

SUMMER PREVIEW

50 SHOWS WORLDWIDE

HOUSTON

Clifford Owens

CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM HOUSTON

Clifford Owens has written that he doesn't want to be pigeonholed as a performance artist, yet his work is deeply enmeshed in classic performance-art interrogations: What is the role of the document? Can performance and the museum coexist? Most explicitly, what are the codes mediating a performer's relationship to an audience? And feedback—both via artist-to-artist conversation and as an exchange between performer and viewer—is crucial to what he does. This exhibition (Owens's first solo museum show) not only actively involved the artist's immediate audience but, laced with references to earlier performative/conceptual acts, reverberated with performance-art history as well. In a nice bit of matchmaking, curator Valerie Cassel Oliver paired Owens's exhibition with a survey (on the second floor) of the work of Fluxus artist Benjamin Patterson. Having interpreted the elder artist's 1964 *Lick Piece* in 2006, Owens included documentation of this recent restaging in his own show. Also exhibited were photos, video, and drawings from Owens's "Studio Visits" series, 2004–2008, for which he invited performance artists not to just discuss his existing work (as is customary in a studio visit), but to actually help fabricate it. For example, alongside William Pope.L, Owens crudded up a wall (bearing unmistakable Mendieta-like handprints of mud tracing downward); when Joan Jonas visited, he attached graphite to his hands and feet and had Jonas drag him across the floor, thereby becoming her stylus; and, in a nod to Acconci's 1971 *Pryings* video, he asked Patty Chang to force open his eyes with her fingers—all the while using these (often minority or female) participants' bodies and histories as a medium for his own work.

For the opening of the CAM show, Owens staged the third iteration of his ongoing *Photographs with an Audience* project, 2008–, alongside documentation of the previous two. In one photograph from the first version (executed at New York's On Stellar Rays gallery), Owens



squeezes himself within a tightly bunched queue of participants, evoking the social space created by the naked frames of Marina Abramović and Ulay during their performance of *Imponderabilia*, 1977. But whereas Abramović often exploits the drama of silence (and the psychological chasm between artist and viewer), Owens's *Photographs with an Audience* is all about interaction. Apart from Owens and the large group in attendance, the only other physical elements involved were a photographer and her equipment. However, the threat of photographic capture (perhaps even its potential for transforming life into art) loomed large throughout the work's approximately ninety-minute free-floating conversation, during which Owens asked questions, many rhetorical, and led trust exercises in suspiciously therapeutic tones. "Who would get naked for performance art?" Owens wondered aloud. "That's what happens in performance art, right?" Yet even while the artist sought to build the confidence of his audience, he freely admitted his dependence on them, often posing uncomfortable questions regarding sensitive issues such as race, political leanings, and sexual preference to generate a (photogenic) reaction.

In Houston, the performance became heated when Owens's unremitting provocations led one audience participant to display a range of affective responses: Upon being asked by Owens about the difficulty of escaping gang life, a young volunteer identifying himself as Mexican mugged the tattoo on the inside of his lower lip and frankly discussed his background, saying that he now worked three jobs; within minutes he was embracing an emotional Owens for a photo op; and then, shifting between Spanish and English, he went on to earnestly describe his conviction that art is expansive, capable of allowing us to transcend personal limits and fears. From this exchange alone, dozens of fruitful questions arose—regarding Owens's knowing exploitation of his audience as "material" for artworks, the general assumptions as to who can speak about art with eloquence and authority, and whether intimacy between strangers in a constructed situation, sanctioned as art by the museum and documented by the camera, is intimacy at all. The performance was so bluntly confrontational that in the moment it was difficult to process; however, the underlying message was crystal clear: What Owens is scrutinizing is a mechanism intrinsic to human nature—the performance of selfhood.

—Nick Stillman

Clifford Owens, *Studio Visits: Patty Chang*, 2006, still from a digital color video, 28 seconds. From the series "Studio Visits," 2004–2008.