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Sex with Ron

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PLEADING IN THE BLOOD
THE ART AND PERFORMANCES OF RON ATHEY
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SEX WITH RON
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Sex is everywhere in Ron Athey's reception history. Conversations about sex and art, art and pornography, obscenity and the law, loop around him. Sex is all over his archive; erotic photographs of him appear in gay magazine articles on the tattoo scene, modern primitives, bondage. Then there are the newspaper and magazine interviews that wander from art to politics, to religion, to sexual cultures and practices. Sex is everywhere in Ron's work. Reviews of his performances in gay publications are frank and explicit. Take the following account of a performance of excerpts from Deliverance in 1996 in San Francisco:

Ron's next act involved himself with another performer wearing nothing but body painting. Oddly enough, they didn't appear to have cocks. Having mastered the art of tucking, both men had their gear twisted up inside their bodies with the surrounding skin stapled shut. This impressive illusion had even us doing double takes. Ron and friend [Brian Murphy] then moved to their hands and knees. The star began reading poetry while his lovely assistant shoved a double headed dildo up his butt. Soon they were cheek to cheek sharing the tow between them. The performance ended with Ron throwing the slippery toy into the audience. This was one of the most spectacular shows we've witnessed since we were in Europe.

If a double-headed dildo is used and then thrown into the crowd, a gay rag will tell you all about it. And usually in just this tone: light, funny, frank and gossipy. The idea is to make you feel some of the audience's pleasure. To feel that those who were there were happy that they were, to make you wish that you had been.

Sex in queer spaces isn't a punch line or a surprise in and of itself. It doesn't appear as an incursion, or a disruption of protocol (which is usually how sex 'happens' in the art world). In a club, it is what folks are looking for. It's what the space promises. Artists who work in and from these spaces take sex as a given. The above review lets you know not that sex was there, but how.
Sex is a base note in much of Ron's work. You can see this in his writing: 'Ron's Dissections', his 1990s column for the porn magazine *Honcho*, chronicled his art adventures and offered all sorts of wisdom regarding the practice of a sexual life. One storyline flows organically into the other. 'Handballing', for example, ruminates on fisting and being fisted. He meditates on a lunchtime trick ('the pig') whose collapsed anus had him thinking about the man's 'cunt' and how close he came to 'massaging his heart.' He mulls over the fact that in his performances he's made his own asshole 'the star of the show'. At the moment he wrote that article, however, he was, in his life, more preoccupied by the assholes of others.

Because sex is everywhere around him, Ron has been asked often to comment on the 'art vs. porn' question. In the *Honcho* column, he explains:

I generally describe pornography as a media created to sexually excite and hopefully inspire people to have more interesting sex. In my performances, sex acts are used to make statements about politics, identity and physical boundaries. They can be intentionally repulsive. They can be ironically humorous. Or both. In the 'Post-AIDS Boy-Boy Show' [in *Deliverance*] Brian Murphy and I wear layers of opaque, orangey-colored suntan makeup, and I read a story about muscle queens and HIV re-infection while we ride a double-headed dildo in every imaginable position. It usually makes a mixed/art crowd slightly uncomfortable. So walked out in Amsterdam last July.

Porn can expand and focus one's sex life. It is a part of one's sex life – the porn consumer consumes her object sexually. The pornographic
text dissolves in sex. It has a practical, local aim. At some point, the reader drops the book. And at that moment, the pornographic aim migrates from the text to the body. That moment is totally unpredictable.

This is to say that pornography isn’t a stable thing. It isn’t inherent to a text. It’s a reading and viewing practice, a way of seeing things, a method. Porn inspires people to have more interesting sex. But it also shapes the nature of interest and inspiration. It inspires people to have more interesting reading and viewing practices. It’s an aim, a direction.

Sex, with Ron, is more a means than an end. The point of sex as it happens in Ron’s work is not to meet the spectator’s desire. Nor is the point to frustrate or shock. It is, in fact, totally unhelpful to think about Ron’s work through the art/porn axis. Or sex/not sex.

Sex is a part of his work in the same way that sexuality is, namely as something that shapes the space of transgression. ‘Transgression,’ Michel Foucault writes, ‘is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin: it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses’. He is writing here of Georges Bataille, and the way Bataille wraps eroticism in knowledge of the death of God. Transgression here does not ‘oppose one thing to another’. Transgression ‘contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the(limitlessness) into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time’. It ‘opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world, a world without shadow or twilight, without that serpentine “no” that bites into fruits and lodges their contradictions at their core’.4

THE POINT OF SEX AS IT HAPPENS IN RON’S WORK IS NOT TO MEET THE SPECTATOR’S DESIRE. NOR IS THE POINT TO FRUSTRATE OR SHOCK

The sexual noise of Ron’s work – its way of engaging with sex without quite being sex – or what sex is ‘supposed’ to be – that’s what feels obscene to some. His work hovers over practices a lot of people don’t understand. But even in not understanding, they feel its transgression; they feel it in just the idea of it – as a note of fear, a whisper of desire, a hint of the outer edges of their own appetites.

Some very famous artists have reframed sex as art. Robert Mapplethorpe (his photographs of black men, or his SM portraits, of the 1970s and 1980s); Andy Warhol (films like Blow Job [1964] and Blue Movie [1969]); Vito Acconci (Seedbed [1971]); all produced sexually explicit works that circulate in art historical scholarship as important interventions. When you spend time with this kind of work, you can find yourself approaching art as a disciplining system – and sex as a form of interference, a disruption, an intrusion of not-art into the space of art. Although that’s a pretty dry take on Warhol’s Blow Job, or Mapplethorpe’s

SM portraits (because surely what makes them interesting isn’t just their relationship to art), it’s also not the whole picture.

But that approach to Ron’s work would be wrong. You can spot this difference in Ron’s origin stories. In one essay on his relationship to his tattoos, he credits Annie Sprinkle’s LOVE magazine with turning him out in 1980: ‘In it, there were pregnant women in bondage, essays on sex and avant garde, and most important to my life and development, a huge spread on Fakir Musafar.’ In another interview, Ron tells the late ‘Alien Comic’ Tom Murrin that he was turned out by a performance of Johanna Went’s at about the same time. Went’s performances certainly were hardcore. Noisy, and involving lots of props and costumes, they could be manic, as Went screamed and preached and threw buckets of (fake) blood or four-foot-long bloody tampons out onto her audiences. ‘Went,’ Ron explains, ‘was pulling the world out of herself.’ Feminist sex-worker, performance-art punks showed him how to pull the world out of himself.


The sexual is, for some artists, more a medium than the message. Or, the sexual is a way of building the message into the medium, bringing the two so close to each other you can’t tell the form from the content, the content from the form. Where to start with that if not with the body – your container, your form, your content. The form and the content of the body is something that ‘sexual repulsives’ (as Ron and Vaginal Davis sometimes dub the tribe) know well. Whether you’ve needed to get an abortion, or been the country’s most visible sodomite,
you know the body isn’t beyond the word, beyond the law’s reach. The word and the law manifest themselves on it and in it.

In another *Hustler* column, Ron reviews his muses — things, people, images that inspire him. One in particular speaks to the way sex is written onto and into the body. He writes:

I keep this photograph of Mark’s back on the top of the bookshelf in my office. When I first laid eyes on this image, I had met Mark a few times, but I had never seen his back. He was so straight-acting/straight-appearing, I would never have suspected he had the word SODOMITE tattooed on his back. SODOMITE, the condition, engraved in granite. Here kneels a butt-fucking macho man with rough, scarred-up skin, proudly wearing a scandalous banner dressed up in fancy lettering. His broad, naturally muscular back (a body earned from hard labor), the texture of the skin (from physical abuse, or skin condition), and the boldness of the lettering (prison gang-style), each contribute volumes to the story. It has to go beyond queer, not just subversive but downright abject, a man’s man wearing his identity — his personal sin — across his back. Now I was lyrical; there is something not new, but archetypal, my brain makes the picture twist on mythology. After the butt-fucker finishes his rampage, he can’t resist the urge to look back, but for [a] last glance, on the spoils of Sodom?  

It’s a worthy image — the twist, the turn back to look at sodomy’s scene — to sex plugged into the world like an electrical cord plugged into a socket.

*Ron Athey, *Hustler* (June 1986), pp. 50-51 (pp. 56-60).