



CLIFFORD OWENS: ANTHOLOGY (KARA WALKER) (DETAIL). 2011.C-PRINT. COURTESY OF ON STELLAR RAYS

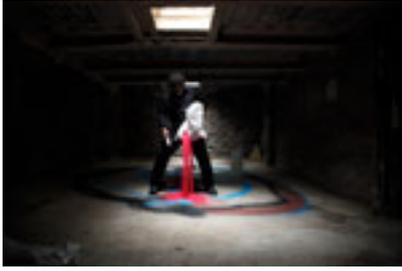
Trusting Clifford Owens: *Clifford Owens: Anthology* at MoMA PS1

Gillian Young | Columbia University

Clifford Owens: Anthology. MoMA PS1. Long Island City, New York. Organized by Assistant Curator Christopher Y. Lew. 13 November 2011-12 March 2012.

“Do you trust me?” Clifford Owens smiled at his question. After what he had done to his audiences at MoMA PS1 over the past year—kissed them, poured sand on their shoes, asked them to do something they would regret, dusted them with baby powder—it was anyone's guess how the present group, gathered in a small museum gallery, would respond. *Anthology*, Owens's first exhibition in a New York museum, depends on the cooperation of fellow artists rather than the display of an extant body of work. Empty galleries are the conceptual starting point for Owens's project on the unwritten history, or blank page, of African American performance art: his response to the under-acknowledged contributions of African American artists to performance art history is not to produce a supplemental account and insert it into the institutional timeline but, rather, to generate a living document that would inhabit the physical space of the museum.

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Clifford Owens: Anthology (Senga Nengudi). 2011. Performance still .

Courtesy of On Stellar Rays

The archival challenge of *Anthology* hinges on the medium of the performance score: written or graphic instructions for action. Derived from experiments in musical notation, text-based scores for events were pioneered by John Cage and the artists associated with Fluxus and minimalism in the 1960s—the title of Owens’s exhibition echoes *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, a collection of score-based work published by Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young in 1963. Owens, who works across photography, video, and performance, began integrating scores into his practice in *Tell me what to do with myself*, a piece he contributed to the 2005 Greater New York exhibition, also at MoMA PS1. In this performance, Owens invited visitors to give him instructions for action; he was asked to run headfirst into a wall, drink his urine, and stand like his mother, among other things. The following year, Owens interpreted scores by Benjamin Patterson, an African American Fluxus artist, including Patterson’s provocative *Lick Piece*, which instructs the performer to lick whipped cream off a shapely female; “Topping of chopped nuts and cherries is optional.” For *Anthology*, Owens produces a living history by soliciting scores from a multigenerational group of African American artists, twenty-six of whom contributed scores; these range from Senga Nengudi’s detailed instructions to scatter and sweep colored sand (fig. 1) to William Pope.L’s more open-ended prompt: “Be African American. Be very African American.” As Pope.L’s score suggests, the trust and risk involved in the exhibition relate not only that of public display, but of the endeavor of representation itself. Owens interpreted and documented each of these scores in the rambling halls, galleries, and utility rooms of PS1—a building that formerly housed a public school—and continued to perform and develop the pieces over the course of the show.

“Do you trust me?” Owens’s question to his audience was scripted by Benjamin Patterson in a score titled *First Symphony*, initially performed in New York in 1964: “One at a time members of audience are questioned, ‘Do you trust me?’ and are divided left and right, yes and no. The room is darkened. Freshly ground coffee is scattered throughout the room.” Patterson’s score foregrounds the fact that, rather than being passively consumed

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by neutral viewers, the piece will be actively shaped by their prejudices and intuitions. This sense of unpredictability was enhanced by the context in which Owens performed *First Symphony*. For *Anthology*, Patterson's original set of instructions was quoted through another score by Glenn Ligon, which directed Owens to, "Annotate an existing performance/score. Perform that performance annotated." Ligon's score articulates a general contradiction that characterizes *Anthology*: instructions are informed but not governed by authorial intention; once issued, they become susceptible to wayward interpretation and unexpected reiteration.



Clifford Owens: Anthology (Kara Walker) (detail). 2011.C-print.

Courtesy of On Stellar Rays

Kara Walker's contribution to *Anthology* remains the most talked about piece in the exhibition: "French kiss an audience member. Force them against a wall and demand sex. Then turn tables and assume the role of victim. Accuse your attacker. Describe your ordeal. Repeat" (fig. 2). Owens only performed the first part of the score. At times, this felt like a wise exercise of restraint; however, at others, it appeared an excuse for contact with attractive women. Nevertheless, it was fascinating and embarrassing to watch the piece emerge from these seductions in an environment where watching means the risk of meeting the artist's gaze—that is, the risk of sharing the responsibility for what you are there to see. Toward the end of the exhibition's run, it was reported that Owens planned to force a sex act on a member of the audience in his final performance of Walker's score. In response, Walker first threatened to withdraw her score from *Anthology*, and ended up joining Owens in the performance: Walker shadowed Owens as he approached members of the audience, her presence hampering his sexual advances. Though Owens had taken other interpretative liberties over the course of the exhibition, Walker intervened at the very moment that Owens followed her instructions most closely. The complications of participation in the performance situation delineated by Walker's score were thus redoubled on the level of artistic collaboration.

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But the central tension both evoked and negotiated by *Anthology* is that between the archive as a repository of enduring materials, and the repertoire as ephemeral practice and embodied knowledge. Rather than pitting performance against the archival impulse, Owens, who always documents his work with a camera, provocatively demonstrates what Diana Taylor has identified as the constant state of interaction between archive and repertoire. Placed in opposition to the staying power of archives, performance is often understood as always on the verge of disappearance. In contrast to this quality of vanishing, the score suggests an iterable—that is, repeatable—paradigm of performance. *Anthology*—built on cooperation and confrontation with others and the unexpected possibilities of repetition—hinges on this notion of iterability. Owens’s exhibition is not an attempt to recover works by African American artists lost to history, but instead to generate performances that reinsert difference into the heart of representational and archival practices, which themselves violently divide and structure our world, in order to liberate unexpected outcomes. Trust him: this might hurt.

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