

In Conversation with Ron Athey
By Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage)
(Edited with authors notes by Lisa Newman)

Andrea Pagnes. *Although there is a massive return to performance art, I have a feeling that today's performance art risks annihilating itself. For some time now, especially in the young generations, many performance artists debase their creative vision for an excess of flat conceptualism dictated by external trends, to the expense of what is instead the richness and uniqueness that can emanate from personal experience, lived life and the consequent artistic research which arises directly from the deepest inclinations and existential urgencies of an individual.*

From my point of view, the problem resides also – if not mainly - in the educational system.

In fact, many young artists feel obliged to fulfil the requirements of institutional schemes and rules as the only right way to find opportunities to make their own proposals public. This leads ineluctably to a regimented uniformity, which impoverishes and weakens art itself.

To structure a performative work of art as a mere up to date critique against governmental or economical policies, wrong distribution of public funds, censorship, morality (issues that basically have always been and probably always will be), or venture into sensationalist effects and shock tactics per se, without having a clear sense of the true inner urgency that drives an artist to express himself as such, the impact that a performance ought to have is inevitably aground. Today a lot of performance art production seems just boring, a confusing approximate attempt, or gratuitous nonsense in the eyes of many people.

I find instead (like in your case) that when performance art intersects life directly and uncompromisingly, and draws on the most basic instincts, processes and transforms the deeper reasons and urgencies of Man's presence in the world (which is always more than a condition), it is revelatory: a sincere, transformative experience on human scale.

You are also a teacher and have been a professor at UCLA. As an artist you have created a legacy. What could you suggest to the young generations of artists approaching performance art?

Ron Athey. Well I've been a visiting teacher! I feel compelled to explore immersion techniques even further, in upcoming workshops. I'm moving back to southern California (the region rather than just Los Angeles!) in late April, and desire to explore more. The Praxis Mojave work (*author's note: a performance art multi-day workshop which took place in the Mojave Desert, Southern California in 2008*) I co-facilitated with Julie Tolentino and Juliana Snapper was an incredible experience, with participants who I would consider younger peers, like Heather Cassils, Zachary Drucker, Tania Hamidi, Lee Adams, and from other mediums such as Empress Stah, Manuel Vason, and Aliza Shvartz. And it was dynamite! Maybe it is a mistake to single out performance or over-define what it is or isn't, I think the goals are what's important. How, in any medium, to bring something esoteric to life, how to disturb a given, how to represent the super natural. The body is still present in other forms, so what is written on the body and do we need to keep hammering its history, or assume its present, and to what extent? We could revisit questions within victim art, how to own it, or not fall in the uncriticable zone of righteousness. In the confusion of our times I think it's

comfortable to revert to assigning who has authority to work in race, who is authentic to explore sexuality, and who's egotistical enough to work in the spoken 'I' monologue!

I think the way forward is to light fires, to show work as far away from academia as possible till it comes to life, and bring it into a philosophers circle and see where it sits, then take it back out. Same with fact-checking against art history. It's been done, how many ways and is it my way and is it relative to work in 'it' again? Like the voice in the ear talking about the image of Christ, or the desire to strip everything away and scratch at your personal vulnerabilities. The other side is craft and form, and category. I think it's time to stop being phobic of theatre, but be clear that cabaret and circus, if done as such, is such.

A.P. *When performance art delves deeply into the physical, psychological and spiritual needs for human interaction; our fears, dreams, self-consciousness, and our human concerns for life, the time and space we live in - it can generate a powerful reflection, thus sometimes unsettling and uncomfortable, while drawing our attention to the absurdity of life, social prejudices, and sclerotized idiosyncrasies of human behavior.*

Since the early 80s, you have employed performance art as a thought-provoking medium that violates borders between disciplines and genders, between private and public (and the private made political), challenging conventional bourgeois mores, tastes and expectations.

During the 90s, you have been able (at the cost of putting your own life at risk) to courageously and openly confront the audience on determined relational issues through your work, by addressing viscerally emerging social hypocritical worries, which demanded personal interaction and the raising of popular awareness on one's personal beliefs and convictions (on HIV, for instance).

Of course there is even more: being also a master in extreme body art, some might have also superficially criticized you of making a public spectacle of the human body 'activity' and intimacy, without comprehending that to face thoroughly such issues, the duty of a contemporary artist ought to be able to express his most profound concerns by showing his wounds, which are at the same time vectors of his inmost grief and suffering, as well as metaphors of a constant exploration on philosophical, spiritual and psychological questions about human existence. Conveying meaning in this way, 'pleading in the blood' - and almost redeeming in your own blood all this - you led viewers to always engage with a real person (you) who feels fear and pain, excitement and embarrassment, just like every human being.

Could you shortly summarize your ideas on performance art?

R.A. As above, but also I think we have to look at times performance art has hit the nail. I LOVE issue-based performance, Women's Building "not for sale" times, (author's note: WB is an arts and education non-profit organization based in San Francisco, California founded in 1971 as the first woman-owned and operated community centre in the United States. "Not for sale" is an on-going world-wide project which explores labour injustice and the exploitation of women in human trafficking, using art and education; see: www.womensbuilding.org; www.notforsalecampaign.org), honest identity politics, ACT UP/gran fury/AIDS/Diamanda plague mass, David Wojnarowicz, et al, these times when the bubble has exploded with

life issues and movements, but these are ephemeral, the energy works and then its served its purpose, and some pieces stand the test of the timeline and some stand up only in the context of their light. But we can also look at abject art, and coo-coo experiments with attention span and nothingness and duration. Let's look at duration: often it is guilty of imposing (a) majesty. It does change by defying the timeline but the energies HAVE to move it into the zone where symbolism and intension are only a way in, and often only a way in for the performer.

A.P. What is exactly performance art today for you?

R.A. Ugghh, I can complain but there's some juicy art going on, and probably more than ever! But in the memory of some of us who were part of the glory days at the ICA London (*author's note: the Institute for Contemporary Art supports radical art and culture. Through a vibrant programme of exhibitions, films, events, talks and debates, the ICA challenges perceived notions and stimulates debate, experimentation, creativity and exchange with visitors. Founded in 1946 by a group of artists, collectors and critics including Roland Penrose, Peter Watson and Herbert Read, the ICA continues to support artists in showing and exploring their work, often as it emerges and before others. See: www.ica.org.uk*) it's not the first Annie Sprinkle and the first Marcel.li Antunez Roca and the first Stelarc and the first Franko b. etc. But there was always lots of performance you just had to endure. What is significant about festivals is you bring together that one person whose work is in dialogue with another 2,000 miles away and another from the older generation and an insane student who's nailing it. The dilemma is it can accompany visual arts, which fit in the art market, but it is a charity reliant on funding, in and of itself. When you do the American thing of raising the audience to a size that box office (just about) pays for it, it loses intimacy. So the fact that it is an unpopular welfare state, or that very few have the stomach to keep slugging it out into old age like myself! I'm uneducated so i can't teach for more than a quick visit, I'm not cabaret or proper theatre so i can't do runs long enough to really justify the money spent on the piece! So I have my personal dilemma, what the fuck do I do next?

A.P. What should it address to be an effective tool for society - civil and poetic at its best?

R.A. This is categorical to the intention of the artist! I think it can be a cheerleader for activism, intervention, bearing witness, but we always need to remember it is not populist. Even the one or two super fame examples aren't populist because of the work, but because of the brand and spin. Because the outsider always moves my experience and taste, I think outsiders have thrived within performance. I think it is corny when it becomes community centre, art therapy, or sideshow to a main event often being the art market.

DIY (*do-it-yourself*) is more important than ever. Why wait for curators? Why wait for your turn? For the asshole to leave the Tate? For the climate to change in that conservative place that still means so much to you? Why not do benefits/write for funds/self produce in an amazing site-specific place? Cuz it is so much work but so worth it!

A.P. To find new interdisciplinary models at all costs, in the multi-faceted

field of the performing arts, today we are witnessing a proliferation of so-called 'new strategies', variously described as situations, relational aesthetics, interventions, etc. mainly aiming to set up a participatory climax to involve the viewer actively in the process of whatsoever artistic/creative act. These same strategies are then promoted and cleverly described as evidence of cultural changes towards interactive modes of communication and social exchange that characterize the 21st century.

Personally, I'm rather sensitive and sceptical of all this. It sounds like when a politician tries to convince his interlocutor with promises or guarantees of novelty to get his vote.

In your work, instead I see consistency and coherence, a total recall, a determined clear line that you have never abandoned, by virtue of a precise, radical choice that has strengthened with time passing by.

Along the years, in your live oeuvre, your body – as a main tool of expression – has transformed as an effective, factual possibility of challenging historical and contemporary iconography, where ethics and aesthetics converge. Embracing a certain liturgy, without having to give in to attitudes that are openly iconoclastic; and by processing, re-visiting, and re-considering some particular myths and archetypes, you have started to bend cultural elements of the past into contemporaneity and therefore, by refreshing them, re-writing a certain culture.

Could you tell us more on your interest about liturgy (and specifically which holy figures)?

R.A. This feels like my whole life!!!! What I call ye *olde* rugged cross. I was raised to be a Pentecostal minister by a prophecy in my family, from birth. So this is really a cult with a lot of ties to the spiritualist church. Including automatic writing, glossolalia, xenolalia, prophecy, communion with the spirits of the dead, and then the more culty protestant obsession like faith healing, and *olde* timey rituals like baptism, foot washing, anointing in different oils, singing, shaking, spirit dancing. Which is where it gets tribal into ecstatic dancing and screaming. These are durational performances, and in the most remote places (not my experience) venomous snakes are passed.

The second part of this is explained in a story I wrote called "The Catholic Envy of Vena Mae" about my Aunt, who for the most part channelled the Virgin Mary (*author's note: by "channelling", Athey is referring to the spiritual act of acting as a conduit for divine communication. The story, "The Catholic Envy of Vena Mae" appears*). Her obsession with various saints was environmental; we lived in a Mexican Catholic neighbourhood and she very much was enticed by the rituals and symbolism. These were brought into our home even though very much in contradiction with the Protestant law: worship no golden idols, no false idols, only the trinity as one.

A.P. From where does it originate? Why do these specific liturgical figures inform your live performances so broadly?

R.A. I guess i get Jungian here! I do see everything in terms of archetypal, and The Archetype repeats and reconfigures. It's a lens I'm happy with keeping on!

A.P. What is the actual purpose in all this?

R.A. I think there's a freedom in keeping it alive. What would it be replaced with, Scientology? New-age American Buddhism? Well I am from California, there's more than a little New Age that has infiltrated into me! But I do identify as an atheist, or with my obsessions, a mystical atheist. But I don't practice magic in my work, I will use the format to bring me (us) in, as a facade or flavour, but then contrast it. It's my experience with the prophecies, they were false, as told, but have a truth in their reinterpretation.

Part II for us non-breeders: if I am not subscribing to reproductive futurity, and I am not embracing nihilism. Then what am I doing? Beyond pleasure activism? I try to face these philosophical dilemmas without succumbing to the grimness. So I use shells, which happen to be rituals and archetypes that rock me!

A.P. *Paraphrasing Theodor Adorno, I consider your art as a reverberation of poetry imbued in the light of suffering, which withdraws itself from your lived experiences; your grief as well as the physical pain sublimation that you activate during your live performances as a potent form of self-transcendence. By my personal perspective, "Messianic Remains" triggers multiple levels of reading: in a way it stretches the value of truth itself to the limit of being a negative one, on the other hand it gives space to compassion and togetherness as contingent possibilities to overpass contemporary society biases, bigotry and stolid prejudices.*

The way you ended the performance, with a genuine, authentic, liberating soft smile immediately after the last pronounced verse of the Jean Genet monologue you transcribed from his "Our Lady of the Flowers", likewise confirmed for me that the truth itself is a relative virtual construction – one that is liable to fall and change at every moment.

I like to identify and recognize some universal traits that some art carries within. Maybe I'm wrong, for I was probably reflecting myself too much into what I've seen during your performance. Notwithstanding, after having reflected upon "Messianic Remains", that same closing monologue you played and the way you ended it, left me with these two – intense – sentences: I do it to avenge your death, and the fact I survived might also tell of the metamorphosis of an era.

Could you tell about your 'encounter' with "Our Lady of the Flowers" by Jean Genet, and the reasons why you have chosen this particular text to be played in "Messianic Remains"?

R.A. I HAD to know who I was, and where I sat, as a teenager. And being gay was the least of it, but being twisted, damaged, perverted, destructive... Patti Smith led me to Genet, and with my first lover we studied the role of the maids! Which unfortunately was never performed but still on my list! But the legend around *Our Lady of the Flowers* being written two three times in prison at the start of WWII, and the Cocteau and Co. intervention (*author's note: referring to Jean Cocteau's advocacy and support to have "Our Lady of the Flowers" published in 1943*), fast forward to *Prisoner of Love* (1986), Genet resonated and still resonates. In appropriate some of the images and Thelemic ritual elements from Kenneth Anger's *Lucifer Rising*; I knew that wasn't what I meant (*author's note: Thelema is a philosophical law which provokes: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will." The law of Thelema was*

developed in the early 1900s by the magician and writer Aleister Crowley, 1875-1947). The power of camp entered my head, where Genet is naming the queens at the funeral, Mimosa I, Mimosa II, Angela, milord, etc., and I dug out all the text in the awkward English translation! This was also part of the challenge: to take this overwrought translation and digest it, modify it to where it could be the bitchy funeral procession. Instead of raising Lucifer or Babalon, it was honouring Divine. In an old mannerly way, where she had to be dead before digested into culture. Something not sure any longer!

A.P. *This following question I'm going to ask you it is because Storie magazine is highly focused on, held and promote creative writings as none else in Italy today. It will surely interest our readers. Storie editors run post-graduate courses in creative writings also.*

You led a workshop series as part of "Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing" nearly six-hour session per day for 3-4 days, with groups of about thirty participants. The final result of the one I saw two years ago at Participant Inc., New York, culminated in a live performance and a reading.

Long rolls of white paper were set on the floor, intersecting in the centre. In New York you started the workshop with some yoga exercises and a light hypnosis to put the participants in a relaxed state to then facilitate the automatic writing. You directed the process by reading your early memoirs you've been writing since 18, about your childhood and religious education in the Pentecostal church in which you were deemed a prophet messiah. At one point you stopped your reading and asked abruptly the participants to start writing anything that came to their mind on the paper with pens and pencils, while a few others used old typewriters to transcribe randomly what the group had written the previous day, likewise in Burroughs cut-up mode. The accompaniment of songs and music facilitated the writing automatisms. At the end of the day, the huge papers filled with dense writings remain taped on the floor to be turn into material for the next day's typists.

On this workshop, Emily Colucci in her article published on Bedford + Bowery online magazine, on July 26, 2013, wrote: "Athey became interested in automatic writing as a way of achieving collective transcendence in the secular realm, influenced in part by his religious upbringing." In the same article, she reported you as saying: "I like the idea of a collective unconscious and the writing going through a kind of algorithm, the ecstatic state of automatic writing and the challenge is to make it like a machine."

Could you detail a bit more this activity of yours? In particular what led to your idea of a workshop on automatic writing, which is also a form of creative writing based on the stream of the unconscious?

R.A. I love the idea of a collective conscious, or better yet a collective unconscious. I've worked on hypnosis projects since the mid-90s. I have experience with automatic writing with my family's religious practice, but i always need a formal project to kick off new experiments, so to make a piece with it, i imagined something much more ambient than a performance. And i had no idea how to make a new text in performance time. Yes it could be true and take as long as it takes, but i wanted it to happen in less than 2 hours. Eventually i restricted it to one. Here is the idea of the flow, if you can do stream of consciousness writing, can it be ramped up to ecstatic writing? And with the hypnosis and group experience, can that be ramped up into something supernatural? What I ended up

having to do was figure out a machine: how to make enough writing, and how does that writing get to the typists and how do the 6 typists get their typewritten papers to the editors? And how do the editors make an algorithm from these pages? Somehow the answer was to make a sound score! I read a story and countdown, so the 16 writers write, and then the typists and editors cut out the writing from Story 1 (of 4) and tape it over the 6 typewriter stations, all manual so the clacking starts up through the piece. I count down the stop time for each story (5 minutes with a 10 second stop), and the typed sheet goes to one of the other of the two editors, who use cut-up technique and a teeny bit of added connective words to form the new text. At the 40 minute point the new text is read by the reader (Little Annie in the case of NYC) and the automatic writers go into "unhinged" mode where they can write, in English or their native tongue, or use graphics, knowing it won't be included so there's a new freedom. And the keyboards come in, in that case M. Lamar. I always explain this process in a cold language to the participants, not strategically, just to keep it clear. Then after a few productions i realise: the text i read that they continue writing is from my unfinished memoirs, Gifts of the Spirit. I have been writing these since i left home and church. And what i am doing is giving them to the machine to disperse, to change the outcome, to de-personalise from my destiny. So then this cold thing becomes this emotional thing, and i understand why some of the participants are hijacked by this pathos!

A.P. What are the aims and the possible benefits for the participants?

R.A. I don't know how often we can come together as one. That is for me I guess, and that they produce something pure when they do that, and not showboat. But for them, I think it is a powerful tool. One that I use when I'm stuck with a concept, or need to explore/flesh it out more. Find a logic in. We do special training with outsiders moving and scrutinising, so they don't get spooked by what inevitably happens during the performance, they're able to stay in it. NYC was an exception how over-crowded it was in a small gallery, it works better in an open space with the paper cutting the room up. We all act in trance states but learning how to enter it deeper while being witnessed is something surprising!

A.P. *Probably we are just a cosmic accident, only here for a short while as all the other biological beings, and probably we're also made of the same stuff that dreams are made of, thus shaped in a way that we can describe consciously what it's like to be alive, as being alive is also responding. Probably we are here just for the world to look at itself, but as the sailors say about the weather, we often bluff and mess up. It is quite obvious that mankind continues to deeply trouble life on this planet in the name of a false idea of evolved society. Having to say too often 'hang on to your hopes, for tomorrow is another day', is the surrogate opiate of religions for many, to keep on dancing on ashes for trees. So then, considering that there is no empirical truth beyond an assemblage of cultural fictitious constructions, dismantling meanings and remaking them (as you did in "Incorruptible Flesh" series) could be a possible way to offer a look to the world from a different - non-conservative - perspective. I think that an artist is a finder rather than a solver - a witness, a recorder of experience, and a fueler of creativity. To be aware and give evidence the possibility to*

consider our sense of mortality differently through art is part of the artist's responsibility towards himself and the others.

Could you please explain the dichotomy life/death in your work (for you, is it actually a dichotomy of two concepts indissolubly tightened together, or something else)?

R.A. I have to live with my overdose of light and dark! Sometimes I experience guilt at the darkness in my work, such as in the oblit (*author's note: Ron Athey's "Self-Obliteration" performance*), where I push and push and it almost feels horny but it isn't. What it never feels is sad. And while some of the 90s work or Judas cradle relishes the melodrama, its absent in the obliteration. I feel I did reach a state where it was beyond performing a few times: it was like levitating. I think the church, and my drug problems and teenage suicide attempts and then decades of AIDS deaths forced me to find a life/death logic, which allows for no white-washing. I know I'm heavy, but what also inserts - maybe this is part of the life - is humour. And pizazz! This is why i never shy away from what i joking call my Las Vegas elements! Wade through hell and put on a headdress and cape. Stripping away isn't really stripping away anyway, so adding costume, and starting as a stand-in for the archetype, breaking it, coming back with a new one. Is that relentless, or apotheosis? Sometimes I see this dichotomy and traits of a Trickster Shaman.

A.P. *During a live performance, when the performer experiences extreme, painful physical condition, it can happen that he loses his sense of time and becomes enraptured into a hyperconscious dimension due to the gradual weakening of the senses caused by numbness of pain receptors, though remaining vigilant. To be someone completely caught up by that condition itself, to the point of feeling real pleasure or great excitement. Pain is a powerful conductor of energy, especially when considered in a performatic way, because when the physical body doesn't oppose too much resistance to pain, it can allow continuing to work or continue to see the end of the work because the "self" moves ahead of "yourself" all the time. It is like there's no future or past, but just an extended present where it is possible to produce new meaning independently from the rational will. Under a painful condition, inflicted or self-inflicted, meaning is carried to a higher state. The communication may be total, because of the feeling that there's no other way to express what you're expressing. The way you welcome and embody pain, like when you lay on the metal rack, or in "St. Sebastian", for instance, it is not just a re-enactment of a martyrdom, for me they are constrictive conditions aiming to suggest another world where the actual living image is called dynamically another into being.*

Could you tell about your approach to extreme body art, and (how and if has changed) the experience of pain in your live work along your 35 years of artistic career?

I started out experimental; really not know what state I could achieve, what that connection could even feel like in PE (*author's note: "Premature Ejaculation" collaborative project formed in 1981*) with Rozz (*Williams*), neither of us did. But we wanted to find an experiential equivalent to "psycho/neuro acoustics" and I think we took our nod from COUM

Transmissions (*author's note: radical art and music project founded by Genesis P-Orridge in Hull, England 1969-1976*) initially, the speedy trance movement from Johanna Went (*author's note: Los Angeles-based performance artist who emerged from the punk scene in the early 1980s*). I didn't know how to articulate that this was what i did in church until i did a body ritual with Fakir Musafar in 1991, i was dancing with balls sewn on me and started speaking in tongues, and Fakir knew how to stoke the flames! I don't perform as myself, or as a character, it is a heightened presence i step into, even if it fails. It's important for me to iron out all the tech glitches, and become familiar with the range of my material, so I'm not reaching, just in it.

Pain/bleeding/penetration etc., fast track me into a state, where articulation of movement and action can really surprise me. What? Where did that grace come from?

I know i can do that with my body, now I'm back with the voice for the next project to come. I recently did a reading where I channelled Sylvia Plath reading "Daddy" and I still can't shake what entered me, being able to reject him (and germaneness!) through her. I am looking forward to collaborating with Juliana Snapper, developing the next Gifts of the Spirit: called "Auto da Fe".

A.P. *Life can be hard, violent and cruel. Grief, when it comes can be so harsh and unbearable that it is nothing like it was expected to be. We live in a culture of division and fragmentation of the self. A large part of contemporary philosophers continue to write hundreds of pages about how to live a full life, with mindfulness and wholeheartedness, but there are billions of people who live a careworn life.*

We dissect and compartmentalize histories and experiences presuming to comprehend.

We analyse excessively, and by doing so we end up losing ourselves in the trap of a secular rationalism.

In your live performance (as in "Messianic Remains" which is very well methodologically organized work), the cathartic moments become an awaking and source of enlightenment. There is an immediacy of the spirit in all this, in the grace of trusting that it can endure out of the wreckage and remains of the self.

What is the meaning for you in the meteoric passage of time, and in the suffering?

Do you think that in the chaos there ultimately resides meaning?

R.A. The passage of time, and the time before that: I look for a logic. I don't need to find meaning in the suffering; time de-personalizes it. But what can't get lost is a document of context; otherwise it'll never be accurately understood.

The chaos opens possibility but fleeting, a frame has to be thrown around it! A loose structure, or a firm structure full of holes. I don't know if the event ultimately means anything final, and its not quite electric either.

Thank you for your time, dear Ron.