through structures like exhibitions and art history. The best we can do, as the powerful contributions in "Performance, Live or Dead" suggest, is to be aware of the reciprocal interrelations between thinking and knowing, perceiving and expressing—between past performances and present modes of documentation, reenactment, and history writing. To keep the "moment of danger" that, as Benjamin argues, "flashes up" and becomes evident as historically important, active and in play.

I sent the contributors the following e-mail in August 2010 to solicit their thoughts and interventions.

Dear XX,

I am writing to you with an invitation to participate in what I hope will be a groundbreaking dialogue on the very current phenomenon of documenting, reenacting, and/or exhibiting traces of past performances in art institutions such as galleries, museums, and mainstream art magazines. You have been central in developing a critical relationship to these practices and we hope very much you will be willing to participate in a brief e-mail dialogue on the topic.

The key question in this dialogue will be: What are the costs and benefits of the current move to institutionalize performance art by documenting it (often on websites or in archives), reenacting performances, and/or exhibiting performance art histories in galleries and art museums?

...

Best,

Amelia Jones

Amelia Jones is professor and Grierson Chair in Visual Culture at McGill University in Montreal. Her recent publications include major essays on feminist art, contemporary art in general, curating, and performance art histories, as well as the edited volume Feminism and Visual Culture Reader (2003; new edition 2010). Her most recent book, Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject (2006), will be followed by Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification in the Visual Arts (2012), and her major volume Perform Repeat Repeat: Live Art in History, coedited with Adrian Heathfield, is also due out in 2012.

Ron Athey

Getting It Right... Zooming Closer

Performance documentation, performance-for-the-camera, restaging the "iconic" performance image for the camera, to get it right—all are editing, reducing, retouching, mediating, specifying, forcing the gaze, and not the full experience, which can essentially lie, enhance, mislead.

Most of the performance work I have done is multiple images, scenes and actions, performed at various speeds from frantic to still, from solo to twenty-five persons involved.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, I only understood how a performance went off by how it felt during, and how it sat with me after. Video and photo documentation showed me that and something more. . . . I had to adjust to the flattening. But something about what the cameraperson focused on actually made the representation more extreme because the context of setting and the sequence in which
Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/Pearl Necklace (from Trojan Whore)*, 2000, Polaroid, 110 x 41 in. (279.4 x 104.1 cm) (artwork © Catherine Opie; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)
the image appeared could be removed. Zooming closer than the audience could ever get in most performances sometimes was beautiful and sometimes vulgar.

This introduction of photographic documentation has the same affect on my work as another form of how the work resonates: the retelling of it in words. Always described and reviewed are the shock moments, the violation of the flesh, rarely ever text, humor, flow.

I have a churchy outlook on the role of audience: they serve as witnesses, and this is what is needed to make the experience possible. In order to justify performing for the camera, I have to imagine being a step away from that chemistry. In the ambitious project I made in 2000 with Catherine Opie, for which we shot thirteen large-format Polaroids in two days, I ran through a selection of scenes from my performance history, restaging them in costume (or look), without any form of set pieces except in three of them. None of these is true to the performance it is referencing, except possibly the St. Sebastian image, which was shot last. Working in a more minimalist way to cooperate with the style and vision of Opie, they are portraits, not performances for the camera. But they express the essence of suicide bed, solar anus, Sebastian suspended. This reduction becomes something else as, especially with the images of earlier performances, they are removed from the politics and issues of their time.

Most of the images I have shot with the photographer Manuel Vason, aside from the Sun card for the SPILL Festival tarot deck, were either taken as the performance setup was finished but before the audience was admitted, or restaged in an improvisational way after the performance. So, less stagey setup for him, but the final effect more perfected with his post-production cleanup techniques.

I don’t have too much to say about the institutionalization of performance work, as I don’t quite understood on what level it is happening. Is it really happening? My opinion of redux perfs, such as LACE’s eight Fridays of Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece, is, “whatever.”


Ron Athey is an artist and writer born in 1961 from Los Angeles now living in London. At fifty years old, he has been making performance works for thirty years and is compiling images and writings for the first book, Pleading in the Blood, a coproduction of Live Art Development Agency, London, and MIT Press. He has received commissions from ICA London, Kamnagel in Hamburg, and CCA Glasgow, has toured in arts spaces and museums, and has self-produced extensively in the United Kingdom, United States, and Europe. His visual art is represented by Western Project in Los Angeles.