Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing: Whitworth Hall, University of Manchester, 27 June 2011

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Tag 1 (to be read to writers in zone one)

I had a dream in which I spewed ectoplasm: I opened my mouth and a manifesto poured out. At first I didn't know to whom, then I realized it was He, the One I had levitated with, from an earlier dream that had caused my life to change.

The topic seemed to be about maintaining high voltage ecstasy, but I was talking too fast ... then ectoplasm came pouring out of me, forming architectural shapes in front of me that formed into block letters. The manifesto had manifested. It declared to Him that the intensity of love would have to be maintained.

Ron Athey, Gifts of the Spirit script

In the recent performance, Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing, U.S.-born-now-London-based artist, Ron Athey, orchestrated twenty-nine performers into what he referred to as a 'machine'; a corps united in the task of using automatism through writing, typing, and glossolalia to produce new distillations of texts stemming from Athey's own memoirs in an attempt to decode and unpack his childhood experiences as an ecstatic.

Athey's upbringing within the Pentecostal church, his estranged mother, and his Aunt Vena's prediction, prior to his birth, of his future as a powerful minister within the church prior have all been explored in earlier performances, such as Four Scenes In a Harsh Life (1994), Deliverance (1997), and Joyce (2002). However, what was noticeably different in Gifts of the Spirit was the lack of emphasis on Athey's own physicality and the absence of the social politics surrounding queer sexuality and AIDS, which led to his infamy as a bugbear for conservative Senator Jesse Helms and the subsequent re-evaluation of federal funding for experimental arts in the United States in the early 1990s.

In these earlier works, Athey gained notoriety for the extremely visceral, and often challenging, presence of his bleeding HIV+ body. These performances were often presented in a blur of spectacle, physical wounding, camp, and allusions to martyrdom which were shared by other artists of the era, such as Diamanda Galas, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and David Wojnarowicz, who spoke out against the government's stigmatization of homosexuality and silencing of AIDS victims.

In both versions of Gifts of the Spirit – the first having originated as part of an AiR residency at Queen Mary University London in 2010 – Athey's own body is subsumed by the larger collective of the performers, and his voice vacillates between an emotionless reading of excerpts from his memoir, in which phrases are left unfinished to be completed by the rest of the cast as an 'exquisite corpse,' and bursts of ecstatic glossolalia. His trademark bleeding is replaced by a more subtle, but no less evocative, offering of words and memory.

The roots and crossroads of automatic writing in surrealism, psychoanalysis, and various spiritual practices are not ignored by Athey, though no one approach or canon is singled out. Athey has referred to himself as a 'mystical atheist,' not ascribing to any one belief system and having...
rejected formal religion as a teenager. What he does claim to question, in both life and research, is ‘can proper phenomena be constructed/conjured/designed?’

The process of organizing and training the cast of the Manchester performance happened largely through a series of emails, with an initial invitation sent through various social networks and to targeted individuals by Athey, myself, and another co-organizer, Nick Kilby. The provocation given by Athey was fairly straightforward:

In Gifts, there is a premise that acts as the starting point, and a fantastical goal: to use the collective unconscious of the writers as a means to resolve the structured text. To not only use the writing machine as spectacle, but to activate processing text, straddling this stodgy one and an alternative reality.

Submissions came from people throughout the Northwest and as far away as Bristol and Scotland, with only one person having been involved in the London performance. Applicants were asked to send a few words about their interest in the project, their background, and also needed to consent to undergoing light hypnosis during preliminary workshop exercises and the performance. These emails were then forwarded to Athey for his approval. Previous performing experience was not required, and while the majority of the participants did not have Live Art backgrounds, many were familiar with the ideas of the ‘cut-up’ techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin and concepts of automatic writing developed by Andre Breton and the surrealists, or had experimented with various forms of automatism in other creative practices.

Once a cast was confirmed, they were invited to a mandatory two-day workshop prior to the performance. The workshop was held in a rehearsal space on the University of Manchester campus, rather than in the Whitworth Hall where the piece would be shown, and was co-directed by Athey and Mancunian writer/performer/hypnotist, Sue Fox. Each of the two seven-hour days began with physical exercises, borrowing from Ashtanga yoga and Qi-Gong practices, which then evolved into breaking in to small groups of three to take turns massaging one another. The purpose of these exercises, which Athey has employed in other workshop environments, is to break down barriers and inhibitions between performers, and, I would also posit, to acknowledge the body as a site on which to build, and later integrate into the larger ‘machine,’ a process requiring a certain synchronization of movements and tempos.

After the initial exercises were completed, the floor of the rehearsal space was covered in giant rolls of paper. Participants were then given markers and instructed to lay down on the paper with their eyes closed, making sure to leave sufficient room around them to write. Fox then began speaking in a low, even voice, leading the group in a form of guided meditation or relaxation. They were initially told to envision themselves somewhere warm, somewhere safe. When the language became more visceral, sexual, and even grotesque participants were then instructed, with their eyes still closed and in a (presumably hypnotic) trance state, to begin writing, making marks, or drawing.
I should make it clear that as the lead organizer of the event, I was not a direct participant myself, and, as the only one who did not undergo the entirety of either day of workshops, can only offer an outside perspective. I have supplemented my retelling of the events here with testimonies from those who experienced the workshops and performance from within, in order to give a more in-depth and panoptical view of the process.

From my position outside of the exercise, I was surprised at the variety of actions that were manifested during this phase of the workshop. Some participants engaged in repetitive gestures, digging through the paper with their marker; others drew around their bodies, defining their space through line; some wrote clearly, interjecting fragments or words from Fox's narration, or writing their own text; others made patterns or small drawings.
As Fox explains: ‘There is no plan in the hypnosis other than to get people into freefall into the unconscious and very often artists and writers can access that zone anyway but I wanted to try all kinds of ideas to get them using alternate options like with the qigong.’

After this first foray into hypnosis, Athey and Fox asked the group to share their experiences with the exercise. Many said that they had not felt so free to write since they were children, and this sparked a kind of gentle euphoria which appeared to be shared by all the participants. As Joey Hateley reflected, post-performance: ‘I left my old safe familiar patterns of writing from the “inner-self” behind while looking for something that was outside of myself, and at times I felt perhaps that I was channelling [the] collective consciousness of the group, led by a sort of shared belief or spirituality that was bigger than ourselves.’

Most described the hypnosis not so much as a sensation of ‘going under’ or becoming unaware of one’s surroundings or actions, but rather a deep state of relaxation that allowed for a suspension of inhibitions and greater creative flow. For Roberta D’Angelo, ‘the fact we were induced really helped and the automatic writing process was so liberating in a sense that I wasn’t thinking at all about what I was writing, I was just writing.’ Though the majority of outcomes were positive and produced effective results, one participant was affected negatively, stating that the hypnosis released emotions which had been suppressed up until the workshop and subsequently withdrew from the project.

The preparation of the glossolalia choir involved a slightly different process to that of the writers, and, as Athey professes, was one of the more experimental components of the performance since it had not been a part of the original version at Queen Mary. In the workshop, the vocalists experimented with methods to loosen their voices in both cacophonous and controlled bursts of sound; comparable to the actions of the writers, typists, and editors who generated, translated, and cut-up the text into new distillations of Athey’s primary narrative. As with the automatic writing, the goal of this was to use automatism to generate an ecstatic state akin to the ‘channelling’ of outside forces in seances, though without any pretence or assurance that actual spiritual invocations would occur, and also avoiding any imagery of the New Age movement. Athey explains:
I learned a lot of workshopping at Queen Mary. I think I realized the ‘authenticity’ of the experience relies on knowing how to get in the zone, but the zone not becoming so familiar that it can be acted, or have a hammy element. It can verge right on drum circle energy which isn’t what this machine vibrates on.

It is this sense of ‘authenticity’ that troubles many critics and creators of Live Art, which generally eschews acting in favour of a blurring of art and life, often in autobiographical works such as this one. The difficulty in achieving this in this performance was finding the balance of theatrical and aesthetic components – the use of scripts, lighting, sound, and the Victorian opulence of the Hall, for example – with an openness of orchestration that could allow for an unknown outcome, and potential revelation, to emerge.

Fig. 4: Ron Athey, Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing, Whitworth Hall, Manchester, 27 June 2011. Photograph © Roshana Rubin-Mayhew.

In the performance, the four members of the choir were seated at a ‘seance table,’ (complete with automatic writing planchettes built and hand-delivered by local occultist, Peter Leckie) along with Fox and Athey, in order to become both the instigators and end-points for the flow of text.
By operating as a point of delivery and reception, the choir needed to be capable of transcribing and translating the outcome of Athey’s words as they filtered through the automatism of the writers, typists, and editors who reconstructed the texts in cut-up scripts to be read, sung, and uttered by the choir.
A second role of the choir was to provide direction to classically trained pianist Othon Mataragas, who alternated between playing the massive pipe organ which fills the front wall of the Hall, and an upright piano on the stage, both of which created a sound-scape for the piece. Mataragas wore boxing gloves to avoid slipping into any of the precision deeply embedded within him as a musician, and allowing for improvisational playing of both instruments.
What was unanticipated, Athey professes, was the lack of clarity of the resulting messages delivered by the table, though this created a constructive failure from which to build on:

I think the idea of the machine was still working, but I realized the seance table wasn't just another piece of the machine; it was where the information and the pulse that runs the machine came from. It had to run tightly, and at one point it had maxed and had no plan of how to come down, no way to communicate to Othon. So I found a revelation and a glitch in that, and my own presence, which I hadn't (and still haven't) reckoned with in this piece. Perhaps in that way I do infuse the memoir with a lot, I take it to represent me and my previous work, previous ways of working through that prophecy. But I have to commit to my physical attendance in it, beyond reading.

For the majority of the performers, this failure went unnoticed. The variety of interpretations by the vocalists appeared to be congruous with the overall flow of experimentation and spontaneity of the performers. What most found surprising, however, was the short duration of the live piece after having spent seven-hour days immersed in writing and hypnotic states. As Alex Simmons recalls: ‘Time took on a very different meaning in performance, and from start to finish I could have sworn only a few minutes had passed.’ The 50-minute long performance seemed to be almost a teaser, or preview, of what could have easily evolved into a multi-hour event. Not wanting the piece to become an ‘endurance’ performance, (referring to a form of Live Art which engages in repetitive or evolutionary actions which are physically and/or mentally challenging and often span hours, if not days), Athey ended the piece ten minutes early with a simple ‘thank you.’
To return to Athey’s question regarding whether or not phenomena can be constructed, it should be noted that in its design, this performance was developed by Athey not as a solution to this dilemma, but as research. Perhaps the process of engaging multiple minds and bodies in the task of filtering, interpreting, (and perhaps even channelling) the mysteries of his childhood through an embodiment of what Breton referred to as ‘pure expression’ allowed by automatic practices did offer a glimpse into the unknown; a tangible, audible mapping of ecstatic experience. Or, perhaps this will become an ongoing experiment where the goal is to strike a balance between the ‘machine’ and the riddles of the language fed into it by its enigmatic creator.

Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing was performed on June 27, 2011 in Whitworth Hall at the University of Manchester. Cast: Ron Athey, Agata Alcaniz, George Arnett, Michael Barnes-Wynters, Joanna Brown, Roger Bygott, Eleanor Byrne, Lewis Church, Roberta D’Angelo, Luci Fiction, Sue Fox, Mark Greenwood, Joey Hateley, Rachel Holmes, Peter Jacobs, Nathan Jones, Alice Kemp, Nick Kilby, Pavlos Kountouriotis, Llewyn Máire, Othon Mataragas, Michael Mayhew, Russell McEwan, Jonathan McGrath, Teemu Metsälä, Rachel Parry, Olivier Richomme, Charlotte Rodgers, Phaedra Shanbaum, Alexander Simmons, and Nina Whiteman. Supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies 2 Gyrlz Peformative Art, Glorious Trauma, with additional thanks to the University of Manchester, Kim By the Sea, Peter Leckie.

Author’s note: Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from post-event emails sent to me by participants during the week of 2 – 7 July 2011 for the purpose of being included in this article.

1 Ron Athey, Artist CV and Biography, 2011.
3 Athey, call to performers text sent during 10 – 22 June 2011.
4 Ibid.