

## Ulay

(Solingen, Germany, 1943 – Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2020)

Known most of all for his artistic and sentimental link to Marina Abramović, with whom from 1976 to 1988 he produced works of great importance in the history of performance, Ulay started out in the field of photography at the end of the 1960s. After leaving Germany for Amsterdam, he was included in Polaroid's support programme for artists, and obtained a free supply of devices and film in exchange for scenes of urban life for the company collection. However, the instant and DIY development process allowed him absolute freedom to experiment with more private and provocative images in which very often he would be portrayed in positions of self-harm. It was in this same period, after having frequented groups of transvestites and transsexuals in the city for a long time, that he began to question his own identity and conventional genre roles. As well as choosing a pseudonym obtained from the elision of his name and surname (Frank Uwe Laysiepen), he elected Paula as his muse – his companion at the time – and for a certain period signed his works as 'Paulay'. Starting from 1973, he began to be portrayed with his face split in two in the series *S/he*: one side is perfectly cared for and made up, with a long-haired wig, while the other half shows his usual dishevelled appearance. Ulay immediately understood the expressive potential of photography, and made use of it in an incredibly performative manner. He coined the definition 'auto-Polaroids' to refer to a practice in which the eye of the camera is entrusted with the role of sole witness of what – even without an audience – he considers to be actions to all effects. Then, in the mid-1970s, he decided to challenge the physical limits of the exhibition space and involve the audience in the creation of the work. From here, the shift towards the performances created on his own and with Abramović was a short one.

Documented in the photographic prints acquired for the collection, *There is a Criminal Touch to Art* dates back to December 1976. At the heart of the action there is the theft by Ulay himself of the painting by Carl Spitzweg *The Poor Poet* from the rooms of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Firstly we see him take the painting off the wall of the museum, then report himself with a phone call to the museum director before running along the snowy streets until he reaches the apartment of a family of Turkish immigrants. Here, with a highly political gesture, he replaces the print hanging in the living room with the stolen painting, which is said to have been among Adolf Hitler's favourite works. In Ulay's intentions, as the son of a German soldier deployed in both World Wars, his work intends to mark a parallel between the cumbersome legacy of Nazi Germany and the difficulties faced by the new generation of immigrants. The title deliberately leaves space for ambiguity, without specifying whether the criminal touch lies in the gesture of the artist or that of the museum: a bourgeois institution accused of keeping the most disadvantaged social classes away from art.

RA