

# SPURS GALLERY

## **Ulay: The Turbulent Body**

**August 30–October 12, 2025**

**Gallery I | SPURS Gallery, D-06, 2 Jiuxianqiao RD.N, Chaoyang, Beijing**

SPURS Gallery is honored to present *The Turbulent Body*, a solo exhibition by Ulay, opening on August 30, 2025, in Gallery I. This marks the artist's third exhibition with the gallery. The exhibition brings together more than 20 works spanning Ulay's early performative photography, performance art, and collaborative performances with Marina Abramović.

## **The Turbulent Body**

**by Neil Zhang**

Born in wartime Germany and self-exiled to the rest of the world since the 1970s, Ulay turned his unstable/diasporic experience into a lifelong art practice. Without fixed roots or stable material resources, he worked with the one medium always at hand, his own body. His works challenged identity, power, and belonging, by placing the body in raw states of risk, endurance, and trust, collapsing the distance between art and life. For Ulay, the body was not just a medium; it was the site where personal history, spirituality, and political urgency converged.

As we look toward Ulay's exhibition in 2025, we too find ourselves living with turbulence in our daily lives, more than ever. This word "turbulent," often used to describe moments of social or political unrest, here turns inward. It becomes a metaphor for psychic dislocation, emotional rawness, and existential rupture. How should we face such turbulence? Under the weight of geopolitical forces and the will of the state, the traditional instinct to "fight or flee" no longer feels sufficient. Ulay's practice suggests another possibility, one that does not attempt to escape reality but falls directly into it.

His performances were never safe, rehearsed acts; they were volatile gestures, improvised, uncomfortable, and charged with contradiction. This recalls the Japanese writer Sakaguchi Ango, who argued that authenticity is found in *fallenness* (daraku). For Sakaguchi, to fall was not decadence but exposure: a radical openness to reality and to others. We shed the illusion of a stable self not by holding reality at a distance, but by surrendering to it completely. Ulay's works embody this fall. In *Irritation—There Is a Criminal Touch to Art* (1976), he crossed the line between critique and crime, exposing himself to arrest in order to reveal contradictions between cultural ideals and lived realities. In *Nightsea Crossing Conjunction* (1983), he submitted to long

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durations of stillness, transforming endurance into an unsettling form of presence. To fall, for Ulay, was to embrace turbulence itself as a condition of truth.

Seen in this light, the exhibition title *The Turbulent Body* captures the emotional urgency, political resistance, and physical risk embedded in Ulay's art. His body is never passive. It is a site of disruption, conflict, and becoming, a vehicle through which he confronted structures of power, identity, and meaning. From early Polaroid self-portraits that fracture the male gaze to long-form performances that stretch the limits of endurance, Ulay's body is at once agent and battleground, subject and weapon.

In *Irritation—There Is a Criminal Touch to Art*, Ulay staged one of his most radical disruptions. By stealing a painting from the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and temporarily relocating it to a Turkish immigrant family's home, he unsettled not only the museum's authority but also the illusion of art's neutrality. This gesture—illegal yet poetic—forces us to confront a fundamental question: can transgression in the name of art be justified? And if so, who bears responsibility for its consequences?

Ulay's act was no ordinary theft. It was carefully timed, highly symbolic, and deliberately public. The painting he stole—Carl Spitzweg's *The Poor Poet*—was a 19th-century romantic depiction of artistic poverty, hanging in one of Germany's most esteemed institutions. By removing it and placing it in the modest home of a working-class immigrant family in Kreuzberg, Ulay exposed the contradiction between cultural ideals and socioeconomic realities. His action transformed a bourgeois relic into a live provocation: Who owns culture? Who has access to beauty? Who is art really for?

The brilliance of this gesture lies in its discomfort. It was not only symbolic but a real crime, with real consequences. He was arrested, the work returned, the museum violated, the public startled, the law briefly broken. Unlike many forms of institutional critique that remain confined within conceptual frames, Ulay accepted personal risk to confront the system from the outside. In doing so, he collapsed the boundary between life and performance, artist and criminal.

Yet even as we admire the clarity and courage of this act, we must ask: does declaring something "art" free the artist from ethical scrutiny? If the performance had endangered others, involved deception without consent, or reinforced stereotypes, would we judge it differently? In the case of *Irritation—There Is a Criminal Touch to Art*, the ethical calculus is complex. The immigrant family involved appeared to participate willingly; the museum sustained no lasting damage. But the work's power comes precisely from walking the edge—between theft and critique, spectacle and sincerity.

Today, in a moment when artists and institutions are increasingly held accountable for the social impact of their work, Ulay's performance feels newly urgent. It reminds

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us that art can, and sometimes must, violate norms to expose uncomfortable truths. But it also insists that such acts carry weight. Transgression in the name of insight or justice does not erase responsibility—it deepens it.

In the end, *Irritation—There Is a Criminal Touch to Art* is not a defense of crime but a meditation on its symbolic force. Ulay did not glorify theft; he weaponized it to expose deeper imbalances of power, access, and value. His work challenges artists, viewers, and institutions alike to reconsider the ethics of provocation. If art is to remain free, it must also remain self-critical—aware that every bold gesture reverberates beyond its moment, into the lives and systems it dares to disturb.

*The Turbulent Body* recognizes Ulay's lifelong refusal to stabilize the self. His practice resists containment of any sort—by genre, by gender, by state. Instead, the body becomes a medium of restlessness: shifting, reacting, protesting, searching. It is in turbulence that Ulay found clarity.

## About the artist

Ulay (b. Frank Uwe Laysiepen, 1943, Solingen, Germany; d. 2020, Ljubljana, Slovenia) was a pioneering artist who redefined the boundaries of Polaroid photography, performance art, and the interplay between the two. His art, regardless of medium, was a force of disruption, challenging conventions, pushing limits, and confronting uncomfortable truths about identity, the body, and society.

Ulay's work is featured in the collections of major art institutions around the world, such as Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Tate London, Kunstmuseum Bern, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

For Ulay's biographical information and exhibition history, please visit [spursgallery.com](http://spursgallery.com).

## About the writer

Neil Zhang is a curator at UCCA. He has curated exhibitions including "Silent Thunder" (2021); "Huang Rui: Ways of Abstraction" (2021); "Zhang Ruyi: Speaking Softly" (2022); "Alice Wang: The Touching Touched" (2023); "Sugimoto Hiroshi: Time Machine" (2024); "Liang Hao: Pacing the void" (2024). He also co-curated the inaugural "Ad-Diriyah Biennale: Feeling the Stones" (2021) in Saudi Arabia. Zhang has previously studied at RISD, Brown University, and Columbia University. His research interests include the analysis of Buddhism under a postmodern framework, visual culture in pre-modern East Asia, and contemporary art. He has translated

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academic works including Columbia University professor Bernard Faure's *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*.