

**ABOUT INCORRUPTIBLE FLESH**

By Ron Athey

The concept of the *Incorruptible Flesh* series took form a year before the three-therapy HIV drug treatment would give hope by halting the numbers of AIDS deaths. In a research residence at the CCA Glasgow in February 1996, Athey and collaborator, Lawrence Steger studied the lives of saints, the relics and in particular, the display of the ‘incorruptible’ bodies, most of which are wax sculptures with a corpse inside. Applying the status of ‘incorruptible’ upon their own dying HIV+ bodies, Athey and Steger wove solo actions into interactions, including “*The Trojan Whore*” which Athey performed at the memorials for Leigh Bowery in 1998. The final action in the piece contained the image of the living corpse on display: Athey laid out on a simple plank, tended to by Steger (with special affects makeup suggesting decomposing). The live AIDS body, on-display, anointed (greased), bathed in golden light marked the glorification of the live AIDS body, which in future performances in the series, “*Dissociative Sparkle*” and “*Perpetual Wound*”, became the more esoteric post-AIDS body. Lawrence Steger died in February 1999.

“*Dissociative Sparkle*” was performed in February 2006, exactly 10 years later, for the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow and was later repeated at Artists Space in NYC. Athey presented his first durational piece: a 6 hours solo performance. Honouring the anniversary of his collaboration with/and the loss of Steger, Athey used the static, martyred image of his body, suffering on a rack. The audience were allowed to take the role of Steger and anoint Athey's body in grease. As in “*The Trojan Whore*”, the body was enhanced: tortured, but not vulnerable. Invaded by hooks, bat and rack, his skin was bronzed and shining, genitals inflated to grotesque size with medical saline.

For “*Perpetual Wound*” (2007), Athey worked in collaboration with a younger artist, Dominic Johnson, and focused on this trans-generational relationship mythologically, characterizing Sophocles' pairing of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. Philoctetes (Athey), in exile for possessing a stinking weeping wound that would not heal, was seduced by Neoptolemus (Johnson) into returning to battle and directions to receive healing. This reality comes to fruition during the start of a dance, wherein a sheet of glass on a stand is used as a prophyllaxis, protecting the younger man from the shared wound.

The fourth installation in the *Incorruptible Flesh* series, “*Messianic Remains*”, continues Athey's exploration of the continuation of his own post-AIDS body. Is a solo performance commissioned by Performance Studies international, debuting at Stanford University in June 2013. Returning to the laid-in-state-sexualized corpse scene presented as a static image in “*Dissociative Sparkle*”, the messianic impulse/prophecy is activated. Dressed in vestmental finery, a funeral procession draws its pulse from Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, and Athey arises from the viewing into a walking meditation. As in earlier works in the series, Athey rides the grandiose myth of enlightenment that only the face of death may reveal.