

# Honcho

DAVID J. GETSY



*Honcho* magazines in Ron Athey's collection, 1990s

Most of the gay porn magazines I ever held had already been used. I would find them in sex shops, bookstores, and boothstores with their tiny mazes of coin-operated “single-occupancy” video cubicles at the back. In such stores, the racks of magazines like *Honcho* were simultaneously a buffer, a gauntlet, and a promenade to the welcoming darkness in the rear. They provided a place to watch and to wait. No one ever bought the magazines, but everyone looked at them. Thumbed-through and ragged at the edges, their glossy covers had dulled, and folds, creases, and tiny tears were everywhere. The corners bore the traces of the many thumbs and anxious fingers that had previously pinched each page. Whenever I picked one up, it was

apparent that these magazines had opened themselves up to many men before me.

In my late teens, they were a lifeline. Their presence on the shelf was proof of others. What's more, the threadbare glossies showed that these other readers were not just in some far-off place, but also had been here, at this rack, before me. As the years went by, my relief at recognizing this began to tarnish as I realized that each magazine (and the VHS tapes that started to populate the racks) presented an ideal that really was not like me and that I could simply not inhabit. They seemed impossible in what they told me I was supposed to look like and how, as a now self-identified gay person, I was supposed to *be*. By and large, those magazines trafficked in a homogeneous white bourgeois homosexuality, with the occasional image of rough trade or stereotype of racial exoticism thrown in. They were narrow in who they thought their audience was and what they marketed as their product. This was the 1990s, and there was an obsession, in particular, with images of white bodies that conveyed health, youth, and vitality. This reaction to the ongoing AIDS crisis compelled much magazine pornography to project smooth, muscular, and hard bodies looking as if they were wearing glabrous, unpuncturable armor.

And then I found *Honcho*. It had been around since the 1970s, but in the late 1990s it offered a different vision of what sex and life could be. Mixed in with the typical pornographic images that allowed the magazine to vie with its competitors were different kinds of bodies and styles, albeit still idealized. Its covers were particularly deceiving, because they made *Honcho* look like any other of its ilk. But, inside, there was Ron Athey. His “Dissections” columns befuddled the younger me, and it took me a while to understand how to read them. Ron, and others such as Bill Arning, wrote columns for *Honcho*, with its aspiration to be a culture magazine in which you could also find centerfolds. Of course, this was also the formula of earlier straight porn magazines since Hugh Hefner's *Playboy*, but *Honcho* embraced this opportunity uniquely by including countercultures and different views of “gay culture” in its pages. In particular, Ron's columns broke with the juggernaut of homonormativity—that normalizing of the image of and options for gay and lesbian visibility—that came hand-in-hand with the thaw of restrictions on mainstream representations of gay and lesbian life in the 1990s.

There was a lot of text in *Honcho*, and it was filled with (often quite good) erotic stories that usually did better than the photos themselves in getting me going. So, I would skim through the magazine and look for a passage to catch my eye before I would commit to reading the whole story. (Cruising is a lot like that, too.) Ron's journals, columns, and reviews stuck out in this context. They were opinionated, sexy, rude, and smart. They gave a picture of a different world of culture, sex, tattoos, art, and cruising. More than anything else, however, it was his defiant and repeated presentation of his tattooed body that showed an unfamiliar kind of confidence and a stark alternative to what was on the cover. His brash and bitchy testimonials

declared that there was another life to be had out there. Ron's voice in these pages demanded a different view, and it was one that we might now think of as definitional of the more tactical and oppositional term "queer." He wrote reviews of the Venice Biennale and of performances by artworld darling Vanessa Beecroft, in addition to talking about fisting, body modification, trade, and HIV. It was an enactment of a queer politics that was defiant in its self-exposure and in its demand for recognition (and respect).

I can't recall, but I probably first read one of Ron's columns 20 years ago standing in a fluorescent-lit boothstore, probably keeping an eye out for who was heading to the back. My dollar bills I was saving to buy tokens, so there wasn't money for magazines. The magazines were an excuse, and their highly trafficked pages indicated to me, again, that others were there before and would be again. Even though I didn't take the *Honcho* home, the shock of interruption that Ron's columns produced was carried with me. His image was proof of how much more there was to know, to explore, and to be.

## "Rod 'n' Bob" (Arrested Intimacies of the Flesh)

AMBER JAMILLA MUSSER



Ron Athey, "Rod n' Bob" sketch, early 1990s

This sketch is an artifact of "Rod and Bob: A Post AIDS boy-boy show," a performance in which Ron Athey and Brian Murphy are "castrated" using surgical staple "tucks" before anally penetrating each other using a double-ended dildo. What the drawing does not show is what happens after this moment—the severing of the dildo by a pair of gardening sheers and the pair's burial under mounds of dry earth.<sup>1</sup> In the sketch, we see the outline of two bodies—marked as human by their eyes—kneeling away from each other, a line that we understand to be the double dildo, and a list of items and instructions necessary for the performance: "paint orange (or dk foundation), Dbl dildo, lube, staples, Rod 'n'bob slides." That this sketch lingers on the moment of connection between the figures is profound because it tells us a great deal about Athey's mobilization of intimacy.

The performance itself is a critique of the discourses of homonormativity, which

# Queer Communion

Ron Athey

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