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**MICHELE ROBECCHI**

**MICHELE ROBECCHI** 'Project Cancer' (2013), the documentary film you made about your battle with a disease initially diagnosed as terminal, touches on a very personal and delicate subject. How did you feel about it during filming?

**ULAY** Filming it was a rather intense experience. I was on heavy cancer treatment, doing chemo and other things. They told me I had six months to live so I started travelling. I went to New York, Berlin, Amsterdam, Ljubljana. I went to Piran – this beautiful Slovenian town on the Mediterranean Sea. Working on the film took my attention away from being a really sick man. I actually call it a therapy film – it helped me developing a philosophical attitude towards the disease, the illness, the whole ordeal. I think it was very important for me not to be another terminal cancer patient thinking about my predicament all the time and worrying about the last minutes of my life. The film is great, I must say. Damjan Kozole is a tough director but he was also fun to work with. I was very sceptical at the beginning, but at the Q&A that followed each projection, most of the questions weren't about art, they were about the stigma of cancer and chemo. Every third person in the Western World is somehow affected by it. So I didn't end up talking so much about the film but more about how my experience with cancer and how I dealt with it.

**MR** In your life and previous work, you often put yourself in situations that pushed you to explore your psychological and physical vulnerability. Do you think it helped you dealing with the disease?

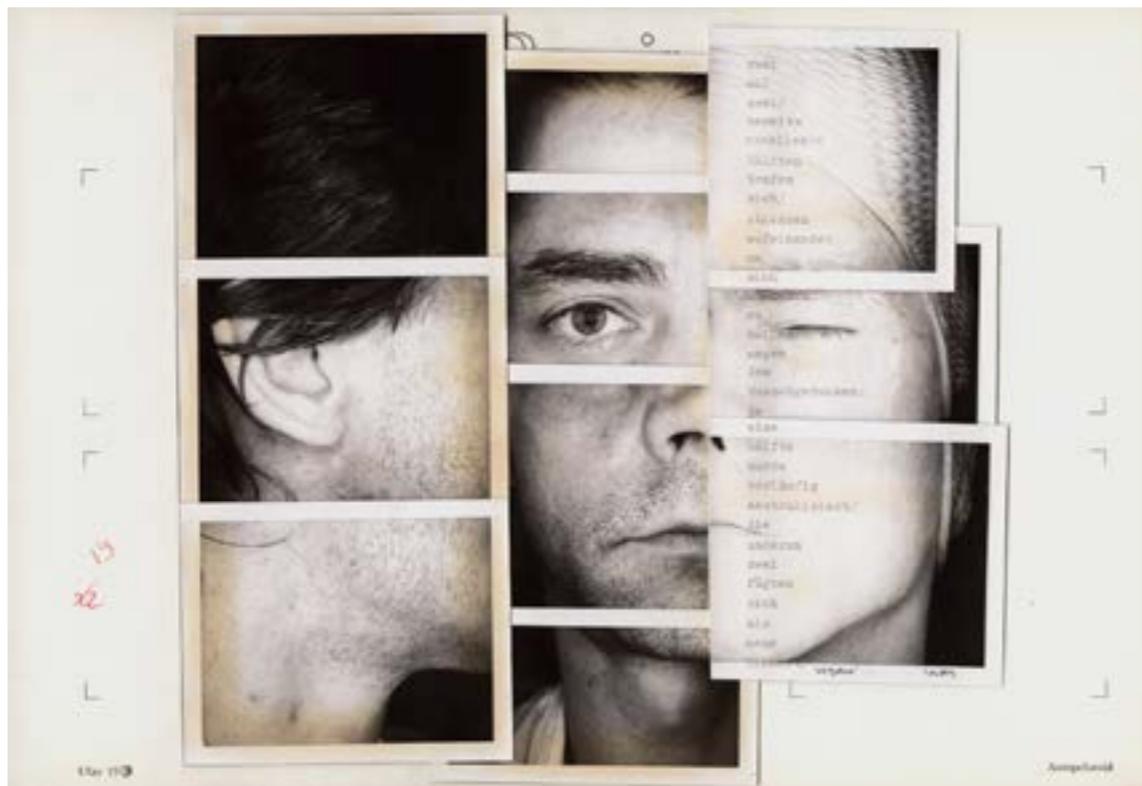
**U** I think so. I think showing your vulnerability can be a demonstration of power sometimes. Let me give you an example. A couple of years ago, in Amsterdam, there was a major clash between some squatters and the police. It was war, absolute war. I saw it on television and it wasn't far from where I lived, so I stripped off my clothes, hopped on my bike, and jumped into it. I was right there and nobody hit me – nobody. They must have thought I was a nutcase, but eventually I was able to use my vulnerability to protect some of the people around me. Showing your vulnerability can make for quite a strong statement. Of course there is always an element of risk involved. We all are vulnerable but we have been taught to have a different attitude in life. Our usual social behaviour is not about being vulnerable but the exact opposite – it's about being strong. And I'm getting tired of it. My body is not in great shape anymore but I like it better now. I'd rather live with an odd, aching body, openly displaying my limits rather than trying to fool myself and all the people around me into thinking that I am a superstar. It's just not my thing.

**MR** The difference is that in these past occasions, like the episode you just described in



*Auto-Portraits from the series Renaissance, 1974*  
Polaroid type 108  
8.5 x 10.5 cm each  
Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels





*Polaroid Aphorisms series, 1972 – 1975*  
Collages made of original Polaroids type 107  
51.5 x 63.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels

Amsterdam, you deliberately put yourself in danger, whereas in 'Project Cancer' you are battling a situation you find yourself in against your will.

**U** Yes, that is a big difference. One is self wanted – you put yourself in a situation willing to deal with all the consequences – and the other one just falls on you, and it's presented as terminal. It was a different type of ordeal but I do believe that the works I have done in the past, being performances, bodyworks or even trips to remote places, made me a very strong man. They somehow affected my biology, my body and brain cells, whatever; they have shaped me into a different person because what I have done is rather unusual. In a way I have prepared myself for the time where I got sick. And it's a mental as much as a physical thing. The combination of my mental and physical abilities seems to be a good match. You know, body and mind are connected, but there is no way to know what the brain really thinks about this connection because the left and the right hemisphere of your brain communicate exclusively between them almost 90 percent of the time – they are not busy with you. It's a funny idea but it's a scientific fact. I have learned to survive adversities pretty early on in life, because I was on my own by the time I was 15. My experience doesn't quite conform with what a lot of people went through. I don't mean to say that I'm special or anything, but the circumstances that I found myself in, voluntarily or involuntarily, eventually made me what I am – an extremely openhearted person. I try to be honest and straightforward as much as I can.

**MR** It seems to me that from the very beginning your work was designed to escape definition.

**U** Yes, I am actually The Escape Artist. That's the title Dominic Johnson used for an interview he did with me. I have escaped the art market and stardom. It's not really escaping – it's more like avoidance. They just don't suit my intentions, my picture of things. I literally escaped only once, when I stole a painting at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 1976 and got away with it.

**MR** At the time you insisted that it was an action and not a work of art.

**U** I tend to distinguish between performances, actions, demonstrative actions, and works of art. 'Da ist eine kriminelle Berührung in der Kunst' was a demonstrative action. It is now credited as an artwork but it's not my fault.

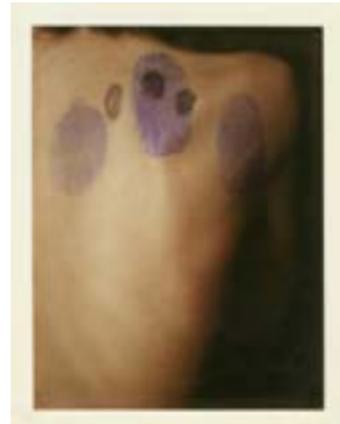
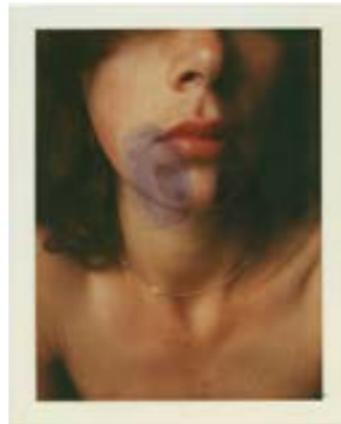
**MR** I guess that's why you like an artist like Tino Sehgal. He seems to be someone escaping categories as well.

**U** Absolutely. He's so good at what he does. I know he doesn't consider them to be performances but to me his pieces are everything performance art should be about. He recently made a great piece in Amsterdam. His work is so ephemeral – you don't need a contract, you just need a handshake. This is so beautiful. I really envy him. That's the way to do it. And he gets paid for it! [laughs]

**MR** I heard a great story about 'Imponderabilia' in Bologna in 1978 where, in order to get paid, you went to the museum office minutes before the performance with no clothes on...

*Polaroid Aphorisms series, 1972 – 1975*  
Collages made of original Polaroids type 107  
51.5 x 63.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels





*Retouching Bruises (detail), 1975*  
 Polaroid photography  
 Installation, 100 pieces  
 8.5 x 10.8 cm each, unframed  
 Each unique  
 Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels

*Retouching Bruises*, 1975  
Polaroid photography  
Installation, 100 pieces  
8.5 x 10.8 cm each, unframed  
Each unique  
Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels





*Imponderabilia*, 1977  
Performance  
Galeria Arte Moderna, Bologna  
Courtesy the artists

**U** Yes, I went to the office stark naked and I said 'I want my money'. I got what I wanted but I didn't know where to put them. I had to hide them in the toilet in a water container and pick them up after the performance was done.

**MR** Where do you think this necessity of avoidance ultimately come from?

**U** I think it's about wanting to maintain some form of anonymity.

**MR** It can certainly be a value.

**U** It is absolutely a value. Anonymity doesn't put any pressure on you. Unlike fame, it doesn't dominate your life. Being anonymous is good, especially for somebody who is very renewed. I hate the word 'famous', I never use it, but for a renewed artist, anonymity is like going on holidays.

**MR** Your first solo exhibition in Amsterdam in 1974 turned out to be a rather traumatic experience, to the point of prompting you to declare that you would never show your work publicly again. Do you think that particular episode played a part in your desire to be anonymous?

**U** I think so. I was already working on my Polaroid self-identity research at the time. They were pretty far out pictures. Really far out. There was a commercial gallery called Seriaal in Amsterdam. They used to work with great artists like Sigmar Polke and Richard Hamilton but they wanted to do something else and do performance, actions, films, etc. They asked me to show my Polaroids. I refused three times but they kept insisting so eventually I said yes. I was a bit hesitant, you know. They're very intimate, private and personal images but they are also about disability, marginalization, transgenderism, all sort of things. We installed the show and it was amazing. We covered the whole space and put each Polaroid into an empty Polaroid cassette with magnets on the clips on the wall. They looked like sentences in a book. Then there was the opening of course, and they sent out an invitation saying 'The artist will be present'. At the time it was customary to say 'The artist will be present'. Even later, when MA [Marina Abramovic] and me were working together, doing live performances, the invitation card would say 'The artists will be present'. Isn't that funny? Anyway, I was present, and the reaction of the crowd at the gallery the day of the opening was so bad, I promised myself I would never, ever, make an exhibition again. I walked away from that experience with a little scar. I might be a performer but I'm not an entertainer.



**MR** What do you think of Marina's performance 'The Artist is Present'?

**U** I think the audience was awful. They came for the glam. They wanted to meet the star. She is an art star. And she is doing an amazing job in that respect. And people want to be close to her. That's why they stand up in line waiting for hours. I'm not talking about the quality of the performance, I'm just saying that the public attending those events is awful.

**MR** How did you feel when, after 12 years of collaboration with Marina, you had to start again on your own?

**U** It wasn't easy. For some time I returned to photography because it was an old time favourite of mine and I was good at it. Still, it was performative photography, a bit like in the early works. I had a dark period, I felt like I was in a vacuum. And then I came out of it. Actually, whenever I see those images now, I think they look great, but I can clearly tell that I was in an abyss. It was just unavoidable. The collaboration, the togetherness, and the performances were so intense. Dropping off that degree of intensity is difficult. It's not like changing a t-shirt. The interesting thing is that during our performances, we were opponents, but in private life, we were together. It was a bit schizophrenic.

**MR** You exhibited 'Retouching Bruises' (1975) for the first time last June in Basel. What made you think it was the right time?

**U** I exhibited single images from 'Retouching Bruises' here and there before, but never the entire sequence. It's made of 100 single-framed images. The whole installation looked like a beautiful panorama. The funny thing about what I do is that although I enjoy anonymity, the work is very recognizable. And that's a paradox, if you make art. When I worked on my book 'Ulay on Ulay' last year, I had to take a trip down memory lane. I had to go back and open crates and boxes I haven't touched in ages in order to get out what I needed for the book. I tremendously disliked the process and if it wasn't for Lena Pislak's help, I would have never done it. I was a bit of an asshole the whole time. I just don't trust that kind of linearity. History is not linear. Life is not linear. Progress is not linear.

**MR** I think it's interesting in this sense to compare what you were doing in the early days with Polaroids with the state of photography today. Both Polaroids and digital cameras give you immediate results. The difference is that a Polaroid generates a unique image. It's like an object.

**U** Digital photography is fabulous. You can do it very economically – cameras are clean, immediate, but the physical relationship you have with it is very different. You cannot touch a digital picture. Perhaps this explains why so many artists involved with digital photography are making these gigantic, larger than life images. They feel pressured into making something out of it. I was deeply involved with photography and the history of photography, but I haven't spent a single minute of my time theoretically analysing digital photography so far. You can't think about digital and analogue photography in the same way. They're just different worlds.

**MR** One thing I find fascinating about digital photography is the possibility of editing out images you are unhappy with on the spot. With analogue photography, those mistakes would have to be printed out anyway, occasionally turning into something unexpected and special.

**U** My biggest pleasure is to use the delete key on my computer and cell phone. That's the only power I have over it. We don't have that option as people. Everything we have experienced in life, whether dramatic or pleasurable, is stored in our memory. The delete button is fantastic. In the old days, when we were using typewriters and the clatter would provide this beautiful rhythm, I wouldn't erase anything. I would just type over again or on the side. I'm still typing like that, with two fingers hitting the keyboard really hard.

**MR** Do you think the awareness of not being able to easily rectify mistakes could contribute some sort of mental clarity?

**U** Yes. It's the same as with analogue photography. You need to work on your compositional abilities, you need to train, you need to know a lot about how it works. With digital photography, all this becomes meaningless. You get the wrong picture, you just erase it

*S'he*, 1973  
Auto-portraits from the series *Renais sense*  
Polaroid type 107  
8.5 x 10.5 cm each  
Courtesy of the artist and MOT International London & Brussels



*S'he*, 1973  
Auto-portraits from the series *Renais sense*  
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and try again. And look at all these people taking selfies. You see them all the time, walking around the world like that. [Holds an imaginary phone in front of his face] The only reason why they do it is to prove their friends at home that they have been somewhere. They hold those sticks to make themselves part of the scene...

**MR** I know. I was at the Mauritius in The Hague recently and tourists were taking pictures of themselves in front of Vermeer's 'The Girl with the Pearl Ring' without even looking at the painting. They would just take a picture and walk away.

**U** Yes. The painting is nothing more than a backdrop for their ego.

**MR** The introduction of photography in the early 1900s forced painting to reinvent itself. Do you think what is going on with photography today, with the proliferation and accessibility of images forcing photographers to renegotiate their relationship with the media, is remotely comparable to what happened to painting back then?

**U** That's a difficult question. I like the idea of photography reinventing itself. Art as a whole should probably reinvent itself. But who has the intelligence to do that? Who has the courage to say that? The only person I knew that could have done it has passed away two years ago – Thomas McEvelley. I think photography has to be redefined. Art has to be redefined. As for painting, I don't know. It would be great if all these disciplines would be redefined. And then you start from zero, and a new generations of pioneers emerges.

**MR** Don't you see yourself as part of a generation of pioneers?

**U** Maybe. Maybe the day I will have a retrospective, someone will say that I helped redefining performance and photography. That would be the biggest compliment anybody could ever pay me.

**MR** You recently returned to performance with 'Skeleton in the Closet' (2015) at the Stedelijk Museum. Where does the title come from?

**U** We all have skeletons in the closet. We all hide something. I haven't disclosed what I was hiding in this case yet, and I don't think I ever will.

**MR** If one looks at 'Skeletons in the Closet', 'Project Cancer', the Earth Water Catalogue (2002), down to the early Polaroids, it seems that the quest to find your own identity is still very much going on. Do you see it as a life long project?

**U** Unfortunately not too many people, if any at all, question their own identity. They see identity as a national flag. It is something that has to do with education, nationalism, schools, systematization of young people that don't voluntarily adopt their identity and it just gets forced into them. If you can walk away from it and accept your status as an outsider, there is no need to push it. I think identity is a very frail, elegant, tiny sailing boat on a big ocean with an anchor the size of a tanker.

**MR** That's a very nice metaphor.

**U** That's my metaphor about identity. I think you're right though – if I look at it now, the whole identity issue hasn't been worked out yet. I think it has to do with my personal history. I'm a typical product of the 1960s generation and the Provo movement. Be free. Don't follow leaders. Don't be this, don't be that, just be yourself. Don't hurt anybody. Don't take anything from anybody. Just stay out of it. And I think I managed until today ●

**Ulay** (b. Frank Laysiepen in Solingen in 1943) is a visual artist. Formally trained as a photographer, he transitioned to performance art in the early 1970s, eventually forming a successful partnership with Marina Abramovic from 1976 to 1988. His work is featured in many institutional collections around the world, including the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Centre Pompidou Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. After several long-term art projects in India, Australia and China, and a professorship of Performance and New Media Art at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe, Ulay currently lives and works in Amsterdam and Ljubljana.

**Michele Robecchi** is a writer and a curator based in London.



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**When exactly:** Beginning on the first Saturday of September and ending on the first Sunday of November

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## COVER

Chuck Close, 2006

President Bill Clinton

Oil on canvas, 275.6 x 213.4 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and

Pace Gallery, New York

Photo: Kerry Ryan McFate

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