction, as is also the legendary marriage of the princess with the prince who has rescued her. In conjunction lies the only possibility of supreme peace and rest."⁵

Also summoning up the notions of identity, otherness and union, Ulay makes use of a two-dimensional representation of one of the three-dimensional objects with the most connotations in the traditional iconographic repertoire: the urn. The vase, which has always been considered an object that is utilitarian first, and decorative second, represents life, by recalling the uterine cavity, and symbolizes death by analogy with the funeral urn. The motif and signature act to individualize its previously anonymous nature. "The vase brings into play the dichotomy between interiority and exteriority or their merging together. Neither painting,



Marina Abramović, WHITE DRAGON, Standing, 1988-89

7 of 10 components, copper and quartz

which can only represent this kind of presence, nor sculpture, which tends to deny it all interiority, has this duality. The painted vase is both painting and sculpture.”⁶

Through the cutout process, Ulay exposes emptiness and fullness and brings into relief, albeit on the surface, positive and negative image, absence and presence (*L'ORCHESTRE DE FEMME*, 1988-1989). The obvious contrast of black and white suggests the polarization of the roles of men and women and the relations of difference and similarity which the artists examined in their performance cycles. “Identity lies within difference. Difference is the irrevocable condition of identity.”⁷

THE WALL, THE WALK, THE ALIEN, is what Ulay called his participation in the exhibition. He acknowledges and accepts his status as a foreigner in China, and confirms the authenticity of the project by the determination and intensity he invests in it. His gradual progress along the Wall and the immaterial progress of his thought process coincide. “Straight thinking reveals that everything in me is curved. My organs, my bones, held by an epidermis that wraps my body in a supple, sinuous harmony. The same goes for animal and plant species, the earth, sun and moon, the stars, the planets, the whole universe... Those who live in a curved space are in agreement with nature... Their environment, if not their nature, is made up of curved shapes and volumes in which nothing interferes with flexibility. Life itself, with its highs and lows, describes an undulatory curve.”⁸ Ulay evokes and circumscribes the human silhouette, just as he modulates and

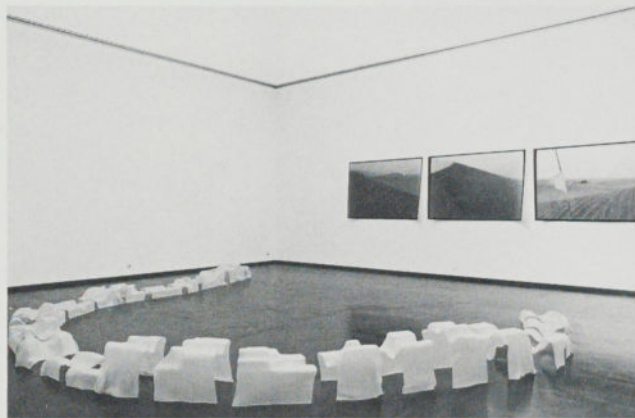
assembles the segments of the Great Wall. The curvilinear morphology he favours fits in with his knowledge and experience of cultures.

In the course of their walk, Marina Abramović and Ulay not only ended their personal and artistic involvement, they completed the transition to their respective autonomies and individual identities. They devised a joint undertaking that went beyond its original considerations. Politics, bureaucracy and the buildup of events, one after the other, affected their progress, without altering its basic symbolic and metaphysical nature. Beyond the initial fascination exerted by the spectacular Chinese monument, the artists recreated and recalled the gestures of human existence from time immemorial.

Josée Bélisle

Notes

1. *THE LOVERS*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1989, p. 173.
2. Thomas McEvelley, “The Great Wall Talk,” *ibid.*, p. 77.
3. Marina Abramović, *SUR LA VOIE*, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris 1990, p. 97 (unpublished translation).
4. *Ibid.*
5. *THE LOVERS*, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
6. Thomas McEvelley. “Le vase” in *URN ODE LAUREL GREEN*, (*ODE À L'URNE VERT LAURIER*), Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris 1990, p. 11 (unpublished translation).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
8. Ulay, “L’octave cosmique” in *URN ODE LAUREL GREEN*, *op. cit.*, p. 22 and 27 (unpublished translation).



Ulay, MA1, 1988-89

24 glass components

AEVE
007695



May

L'ORCHESTRE DE FEMME

1988-89

1 of 5 components, painted aluminum

May

MEN 98, 107, 110, 1988-89

painted aluminum

Catalogue

Marina Abramović

WHITE DRAGON, Standing, 1988-89

copper and quartz
10 components
250 × 55 × 11 cm (each)

RED DRAGON, Sitting, 1988-89

copper and quartz
9 components
250 × 55 × 11 cm (each)

GREEN DRAGON, Lying, 1988-89

copper and quartz
6 of 8 components
11 × 250 × 55 cm (each)

THE LOVERS, 1988-89

coloured polyester
2 components
170 × 100 cm (diameter, each)

HEADS, 1988-89

colour photographs
3 components
50 × 50 cm (each)

BOAT EMPTYING STREAM

ENTERING, 1988-89
video installation
3 parasols
3 videotapes
2 colour photographs
(180 × 60 cm, each)
photography: Marina Abramović
and Da Hai Han

sound: Charlemagne Palestine
produced in collaboration with
E.C.G. – T.V. Studio 300, Frankfurt
and Inka – Digital Art

May

MEN 98, 1988-89

painted aluminum
243 × 110 × 1 cm

MEN 107, 1988-89

painted aluminum
243 × 100 × 1 cm

MEN 110, 1988-89

painted aluminum
243 × 86 × 1 cm

MAI, 1988-89

glass
24 components
30 × 50 × 900 cm
(diameter, approx.)

L'ORCHESTRE DE FEMME, 1988-89

painted aluminum
5 components
250 × 200 × 1 cm

CHANG CHENG NEI WAI, 1988-89

audiovisual installation
slide show: 456 slides
sound track and music:
Mei Hong Fu
34 min (approx.)

May / Marina Abramović

THE LOVERS, THE GREAT

WALL WALK, 1988-89

film, 16 mm, 52 min
directed by: Murray Grigor
photography by: Douglas Campbell
produced by: Eduardo Lipschutz Villa
and Barbara Grigor
Viz/Eduardo Lipschutz Villa
Production for la Fondation Amphis
in collaboration with Channel
Four Television and NOS Television



MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

February 24 - April 21, 1991

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THE LOVERS: THE GREAT WALL WALK

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