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Mary Abbe

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Bloody performance draws criticism

Walker member complains to public health officials

By Mary Abbe
Staff Writer

A Walker Art Center member has complained to state health officials about a Walker-sponsored event in which a performer sliced an abstract design into the flesh of another man, mopped up his blood with towels, and sent them winging above the

audience on revolving clotheslines.

The informal complaint expressed a concern that people in the theater could have contracted the AIDS virus if blood had dripped on them. Walker officials insist that they took appropriate safety precautions; state health officials concurred.

The knife-wielding performer, Ron Athey of Los Angeles, is known to be HIV-positive, said John Killacky, the Walker's curator of performing arts. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS.

Killacky, who staged the event, said Wednesday that he did not know the

Walker continued on page 15A

Star Tribune

THURSDAY/March 24/1994

NEWSPAPER OF THE TWIN CITIES

Walker/ Director defends show, says artist is appropriate for sponsorship

Continued from page 1A

HIV status of Darryl Carlton, the man who was cut. Nor did he know the HIV status of two female assistants who wove acupuncture needles through the scalp of Athey's shaved head, helped as he pierced his arm with about 30 hypodermic needles and permitted him to pierce their cheeks with slender steel spikes.

Walker Director Kathy Halbreich yesterday defended Athey's inclusion in the Walker's programming. She said his performance should be understood in the context of contemporary art and historical and religious precedent, including "the rituals of the church and the body and blood of Christ being used."

Halbreich said she did not attend the March 5 performance at Patrick's Cabaret in Minneapolis. She also said she has not seen other performances or art by Athey.

But, "I think this is an artist who is appropriate for the Walker to be sponsoring," she said. "You can describe any action out of context and make it seem sensational and without meaning."

According to Killacky, the cabaret at 506 E. 24th St. seats about 100 and was sold out for the event. The show was presented by the Walker in conjunction with the 5th annual Minneapolis/St. Paul Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Film Festival. Walker performances are funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Killacky said less than \$150 from the grant would go toward the show.

The Walker announced the show in its monthly calendar of events for members and via inserts in the gay and lesbian publication Equal Time. Killacky said he also sent letters to Twin Cities gay and lesbian groups.

The museum's calendar included a note: "Due to the nature of this material, viewer discretion is advised." It described the program as ritual-like and said it incorporated "erotic torture" and used "religious iconography, medical paraphernalia, and bondage and discipline techniques."

Jim Berenson, a Twin Cities sculptor and Northwest airline flight attendant, who complained about the show, said, "I had no idea what I was in for."

At least one member of the audience fainted during the performance. Others left as it progressed.

The bloody towels were most upsetting to the audience, said Dennis Yelkin of Hopkins, who attended with a friend. "It appeared that the towels were going to drip or fall apart because they appeared to be paper towels," he said. "People knocked over the chairs to get out from under the clotheslines."

Killacky insisted that bleeding at the performance was minimal. He said that Carlton, a black artist from Los Angeles, regularly performs with Athey and regards the mutilation of his body as a cultural tradition. "Afterward he [Carlton] spoke of the traditions of scarification as revered in Africa and feared in America," Killacky said.

As for Athey's own mutilation, Killacky said, "The head thing actually did bleed, the arm did not. Anyone who stayed for the post-concert discussion would have seen there was no active bleeding five minutes after the performance. It was all skin or surface puncturing."

Berenson said he was disgusted by the performance and shocked that it had been put on by the Walker. He said he didn't want to stay but couldn't reach an exit.

He later called the health departments of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, which referred him to state officials.

Rich Danila, supervisor of the AIDS epidemiology unit at the Health Department, said yesterday that it did not appear that audience members were endangered. A Health Department staff member contacted the Walker and was given a memo outlining medical safety precautions that it had taken.

They included latex gloves for all crew members when in contact with performers or bloody items, separating trash and "items with blood product" into color-coded garbage bags, disposing of needles and scalpel tips in special containers, cleaning up blood with bleach solutions, and directing the audience away from the performance area after the event.

"There would be no risk unless blood came in direct contact with an open cut or sore or a mucous membrane such as your eye or mouth," Danila said. "Unless the cloth was dripping with blood and then dripped into your eye or mouth, there is a low risk."

Killacky and Halbreich said they were saddened that audience members hadn't spoken to museum staff members before contacting the media. Killacky said they had received no complaints about the show.

"Only one person has complained

and didn't have the dignity to complain to the curator or the institution," Halbreich said. "I think that's unfortunate because I think this institution is responsive."

They said they believed people's dismay about the performance reflected public fear of people with AIDS. "Our society has proven not only that it is extremely homophobic but also extremely AIDS-phobic," said Killacky.

He said he does not intend to present Athey's work again "in this community," but he added, "I stand behind the integrity of presenting him. I think his point was a valid one."

Yelkin, though dismayed, said he thought the performance was artistically valid. "I was shaking, perspiring, nauseated," he said. "But I have to add that I thought it was a . . . legitimate performance, as weird and horrible as it sounds."