

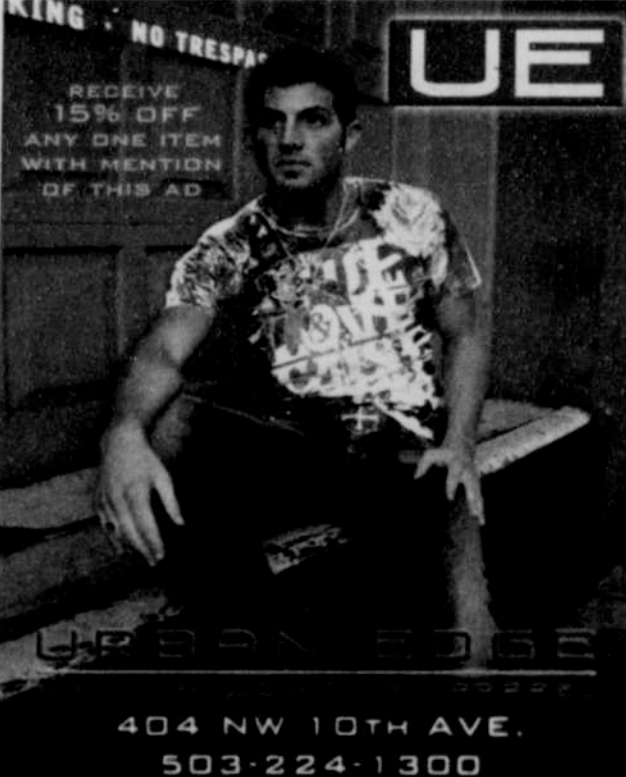
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ART ON THE EDGE OF ENDURANCE

EXTREME PERFORMANCE ARTIST RON ATHEY COMES TO PORTLAND
BY TONY LETIGRE

There are many ways to say "hallelujah." Such is the motto and modus operandi of Ron Athey, a man who has been dubbed "America's most controversial performance artist." Athey, whose last name is pronounced like the first two syllables of "atheist," has lived the sort of life that might have landed him an appearance on *The Jerry Springer Show*. Fortunately, he aimed higher, choosing to transform and exorcise the traumas of his early life with art rather than exploiting them for the low-brow masses hypnotized by daytime television.

The "hallelujah" mantra is appropriate for a man who was trained as a child to be a Pentecostal minister by a family for whom the adjective "dysfunctional" is altogether inadequate. Although he long ago rejected the crazed faith forced to him as a youth, its continuing impact on him is plain to see in the religious iconography he employs (and annihilates) in his work. It would seem that no one knows better than Ron Athey how to transubstantiate taboos, to

merge the profane with the profound, to mix the beautiful and the repulsive, the demonic and the divine in such a way that we no longer see them as polar opposites, but as points on the same continuum, or even as indistinguishable from one another. Through the alchemy of art, Athey spins the straw and shit of his macabre life into a peculiar and challenging kind of gold.

"If the inside of your head gets pummeled with enough emotional blunt force trauma to splinter the psyche, you develop ways to punish the body, that fleshy prison which houses the pain," Athey waxes eloquent in an excerpt from his online biography. "The sight of your own blood, brought forth from your hand, is a violation that you yourself now control."

PROFOUND PROFANITY

To say that Athey is an HIV-positive gay artist is like saying that Cirque du Soleil is a circus that doesn't have any animals. It's true as far as it goes, but it doesn't begin to encompass the magnitude of its subject. Athey's body of work—in his case, an eminently apt pun—stretches over the past couple of decades, during which he has managed to shock many, offend some and impress others with the freaky intensity of his singular vision and willingness to make his own body his canvas. His work has enshrined and lifted to the level of high art all sorts of behaviors normally associated with the extreme subcultures that thrive on the kinky outskirts of society: bondage and sadomasochism, bloodletting, mock castration, self-mutilation, branding, flogging and genital stapling. ("The scrotum tissue really isn't that sensitive," he avers. "It's just like a quick pinch.")

Athey's name belongs in a pantheon of names you may or may not have heard: Lydia Lunch, Helen Spackman, Andres Serrano, Bob Flanagan, Gina Pane, Karen Finley, Vaginal Davis, Annie Sprinkle, Franko B, Bruce LaBruce. It's a rogue's gallery of underground anti-celebrities, the outsider artists of stage, screen and gallery. They're not household names, and they're probably OK with that. Athey concedes that his work is "certainly not mass popular culture." But just as his venues have changed from seedy clubs to august art galleries, his name and work have bubbled up from the fringes to the mainstream. As a writer and editor, his byline has appeared not just in *Infected Faggot Perspectives* and *Virus Mutations* but also in *LA Weekly*, *Details*, *The Advocate* and the venerable *Village Voice*.

Then there was that little incident in 1994 for which Athey may be most notorious, when the religious right, foaming at the mouth in the wake of the Clinton presidency, zoomed in on Athey as an easy target in its quest to curb govern-

ment funding for the arts. In question was \$150 that made its way to Athey as part of a block grant that the Walker Art Center had received through the National Endowment of the Arts. U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and others based their objection on rumor that audiences were assaulted with HIV-positive blood.

During a scene in the performance called "The Human Printing Press," Athey, who had spoken frankly of his HIV-positive status, carved designs on the back of fellow performer Divinity Fudge, dabbed the blood with white cloths and hoisted them over the audience on a pulley. A sensational account of the performance that appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, written by a reporter who had not attended, created ripples that eventually led to the NEA's annual budget for fiscal year 1996 being slashed nearly in half. Athey proved a convenient scapegoat.

In commenting on the hoopla, Athey's criticism is directed less at the religious right, whom he takes for granted as detractors of his work, than at the NEA and conservative figures in the art world who are quick to disassociate themselves from artists whose work foments controversy. "I see amazing things in Europe that are government funded, that are too expensive for the box office to pay for, that will never come here," Athey says. "The government can have a place in arts funding, but there can't be that decency clause."

A HARSH LIFE

Athey's life, like his work, has been extreme in every way. He was born in Groton, Conn., in 1961, but by age 2 was living in Los Angeles, where he has been based ever since. By the age of 10, "Ronnie Lee," under the aegis of a schizophrenic mother and her devoutly deranged household, was speaking in tongues and had been sainted as a budding prophet messiah. His childhood years were spent in and out of revival tents, where his tears were urged and coveted by the congregation, hands were laid on him and he witnessed faith healings at least once a week. Add to this an aunt suffering from hypersexualized mania who believed she would marry Elvis Presley only after giving birth to the second incarnation of Christ; a grandmother given to channeling extra-dimensional spirits through the mediums of automatic writing and Aktion paintings; and a general belief that Athey's family had been "chosen by God to kick off Armageddon," and your unconventional childhood starts to look entirely unremarkable by comparison, now doesn't it?

For 15 years Athey weathered this psychic onslaught before running away from both church and family. But the loss of faith left him with a void that he attempted to fill with self-mutilation and drugs. He spent about a decade as a junkie, during which time he made several overt suicide attempts in addition to the slow, passive suicide that many would argue heroin addiction itself represents. Now, 46 years old and having been diagnosed with HIV 20 years ago, his days as a junkie

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