

The Point

A performer on the cutting edge

by Trey Graham

March was a tough month for *L.A. Weekly* staffer Ron Athey. And this is a man who sticks needles in his head for fun.

Well, not for *fun*, precisely. In his off hours, Athey is a performance artist; the bit with the acupuncture needles in the scalp is part of his latest piece, called *Excerpted Rites of Transformation*. And some people in Minneapolis, where he performed it under the auspices of the respected Walker Art Center on March 5, didn't like it a bit.

As Athey explains it, *Excerpted Rites* "looks at ancient ritual as well as assimilated contemporary ritual. It's about addiction — why queer people are obsessed with marriage" and other ceremonies of mainstream society. The 75-minute piece examines "different forms of obsession and fetish," he says, and it raises questions about whether cultural traditions and institutions can be described in those terms.

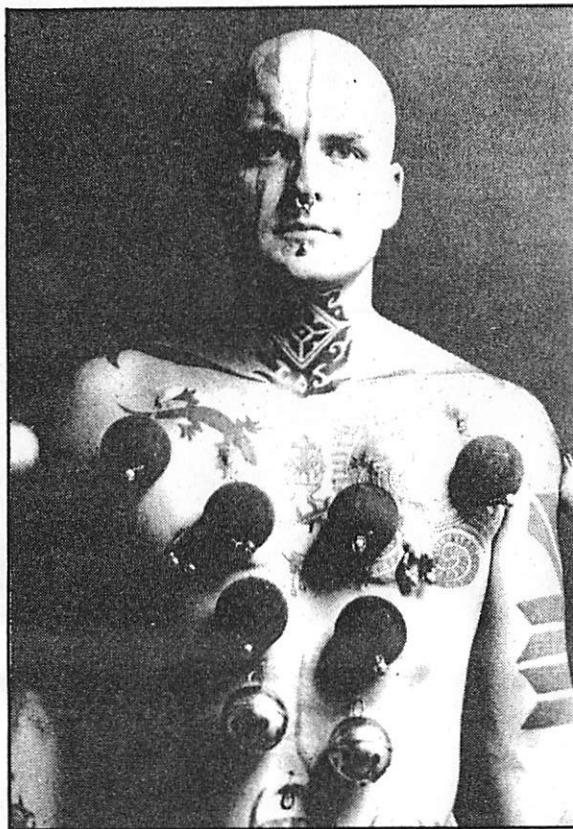
"What I'm asking is, should queers discover their own rituals, or should we take on hetero rituals?" Athey explains.

Excerpted Rites is partly about HIV, too. Athey is positive for the HIV antibody, and he says dealing with the whirlwind of emotions that fact creates "is one of the elements, one of the motivators" in his performances — "because it makes me feel like I'm living the Apocalypse."

During the evening, Athey and several fellow performers do things to themselves and to each other that most Americans haven't even imagined, much less seen. Two assistants allow Athey to pierce their cheeks with slender barbs; he in turn stands immobile while they weave spinal-tap needles through the skin of his shaved head and then wind them with wire to create a "crown of thorns."

In another section of the program which draws on African ritual scarification traditions, Athey uses a surgical scalpel to cut a series of small designs into the skin of another performer's back, then blots the wounds with paper towels and attaches the "prints" that result to clotheslines suspended above the audience.

All this is strong stuff, to be sure, the kind of strong that brings on knots in the stomach and cold sweat on the brow. And it was *too* strong for one member of the Minneapolis audience, who complained to local, county,



In his off hours, Ron Athey is a rather unusual performance artist.

and finally state health authorities, saying he was angry because he and others might have been exposed to HIV.

The story didn't break in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* until nearly three weeks after Athey's Walker-sponsored appearance. But it broke big, under a front-page headline that screamed "Bloody performance draws criticism; Walker member complains to public health officials."

Athey says he thinks it took so long for a flap to develop because there really was no flap. As the *Star-Tribune* acknowledged in its story, health officials determined that Athey, his fellow performers, and the Walker staff had taken proper precautions against any

possible transmission of HIV. But, Athey claims, the man who complained about the show wouldn't be satisfied.

"Every time he retold his story it got wilder and wilder. It went from moderate to outrageous, which is why it got picked up. What would be the clincher? To say, 'I could have been exposed to AIDS.'"

If the outraged Walker patron really did sensationalize his story in an effort to embarrass the Art Center, he found his reporter in the *Star-Tribune's* Mary Abbe. In the fourth paragraph of her story, just after she noted the health department's judgment that "appropriate safety precautions" had been taken, Abbe reported that although Athey's HIV-infected blood never came near the audience, Walker Art Center officials "did not know the HIV status of Darryl Carlton," the man whose back was cut and whose blood was sent "winging above the audience" on the paper towels.

Later, she quoted an audience member who said "it appeared that the towels were going to drip or fall apart because they appeared to be paper towels." Athey denies this, saying he has examined videotapes of the performance and determined that there was no spreading of the blood patterns on the towels. "I think everybody has experience with a paper towel," he observes. "If you put a few drops of something on a paper towel, it's hardly going to drip or fall apart. That was a total overreaction."

Five days later, Abbe wrote a commentary piece for the *Star-Tribune* in which she said that "a show that involves ritual mutilation is still a horror to most people in this country — me included." Curiously, what made the performance "even more disturbing" to Abbe was that it was "staged by the Walker, which occupies such a prominent piece of artistic real estate."

"I felt like she wrote in such a way as to perpetuate public fears" about AIDS, Athey says. And he questions not only Abbe's style but the substance of her reporting, saying she got a number of details wrong in her news story.

What bothers Athey most about the Minneapolis incident and its aftermath is that now he fears "I'm gonna become the AIDS performance artist, the performance artist with AIDS."

"This has really dragged the context of my work back to that," he says ruefully. "Every scene in my work doesn't have to do with AIDS." ▼