

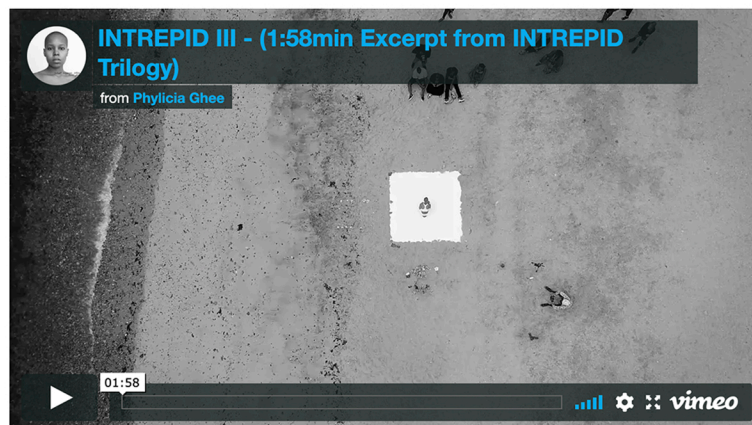
Photo taken by Dayo Kosoko during Art on the Vine, Martha's Vineyard

## Decolonizing Performance Art: Phylicia Ghee Uses Ritual Performance to Heal the Generational Trauma of Black Women

Angela N. Carroll

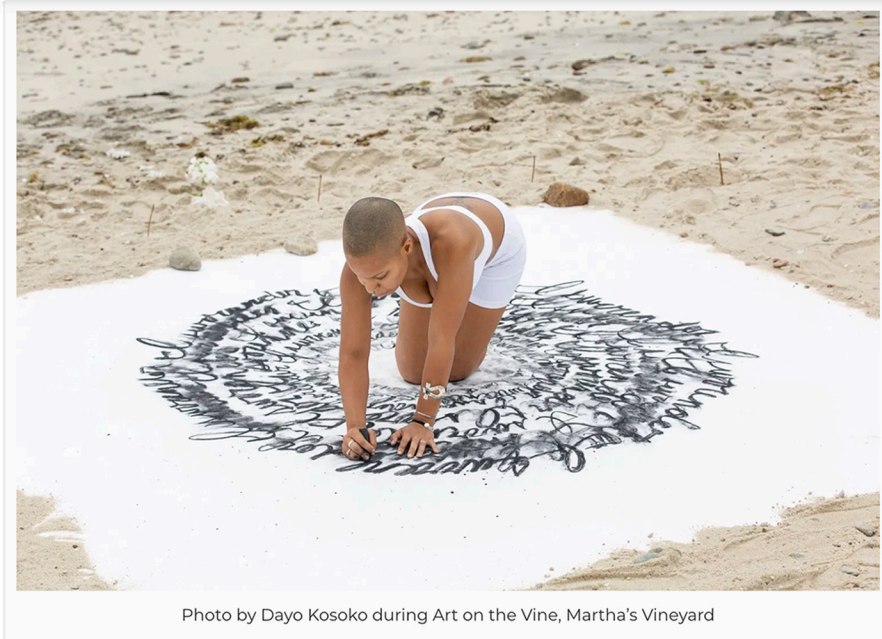
Performance art is difficult to encapsulate; it is a hyper-malleable and perpetually shape-shifting genre. In the 1960s, artist Allan Kaprow called his experiments in performance art, "happenings". From the 1970s to the present, Marina Abramovic has used performance art to interrogate her relationship to the body and the mind, and situate the temporality of performance works in contrast with the fixed and repetitive archetypes of theatre. "Performance is real." She shared during an interview with The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2010, "...the blood, the knife, and the performance is real." Both Kaprow and Abramovic as well as other prominent artists including Carolee Schneemann, Joseph Beuys, and Vito Acconci have dominated academic dialogs, art historical canons and definitions about what performance art is and the bodies it serves.

Simultaneously, from the 1970s to the present artists like Coco Fusco, Maren Hassinger, Guillermo Gomez Pena, Dred Scott, James Luna, Senga Nengudi, Maria Marmolejo, Carrie Mae Weems, Ana Mendieta, and David Hammons, among countless others, have used performance art to unpack the violence of colonialism, imagine the possibilities of liberation, womanism, feminism, or to stage revisionist histories. Their performances, a diverse collection of culturally and geographically specific staging's, have laid the foundation for a new generation of brave performance artists to continue the work of decolonizing performance art.



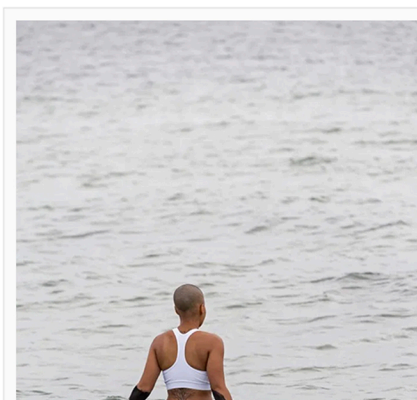
Performance art can be unsettling, leaving observers fraught with uncertainty, tension, and a feeling of distance from the artists and their works. Some champion this reaction as proof that performance art is doing what it was designed to do: trigger a response, a feeling, any feeling, from its witnesses. Others have avoided the medium altogether, labeling it elitist and exclusionary.

Emerging interdisciplinary artist, visual artist, and photographer, Phylicia Ghee, engages “ritual performance” as a healing modality for herself, her ancestors, and unrelated women to grapple with histories of cellular and experiential trauma.



“I think *ritual performance* just makes more sense for what my work is.” Ghee says, “It is ritual. It’s about ritualizing the mundane — the things that seem very simple, but also are very complex. Ritual can be the simple things that we do but the ramifications are so deep for what we experience. Or [ritual] deconstructs or reconstructs [us] internally.”

By weighting the word “performance” with the preface “ritual”, Ghee not only establishes her process and the documentation of her process as something more than performative, but she also offers a critical assessment and framing for her work as an active, community-centered practice. The spaces she occupies and the histories she channels center Black experience, draw from African diasporic spiritual systems and assert intuition as an essential feature of her artistic process.



Ghee’s ritual performances are also indelibly tied to her innate ability to receive messages, often in the form of visions, that she recreates as deeply moving photographs and short films, healing workshops or interactive installations. The work is incredibly intimate, earnest, and accessible. Ghee’s ritual performances offer a profound provocation that allows those who witness her to see themselves and the potential of healing through art.





Photo by Dayo Kosoko during Art on the Vine, Martha's Vineyard

"When I was going through really painful experiences, I was channeling and I was receiving genetic memories of ritual matched with the urgency to create it." Ghee continued, "The work was birthed in a space of tension between limitlessness and limitation. I was tracing the pain back to my mothers' womb and my experience in the womb. The work teaches me and helps me

reconnect with transgenerational wisdom. It teaches me resilience and teaches me how to be at peace."

Among the many works that Ghee has created, her most notable effort may be *The Intrepid Trilogy*, an ongoing series of durational performances that interrogate sexual violence, addiction, mental health, and women's self-care rituals. Ghee performed *INTREPID III*, (2018), as an accompaniment for Art on the Vine, an annual artist-residency in Martha's Vineyard presented by The Agora Culture. Ghee began the performance dressed in crisp white, kneeling in the center of a 9 X 9 ft sheet of white paper placed near the shore of an isolated beach. For 45 minutes and 46 seconds, Ghee wrote the words "I am, I am, I am, I surrender..." in black charcoal script from the center of the page where she sat in a circular pattern out to its edges. As she moved along the paper, stretched flat to fill its surface with healing affirmations, residue from her charcoal words smudged off and transplanted onto her body from the paper. When the paper was filled Ghee, covered head to toe in charcoal, stood up, walked to the shore and disappeared into the ocean.

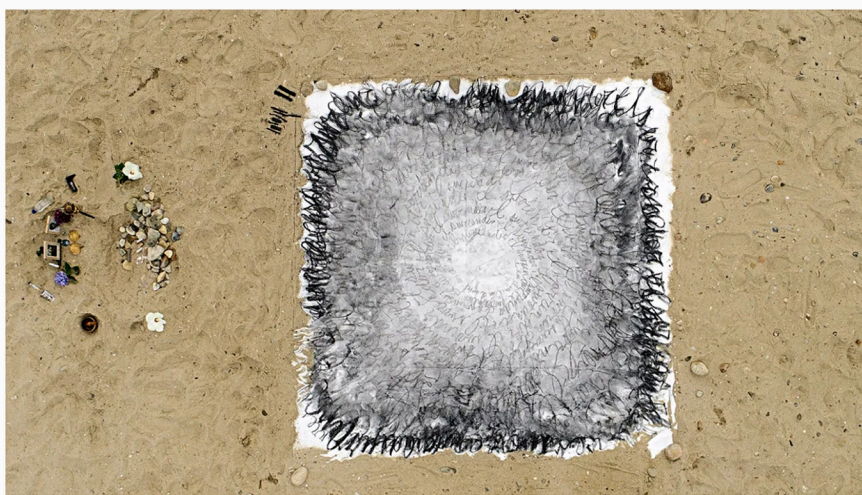


Photo by David Welch during Art on the Vine, Martha's Vineyard

There are layers to the rituals Ghee invokes, meta-narratives inspired by origin myths and oral histories from Indigenous African spiritual systems. Many of those stories speak about the power of Black goddesses, the medicine of water, and the transformative potential of intentional words. The once white 9 X 9 ft sheet of paper became an archive, a living prayer, evocative of fractals, logarithmic spirals, and other naturally occurring patterns. The alchemy of Ghee's process resides in the artist's ability to literally transmute her trauma into a charged ritual artwork.

"[The] Intrepid series is one of the first deeply ancestral works, one of the first times that I felt called to share the process or making of the work and not just documentation of the work." Ghee says. "I know that aspects of that work come from practices that [my ancestors] did."

To learn more about Phylicia Ghee visit: <https://phyliciaghee.carbonmade.com/>



Angela N. Carroll is an artist-archivist; a purveyor and investigator of art history and culture in Washington DC, Maryland and Virginia. Angela contributes contemporary art, performance and film criticism for BmoreArt Magazine, Arts.Black, Sugarcane Magazine, and Umber Magazine. She received her MFA in Digital Arts and New Media from the University of California at Santa Cruz and currently teaches within the Film and Moving Image program at Stevenson University in Baltimore Maryland. Follow her on IG @angela\_n\_carroll or at angelancarroll.com.

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