

Leigh Bowery Cape

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Leigh Bowery wearing cape later given to Ron Athey, c. 1993; photograph by Fergus Greer

I first encountered the brown velour cape or gown as a small image on an exhibition checklist.¹ Despite the size and quality of the image, I was immediately taken by it. The cape appeared soft to the touch and something one could throw on and go out for the night with relative ease. I was surprised to find out that it is actually quite heavy and large enough to fit several people of my size, and so awkward to handle. Given that I do not have access to the cape in person while writing this, I have explored photographs of the cape to vicariously experience its physical contours and to better understand its metaphorical resonances.

The cape originally belonged to the performance artist and club kid Leigh Bowery (1961-94) and after his death Bowery's partner, Nicola Bateman, gifted it to Athey.² Fergus Greer's 1991

photograph features Bowery wearing the cape, which flows into a dramatic circular train. The piece of clothing into which both his arms and legs disappear seems to defy gravity (and this is precisely how I imagined it would function). Of course, this is an illusion. Indeed, the effortless manner with which Bowery often wore his eclectic costumes belies how cumbersome and precariously constructed they would have been. Indeed, there is clearly a fatigue factor involved in wearing such clothes. However, if there is an exhaustion, then it is a "queer exhaustion."³ Queer exhaustion refers to the work of queer of color performance artists who mobilize stereotypes to distort, parody, or overturn them, that is, a fatigue that is productive—for example,

in the case of Bowery, one that realigns or challenges norms of gender and sexuality. Although neither deals explicitly with race in his work, Bowery's as well as Ron Athey's practices exemplify such strategies of employing exaggeration as well as blurring abjection with joy and pleasure.⁴

A notable appearance of Athey wearing the cape is included as part of the large-format Polaroids, a series of photographs by Catherine Opie, who had been a part of Athey's troupe during the mid-1990s.⁵ Commissioned by the charity The Estate Project of Artists with AIDS, Opie created unique life-size portraits alluding to Athey's performances. For instance, *Ron Athey Crown of Thorns* incorporates elements both of *Incorruptible Flesh (A Work in Progress)* (1996), in which he wore the gown, and *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993) in which he wore a crown of spinal needles.⁶ Athey's posture and the way he holds the cape makes him look regal. However, his facial expression implies something altogether different: an endurance under duress (perhaps reflecting the difficulty of keeping the gown in position), a central aspect of Athey's performances (consider his references to Saint Sebastian) and of queer exhaustion.

Comparing Michael Childers' photograph (2002) *Ron Athey in "Leigh Bowery" Gown* with that of Greer's of Bowery helps to tease out an important difference in how queer exhaustion manifests in their practices. Athey looks directly at the viewer, in contrast to Bowery, who looks away from it. Also,



Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/Crown of Thorns* wearing Leigh Bowery's Cape (from *Martyrs & Saints*), 2000, polaroid, 110 x 41 inches (279.4 x 104.1 cm); © Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles



Michael Childers, *Ron Athey in Leigh Bowery Cape*, 2002

Athey's tattooed upper torso and face are visible, whereas Bowery's body and face are completely covered by a white garment. In the images, Bowery is more an object and Athey a subject. The photograph of Athey is less an image at which to be looked than one with which to be engaged. Even when Athey is looking away, as in Opie's

photograph, his crown of thorns evokes a visceral response from the viewer. It evinces a queer exhaustion but one that is importantly relational with or cathected through his viewers. Through this evocation of relationality, Athey instantiates a very queer notion of community built on discomfort and pain that is in fact the very frame or central concern of this exhibition. Given the genealogy of the gown—being passed down from Bowery to Athey—it holds within its history the generosity that is also a core aspect of this community building.

NOTES

1. It is typically referred to as a “cape” or “gown,” but this one-of-a-kind garment has a hole cut for a head and so could also be described as a “poncho.”
2. [Editors’ comment: According to Athey, he originally met Bateman through his tattooist, Alex Binney (with whom she has two children) and got to know her at the Bowery memorial at Matthew Marks and at Love Ball Amsterdam. Athey notes: “Binney was the one who pierced Bowery’s cheeks, hence all the famous pin on plastic mouths he used. All referenced in [my] ‘Trojan Whore’ [figure].” Email from Athey to Amelia Jones, October 5, 2018.]
3. Queer exhaustion is a concept that was the organizing framework for my and Tina Takemoto’s Queer Art Caucus panel for the annual College Art Association (CAA) conference, held in Washington, D.C., in 2016.
4. There is a case to be made that Athey’s works implicitly examine a particularly Pentecostal American whiteness, and this is explored in more detail in the essays by Karen Gonzalez Rice and Andy Campbell in this collection.
5. See Moira Roth, “*The Drive to Describe: Interview with Catherine Opie*,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 83-85.
6. See Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 58. Doyle notes that this particular work in the series was used for the invitation to the “Aesthetics of Shame” conference but that ultimately neither Athey nor his works were part of the event. In this sense, the relationship of photography to his performance is a vexed one. Implicit in my essay is that the foreclosure of the complexity of Athey’s work, often through iconic photographs that distort or mislead, is an unfortunate mischaracterization of it.

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