

THE NEW MUSEUM

TheNewMuseum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

september 23 - december 31, 1994

On View Program

Visiting Hours
An installation by
Bob Flanagan in
collaboration with
Sheree Rose

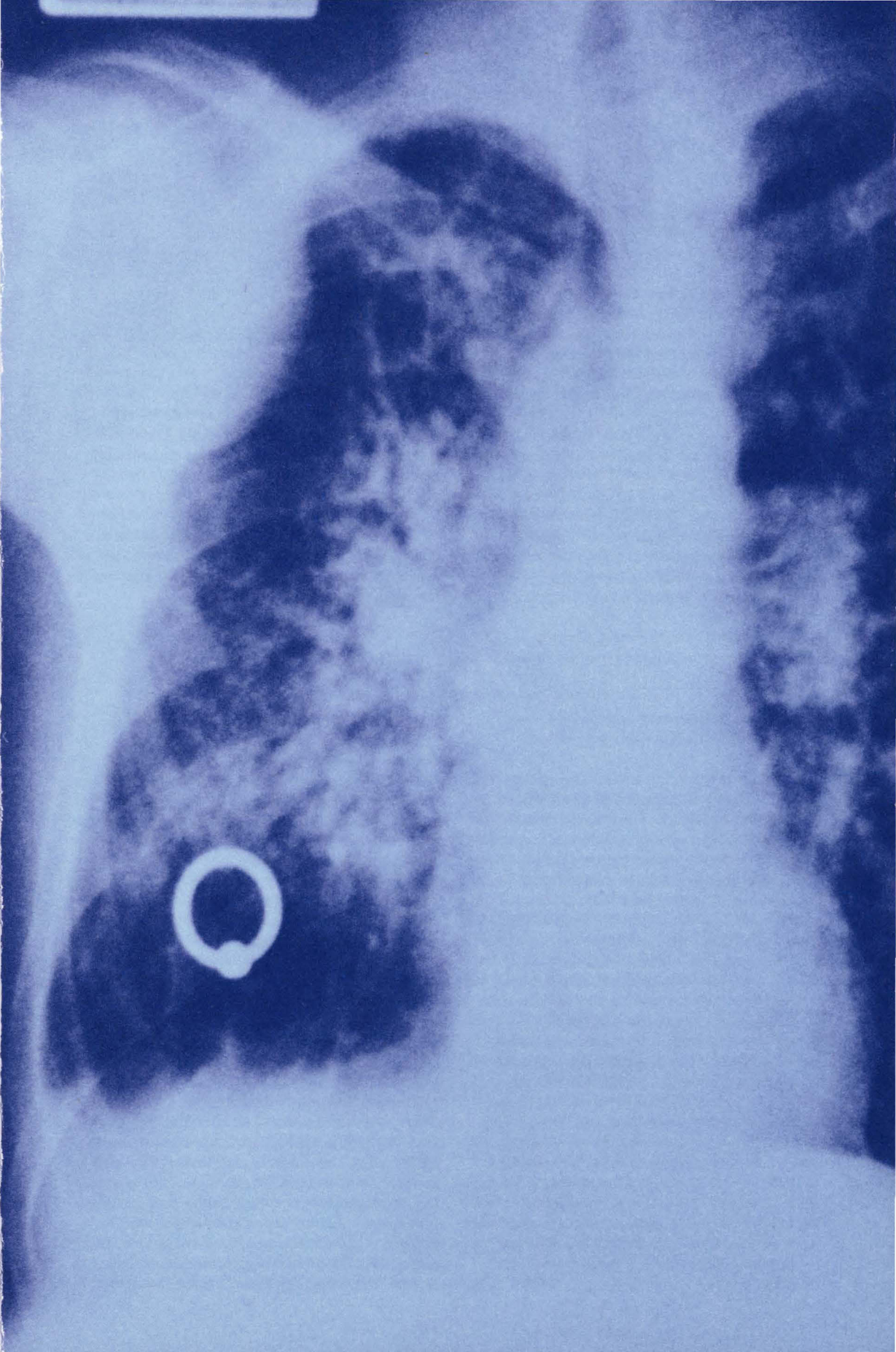
Window on Broadway

Who are we?
What are we?
Where did we
come from?
Rita Ackermann

Workspace Gallery

Courage
A video program
organized by
David Leslie

Self-Help Library
An installation by
Cathy Busby



WHO ARE WE? WHAT ARE WE? WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Window on Broadway by **Rita Ackermann**

Rita Ackermann's *Who Are We? What Are We? Where Did We Come From?* is an allegory of transmutation, a picture of a paradise perhaps arriving, as the artist puts it, *after* the end of the world. Using both the rectangular street-level section of the Museum's Window on Broadway and the semi-circular upper lunette, Ackermann has fabricated a *faux* stained glass window using special paints directly on the glass. This is the third such window produced by the 26-year-old artist, whose work also includes paintings on canvas, pastels, clothing design, and an audio-visual project on the interactive CD-ROM "magazine" *BLAM!*

Born in Hungary and classically trained at the Budapest Academy of Fine Art, Ackermann often borrows from Old Master paintings, reworking source material into a distinctive style that borders on greeting card kitsch—from the notebook doodles of junior high school girls to the sentimental sexuality of 1960s "flower power." But ultimately this work balances on the side of the secular fable. It features groupings of adolescent girls and, often, animals embodying at once innocence, compassion, and an evolved

intelligence familiar from such "adult" children's literature as C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* and Antoine de Saint-

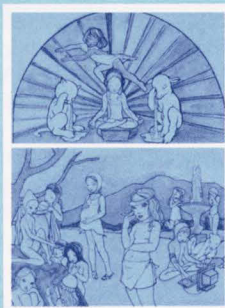
Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. Saint-Exupéry's tale describes the journey of an innocent androgyne through worldly vanities to discover love as loss and death as transcendence. In the same vein, the doe eyed adolescent girls in Ackermann's work rush headlong through dissipated lives that conceal and reveal secret teachings.

Drawing on sources that include Gauguin, Rembrandt, and the pastoral tradition exemplified by Poussin, *Who Are We? What Are We? Where Did We Come From?* presents a vision of Arcadia tied to the "techno-hippie" youth culture of "raves," roving dance parties that run for hours and even days, featuring light shows and ecstatic altered states. The lower panel bears a striking resemblance to Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*, while the grouping on the rock in the lower left derives from Rembrandt's *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*. The blue figure on the rock, an underwater diver metamorphosed through her wet suit into a dolphin like alien intelligence, takes on the attributes of Jacob who blesses the inauguration

of an as-yet untold spiritual tradition. The seated diver to the right, literally plugged into her computer, provides a key to the transmutation as she demonstrates one meaning of the painting's abundant water imagery: active with both keyboard and mouse, she dives into the "liquid sky" of an unseen computer screen-landscape.

The densely peopled landscape of the lower panel gives rise to transcendence in the lunette. This two-part structure echoes the duality of the Arcadian ideal, the ideal of a society in aesthetic harmony with nature: Arcadia is a real place, a ruin, and a mythic region outside time. In both aspects, the Arcadian landscape appears impossible, at a distance from the present and the urban world. But Ackermann's futuristic vision, in which nature has become a blank and abstract backdrop for society, generates a three-part scheme that opens out to include the viewer. The figure in the foreground, looking directly into the space before the picture, establishes a visual hinge between the represented scene and the location of the viewer in real space; the "fourth wall" is re-opened as she establishes a link, an ongoing avenue of access to this "virtual world."

Ackermann's *neo*-Neo-Classical tableau models and tugs at human tenderness with an attitude so innocent as to be almost artless. The window's title, *Who Are We? What Are We? Where Did We Come From?*, reworks that of Gauguin's vast Tahitian tableau, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* which the artist himself described as embodying "a passion of suffering in appalling conditions." So Ackermann envisions a world in which fond gestures and gentle attitudes are dangerously close to disappearance. Yet her paintings are coyly limpid allegories meant to assist as spiritual guides, soliciting affection as the operator of cultural transformation. Here as elsewhere, her work anchors the idea of the transcendental in a teen fantasy of simple human rituals—gestures of caring and community depicted in the picture as well as those of pleasure and tender incredulity excited by it. Out of the drugs and dancing of the non-stop "end-of-the-century party," Ackermann retrieves clues to an arriving society at once post-human and all too human, as plump, sleek animals cry vast pools of tears.



Rita Ackermann, watercolor sketch for *Who are we? What are we? Where did we come from?* 1994

Laura Trippi Curator

VISITING HOURS

An installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose

Bob Flanagan's Visiting Hours begins and ends with a question: "Why?" A poet as well as a visual, performance, and video artist, Flanagan has wrapped the perimeter of this autobiographical installation with a prose poem that rhythmically and repeatedly offers answers: "Because it feels good;... because it makes me come; because I'm sick...."¹ Starting at the gallery's entrance, the poem runs uninterrupted in a single line around the space of display—along the institutional green walls that enclose *The Waiting Room*, various thematic play and display areas, the video scaffolding entitled *Bob Flanagan's Sick*, and the aptly titled *Wall of Pain*. The text flows around odd corners, over doorways, and across a flight of stairs. Relentlessly, "Why?" works its way into every crease and wrinkle along the circumference of the galleries.

"Why?" addresses the origins of Flanagan's involvement with extreme pain practices as a form of pleasure (somasochism or "s/m"); it points to sources as diverse as Cinderella, the natural endorphin high produced in the brain by pain and exercise, and pop culture slogans ranging from "You always hurt the one you love" to the ever-American "No pain, no gain!"² At the same time, the installation resounds with a disquieting question: what to do with time on your hands?³ "I was promised an early death, but here I am still waiting," the artist writes elsewhere.⁴ Now perpetually hooked up to a tank of oxygen, Flanagan at 41 is among the oldest living sufferers of cystic fibrosis, a degenerative genetic illness affecting the lungs and stomach that usually is fatal by early adolescence.

Visiting Hours stages Freud's strange drama of Eros and Thanatos, in which existence unfolds as a ceaseless struggle between the instinct for life and the instinct for disintegration or death.

But this appears to be a version interpreted by Pee Wee Herman. The installation is designed like a crazy stage set of a children's residential hospital, replete with a torture chamber lurking amidst the institutional cheer. Here, the dark encounter between drives for sex and death is framed and buoyed up by a keen wit and a cool sense of the absurd.

But, in terms of masochism, *is* Bob Flanagan sick? Contemporary pain practices, from consensual s/m to the recent fashion craze for body piercing and tattooing, are fundamentally masochistic. They operate societally as a form of critique, affirming the value of powerlessness within a culture that esteems mastery and domination.⁵ Increasingly, death, violence, and drastic social change pervade our society. In the face of AIDS, escalating racial and ethnic violence, the continuing rise of techno-science, the growing instability of geopolitics and the environment, and even the incremental redefining of gender roles, the temptation to respond with a stiffening of the will is almost irresistible. Curiously, though, alternative models to domination are to be found where

we least expect them—in the burgeoning self-help industry, where issues of domination and submission emerge under such umbrella concepts as "addiction," "co-dependency," and "shame"; in the masochistic excesses of current music cultures that exalt self-surrender to the compulsive pulse of D.J.-driven dance parties; in the dispersion of the self into the fluid group structures of online computer communication; and in the assertion of attitudinal masochism, with the prevalence of piercing and bondage gear, as a postmodern house style for meeting the end of the millennium.

These and other developments do more than attest that a fascination with pain has arrived with a vengeance. They meet the challenge of a terrifying situation with a self that is porous and pliant, embracing an environment in which the self is gradually but radically being redefined. Relinquishing the impulse toward domination and advancing instead the capacity *to feel* as the ultimate, distinguishing human trait,⁶ such forms of social intercourse can be understood as part of a project to construct an ethics of self-abdication. They evidence a determination, as Flanagan would have it, to fight sickness *with* sickness.⁷

And then there is art.

As a poet, but also a stand-up comic, Flanagan's performance career began with readings of his own poetry that he soon incorporated into s/m performance-demonstrations in the late 1970s and 1980s in the clubs of Los Angeles. In this, he is allied with a loosely affiliated group of



Bob Flanagan *Ascension from the sickbed* # 5 Installation view of *Visiting Hours* at Santa Monica Museum of Art, 1992
Scott Boberg

contemporary writers and performance artists pushing language, sexuality, and identity to the edge of a violent rupture, from Kathy Acker and Dennis Cooper to Ron Athey and Karen Finley. With the original installation of *Visiting Hours* at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992, Flanagan produced his first major work of visual art, linking him into a sprawling network of artists working with the body in terms of degraded, polymorphous, or socio-disciplinary themes, an approach that has recently been considered under the rubric of "abject art."⁸

Various other artistic traditions cross paths in Flanagan's work. Some of these reach back to art of the 1970s: practices of endurance that tested the corporeal body, such as those employed by Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, and Gina Pane; of performance that explored taboos of eroticism, as in the work of Carolee Schneeman, Barbara Smith, and Hannah Wilke; and of duration that converted the material of lived experience into an art of everyday life, such as the performance activities of Marina Abramovic, Linda Montano, and Tehching Hsieh. But it is finally in terms of his 14-year collaboration with Sheree Rose that the nature of Flanagan's art most clearly emerges. Through the documentary incorporation of intimately personal material, their work together runs the gamut from private to public "performances," including college lectures. It rests uneasily within traditional categories, yet in itself is rigorously specific, operating on the border between artistic practice and social work.

Rose has described *Visiting Hours* in terms of the idea that, if you pull one thread of a person's life, the rest comes along with it. This image of a life as a tangled skein informs every aspect of the exhibition, from the wrapping text to the complex connections between sickness, death, and sexuality posed by each component work in turn. A skein is also a labyrinth and, as "Why" winds through *Visiting Hours*, the space it stakes out is labyrinthine as it tacitly invokes the image of a body riddled with afflictions. At its heart is a hospital room where Flanagan, in bed with the t.v. running, holds visiting hours. Having circled the gallery and its installation areas, visitors are free to meet the artist and discuss whatever comes to mind. Flanagan has commented that, when he first presented the installation, his conversations with visitors often achieved an unprecedented level of intimacy, taking shape as quasi-confessional mini-narratives. Speaking with the artist, visitors gave voice to their own

encounters with illness or abuse, or the loss of a loved relative or friend.

Free standing in the center of the gallery, the hospital room is a collapsed and kaleidoscopic emblem of the exhibition in its entirety. Its interior is animated, less by Flanagan than by the visitors' conversations with him and the fast cut compilation video of old cartoons, t.v., and movie clips that plays on the wall-mounted monitor. Flanagan's inner sanctum is ruptured and pervaded by the outside, a pattern echoed elsewhere in the exhibition. Within the "standing bondage" of the video scaffold, the body is represented as a composite of parts screened independently on seven monitors; but each part is also discontinuous within itself, separate receptors for which "sensation" (documentary clips of s/m actions) appears interchangeably with "information" (cartoons and movies, advertisements, home movies of Flanagan as a young boy).

A space of listening and waiting, the core of the exhibition is heartfelt and hollowed out. Along its outer walls, three views of Flanagan appear; each is distinct but partial. Clamped to a light box centered on an otherwise empty white wall are a pair of chest x-rays in which eye-like nipple rings, precisely defined, seem alternately to float through the chest cavity or fuse with the plane of the x-rays themselves. Here, technologies of pleasure and medicine mesh gears, catching between them a spectral image of the human body. When, intermittently, Flanagan slowly and quietly is pulled feet first by an ankle harness toward the ceiling, elevating like the hanged man of the tarot above the hospital room's open walls, this serves as a rending reminder of the authority death holds over life.

But the image of Flanagan suspended further suggests a radical humiliation of the self, a squandering of that precious human capital so conscientiously acquired. Drawing to the surface quandaries, wishes, and fears embedded in the body itself, *Visiting Hours* subtly redirects the will to survive through paths of self-renunciation. Death forms a threshold over which all the exhibition's movements are suspended; as in horror films, the nearness of death here solicits from the viewer an almost corporeal enjoyment as well as dread. The complex web of issues raised by the exhibition settles into a layered meditation on the prospect of death. Why? Why? And, in the meantime, the rhythmic repetitions of "because...."

Laura Trippi Curator

PROFILES IN COURAGE

*He turned with such a smile to face disaster
that he sublimed defeat.*

[“The Hero,” Florence Earle Coates]

I suspect that the most common image of courage in books, poetry, film, and music is the act of flying. The Flyer summons undeniable courage so as to sail toward new heights, chart new territory, record greater distance, and hopefully return to report the exploration and experiment.

The Flyer inspires, if only in that his or her trajectory keeps our collective chin up, should we care to notice. Those who do care, crowd as The Flyer descends and lands to beg, “What’s it like?” *Of course I realise there was a measure of danger. Obviously I faced the possibility of not returning when I first considered going. Once faced and settled there wasn’t any good reason to refer to it (danger) again.* [Amelia Earhart, 1928]

Consider two of the most alluring, intriguing, entertaining, and inspiring Icarians of all time.

Amelia Earhart and Evel Knievel—their uncanny similarities are uniquely allied.

These dirty blonde airdevils were beautiful, famous, charismatic celebrities of their generations. Earhart and Knievel were true originals, free thinkers who possessed a heroic commitment to fulfill their aspirations regardless of the size of the goal or the price paid. Their critics accused both showoffs of being brash, audacious, arrogant, and all the while—foolhardy. Their dangerous (and seemingly purposeless) obsession was to surpass ever increasing marks set by no

one but themselves. Both determined that their greatest and final challenge would be to leap a too-wide body of water—Earhart’s being the Pacific, Knievel’s the Snake River in Idaho. When questioned about the impending deaths they surely faced, their attempts to explain eerily echoed one another’s. Cocky

wisecracks to the media and throngs, while holding court at the edge of their respective shores, were but pacifications for crawlers who would never really understand or accept The Flyers’ commission.

Someday, I’ll get bumped off. There’s so much to do, so much fun here, I don’t want to go but....

[Amelia Earhart]

If something should go wrong I’ll spit at the canyon wall and then I’ll go somewhere we’re all going someday—I’ll just get there quicker... and I’ll sit and have a beer and wait for you.

[Evel Knievel]

July 2, 1937 AE and her navigator went down in the Pacific. President FDR’s 4 million dollar search found no trace of bodies or wreckage. She died as she had wished: *“When I go I’d like best to go in my plane. Quickly.”*

September 8, 1974 EK fell short of his projected one-mile leap over Snake River by slightly less than a mile. He was rescued by a couple of spectators in a kayak.

Oh, another similarity in Earhart and Knievel—they were both poets.

Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace. [Amelia Earhart, “COURAGE”]

For you, what I do is not right—/But, for me, it’s not wrong. /What I have been trying to tell you all along/Is that it’s got to be./You ask why?/Well, just like you, I’ve gotta be me.

[Evel Knievel, “WHY?”]

This summer Americans celebrated the 25th anniversaries of Apollo XI’s Giant Leap and Woodstock Nation. Their team logos were the Eagle and the Dove, respectively. As we watched reruns of one (“that’s one small step for a man...”), the other was preparing us for its multi-million dollar sequel... must have been the soundtrack....

Gonna Fly Now... The Rocky theme did, but *he* never actually flew. He didn’t even win the fight, but he does own a Planet called Hollywood. We favor our Flyers (i.e. the Wrights, Claus, Glenn, Poppins, Dumbo, McCaulife, Aldrin and Armstrong, Aladdin). As they ascend, our hearts leap to our throats and for the duration of the climb and descent we can almost taste life. Our inspiration is not measured by the quality, purpose, or significance of their leaps of faith. It is not The Flyer’s approach, re-entry, or receipt count that is of greatest importance to us, the watchers. It is not The Flyer’s return that truly

Amelia Earhart
National Air and Space
Museum, Smithsonian
Institution, Photo No.
A45906F

Evel Knievel
Signed publicity photo
circa 1972

Bob Flanagan
Video still from
Bob Flanagan’s Sick
1991 Sheree Rose



inspires, but rather why and especially *that* The Flyer embarked.

September 23, 1994 Look! Up in the sky! Its a bird! It's a plane! Nah, it's just another poet.

—it's me. Yes, it's me, and most of the time I feel as though I come from another solar system. And despite my skinny physique and frail sensitivities, I possess certain powers and abilities beyond those of so-called normal human beings.
[Bob Flanagan, *Sick Superman*]

And so, it has come to this—*Bob Flanagan* is my current Icarus! And he looks nothing at all like a Kennedy. But he's up there, a Flyer, a Pioneer, and a Voyager going where no man or woman (that I know of) has gone before. It takes nerve just to read this Captain's log. Former unfortunate Icarians kept their spilled guts and singed flesh sealed from view under thick leather or enclosed capsules that flashed past....This one's hanging up there bare assed in a long slow dangle. He's pokin' peek holes in himself so that we can get a better view. Yeah, this hellcat's got balls *and* he's driving ten-penny nails through'em! Hail Bob Flanagan King Of Pain! Long Live The King!

David Leslie Guest video curator

SELF-HELPLIBRARY

Four Decades of Pain Management in North America

Emotional pain is an abundant resource and the self-help book has a flourishing market. The *Self-Help Library* presents the museum visitor with several hundred titles to skim, tracing four decades of the recovery industry. The books of the 40s and 50s give birth to pop psychology, those of the 60s and 70s cater to the anxieties of the New Woman, with the 80s come stress and burnout remedies. The 90s offer the intimate life stories of female celebrities that give a face to the conditions we've learned to name: "Adult survivors of child sexual abuse" as told by Roseanne and "eating disorders" as embodied by Lady Di.

Titles in the *Self-Help Library* boldly announce emotional plights: *The Cinderella Complex* ■ *Up From Grief* ■ *Your Erroneous Zones* ■ *Women Who Love Too Much* and prescribe solutions for a better life: *Awaken the Giant Within* ■ *Release From Guilt and Fear* ■ *Never Be Nervous Again* ■ *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. With promises of redemption and renewal, these books fill the void that earlier generations once filled with prayer and piety. The focus is on the "average" American who is conceived as white, middle class, and full of worries. Each volume

promises that you can manage your anxieties and pain; you *can* "Do It Yourself." They offer comfort and reassurance that we can control our emotional lives, and get along with our families, friends, co-workers, and ourselves.

While she's reading: *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity* ■ *Superwoman* ■ *Women's Burnout*, he turns to: *The New Male: From Macho to Sensitive But Still All Male* ■ *How To Father* ■ *The Inner Male: Overcoming Roadblocks to Intimacy*. Or both can enjoy: *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old* ■ *Genderspeak: Men, Women, and the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* ■ *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* ■ *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*

Tips and testimonials tweak our desire for control and speak to us on a one-to-one basis. Yet, though we may believe in the authority of these books, they rarely stand up to their claims. Our complicated lives exceed prescriptive steps and stages, even in the face of our continuing need to name and know our pain.

Cathy Busby

Visiting Hours was originally presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and is organized for presentation at The New Museum of Contemporary Art by Curator Laura Trippi.

Presentation at The New Museum is made possible by generous support from The Lannan Foundation and The Norton Family Foundation. A poster for the exhibition, including a signed limited edition, has been made available courtesy of the Robert J. Shiffler Collection.

Support for the *Self-Help Library* has been provided, in part, by the Canadian Consulate General/New York.

The New Museum is supported in part with funds from the Jerome Foundation, the New York State Council for the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Notes to *Visiting Hours*

1. Bob Flanagan, *Why?* This text also appears in *Bob Flanagan: SuperMasochist*, RE/Search People Series, Vol. 1, 1993, pp. 64-65.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
3. This phrase was suggested by the artist Julia Scher in an informal discussion about the exhibition.
4. Flanagan, text of *Video Coffin*, 1994.
5. See, for example, Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The MIT Press, 1988), pp. 197-222.
6. See Celeste Olalquiga, "*Forbidden Planet*: Pain Practices and the Reconfiguration of Physical Experience," in *When Pain Strikes*, Bill Burns, Cathy Busby, Kim Sawchuck, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming), manuscript p. 3.
7. Flanagan, text panel of *Sick Superman*, 1992. This text also appears as the frontispiece to Flanagan, *ibid.*
8. See *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992).

Public Programs

The Submissive Moment:

Pleasure and the Politics of Pain
Friday, October 21 6:30-8:30 pm

Presenters: Karmen MacKendrick, assistant professor of philosophy at Gettysburg College; Arthur Jafa, filmmaker; Tricia Rose, critic of contemporary culture and politics, professor of African studies and history at New York University; and Julia Scher, artist.

An Evening of Readings

with Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey, and Carol Queen
Tuesday, November 1
6:30-8:30 pm

All programs take place at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, between Prince and Houston Streets.

Tickets: \$7.00 general, \$5.00 students, seniors, members. Tickets are sold in advance at the Admissions Desk during Museum hours; no reservations or tickets orders will be taken. For further information, please call (212) 219-1222.

Workshop for Teachers

How to Teach the Unteachable:

The Art of Bob Flanagan

Thursday, October 13

4:00-6:00 pm

Free with Museum Admission

Student Poetry Writing Workshop

Writing as an Art of Healing

Thursday, October 27

4:00-6:00 pm

Free for students

Both workshops are conducted by Carmen Bardeguéz, a poet, writer, and history teacher at Satellite Academy High School in Queens, New York. For further information and to R.S.V.P., please call (212) 219-1222.

Special thanks to Carmen Bardeguéz, Denya Cascio, Marjorie Heins, Karmen MacKendrick, Celeste Olalquiga, Richard Rifkind, Elyse Rivin, Julia Scher, Ira Silverberg, Julie Tolentino, and Linda Yablonsky for generously sharing their time and insights, and to Sandra Gillespie, Jill Hartley, and Elizabeth Moran for assisting with research and coordination.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art

583 Broadway in SoHo between Prince and Houston Streets
New York, New York 10012
(212) 219-1222

Hours:

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday 12-6 pm; Saturday 12-8 pm (6-8 pm free); closed Monday and Tuesday.

Admissions:

\$4.00 general; \$3.00 artists, students, seniors; members and children under 12 free.

Directions:

Subway: Lexington Ave. line (#6) to Spring St. or Bleecker St.; Broadway line (N/R) to Prince St.; 8th Ave. line (A/C/E) to Spring St.; and 6th Ave. line (B/D/Q/F) to Broadway/Lafayette.
Bus: #1/5/6/21 to Houston St. or Broadway.

Group Visits

Guided group visits are available at The New Museum for adults and students grades 7 through 12. Please call (212) 614-6650.

The New Museum strongly recommends that all teachers preview *Visiting Hours*. An installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose.

For Membership programs and events, please call the Membership Office at (212) 219-1222.