



Doppelgangers and the Third Force: The Artistic Collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramovic/Ulay

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Gilbert & George. *The Singing Sculpture*, 1973. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photo, Collection John Kaldor Archive.

Missing in Action

Gilbert & George's and Marina Abramovic/Ulay's actions of the 1970s were collaborations that blurred and doubled the "normal" figure of the artist as an individual body. This type of collaboration had the properties of a third identity, but did the new identity resemble a third hand, a doppelganger (an apparition associated with death, sometimes experienced historically as a shadow or as the double of a living person), or a phantom extension of the artists' joint will, rather like a phantom limb? The nature of this modified artist is important, for it represents a strategy to convince the audience of new understandings of artistic identity. In this regard, these 1970s actions now seem

absolutely prescient with respect to art in the late 1990s, in which so many artists absented themselves from the position of either author or maker.

The believability of Gilbert & George's action, *The Singing Sculpture* (1969–73), was linked to their manipulation of absorption and theatricality, the qualities Michael Fried theorized in his influential study of Denis Diderot's bourgeois milieu in eighteenth-century Paris.¹ Gilbert & George were emphasizing a physical and mental discontinuity between artists and their beholders. The idea of art that encodes personal absence and misplaced identity, of going away and leaving markers or traces of that departure, is far from new and has at least

one clear artistic precedent from a much earlier period—the Enlightenment. It had been theorized, for example, in a completely different context, that of Denis Diderot's 1767 essays on the landscape painter Claude-Joseph Vernet.² In his celebrated "Salon" of 1767, Diderot imagined himself stepping into and taking country walks in Vernet's landscapes. To recapitulate Fried's elaborations of Diderot's theories, this imagining was prompted by Diderot's proposal that the spectator of a painting must be free and active, not just a passive consumer, and conversely that the painting itself should seem to be an impassive object in nature and not appear to be asking to be looked at. Diderot was arguing for two ideas: The beholder has an active place and role in the work of art, and the work of art can be a place in which the artist or the viewer could "go for a walk" and mentally move around within the picture-space. The resulting artistic preference for the painter's self-effacement and depersonalization represented a departure from previous Rococo ideas of theatrical self-presentation and the spectator's appreciation of such theatricality. Mental travel was part of the process of dissociation in a special case of absorption—the pastoral—in which the disembodied spectator became a visually active phantom participant in the work itself.

Fried's reading of Diderot provides a conceptual model for understanding artistic self-representation in which the attributes of a declamatory, assertive artistic self are apparently absent.³ According to Fried, the risk of the overtly theatrical was the failure to convince the beholder of the reality of the illusion presented on the pictorial surface.⁴ The element of theater, though, could be systematically negated through the means of the representation of profound

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Doppelgangers and the Third Force: The Artistic Collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramovic/Ulay

1. See Michael Fried's arguments in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); new ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. I have extensively drawn from his useful gloss of that book in the introductory chapter of his *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). My next paragraphs—and all the implicit rehearsals of absorption and theatricality—rely heavily on Fried's text. For a discussion and critical evaluation of Michael Fried's later writing, placing his dialectic of absorption and theatricality into a critical, postmodern context, see Stephen Melville, "Compelling Acts, Haunting Connections," in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context* (Amsterdam: Gordon + Breach Arts, 1996), 187–98. Melville convincingly points out that Fried's binary construction is inadequate though useful for, in art, the terms of theatricality and visibility overlap (191).

2. Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art—Volume One: "The Salon of 1765" and "Notes on Painting"* and *Diderot on Art—Volume Two: "The Salon of 1767,"* ed. and trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); for a review of this translation, see P. N. Furbank, "Stylist at the Salon: The Impetuous Flood of Diderot's Art Criticism," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 10, 1995, 4–5.

3. Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 276.

4. *Ibid.*, 7.



self-absorption.⁵ Marina Abramovic/Ulay's *Relation Works* (1976–80) and *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–83) crossed the limits of normal sensation and the boundaries of gender into unrepresentable experiences of which the index was the enactment and presentation of extreme self-absorption. Both teams re-created themselves as distant, spectralized apparitions in which a doppelgänger—a third, phantom identity created by team effort—obscured the individual artists. These recreations were uncanny, marked by rhythmically disjointed movements and the stillness of marionettes or mimes.

Gilbert & George

Gilbert & George first exhibited *The Singing Sculpture* in 1969 at the Royal College of Art in London as *Our New Sculpture* and, shortly after, at St. Martin's School of Art under the present title. The two "sculptors" stood on a small table in drab suits, their faces and hands covered in bronze paint, and sang the English music-hall standard "Underneath the Arches" to a long-playing record accompaniment. Each time the record finished, one of the artists climbed down from the table, restarted the music, took a walking stick, and handed a glove to the other. The works were long and arduous: five seven-hour days in London in 1970 and ten five-hour days at Sonnabend in New York in 1971. The two artists had cast themselves both as homeless aesthetes and as a hybrid work of art composed, in equal portions, of music-hall tramp and Walter Pater. Both identities proposed interminable journeying: As tramps, the artists were doomed to life outdoors on the road or "underneath the arches," just as Pater's melancholic aesthetics had suggested a long mental quest for quality.

In August 1969, Gilbert & George sent an ornate manifesto to leading art figures in which they declared that they were "walking along a new road. They left their little studio with all the tools and brushes, taking with them only some music, gentle smiles on their faces and the most serious intentions in the world."⁶ In the May 1970 issue of *Studio International*, the critic Michael Moynihan noted this detachment from normal routines, observing that "they appear to be living on private means and Mrs Passmore's [George's wife and mother of his then-sixteen-month-old daughter] earnings as a kindergarten teacher. 'Whatever else they are, they are emphatically not phoney,' observed Mr Kustow."⁷

Over the next four years, Gilbert & George re-presented *The Singing Sculpture* approximately two dozen times, until the August 1973 Australian performances, after which they retired the piece (apart from its brief resuscitation at Sonnabend in 1991).⁸ In these performances, although they occupied the same physical space as audience members, they stood above them; indeed, they behaved as if they lived on an elevated mental plane, distant from the emotions and cares of ordinary mortals. This strategy was not shared by most performance artists of the period, who strove to bridge the gap between artist and audience. Gilbert & George had no such desire, and wished to distance themselves entirely from the genre of performance. According to Gilbert, "We never did performance, ever. We never called it performance, ever. We didn't like it. For many, many years, we wouldn't even show in the standard group shows to do with performance, because we felt it was something completely different."⁹ In interviews and in correspondence, they absolutely insisted on this difference, dis-

5. My misuse of Fried's arguments to describe examples of an art form that he detested is far from unprecedented. Jack Burnham observed that his "continuous and perpetual present" was, if the formalist had the eyes to see it, exactly the same quality experienced in the expanded field of post-object, ritual-based art; see Burnham's chapter "Objects and Ritual: Towards a Working Ontology of Art," in *Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 152.

6. See Gilbert & George, *A Message from the Sculptors*, August 1969, postal sculpture. The text is quoted in Michael Moynihan, "Gilbert & George," *Studio International*, 179, no. 922 (May 1970): 196–197, 196.

7. *Ibid.*, 196.

8. See Carter Ratcliff, "Gilbert & George: The Fabric of Their Words," in Gilbert & George, *The Singing Sculpture* (New York: Anthony McCall, 1993), 35.

tancing themselves from the interactive connotations of performance art made by charismatic personalities who emphasized bodily experience.

Given this distaste, and in order for their distance to be properly convincing, Gilbert & George had to eliminate all signs of private personality, preserving only their public personae as artists. They protected their elaborately dignified mental distance as living sculptures both in performance and in private. Working as a collaborative team was one means to this end; refusing to live outside art was another. At a more general level, the detached homelessness of the living sculptures was a literal enactment of the consequences of avant-garde stylistic exhaustion, marking out their distance from both late modernist formalism and Conceptual art alike.¹⁰

As many of their hosts and guides recalled, the two living sculptures behaved formally at all times, exaggerating genteel etiquette until it became a regal distance. The requirements of detachment meant that they never established eye contact with audiences, nor did they allow time to stop for breaks or to chat between performances. Accosted by members of the crowd during rock concert performances at the London Lyceum in 1969, and by bemused members of The Who at the Sussex Festival that same year, they replied neither to provocations nor to friendly questions off-stage.¹¹ Their status as living sculptures, certified by their mask-like face paint (it was, incidentally, reported that they removed this substance from their faces with Ajax, a highly abrasive kitchen cleanser), prohibited all interaction.

Gilbert & George's robotic self-control and evasion of personal contact was redolent of the utter self-absorption of mimes. Indeed, their metallic face paint strongly recalled the makeup of these performers, and most English and Australian gallery audiences of the late 1960s and early 1970s would have been aware of and might have associated *The Singing Sculpture* with the then-famous French mime Marcel Marceau in particular. Gilbert & George combined Marceau's inscrutability and heavy makeup with his Pierrot-like pathos and aura of vulnerable naiveté. But the link with mime was even more significant than this simple correspondence might suggest, for the affective power of works like *The Singing Sculpture* was directly comparable to mime: the removal of speech, except as karaoke-like accompaniment to prerecorded music, and immobility punctuated by jerky movement.¹²

In "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi eloquently locates mime's power in interruption, and in its decomposition of movement into a series of submovements punctuated by jerks. At each jerk, according to Massumi, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, continuity is suspended. This allows the signification of potential movements that are made present without being actualized. Each jerk is therefore a point at which an instant of virtuality appears. In 1970, Moynihan described Gilbert & George moving jerkily like robots on a small table to the strains of "Underneath the Arches." Regarding this motion, George commented, "you know when you're walking and you suddenly feel there's someone you know coming up behind you and your leg and arm and body muscles go stiff with nerves? That's how we walked, completely unrelaxed, a zombie-like walk."¹³ Through this zombie-like motion, Gilbert & George brought their self-creation—the double identity of the collaboration—to a semi-autonomous marionette-like "life." If the discipline of mime has

9. Gilbert, in Michelle Helmrich, "Gilbert & George Interviewed," *Eyeline* (Brisbane), no. 24 (Autumn–Winter 1994): 16.

10. See Ratcliff, 35.

11. Moynihan, 196.

12. For an analysis of mime, see Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy Effect," *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1995): 83–109.

13. Moynihan, 196.

14. Steve Tillis, *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* (New York: Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, 1992), 64–65.

15. *Ibid.*, 64.

16. Ratcliff, 14.

17. Abramovic: "In every cell of our body we have energy that we never use. Survival situations give you the energy to use this energy. The same energy is used by Tibetans in Inner Heat exercises. We needed that excess energy when we made the work with the bow and arrow pointing at my heart" (Abramovic, telephone conversation with the author, March 22, 1996). She also observed that "The performance is an exchange of energy" (Abramovic, "Performing Body," Storey Hall Theatre, Melbourne, April 15, 1998, author's notes). Other collaborations were equally aware of the creation of an authorial character exceeding the sum of two identities. According to Komar and Melamid, who had collaboratively evolved a hybrid history painting from a combination of Socialist Realism and modernism during the 1970s, "We invented that third person, the third artist, but we never specifically named that third artist." (Alexander Melamid, taped interview with the author, New York, December 4, 1996; Melamid cited extensive Russian literary precedents for the renunciation of one's own voice in favor of an invented, fictitious identity, observing, "The artist's 'name' is important, and is a fictional device." However, the identity of artist and artwork had resulted in a different type of collaboration.)

18. Ulay, quoted in Jennifer Phipps, "Marina Abramovic/Ulay/Ulay/Marina Abramovic," *Art & Text*, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 50. The fame of Zen in the West has meant that when art-critical comparisons and analogies are made with Buddhism, they are invariably made with Zen, which was only one of many schools within the vast heritage of Buddhist philosophy. Abramovic/Ulay's performance works were unsystematic secular attempts to explore extreme states of consciousness, which had been systematically codified in Mahayana Buddhism by the "Six Topics"; see a famous Mahayana meditation manual written by Tibetan teacher and monk, sGampopa (sGampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. and annotated by Herbert Guenther [London: Rider, 1959], xiii.) The Six Topics were meditation techniques taught by Tilopa (also known as Tillipa), the great Buddhist mystic and teacher, which included meditation developing the mystic "inner heat" or concentration; the experience of seeing one's own body as a phantom; the experience of the state of dreams; the experience of the Radiant Light; the experience of the state between birth and rebirth while living; and the practice of spiritual meditation to raise the consciousness to higher planes.

19. Abramovic/Ulay, in Phipps, 46.

20. See "Emptiness: The Two Truths. Excerpts from 'An Interview with the Dalai Lama'" (New York: John F. Avedon, 1979), reprinted in Stedelijk van Abbeuseum, *Ulay & Marina Abramovic: Modus Vivendi Works 1980–1985*, exh. cat. (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbeuseum, 1985), 75–77; the artists' debt to Buddhist philosophy—and Abramovic's debt in particular—is acknowledged

certain characteristics of communicative emptiness and awkwardness, as Massumi has noted, then the marionette has others. According to Steve Tillis, a marionette inspires double vision: The puppet-figure is an object, but one onto which the viewer projects his or her own emotions and expectations of presence.¹⁴ Furthermore, the viewer is unable to resolve the conflict of seeing the puppet as an object and as a live, sentient subject.¹⁵ Gilbert & George embodied a particular doubleness—both literal and as marionettes—for they objectified themselves to the point that they appeared as a pair of emotionless puppets.

There was something else, though, as well: from an initially ironic, fictive, and performative gesture—naming themselves "living sculptures"—they had created a surplus of aura around a single persona. That was the initial double irony in Gilbert & George's work from which utter seriousness, without irony, then followed: There was to be no time out.¹⁶ This is a crucial point. An initial performative gesture by artists—naming themselves an artistic collaboration—created an excess of artistic identity that was manifested in the auratic and often fictive presence: the persona of the collaborative team, not the diminished persona related to the self-objectification of real bodies which had become marionettes. The identification of artists with their works, as well as with work itself, was crucial and deliberate: if the artists were deliberately uncommunicative, so would be the works.

Marina Abramovic/Ulay

Another entity therefore emerges: collaboration could create a third hand—the authorial excess of an invisible actor. Marina Abramovic/Ulay called this third hand "REST ENERGY," and Abramovic insisted that a third hermaphroditic force, independent of them, was created by collaboration.¹⁷ Abramovic/Ulay's performances were hard work—labor that, they hoped, would liberate them from the encumbrance of the limits of language. In their trance-like performance *Nightsea Crossing*, the title of which refers to the soul's spiritual journey, speech was unthinkable. In this work, Abramovic/Ulay dressed in contrasting red and black outfits and sat completely still at either end of a long table, staring at each other for seven-hour installments, often stretching for days. In the 1981 Sydney performance, gold nuggets, a gold boomerang, and a live diamond python rested on the table. The python in *Gold Found by the Artists* symbolized the current of psychic energy running down every person's spinal column, traditionally represented, in a wide range of mystical literature, by a coiled snake. This mystical "snake" would, in turn, be awakened by spiritual exercises on which Abramovic/Ulay's focused silences and mental withdrawal were clearly borrowed. The still-life arrangement of gold and snake on the table somewhat unsubtly prompted the audience to recognize the performance as a tableau vivant in which a process of active but hermetic mental transformation was taking place. The alchemical stage props "explained" the otherwise completely inaccessible, sealed-off process performed by the artist-actors. Presumably, the live snake's mobility also indexed their psychic awakening.

In preparation for this performance, Abramovic/Ulay undertook a journey through the most remote regions of Central Australia between October 1980 and March 1981, during the course of which they experienced a variety of harrowing physical and mental exercises. As Ulay has stated, "I think our



Marina Abramovic/Ulay.
Gold Found by the
Artists/Nightsea Crossing,
1981. Art Gallery of New
South Wales, Sydney.
Photo, Collection Art
Gallery of New South
Wales.

in this interview. To understand the concept of emptiness alluded to by the artists, it is necessary to refer to the Mahayana Buddhist understanding of the “bedrock” underlying individual psychological life, and therefore to allude to the concept of “Skandhas,” explained in *sGampopa, 200*. The Skandhas are the five constituents of individual psychological life—the Buddhist description of mind—which consists of corporeality, feeling, sensation/identification, motivation, and consciousness. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that these constituents are together an accurate description of the mind, but that they do not begin to describe anything that is ultimate. The mind is provisional, and so are the fruits of analysis. In the same way, the experiences of meditation (and, presumably, contemplative performance activity) that go beyond the wavering, confused nature of normal, mental activity are nothing ultimate in themselves,

desert trip was part of tuning yourself more, training yourself.”¹⁸ Their slightly mad, Bruce Chatwin–like epic of crushing summer heat, loneliness, disappointment, and eventual epiphany took them to Papunya, near Alice Springs, and then through the Gibson Desert to Leonora, Willuna, and Mount Newman. Much of their journey was spent struggling with sheer physical discomfort while camping alone for extended periods at remote desert water-holes. In a brief interview, published shortly after they had returned from the desert, Abramovic/Ulay recorded their frustrated expectations about the apparently inaccessible Other: “I must say for myself I expected very much from the contact with Aborigines, and I got very disappointed.”¹⁹ Disappearance, Abramovic noted, described the impermanence of both her performances and Aboriginal ceremonies, and each type of disappearance from public view was a way of gathering psychic power.

Abramovic/Ulay were also aware of the philosophical connotations of conceiving emptiness and void as strata underlying phenomenological existence. They even reprinted an interview with the Dalai Lama on this subject in their 1985 exhibition catalogue, *Modus Vivendi*.²⁰ According to Abramovic, the intense visions they experienced during *Nightsea Crossing* compelled them to seek a way of organizing or controlling the flood of disruptive, powerful sensations. They accordingly visited the large Tibetan Buddhist community at Dharamsala, in

northern India, where the Dalai Lama resides, and undertook structured Mahayana Buddhist meditation sessions.²¹

Through this process, Abramovic/Ulay were digging through the sediment of culturally constructed gender roles, they thought, to the bedrock beneath and, at the same time, creating a new “body” outside the binary iterations of male/female or nature/culture. During their 1980–81 Australian journey, Ulay stated, it was “not important that we are man and woman. We talk of ourselves as bodies.”²² Moreover, from the beginning of the collaboration, they spoke of themselves as parts of a “two-headed body.”²³

It is immediately apparent that interpreting this art as symptom is of limited use, for Abramovic/Ulay’s affective “REST ENERGY” had to be distinguished from the agency of therapeutic catharsis, even if the processes overlapped to some degree.²⁴ Abramovic emphasized that the endurance of pain was irrelevant to her conception of the works’ meanings: “Pain is not there in the performance.”²⁵ Collaborative biography was a resource, but it was not regulated by trauma. Their repressions were neither uncovered nor resolved by collaborative catharsis. They were sublimated through a ritualistic, meditative system of repetition, distance, and self-absorption.

In both teams’ performances, the artists folded themselves into an elusive extra identity: the double body of the collaborative artist. Gilbert & George dressed alike and, with metallic facial paint on, looked alike. Abramovic/Ulay’s bodies changed dramatically during their collaboration. According to many observers, they became remarkably similar in appearance, even though they made a work highlighting the differences between their physiques, *Communist Body—Capitalist Body* (1979). In fact, they looked and behaved almost like twins: they were both tall, muscular, athletic, and long-haired and dressed in similar clothes.²⁶ In *Relation in Time and Breathing In—Breathing Out* (both 1977), they effectively presented themselves as joined halves of a double being, like Siamese twins. In addition, they had met on their mutual birthday. Abramovic/Ulay were well aware that they were re-creating themselves as doubles—that they were moving beyond conventional gender-based markers of identity at the same time that they were attempting to develop faculties such as telepathy through sensitization processes. In public lectures after their collaboration had ended, they described the collaboration as symbiotic, emphasizing the absolute trust that had been necessary to produce their works.

Just as Abramovic/Ulay, through extreme self-absorption, spectralized their bodies, so their collaborative body became their real body, for their corporeal bodies had been stripped of normal significance, like shadows. Their collaborative work implied a phantom body—an apparitional third entity created by the two artists—and the nature of this entity, either in the “safe house” of the art gallery or the world outside, was uncanny, for the distinction between the real and the phantasmic was blurred. Their individual identities were marginalized, spectralized, or became progressively and deliberately less accessible. In this, the team’s evolution resembled that of Gilbert & George. Asked why they made a point of not distinguishing their separate contributions to the collaboration, George replied, “Well, it’s not based on that. It is ‘us’ doing it together.”²⁷

though at the time they appear to be. Afterwards, the subject can mistake such memories for the real things themselves. By clinging to this type of nostalgia the subject turns the experience of rapture into the worship of dead concepts, which has the effect of dulling and retarding meditation. Thus, the activities of mind are regarded as not only constructed by language, but also as completely illusory, for there is only emptiness. sGampopa continues: “Since it is not obtained by itself, from others or both/Nor by the three aspects of time [past, present or future]/The belief in a Self collapses” (207). Mortification of the body was a standard technique amongst both Buddhist and Hindu mystics (and spiritual aspirants generally), but the demonstration of great physical endurance was not an end in itself; it was the means to the stripping away of layers of mental activity. As another important Buddhist sutra observes: “First open this heap of skin with your intellect/Then separate the flesh from the network of bones with the scalpel of discriminating awareness./Having opened the bones also look into the marrow/And see for yourself/Whether there is anything solid” (47). Marina Abramovic/Ulay were effectively carrying on this tradition without strict adherence to any organized mystical system.

21. Abramovic, telephone conversation with the author.

22. Marina Abramovic/Ulay, “Interview,” in Nick Waterlow, ed., *European Dialogue: Biennale of Sydney* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1979), 19.

23. Abramovic/Ulay, in Bojana Pejic, “Being-in-the-Body: On the Spiritual in Marina Abramovic’s Art,” in Friedrich Meschede, ed., *Marina Abramovic* (Berlin: National Gallery and Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 34.

24. Abramovic, *Biography*, 35.

25. Abramovic, “Performing Body.”

26. This, at least, is my recollection of their Australian performances, confirmed by others, including Australian curator Jennifer Phipps, in whose Melbourne house they stayed for several weeks upon their return from the desert.

27. Gilbert, in Helmrich, “Gilbert & George interviewed,” 17.

There is a linked proposition—that the body constituted in artistic collaboration was a phantom extension of the artists' joint will, rather like a phantom limb. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz explains the phenomenon of a phantom extension of the will. She suggests that "The phantom limb is a libidinally invested part of the body phantom, the image or *Doppelgänger* of the body the subject must develop if it is . . . to take on voluntary action in conceiving of itself as subject."²⁸ Grosz offers a way of theorizing the collaborative artist formed by the teamwork of two or more artists—the artists' phantom appendage or third hand. Although this is a familiar proposition about collaboration and teamwork, it is more than a poetic metaphor. In the cases of both Gilbert & George and Abramovic/Ulay, artistic collaboration was an aesthetic gesture born of free choice. It was a way of acting freely rather than capitulating to circumstance, training, or expectations. Perhaps it was also a way of seeing the limits of the artistic self clearly. In the case of artists who were also actors in their works, it was a way of having the artistic self made available for self-scrutiny. Grosz observes that human subjects are never able to see their own bodies completely. While hands and legs may be visible, for example, the small of the back cannot be seen. The out-of-body, synchronistic visions of psychics—who say in trance they see their bodies from above and from several sides at once—sometimes enable a point of view of the whole body. In collaboration, however, the creation of another synthesized subject seems to suggest that the impossible idea of a unified body-image may be almost magically attainable by the conjunction of complementary parts: Abramovic reported that during the extended silences of *Nightsea Crossing*, she had the sensation of seeing in every direction around her, as if every pore of her body could see, and of developing a spectacularly magnified, all-encompassing sense of smell.²⁹

Collaboration in which the artists acting out dramas of real communion and pain suggested to many viewers an almost unbearable closeness. However, the poles of schizoid division and fusion were not, as we have seen, the only identities created. In their actions, though, Abramovic/Ulay directly referred to "body memory" and a "third force," as they interacted with each other but ignored their audience. They stoically endured extraordinary self-abuse in their experiments with the paranormal in order to create a new identity, their hermaphroditic state of being. These were not straightforward attempts to experience an unmediated state of perception; the recourse by Abramovic's friend, Bojana Pejic, to a concept of prelinguistic communication obscured the deconstructive nature of this artistic collaboration.³⁰ Abramovic herself often hindered this understanding, for her presentation of an eclectic collage of geomancy, Tibetan Buddhism, and Aboriginal shamanism obscured the differences between lifestyle and rigor. The bedrock she referred to was absence—specifically, the concept of absence from Buddhist discussions that refused all talk of essences. Many poststructuralist commentators have noted that systems evoking or citing a ground of emptiness, negation, and voidness are not necessarily utopian, Jungian, or philosophically naive at all.³¹ Abramovic/Ulay, in particular, acknowledged sophisticated non-Western quasi-deconstructive precedents in Mahayana Buddhism.

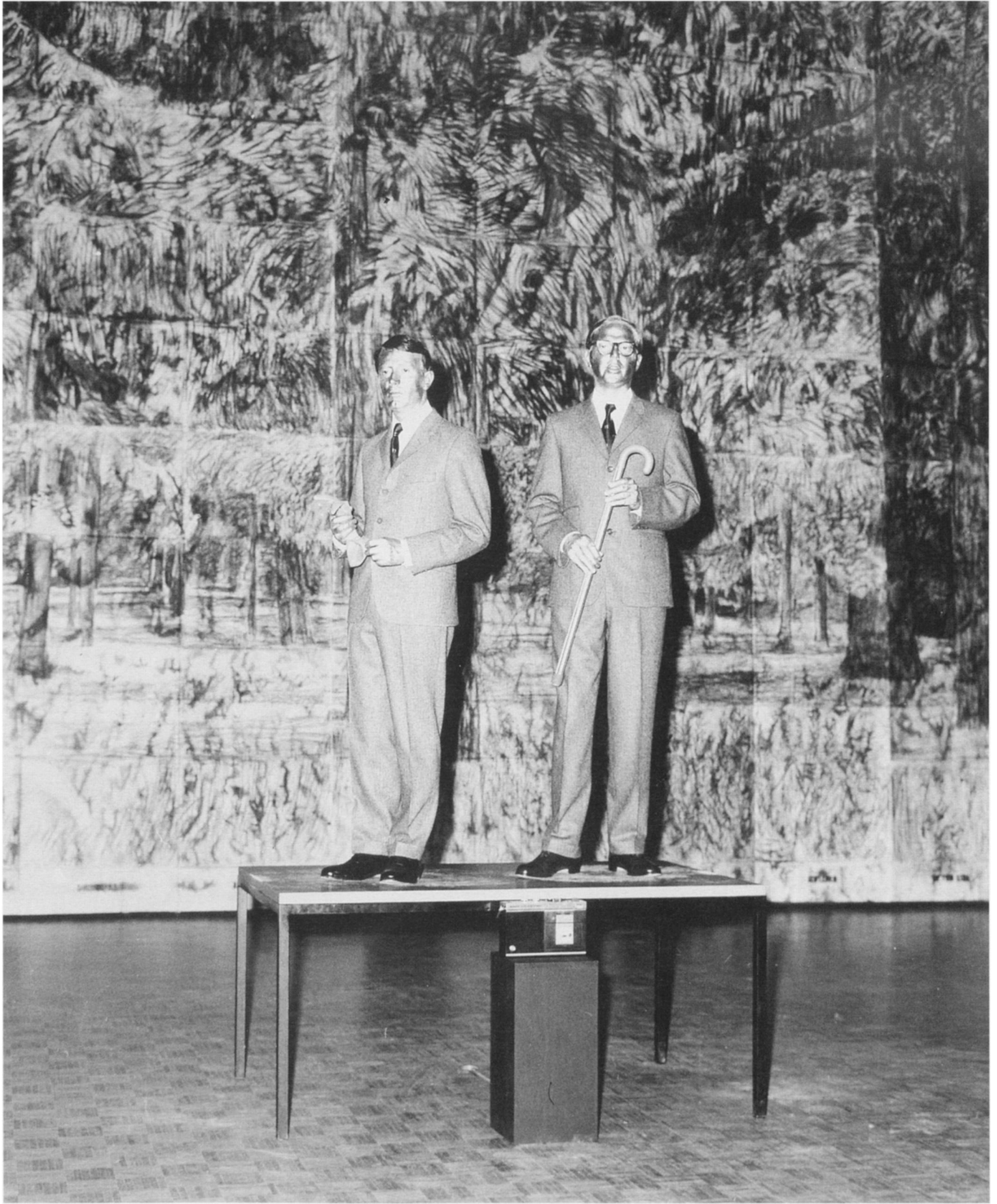
To be sure, other artists and writers of the 1960s and 1970s had empha-

28. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 41–42.

29. Abramovic, telephone conversation with the author.

30. Pejic, 26.

31. See Nathan Katz, "Prasanga and Deconstruction: Tibetan Hermeneutics and the Yana Controversy," *Philosophy East and West* 34, no. 2 (April 1984): 185–203; see also Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).



Gilbert & George. *The Singing Sculpture*, 1973. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photo, Collection John Kaldor Archive.

sized the possibilities of active, nonpathological body-image disintegration and reorganization. Influential 1960s counter-cultural psychologists such as Richard Alpert and Timothy Leary—who had been significantly influenced by Tibetan Buddhist psychology, Islamic Sufi dance, Christian mystics such as Nicholas of Cusa, and proto-counter-cultural theorists including Aldous Huxley—had over-romanticized extreme self-alienation, doubling, and depersonalization. And during the same period, Joseph Beuys was actively proselytizing a concept of the artist as a paradigmatic example of actively chosen personal freedom. In these widely circulated terms, collaboration was a way of seeing oneself as a nonalienated, free subject, for it was an example of a free action by an individual who had stepped outside the boundaries of personal expectations and conditioning.

The Authorial Excess: Collaboration as a Decision

The limits of representation are also the limits of language, and what lay beyond these limits had been in itself an important and complex—but heterogeneous—concept in other Conceptual art of the period. Gilbert & George's refusal to take time out to be anything other than living sculptures and Abramovic/Ulay's third source of energy were strategic means of shedding the traditional signs of unwanted artistic personality—the conventional studio-based artistic identity increasingly under question in the 1970s. Such extensions of Conceptual art were predicated on the disintegration of authorial stability, but even more importantly on something more: the limited horizon of the concept of identity itself. This artistic authorship identified itself, in Abramovic and Ulay's complex perspective on language, for instance, with an emptiness and blankness that was, the artists were in effect asserting, outside and not inside the horizon of representation. This flight outside the prison-house of language—if it can be judged to have been successful—was possible precisely because of the teams' escape as individual "artists" from their personal bodies into the uncanny realm of phantoms.

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