

Performance Art

# Ron Athey

03.12.21

## *James Hannaham*

*The pain artist: a show documents the work of a controversial performer.*



*Queer Communion: Ron Athey, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.*

*Queer Communion: Ron Athey, curated by Amelia Jones, Participant Inc, 253 East Houston Street, New York City, through April 4, 2021*

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I've known of Ron Athey's BDSM-inspired ecstatic pain rituals since the 1990s, when he and other performance artists regularly packed houses at P.S. 122 (now called Performance Space New York). In those hallowed halls, Karen Finley covered her naked body in various substances, Annie Sprinkle invited us to gaze into her vagina, and Spalding Gray talked about Rhode Island. Athey, though, like Finley a

target of Jesse Helms's NEA outrage, operated in even more extreme territory, and still does, after thirty-plus years.

Onstage, he and his company pierce their bodies with spikes and slice their skin with blades. Athey stapled the flesh around tattooist Alex Binnie's genitals, Athey pushed pearls out of his anus, penetrated himself with a dildo attached to a stiletto heel. In the piece that raised Helms's wrath, one performer's wounds became a "human printing press" after several two-ply paper towels absorbed the blood, and the patterns of the injuries became monoprints. (This was falsely assumed to be Athey's HIV-positive blood, and an uproar ensued.)

Athey was devoutly Pentecostal as a child ("sainted as a prophet messiah who proselytised in tongues," says one description), then fell hard from grace—into LA punk, drug addiction, '80s-'90s queer culture, and HIV-positive status—so tumbling into that scene granted him a kind of shaman status. He continues to revel in it, especially in countries less hostile to transgressive art. But the solemnity, long robes, and dim lighting in which he and his acolytes often perform these shocking sacraments always point toward the eroticized suffering of Christ depicted in myriad artworks, as well as to the writings of French thinkers like Jean Genet and Georges Bataille, and contemporary body artists Carolee Schneemann, Chris Burden, and Bob Flanagan. Never do his pieces indulge in exploitation or sensationalism; instead they position Athey as a sort of underground spiritual leader.

As a queer person, I respect the extremity of this work, its cathartic potential, and its radical critique of gender norms. But as a nonreligious person of color, I find its trappings primarily geared toward Euro-Americans who, like Athey, have become disillusioned specifically with Christianity, and who find transcendence in witnessing the real physical pain of others, which I suppose I don't. I prefer to help people when I see them in pain, but a fourth wall in the way pretty much prevents this. So to Athey's shows, I find myself emphatically saying both *Yes, do this work!* and *Um, I'm busy that night.*



*Queer Communion: Ron Athey, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.*

Athey's themes and controversies are mother's milk for many cultural critics, who leap to put these scandalous tableaux vivants in context and defend his right to create them. Hence, it's not surprising that Participant Inc's retrospective *Queer Communion* appears in tandem with a 439-page book of the same title, its first half composed of Athey's writings, its second of brief essays by others. That the show and the book provide a welcome distance from the harrowing experience of live Athey performances is a boon to the appreciative bystander, the performance historian, and the just plain fraidy cat.

The nonprofit Participant Inc is really the perfect venue to present this show; it's the art space that most resembles an East Village punk-rock performance club from bygone days, a veritable CBGB of artists whose work opposes the mainstream—Jayne County, Narcissister, Christeene—its interior painted black as often as other galleries paint theirs white. Raw tin ceilings and fluorescent lights help create the impression of the aftermath of an energetic, messy concert.



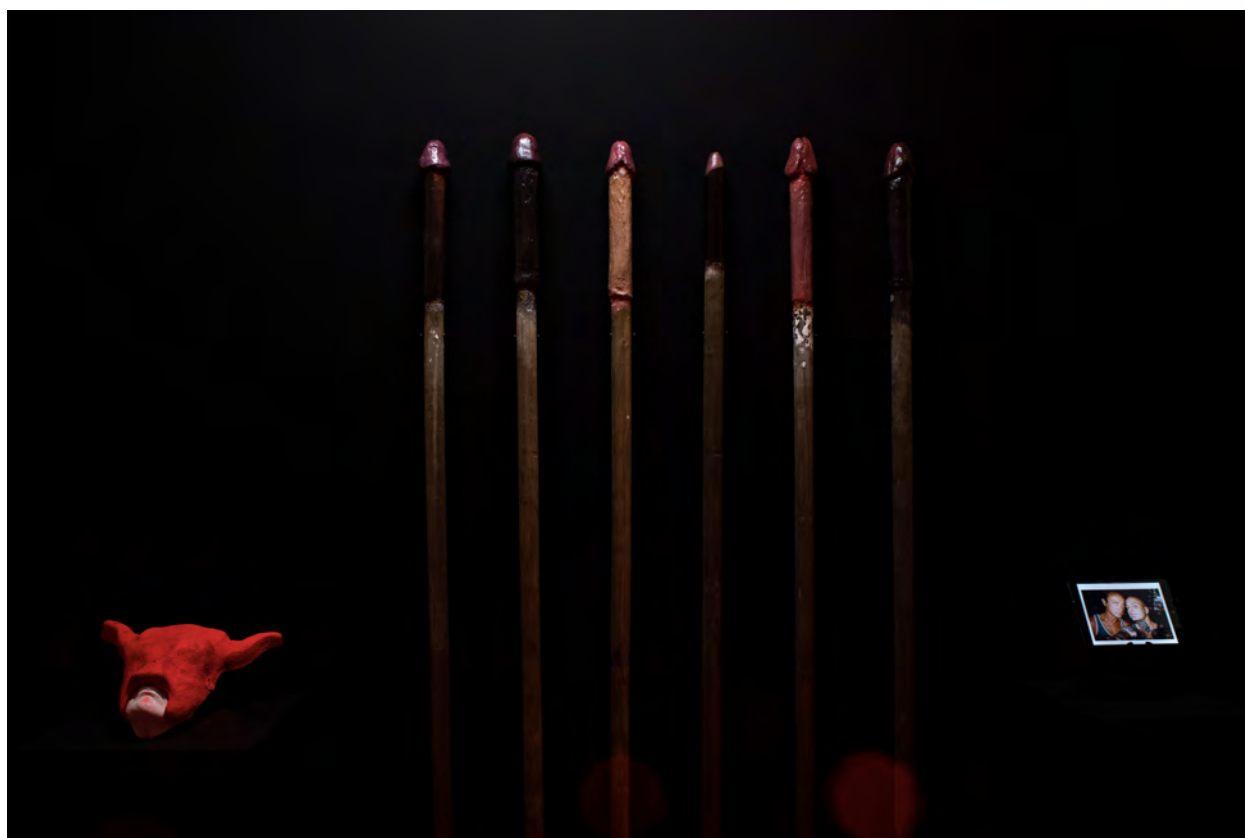
*Queer Communion: Ron Athey, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.*

In that spirit, the Athey show consists of a wide array of artifacts from the artist's personal and onstage lives, arranged by themed "zones" rather than a timeline: Religion/Family, Music/Clubs, Literature/Tattoo/BDSM, Art/Performance/Politics, New Work/Community, organized in stations around one large room and a darker back area.



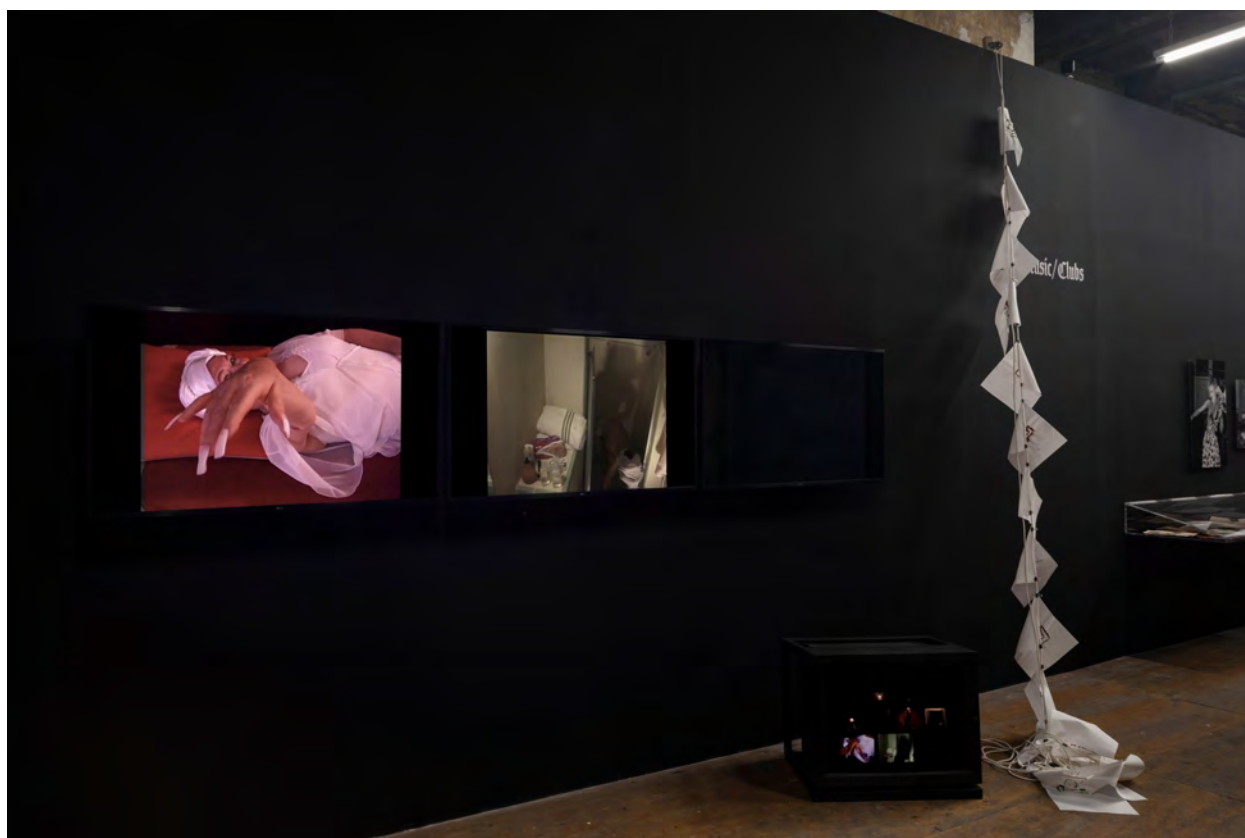
*Queer Communion*: Ron Athey, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.

The copious topics presented aren't actually separable, though. Athey constantly excavates his biography to bring back some pretty grim material, but the exuberant theatricality of the extraordinary props and costumes of his past takes over the space. For the *Torture Trilogy* (1992–95), Athey donned a matronly white gown equipped with an outsize bustle, in tribute to (or mockery of) Sister Aimee Semple McPherson, the larger-than-life star evangelist and founder of the Foursquare Church; this and a few other drapey, quasi-religious costumes in velvet immediately set a tone of sleazy chic. Other dazzling items—a crown festooned with prosthetic eyeballs, a pair of hip-high lace-up leather boots, a series of six dildoes on ten-foot-long sticks—accompany a number of glass cases containing smaller objects, numerous snapshots of wild early performances and backstage antics, and rare manuscripts, all surrounding a wooden pyramid, a torture device on whose apex Athey parked his high-endurance booty for three minutes during *Judas Cradle*, a piece created for the 2004 Visions of Excess Festival.



*Queer Communion: Ron Athey, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.*

If the installation throws everything at you rather than providing much in the way of guidance, that seems to be part of the point. The viewer can control their level of involvement here much better than the audience members in some of the videos looping on the far-left wall. One may watch for as long (or short) as one wishes before diving into a different aspect of Athey's decades in the margins. To wander among the trappings adds a veneer of glamour that the performances don't highlight in quite the same way. One can see more of the beauty rather than being overwhelmed by the gore: drawings on storyboards from previous shows, Catherine Opie's sumptuous photos of Athey in a leather corset, a notebook with a photocopy of a photograph Scotch-taped to it of Athey as St. Sebastian, pierced with sundry arrows. Offering autonomy to the spectator does tone everything down, but the softened impact allows for a different kind of engagement, perhaps a launch pad for the unconverted. What good is subversion when everyone's already on board?



*Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.

It also starts to become clear that while Athey’s rituals critique and mimic those of Christianity — “building a makeshift church, of sorts, for the bulldaggers, faggots, and marginalized folks that form the luscious core of his community,” say the catalog editors—the followers of Jesus are not just compelled by ritual but narrative. Since so much of Athey’s output, though, is about action rather than storytelling per se, and that he inhabits the role of the sufferer at the center of his work, his life story and charisma are a large part of what drives interest and enthusiasm around the proceedings. A charming, lucid, and surprisingly sweet explainer of his own work—in the companion book, his writings are delightfully plainspoken and nonacademic—Athey obviously inspires a great deal of devotion, dare I say a cultlike following, especially in his performers, willing to do damn near anything for him, at least on stage.



*Queer Communion*: Ron Athey, installation view. Photo: Daniel Kukla.

And if these elaborate performances of actual pain amount to surrogates for Christian ritual, sacrifice, and suffering, with Athey as profane Christ figure, the experience of visiting *Queer Communion* can be just as exciting as going to a religious site as a tourist of a different denomination—taking pictures, marveling at the reverence, the vestments, the chalices, the stained-glass windows—especially for those who are not already devout Atheists.

*James Hannaham's most recent novel, Delicious Foods, won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. His next book, Pilot Impostor, a bevy of multigenre responses to work by Fernando Pessoa, comes out in November 2021. A third novel, Re-Entry, or What Happened to Carlotta, is set for release in 2022. He teaches in the Department of Writing at the Pratt Institute.*



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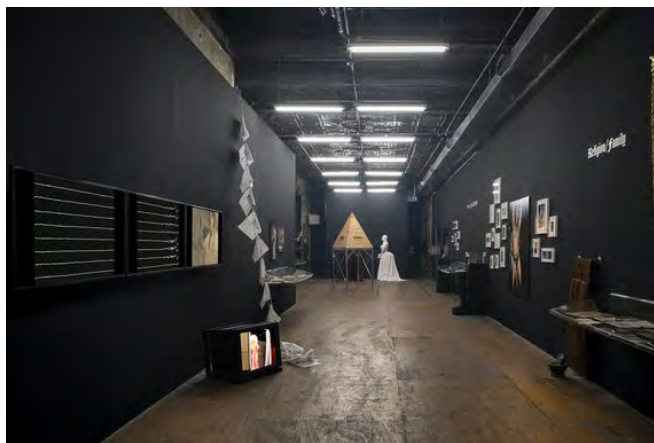
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ArtSeen

# Ron Athey: *Queer Communion*

By [Ksenia Soboleva](#)



Installation view: *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, curated by Amelia Jones, Participant Inc, NY, 2021. Photo: Daniel Kukla.

The fact that the world has had to wait until 2021 to see a Ron Athey retrospective is a tragedy. A queer icon who indisputably helped shape the role of the body in performance art, Athey has only recently started to receive long-overdue art historical recognition. Many know him as a recurring figure in Catherine Opie's portrait photographs, where the heavily tattooed artist usually appears engaging in some form of masochistic ritual. Yet these are frozen moments, and few platforms have been provided for viewers to engage with the complexities of Athey's body in truly performative motion. This is largely, if not entirely, due to censorship the artist has faced since 1994, when he was accused of spilling HIV-infected blood on the audience attending his performance *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* at Patrick's Cabaret in Minneapolis, an event partially sponsored by the Walker Art Center using NEA funds—Athey staged a live-streamed re-iteration of this performance on February 16th in conjunction with the exhibition currently on view at Participant Inc.

The original performance featured Athey making small incisions on Daryl Carlton's (aka Divinity Fudge) back, then absorbing the blood with pieces of paper towels to create intricate drawings, which he then hoisted into the air. The inaccurate claim that the audience was exposed to AIDS infection, made by a reporter who didn't even stick around for the full performance, exposed both the homophobic paranoia often associated with queer blood and the public's blatant ignorance as to how HIV is transmitted. Conservative politicians such as Jesse Helms seized this juicy opportunity to target Athey, labeling him as representative of a corruptive threat the queer community posed against the heteronormative nuclear family. This unsurprisingly made it difficult for the artist to receive any institutional support for his work going forward. Yet it did not stop Athey from remaining dedicated to his practice, and the exhibition at Participant Inc. is a testament to his commitment and devotion.

ON VIEW  
**PARTICIPANT INC.**  
 February 14 – April 4, 2021  
 New York



Installation view: *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, curated by Amelia Jones, Participant Inc, NY, 2021. Photo: Daniel Kukla.



Installation view: *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, curated by Amelia Jones, Participant Inc, NY, 2021. Photo: Daniel Kukla.

Curated by art historian and performance studies professor Amelia Jones, *Queer Communion* offers a scholarly approach to exhibition making and excels in highlighting archival materials as art objects worthy of aesthetic consideration. Spanning from the late 1970s to the present, the exhibition is divided into five sections: Religion/Family, Music/Clubs, Literature/Tattoo/BDSM, Art/Performance/Politics, and New Work/Community. These “zones,” as they are described in the press release, refer to the different communities that Athey has been part of throughout his life. Starting with his upbringing in an extreme Pentecostal family, Athey moved through various underground and alternative subcultures as he explored his queer identity, but his practice always remained underpinned by his religious background, the iconography of which is often manifested in his work. At Participant Inc., rare video footage of key performances is juxtaposed with photographic documentation, sketches, and writings, as well as striking performance props that take on a sculptural quality in the exhibition space. A yellow-red religious dress designed by Susan Matheson for Athey’s 2002 performance *Joyce* hangs on the wall at the beginning of the exhibition with arms wide open, like a cross welcoming the audience into a church. On the left wall, three beautifully adorned crowns rest on shelves—these were worn by Athey and his performance collaborators, and recall Arch Connelly’s

pearl objects. These garments speak to the important and underestimated role that masquerade plays in Athey's practice. Several vitrines in the exhibition hold precious sketches, photographs, and writings. Most noteworthy perhaps, are excerpts from Rozz Williams's diary, the vocalist of *Christian Death* and Athey's first boyfriend. Williams's rather disturbing written accounts of his journey with Athey read like hallucinatory passages from a dystopian novel. An austere reconstruction of a Judas Cradle, a medieval torture device that Athey has utilized in various performances, functions as the centerpiece of the exhibition. The structure makes one consider the body as porous, something that can both be invaded and expel, a vessel capable of absorbing and leaking, shrinking or expanding.



Installation view: *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, curated by Amelia Jones, Participant Inc, NY, 2021. Photo: Daniel Kukla.

When I meet Athey on opening day, I want to ask him: “Does it hurt?” But instead I get flustered and murmur something inconsequential. It seems like a silly question to ask. We're queer, of course it hurts. As Heather Love once wrote: “For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it.”<sup>1</sup> I have always viewed Athey's work as doing exactly that: engaging with acts of bodily injury, without being undone by them. Staging the queer body in crisis, Athey practices the shattering of self without ever actually breaking. His work negates the strict binary between ecstasy and suffering, and can as easily evoke disgust as tenderness, depending on the audience. While Athey's work is often discussed in the context of the culture wars and the AIDS crisis, it deserves art historical consideration beyond contemporary shock factor. Deeply informed by Surrealism and writers such as Georges Bataille, Athey builds on a longer tradition that conflates pleasure and pain, desire and disgust, and sex and death—all of which, of course, took on new meaning during the AIDS crisis.

*Queer Communion* provides an intimate portrait of a life lived in devotion to queer rituals that are easily dismissed as filthy or deviant by anyone not willing to consider why Athey's work arouses this kind of response. Despite censorship, Athey has thrived, and established a solid cult following in the queer art community. When I was teaching a seminar on “Art of the AIDS Crisis” at Cooper Union in the fall of 2018, I was pleasantly surprised that many of my queer students knew more about Athey than, for example, Peter Hujar or Paul Thek. Towards the end of the exhibition, we encounter a digital slideshow of Athey posing with various friends, many of the images plucked directly from his social media accounts. Jones herself appears in a number of photographs, demonstrating that the curatorial project can be a gesture of friendship and mutual interest as much as a purely scholarly endeavor.

1. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press: 2009), p. 1

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### Contributor

#### Ksenia Soboleva

Ksenia M. Soboleva is a New York based writer and art historian specializing in queer art and culture.

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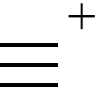
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# Contemporary Art Daily



March 17th, 2021

Ron Athey at Participant Inc.



*Artist:* Ron Athey

*Venue:* Participant Inc., New York

*Exhibition Title:* Queer Communion: Ron Athey

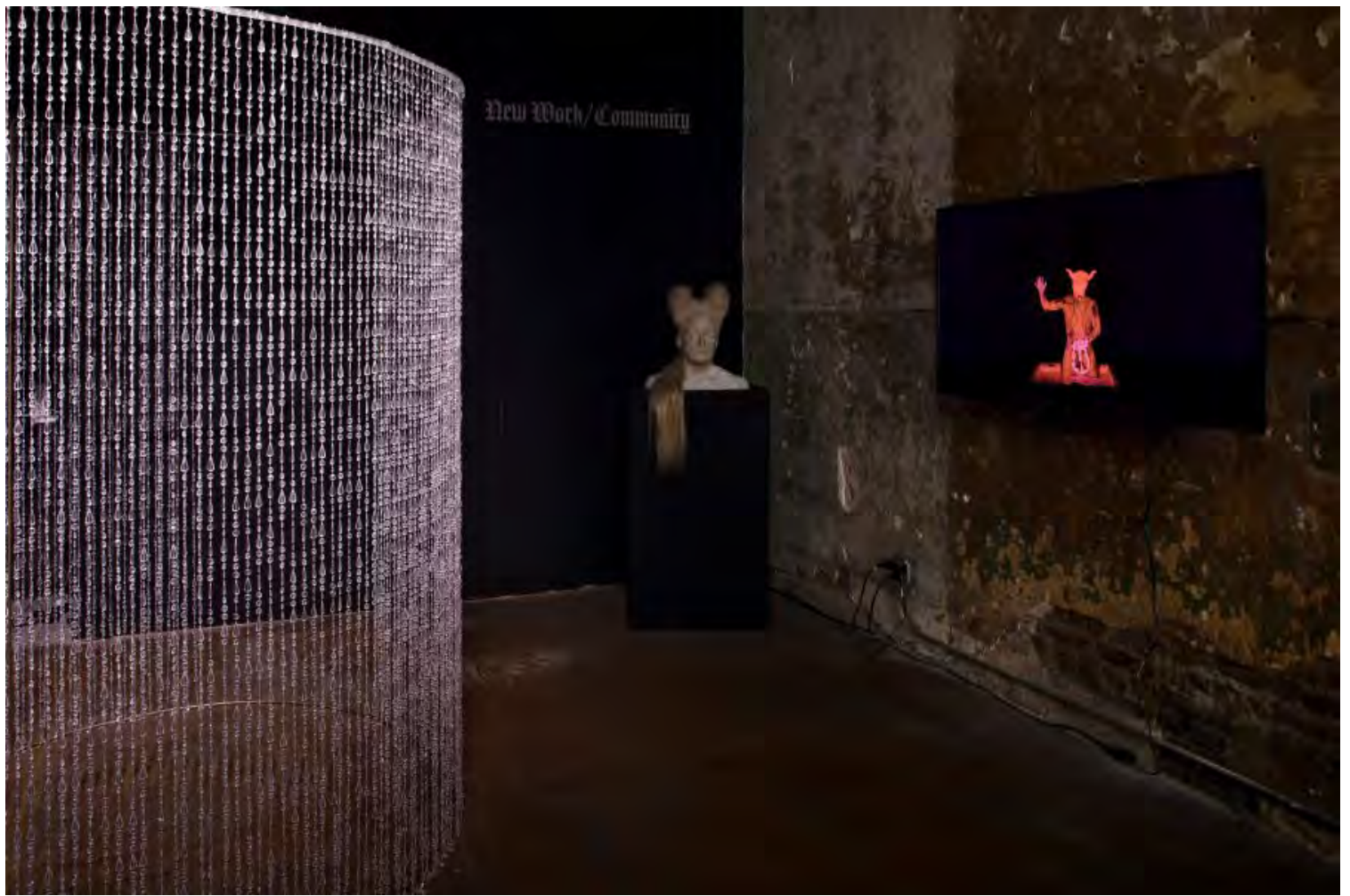
*Date:* February 14 – April 4, 2021

*Curated By:* Amelia Jones

*Note:* An additional text about the exhibition is available [here](#).

[Click here to view slideshow](#)







*Full gallery of images, press release and link available after the jump.*





*Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, curated by art historian and performance studies scholar Amelia Jones, offers the first retrospective of the work of Los Angeles-based performance artist Ron Athey. The exhibition and related publication explore Athey's practice as paradigmatic of a radically alternative mode of art-making as queer communion—the generous extension of self into the world through a mode of open embodiment that enacts creativity in the social sphere through collective engagement as art. Athey, through his significant and generative work as a performance artist, is a singular example of a lived creativity that is at complete odds with the art worlds and marketplaces that have increasingly dominated contemporary art over his largely undervalued career. Having been the focus of a homophobic, AIDS-phobic, and sensationalized political attack during the U.S. culture wars of the 1990s, in which a conservative leader denounced a partially government-funded Athey troupe performance as depraved, Athey's practice remains a challenge to the politics of today's renewed culture wars. Athey's work will be organized in relation to thematic intensities and overlapping communities spanning religion, queer subcultures, music, literature, performance, film, and theater, and displayed via photographic, archival, and video documentation as well as artworks and props from the original performances. The exhibition will travel to ICA Los Angeles in summer 2021.

*Queer Communion* presents Athey's career and lifework through the lens of these communities that Athey has engaged and helped form throughout his career: each section (Religion/Family, Music/Clubs, Literature/Tattoo/BDSM, Art/Performance/ Politics, New Work/Community) is laid out with a range of artifacts, props, costumes, photographs, video, audio, writings, and sketches relating to his creative work, artistic development, and engagement of friends and colleagues across queer networks. The zones move forward in a roughly chronological but recursive and overlapping way, transporting the visitor from the 1970s to the present, laying out the interrelations among the communities and actively purveying a sense of each community's mood, political energies, and creative ethos in relation to Athey's practice. Visitors will ideally gain an active sense of what it was/is like participating in these communities rather than simply a sense of viewing relics from the past, while also gaining a strong understanding of the aesthetic and political trajectories within Athey's own work.

A catalogue is available which accompanies the exhibition and includes extensive original never-beforepublished writings by Athey as well as an illustrated checklist and essays by a range of contributors on Athey's work and impact. *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* (Intellect Press, 2020), is co-edited by Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell; the catalogue was listed among "Best Art Books 2020" in the New York Times. <https://www.intellectbooks.com/queer-communion>

Ron Athey (b. 1961) identifies as a self-taught artist, having, since 1980, life of experience in Los Angeles post-punk performance scenes. He has collaborated with performers, visual artists, and opera directors, participated in philosophy seminars (via Professor Johnny Golding's tenure at Greenwich University 2012-13), and has visiting artist teaching history at Cal Arts, Roski, UCLA, and Queen Mary University, London. Recent projects include *Acephalous Monster*, Performance Space NY, 2018; *Sebastiane*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2014; *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, Spill Fest Ipswich, UK, 2014; *Self-Obliteration*, Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2011; as well as community-based projects including *Gifts of the Spirit*, a collectively authored automatic writing opera, culminating in the ultimate version with Opera Povera through the Broad Museum at the Cathedral of St. Vibiana, 2018. Athey's work has been included in group exhibitions including *Art AIDS America*,

Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington, 2015 and *The Displaced Person*, Invisible Exports Gallery, NY, 2012. Athey has received grants and fellowships including English Arts Council 2014 and 15; Art Matters 2018, Foundation for Contemporary Arts 2019, American Academy of Religion for Religion and the Arts Award 2019, and most recently the Harpo Foundation Fellowship 2021. Upcoming projects include a live art/video production in collaboration with Hermes Pittakos, *The Asclepeion*.

Amelia Jones (b. 1961) is Robert A. Day Professor and Vice Dean of Academics and Research in Roski School of Art & Design, USC. Recent publications include *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (2012); *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, coedited with Erin Silver (2016). Her book entitled *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* is published in 2021 by Routledge Press.

*Link:* [Ron Athey at Participant Inc.](#)

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## QUEER COMMUNION — RON ATHEY

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**A**they's work resists formal introduction: he is an artist's artist, a visionary, a dreamer, a transformer. Ron has blazed a path from the margins into clubs, galleries, and museums around the world; from the Pentecostal churches of his youth to the legendary goth punk and queer venues of the underground; from downtown SRO hotels to Hollywood. He's even made it into the filthy mouths of evangelical lawmakers looking for ways to defund the NEA. — **Zackary Drucker**

**QUEER COMMUNION—RON ATHEY**, the first retrospective exhibition of the artist's work, is on view in lower Manhattan. Curated by **Amelia Jones**, the show explores the "generous extension of self into the world through a mode

of open embodiment that enacts creativity in the social sphere through collective engagement as art.”\*





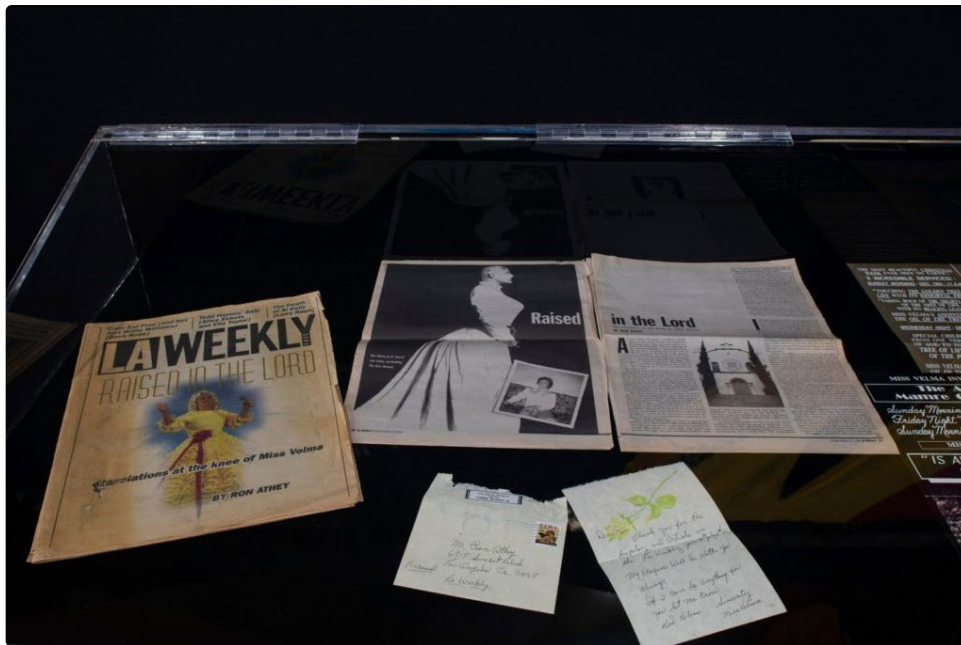
**QUEER COMMUNION—RON ATHEY\***

Through April 4.

**Participant Inc**

253 East Houston Street, New York City.

See **Queer Communion: Ron Athey**, ed. **Amelia Jones** and **Andy Campbell** (Bristol, UK: **Intellect Books**, 2020).



**Queer Communion: Ron Athey, Participant Inc.**, New York, February 14, 2021–April 4, 2021, from top: Installation photographs by **Daniel Kukla** (4); **Ron Athey, Acephalous Monster**, 2019, **MoCA Skopje**, photograph by Andreja Kargačin; **Queer Communion: Ron Athey**, installation photographs by Kukla (3). Images © **Ron Athey**, courtesy of the artist and **Participant Inc.**





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RON ATHEY INTERVIEWED BY  
HANS ULRICH OBRIST

# ATROCITY EXHIBITION

Photography MAT+KAT  
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Makeup LARAMIE  
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Los Angeles-based artist Ron Athey is one of the most important performance artists of the past 40 years. With ritualistic tattooing, hooks clinging to his flesh, extreme body modification, and mutilation, like saline injections in his testicles, and spinal tap needles to create a crown of thorns, his artistic history is written with a trail of his own blood—which was a radical reaction to the rabid conservatism of the 1980s, and to his religiously fundamentalist upbringing. Senator Jesse Helms called him depraved in a testimony to defund the National Endowment of the Arts after a 1994 performance at Walker Art Center where Athey, who is HIV-positive, sent blood soaked cloths into the audience during the height of the AIDs epidemic and panic. The performance caused a sensation. But there was no risk to the audience—the blood did not belong to Athey, but to another performer who tested negative for the virus. In effect, Athey was blacklisted from U.S. arts venues until 2005. In 2021, Athey will have two major retrospectives, entitled *Queer Communion*, of his electrifying, sacrificial practice, curated by Amelia Jones—the first will be at Participant in New York City and will then travel to ICA Los Angeles. In the following interview, Hans Ulrich Obrist investigates Ron Athey's boundary destroying practice.





**HANS ULRICH OBRIST** I wanted to begin with the beginning. I wanted to ask you how it all began, how you came to art, or how art came to you?

**RON ATHEY** I'd say that the music scene in Los Angeles had a lot of crossover with the art scene—being part of the late '70s, early '80s punk scene, and post-punk scene. I saw the work of Johanna Went, and experimental, mutated, classical groups, like Fat & Fucked Up. I always wondered how I could work this into performance. So, I always thought of the live image from the beginning. A punk show is an unlikely place to see a performance artist. And, I know there were parallel scenes in different cities.

**OBRIST** And was there an epiphany, or as you would call it, a dissociative sparkle?

**ATHEY** Yes. [laughs] The first performance in 1980 with my partner, Rozz Williams (founder of Christian Death)—as soon as it started, I felt this kind of trance. I never had questions, like, why am I doing this? What am I going for? It had logic right away for me. It was the right fit because I could expand within that framework. It's an enhanced state. So, that's what hooked me in—looking for that state again in different ways.

**OBRIST** You read Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower," set in a very dystopian future where she starts channeling a new religion. And that's what you're obsessed with, channelers, and the messianic complex. And that moment the pressure hits; the critical point. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, this idea of channeling a new religion? Because of course, you had a very strict religious upbringing, which I suppose continues to be present.

**ATHEY** It does. And while I use all of that language, I am a little bit more like Nietzsche about that. I think that we have to remake new celebrations and maybe even try to call it something different, but I'm not afraid of still understanding that on some level I'm a Christian, because I'm wired as a Christian. I still visit churches. I still go to Orthodox Easter when I'm in Thessaloniki. I'm still curious all the time about what that impulse is and the belief, particularly the more mystical and metaphysical chapters of that.

**OBRIST** I would like to hear more about your current relationship to theology. And whom are you reading right now?

**ATHEY** Right now, I'm reading the writings of Vampira. There's a new book her niece put out. When she was still alive, she gave readings at clubs near my house called "How to dig your own grave with your mouth." And I'm reading Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which has the essay about Wagner, but then it goes into the broader forum because I'm working on a concept about the Asclepeion and about healing chambers, dream chambers, the baths—in a fictional way, or as a starting point, anyway.

**OBRIST** I was wondering about who your influences and inspirations might be, but maybe it's actually not so much influence. I read this extraordinary book, *Dub*, by Alexis Pauline Gumbs. It's about Silvia Wynter and this idea that she has not so much been an influence on Gumbs, but rather that Gumbs has been thinking with Sylvia Wynter. So, I was wondering, who are the artists from the past and present you are thinking with or working with?

**ATHEY** I think my dilemma when I was a teenager was that I had this kind of angst that could have destroyed me. I went down a real Francophile channel. It started with Jean Genet, and eventually went to Bataille, but I had to understand that in history, ideas out of sync with the dominant culture existed, not just the gay, but also the pervert, or the abject. So, I was kind of looking for answers to exist. And within that, the poetry of *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943)—I read all the plays, the five novels—and screamed when *Prisoner of Love* (1986) was released because of what it really contained.

**OBRIST** And you are self-taught. Can you speak a little bit about this idea of DIY in relation to art? I learned about artists by doing studio visits. I never studied art history. I studied economy and ecology. It came out of conversations, and studio visits, and seeing artists work. So, if you could talk a little bit about this DIY thing, of being self-taught.

**ATHEY** I do feel fortunate. I had that DIY aesthetic really ingrained in me, so I don't fear somebody who is a master at a certain skill. It's more of how it butts together. An early person I worked with is Julie Tolentino—when she was doing choreography and dancing with David Roussève's company [REALITY Dance and Theater Group founded in Los Angeles in 1988]. I really learned about movement and the connective tissue within a piece, and also how to structure grandiosity. I worked with the opera singer, Juliana Snapper, and Opera Povera director, Sean Griffin, who I still collaborate with. At first, I wanted an opera singer in a piece and she was like, "No, stand in the nook of the piano." And we spent two years helping me have opera strength, even if I don't have opera talent. We made a duet called *The Judas Cradle* (2004-2005). I think fearlessness and doing the research is important. I spent a lot of time in the UC San Diego music library, which has a massive musicology department. Diamanda Galás comes from there as well. The curve ball on these classical arts is so inspiring. And you know, when I lived in England, if someone got the Arts Council grant, they made the piece. If they didn't, they'd be like, you know, I'll wait for the next cycle. I would never wait for money. Never wait to be curated, never wait to be shown. If you have a burning concept in you,

find the place and produce it yourself, I still do that. I'm doing it right now. I made a video about the myth of Acéphale and I did a fundraiser for it, selling t-shirts. I successfully did all of it in two weeks.

**OBRIST** What's on the t-shirts?

**ATHEY** The Solar Anus, which is based on the Pierre Molinier mandala.

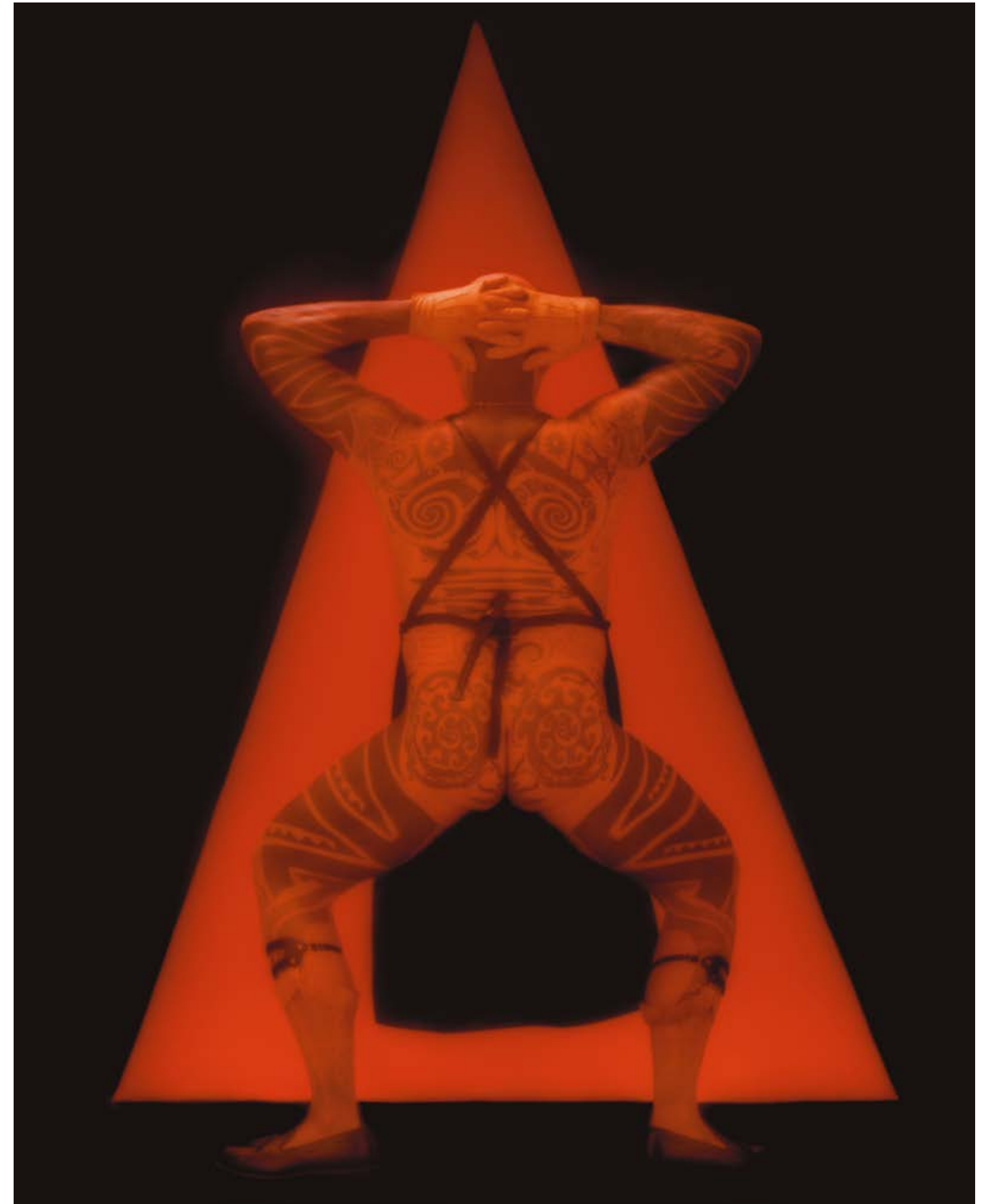
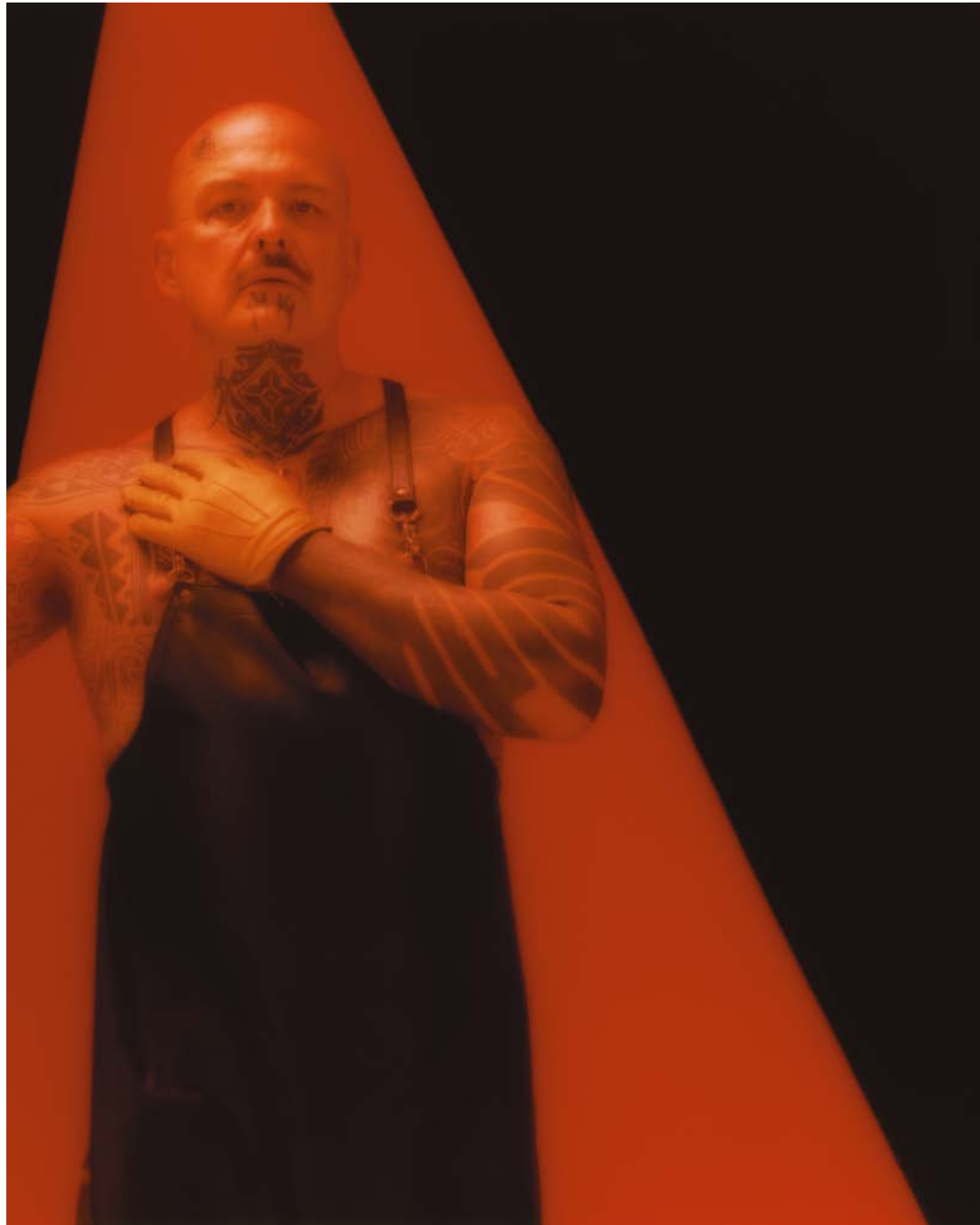
**OBRIST** Before we look at the recent work, maybe a few questions about the older work. You mentioned the dissociative sparkle—the epiphany of 1980. But between 1980 and 1998 you had eighteen years of touring with a troupe of people, and then you became fatigued. Before we talk about this '98 epiphany, as you call it, the dissociative sparkle of the Solar Anus, I wanted to ask you about two or three moments between 1980 and 1998, where you felt a particularly striking dissociative sparkle.

**ATHEY** Let's skip to '94, which is when the idea to make solo work came together—the piece *Four scenes in a Harsh Life* (1994). There's a scene called *Suicide Bed, Tattoo Salvation*. And it's a little story about compressing ten suicidal moments into one, and then a dream I had that my tattoos were finished. I put, like, 28 needles in my arms. Looking back on that video, I was kind of rattled by it. So, it was the first time I actually looked at something from the outside and experienced it instead of just experiencing it from being in it. That changed the way I started thinking about documentation—maybe I had to be more purist about it—it had to be the live experience.

**OBRIST** And the fatigue led you to this first solo piece, the Solar Anus (1998), and that was inspired by the 1931 Georges Bataille essay ("The Solar Anus," 1931), and also the action photographs of Pierre Molinier.

**ATHEY** I first saw Molinier at a festival in Nantes, just in a booth there, in the early '90s. So, I pursued seeing shows of his whenever they would pop up in that era. I had read the Bataille essay a bit earlier and it was very visual, so I connected with it. I still think that sometimes when you make a piece, it just comes together, which was the case with *Solar Anus*. I made it in two weeks, even the crown and the shoes. Then, I brought all of that stuff to Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana, which is the first place I did it. It was embodying this kind of twisted Sun King, which has a little bit of the legends and Dietrich [von Bern] in it too. Somehow, it was all of these characters coming to create a new one.

It's very different trying to control something that's closer to theater—trying to control ten people on stage. You know, I don't use a script, but I do have an outline of the order that things go in. It was the most present performance piece. The dissociative sparkle, like when I first started using that term was with *Incorruptible Flesh*.



Leather apron David Samuel Menkes, leather shoes  
David Samuel Menkes, leather hold ups Zara Bayne

I only did two durational pieces that were six hours, one in Glasgow as a challenge from Nikki Milliken who curated The National Review Of Live Art. Basically, people could touch me for six hours. And I went to hell and back, and hell and back, and hell and back. It's not my medium to work in, but because I committed to it, I did it twice, and it was interesting.

**OBRIST** In "A Polemic of Blood" in 2015, you said, "Suddenly the topics were extreme beauty, finding context for a live (self) sex action, and deeper exploration into using hypnosis via soundtrack and movement articulation." How exactly did these different topics come together?

**ATHEY** I started working with a hypnotist in the mid-nineties, just to synchronize the cast, and also to find a pace that wasn't like holding a magic wand prop, or wasn't related to butoh. It wasn't related to something else. I learned how to do that in every piece—using hypnosis to do automatic writing, to establish choreography, and then work with a musician so that it's embedded in the soundtrack for me. Then, there was just this truth that no matter what my intentions are, the polemic of the day overrides—this blood coming over the audience in the heat of the AIDs pandemic. I needed to own that it wasn't only my personal experience with HIV, with my own blood—it also carried the power and the phobia of that time.

**OBRIST** And now, you're actually preparing your first big retrospective called Queer Communion at Participant. It's curated by the historian Amelia Jones, who also is the co-editor of the catalog. Can you tell me about this exhibition and what it means to look back? This is a retrospective of dissociative sparkles as one could call it. It would be great to hear about how you work on this, because it obviously also brings you to your archive and I've always been very interested in archives of artists. Your archive is costumes, there is, of course, documentation of your performances and soundtracks of the performances, so it's not only the visual, it's also the sound. And as you said, the archive is a shifting layer of identity politics, body art, sex acts, archetypes, the AIDS pandemic, the "polemic of blood," deconstructing memoir and automatism. Interpreting esoteric traditions excites you more than ever. So, what is your arc of organizing, how do you work with these shifting layers, all these things, and then, if you deconstruct the memoir, you somehow also deconstruct the notion of the retrospective, I suppose?

**ATHEY** Yeah, well, maybe that's the battle with the art historian as well. There are the vitrines telling the dry story. And then, there's the things like costumes that have to come back to life, and for me, they also have to have a relevance with each other. I have such a solid archive because I always lived in the same house with a gi-

ant detached garage and I just put everything in it, but not with so much strategy. And there were a few interventions to organize my archives by The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, which also did the giant Polaroid project with Catherine Opie and me. So, that was the time when my paper archives started being organized by UCLA. And then, finally this time, I received an Owner Move-In eviction, so I had to move all this stuff. But Amilia Jones kind of intercepted it before. So, I have the Judas Cradle, which is like this huge wood prop that scaffolds costumes from every show since the early '90s. I'm also making two books with Intellect Books. I had bought some of the negatives back from '80s photographers, so I have been gathering materials since say, 2013.

**OBRIST** An archive always hides another archive. It's not just one archive, it's many.

**ATHEY** Right. There are about four rooms that go through Family, Club Years, Torture Trilogy is the AIDS years, and that will have a little tiny Jesse Helms talking. So, of course I have Senate records from the Freedom of Information Act. I have everything from different hearings, correspondence with Jane Alexander when she was the head of the National Endowment for the Arts. Opera, sheet music, pieces that I made in collaboration with a psychic outside of Manchester, like an automatic writing planchette that he made for me.

**OBRIST** You mentioned club culture. Last week, I had a long conversation with Honey Dijon and we talked about many different topics. In her work, there are so many layers—from the DJing, to her own music, to the fashion brand, to the activism. And one thing, which was really striking, is that it's all based on what happened in the clubs between the late '70s and 1983. As Honey told me, it was one of these moments when all the disciplines came together—it had to do with a community of people from many different backgrounds, many different fields. I wondered if you could talk about that, if you see it the same way?

**ATHEY** I feel like a good analysis of scenes is England's *Dreaming* (1991) by Jon Savage, where he analyzes the Sex Pistols, and how punk managed to remain authentic on the West Coast for nine years. And the answer is because no one cared about it. It didn't become saturated with branding and co-option. It stayed in its ghetto for so long. So, that scene was my foundation. Also, my first boyfriend was Rozz Williams—so what preceded goth in America was death rock, and that is when I started making performance, in those years. I also had some rehab years, and then back to 1989, 1990, when tattooing and piercing was sort of hitting a pitch—techno dance coming out of Detroit, Chicago, and some bands in England, like Sheep

on Drugs was this new sound that became hard techno later. So, that was a very public sex kind of time, like go-go dancing—out of a long shut-down period. I wouldn't claim it as one period, even moving to London and being a part of Kaos when it was at Stunners, like there are still spots where you feel a scene and people being transformed by the scene every week that they come. Their look starts shifting and their reality cracks open. So, I wouldn't give the glory day one thing, it's just that everything cuts and pastes, and re-gurgitates, and comes back together.

**OBRIST** And one thing I also wanted to ask you—that goes back to this Kembra Pfahler interview, which I did for the last issue. Kembra talks about you quite a lot in that interview. When Kembra talks about the beginnings of the performances, you know, inspired by Butoh, by Katzuo Ohno—when the transition happens, from drawing to performance quite early on—she told me it has to do with gender politics. Kembra said that "many of us felt gender fluid, but there wasn't a language for it." And then, Kembra says "a language was born." This idea that a language is born—it is incredibly important. Then, she says your generation—you, Bruce LaBruce, Vaginal Davis—would then find ways to articulate it. So, I wanted to throw that question back at you and see if you agree, and could you maybe give a response to Kembra?

**ATHEY** I think those were less defensive times. We were just doing our thing and creating a bit of a family around that. We all curate each other and do our own events. Me and Vaginal Davis co-curated events for fifteen years. And so Kembra and Bruce would almost always be a part of that, and sometimes other artists like Slava Mogutin. But I feel like Vag and Kembra were the linguists. They would play with words and phrases, and sometimes it would be derogatory and they would keep doing it until it refined into a new description. So, I think they are the lingual geniuses there, but there are things that then suddenly everybody needs an answer for, so you become articulate about it. I care a lot about context and logic and often go deep down those roads before I do something.

**OBRIST** And you have also written. Can you talk about the practice of writing? You've written manifestos, you've written texts, can you give a few examples and maybe talk about what the writing means within the practice?

**ATHEY** I think I write in a formal thesis way for myself, as I'm researching and I keep adding to it. I've also worked as a journalist and I try to write about other artists as part of my practice. I'm going to edit a book of the work of Johanna Went, a monograph, so I'm working on that right now. There's never been a book on her. She's included in Cynthia Carr's book *[On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century,*





Patent leather jacket R13, leather boots  
David Samuel Menkes, Ron's own glasses



1999], and Meiling Cheng's *In Other Los Angeleses* (2002) and early on in the first *Re/Search* books, like *Industrial Culture Handbook* (1983), which placed her with *Throbbing Gristle*, and *Survival Research Laboratories*, even though she did more actionist performances. For ICA London, I often wrote for their brochures, like about Marcellí Antúnez Roca, in that moment where everyone was obsessed with cybersex. I think it's an opportunity to do research. I had a column in *Honcho Magazine* for two years where I could write about fucking suburban guys in Orange County, or I happened to be at the Venice Biennale for two weeks and I'm going between the nude beach and the Pavilions. They gave me freedom to write about anything. I enjoyed writing that column for those two years.

**OBRIST** And besides writing, does drawing play a role? I was looking at the Viennese actionists, like Schwarzkogler or Nitsch—I've interviewed Günter Brus a few years ago, his actions all came out of a very intense process of drawing. And I was wondering about the drawings in your practice.

**ATHEY** Mine is more storyboarding and writing. I'm more of an essay writer. But I only draw in the presence of the person I'm trying to communicate with—using a sketch.

**OBRIST** And do you still sketch?

**ATHEY** Yes. I'm also doing more collaging than usual on the next concept.

**OBRIST** The retrospective is also a moment to think about documentation of live situational art. Tino Sehgal, for example, doesn't want his pieces to be photographed. There is a whole discussion about the documentation of live situational art, how a performance that is not documented is materially ephemeral, but it may stay with the viewers through memory. You have not rejected photographs, but it's part of your collaboration in a way, part of your community, one can say maybe a modern collaboration. And I suppose that would also play a role in the exhibition—featuring these photographers. So, I wanted to ask you about the relationship to these photographers and to photography.

**ATHEY** Photography was kind of like a mirror for me. Like another way of looking at the work. And finding the patience to stage a performance for the camera didn't come easy for me at first. I thrive on the audience, or you could call it witness feedback. So, to be alone with one person, I'll only go so far. When I did the giant Polaroids with [Catherine] Opie, there were like forty people in the room sometimes, so it felt like a performance. I have a long running relationship with Manuel Vason—I've shot with Steven Klein and Herb Ritts. And, you know, I'm a ham, I like it more as I get older, to challenge myself to still make work for the camera that way. I welcome the mediation of photography in my work—that

there's something that captures some kind of perfection. Because the entire live experience isn't perfect, but there are some things that can't be caught on camera. That's still the number one thing that drives the concept. I don't have a concept for a photograph, I have a concept for an action, and sometimes that action makes a perfect photograph at some point.

**OBRIST** And if you have a concept for an action, how much is it scripted, and how much does improvisation and chance enter the picture? How would you describe that relationship in the performances?

**ATHEY** I think what I'm scripting is a frame. And there's always these big windows left open. It can't be like a perfect play for me. Like each space, each city, each mood has to have room to express itself. I do think it's different every time. And that's why I have to do a piece for at least three years to feel like I nailed it.

**OBRIST** Rereading your texts, "Getting It Right ... Zooming Closer" (*Art Journal*, 2011), you say, "Performance documentation, performance-for-the-camera, performance image for the camera, to get it right—all are editing, reducing, retouching, mediating, specifying, forcing the gaze, and not the full experience, which can essentially lie, enhance, mislead. In the 80s and 90s, I only understood how performance went off by how it felt during, and how it sat with me after. Video and photo documentation showed me that and something more... I had to adjust to the flattening. But something about what the cameraperson focused on actually made the representation more extreme because the context of setting and the sequence in which the image appeared could be removed. Zooming closer than the audience could ever get in most performances sometimes was beautiful and sometimes vulgar." It's a great text. So, I want to ask you about that shift in perspective, and then actually about the process, and

the way in which you started seeing yourself, and your performances differently through documentation.

**ATHEY** I think I could also include critical reviews in there—being able to see in a way that I couldn't see before. I think some of it was considered the most violent work in the '90s, like men on hooks. If the camera went into the detail of the flesh tearing on one person, it would make someone sick—if you're watching live, you could always gaze somewhere else. Video, especially of a multidimensional piece is manipulative; someone's always choosing the money shot. So, I still argue that nothing's better than the live experience, but I'm aware of how ephemeral that is. I didn't want the same few people to see my work. And I do love the meditative quality of a photograph, of being able to just stare at it.

**OBRIST** I want to ask you about two very

important people in your life. You already mentioned Catherine Opie whom you've been collaborating with since the early '90s—for almost thirty years. And you've also done this incredible Polaroid series with the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS. So, I wanted to ask you—tell me, and tell our readers about this very special relationship you have with Catherine Opie, and then particularly about this Estate Project for Artists with AIDS project.

**ATHEY** Sometimes it's hard to back up to a period before [AIDS]. Well, right at that moment, there was the grief people were living with. But until then, a lot of people around me were kind of holding on, they didn't want me to get sick and die. With Catherine so inside the scene, you know, all the dykes with mustaches are my crew forever, and they've all transitioned into different people since then, but it really was this strong moment and time both in inner relations, but also in coming into the light together. It was a strong time to make a statement about who you were. And yeah, that language didn't exist. It was just sometimes fun, sometimes it was clubby. They had a biker gang called the Hell's Belles. You know, it was cheeky. By the time we got to the thirteen images that we recorded on Polaroid, we had been talking about documenting. I guess you could say, the iconic image from each performance that we both agreed upon.

So, it would be the Solar Anus, then she wanted to add a sex act, so we added a fisting one—with a little prompting to up the ante. But, to actually cull it down to one image, there was this back-and-forth prompting and deciding what it would be mixed with to create the ultimate image. Will it be the crowned look or the beads coming out of the ass? It was an amazing durational thing over two days. The last one was the really bloody Saint Sebastian. Because it would be hard to back down and do something clean after that.

**OBRIST** And there's actually another question I had about that because when you worked on these large-scale Polaroids, you said that they were an attempt at restaging scenes from your performance history. One way of documenting performance is by photographing it or filming it. Another one is by not doing that and having it in people's memory. But the other one is by redoing it. I've been working on this project, "Do It." I have been inviting artists to write instructions and then people can Do It, and interpret it. It's inspired by Fluxus, but also by the autoprogettazione design of Enzo Mari, who asked how you can actually transmit knowledge through these instructions. So, I was very interested in this kind of dimension of restaging. And also, in you saying that the photos were not true to the reference. The only one that was true





Overcoat Sacai,  
blazer Sacai

to the reference was Saint Sebastian. So, it's kind of no longer a remake, but it's sort of like an essence—of Sebastian Suspended or Solar Anus. I would love to hear more about this.

**ATHEY** Well, I think if we talk about Solar Anus, I lived it as a performance when I was making it, but I felt like when it's put away, that it was an opportunity to give it another life—by refining it as a static image. So, I didn't see it as I'm in the middle of this action—it was a proper formal portrait. And also, the nature of that camera was how long we had to stay in the dark—how to have an expression in the dark and not change it when a hot flash hits your whole body. So, it took this kind of building up of how to work that hot flash coming at me. Some of the images are two different performances meshed together.

**OBRIST** For example, there is also "Suicide Bed." Can you talk to me a bit about "Suicide Bed" and "St. Sebastian"?

**ATHEY** "Suicide Bed," as I've said earlier, was the first performance experience that made me realize that a solo performance could be as, or more powerful, than a group extravaganza. For the Catherine Opie portrait, because of the shallowness of the focus of that Polaroid camera, we had to go almost vertical with the bed. So, it was almost like "Suicide Bed" suspension. It never felt like that in the performance. Also, I was being held up by the needles for much longer than I did in the performance—it didn't have the authentic melancholy that the performance did. For "St. Sebastian," I think everything was building up in everyone by that scene, you know, it's an atrocity exhibition in a way. It's beautiful, it is poetic, but it also looked like a piece of liver on the floor from so much blood pouring off of me, and two liters of saline in the scrotum, so there's this disfigurement. That's another Vaginal Davis-ism, sexual repulsive.

**OBRIST** I saw the great interview with you and Lydia Lunch. Generosity is a word that often comes up in relation with Lydia Lunch. And generosity is such an important word, such an important medium. It should be the medium of the 21st century. In a post-medium condition, generosity should always be the medium, in art, in curation, in museums, and I think in a way, generosity in your work is very important. It's interesting that in the press text of the show, *Queer Communion* explores your practice "as paradigmatic of a radically alternative mode of art-making as queer communion—the generous extension of self into the world through a mode of open embodiment that enacts creativity in the social sphere through collective engagement as

art." I wanted to ask you about generosity as your medium.

**ATHEY** Wouldn't it be better to help develop a scene that you would want to live in, or that you would want to learn from? There's an often repeated and not quite true thing that I formed a new religion after leaving religion. And I'm lucky I have Nietzsche for that. Like, yes, I do something, but I don't want to just be alone in doing it. So, you have to find the reason why you do it and nurture people around you. I think of generosity in terms of interaction with people, it's hard for me to use that word within the work itself. Because I don't know another way to approach how I work.

**OBRIST** I wanted to ask you about censorship, and unrealized projects, because, ultimately, we know a great deal about architects' unrealized projects because they publish them. But we know very little about artists' unrealized projects. Now the range of unrealized projects can be very wide or broad because there are projects that have been too big to be realized, too small to be realized, or maybe too expensive to be realized. Or too little time to be realized because of our lifespan. There are also forgotten projects. Then there are projects that are unrealized because of self-censorship. Your work for many years has been banned or censored by museums. Today, there is a new form of control, of censorship through social media. So, I wanted to ask you about this whole kind of idea of the unrealized project, and maybe also then in the second part of the question, self-censorship, or censorship.

**ATHEY** I was a teenager before the Meese Commission Report (Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, 1986) in the States. So, I could go to discos until six in the morning when I was fifteen. Then, there was Operation Spanner (investigation into same-sex male sadomasochism across the United Kingdom in the late 1980s) in England while there was a war on culture in the States. So, I know how different the world is on different sides of this line. And then, to think you can thrive in an underground or a counterculture that you build, and you're very happy within that. But then, the commercial world starts absorbing your culture. So even that doesn't exist. I think it's a challenge to carve out your space and also expand and not be used up. I have to be aware of that and I'm also somebody who is a bit phobic of popular culture and celebrity culture because of that. I think it cheapens everything. I have a willfully ignorant ability to stay in my lane. I certainly have a grandiosity in me, so ever since I thought operatically, to collaborate with an op-

era singer, there's never enough of a budget. I mean, give me a hundred thousand dollars, I'll need two—and those are lower in budgets. So, I will go to the next way of making it. I wouldn't call those unrealized projects, but they didn't reach the potential that they could have reached. Sometimes I'll take that as a nod to work in a different way, to work in duets, or work with four people or less if it's company work, or work in a way where you invite people to perform their own work within yours, like in a happening. I did that in Naples at the Madre [Museum], which was a fantastic experience.

**OBRIST** So, what's too big to be realized? An opera?

**ATHEY** Yeah. I'm trying to work on it in pieces right now, but it is the Asclepeion. And I would like to stage something in ancient ruins—something massive and multi dimensional, more immersive, and less of a show. It's more of a monster installation.

**OBRIST** A monster installation in ancient ruins.

**ATHEY** Yes, it could be in Africa, it could be in Greece.

**OBRIST** I've also got a question from our mutual friend Parma Ham. Ham wants to know about rituals. And I often ask this question about rituals, because Tarkovsky said, "We're living in a time bereft of rituals." We need to reintroduce rituals, and that's definitely something you have done for more than forty years. But their question is, what are rituals today? Queer communions?

**ATHEY** I think there's the archetype of the ritual—and it resonates through time and space, but the context or the way it looks has to change. And so, I think for myself, that's what I'm always doing—to push the body and spirit. It has to be boundary-pushing. It can't just be offering flowers to a statue.

**OBRIST** It has to be boundary-pushing?

**ATHEY** Yes. There has to be a sacrifice to have a ritual.

end

## GLORY IN OUR SUFFERINGS

### Tavia Nyong'o and Coco Romack on Ron Athey at Participant Inc

#### TAVIA NYONG'O

IT SHOULD BE ASTONISHING that the artist Ron Athey has received his first retrospective, at New York's Participant Inc, only now, in 2021. But the steadfast alterity of his aesthetic has made this extreme belatedness, although unacceptable, perhaps understandable. Since his rise to prominence in the early 1990s, Athey has generated a series of unforgettably transgressive tableaux and received backlash and been blacklisted on two continents for his pains. It is always a challenge to curate performance art for gallery and museum spaces, but Athey's particular stripe of excess has led more than one institution to wince at the idea of showcasing his work. The postmillennial mainstreaming of queerness and the rise of homonormativity did not bring rebels like Athey in from the cold, so his output over the past few decades will be a surprise to anyone who hasn't been tuning in to the underground aesthetic, even though it is this very underground that has seeded Athey's relationship to so many young Los Angeles-based artists today (the Participant Inc exhibition, curated by art historian and writer Amelia Jones, will be moving to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, sometime this summer).

When I first saw *Incorruptible Flesh* [*Dissociated Sparkle*] at Artists Space in New York in 2006—a piece in which Athey lay on a bed of steel bars for six hours with a baseball bat inserted in his rectum while his eyelids were held open by hooks attached to the bed's frame—I must confess that I did not approach this as a performance of agony so much as a passage into ecstasy. I say this having a peculiar attitude toward pain. As the child of two doctors, I grew up with their conception of the body as a sack of gross, profane stuff that we must nonetheless be responsible for patching up along the way, protecting people without judgment from the harmful things they do to themselves. Here was the thrilling inversion of that doctors' code: following someone into and through their pain in extremis, but at an impersonal remove. That *Incorruptible Flesh* emerged out of a series of performances of nursing, healing, and rituals of grief made intuitive sense to me, since we were invited, as an audience, to gently rub ointment into Athey's skin as he lay prone under the hot lights.

As a member of Generation X, I was exposed to all the terrible lies that scoundrels like Senator Jesse Helms of



Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper, *Judas Cradle*, 2004. Performance view, Grad Kodeljevo Castle chapel, Ljubljana, December 17, 2004. Ron Athey. Photo: Miha Fras.

North Carolina were telling on the floor of the United States Senate about radical performance artists like Athey and the NEA Four (Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller). For me, touching Athey represented more than a transgression of whatever bullshit taboos that, infuriatingly, still irradiate the HIV-positive body. The act embodied my point of contact with an intergenerational legacy of the arts of survival, my connection with a body that is testing the limits of what it can do—in ways that demand to be seen—through acts of sublime beauty and profound endurance. As we again confront the task of reinventing intimacies in a pandemic, we could do worse than revisit the legacy of the gothic visions Athey painstakingly erected each night in LA venues such as Club Fuck! and Sin-a-Matic, where the artist frequently performed during the '80s and '90s.

When I entered Participant Inc, the object I was immediately drawn to was the large wooden pyramid Athey used in his 2004 performance *Judas Cradle*. That duet, with opera singer Juliana Snapper, involved Athey lowering his anus onto the pointed tip of this torture

device, emitting an uncanny voice, thanks to Snapper's vocal lessons, that grated against his teacher's own powerful instrument. The use of premeditated pain and bodily stress in this work—and of real blood in others—creates great anxiety and sometimes even revulsion. But the explicit pain and sex in much of Athey's art, critic Jennifer Doyle has pointed out, is not about “shock value.” It is instead about sacralizing the lives of “lepers” and “perverts” shunned by “proper” society, as Jean Genet, one of Athey's literary heroes, did in his 1943 novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*.

The show starts with the miraculous and traumalaced surroundings of Athey's birth into a Pentecostal matriarchy that had foretold the arrival of a boy prophet in small-town Connecticut. We get snapshots of a teenage Ron relocated to sunny California, where both mental illness and ecstatic Christianity shaped his upbringing. Some of Athey's early pieces—done with the musician Rozz Williams via their two-person performance outfit, *Premature Ejaculation*—would redirect the holy glossolalia of his childhood religion toward darker designs. A treasured relic in the show is a letter Athey received from Miss Velma Jagers, a charismatic preacher he grew up watching and on whom he partly based his “Holy Woman” character. Their cordial mutual recognition of each other's gifts of the spirit is one special moment of auratic contact in this document- and artifact-heavy show. Besides the overarching theme of communion, the exhibition is organized into five sections: “Speaking in Tongues,” “LA Clubland,” “Body Art,” “The Culture Wars,” and “Literature, Opera, Theater” (and with references to figures such as Brion Gysin and Georges Bataille, Athey's scripturalism becomes present in works incorporating automatic writing). To emerge from the ordeals Athey has undergone as a kind of mentor and zaddy to younger artists of all types—including but not limited to those whose work incorporates the same rites and rituals his does—is indeed a miracle of some kind, if not one the pope could approve of.

“Queer Communion” enthralls even as it grapples with the self-consuming nature of Athey's art. Given its ritualistic nature, much of what remains in his archive and is available to the public is something like a reliquary. His nocturnal creative practice emerges from self-created rites during which bodies are modified and modulated in ways that tend to leave little physical residue at daybreak. The economy of subcultural nightlife is directed toward expenditure, not accumulation, and thus necessarily confounds even the most acquisitive of collectors. Although Athey's long record of commissioned

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Left: Ron Athey performing in *Premature Ejaculation*, Arts Building, Pomona, CA, 1981–2. Above: Ron Athey in front of the Poseur storefront, Los Angeles, 1983. Right: Catherine Opie, *Saints*, 1995, C-print, 60 × 40". From left: Divinity Fudge (Darryl Carlton), Ron Athey, Pigpen (Stosh Fila), Julian Carter.

performance leaves documentary traces, they're never an acceptable substitute for having been there. This quarantine age and its countless digital mediations have proved how draining living life vicariously can be. Togetherness, proximity, and mutual contagion (of the non-corona variety) matter. Yet this is not to diminish the power of the remnant. Take, for instance, a cloak that was on display, bequeathed to Athey by the performance artist Leigh Bowery—it activated the archival vitrines in the show with the sparkle of another departed divinity.

Your grimoire for this wondrous world of arcana is an exhibition catalogue expertly edited by Jones and fellow art historian Andy Campbell, with copious writings by Athey himself as well as a welter of critical texts, including one from Dominic Johnson, who has edited the other important essay collection on Athey, *Pleading in the Blood* (2015). Artists in different media—the photographer Catherine Opie in particular—have made Athey their muse, and a huge Opie print from 1995 of Athey as Saint Sebastian is a showstopper. Once seen, this image of Athey in flagrante delicto is not easily forgotten: In it, Saint Irene (played by the artist Julian Carter), accompanied by her maid (actor Stosh Fila, aka Pigpen), tends to Saint Sebastian (Athey) after he has been shot full of arrows, while a grieving Divinity Fudge looks on. In esoteric Christianity, Athey tells me, this scene is considered a resurrection, since Sebastian managed to live through his first martyrdom by arrows (he was later bludgeoned to death). There is an allegorical resonance between Sebastian's survival and Athey's own status as an "elite controller" of his HIV infection, as well as the saint's entourage, all of whom are played by Athey's chosen kin.

It has long been a terrible irony of Athey's career that its most notorious moment—specifically, the "human printing press" section from the 1994 performance *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, where the artist created blood prints from incised flesh—involved government funding he never applied for at a museum that hadn't offered him a platform (the work was originally sponsored by

the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis but took place at Patrick's Cabaret, an off-site venue in the city). In 2015, on the twenty-first anniversary of this performance, the Walker convened a panel on Athey. It also featured what was billed as a "Culture Wars Cabaret," in which a new generation of local queer performance artists tried to shake critics out of their complacency. One of those performers, Elliot Reed, first met Athey at Patrick's Cabaret and subsequently went on to work with the éminence grise on multiple projects, including a pair of socially distanced live performances that were shown at Participant Inc's "Participant After Dark" series and New York's MOMA PS1. Reed is among a group of artists—which includes Cassils, Ms. Vaginal Davis, Zackary Drucker, and Fanaa—with whom Athey collaborates. For the Participant work, Reed helped Athey restage the human printing press for an audience who could only observe the work through the gallery's windows from outside the space. In the MOMA PS1 piece, Reed wore a cardinal's cloak while reading out an indictment of the Swarovski family for its alleged complicity with the Nazis during World War II. Athey, bedecked in crystals, punctuated the clown show with his signature cackle. At one point, Ms. Davis entered the goings-on via FaceTime and christened Reed the second coming of Jerry Lewis.

Artistic collaboration as a way to live through collective and ongoing trauma is one of the many gifts Athey's art provides. Yet it is not always an easy gift to give, or to receive. Take the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice—the ritual consumption of his body and blood, an acknowledgment of one's own sin and fallenness. The difference between organized religion and "Atheyism" is that the latter is an acephalous, or "headless," sect. While cultivating a distinctive oeuvre, the artist has always inspired collaborators whose work diverges in look and feel from his own.

The queer subcultures that Athey continues to sustain, and that also sustain him, are crucial and living instances of the mutual care that so many are now embracing in our present moment of deep alienation from capitalism,

patriarchal religion, mainstream politics, and the cultural institutions that frequently hinder work that's as visceral and uncompromising as Athey's. Such a legacy of mutual care does not easily lend itself to being summed up in a retrospective. But if the radical love Athey has managed to inspire is visible at all, it won't need to be encapsulated in a show, however belated and well deserved.

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## COCO ROMACK

**BLOWN UP** and stationed near the entrance of Participant Inc was a ca. 1990 photograph taken by the artist Sheree Rose—the camera's bright flash has caused the metal grommets on the leather codpiece worn by the photo's subject, performance artist Ron Athey, to glimmer. The image captures him in the middle of go-go dancing, his arms and chin flung euphorically upward. He is mostly naked, save for his studded pouch and a constellation of exquisite tattoos across his body. The snapshot was taken at Club Fuck!, one of the underground parties in Los Angeles where Athey developed the bloody performances that would make him famous—and infamous. Hanging near this picture were more documents from 1995 that capture Athey playing his Trojan Whore character, his engorged lips pierced by needles. Throughout "Queer



Clockwise, from top left: Ron Athey go-go dancing at Club Fuck!, Los Angeles, ca. 1990. Photo: Sheree Rose. Ron Athey and Lawrence Steger, *Incorruptible Flesh [In Progress]*, 1996. Performance view, Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana, July 1997. Trojan Whore (Ron Athey). Photo: Sandra Vitaljic. Video still of Jesse Helms excoriating Ron Athey (as Saint Sebastian in his *Martyrs & Saints*, 1992) on the floor of the US Senate, July 25, 1994.

Communion,” Athey’s first-ever retrospective, organized by the writer and curator Amelia Jones, we saw many images of the artist like this—vulnerable, in public, and in various states of acute distress or shuddering ecstasy. Frequently, it was difficult to tell the two sensations apart.

These photos and other kinds of ephemera—including writings, props, costumes, and videos—covered more than forty years of the queer artist’s visceral, challenging production. Athey’s ritualistic live performances have incorporated bondage and bloodletting, piercing and penetration, suffering and joy. In stills from the recording of a 2006 performance of *Solar Anus*, the artist plunges a black dildo strapped to a stiletto heel into his own asshole, which is ringed by an elegantly stylized tattoo of a sun; his white-powdered face is pulled taut by steel hooks, and appears as though it has undergone extreme surgical feminization. Despite Athey’s influence on generations of queer artists, including frequent collaborators Julie Tolentino and Divinity Fudge, the radical nature of this piece—and many others—has left the fifty-nine-year-old artist largely ostracized by most institutions. This indignity was compounded after Athey in 2017 lost the rent-stabilized bungalow in the Silver Lake

neighborhood of Los Angeles where he had lived for twenty-six years. Decades of his art, stored at the house, were nearly tossed to the curb.

Thankfully, his papers were acquired by LA’s J. Paul Getty Museum in 2018. And in this show, parts of that archive were made available to trace the genealogy of Athey’s practice through myriad subcultures and other social contexts. Arranged in a quasi-linear fashion, “Queer Communion” began with reflections on the artist’s upbringing in a fanatically religious household, where he was thought to be a prophet and groomed to become a Pentecostal pastor. Displayed across four screens, the autobiographical installation *Joyce*, 2002–2003, named after his mother, explores these familial dynamics in brief vignettes. In one part, “Ronnie Lee,” an actor plays a young, self-harming Athey, making many small cuts with a blade across his arms and torso; “Vena Mae,” another section, explores the sexual abuse of his aunt with a vaginal douching and fisting scene. Even as Athey renounced his faith and sought alternative family structures in death rock and BDSM, he wrote in an *LA Weekly* cover story that he “still felt protective of the church.” Its pageantry and iconography inspired pieces such as *Martyrs &*

*Saints*, 1992; for one iteration of this performance, arrows pierced his flesh à la Saint Sebastian—the moment was immortalized in a photograph by Catherine Opie.

A black-and-white picture from the Saint Sebastian tableau was displayed during a 1994 hearing that for years clouded Athey’s work with gross misunderstanding and reactionary stupidity. Published in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* was a misreported review of a segment from *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*—a 1994 performance that was partially sponsored by Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center—in which the artist cut into the back of a collaborator and dabbed the wounds with paper towels to create monoprints. The story falsely asserted that Athey exposed the audience to HIV-positive blood, and this sensationalized account was picked up by national publications, eventually reaching the right-wing and rabidly homophobic Republican senator from North Carolina Jesse Helms. In his congressional plea to disenfranchise public funding for the arts, Helms said, “The media have . . . been obsessed with trying to prove that black is white and white is black, and that disgusting, insulting, revolting garbage produced by obviously sick minds is somehow art, and that this art is worthy of being subsidized and rewarded by and with grants of federal funds.” Alas, the senator’s venom and fearmongering worked: That year, the National Endowment for the Arts’ budget was slashed from \$170 million to \$161 million, which left the agency, according to a report in the *Christian Science Monitor*, with its “lowest level of purchasing power since 1985.”

As the scholar Jennifer Doyle put it in her 2013 book *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, “Controversy invariably simplifies its object,” precluding meaning and real engagement. Athey’s hauntingly beautiful art has on occasion been interpreted as an obscene, violent attack on the audience. But oftentimes beneath the congealed blood and torture is an entreaty for compassion, as we see in the durational piece *Incorruptible Flesh [Dissociated Sparkle]*, 2006. For this work, Athey’s body was laid out like a shimmering corpse on a metal table for six hours, his eyes forced open by steel hooks, his genitals swollen thick with injected saline, and the fat end of a baseball bat inserted into his anus. All he asked of the viewer in terms of participation was that they with a modicum of care soothe his thirsty skin with a gently applied layer of Vaseline. “Queer Communion” reveals Athey’s legacy to be less a singular, commodifiable body of work than a nebula of social spaces and bonds forged from pleasure, mutual experience, and community. Perhaps the artist’s retention in his work of some sense of religiosity—itself a transgressive act given the general skepticism regarding religion in alternative spaces and cultural institutions alike—is a means of transforming his suffering into a crucible for redemption. By making the pain public, and allowing his friends, lovers, collaborators, and audience to watch and hurt and feel the ecstasy alongside him, he might save us too. □

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