

Every Breath You Take Artist Statements

Sheree Rose:

In 1981, ending with his death in 1996, I began collaborating with my partner, Bob Flanagan, in a series of photographs, videos and performances that documented our sado-masochistic relationship as well as the impact of his genetic disease, cystic fibrosis on both our artistic and personal lives.

When we first met he was twenty-seven years old; he told me that he was looking for “a good two-year relationship” because of cf, he didn’t expect to live beyond the age of thirty. I was thirty-nine, divorced with two children, and was open to a new experience!

Because Bob was so talented as a poet, comedian, and musician (not to mention as a masochist) I decided to document our life together, thinking that the world needed a record of this remarkable man. But as Bob noted in his song, “the cf would have killed him if it weren’t for S&M!” So began a remarkable journey of 16 years, which turned into an artistic odyssey that brought us into the international art world. Bob’s death was traumatic for me, although we had dealt with his mortality in our work; I was unprepared for the reality of his absence from my life. I finished my MFA from the University of California at Irvine in 1996-just months after his passing.

The documentary, “Sick” was released a year later, utilizing much of the footage I had taken of Bob over the years, including his death, but the director, Kirby Dick, never gave me the credit that was due to me. As a result, I retreated for several years, in a state of grief and depression. But the movie became a cult sensation, and I received many letters and emails from fans all over the world, telling me how much the movie had impacted their lives. So I rejoined the art world, and began performing a series called “Corpse Pose”, in which I reenacted the part of Bob, dead on a gurney, inviting audience participation while I lay immobile. I also did performances involving cutting both myself and others, blurring the line between art and S&M. More recently I began collaborating with a young English artist, Martin O’Brien, who also suffers from cystic fibrosis. We mirror many of the practices I did with Bob, including the “Death Trilogy”, which Bob conceived of, but were not performed prior to his death.

The themes of disease and mortality were always present in my work, but as I grow older, I am much more aware of how close my own death is approaching. The poignancy of life is foremost in my mind, and my art practice bears witness to my acceptance of this fact.

Rhiannon Aarons:

Rabbit Hole is constructed on the premises of slippage in subjecthood, authorship, and narrative; it is a serious evaluation of my own positioning within post-feminist art discourse. In *Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Mulvey points to problems with the feminine construct.

Constituting a greater intellectual stumbling block, the feminine cannot be conceptualized as different, but rather only as *opposition* (passivity) in an antinomic sense, or as similarity (the phallic phase). This is not to suggest that a hidden, as yet undiscovered femininity exists (...) but that its structural relationship to masculinity under patriarchy cannot be defined or determined within the terms offered.

This leaves an issue with how to use the de-centered voice within an art context, and it is arguable that the dominant method of definition as opposition proposed by Mulvey is the root of objectification of cis female and other marginalized bodies in post-colonial cultures. As my own body is a post-pornographic one, the challenge in disrupting my own objectification while maintaining a voice of authorship is extensive; there is an imperative for my body to become an unstable signifier. I elected to use Alice as an avatar in response to Bivona and other literary and psychoanalytic theorists who have written extensively about the "polymorphously perverse" spaces of both Wonderland and The Looking Glass. In a sense, one can see Alice's "problem" as a problem of living with the consequences that stem from her living in a "decentered" world: she must reestablish "precedence" in all its senses for herself-temporal, spatial, political, and interpretive-so that her own position as, impossibly, both master in the master/slave drama and Hegelian "Wise Man," who lives beyond a point of closure outside of the "game," is preserved.

However, Bivona's stance relies on the integrity of the heroic Metanarrative being left intact. The appropriation of Tenniel's illustrations to illuminate personal narrative without traditional resolution is an act of embracing the "decentered" and counter-engineering Alice's relationship to "re-establishing precedence." Objectification relies on the (precedented) locus of singular context; objectified bodies are not to be seen suffering, discussed outside of the function of desirability, or in any other way humanized or translated. "A cyborg is (...) a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. (...) The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as a woman's experience (...)" In the narrative of *Rabbit Hole*, Alice leverages the decentered world; the "precedence" that is established is not one of overlaying pre-existing social constructs onto Wonderland, but of peeling those very constructs back to expose the "terrifying" foundations of culture.

Sheree Rose and I produced *Philosophy in the Bedroom* with Martin O'Brien as our first of six pieces together. Based on an untitled and unexecuted work Flanagan and Rose originally created in response to John Lennon and Yoko Ono's *Bed-in for Peace*, *Philosophy* was re-worked to encompass a broader spectrum of creative dialogue that accurately reflected the new collaborative configuration, as well as address my relationship with the sex industry. An equipment table was placed within the room in response to Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* and, instead of guests coming and going freely as in Rose and Flanagan's *Visiting Hours*, participants could submit proposals to do anything with myself, Rose, and/or O'Brien for one hour in a motel and were subject to the same screening methods used by Rose and myself when selecting Domination clients. The work subsequently generated within *Philosophy* was effective in hijacking the methods and aesthetics of the sex industry to discuss healing, gender, politics, and loss. The motel room served as an otherworldly space – the other side of the looking glass, what's beneath the hole in the earth.

The binary of objectification consists of the objectified body and the conditioned gaze of the viewer; to this end disrupting an experience of singular looking strategies became an essential component of the work. As a performance, *Philosophy* was only viewable in an adjacent motel room, mediated through a four-channel security camera and disjointed audio to disrupt the Cartesian perspective and suspension of disbelief traditionally associated with cinematic pleasure. In our hour with Cooper T. Moll, Rose permanently marks my inner thigh with a scalpel. An act of matriarchal penetration, she is facilitating in disrupting the gestalt of my pornographic objectification. "The art of the 'real body' does not pertain to the truth of a visible form, but refers back to its essential content: the irreducible, irrefutable experience of pain. The body, as artist text, bears the authenticating imprint of pain like a signature."

Philosophy in the Bedroom as a performance and its accompanying prints explore the intersection of viewer/voyeur. The prints generated in response to the performance hold documentation recorded from a

camera placed the bedside table; the viewer can then elect to download the documentation by scanning a hidden qr code in the print with a smartphone. As the video documentation is only accessible through viewing the print, the standard that serves as the measure for spectacle is taken out of realm of the viewer's preconceptions and supplanted with the image that has just been presented. This intertextual local narrative, with its simultaneous (lack of) fidelity to sameness and otherness, provides a creative mechanism that is disruptive to the "unification" that is the foundation of both objectification and spectacle.

The series of prints combined with performance relics within the exhibition are a continued disruption of the heroic Metanarrative. "The Hero's Journey" plays out its full trajectory – directly attached to my personal history – before collapsing in on itself as a closed loop within the gallery space. The end goal of this quest cannot be one of returning with "the elixir," of compensating for lack with the magic vial, to be defined only by terms in which I cannot exist. There is no returning as "more than," there is only the option to return in an infinite number of unnamable fragments, all of them bleeding.

Jeffrey Vallance:

St. Bob Flanagan (December 26, 1952 – January 4, 1996) was an American performance artist, comic, writer, poet and musician. Flanagan grew up with Cystic Fibrosis, a genetically inherited and fatal disease. Flanagan practiced sadomasochism with his partner dominatrix Sheree Rose - which miraculously kept him alive longer than any other person with CF. Together they discovered the miraculous healing connection between pain, sex, CF and S&M. Flanagan was once contacted by the Make-a-Wish Foundation and told of a 17-year-old Canadian girl dying from CF wanted to meet him as she was big fan of his work. A few months later, she arrived in L.A. with her mom. Flanagan and the Make-a-Wish girl went inside to whip each other while the mother chain-smokes cigarettes outside. This was the first of many miracles performed by healing presence St. Flanagan. The Holy Relics of St. Flanagan include whips; nipple clamps; fishhooks; scrotum crucifixion nails; handcuffs; amulets; a ritual knife, spanking paddle; butt plug; slave collar and ring; and other astonishing S&M instruments.

Since the early days of the Christian Church, the reverently preserved earthly remnants of saints and martyrs have been known as "relics," from the Latin term reliquiae, meaning "remains." But it is not only a Christian practice to honor such things, relics of pop-culture icons – like the bed sheets the Beatles slept on, or Elvis' sweaty scarves— are covetously collected and kept holy. Relics are divided into three categories: first-class, second-class, and third-class. First-class relics are actual body parts of Jesus, like the Holy Foreskin; and objects that come into intimate contact with His body like the Sacred Whip of the Passion (flagellum). Over the centuries, elaborate performances evolved, such as the "Ritual of the Holy Prepuce," a peculiar rite in which sterile women would kneel down and kiss the Holy Foreskin in order to become fertile. Second-class relics are objects made sacred by close physical contact with the saints – things such as clothing and everyday objects and instruments of their torture. Third-class relics are objects that have been physically touched to either first-class or second-class relics. The collected legends of the saints, known as hagiography, became an invaluable adjunct to the Cult of Relics.

All of my life I have collected objects which I call relics. These objects date far back into my childhood, and also trace my entire history of art making. To me relics are magically charged items, items that are perhaps insignificant to look on (like a fragment of the True Cross), but are profound in the stories and memories, which they evoke. I have always been interested in the way power is transferred to objects by the touch of a saint, or a celebrity, or by virtue of its history. In making these reliquaries, I am investing

objects with that power. I enshrine each object in a small, ornate reliquary that I fashion myself. The design of each reliquary reflects the meaning of the object within.

Victoria Reynolds:

For over a decade, I have rendered detailed and sensual paintings of tri-tip sirloin, reindeer viscera, brisket, pork bung, and honeycomb tripe. I depict raw flesh for its associations with sensuality, love of the world, our carnal nature and mortality, and sins and pleasures of the flesh. The works are often ornate, even gaudy or carnivalesque. ("Carne vale" in Latin means "farewell to meat," traditionally a time for one last chance to indulge in pleasures of the flesh before the onset of Lent.) In the paintings, the subject's beauty is emphasized, as well as paint's physicality and seductive nature. And since oil paint was invented to render flesh realistically, I'm using it for its original purpose!

Ideas of "temptations of the flesh" and a strong suspicion of the beautiful, seductive image abides in Western thinking. Various works of mine refer to the Venetian art of painting flesh, Dutch vanitas, kitchen and butcher stall scenes, divine sacrifice, and humans' use and sacrifice of animals. Our distinction between flesh and meat is arbitrary, and the flesh sacrifice of the countless animals we consume is often without thanks or thought. In Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* and Beuckelaer's *Slaughtered Pig*, large animals are spread and hung like crucifixion scenes. Sacrificial animals include the ox, lamb, dove, and chicken, among others. (Jesus likened himself to a mother hen.) For centuries, paintings of butchered meat have referred to "the weak flesh" and "the way of all flesh," and a slaughtered animal can symbolize the death of a Christian believer. Chaim Soutine was obsessed with *Slaughtered Ox*, and Francis Bacon continually revisited Velasquez's *Innocent X*. Austrian Actionist Hermann Nitsch's bloody performances and relics reenact divine sacrifice. Paul Thek's ornate reliquaries house wax-sculpted pieces of meat. All these works ooze with Catholic imagery. In Bob Flanagan's and Sheree Rose's work, the body and flesh, sickness, and pain are emphasized. Like saints mortifying their flesh, this performance team employed whips and various instruments, recalling the *Arma Christi*.

Customs of representation are alluded to in my paintings of flesh. Seemingly imbued with life, blood, muscle, and fat, they are dead representations fashioned of Titian-like layers of oil paint. Much of their tension lies in the subject and its realistic representation. Some viewers initially deem a meat painting beautiful—until they realize the subject is flesh, from which they heartily recoil! (Is it from guilt of visually partaking of the image, exploring its corporal, visceral wetness, or a grim reminder of their own mortal flesh?) These paintings of flesh draw a red line between flat, abstract colors and shapes and an illusion of the real, undeniable, material flesh. Ornate frames bound many of my paintings, placing fleshly imagery into a specific context of "classic" or vaunted artwork—dishing it up as artful, artificial decor. Served here are mere representations of the physical, animate, palpable flesh in its ruffled sumptuous tissues, corporal victuals, marbled sirloin, globular clusters of glistening crown-roast fat, and medallions of flesh. Like stained-glass windows, incarnadine glazes may enhance the illusion and instill the paintings with a living presence.

Simone Gad:

I am honored to be included in Every Breath You Take at Jason Vass Gallery for December 2017. I was invited to make collabs with Sheree Rose, Jeffrey Vallance, Martin O'brien and Rhiannon Aarons incorporating their pinups of themselves in my drawing collages with animal rescues as individual works on paper.

I am a Getty Museum Sponsored Pacific Standard Time Artist also included in Lyn Kienholz's Encyclopedia-L.A. Rising/So CAL Artists Before 1980, One National LGBTQ Artists Archives Library-USC,

MoMA/PS1 Archives-Simone Gad 1980 New Talent Show-Monique Knowlton Gallery NYC, National Women Artists Museum Of Art-Library Archives Washington DC, National Portrait Gallery Library Archives - Washington DC, Smithsonian Library Archives LAICA Journals 1970s-Washington DC, among numerous catalogs/books/publications/reviews.

I am a self-taught artist making pinup drawing collages with animal rescues circa 1850s to 1960s/70s, fudog and chinatown pagoda paintings and self-portraits assemblage/collage paintings with hollywood icons, My mentors were Wallace Berman and Al Hansen-Fluxus Artist who got me into the Fluxus Movement during the early 1970s.

Michael Delsol:

In late September of 1994, I had been commissioned to photograph Marcia Tucker, the founder of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. As we were touring the museum on its closed day (a Monday, I believe), I was absolutely awed by the about to open exhibit, a collaborative and performative installation of artists Sheree Rose and her husband Bob Flanagan, it was especially dramatic as the museum was empty of visitors on that day.

The following Tuesday, I mentioned to my friend Allan Bridge aka Mr Apology my desire to photograph the artists, and he underlined the importance of not doing individual portraits but of having both Sheree and Bob together in all of the photographs.

I returned the following week to see the exhibit, which had a live performance with the artists, I remember an ascent of the cross, with Bob upside down and having a leather 'belt' tied at the ankle and being hoisted from it in the air with a crane by Sheree. After the performance, I shyly approached them asking permission and to make arrangements for a shooting date...the only shooting date available was to be on October 31st, which had a triple signification, as it was on a Monday, (a closed day for the Museum, which meant that Sheree and Bob did not have to be at the museum for their live performances), it is the day of All Hallows' Eve and most importantly and unknown to me then, it was the Anniversary of their wedding.

On Monday the 31st, they arrived at my studio, for the 1st shooting, Sheree donned a full length wedding gown and Bob a leather straightjacket and staying naked from the waist down. For the second set of photographs Sheree changed into a black dress and Bob into black trousers with a bared chest, Sheree then cut / carved with a thin razor blade into Bob's chest, above the heart and around his nipple an 'S', 'S' as in Sheree. The droplets of blood dripped like the ones from a crown of thorns would.