

*Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey* edited by Dominic Johnson

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The potency of myth in Ron Athey's work is the problem tackled by this formidable new book. Edited by Dominic Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood* is the first near-comprehensive treatment of Athey's complex body of work. Athey emerged in the Los Angeles punk scene in the early 1980s and became known for his operatic-scale performances in which he inhabited the roles of saints, martyrs, and survivors. Many of these performances featured body modification, blood, and techniques borrowed from non-procreative sex and S&M practices. These elements were orchestrated in endurance works that allegorized the experience of survival, anger, and loss during the first decades of the AIDS crisis. Because of his interweaving of religious and sexual imagery, misrepresentations of Athey's work abound, and this volume is at pains to rectify these wrongs.

Across the 21 contributions that make up the book's narrative, recurring tensions between myth and verification erupt. *Pleading in the Blood* struggles to accommodate Athey's recalcitrant performance practice with the book's own revisionist and archival aims. Any account of such a body of work would necessarily evidence such an internal struggle, and Johnson's committed, affectionate, and generous volume does an extraordinary job of paying homage to Athey, of grappling with the complexities of live art, and of doing justice to the wildness of belief that is perhaps the key theme in Athey's work and in his contentious critical reception.

Different modes of writing rub up against each other in this lush and well-illustrated book. Johnson leads the way with an exemplary historical account of Athey's practice and of the public scandal whipped up over a 1994 performance Athey gave in Minneapolis with Divinity P. Fudge (Darryl Carlton), which drew national attention after it was misappropriated by arch-conservative Senator Jesse Helms in his attacks on federal funding for the arts. Johnson's history of this episode is extremely valuable, and this essay alone makes this book a significant contribution to the literature on art at the end of the twentieth century.

Arguably, the most important texts in the book are Athey's own, but these myth-making remembrances of his youth prompt a resistance to the conventions of historical narrative. Raised in a fanatic and evangelical household by his grandmother and two aunts, Athey was prophesized to have the Calling before his birth and spent many years of his youth in training and in expectation of becoming a prophet. Writings by Athey about this are both tender and raw, and they contribute to the myths surrounding him and establish how faith in the unseen underwrites his practice. The historical tone of this retrospective volume might prompt readers to try to see these as merely iconographic sources or a new spin on the genre of artists' youthful exceptionalism, but Athey's writings compel faith in the reality of these events (even as he voices his own skepticism about their meaning), leaving the reader in a state of suspension about his authorial intentions. These writings voice doubt about signs and omens, but they ask to be read as pre-figurations for his art. They are remarkable texts that deserve sustained attention for themselves and for the ways in which they replay the structures through which Athey organizes his art and performance. Indeed, one wishes that more of Athey's writing was included in this book, but perhaps that will be its companion volume.

Also present in the book are many first-hand accounts from friends and collaborators. These are loving and illuminating, and we learn much about Athey's priorities, affections, and distastes from such important figures as Catherine Gund, Julie Tolentino, Juliana Snapper, Jennifer Doyle, Catherine Opie, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Beyond that, recollections from Bruce LaBruce, Alex Binnie, Tim Etchells, and Matthew Goulish and reprinted texts by Homi K. Bhabha and Lydia Lunch fill out episodes in Athey's history. Running throughout these affectionate memoirs and stories of sodality is the generous and committed personality of Athey himself. Indeed, cumulatively, these more personal statements provide the most

powerful retort to Athey's critics (and to the historical record) that would cast him as merely shocking, extreme, and confrontational. These testimonials of Athey fight against the flattening scandal-mongering that determines his reputation amongst his critics and continues to drive his most obsessed fans. Against that myth of spectacle, these texts remind us that the work is not ultimately about provocation so much as it is about emotions (of all kinds), kinships, and survival. For an artist who has so often been instrumentalized as a myth, these texts are both revealingly personal and historiographically necessary. It is also worth noting that any scholar of the LA art scene or of performance art would do well to read this book for the document it presents of this supportive network in which performance thrived.

Detailed scholarly analyses of Athey's practice also participate in the book's reconstruction. To Johnson's credit, he has chosen scholars who find the complex emotional politics of Athey's work nourishing to their analyses. Athey's subject matter makes many historians or critics uncomfortable, and his practice more broadly embraces convictions that some would find difficult to assimilate – just as his own de-emphasis on completion or consistency fights against the idea of the 'finished' (and, consequently, closed) work of art. This is not the case with Jennifer Doyle, Amelia Jones, and Adrian Heathfield, who each offer compelling interpretations of Athey's work that attend to its emotional range, its moments of ad-hoc improvisation, and its eschatological and expiatory aspects. These texts, along with Johnson's own, offer models for writing about such work as Athey's and should be read for their methodologies by anyone interested in contemporary art.<sup>1</sup>

*Pleading in the Blood* offers a remarkable and enduring contribution to literatures on performance and contemporary art. If there was one thing that this book could be said to lack, it would be a fuller recognition of the negative deployments of Athey's work which, themselves, make up crucial parts of its history. In the earnestness of its defensive recuperation and in its desire to redress the decades of misrepresentation, the book (perhaps necessarily) devalues the virulent effectiveness of the Athey myths. Even though this does emerge as foil in some of the essays on the 1990s (most notably, Johnson's history), a document of Athey's career cannot fully shy away from the violent, prejudiced, and fearful misrepresentations that are part of its

past. It's a delicate balance, since such texts as Helms's testimony, the factually erroneous 1994 article by Mary Abbe, or any of the host of other criticisms of Athey would enrage the authors and most readers of the book (myself included). Nevertheless, they would have given evidence of the potency of the negative emotions and threat produced by Athey's work. This book's loving attempt at credibility and authenticity disallowed inclusion of any of those powerful misrepresentations and admitted only grudgingly their very real and long-lasting political consequences. (Beyond the specifics of arts funding, many in Athey's ardent non-art fan base thrive on his misrepresentation and the mythology of scandal.) I don't bring this up as an actual criticism of the book, for I think that *Pleading in the Blood* is a wonderful and rich example of how to do a history of performance art. I mention it as a reminder of what makes Athey's history so engaging and important: its fearless embrace of the abundance of emotions, meanings, and solicitations it produces. There is, in other words, more to be learned from and written about Athey and his history. Without a doubt, the standard for any future writings on Athey will be the challenging, poly-vocal, and powerful testament offered by *Pleading in the Blood*.

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1. I would add that a necessary complement to this volume in this regard is the valuable discussions of Athey in Doyle's book *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2013).