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March 31, 1994

Art on the Cutting Edge

Bloody Performance Renews Funding Debate

By Jacqueline Trescott
Washington Post Staff Writer

On a stage in Minneapolis last month an artist cut a design into the back of another man, blotted the results with a three-ply paper towel and then hoisted the bloodied print on a clothesline above the audience.

Ron Athey, a body artist from Los Angeles who is HIV-positive, used a surgical scalpel to carve a tribal symbol on Darryl Carlton, another artist from Los Angeles. In the 75-minute program, Athey also tapped his own scalp with needles, which caused slight bleeding, and stuck his arm with acupuncture needles. At the end of the program, the cheeks of two female assistants were decorated with steel spikes.

Audience reaction varied from impressed to horrified. Some in the crowd of 100 gasped, others fled and two came close to fainting.

But the program, put on by the prestigious Walker Art Center, which is funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, provoked an even a more lively post-mortem discussion among audience

See PERFORMANCE, C2, Col. 1

PERFORMANCE, From C1

members, health officials, media commentators and critics. In addition, the show raised issues about how far the genre of performance art should go, how a museum decides to take a risk with the avant-garde and topical and whether the NEA should be accountable for all the programs within institutions it funds.

"It was quite beautifully done. It was engrossing not because of the sensational pieces but the depiction of the ritual aspects was quite wonderful," said Anne Sales, a nurse practitioner and research assistant at the University of Minnesota. When the cutting occurred, she said, "a few people gasped. A few were taken by surprise but mostly people were silent, very rapt."

In a front-page story, the Minneapolis Star Tribune quoted one audience member as saying, "It appeared that the towels were going to drip or fall apart because they appeared to be paper towels. People knocked over the chairs to get out from under the clotheslines." Sales, who said she was sitting by the door most of the evening, said that kind of exodus didn't happen.

Officials at the Walker say the show was physically safe, fit the boundaries for an experimental art event and incorporated symbols and practices from many cultures, as well as opened a discussion of AIDS and other contemporary issues.

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