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Everything Loose: Ron Athey's *Acephalous Monster* at REDCAT.

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Abstract: The work of artist Ron Athey has long befuddled the art historical establishment and has mostly remained under the philosophical radar. In this review of Athey's *Acephalous Monster*, performed on August 28, 2021, at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater in Los Angeles, I propose a philosophical framework for Athey's radical reinvention of ethical categories like agency, mutuality and communion. I describe the performance and its critical context in order to tease out the aesthetic dimension of this reinvention and the subversive power of reconstituting personhood along lines of collective artistic jubilation and creative survival.

The American obsession with reinvention has borne more gods and monsters than our cultural purse can hold. This might be a function of a historical self-consciousness – the compensatory fever of a youngling nation whose invention by the Old World trailed the invention of everything else. But it could also be a different matter altogether. There is no other place of expansive possibility like the United States, where so many stark contradictions effloresce and flourish. This is the land where pungent nationalism cohabitates with colonial guilt, where democratic ideals play charades with structural injustice, and where capitalist greed and protestant beneficence share a respiratory system. What better soil to reinvent oneself upon than the quicksand of the American project?

When Frank Lloyd Wright said 'Tip the world on its side and everything loose will land in Los Angeles', he was taking on what looked like an easy target. But if Los Angeles was the final repository of civilisational detritus, what

would the city of Pomona be – a quaint backslash for the urban sprawl’s toxic brew? And what part would Pomona’s most controversial son – the artist Ron Athey – play in the Russian-doll drama of a conservative town swallowed by the loosest of cities swallowed by a contradiction of a country? The answer to the last question is, as a matter of course, Grand Reinventor. ‘Grand’ because Athey’s lifework has, for four decades, been testing and stretching the limits of ritual and ceremony. As to the designation of ‘reinventor’, Athey epitomises the nature of the beast. Just like cuddly Pomona, colostomic Los Angeles and schizophrenic North America, Athey assumes shapeshifting as a matter of genetic necessity.

Acephalous Monster, Athey’s recent performance suite presented on four consecutive nights at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Center (REDCAT) in Los Angeles, was a phantasmagoric sort of homecoming for the artist. The career-spanning exhibition ‘Queer Communion: Ron Athey’ had already opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the performance at REDCAT felt like the summation of the curatorial and creative efforts of an entire village. *Acephalous Monster* employed the soundscapes of Sean Griffin’s Opera Povera ensemble, the sublime vocal viscera of Carmina Escobar and the procedural onstage assistance of Greek artist Hermes Pitakos. These physical presences occupy only the tip of the communal iceberg that informs and supports Athey’s practice. The work in *Acephalous Monster* was the culmination of a decades-long iterative process engaging fellow artists, nightlife personalities, BDSM scene denizens, curators and theorists.

Queer Communion: Ron Athey – the book edited by Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell in conjunction with the eponymous exhibition – truly captures the sense of participatory collectivity that Athey’s global family epitomises. The title also celebrates what Jones sees as Athey’s radical ability ‘to re-form himself powerfully in relation to the culture around him, often reshaping it in return.’¹ And indeed, Athey’s penchant for reinvention strays far beyond the centrifugal pull of a singular artistic ego. To the contrary, Athey’s private person and his multiple artistic personae are fully networked across a complex ecology of queer life and queer expression.²

In his essay ‘The Philosophy of Creativity’, Berys Gaut references a description from Gregory Feist who spent fifty years studying the creative personality as a psychological type. Feist describes this type as ‘open to new experiences, less conventional and less conscientious, more self-confident, self-accepting, driven, ambitious, dominant, hostile and impulsive.’³ This portrait presupposes that the average artist would have a strong sense of self and an equally strong sense of freedom. The latter is confirmed by Gaut’s definition of creativity as ‘the capacity to produce original and valuable items by flair’ with ‘a particular kind of agency.’⁴ These parameters seem appropriate when applied to Athey. Some of his legendary performances from the past – involving sexual acts, bloodletting, bodily mutilation etc. – have garnered a reputation that almost too precisely matches Feist’s description of



Figure 1: *Acephalous Monster*. Courtesy of Ron Athey

the creative type. Words like ‘less conscientious’, ‘self-accepting’, ‘dominant’, ‘hostile’ and ‘impulsive’ often feature in the decades of public noise around his work. The further implication that Athey’s practice is driven by an ambitious and self-confident agent is also mostly taken for granted.

Upon closer inspection, however, Athey’s life and work could not be further from the picture Gaut paints with Feist’s help. In Jennifer Doyle’s book *Hold It Against Me*, she dispels the surface impression of Athey as an assertive and violent man bent on shock tactics. Doyle, who counts Athey as a friend, does this by attending to the contrast between controversy and difficulty. Controversy is a function of a media machine training its tin ear on the next big thing in art, be it a thing of beauty or monstrosity. Difficulty, on the other hand, is internal to the artwork – a dimension of moral and aesthetic disquiet that ‘forces us to keep company with vulnerability, intimacy and desire’.⁵ The critical edge of Athey’s work does not boil down to the novelty associated with ‘the capacity to produce original and valuable items’ as Gaut would have it. On the contrary, Doyle sees the real critical value of Athey’s performances in breaching the art-life divide and bringing audiences closer to their own inner worlds rather than exposing them to some putative artistic example of originality. And while she laments the fact that Athey has not enjoyed the art historical attention he richly deserves, she is convinced that it is art history’s loss. Athey’s work is difficult to witness and difficult to theorise about and, instead of engendering productive conversations, the



Figure 2: *Acephalous Monster*. Courtesy of Ron Athey

controversy surrounding it ‘is engineered to keep us from thinking about and working through these aspects of its difficulty’.⁶

Doyle reminds us that controversy and difficulty are not just two ways of looking at art, but also two distinct approaches to living. When Athey recalls the emotional abyss that the AIDS pandemic opened up in his life, he evokes the concept of ‘dissociative sparkle’ – a coping mechanism for him that combines the unfathomable hardship of precarious living with the performative grandiosity of his art.⁷ For Athey the dissociation has been as much a matter of sublimating the specific trauma of living and surviving as an HIV-positive gay man as it has been a way to dissolve that fraught identity cluster altogether. In 1998, Athey took a partial inventory of the performative personalities he had assumed since he started making art in 1981, the list including ‘a nun, St. Sebastian, Christ, a kinky Nazi, a house painter, a factory worker, a nurse, a eunuch and a Butoh dancer painted gray’.⁸ For anyone tempted to confine Athey’s shapeshifting tendencies to the bounds of his art practice, he adds a reminder that they are a matter of existential predicament: ‘I suppose it all goes back to my manifesto: Nothing is pure. I am many things, but my ambiguity, my inability to land, continues.’⁹

José Esteban Muñoz’s term ‘disidentification’ is helpful for understanding Athey’s perpetual interrogation of his ‘socially encoded role’.¹⁰ Muñoz claims that the concept applies best to minoritarian subjects ‘whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white

supremacy and misogyny'. The disidentificatory performances of such subjects 'circulate in subcultural circuits and strive to envision and activate new social relations'.¹¹ There are two simultaneous social dynamics at work here. The first is the dissolution of the minoritarian self in response to societal pressures of unattainable normative selfhood. The second is the reconstitution of the artist's agentic viability through the forging of alternative modes of socialisation. Athey's dissociative sparkle is clearly, among many things, a disidentification campaign in the first sense of pushing back at the pressure to conform to his socially-encoded identity.¹² Queer communion, in turn, is exemplary of the 'new social relations' Muñoz sees emerging from disidentificatory performances like Athey's.

The night I saw *Acephalous Monster*, I could recognise many of Athey's friends and collaborators in the audience. Judging by the air of giddy anticipation before the show, the rapturous applause at the end, and the jovial beehive of debriefing and reconnecting outside the venue, the performance was an unqualified success. This sense of congenial spectatorship, however, was hard earned. The topics and images *Acephalous Monster* conjured were complex and emotionally fraught. The first part was an interpretation of Brion Gysin's 'Pistol Poem', which involved a gradually intensifying chess-like choreography across a grid projected on the stage floor. Dressed in a black suit with hair and moustache groomed to resemble an infamous *Führer*, Athey acted as a master of ceremonies of sorts. A couple of minutes in, he was joined by a similarly dressed Hermes Pittakos. As they marched across illuminated tiles and counted out loud, what initially resembled a military routine soon gave way to a more chaotic and dangerous proposition. The pacing across the grid became more hectic and the resulting din was occasionally punctured by gunshots fired by Carmina Escobar, herself styled as a high-camp Weimar dominatrix.

The second part of the performance had Athey reading a Georges Bataille essay on Nietzsche's madness and the Turin horse. Dramaturgically, this part was staged as a dialogue between a bespectacled Athey standing at a lectern on the left side of the stage and a projection of the same text on a screen in the center. Midway through the reading, the screen changed to a film of a naked female body on hands and knees, gently swaying as if possessed by an unknown anticipation. Closeups showed the glistening skin dripping with a transparent viscous liquid. The side view of the body was interspersed with occasional shots of the person's behind and genitals.

In a video of a previous iteration of *Acephalous Monster* (performed in Manchester, UK on 26 October 2019), posted by Athey to his Vimeo portal, just as he pronounces the words 'the simulated deliriums of art', a shiny black dildo is shown penetrating the person onscreen from behind.¹³ As a live audience member, I could not have possibly caught this kind of synchrony, even if it had occurred at the identical junction in the performance I was watching. The scene's dramatic denouement collaged the penetration scene



Figure 3: *Acephalous Monster*. Courtesy of Ron Athey

upon a mannerist painting of a bull straddling a cow. The beasts' interlinked genital areas almost perfectly overlapped with the one of the woman in the video, which appeared to be a complex reference to the myth of Pasiphaë.

During the third part, Athey disrobed and sat down in front of an ornate vanity table, draped in a regal cloak. As he took sips from a dainty glass of liquor, he carefully placed a rococo wig on his head and whitened his countenance with a large powder puff. Then he walked over to the left side of the stage, where he hid behind a partial black wall, with only his bewigged head sticking outwards through a hole. While Athey made indecipherable sounds, the center screen showed scenes of metaphorical decapitation from the film *The Executioner and the Labyrinth*, in which artist and longtime Athey conspirator Divinity Fudge played an axe-wielding masked character who repeatedly crushes a cast of Athey's head. In a demented duet of sorts, Athey's vocal exertions in this part of *Acephalous Monster* were joined by similar ones from Carmina Escobar, standing on the opposite end of the stage.

For the fourth part, Athey waded into a shallow, grave-sized pool of sticky liquid in the middle of the stage. The spectacle of him writhing inside it was enhanced by an ominous minotaur mask, the organic undulations of an intestine-like prop and the uncanny glow of a blacklight bathing the scene in stark neon hues. During the last part of the performance, Athey stood naked against the black wall, wearing a sun-like crown of concentric metal

beams. Clad in nothing but a jockstrap, Hermes Pittakos carved a circle into Athey's sternum and proceeded to unfurl long scrolls of canvas, pressing blood prints into it at even intervals. Pittakos' gesture was accompanied by a film of a different performance – curated by Athey and featuring a dozen or so recognizable artworld and nightlife luminaries, including Pittakos – playing onscreen. Titled *Entering the Forest*, the film showed various scenes of ritualistic body mutilation and penetration in what looked like a whirl of peacock feathers and medieval torture instruments. By the end of *Acephalous Monster*, Athey walked down to the edge of the stage and bowed, blood trickling down his torso and dripping onto the floor. Behind him, hanging from the black wall like decorative columns were four long stretches of fabric imprinted with splotchy dark red circles.

Had Frank Lloyd Wright witnessed Athey's performance, I imagine him feeling totally vindicated in his condescension toward Los Angeles as a repository for 'everything loose' in the world. The problem, of course, is that almost everyone on Earth could find something to get offended or outraged by in *Acephalous Monster*. This is because, to follow Doyle, almost everyone on Earth would rather attend to the controversy of what they are seeing than its difficulty. It is difficult to witness an embattled artist pursue the horrors of our imagination to their vanishing point, especially when these horrors are already traceable to the ground we are standing on – our restrictive cultural practices, our violent institutions, our dehumanising science and our sterile scholarship.

Even seemingly innocuous thematic strains of *Acephalous Monster*, such as recurring references to Minoan mythology – in the image of the copulating bull, Divinity Fudge's ceremonial prowling of a labyrinthine mosaic and the minotaur mask worn by Athey in the fourth part – pack enormous critical power in their assault on our ideological comforts. The questions these references tease out expose the difficulty behind the controversy: How do we sustain the delusion of sanctity we attach to historical monuments like the temple of Knossos, considering that it is a cartoonishly-maintained relic of some Hollywood pastiche made by an overzealous British nobleman who had it restored in the early twentieth century? What have we learned from the ancients if we keep reinvesting lives and resources in a cycle of mutation and mutilation? How is Frank Lloyd Wright, who spent his career 'incorporating' Mayan, Japanese and other far-off design traditions, justified in his disparaging Los Angeles for its Frankensteinian urban simulacrum?

These questions are the product of a strange kind of contrivance. They are not Athey's to ask or answer and, yet, I am only able to formulate them as a result of thinking with him and through his art. This might well be a definitive

aspect of aesthetic communion. When I ran into Athey outside of REDCAT, surrounded by a gaggle of euphoric audience members, it felt very natural to embrace him and congratulate him on his performance. That filial hug brought me in intimate proximity to a man whose only consistent character trait is reinvention. With Athey, this does not amount to a contradiction. Instead, it is a reminder that, try as we might, we have little reason to believe that everything is anything but loose.

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NOTES

¹Jones and Campbell 2020, 10.

²A recent review of the work of artist Martine Gutierrez shows another case of destabilised identity: ‘The 32-year-old artist, who lives in Brooklyn, has always controlled her image in front of and behind the camera, as model, costume and set designer, makeup artist and director, interrogating ideas about gender, ethnicity and how identity is constructed personally and collectively. Known for her sumptuous photographs and videos in which she performs a chameleon-like array of stereotypes culled from glossy magazines, Hollywood and the music industry, the artist here takes on the challenge of enacting personas spanning time and cultures.’ Sheets 2021.

³Gaut 2010, 1036.

⁴Gaut 2010, 1041.

⁵Doyle 2013, 20.

⁶Doyle 2013, 20.

⁷Doyle 2013, 56-57.

⁸Jones and Campbell 2020, 102.

⁹Jones and Campbell 2020, 104.

¹⁰Muñoz 1999, 6.

¹¹Muñoz 1999, 5.

¹²A version of this artistic pushback was theorised brilliantly by Nicholas Whittaker in their recent article ‘Blackening Aesthetic Experience’. Their case in point is the art of Adrian Piper and, more specifically, ‘the power of the artwork to dissolve ontological distinctions by becoming entangled in the appreciator’s ownmost being’. Piper accomplishes this in part by pushing against the objectifying constraints of her identity as a mixed-race woman. As a result, according to Whittaker, the subject/object relationship between artwork and viewer is collapsed and new forms of aesthetic communion emerge. This picture coheres with Muñoz’s account of disidentification and its aesthetic and political potential. Whittaker 2021.

¹³<https://vimeo.com/474866776>.

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