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Selected Press on Ron Athey

MISSION ABORTED

by Charlie Finch

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During the 1980s, there was a repertory theater group in the East Village called PINK. Its most notorious piece was one in which a woman on a table, surrounded by male actors, described an abortion as she was experiencing it. Her monologue was filled with a kaleidoscope of emotions from liberation to sorrow; it was a masterpiece of nuance and regret and naturally it was picketed by both pro-choice and "pro-life" protesters.



Aliza Shvarts' controversial Yale performance piece of rapid, self-induced abortions, is, in spite of its shock value, just as nuanced in its implications. Among other things, it reminds us that no abortionist can rival "God" or "Mother Nature" in the numbing frequency of spontaneous abortions or other accidents, including a long history of mothers dying in childbirth. Human stupidity is often an ally, as with the nurses and doctors who laughed at Louis Pasteur, when he suggested that they wash their hands before delivering babies.

Shvarts' piece is all the more powerful because it exists as artwork solely in our perception of it, starting with the idiotic ex post facto censorship by Yale authorities on the grounds of protecting the artist's health. Indeed, Shvarts' masochistic demonstration stands as a Rabelaisian satire of many similar male artistic efforts: Vito Acconci's wanking; Chris Burden's self-shooting and VW crucifixion; Keith Boadwee's paint enemas; Dennis Oppenheim's sunburn series; Warhol's oxidization paintings. It as if Shvarts has taken the whole load of their semen up her yoni and spit it out with joyous contempt.

Did I mention **Ron Athey**? The idea that all art is masochistic by definition, in its pretensions to beauty and immortality, is depressing but justifiable, and Shvarts enjoys the added orgasmic jolt of fame and attention, surely a significant motivation. Last week, the Reverend Al Sharpton described the acquittal of cops in the Sean Bell killing as an "abortion." The negative connotation of this metaphor, even from the mouth of a street radical, shows how powerful abortion's associations remain in our minds, and highlights all the misunderstandings about it, one of which is that abortion is not an upper-class lifestyle choice, but a powerful means for poor, minority women to take control of their bodies for the first time.

Shvarts spins the notion of control out of control as a means to shock, in a clichéd sense, but also to arouse in an intellectual one. Yale should grant her legitimacy for this reason alone.

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THE ART ISSUE

RON ATHEY

In extremis and in my life

By Kateri Butler, Kateri Butler has written for Details and L'Uono Vogue.

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To describe a performance by Ron Athey is, at least in part, to sensationalize it. Double-headed dildos, "castration" by tuck with surgical staples, a crown of steel thorns, suspension by hooks through the back, a baseball bat. Blood flows. But a sacredness infuses.

Ritual. Exorcism. Taboo. Transcendence. The body invaded. The body politic. AIDS, homophobia, addiction. Religious fanaticism, identity, oppression.

Scenes from a harsh life. Pain as transformation, as a way to an altered state.

He's not necessarily trying to shock anyone, but of course he does. What you see, how you react, depends on your own experiences. I've seen people faint and vomit at his shows, I've seen people weep with recognition, I've seen people walk out. The artist's body chemistry changes, the audience's chemistry changes. Watching the unwatchable. You can't be jaded.

It's real pain. Yet there's beauty shining out of the horror. And hope. There's love.

Joyous day. I show up at Ron's and he has the massage table out. Ron lives in one of those Silver Lake tree houses, a tucked-away bungalow in a small complex with a storied past. In the 1980s, just next door, artist Lari Pittman was shot by a startled intruder.

Of course, property values have increased considerably since then.

Ron has magic hands, strong, healing, intuitive. He's got me through more than one deadline. And life-giving hands, earth-transforming hands, coaxing a lush garden of Vietnamese and Japanese grasses from inhospitable soil.

Part of what defines Ron as a performer is his willingness to give: "I believe in generosity in performance." And that's part of what defines him as a friend. His tattoo-tough exterior belies a tender heart. "It hurt my feelings," he will sometimes say about a mean thing someone has done—and not necessarily to him. He's "Daddy" to many of his friends.

Gracious and charming. Manners any mom would praise.

And so sensitive, eyes clear but heart open. His laugh, an impish chuckle. Cigarettes and gossip.

Fashion. Bitch sessions. Lunches. This is the Ron I've known for almost 20 years.

He was raised with the calling, "a little prophet angel of doom." He would be a minister—more than a regular minister, a John the Baptist. Even showed signs of being an ecstatic at a tender age, started speaking in tongues when he was 9 or 10 at Sister Crow's service, feeling a vibration in his mouth, a yearning to pull the spirit down into the room. The spirit. He believed in it, loved the faith-healing, the shamanism. The entertainment.

His mother was mostly institutionalized, a schizophrenic. She divorced his father, a career Navy man, when Ron was still a baby. So he and his brother and two sisters lived with his grandmother, grandfather and aunt in a three-bedroom tract house in Pomona—somewhere around the intersection of Flannery O'Connor and J.T. LeRoy (a.k.a. Laura Albert). There were four generations of Pentecostal women on his grandmother's side. And there were family prophecies.

The main one held that his aunt would bear the second coming of Christ through immaculate conception, then marry Elvis Presley and have twins. He stayed on this path of righteousness until he was about 15. Elvis died. None of the prophecies had come true. And he was starting to make friends, get socialized, get sexualized. And there was the meanness of the tent preachers, the storefront evangelicals, their envy of the big TV ministers, their epiphanies that Oral Roberts was the antichrist, or Billy Graham was. Suddenly he had nothing to pray to.

Ron is fearless in his work. The only true darkness is that which comes out of the hidden and misunderstood.

He doesn't flinch. Oh, but I do. Especially when I see him the day after a performance, blotches of yellow and purple where hooks had pulled his face into a garish mask, or barely formed scabs where he had cut himself. I admit I'm one of those people who shivers and turns away during such scenes—yet one of the most powerful parts of a Ron Athey performance is the collective physical reaction that sizzles through the audience when he impales himself on a Judas cradle, say, or teases a rope of pearls out of his ass. Which is critically acclaimed, by the way. "Ron Athey's asshole," Amelia Jones declares in the spring issue of

TDR: The Drama Review, "has its own place in the history of contemporary performance art."

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Let us discuss said anatomy briefly. I—like you, no doubt—never expected to exalt over someone's asshole.

And yet after watching "The Solar Anus" performed at Action=Space downtown in 1998—in which Ron channeled a creature out of Bataille and Molinier and rumors of Dietrich—I bumbled with wonder upon gazing at Ron's sunburst-tattooed anus. Revelatory, I swear, but I couldn't tell you exactly why. A kind of abject intimacy, a provocative happiness. And a weird realness.

Realness. Authenticity. Such overused blah blahs. But still, Ron is, has. Not because he spoke in tongues as a child, or shot heroin as a teen, or has HIV. But because he knew how to conquer it all, to claim it, to turn it into art. Although he still sometimes hesitates to call himself an artist: "There's something kind of intuitively alchemical I'm trying to do, and I don't know if sometimes it's really art that I'm trying to land at. Sometimes it's outside of art."

In the October issue of ArtScene, in a review of his solo exhibition at Western Project in Culver City, critic John O'Brien comments on Ron's exclusion from a show at New York's P.S.1 titled "Into Me/Out of Me," which surveyed artists and their bodies. "Is it possible," O'Brien asks, "to be an outsider's outsider?" He is. Sometimes. But then he shows up in the December issue of Vanity Fair, in its super-insider "The Art Universe" list, under "Performance Galaxy."

"It's a limited concept being an outsider," he says.

"I don't ride a train that I'm an outsider." Yet he doesn't consider himself part of the art scene either.

"I've never been in an art scene because I don't understand how that relates to making your own art."

The outsider's insider, the insider's outsider.

At her 40-something birthday party, Ron took a friend of ours over his knee, spontaneously giving her 40-some whacks. She still rhapsodizes about "breaking through to the other side." It was a moment she tried to re-create on her 50th—but while Ron's hand got as red and her face as flushed as the first time, it wasn't quite as revelatory.

Ron spent his last two years at Garey High School in the Upward Bound program, interning summers at the Salk Institute in La Jolla. But he was also venturing into street drugs, hanging out with cholo boys and having sex with some of them, although he had a cheerleader girlfriend at the time. Not that he was a jock, mind you. More a disco-glam fashion freak. He considered himself a pansexual, a natural-born pervert.

By 1979, as he was on his way to trading a future in science to become "a trash bucket of drugs," DIY—Do It Yourself—had ignited underground culture.

A girlfriend he interned with introduced him to the Claremont punk scene. He met Rozz Williams, the late lead singer and lyricist of Christian Death, then getting started in a garage, later to become an iconic punk goth band. Ron and Rozz spent the next three years together, doing lots of drugs, reading the French greats (Genet, Baudelaire, Gide) and forming a performance collaborative called Premature Ejaculation.

"There was a creative fever around me," Ron says.

Seemed like everyone was in a band or had a gallery.

He was going to clubs—the Brave Dog, Al's Bar, Theoretical—and seeing seminal performance artist Johanna Went, flipping through High Performance magazine and learning about artists such as Monte Cazazza, filtering it all through his extensive reading—the French, Burroughs, Patti Smith.

Self-education. Abjection. Drugs. One passage of Smith's "Babel" resonated through an acid trip: catharsis through shedding filth. Finding knowledge of a world he wanted to live in, following literary paths wherever they took him—Ginsberg, later Kathy Acker.

Discovering Pasolini films via friends in the industrial psycho-pop band Nervous Gender.

"I just had to know that there were misfits throughout time who were articulate and brought their vision into something solid. I suddenly realized there was this form where you didn't have to learn how to play an instrument to do it but you could take the insane visions in your head and interpret them into a visual

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reality. You could do a performance vomiting and it would express what you couldn't actually say."

With *Premature Ejaculation*, which performed occasionally at spaces such as the Arts Building in the Pomona Mall, Ron took "everything that turned me on or that I wanted to do and crunched and plowed through it." Cutting apart road kill, crawling through glass, creating sculptural bondage. "It was all about the mess, and the idea of pushing yourself to the edge. A lot of the elements I worked with later were in there, but they were just done in a very messy, explosive way. Which I think that time period was about. And it also gave me this huge adrenaline pump, just the idea of having ideas in your head that you want to make come to life. . . . Some things turn out better than you can imagine and some things fail—the kind of stakes that are in play with a live performance."

He also started to figure out how to be a working-class junkie, punching the clock at *Poseur and Aesthetic Frame Design*, making costume jewelry.

Working two jobs sometimes, hustling a fix. "I wanted to fly when I discovered Class A drugs." And although he didn't want to be waking up sick and having just enough heroin to maybe get well, that's where he ended up.

Petty crime and short jail stints followed. Friends he was using with were going to prison for armed robberies. And he was never going to get as high as he wanted to be with low-paying jobs. He was tired. He could see the trap. It took time, but he kicked in 1986. There's a kind of psychic hole here, from 1986 to 1990, which was just about recovery.

And then, a club with an unprintable name. "It's cheesy, but go-go dancing at [the club] brought me out of my skin. That's the launch into the performance that I do now. It's still on this trajectory that started in [the club] when I was wearing military boots and a codpiece."

The club brought together a group of people who had been getting tattooed and pierced over the past decade and were ready to show it off. A gathering of modern primitives, a celebration of body modification.

"I think a lot of why I did *Premature Ejaculation* was the energy of the scene—a real scene that was completely transformative, a scene that changed who you were by being in it. [The club] was another scene like that. It doesn't happen that often, a scene that deeply affects everyone who's involved."

A cashmere coat discovered in a thrift shop in Italy.

Helmut Lang shirts. Clear vinyl hot pants—for day!

Always the right outfit for the occasion. Dialed into style. A fashion dish, that's Ron.

A poster boy for bullshit. That's how Ron describes his part in the aftermath of a 1994 performance of "Four Scenes In a Harsh Life" at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Catapulted into the heart of the culture wars. Denounced from the floor of the U.S.

Senate. Blacklisted by the art world. All over the "Human Printing Press" scene—in which Ron cut the back of Darryl Carlton (a.k.a. Divinity Fudge) and made impressions of the wound on paper towels, which were then sent by a clothesline pulley out over the audience. It was erroneously reported, by a writer who had not attended the performance, that the audience had been exposed to HIV-positive blood. (Ron has lived with HIV for the past 20 years; Carlton is not positive.) And with that, the religious right was off and fulminating, and the media dutifully fanning the flames. Because \$150 from the National Endowment for the Arts had been used in support of the performance via the Walker Art Center, Ron found himself defending a concept—public funding—that he didn't really even understand, never having then or to this day applied for a public grant in the United States.

"To have to become a spokes model for this was a weird role to take on. Being primed by the NEA and the Walker about what to say to the media, who to talk to, whom not." And he was conflicted. If venues were willing to stop programming work that might be considered problematic to keep their NEA funding, then maybe they should lose that funding. But he talked the party line. Not that it mattered. For years the only art spaces in this country willing to give him a show were in L.A. and New York. And at New York's P.S. 122 that turned into what Ron calls pay-to-play. He ended up losing a few thousand dollars after a five-night sold-out run of "Four Scenes." Worst of all were the freeloaded media. "There'd be 35 people

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from the press on the list and I'd think, why do I have to pay for them to come see it? It was as if I was on trial and was going to have to pay for my exhibit."

But he didn't go up in smoke. He had a relationship with the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and that opened up Europe. France, Germany, Holland, Croatia, Portugal, Italy, Slovenia. European audiences continue to see performances that Angeleno audiences don't. "L.A.," Ron says, "doesn't invest in me." (In fact, his local performances have never been reviewed by this paper.) But over there, his works are fully produced, he dines with ministers of culture, he's asked for autographs like a rock star while walking down the street. "You can't be at the same level everywhere," he says. "I think that was really what made me not eat up in bitterness after the NEA thing."

Ron is one of those people who has many circles of friends—around town, around the world, overlapping and never-mets. Show up at one of his parties, back when you could still find parking near his house, and you might find yourself chipping-and-dipping with costume designer Susan Matheson, actors Juan Fernandez or Udo Kier, writer Lisa Teasley, composer David Harrow, artist Skot Armstrong. Professors and film programmers, divas and curators, musicians and tattoo artists, and almost always a visitor from abroad.

Maybe artist Cyril Kuhn's mom, Rosina, from Switzerland. His Grand Guignol trilogy—"Martyrs & Saints," "Four Scenes In a Harsh Life," "Deliverance"—often featured more than a dozen performers onstage, friends conversant with extreme body play. After all, it wasn't like he could hold a casting call.

Platinum Oasis, a polymorphously perverse 18-hour spectacle that Ron co-curated with Vaginal Davis as part of Outfest 2001, stirred it all together. Tapping the long list of friends and artists he had performed or shared a bill with, Ron, along with Vag, assembled an impressive international lineup of some 40 artists, such as Franko B, Kembra Pfahler, Bruce La Bruce, Ann Magnuson, the Velvet Hammer, Kira O'Reilly, Osseus Labyrinth, Lydia Lunch and Little Annie. And a nearly as impressive audience: Gus Van Sant, Larry Clark, Chloe Sevigny, Vin Diesel, Bruce Weber, Annie Sprinkle, Clive Barker.

In the spirit of no barriers, the viewer as voyeur, as participant, designer Rick Owens created red togas for the audience at the second Platinum Oasis in 2002.

After entering, you were directed to a kind of sweatshop filled with people sewing and customizing each garment. Mine remains, alas, the only piece of Rick Owens couture I own.

You're supposed to laugh—at least at some point—in a Ron Athey performance. There's always a tongue-in-cheek moment. "If there's not a few cackles, I'll turn up the volume on something."

In his most recent work shown in L.A., "The Judas Cradle," an operatic duodrama with Juliana Snapper performed at REDCAT as part of Outfest 2005, there's a hilarious bit in which he and Snapper face off as two bitchy French Mae West types. Shortly after, Ron ascends to a platform and impales himself on the pyramid-shaped Judas cradle, an Inquisition-era torture device. It's a scene made all the more horrifyingly startling by the frivolity that preceded it. That's a challenge Ron likes in performance, shifting from camp to serious or serious to camp.

The physicality of his work has changed over the years. "The Judas Cradle" has just the one penetration scene, where "Four Scenes In a Harsh Life" had more than a dozen overwhelmingly physical moments. "I'm not trying to outdo myself," he points out. "I'm always trying to move forward."

For "The Judas Cradle"—a response to Homeland Security, Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, American guilt and Ron's long obsession with instruments of torture—that meant a year and a half of voice lessons, learning how to sing opera. (He's a countertenor.) His work is extremely research-based.

Layers of meaning. History. Mythology. Politics. For the 1995 durational performance "Incorruptible Flesh [In Progress]," he hired a researcher and studied Victorian body parts collections and shamanism, and spent two weeks in Naples investigating alchemical relics such as the boiling blood of St. Gennaro.

After touring for much of the '90s with a large company, Ron started to move into more solo and duo works. "Even though I love the way a piece looks with lots of people in it, it takes on this labor running a company, and I didn't exactly know that I had ever wanted a theater company. Also, as an artist, I

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thought, do I always need a three-ring circus? What's underneath all the multiple actions going on at the same time—three people here doing this, while two people come in doing that and three more come in... Where am I in there?"

Today he's working with English artist Dominic Johnson through a mentoring program as part of a commission from the Chelsea Theatre in London. They showed the fourth in Ron's "Incorruptible Flesh" series as a work-in-progress last November; the piece, which uses the myth of Philoctetes to explore cross-generational queer relations, debuts at the Chelsea Theatre in April. And before heading to London, Ron goes to Italy, where the Torino GLBT Film Festival is honoring him with a retrospective.

Who knows why certain images stick with us, but I'm remembering a dinner party Ron had a few years back.

He's standing in the kitchen doorway, a hunk of Gruyère in hand, this beautiful grin just glowing as he watches a bunch of us jammed around his table, spearing pieces of bread into the fondue he just made.

The flesh. Incorruptible, corruptible. A literal and figurative canvas. Eroticism. Violation. Glorification. Martyrdom. Glamour. Pain. Of course, as I remind myself, it's not everyday Ron onstage. In performance he becomes a symbol, a heightened state, a reaction, an interpreter, a healer, a commentator. An ecstatic. He cracks the schisms and isms, gives us glimpses of alternatives to this reality.

This is what forces me to look, after initially averting my eyes.

RON ATHEY

ArtScene – October 2006

September 14 - October 28, 2006 at Western Project, Culver City

by John O'Brien

Performance artist Ron Athey has long been known for his challenging, sexually explicit and very extreme art work. Through performances that combine pomp, ritual, duration and physical action, Athey lays open the vulnerability of the human body with a--sometimes literally--surgical precision. He accomplishes this in ways unlike any other artist working within this context. His actions contain some of the same visceral qualities and the direct transformation of bodily flesh seen in the works of such artists as Bob Flanagan, Gina Pane, and Rudolph Swartzkogler. But his staging is of a different, more ornate and elaborate order. Hermann Nitsch's orgiastic group performances are somewhat closer in spirit to the presentational device which Athey favors. The decidedly theatrical and operatic qualities differentiate Athey's work from these precedents. It is only in the context of the crossbred, hybrid art form he has fashioned that his exclusion from the exhibition "*Into me / Out of Me*," at PS1 in New York, is understandable. Is it possible to be an outsider's outsider? Certainly, in an exhibition described as being an exhaustive survey of "how artists have explored the physical and psychological boundaries of their bodies and those of others creating images of fragility and strength, illness and suffering, tenderness and violence," his absence from that New York venue is glaring.

The current exhibition features video still images taken from his duodrama, "*Judas Cradle*." The actual Judas Cradle device, inspired by the original design, is a pyramid cast in resin on which Athey performs (literally embedded). Next to him on a podium is the opera singer Juliana Snapper, who acts as his interrogator throughout. Together, they use the body and their voices, as well as projected images and elaborate costumes, to explore the history of torture and personal suffering. Their multilingual libretto is built from disparate sources, including the transcripts of Inquisition hearings, opera quotes and the author Jean Genet. Their vocal techniques include high-pitched duets and speaking in tongues.

In performance, the sequence of actions he works upon his body are often derived from torture or other painful and controlling methods. The sounds of the actions can go well beyond most viewers' ability to withstand them. The tension and the duration of these extreme actions make them hard to follow without turning away. The unbearable intensity of this is redistributed and, to some degree, reduced by the

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distancing effect exerted by photographic stills. A further advantage—setting aside the aforementioned observations—is that this permits a clearer view of how Athey sets up the hard-to-imagine scenes of his stories.

Sumptuously framed against a backdrop of black or dark blue cloth, his naked and tattooed body stands out as a vulnerable and physically fragile construct within a world of restraints and constraints. His performances reveal how the body functions as an interface between a spirit and the world. He underlines just how fragile the body is: a naked and easily breakable thing. Photography also allows him to freeze-frame his almost entirely tattooed body, which is an integral and regular part of his artwork. His “Solar Anus” (I suspect so named as an homage to the surrealist writer Georges Bataille) consists of black sunrays pouring out in streams of black light and triangles. It is featured prominently in all of his images. This, along with the arrowed perforations of his heavily muscled torso, both relate to his own artistic narcissism and to the history of painting with its abundance of images of beautiful dying saints and martyrs from medieval times to the present.

It has been written that from within his experience of it, the body is a kind of prison, the outmost limits of which he seeks to know, right up to the definitive transformation of death. This is also a theme from the history of opera. Often, the main characters in the librettos die, or are soon to be taken away by Death. The long soaring voices, which distort the phonetic value of the spoken words, give opera its distinctive aural qualities. Athey has found another dimension in which to express this cry, this frailty and mourning.
