

MEDIA RELEASE

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles announces its Summer 2021 exhibitions: Los Angeles performance artist Ron Athey's first museum survey and a presentation of new work by Brooklyn-based artist Kenneth Tam

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Los Angeles, CA (May 14, 2021)—The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA) is pleased to announce its summer season of exhibitions, underscoring the museum's commitment to artists living and working in Los Angeles—past and present—and supporting artists through exhibitions at various stages of their careers. On view June 19–September 5, 2021, ICA LA's Summer 2021 exhibitions highlight two artists whose explorations in video and performance examine some of the most enduring and challenging issues of our time: *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, the first historical museum survey dedicated to renowned Los Angeles-based performance artist **Ron Athey** (b. 1961), curated by noted art historian and performance studies scholar **Amelia Jones** and *Kenneth Tam: Silent Spikes*, a newly commissioned two-channel video by Brooklyn-based artist **Kenneth Tam** (b. 1982).

“We are thrilled to present the work of these two exceptional artists,” says Good Works Executive Director **Anne Ellegood**. “From different generations and with distinct backgrounds and life experiences, both artists work primarily through performance and video to examine the social codes and rituals that revolve around gender and other aspects of identity. We are incredibly honored to present this overdue survey of the work of the inimitable Ron Athey, whose challenging, provocative, and mesmerizing performances have had an enormous impact on contemporary art practice since the 1990s and whose deep enmeshment with various communities speaks to the power of collective discourse and action.”

***Queer Communion: Ron Athey*
June 19–September 5, 2021**



Ron Athey, *Acephalous Monster* (performance documentation), 2019. 2017. Performance Space 122, New York, November 14, 2017 (premiere). Courtesy the Ron Athey Archive. Photo: Rachel Papo

Queer Communion: Ron Athey is the first major U.S. solo museum presentation of renowned Los Angeles-based performance artist **Ron Athey** (b. 1961), organized by guest curator **Amelia Jones**, noted art historian and Robert A. Day Professor of Art & Design, Vice Dean of Academics & Research, and Chair of Critical Studies at USC Roski School of Art and Design. As one of the most generative and important performance artists to emerge in the twentieth century, Athey challenges traditional limits of artistic practice—activating the body as a site of trauma, resistance, sexuality, and religious ecstasy. The artist, who has been HIV positive since the mid-1980s, explores pain, fetishism, power, and queer politics, commenting on the intersections and synergies among Christian fundamentalist religious traditions and ritual, through highly visceral performances and interventions. Coco Romack writes for *Artforum*, “*Queer Communion* reveals Athey’s legacy to be less a singular, commodifiable body of work than a nebula of social spaces and bonds formed from pleasure, mutual experience, and community. Perhaps the artist’s retention in his work of some sense of religiosity—itself a transgressive act given the general skepticism regarding religion in alternative spaces and cultural institutions alike—is a means of transforming his suffering into a crucible for redemption.”

Queer Communion is a historical survey of Athey’s internationally influential body of work, tracing the development of his artistic practice outside of institutions in the music (post-punk and goth), literature, and self-publishing scenes of the 1980s before he gained an international profile and wider exposure in the 1990s, where his work was a lightning rod within the “culture wars.” It also establishes his creative trajectory and lifework through the lens of the queer communities and networks that Athey has engaged and helped form throughout his career. The exhibition comprises videos, costumes and props from performances, photographs from the artist’s extensive archive, press clippings, and other assorted ephemera, providing a discursive view of Athey’s diverse oeuvre interweaving music, literature, performance, film, politics, opera, religion, and theater. Examining Athey’s complicated relationship to institutions, the contemporary art market, and the art historical canon, this presentation situates his work as definitive of a radical practice where art-making is a form of communion.

The concept of “queer communion” anticipates the relational, participatory models of art-making that emerged in the 1990s and accounts for the ways in which social interactions can function as collective engagement and production. The exhibition pays homage to Athey’s generous extension of self into the world, experimentation with different performance models, and intensive collaborations with a range of communities, who support and influence his transgressive work. Organized thematically, *Queer Communion* provides an overview of Athey’s work that is loosely chronological, with overlapping themes and modes of practice and the mood, political energies, and creative chaos of his various and often interrelated communities.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 456-page, fully-illustrated publication, edited by Amelia Jones, the exhibition’s curator, and Andy Campbell, associate professor of Critical Studies at the University of Southern California Roski School of Art and Design, published by Intellect Books. Emphasizing the ephemeral and largely uncollectible nature of Athey’s work, the book places his own writing at its center, turning to memoir, recollection, and narration to forge a dynamic archive of his performances. In addition to documenting Athey’s art, ephemera, notes, and drawings, the volume features commissioned essays, object lessons on individual objects in the Athey archive and found in the exhibition, and short testimonials by friends and collaborators, including Dominic Johnson, Amber Jamilla Musser, Julie Tolentino, Bruce La Bruce, Ming Ma, David Getsy, Alpesh Patel, and Zackary Drucker, among many others.

Los Angeles-based artist **Ron Athey** (b. 1961) has been working at the vanguard of performance art for 30 years. Self-taught, he has performed extensively at clubs, alternative spaces, festivals, and museums in the U.S. and abroad. Athey formed a company of performers in the 1990s, producing the Torture Trilogy, addressing the AIDS pandemic through memorializing and philosophical reflection. He has developed genre-stretching theatrical works like *Joyce* (2002), *The Judas Cradle* (2005), and major solo performances, including *Sebastiane* (2014), *Incorruptible Flesh* (2006), and *The Solar Anus* (1998). Currently, Athey is performing *Gifts of the Spirit* (2018), which returns to his Pentecostal roots, with an embodied performance anchored in the

spiritual; and *Acephalous Monster* (2018), a multimedia performance with projections, readings, lectures, appropriated text, and sound.

Amelia Jones is Robert A. Day Professor and Vice Dean of Academics and Research, Roski School of Art & Design, USC, and is a curator and scholar of contemporary art, performance, and feminist/sexuality studies. Recent publications include *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (2012); a volume co-edited with Erin Silver, *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories* (2016); and the edited special issue “On Trans/Performance” of *Performance Research* (2016). Jones’s catalogue *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* (2020), co-edited with Andy Campbell, is listed among the *New York Times*’s “Best Art Books of 2020.” Her book entitled *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* is just out from Routledge Press, and explores the history of performance art and queer theory since the 1950s from a queer, feminist point of view.

Queer Communion: Ron Athey is organized by Amelia Jones, guest curator. Archival and research assistance for the exhibition and publication was provided by Ana Briz, David Frantz, Hannah Grossman, Dominic Johnson, and Maddie Phinney.

The exhibition is made possible thanks to the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Laura Donnelley and the Good Works Foundation, Tim Disney, The Audrey and Sydney Irmas Charitable Foundation, and the Michael Asher Foundation.

ICA LA is supported by the Curator’s Council, Fieldwork, and 1717 Collective.

Kenneth Tam: Silent Spikes
June 19–September 5, 2021



Kenneth Tam, *Silent Spikes* (video still), 2021. Two-channel HD video (color, sound). TRT 20:29 min.
Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.

Silent Spikes is the first solo institutional presentation of Brooklyn-based artist **Kenneth Tam** (b. 1982) in Los Angeles. *Silent Spikes*, a two-channel video, recently commissioned by the Queens Museum, New York, explores archetypal expectations of masculinity in relation to the intersections of gender, economics, and race. Tam reflects upon the underrecognized connection between the histories of Westward expansion and Chinese immigration in the U.S. and considers how Asian men have been marginalized against the standards of the “All-American” iconic trope of the cowboy, despite the fundamental contributions of Chinese laborers to the building of the American West, specifically the treacherous western portion of the Transcontinental Railroad between 1863 and 1869. The work incorporates visual and narrative references to the labor strike organized by

Chinese Transcontinental Railroad workers in 1867, the response to the intense exploitation and marginalization of the laborers—one of the earliest instances of racialized protest in the U.S.

Composed in a cinematic style combining interpretative reenactment performed by a group of diverse, Asian-American male participants (all untrained actors) and location footage, *Silent Spikes* can be taken as a response not only to this history, but also to centuries of stereotyped representation of the Asian male in media, particularly in Western-genre films. Inhabiting and adapting the archetype of the American cowboy, Tam and his participants honor inherited struggles while centering vulnerability and connection as reparative forms of male embodiment and selfhood. Tam's work acknowledges the complex dynamics impacting the experiences of young men living and working in American society today.

Kenneth Tam (b. 1982, Queens, NY; based in Brooklyn, NY) works in video, sculpture, and photography, using the male body as a starting point for discussions about performance, physical intimacy, vulnerability, and private ritual. Tam received his BFA from the Cooper Union, New York and his MFA from the University of Southern California. Tam will participate in *Open Call*, an upcoming exhibition and program series at The Shed, New York. He recently produced *The Crossing*, his first live(streamed) performance at The Kitchen, New York. He has had solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art; MIT List Center for Visual Arts, Boston, MA; Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles; Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Tam has participated in group shows at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; 47 Canal, New York; Hollybush Gardens, London; and SculptureCenter, Queens. He has participated in residencies including Artist Lab at 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica; Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace; The Core Residency Program at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Pioneer Works, Brooklyn. Tam is currently a Lecturer at Princeton University.

Kenneth Tam: Silent Spikes was organized by the Queens Museum and made possible with support from the Asian Art Circle at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

The presentation at ICA LA is organized by Jamillah James, Senior Curator.

ICA LA is supported by the Curator's Council, Fieldwork, and 1717 Collective.

About ICA LA

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA) is an epicenter of artistic experimentation and incubator of new ideas. Founded in 1984 as the Santa Monica Museum of Art (SMMoA) and reestablished in 2017 with a new identity and home in Downtown Los Angeles, ICA LA builds upon a distinguished history of bold curatorial vision and innovative programming to illuminate the important untold stories and emerging voices in contemporary art and culture. The museum's 12,700 square-foot renovated industrial building—designed by WHY Architecture under the leadership of Kulapat Yantrasast—features ample space for exhibitions, public programs, retail pop-ups, integrated offices, and special projects.

ICA LA's mission is to support art that sparks the pleasure of discovery and challenges the way we see and experience the world, ourselves, and each other. ICA LA is committed to upending hierarchies of race, class, gender, and culture. Through exhibitions, education programs, and community partnerships, ICA LA fosters critique of the familiar and empathy with the different. ICA LA is committed to making contemporary art relevant and accessible for all. Admission is free. For more information, visit theicala.org. Join the conversation, follow on social media at [@theicala](https://twitter.com/theicala) and [#icala](https://www.instagram.com/theicala).

Exhibition hours, by appointment: Wednesday and Friday–Sunday, 12pm to 5pm, and Thursday 12pm–7pm. To schedule an appointment, visit theicala.org/visit.

Address: 1717 E. 7th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90021. Parking available onsite.

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