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Hunter Reynolds: Art as Survival in the Age of AIDS

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*New York city residents and visitors can see the exhibition **Hunter Reynolds: Survival AIDS**, a new series of work that incorporates elements spanning 25 years of image making, and constructed around Reynolds' experience as a gay man living in the age of AIDS. Survival AIDS will combine three modalities that the artist has used in various ways in his work over the years: the Blood Spot series, Mummification Performance Skins, and Photo Weavings. At Participant Inc., 253 East Houston, NYC, May 1 - June 5, 2011. Opening reception May 1, 7:00-9:00PM.*

Also, on Saturday May 7, 2011, Partipant and Visual AIDS will host a Symposium 7:00-9:30 PM with a Mummification Performance to follow (gallery hours extended until midnight). The symposium, Witnessing "Survival AIDS", examines how HIV/AIDS reconfigures queer identify formation and contemporary visual and performance art. Presentations will be given by Julia Bryan-Wilson, David Deitcher, Nathan Lee, and Anthony Viti. The symposium will precede a mummification performance by Hunter Reynolds.



Meeting on the Stairs, 1994, The Orangerie, Potsdam, Germany, photo: Maxine Henryson

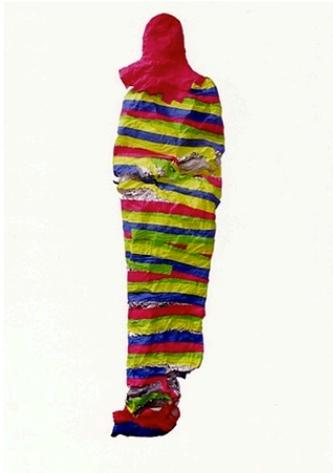
Prologue: The Myth of the Cure

The myth of the modern medical cure both inspires and deludes us. It inspires for the obvious reason that the healing image of the end of disease and the guarantee of long life remain within our genetic imperative and moral code for survival. But the myth of the cure deludes us in promoting the misleading expectation that our medicinal arsenals and knowledge of the body can and should deliver us from every infliction. It's an expectation that no generation prior to 1950 could have held. In fact, the likelihood of succumbing to disease and to a great degree an early death to disease were things everyone in society understood to be among the tribulations they could at any time face. But with the quick succession of advances in medicine of the twentieth century accumulating, the myth of the modern medical cure came to be perceived as a moral and political entitlement endowed by modern civilization. School children in the 1960s were instilled with the expectation of living lives virtually disease free. And it's this expectation that also came to account for the widespread disillusionment overtaking our generation in the last quarter of the last century as we learned that the mythical cure we'd been promised seemingly all at once became deflated and overrun by the shocking onslaught of a new disease that modern medicine not only failed to anticipate and stave off, but from which even these three decades later science still cannot fully deliver us.



Mummification Performance, 1999 (Hunter Reynolds wrapped by an assistant in cellophane and tape).

It's within this overlapping zone of hope and uncertainty that arose with AIDS that I see the art of Hunter Reynolds fulfilling a unique need. His art has been conceived entirely in response to the shocking mortality, disillusionment and prejudice that came flooding in on the AIDS generation. Reynolds was from the beginning of the AIDS crisis part of the generation of queer artist-activists that included painters Ross Bleckner and David Wojnarowicz; conceptualists and sculptors Robert Gober, Nayland Blake, Greg Bordowitz, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres; the photographers Robert Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar, and Nan Goldin; and the artist coalitions General Idea and Gran Fury. Together they disseminated excruciating commentary, documentation and healing efforts during the emergence and spread of what was being mediated as "the gay plague." The range of their work mirrored the shocking newness of a disease no one recognized nor could have been prepared for in an epoch that nurtured the widespread misconception that the march of human progress ensured that medicine would conquer the world's diseases one by one. In composing the signage of a disease that just a few years earlier seemed impossibly medieval for our hyper-clinical and antiseptic world, the artists of the new and mysterious scourge of the 1980s documented and eulogized the youthfulness of the newly felled victims and the speed with which their bodies were ravaged from within.



Three *Mummification Performance Skins*, 1999-2005, cellophane and tape

As the plague came to be identified with what we today recognize as the HIV retrovirus, and the geopolitical climate became remembered as the Age of AIDS, the new generation of artists made the cruel reality shockingly clear. Cures can, do, and may always elude us, especially given that the world of microorganisms is forever mutating new disease. The inevitability of disease makes it even more imperative that people make disease meaningful. It at first sounds self-negating to make disease meaningful, but to leave it meaningless is to remain silent, apathetic, and noncommunicable. If the artists and activists of the AIDS generation taught us anything, it's that "silence equals death." Making disease meaningful is what makes people communicative about disease; what makes us adaptable to it; puts us ahead of its reproduction; enables us to prevent it. And though it wasn't always obvious to the mainstream media and its audience, the art made about and around AIDS played a strategic role in articulating the nature and spread of HIV/AIDS, making the art audiences among the best informed and adaptable in the defense against it.



Patina du Prey's Love Dress, performance and installation at the Kunstraum Elbschloss, Hamburg, 1993. Photo by Quirin Leppert

Today with the world death toll for AIDS reaching well into the tens of millions, we children of modernism have been forced to reacquaint ourselves with the existentialist notion of the meaningless absurd--the utter disregard and inhospitality with which the world greets our will--in this case our will to remain healthy. The myth of the cure is still prevalent, but it is now tempered by an alertness for human conceits that make us blind to human fragilities and a healthy skepticism holding there to be no amount of human desire, action or ingenuity, even when equipped with the sciences and technology of modernity, to secure idealistic assurances over the uncertainties and afflictions of life. By the time we were impacted with the terror of 9/11, we found ourselves awkwardly reaching for the comfort of an ancient prayer (some might call it the mitigating superstition) acknowledging the absurdity of life and asking that humanity again find the grace "to accept that which cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that can, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other."

The Healing Art of Hunter Reynolds

This Sunday, May 1, the New York public art space Participant, Inc. presents recent work by Hunter Reynolds in a show called *Survival AIDS*. A good portion of the work is only weeks old, but it is comprised from photographic grid-collages reproducing newspaper articles published between 1989 and 1993 that chronicle the evolution of queer and transgender culture and the activism then springing up from it to combat the spread of AIDS. To expand on and counter the negative tenor and misinformation of these early articles in hindsight, while seemingly warding off the traumatic memories of prejudice, indifference, and religious superstition that greeted the ostracized and dying HIV positives of those years, Reynolds superimposes documentation of a range of art that he made in the three decades he's lived with HIV. Although Reynolds has never purposely made art of an ironic nature, his work now takes on the overarching irony that confronts our understanding of the myth of the medical cure today, tempered as it is by skepticism and loss. Yet, riddled as the work is with the signage and iconography of death and disease, Reynolds keeps the message clear of becoming an elegy of surrender to the forces that could bury our hopes.



Gay Is Not OK!, 2011, original photo for c-print photo weaving

Reynolds manages this by wielding a kind of night vision in the space of existential uncertainty that dims hope. For uncertainty by its very nature keeps any one potential fate from tyrannically restraining any other potentiality that might inform reality--including the potentiality, uncertain as it remains, that keeps alive the hope that science and medicine can come through for us even if it must be shorn of such modernist and positivist conceits that human progress will inevitably triumph over nature. Of course Reynolds, like hundreds of thousands of HIV survivors, are living because we all continue to depend on science. Despite being flawed and riddled by physiological complications, reactions and setbacks, science enables our bodies to resist overwhelming inhabitation by the HIV retrovirus. The effect is that Reynolds' use of media documentation, which in large part mediated the social reality and history of AIDS as we know it, meshes almost seamlessly with a mythopoetic iconography and series of shamanistic performances despite their stark contrasts--a matter of the rigor of science vs. the aesthetics of acting out. And that's because both science and art are being made to reconcile for the duration that Reynolds is compelled to keep vigilant over the battle waged within him, while at the same time reinforcing Reynolds' will to keep alive and hope-filled.

The mythopoetic urge--that is the impulse to make self-conscious myth (as distinct from myth which we confuse with reality)--has enjoyed something of a renaissance in contemporary art thanks to such artists as Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke, Marina Abramovic, Cindy Sherman, Matthew Barney, Kiki Smith and Mariko Mori--all of whom have identified the body in various ways as a mytho-theatrical site. But Reynolds is unique in mining the mythopoetic force of the body in that in the mid-1980s, when he found out he was HIV positive, and before the known treatments could guarantee even a few months of his survival, Reynolds had little choice but to shift his entire cognitive focus away from the passive anticipation of a cure and onto the altogether more active artistic embodiment of engineering his own willful healing and survival. The idea of "healing" in the sense that Reynolds cites it, is distinct from the cure not just in the degree of wellness attained. Healing is extant wherever cellular regeneration is achieved and sustained in coexistence with the marauding, if now constrained, invading organism. By contrast, the cure is no more nor less than the total annihilation of the marauder. And while it can be said that no one knows how much of healing is a state of mind and how much is the effect of exterior physical stimulation (by medicines, surgeries, machines), no one can deny that healing from within is often within our power to an extent that finding a cure in the world is not.



Soul Exchange Ritual led by Hunter Reynolds, Easton Mountain, NY, July 2010. Photos by Life Knyper

In this context Reynolds sees there being no restraint on our power to make art a healing factor in the fashion that premodern societies (and some tribal communities extant today) convert the myths of magical and miraculous cures into healing ceremonies of faith. I don't mean that Reynolds resorts to quackery or superstition. I mean that in despair of doing nothing, turning to the generative impulse of art making, Reynolds resorts to performance and iconography as a means of taking up the challenge of survival. Art is, after all, an intuitive and heuristic molding of an initially private reality the artist can enter and exit at will and exercise his godliness. For the materialists and positivists among us who dismiss the mythopoetic idea of mind over matter as so much psychosis, I counter with the defense that facing the horizon of death, the individual ravaged by disease doesn't merely have the choice of reaching for the psychological defense and sustenance that in art making can conceivably prolong life. She has the self-responsibility of reaching for art and mythopoetics (even when she doesn't realize that's what she's reaching for) to keep the self and others alive even for the smallest intervals longer. It is, after all, why medical universities have for decades maintained whole departments to art therapy, parapsychological research, and the bio-chemical basis of tribal and folk cures.



The ideological company Reynolds keeps. Sufi dervishes, Avanos, Turkey. Photo by Schorle. Left: cave painting of two-spirit shaman signified by pictographic duo-tones. Ceuva Pintada, Baja, California, Mexico, ca. 5400 BCE.

Art as the last (or, for many, the first) resort to life has informed the newly reflexive, mythopoetic shamanism that laces much current art. I say "reflexive" because unlike the shamanism of ancient cultures, contemporary shamanism, like mythopoetics, admits of the imaginary component and cathartic release provided by myth and the adrenaline rush of real action replacing the magical alchemy that suspends disbelief. And yet, there is no mistake that the new shamanism in art reaches beyond mere aesthetics to effect the sustainability of life in sync with

nature and science. Since art was an essential part of ritual and religion, and as it for many secular people today fills the void of spirituality in a materialist age, art has long been thought to provide a spiritual sustenance. It's the reason why artists in the West since German artists Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polk, and to a lesser extent Dennis Oppenheim in the US, came to regard themselves as shamans, and why since Jean-Hubert Martin's historical and globally-inclusive exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989, held at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, reached out to the indigenous peoples of the world who developed their art as a traditional healing and empowering practice. With the persistence of AIDS diminishing the power of science in the minds of many artists, the impulse to call one's art shamanistic has become particularly attractive to queer artists despairing of waiting for the arrival of the Cure. If even for only a time, the mythopoetics of shamanism, as distinct from the naive belief in magic, seems increasingly tenable as a salve for the brooding consciousness and community of the infected.



Healing Performance, Trinitatiskirche, Cologne, Germany, 1994

The new aesthetic and performative reclamation of mythopoetics is reason enough for us to argue confidently against Susan Sontag's celebrated opinion in *Illness As Metaphor* when she argues, "the remedy to the negative morality of disease lies in its 'demythification,' that diseases (or for that matter, reality) can be described without metaphors, and that the healthiest way of being ill is one purified of metaphoric thinking." The problem with Sontag's proclamation is that, besides there being no reality that isn't composed in the mind of metaphor and myth, the *mythification* of disease is distinct from the *mystification* of disease. Sontag would be right were she to devalue demystification--the belief in things that have no rational anchorage in human experience. But mythification is entirely based in experience; it is the mindful extrapolation of experience. And as long as there is human cognition, which to a large extent operates as a mediation of myth, the valuation of the experiences we assimilate into the construct we call "reality" will always to some degree, and by necessity, include mythopoetic contents--that is myths we don't just imagine, but that we admit to being in part imaginary, yet having the real function of bridging over the voids of uncertainty in our lives.



Patina Embraced on the S-bahn, Berlin, 1994, photo: Maxine Henryson

Herein lies the ingenuity of Hunter Reynolds's mythopoetic adaptation of the shamanistic world view. Just as Reynolds's various mummification performances left behind mummy skins upon the artist's "resurrection" from bondage (see the videos and description below), Reynolds sheds personas, formal strategies, objects and images, that function variously as cathartic therapies and existential memento mori. Readiness for art, Reynolds indicates, is a readiness for healing. Art is the myth that admits its will for power over reality is at best tentative; it is the cure that acknowledges it emanates from dreaming rather than from the hard, abrasive and resistant world thought (also mythically) to be awaiting science as its premiere representation--a delusion of too many scientists insufficiently versed in critical, epistemological skepticism.



From the Roman Well to the Palace, Potsdam, Germany, 1994
Photo by Maxine Henryson

This shamanistic and mythopoetic development takes root in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Reynolds publicly assumed the persona of Patina du Prey, an avatar of questioning and questionable gender. Literally living in the role of Patina, Reynolds didn't merely crossdress or become a drag queen. Through Patina he assimilated and inhabited numerous myths beside the shaman--i.e., the two-spirit berdache; the dancing deity of creation and destruction; the priest who dresses as a woman to attain power; the hero who must dress as a woman to learn humility; the silent diva in the role of Florence Nightingale; Glenda the good witch of transport sending us home. Reynolds as Patina, performed in silence, alternately gazing through us and averting our acknowledgement as s/he silently appeared like an apparition on the country path, in the garden of the villa, along the crowded city promenade, on an underground subway car, in the center of the piazza, or rotating in the rotunda of some public building, church nave, or gallery as unprepared and prepared audiences alike found themselves drawn to Patina's outstretched arms summoning us to her healing presence by invoking, in the words of Reynolds and his longtime collaborator and photo-documentor, Maxine Henryson, "the goddess within."



Becoming Visible and (right) *Dervish Dance for Gay Pride* by Maxine Henryson. Patina du Prey and the Radical Faeries in a spontaneous takeover of the steps of the New York Public Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street during the 25-year Stonewall celebration and Gay Pride March, June 1994.

Patina wasn't the act of some fakir, though there certainly is a hypnotic aspect to Patina's rotations and dances. Patina's magic consists of no more than her unremitting gaze out at the audience which, in feminist fashion, reverts the deadly gaze at the Medusa that the bronze-age patriarchies signified as obliterating men. Reverts, that is, back to its prehistoric, empowering gaze of the life-sustaining goddess. Dressed in a ball gown significantly custom-designed with a male bodice, Patina performed ritualistic dances of healing while silently transiting through public spaces. In other performances, especially those with a confined space, Patina rotated on a dais in a "music box dance" mimicking the celestial revolution of planets and stars long mythified as the home to which souls return in death. Throughout the Patina oeuvre, Reynolds referenced past and even present cultures that still conflate gender (like the Hindu hijiras). Patina's dances borrowed from cultures like the sufi dancers who wear dresses for spiritual purpose and which inform the performances Patina did in public spaces in which s/he turned in a bell dress. Like the sufi dancers, Patina's rotations churn a conceptualized energy of the site, but also offered a vortex drawing to her the public projection of emotions and wishes of the audience. Initiating others into her ceremony of healing, Patina became galvanized by a collection of human tension that Reynolds claimed was unlike any he felt before or since. Filled with a transformative energy, Patina's public visitations reprised the role of the Angel of Bethesda, whose footprint upon the square of Jerusalem unleashed an ambulatory spring of healing waters available to all who sought its waters.



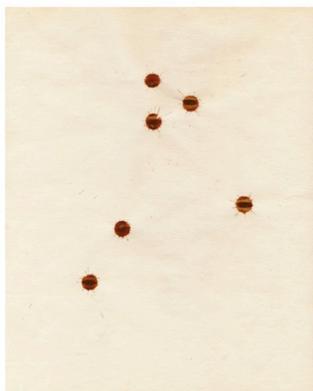
Seiko, Los Angeles, 1995, photo: Maxine Henryson

In various gallery installations in North America and Europe, the place of the "spring" was marked out on the floor by an array of painted and photographic *Bloodspots*--enlargements of real, usually circular, splatter marks made in letting blood drop from Reynold's body onto paper. Several of the *Bloodspots* are filled in with photographic depictions of friends living, dying, and dead with AIDS. Like the blood of some passion deity (Osiris/Prometheus/Christ) shed to redeem humankind in an act of purification, the *Bloodspots* in Reynold's mythos converts HIV into a healing art recalling any number of ancient myths. To Reynolds' mind, the myth recalled most poignantly by the blood spot series is that of the young Dionysus, who had to be disguised as a girl to protect him from the jealous wrath of the queen goddess Hera. But the young god was destined to be cannibalized, torn apart and consumed, so that during his savage demise, a drop of Dionysus' blood fell to earth and mixed with the soil to generate a tree, and from which the god would spring renewed and fully grown and healed. Allegorically, the *Bloodspots* suggests that blood can be purified by making art from it. Blood--the historically sacred symbol of life, in biology reestablishes the mythical link between sex and death: here DNA, which contains the deterministic code of life and death, meets the HIV virus, an agent that activates and accelerates that code. In Reynolds' photographic *Bloodspots* one can literally see the artist and his acquaintances, just as hypothetically one can find the genetic makeup of each individual in his or

her blood. But the *Bloodspots'* photographic representation also implies an unconventional ontology of the relationship of blood to photography, an ontology in which blood gives photography a life apart from semiology or physical presence. For photographs in journalism can increase blood pressure and accelerate the heart; in porn, engorge the penis and vaginal walls with blood; in education, stimulate the nervous system's alertness and idea formation by increasing blood flow in the cerebral cortex.



Bloodspot Series, AZT, c-print, 1992



Original Bloodspots on Paper, blood of Hunter Reynolds, 1992



Bloodspot Series, Blue Eye, 1992, c-print



Bloodspot Photos, 1992, c-prints



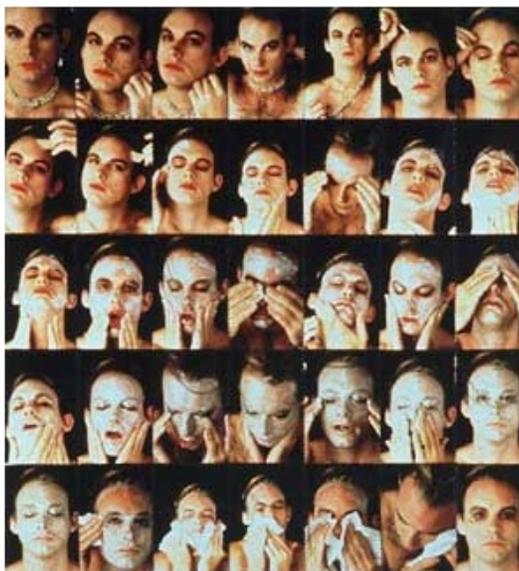
Bloodspot Photos and Sky Weaving, 1992, c-prints

The tension between the theatrical presence of Patina and the personal experience Reynolds himself derived from the performance and interaction with the public generated other meanings beside that of healing. Reynolds, for instance, consciously molded Patina as a transgendered personality removed from the camp significations that had rendered the crossdresser and drag queen as cheap clichés of modernity. His intent was always to reprise the sacred origins of transgender--"sacred" here defined by the urgent needs of the individual (artist or viewer)--whether or not it was received by people requiring healing as a source of material, spiritual, psychological inspiration, or even rejected by them. In an interview I did with Reynolds in Berlin for the *Kunstlerhaus Bethanien* publication in 1994, Reynolds described the uncertain relationship of performer to audience that he defines as depending largely on how the audience related to Patina:



Patina Bell Dress and Bloodspot Photo, AZT, installed in the Trinitatiskirche, Cologne, Germany, 1994

"In a situation when I wear the specially designed dresses, Patina becomes sculptural. There's a defined space and a defined spatial relationship with the audience. But when Patina turns on a stage, she is only partly functioning as a sculpture, since, very importantly, she's also gazing back at the audience. The performance became defined by who is looking at whom and what social codes they represent when looking. But it's also about the act of defining the different parameters in a performance. For instance, when Patina's sitting at the vanity in a room or gallery, there's no defined spatial barrier; people become very confused about what is real, what is sculpture, what is performance. It is a very voyeuristic situation. The audience sees that they've encountered something that is private, or normally is a private act: they see that someone is sitting in a robe at a vanity putting on make-up. But because I'm doing this at a museum or gallery, one would think that the context of art would take over as the defining feature and the viewers' knowledge of performance art would kick in. But it doesn't always; some people are very confused and intimidated. Then it's up to me to do something that allows them access, which goes beyond them looking at an art object. So often when I'm sitting there, I'll acknowledge them by looking at them through the mirror. There were many times when I had fifteen or twenty people standing behind me and I talked with them through the mirror, never looking at them directly, only looking at them through the mirror. Sometimes I would also become a kind of docent for the work, providing information. People ask me all kinds of questions about gender, sexuality. I discovered all this when I was putting on make-up at the vanity. If I wanted to engage them to break that barrier or circuit of just watching, I had to say something to them. But it was that barrier that was for me very interesting."



Patina du Prey Removing Makeup, 1992. Photo by Maxine Henryson

It's this pattern of social empowerment that Reynolds gleans from the cultures of history, informed by world mythologies and religious rituals, some developed centuries ago in what many scholars speculate as matriarchal societies. Reynolds consulted (and still consults in his present work) the customs of many non-European cultures, like those of Native American Indians. And though shamans weren't necessarily transgendered people, transgendered people were often shamans. Among Native Americans, what anthropologists once called "berdaches" and Native Americans still call "two spirits" were individuals whose transgendering had a prescribed order from childhood. Reynolds offers:

"When a little boy showed signs of being effeminate or a little girl showed signs of masculinity, the child would be put into a 'vision quest' by the parents and would have a vision. When the child then came out, he or she adopted the opposite gender, and from that time on the biological boy would be treated as a girl and the biological girl would be treated as a boy. And it was actually a very high honor to have a berdache in the family, because often they were spiritually attuned people. They would often become the shamans and would marry the highest chiefs as a second or third wife. Patina was a way to bring back the ancient idea that there's more than two genders, two ways of looking at humanity. That there's many genders. Patina came to imply that genders are as numerous as people, in the sense that biological, cultural, and personal makeup is what differentiates each individual. With the first Patina performances, the whole picture I had been creating up to that point suddenly coalesced in my mind. And from that I began to do the more spiritual street performances which were to define Patina's role in public for the next few years. It all became clear. Patina allows the audience access to something that has to do with mythology and fantasy and something that's other worldly in a way, because the performance looks something like a vision, where there's no specific context for what they're seeing, except that they may see the camera documenting it. The audience doesn't have a prior experience to relate Patina to except they recognize that s/he is a fantasy like Glenda the good witch coming down to rescue us from the world. And people want to touch her. But they don't know what s/he's for. S/he's so fleeting. S/he doesn't stay around for long. People only see her a very short time when s/he's on the street. It's like she comes down from another planet and then is gone. And most people never see her again. It's an extremely rare visitation."

View clips from a street performance by Hunter Reynolds as Patina du Prey [here](#).

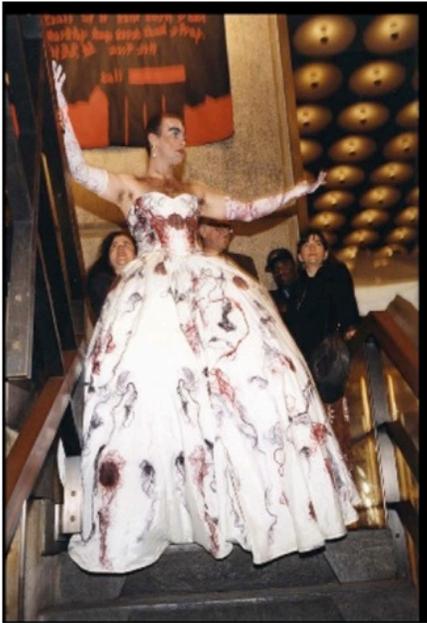
Reynolds put Patina to work modeling what came to be called *The Memorial Dress* in a series of performances that premiered at the ICA in Boston, and repeated at Creative Time in New York, the NGBK/Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, and the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museums in Hagen. In these performances Patina rotated on a dais while wearing a black bell gown on which were inscribed in gold the names of people who had died of AIDS. It was the first time that Reynolds assumed the image of death in a performance, but not just the image but the reality of death that wearing the names of the dead carried. Patina rotated with outstretched arms that, though downcast, gave Patina a Christ-like resonance that enhanced her signification as sacrificial offering for the souls of the dead. The message isn't meant to be messianic, but Reynolds wished to tap the mythopoetic well of ancient sacrificial rituals that any one of us can officiate as a kind of prayer or commemoration for the dead. If Reynolds invests the ritual with grandeur, it's because he wanted to commemorate the AIDS dead with a public ceremony and valuation they had so far (in the early-to-mid 1990s) been denied. It's why Reynolds revived a vestige of myth bequeathed us from a time when male priests were thought to be more potently endowed when dressed as women. One random association is that Patina reprises the myth of Hermes, the original hermaphrodite, united in one body with Aphrodite to reconcile the bipolarity of the incomplete masculine and feminine forms. Remember that Patina's dresses aren't made for women: their bodices, though conventionally of a feminine style, have been designed specifically to Reynolds' male contours. But Patina also invokes Hermes as healer for the living, while for the dead, as for the millions who in 1992 still equated AIDS with certain death, Patina symbolized a contemporary Psychopomp, Conductor of Souls. Patina in the Memorial Dress became the very vision of what Barbara Walker has called "Hermes Lord of Death in his union with the Lady of Life, whose power over rebirth and reincarnation was great" and whose feminine wisdom invented the civilized arts.



The Memorial Dress, 1992. Photo by Maxine Henryson

View clips from a film documenting the Memorial Dress Performances and the exhibition *The Goddess Within* with photographer Maxine Henryson [here](#).

The mythopoetic nature of Reynolds' work reached its apex in 1992, the year Reynolds staged a collaborative performance extravaganza with artist Chrysanthe Stathacos and musician-composer Ben Neill at New York's historic Thread Waxing Space, and which they called *The Banquet*. Performed gratuitously on the night of the Rodney King verdict that unleashed a storm of riots and protests on both coasts of the US, (we could see and hear the protestors on the street below us from the darkened windows of the gallery), it was an evening that reminded me that mythopoetics have always played an important part in cultural revolutions. When a civilization's artists, particularly those living on the cusp of an era of cultural and political destabilization, begin honoring myths that have long been in disrepute, sometimes for centuries, or when artists begin to blatantly alter and defile myths still revered by the status quo, it's a sure sign that a notoriously censorial social order is slowly being eroded if not soon to be toppled and supplanted. Reynolds and Stathacos that night were exemplifying this political and cultural shift. More famously exemplary of this mythopoetic impulse in the Age of AIDS is *Angels in America*. Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play in two parts is arguably the most renowned contemporary theater piece reconfiguring figures of religious faith for secular and inter-faith audiences to explore what is still vital in them while simultaneously purging them of the ideological pathogens that in their genesis bred hateful prejudice and indoctrination. This is the poetic function that distinguishes mythopoetics from myth making--or more plainly, separates the urge to create self-conscious myth from the demagoguery of preaching delusional "truths" in the service of power.



Patina Du Prey in *Heracles Hair Dress* by Chrysanne Stathacos at the 1992 Whitney Biennial and at *The Banquet* performance, Threadwaxing Space, 1992. Photos by Maxine Henryson

View cuts from a documentary film on *The Banquet* here.

On a much more modest scale, yet not unlike Kushner's more conventional *Angels* plays, *The Banquet* conflated disparate myths of a pointedly spiritual persuasion, yet with significance brimming over with left-liberal ideology reactive to the harsh social realities of the Reagan-Bush administrations. Although performance art, activist theater, and independent cinema had famously produced political dissent for decades, *The Banquet*, much like Luis Bunuel's landmark film, *The Exterminating Angel*--which uses the banquet motif to deliver moral redemption to a spiritually bankrupt class--turn its cathartic efforts on what by 1992 had become the obsessional motifs of healing and death. In contrast *The Banquet* offered us healing efforts that were aimed at the political pathogens infecting civilization. The emotive intensity of *The Banquet*, an amalgam of rage, sorrow, forgiveness, protest, and catharsis, raised it above the usual ironic and formal art performance. In fact, after the performance, the nude actor who had lain on the banquet table buried under food for three hours blurted out that during the performance he had mystically seen God.



Heracles Hair Dress with *Bloodspot Painting*, Threadwaxing Space, 1992
Photos by Maxine Henryson



The Banquet, Threadwaxing Space, 1992

Stathacos, in *The Banquet*, led a troupe of women actresses playing maenads reading from their favorite texts on women around a banquet table which offered up to the gods, or the universe, a nude man buried under extravagant mounds of cooked vegetables, fruit, meats, desserts and sundry delicacies. Simultaneously, Patina rotated on a dais to the music of Ben Neill and his

celebrated "mutant trumpet." Dressed in a radiantly white bell gown imprinted with black hair markings made by Stathacos, Reynolds/Patina invoked the Greek myth of Heracles (Roman Hercules) dressed as a woman in a hairdress and bound to the omphalos (the cosmic wheel of the stars around the axis of sky) belonging to Queen Omphale. If Heracles revolves in mimicry and codification of the revolutions of celestial bodies, Patina revolved in mimicry and codification of a civilization's urge to mythopoeticize. Heracles is dressed in the clothing of the queen's female slaves as part of his captivity, but not ending in his humiliation, as some mythographers put it, but rather as ending in the strength that would renew itself as a result of Heracles endurance of humiliation.

Reynolds understood that *The Memorial Dress* performances and *The Banquet* comprised an apogee of healing themes that Patina could never surpass. Although he reprised the role of Patina for the next five years in various public healing performances in the US and Europe, in 1998 Reynolds put Patina to her final rest. In the ensuing years, Reynolds allowed the myths of resurrection to branch out organically into two bodies of work: a series of *Photo Weavings*, and some years later, the *Mummification Performances*, in which Reynolds enacts the Osiris and Lazarus myths of bodily mummification and resurrection by which each image represents a regeneration or reincarnation of the artist. At the same time that Reynolds developed the Photo Weavings, Maxine Henryson's photo-documentation of Reynold's performances came to be seen by the artist as essential to Reynolds' project of healing rebirth in that photography is the ultimate medium of regeneration of the human image, and to some the human essence, in Memorium. This is the reason that Patina, when rotating with the photo *Bloodspots* encircling her feet, would gesture toward the photographed spirits within them, as if silently imploring some power or deity to take up those stricken with AIDS and accord them an honored place among the firmament while offering herself as a priestly receptacle of empathy and access between the human and the divine.



Clouds, photo weaving, c-prints, 1996



Felix, 1996, photo weaving, 1996

In the mid 1990s, Reynolds developed his repertoire of *Photo Weavings* after being inspired by his friend Jack Brusca, who came out as a gay man in the 1950s. Brusca had covered his studio wall with pictures of his friends, family and lovers of thirty-some years into what he called his "wall of angels." When Brusca had to be confined to a hospital, Reynolds rephotographed Jack's wall of angels and sewed the photographs into a quilt that he then brought to Brusca in his hospital room. After Brusca's death from AIDS, Reynolds composed one of his most anguished sculptural series, a group of antiquated hospital beds covered with quilts made with woven portrait photographs commemorating Brusca and other friends dying of AIDS. In *Jack Brusca's Bed of Angels* (1992) Reynolds exhibits the portrait quilt made for Brusca with its depictions of Brusca's gay son and gay twin brothers, all now dead from AIDS. The hospital quilts and bloodspot collages compose part of Reynolds's Proustian effort to rescue the life histories of those around him from the flux and obscurity of time. But whereas Proust's tea and petites madeines are full of charm and the textured imagery of a restrained yet distinct gentility, Reynolds cloud- and flowered-filled photo weavings are interspersed with visually spare, erotic, arduous tension in their depictions of illness and death.



Bloodspot Photos and Sky Weaving, 1992,
Hospital Bed with C-print Photo Weaving



Quilt of Names, 1992, Hospital Bed with C-print Photo Quilt

It's been said that among the hardest lessons in life, learning to let go counts chief among them. In this respect, Reynolds recalls the mystics and artists who have made much of renunciation. Whether we consider the abjurations of Francis of Assisi or Marcel Duchamp, Guatama Buddha or John Cage, letting go of control has been heralded an achievement few can master. For most of us, letting go is a desperate act even when it's born from a loss as common as being made to say goodbye to a former lover or to a child grown up. In the existential scheme of things, letting go is compelled by despair and force, as when facing loss by plague, a conquering army, or natural catastrophe. And, of course, in facing death. As in all Reynold's work, the intended effect of *Jack Brusca's Bed of Angels* is designed to emotionally heal (originally Brusca, but now the viewer) from the anxieties we carry with us about death, by providing aesthetic assistance to our mourning and subsequent letting go. A Franciscan friar I knew some years back impressed upon me his belief that spirituality is both no more and nor less than learning to let go. This lesson is most poignantly embodied in the *Mourning Flowers* and *Clouds Photo-Weavings* and, of course, the *Memorial Dress*, in which the many men and women who died of AIDS are commemorated in union with nature.

It was Hunter Reynolds, not the now deceased Patina du Prey, who enacted the mummification performances between 1999 and 2005. Potentially dangerous for an individual with a low T-cell count, the performances offered audiences both in galleries and on the street a compelling visual ritual of suspense as the artist was wrapped alive and standing vertically with cellophane and tape by assistants, then set to rest for near-unendurable durations horizontally on the floor. But Reynolds purposefully subverted the suspense to detract from the performance's valuation as spectacle and to heighten the sacred or psychological significance of mummification for a contemporary audience. What would be imaginable as the climax of cutting open the mummy skin to reveal the shaman artist reborn actually turned out to be anti-climactic, the effect of Reynolds downplaying the daredevil aura of the event by drawing it out and making it unceremonious, continuous in rhythm, and devoid of fanfare. In effect, the artists's emergence from the mummy skin seemed no more than the emergence of a thing in nature--a seed from a pod; a creature from a chrysalis. It was in its undramatic unfolding that the metaphorical death and resurrection symbolized was made to seem as common as natural events usually are in places hidden from sight. In this respect the performance assumes ideological identification with the common resurrection rather than the cult of the exemplary avatar who defies nature in resurrection. In other words, in keeping the performances understated and utilizing only cellophane and tape, Reynolds' offers an image of universal healing that contrasts starkly with today's exclusive healing of the affluent.

If the late 1990s brought hope to the fight against HIV in terms of increased monies and enhanced treatments, the new millennium undermined whatever fragile security we recovered in burning into our brains the unfathomable iconography of skyscraper-annihilating planes, imploding towers, and raining bodies. On September 11, 2001, Reynolds had just arrived with a sightseeing German friend to tour the World Trade Center as Mohammed Atta crashed American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower. Although easily escaping the concourse, Reynolds and

his friend, like the thousands outside the towers, have never been able to escape the falling bodies around them. Although the work Reynolds produced since 9/11 has largely gone unseen, for Reynolds, 9/11 magnified the intimacy and struggle with mortality that began for him when HIV laid claim to his body nearly twenty years earlier. Like so many artists in New York, 9/11 recontextualized his life and work for the remainder of the decade. For the first time, the trauma bled out of Reynolds in a way that immersed him in substance abuse and prolonged despair. Although he continued to make art prolifically for the next three years in Florida, for some of us in New York at least, it seemed Reynolds had blacked out.

Then, in 2005, Reynolds succumbed to the darkest despair of his life as his Florida home came under siege by Hurricane Wilma at the same time that he suffered the first of four HIV-related strokes. In its indiscriminate rage, Wilma leveled art and artifacts, everyday objects and garbage alike to inconsequential detritus. For Reynolds, the weeks following Wilma provoked an inner turmoil that proved even more devastating. Just as the strokes began taking their toll, Reynolds revolted against his body in an emotional and physical meltdown he now calls Hurricane Hunter--his attempt at a suicide so explosive and out of body that he demolished everything in his studio that Wilma had left intact. I didn't recognize this Hunter Reynolds when I first heard of him. In truth, I didn't believe he existed when I was told of the strokes that cut him down. "Hunter's just being a drama queen," I said to more than one mutual acquaintance as I pictured him whipped by winds like some Baroque patron saint. I failed to recognize that at the moment of my glib accusation, Reynolds was learning the relentless lesson of existential submission to a nearing mortality.



I Will Die For You, Patina lipstick imprint, 1992



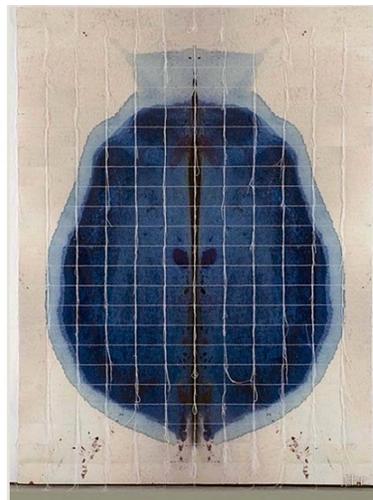
You Gave Me Love, (*Lipstick Disaster Series*), 2009, lipstick painting

After Hurricane Wilma, Reynolds had little choice but to relinquish himself over to the forces of nature. His T-cell count fell to 5 and brought on a series of HIV-related strokes that have since left the right side of his body partially paralyzed. He's always had a secular strain of spirituality circling his brain--he claims to often resign himself to the universe when he finds his willpower outranked by circumstance. But in 2005 Reynolds' grace of resignation became an act of empowerment, though he had yet to find this out. He could only see Hurricane Wilma as one grandly savage random operation that he would mirror in his attempt to kill himself. I have little doubt that Hurricane Hunter was not an attempt at obliteration; it was an attempt to re-empower himself and his art through the ultimate dematerialization. I will not go so far as to say that he didn't want to die. I will say that whether or not he was egged on by delusion, he was transformed--though not by some mystical act or revelation, and not in the dematerialization he desired. His transformation was accomplished by handing over his will to chance, something he came to prize through his knowledge of modernist art history, particularly that strain (Duchamp, Pollock, Cage, Fluxus) which re-systematized spiritual notions of release. The proof of this is in Reynolds' making chance operations the departure point for all the work Reynolds exhibited at Momenta Art in May 2009, specifically the objects Reynolds calls his *Hurricane Artifacts*--the demolished and randomly reconfigured objects and detritus left behind in his studio in the wake of Hurricane Wilma and Hurricane Hunter.

Reynolds eventually digitally scanned the *Hurricane Artifacts* into Photo Shop to compose thousands of individual 4x6-inch c-prints that he sewed together into new photo grid panels with which he then covered the gallery walls to a height of 8 feet. The *Hurricane Artifacts* include water-damaged and wind-ripped photo weavings from earlier series, artwork by other artists, CD covers, paper fragments, and shards of broken glass, all of which were paint splattered, thrown, shattered, and bonded by the forces of wind and rain (the storm named Hurricane Wilma) or the impassioned yet indiscriminate flailing and trashing of the suicide attempt Reynolds made a few days later (the event he has come to call Hurricane Hunter). If the dark and traumatic tenor of the Hurricane Wilma/Hurricane Hunter installations and videotapes is unrecognizable without exposition, it is both because the very nature of chance operations are antithetical to melodrama and because Reynolds has chosen to focus on the role chance played in his survival and recovery. Despite the cumulative toll, the period of crisis that began for Reynolds with 9/11 gave way in the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma and Hurricane Hunter to a slow-growing but unrelenting resilience and determination to climb back to the height of his creative powers as an activist-artist struggling with HIV. "Art has always been one of the tools I have used to heal myself and others," Reynolds says, "and to find order in the chaos of my life, by not only telling the story through art, but by transforming myself in the process of making it, using it, to rebuild my life, and to find hope, beauty and a desire to be alive."



Hurricane Wilma, Hurricane Hunter Installation, Momena Art, 2009, c-print photo weavings



Brain Spot, 2009, c-print photo weaving

In a larger sense, Reynolds' Hurricane Art deserves consideration in terms of the historic context of chance operations and particularly the existentialist art and theory informing it. Most of us suffering a fixation with the art of an earlier modernism, whether in appreciating its aesthetic and utopian virtues or lamenting its political limitations, are well versed in the postwar art impacted by the global catastrophes and despair of 1914-17 and 1936-45. Postwar art, the art made firstly by the Dada and Surrealist artists and secondly by a conglomeration of Abstract Expressionist artists and Existentialist philosophers, writers, performers, filmmakers and theater groups, indicted the grandiose aesthetics and utopian political systems that had failed to civilize a hostile world. In the wake of tens of millions dead and whole cities annihilated, how could the postwar generations not demand that a new art restore the authentic mark of human existence purged of all remnants of the cultures of despotism and mass destruction? To the postwar generations there was nothing more authentic and hopeful than a return to the primitive and unmediated mark made through chance, automatic, and improvised operations. Primitive in the sense of being uncultivated, unmediated in the sense of being devoid of controlled or formal applications, the art of masters became devalued in favor of the raw traces of human existence and survival that manifested not layers of culture but immediate and direct response, not systematized aesthetic theories but the first acts of a throbbing nervous system or the records of random events. In the parlance of Albert Camus, such art was singular because it dispensed with all human contrivance obscuring the human contest with the absurd--the harsh reality that greets any and all human desire with intransigence, obstacle, and naked hostility. Only in recognizing the absurd and making art that takes the absurd into account can the confrontation between human will and

existential reality be mitigated and our despair be circumvented. The postwar generation of 1945-63 in particular turned to an art of chance operations, automatic writing, improvisational movements, and expressionist gestures as stratagems intended to cut through the cultural traditions that not only failed to civilize the barbarous impulses of humankind but were now seen to buttress the endeavors of war, holocaust, and nuclear annihilation. What was called for in the aftermath of global trauma was an art that leveled human artifice and institutions to the core experience of life--physical and psychical events as they exist prior to human cultural refinements and idealizations that fail to stand up to the forces of a hostile world.



Congressional Record, 2011, original c-print for photo weaving; *Sex and Consequences*, 2011, original c-print for photo weaving

If I defer to this history now, it's because I see it entirely informing Reynolds's current work, as well as the work of the many other artists responding to and eulogizing the Age of AIDS. And why wouldn't the artists faced with AIDS and terrorism show traces of the existentialist principles trickling down through the decades to them like so many stalactites of culture? When struggling with devastation and death, we reach out for what looms largest before us. It's why, when facing the myriad crises of his life, Reynolds grabbed at a counterweight that could withstand the onslaught of life-altering events, which means he reached not for the artistic strategies of structuralism or post-structuralism, not for conceptualism or minimalism, not Pop Art or commodity theory art--all highly intellectualized and multilayered armatures of use to us in the pacific interludes between crises. Reynolds seized at life experience and made his own body his medium just as the post World War II artists made the nervous mark of the individual artist in action painting and sculpture bestowing the marks--the traces--of their unique physiologies and nervous systems.

But that is the history that informs the work Reynolds made in 2008-2009. In 2011, with *Survival AIDS* Reynolds takes a step away from the existential mark making we see in a series like his *Lipstick Disaster Series*, which is a layered accumulation of lip prints made with lipstick in expressionist fashion. Photography, with its chemistry and technology intervening on the interface between body and paper, imposes a space of rationalism, contemplation, memory. In this sense, the function of Reynolds' newest photo weavings is to historicize the queer existentialism and shaman mythopoetics, while at the same time tracing the thread of history and identity that composed Reynold's lifeline and which marks out his existence as a survivor of AIDS, 9/11, a half-dozen strokes, and a suicide attempt. In so doing, making *Survival AIDS* these last two years enabled Reynolds to reassume control over his life, as is very much evident in the Participant, Inc. installation. That the exhibition displays an art born in greeting outside and debilitating forces and despair with a reassertion of individual power and control over art media is sufficient reason for Reynold's employment of mythopoetics and shamanism in his art--especially considering that science has so far been unable to keep the specter of HIV from continuing to threaten him.

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