Clifford Owens on writing your own history

May 17, 2017 - Though he rejects the label "performance artist," NY-based visual artist Clifford Owens is known for creating work that not only engages physically and emotionally with the viewer but also frequently involves the use of his own body. Despite his professional reputation as a provocateur, Owens' advice for emerging artists involves such genteel topics as mentorship, community, and love. "The art world is not necessarily a loving space," he says. "They love what you produce maybe, but not you. You've got to have some semblance of love around you that is real."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2656 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Production, Anxiety, Beginnings, Inspiration.

A lot of your work strives to acknowledge its history—the history of performance art, the history of art created by people of color. How important is it for young artists, even if they aren't formally trained, to understand the history of their medium?

It's critical. Knowing the history of your practice as an artist is crucial. Every good artist is in conversation with the history that precedes them. Every work of art refers to another. Artists or creative people who don't value history… well, I feel like that's anti-intellectual, and making art is an intellectual activity. I don't think that you can be a good artist if you're not a serious intellectual. Art is about ideas. Understanding your history is certainly important for younger artists, but I think it's also crucial to understand how the history that precedes you is relevant in your own moment. Your job is not to simply duplicate history, but to have a sense of it and try to expand it in some way.

I found that there was not a significant history of American black artists in performance art, so I made work in which the conceit was to create a history that didn't exist before.

Understanding the history is very important, but so is your practice. You can't sustain yourself as an artist if you're not practicing your art, if you don't do so with a certain kind of intensity. If you know the history from which your practice derives, you know better how to push against it, you know? I think that is also super important. Performance art today looks nothing like it did 60 years ago. The ideas are all still there. It's just taking a different form. The aesthetic has changed. The audience for performance art has changed. It's much more diverse, the New York City performance art scene today, versus the 1950s or '60s. It's a pretty white world, you know? Understanding that history is really so critical.

I also think artists should write their own histories, and writing about my work or writing about performance art is important for me, too. Again, we have a kind of responsibility to our own history because if you're living in this country right now and you're an artist, you have a responsibility to say something about this historical moment. Maybe it's not in your work directly, but you must have some awareness of what's going on.

Your project's largely performance-based, and not necessarily about producing physical objects. What does the "work" of your creative practice look like?

I often say I'm a project-based artist. A project will often come out of an invitation to do a performance or a museum show or a gallery show… an invitation to do something in a space. From there, I first work in my head. Then I work through my body. It takes me time to understand the context, and the context will inform the content of the piece and the project.

Some of your performance pieces have been repeated in different spaces. How do you know when an idea's been exhausted?

There are things I keep going back to. I think it's in part because I'm attracted to that particular body of work or those ideas contained in that body of work—or it's not fully been resolved for me. Each time I do a performance, I change it slightly. It's kind of like being a jazz musician. You never play the song the same way every time. That's always been important. Even if I'm going back to a previous work, I want to bring some new element into it, to challenge my way of thinking about it when I'd done it previously. There are some pieces I'll never do again as a result of that and other works that I've made better through repetition.

You've made work in a variety of mediums, but people generally refer to you as a performance artist. You've also used your own body as the primary focus in much of your work. How did that practice begin?

I came to art through photography and then from photography I moved into the moving image. In the early '90s when I was in college, it was video, and then I expanded that into doing performance. It evolved using the thinking of the body as a material in the work and as the site of meaning of the work. It comes from photography. Documentary photography, which is what I was originally very interested in, is about paying attention to people in the room, paying attention to body language, paying attention to some of these physical attributes in terms of making photographs. I did a lot of self portraiture. I think that was probably when I became aware of my body in my work within that specific, rectangular frame.

It's also important to remember that I was a student at the height of the culture wars. There were a lot of artists who were making political art, but political art through the body. I think the culture wars of the '90s were about the politics of the body in large measure. Performance art was fascinating to me because it seemed to me that to make bodily work was much more than just about the body. It was about the psyche. It was about the self.

For me, the work now is thinking about my own body in relation to other bodies. It sounds so simple, but it can be very charged as well. My performance-based work is really quite simply just my body. I don't do costumes. There's no set or objects that I work with. It's language-based, audience sensitive, and body-based, but there's also work that's just purely photo or works on paper.

Courtesy the artist and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS

Much of our daily activity as humans involves the avoidance of discomfort, while your work often aims to place people in an uncomfortable state. As an artist, it must be challenging to inhabit that space and to be on the receiving end of that sort of fraught energy.

Absolutely. I did a talk a number of years ago and someone in the audience asked me if I lived with ghosts. I thought it was a marvelous question, and I quickly responded, "Yes, of course. I live with ghosts." Absorbing all that energy in that moment—all that discomfort being projected onto you because you're projecting it onto them—is very intense. It stays with you. Also, for a lot of people, going to museums and galleries can be a distraction in some ways. I clearly love art. I love museums and paintings. But to go to an art event or museum and have to engage with living art, I think that disrupts the expectation of being in that space. It disrupts the social decorum of the museum or gallery space. I like that layer.

This notion of denial is also interesting in some of the performances because if there are issues that come up in the performances about race, you can't run out of the room. You have to deal with that discomfort in that moment. In some performances where audience members have gotten naked, in the performance "Photographs with an Audience" for example, you might just be confronted with a body that you find unattractive. You might be a heteronormative person who in that moment finds yourself attracted to or having a gay or homoerotic thought. I like that tension of the live art, that it does disrupt and discomfort.

Disruption is a goal, but not to harm people. Although I think that some of my work has been unsettling to people, and they've expressed that to me. Again, it's my responsibility to bear. I don't think that art should soothe us. It should disrupt, it should un-house us. I'm interested in not just live art but all kinds of art that un-house me. I think that that's important for artists, and I think it's important for audiences to be un-housed in that way.

The quick story I'll tell is of "Photographs with an Audience" in Philadelphia. There's a section where I asked the audience if anybody had attempted to take their own life. The number of people who stood up was staggering. I took a photograph. A young man in the audience came up and talked about the experience of taking that picture and his own struggles, and it was very moving. Then a month later the curator of the exhibition called to tell me that man had hanged himself in his friend's bathroom. I know that I didn't cause that, but it's intense regardless. I say that I do live with ghosts because I remember so many people from those performances. I wake up some days thinking about them. Are they okay? I look at the images. I have a connection with those people that no one else does. It sticks with me. I hope I haven't caused too much harm.

Courtesy the artist and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS

For a lot of young artists there's still this notion that academia is the only reliable gateway for having a professional art career. Outside of that, what do you think of as being the most important resources for a young artist today?

My friend Saya Woolfolk says that graduate school is finishing school for artists. I thought that was really funny. When I went to college in the '90s it was to get an education, and it seems like now people go to college to get a career. In the '90s the last thing anybody wanted to be was a commercial artist. It was embarrassing at that political moment. Nobody gave a fuck about the gallery system. People were more interested in museums. I certainly was.

So, how do we make it? Certainly community is important, but for me I think the key is mentorship. That really does matter. Having a community of other artists around you is important, and most artists I know in New York do have a nice community of people that surround them. This sounds so corny, but I tell young people this all the time, you really have to have love in your life because the art world, the art system, is not necessarily a loving space. It is not a compassionate space. It is not an inclusive space. They don't love you. They love what you produce maybe, but not you. You've got to have some semblance of love around you that is real.

I know that this is important. That's the only way I survive, and mentorship has been very important to me. I've been thinking a lot lately about mentors because I lost both of mine. Barbara DeGenevieve dropped dead two years before Terry Atkins did, and they were both so enormously important. She was my sort of undergrad mentor for 20 years, and he was my sort of early 40s mentor. I'm 46 years old now and I still long to have a mentor. Love, mentorship, community, however you define it. I'm interested in communities that I'm a part of, but not necessarily a singular community. I want more than that. I'm interested in communion with a lot of different kinds of people because a singular community can sort of flatten things out in terms of what your identity is.

I want to be a part of multiple communities. And not just art world communities. I'm interested in everyday communities as well. I think it's so dangerous when young artists come here

and they just surround themselves with people they think will promote their career or make them cool, whatever the motivation might be. For me, I'm still very good friends with people I met 17 years ago who are some of my dearest, most loving friends. I think the careerism here is so extreme that people sacrifice interpersonal relationships to achieve what they believe is success. That's really a mistake.

Courtesy the artist and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS

Are you someone who needs a lot of downtime to work?

No. I do terribly when nothing's going on. It's bad. I get in my head, perhaps get slightly depressed. I also perhaps appreciate the downtime. I'm constantly thinking about what I want to do next, how I could make something better, what the next project is going to be, how I'm going to get some money in my pocket, all these things. When I'm not working, I don't like the downtime, but I'll do some research. I'll do a little bit of reading, I'll do some writing, but I prefer to be working on a project. I'm not a studio rat. I'm not really a studio-based artist. I do stage photographs in a studio and make videos, but I don't have a daily practice of tinkering or painting, whatever. The way I use the studio is much different. I like for my work to be in the world and not in a studio. I embody my practice. I like to be in the world.

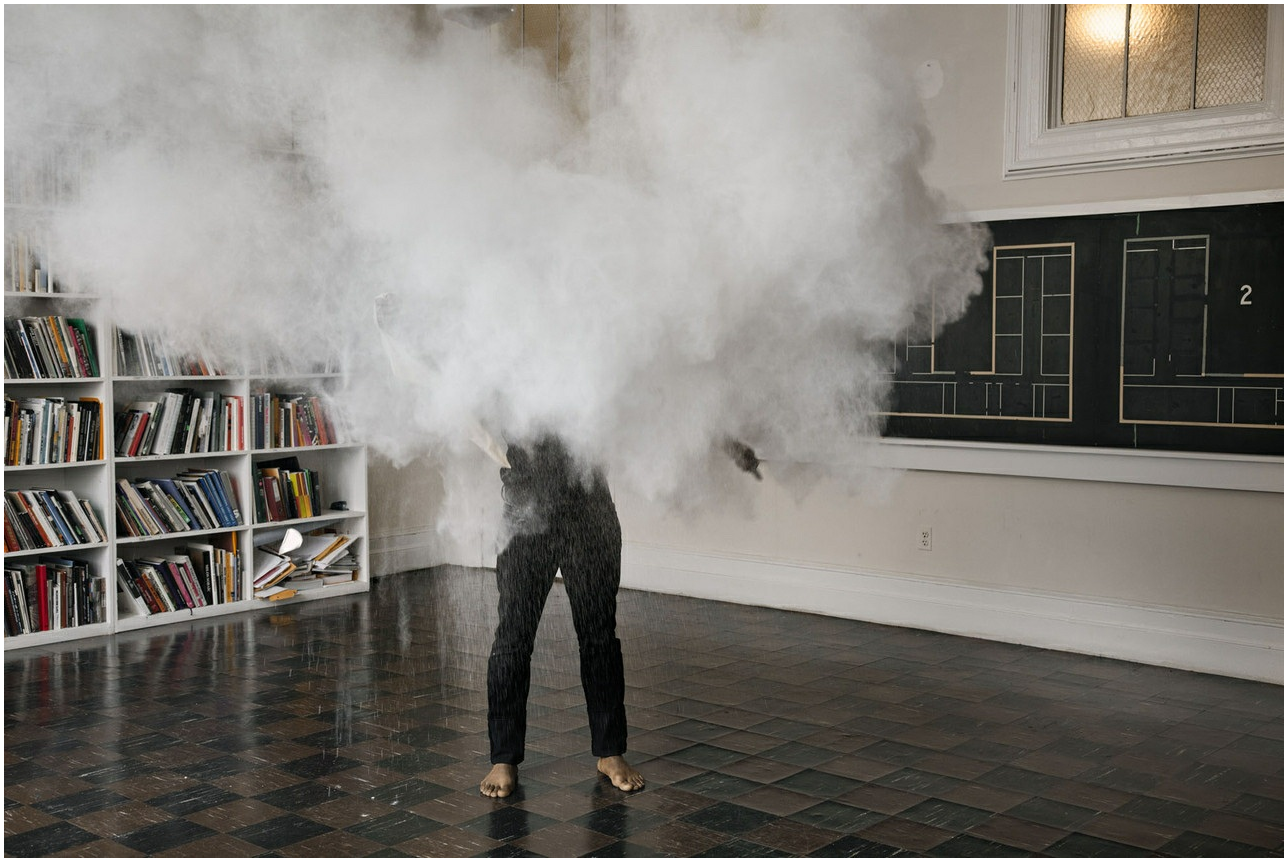
If you're doing performance-based art, how important is it to document what you do?

That's the question that haunts every performance-based artist. For me, with some performances, it's about the images that are created as a part of the performance. That's the documentation. The experience of being there is important, but my goal was to create an image, a photograph or a video, or lately works on paper, ephemera or objects that are outcomes. Sometimes that's the goal. I've even documented performances just with audio. For example, a piece called "In the Dark." It was basically a dark room and people walking around this old space with the floor creaking.

Sometimes I've done performances that have not been at all about the documentation. The performance-based lectures I don't document. I don't allow the schools where I teach to document or record. It really just depends. For my Brooklyn Academy of Music project I encouraged—and in fact lit the space appropriately—so the audience could take selfies. I was thinking about subjectivity. I often think about photography and subjectivity.

With performance art, everyone, every subject, every person in the room, is experiencing the piece differently. I'm thinking so much about how the public is now beginning to document performance art just on their cell phones in ways that didn't exist in the '50s, '60s, '70s. This is a new phenomenon. I still think that the experience of being at a live performance can't be matched. The photographs or the video documentation are not as powerful as being there, but again, for me it's about creating a beautiful image that perhaps can contain enough information to still have a charge, to still have some kind of energy.

There are people who will say that documentation of a performance is important because without the photograph, how do we know it happened? It's such a tricky thing for me. I've learned to let loose trying to control documentation of my performances because it's gotten out of hand. I've worked with so many different photographers and people invariably take pictures of performances even if they're not allowed to. I've tried to ease up on that and think more in terms of photographs as discrete art objects not as documentation. Your feelings about these things can change over time. That's fine.



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Recommended by Clifford Owens:

1. The Art of Loving: An inquiry into the Nature of Love by Erich Fromm
2. Mentors
3. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
4. An indica/sativa hybrid
5. Psychotherapy

Name
Clifford Owens

Vocation
Artist

Fact

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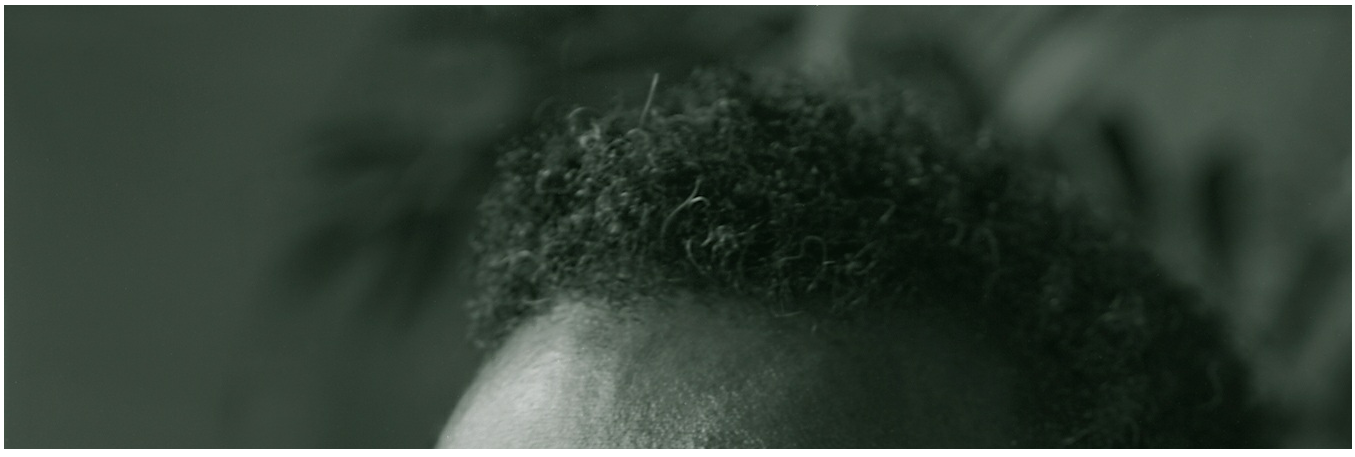

Photo: Mathew Jinks