



# A Living Monument

An Exclusive Collaboration and Interview with Ulay

Bundesarchiv, B 183-Z1218-313  
Photo: Albert Köhler



In the aftermath of World War II, Germany was literally covered in rubble. Thousands of women around the country took on the task of cleaning it. They were soon nicknamed *Trümmerfrauen*, or “rubble women,” in Berlin, where most of the clean-up took place. Since then, they have become a German symbol of selflessness and sacrifice in the name of national rebirth.

In the contemporary popular imagination, the *Trümmerfrau* is a heroine who combines patriotic and feminist features. She helped rebuild a country, and while doing so, paved the way for women’s emancipation, as her work required the liberalization of labor laws to accommodate their contribution in manual tasks. It is estimated that they disposed of enough debris in Berlin alone to build a 600km-long wall, 5m high and 30cm thick, that could have connected the capital to Cologne.

Monuments dedicated to the *Trümmerfrauen* can be found on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Interestingly, their variations testify to the past clash of Cold War ideologies. The Communist version stands proud, seemingly heading towards more work, while her West-German counterpart rests seated, presumably contemplating the task as done — ready to go back to more “womanly” duties.

In this special issue of *ZOO*, German-born conceptual artist Ulay reflects on the importance of the legacy of the *Trümmerfrau* for our present-day society. In exclusivity, he shares his motivation for continuing the long and rich tradition of homages to these women with a monument that is different from all the others. He talks with *ZOO* about the lessons of history, making monuments with people and the exemplary role of women in the past and the present.

by Catherine Somzé / photography Sandor Lubbe (portrait) / photography Ulay (collaboration)





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**Catherine Somzé: What drew you to the topic of the *Trümmerfrau*?**

Ulay: I was born in 1943 in Solingen, Germany, so I am a war child. My parents categorically refused to talk about the war, and I learned about its disasters much later. And when I learned about what these women had done, I was deeply touched. Men had caused the war and women had to clean it up. The *Trümmerfrauen* were a response to what could be called *Mentrummer*, the rubble caused by men.

**CS: Why is it still important today to render an homage to them?**

U: Most men perished and died in the fields, yet these women worked to rebuild Germany despite the despair and, most surely, the deceitful hopes of seeing their men come back from the war. They were probably suffering, but also had the stamina, willpower and readiness to do the work. They showed that they could do heavy lifting, or “unwomanly” work, as physical work had been labeled until the Allied Forces changed its legal status in order to enrol women. Their efforts didn’t only contribute to the *Wiederaufbau*, the reconstruction of their country, but also had a tremendous effect on gender roles. Although the specificity of their situation was slightly different in East and West Germany, they definitely proved that they could do anything. In light of their example, there is still so much to achieve today in order for gender equality to become a reality.

**CS: Is this driven by empathy? Or do you identify with these women?**

U: I always identify with women. At large! I’ve dedicated a great deal of my artistic practice to questions of gender using cross-dressing and other queer strategies. In the period of 1970 to 1975, I lent myself to dress up as a woman for solidarity and curiosity, to be seen in public as a woman. The achievements of the *Trümmerfrau* must have had an influence on this will to explore what it means to be a woman, and that’s just an example.

**CS: There also seems to be a relation with hardship. Your performances as a couple with Marina Abramović were exhausting and also dangerous sometimes.**

U: The performances that we did with Marina between 1976 and 1988 were very pure, very simple. There were no theatricals, no nothing: no sketches, gimmicks or whatever in them. Also, although I am a pacifist, I often said I wanted to be

a “peace warrior”, just as these women had faced hardship to rebuild their country. With Marina, we worked together as a man and a woman, which was a great concept. In our *Relation Works*, we demonstrated the traumatic fears hiding in heterosexual relationships. These performances could be very hard, psychologically, emotionally and also physically. But, privately, we were the most adorable partners to each other. So our work was very much the exact opposite of what we were in private to each other. So, it’s all very complex; my own experiences as well as those of each and every *Trümmerfrau*. That’s why it touches me so much, I think.

**CS: How does your monument differ from existing ones?**

U: Existing monuments, as far as I can tell, look like they were made according to traditional notions of modern state-funded public art. They look classical in their form, and they’re made of concrete steel or bronze. And that’s the thing. My monument, on the other hand, is a living sculpture. It’s a performative monument, and that fits perfectly with my whole history as an artist. Performance is, for me, a choreographed moment of existence. You walk in, you do the performance, and you walk out. Life does not change, except for its intensity at that moment, and the concept behind it. It’s in art just like it is in life. My monument is therefore not made of solid materials that betray a need to halt life. On the contrary, it’s living, fleeting and made of flesh and blood, a fact further emphasized by the contrast of the performance with the place where it occurred, which is the former Saint Agnes Church in Berlin, now home to the König Galerie. It’s a Brutalist building, which pretty much looks like a blow-up bunker.

**CS: The human tower, with its emphasis on strength and community, does recall Socialist Realism as well.**

U: I’d say my inspiration rather comes from Michelangelo’s Pietà. But although I wouldn’t have thought of it myself, I do understand the connection with Socialist Realism, which I know from the former Soviet Union and also from China. All the work is basically heroic. It is the heroic worker or the heroic female worker, the worker with the heroic tractor, or the heroic crane, or the heroic factory. I actually have nothing against it. If anybody would associate or interpret the work with this kind of references in mind, as you do now, I wouldn’t mind. As for the community part,

I sometimes call myself an antisocial socialist. I’m a loner because society often disappoints me. It lacks behind on so many crucial issues such as gender equality.

**CS: But you must be aware of the recent debate surrounding the alleged abuse of the *Trümmerfrau* as a postwar propaganda figure both in East and West Germany. What is your position within this debate?**

U: I do, I’m aware of the critique of the so-called mythology of the *Trümmerfrau*, but I don’t agree with it. I think it’s too easy. In a way, this type of analyses misses the point, or worse, it weakens the emancipatory potential lying in history. The statistics may say that not all German women participated, and that they didn’t do the job alone or for the right motives, but statistics overshadow what’s most important. Numbers say nothing about human suffering, about how it felt to lift stones day in day out, for months, and even perhaps for years. Every story matters and is different. Also, people still need to constantly be reminded that equality between men and women matters to everyone, and that there is still so much to do in order to achieve it.

**CS: Did this have an influence on the making of your homage?**

U: This is exactly why I decided that half of the acrobats that constitute the monument to the *Trümmerfrau* should be men dressed as women. Gender equality will only be achieved when both men and women will work together so that it eventually becomes fully accepted. I think it should be part of the way parents educate their sons and daughters so that people grow up without questioning the validity of gender equality, and will finally naturally behave according to it.

**CS: Could this be the ultimate lesson taught by the *Trümmerfrau*?**

U: There is a lot of guilt and shame surrounding the disasters of war. Germans, and especially German artists, with a few exceptions, if I may say so, are not keen to pick on their war history. They’d rather avoid the subject altogether, and I understand because I often feel that way too. Still, man remains a destroyer and woman a builder. But just as there were surely moments of lightness amidst these dark times right after the war, these women showed we could do better. In that sense they were true heroes!



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Ulay  
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Collaboration between  
Ulay and *ZOO Magazine*,  
José Klap and Sandor Lubbe

Art Direction: **ZOO Magazine**, **Sandor Lubbe**  
Stylist: **Camille Franke**  
Makeup: **Jazz Mang @ Basic Instincts**  
Talents: **Malik Davis**, **Munetsi Dauro**,  
**Lukas Flint**, **Carlos Lilienthal**,  
**Wanida Theerasupaluk and Semih Yalcin**  
**Kathrin Lehrhuber and Chrischa Oswald**  
Production: **ZOO Magazine**,  
**Cherrelle Lubbe and Antonia Spagnardi**  
Photographer's Assistant: **Philippe Gerlach**  
Stylist's Assistant: **Theresa Höbart**  
Set Design: **Dirk Krechting**  
Costumes: **Theaterkunst GmbH, Berlin**

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