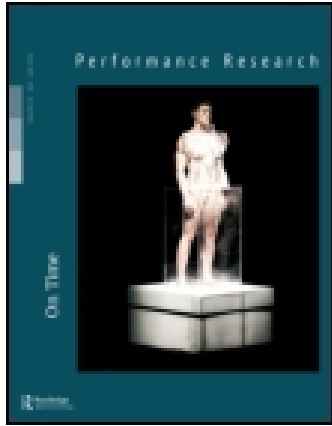


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Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains by Ron Athey

Thursday 27 June 2013 7.30p.m.–8.20p.m. · Pigott Theater

BLOG RESPONSE BY
MEGAN HOETGER

I am not sure exactly how far back to go in re-counting my experience at Ron Athey's Thursday evening run of *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic remains*. Maybe I start, then, with the very title of this conference: NOW THEN. I may say that a piece of my experience last night actually happened back in 2009. Running into Jennifer Doyle in the chaotic cluster of anxious to-be audience members outside the doors of Pigott Theater stirred in me my memory of 2009 when I participated in a performance workshop that Jennifer and Ron ran in conjunction with Jennifer's *You Belong to Me: Art and the ethics of presence* programming at the Sweeney Art Gallery of the University of California, Riverside. In the workshop we (there were maybe about ten of us, many of whom have a continued presence in my now) spent nearly every day for a week together talking and reading and looking and watching and making and talking about making and talking about looking and talking about talking about performances. It was in the basement of a coffee shop from which we would emerge about once an hour for a cigarette break. The week culminated with a night of performances at a closed down jazz bar in which Ron

and Julie Tolentino performed *Self-Obliteration Solo #1: Ecstatic*. It was intense. It was intimate. It was an experience that continues to creep into my now whenever I see, or even think about, Ron Athey's performances, which themselves are intense and intimate.

Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic remains seems to pick up where *Incorruptible Flesh: Dissociative sparkle* (2006) left off (with, of course, the interjecting 2009 *Incorruptible Flesh: Perpetual wound*). The newest in the series began with Athey's splayed, greased and impaled body on a metal frame bed similar to the one used in *Incorruptible Flesh: Dissociative sparkle*. Audience members, like then, could come up and touch Athey's body; his assistants were there to distribute the latex gloves. Here, however, he was not strapped down (although he did have his eyelids hooked open), and he wore a false beard reminiscent of those donned by ancient Egyptian pharaohs, which were meant to convey their status as living gods. The addition of the false beard connected the scene of display with what was to follow. After perhaps fifteen minutes on the frame, Athey unhooked and dismounted from it, clothing his body with a black cape and an exaggeratedly tall top hat. He then slowly paced

to ritualistic-like music as his co-performers marked a chalk circle on the ground using a human protractor system (one person tied to the end of rope, pivoting in circles, as the other pulled on the rope, tracing a line on to the ground). Once the circle was complete and the stage adequately filled with fog (from the fog machine up stage), a recording of Athey's own voice cut in on the theatre's sound system – his disembodied speech weaving together an allusion to Divine (Harris Glenn Milstead, 1945–88) with excerpts from Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), which features a drag queen named Divine from which Milstead's namesake comes. On stage, the embodied Athey moved slowly around the circle (his assistants moving counter-clockwise around him) and made his way into the centre where a bright beam of light shone down. Once in the centre and with the recording having reached its end, the performance, too, ended. Foregoing the long, durational quality of a performance like *Dissociative sparkle*, which went on for six hours, *Messianic remains* took up the theme of blood within a shorter, incantation-like gesture.

I do not endeavour here to unpack the complexity of Athey's new performance, which, as

with all of his work, poetically draws together references from across time and space (as the juxtaposition of an Egyptian false beard, Divine and Genet would suggest) and places them, or, maybe better put, pulls out their place, within a history of blood politics – a history of Athey’s own body as it were. But I want to return to those aspects of intensity and intimacy that temper my relation to Athey’s work. Set in a formal theatre on the campus of an elite private university under the auspices of an academic conference, *Messianic remains* was intense for me in a very different way than in the now-then of 2009 – a way that reminded me, whether it be because of this context, the proscenium stage and attendant compulsory sitting I feel as an audience member in such a space, or both, of the incredible distance between Athey’s body and mine. Around me I could hear pieces of conversations, which seemed pre-occupied with identifying the sexually explicit content on the stage; from the young woman sitting behind me who, in an almost endearingly innocent tone, asked her friend, ‘Is ... is that...a dildo between his lips?’ (it was not), to the older man on my right who said sarcastically to his friend (another older man) as he stepped down off the stage, ‘Didn’t notice the baseball bat until now,’ to which his friend responded, ‘What baseball bat?’ and he shot back, ‘The baseball bat up his ass’ (it was). Meanwhile, another man sitting beside me explained to his apparently foreign-born colleague an abbreviated history of the freak show circuit in the United States.

I sat in my seat waiting patiently for the crowd on stage to die down but also watching the audience members go up to touch Athey’s body, have the experience they were supposed to have, linger long enough on stage to have spent an appropriate amount of time with the work and then return to their seats. I waited too long. Before I knew it, the stage was empty save for Athey and his assistants, and the latex gloves were taken away. The space went silent. We all sat quietly, waiting to see what would happen next; Athey was getting up from the metal frame. I missed my chance to run my gloved fingers over his greasy body. I didn’t have that experience; I had another one, and somehow it felt right in this context to do so – to not take my place in line and wait for my intimate moment

but to stay on the sidelines of, as the man sitting beside me seemed to be inferring in his history lesson, the freak show; a show structured by our collective desire and anxiety as an audience – our desire to have ‘an Athey experience’ and our anxiety over what exactly that should look and feel like. The second part of the performance, in which Athey took on a shamanistic position, his voice slowly leading us through the story of ‘poor Divine’ whose death was less than divine, became my moment of intimacy – of connecting with Athey on that darkened stage, not necessarily his body directly (his voice, to repeat, was recorded and played through speakers), but the network in which it moved, by which it is moved, by which I am moved.



■ Ron Athey *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*. Pigott Theater, Stanford University. Photo Jamie Lyons