

Ron Athey

Incorruptible Flesh: Dissociative Sparkle

Incorruptible Flesh (NRLA 2006) was my first durational performance. I decided to present my body in a single image for six hours without interruption. It was also the first time I allowed the public to participate on a truly interactive level: they were invited to spread grease over my displayed naked body, with the option of wearing latex gloves. Dominic Johnson, the young academic and artist who assisted me, was instructed to keep people from touching my face, which was being stretched by 10 sharp hooks tethered to the rack I was laid upon in a supine position. Because the needles forced my eyes to remain wide open, I needed him to apply eye drops regularly to keep them from drying out. And to keep the image even more moist, my scrotum and penis had been infused with almost two litres of saline solution, creating an incredible disfigurement of the genitals. As I was looking straight ahead – or up – at a few clusters of spinning mirror balls, and had no peripheral vision, I had no way of connecting the hands on my body to a person.

After a few interactions, I became aware that I had little to no control of the mood, or intent, of the audience. The most common discernment I had was that they wanted to give me relief, their strokes were very touchy-feely-healy, with little variation. There were some attempts at massage, a few indifferent tracings, but for the most part they acted out their own fantasy of healing me. Much more challenging and intense for me were the chunks of time where no one touched me. I would hit a 'wall', and have vivid hallucinations; I truly dissociated in those moments. But then the human touch would bring me back to earth to reckon with my achy old body.

In making this work, there was also the spectre of an anniversary: it had been exactly ten years since my residency at Glasgow's CCA with the late Lawrence Steger. Steger and I researched and laid out the structure for *Incorruptible Flesh [In Progress]*, a collaboration wherein we blew out all the morbid imagery we could attribute to our HIV status (mine positive, his AIDS). The death trip had gone shameless. This piece ended with my body laid in state on a plank, and Steger – in horrific special effects makeup – anointing my body with petroleum jelly, spoofing the miracle of incorruptible flesh, wherein a saint's body supposedly or miraculously stays fresh, though more accurately is something maintained like a wax replica in Madame Tussauds.

If there were any vibrations accumulating through my durational 'living corpse' display at the subsequent NRLA, they were disrupted by my having to address the same situation as everyone else: a fire drill. The alarm went off on a nice, cold, rainy day in Glasgow. The tethers my hooks were attached to needed to be released quickly, and I was wrapped in a bathrobe, rushed outside barefoot, where I stood for some minutes in a cold puddle of water with the rest of the NRLA audience.

Returning to my near-death bed, the room quickly filled with those suddenly curious after the obligatory sneak preview I had given. Soon, I forgot all about the alarm and was back in my own private heaven/hell, being caressed and touched and healed.

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