

**FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2008**

**Listening to Sheree Rose, Bob Flanagan's Ex, During 'Come Out and Play' at Apexart**



As part of its "Come out and Play" series—which continues until tomorrow—Apexart (the non-profit art institution a few blocks south of Canal Street) screened over 100 movie shorts under the general theme of "exhibitionism" on Wednesday. Interestingly, the screening was all-inclusive, a kind of open mic for local artists. Titles included such gems as "limb constricting exercise 3," (Corinne Mynatt) "iPod bra for living sculpture," (Holly Lester) and "A video of someone taking a powerful psychoactive substance ordered online, uploaded to YouTube, 2007" (Kevin Regan)

To finish up the day's events, ex-dominatrix turned baby-boomer granny, Sheree Rose, gave a talk entitled "Supermasochist." She was introduced as "the widow of Bob Flanagan," which might lead the uninitiated in the audience to believe that some act of S&M involving the aforementioned Flanagan had gone horribly wrong. But no, Flanagan, the man best known in S&M circles for nailing his penis to a wooden board, died in 1996 of cystic fibrosis, at the age of 43. He had "it's fun to be dead" inscribed on his tombstone. They married, Rose said, "on his deathbed," after she'd spent many years as his dominatrix, companion and artistic collaborator.

An audience member commented that she seemed very much in love with Flanagan, and then asked in a round about way if she was still a dominatrix. It might have been a come-on. Rose replied that she'd retired when Flanagan died; it seemed that her life now consisted of reliving the past and remembering her time in the S&M spotlight.

Rose said that she met Flanagan, who was born in New York, at a Halloween party. "He looked like a dead person without the makeup," she said, smiling. "We had a date, and he told me he was a masochist. I didn't know what that was." So, he explained it to her: "I want to be someone's slave." She agreed, she said, as long as they didn't have to do it "behind closed doors." He, she said, "was a little chagrined, because he never did tell his mother."

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It was odd to watch the baby-boomer Rose sit below the gallery's movie-screen, watching her watching the young Rose as she performed a mock autopsy on Bob's living, mock-dead body (a body that is now really dead.) The old Rose took sips of fruit juice, while 1980s Rose clamped black clothes pegs to Flanagan's reddening flesh and showed a large silver ball up his sphincter with one white-gloved hand. Some audience members groaned. A man who looked to be in his twenties sitting to my right loosened his left shoe, pushed it partially off, and began to massage his ankle.

A woman asked Rose if there was any conflict between her role as caretaker for a terminally ill man and her role as his dominatrix. Rose said there wasn't; on the contrary, she argued that "it kept him alive. It gave him something to do everyday." She said it in a way that suggested that masochism was a hobby like anything else, like stamp collecting or tending a vegetable patch. Rose also offered her own theories on why people become sadists, or masochists. "Masochists have to climb Mount Everest, even if it kills them," she said. "It's spiritual...this is very different than raping someone." The woman to my left nodded in agreement.

Rose then showed a clip from Flanagan's movie, *Sick*, where he hammers a nail through his penis onto a board. There were groans from the audience; whether they were of empathetic pain, or pleasure, it was hard to tell. As Flanagan pulled the nail out, a shower of blood hit the camera screen. Old Rose laughed, and said "he'd done it before as a teenager." A man in the audience asked how he knew where to hammer the nail so it did avoid any major arteries. According to Rose, he didn't. He just hammered it in. "I hope I'm not embarrassing anyone," she said. It seemed an odd question to ask a room full of people who'd come out to hear a talk about sadomasochism. She talked about an earlier scene. "Lots of men, not just Bob, put things up their urethras." The foot-massaging man nodded in agreement.

As a finale, Rose showed two music videos: the Nine Inch Nails' "Happiness in Slavery," which shows Flanagan hooking himself up to a machine that then tortures and kills him, while he makes faces of pleasure and pain. A small black dog started barking from the third row, causing a ripple of laughter from the audience. Finally, she showed Danzig's "It's Coming Down," where Flanagan's penis appears again, along with an assortment of Rose's friends from her L.A. days. "Is that Dirk?" a man behind me asked. "Yeah, somebody know them?" said Rose.

People filed out, or assembled in groups at the front of the gallery. Some fans (including the guy who knew Dirk) waited to talk to Rose. A couple of questions lingered in my head about the evening: First, what makes someone a sadist; second, how did Sheree Rose earn a living? They can't have made enough money from their S&M performance art alone. Clearly another audience member had similar thoughts. She asked a question, to which Rose replied, "I'm retired. I'm a grandmother." The answer mustn't have satisfied the questioner. She asked something else, which answered both my questions. "I used to work for the Federal Government," Rose replied. "I used to work for FEMA." They carried on chatting.

Posted by Anna King at 10:16 AM