

PART ONE

Performance for the Twenty-first Century

Contemporary Art Exhibitionists

June 27, 1995, Washington, D.C.: The Christian Action Network (CAN) stages a “degenerate art” exhibition in the Rayburn Building, sponsored by Rep. Robert Dornan, to drive the final nail in the coffin of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). They hand out black-bordered death certificates, which they urge guests to sign and deliver to their congressmen before the 103rd Congress departs for summer recess. The death certificate reads:

Decedent's Name: NEA. *Sex:* Anything unnatural. *Father's Name:* Lyndon Johnson. *Mother's Name:* Jane Alexander. *Decedent's occupation:* Attacking religion, tradition, morality. Funding left-wing causes. Promoting homosexuality. Lying to the media and Congress about its activities. *Cause of death:* using taxpayer funds to depict Christ as homosexual, a drug addict, and a child molester.

The event demonstrates yet again how expert the religious Right has become in its own bizarre brand of theater—and how spectacular its own fantasies are. Jane Alexander, the *mother* of the NEA? What specific “left-wing” causes did the agency fund? If homosexuals *could* “promote” homosexuality, wouldn’t they be less beleaguered today? To these people, homosexuality, drugs, child abuse, and blasphemy are all synonymous, the moral equivalent of the Anti-Christ.

I pause to collect some of the propaganda, opening a book by CAN’s president, Martin Mawyer, entitled *Silent Shame: The Alarming Rise of*

Child Sexual Abuse and How to Protect Your Children From It. Mawyer claims that *Lolita* "provided pedophiles with many rationalizations favoring child sex," although he confesses that he read the novel solely for the sex scenes. Sounding remarkably like a high school sophomore, he writes: "The story drags on . . . [and] becomes tiresome. . . . Though the story . . . has no socially redeeming value, it did provide child predators with common arguments and language: A 'Lolita' is a female nymphet."¹ If this is the caliber of criticism applied to Vladimir Nabokov, I shudder to think what Mawyer will make of contemporary performance artists and photographers. Soon, I find out: the guilty artists include the usual suspects—Joel-Peter Witkin, Ron Athey, Annie Sprinkle, Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, Carolee Schneemann, Mike Kelley, and Bob Flanagan. And some unusual ones: Why, I wonder, does CAN consider Bruce Nauman's clown or Cindy Sherman's photograph of dinner leftovers "patently offensive"? It is as if some bright undergraduate researched all the most interesting artists working today, then reached all the wrong conclusions. One corner of the room is devoted to sexually explicit gay videos, some of which come from Highways, an alternative performance space in Santa Monica, California, where I first saw Annie Sprinkle and which hosts an annual *Ecce Homo* festival. I'm amused to see hordes of white, heterosexual, mostly male Christians and twenty-something Republican staffers primly studying each image, grimly scrutinizing each sex act. Which ones, I wonder, are amazed, amused, secretly turned on? Someone with a video camera asks me what I think. "I fully support CAN's right to explore its prurient interests," I say on camera. I have infiltrated the meeting to investigate whether CAN violated Bob Flanagan's copyright. (They did.) Ironically, Flanagan never received NEA funds.

SADOMEDICINE: BOB FLANAGAN

Bob Flanagan is a forty-three-year-old poet, writer, and performance artist who suffers from cystic fibrosis (CF), a hereditary disease that affects the glands and lungs and makes breathing and digestion treacherously difficult. It usually kills those afflicted before they turn thirty. While enormous advances in gene therapy have given hope for a cure for CF, it won't come in time to save Flanagan's life.

Visiting Hours is a site-specific installation he and his partner, Sheree Rose, exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992–93, the New Museum in New York City in 1994, and the School of the Museum

of Fine Arts in Boston in 1995. *Visiting Hours* transforms the museum into a pediatric hospital ward, complete with a waiting room filled with toys, medical X rays of Flanagan's lungs, and video monitors of his naked, bound body. In one chamber, the visitor comes upon Flanagan himself, propped up in a hospital bed, his home away from home.

Bob Flanagan is a live model of the posthuman, for he illustrates step by step how the human senses—taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight—have been utterly reorganized by technology. Just as the microscope, oscilloscope, speculum, and X ray not only altered *what* we saw but *how* we perceived the human body in the past, the current sophisticated imaging techniques (CAT scans, PET scans, MRI, and so on) raise scores of questions: What is pathology? What is "sick"? (Like Kirby Dick's film, one of Bob's performances is called *Bob Flanagan's Sick*; his cheerful motto is "Fight Sickness with Sickness.")²

Flanagan juxtaposes the pathology of CF with the "pathology" of masochism. He traces his masochistic proclivities back to infancy, when he spent long hours bound in his crib. From infancy forward, he was prodded and probed, X-rayed, transformed into a medical "specimen." No part of his body was immune, in any sense of the word. With Sheree Rose, his dominant "mistress," Flanagan takes sadomasochism into the art museum. While Robert Mapplethorpe's exposure of the forbidden world of gay sadomasochism was an important precursor, Flanagan and Rose make us realize how little theorizing has been devoted to *heterosexuality*, which for so long has been presumed to be "natural."³

Male heterosexual submissives, moreover, constitute a substantial subculture, unacknowledged because their existence defies too many taboos. Flanagan exposes one of commercial sadomasochism's best-kept secrets: the majority of customers are not sadistic men seeking submissive women. Instead, a growing number of men are willing to pay hefty sums to be clothed in diapers, put in playpens, suckled with bottles. On the one hand, such playacting permits men to return unashamedly to the pre-oedipal bliss of harmony with the mother. On the other hand, they enjoy being punished, spanked, made to clean house, do dishes. Since these men are often highly successful in public life, their sexual proclivities suggest a strong compulsion to repudiate masculine authority and privilege privately.⁴

The regression is not, however, limited to men. Men are not fleeing from masculinity, they are fleeing from adulthood—adult responsibilities, failures, impossible social problems, unhappiness, complex relationships with women *and* with other men. Women are fleeing, too. But where men pay

to act out fantasies of babyism privately, women prance down fashion runways in babydoll dresses. How else can one explain the current fashion phenomenon of preteen waifs carrying baby rattles and pushing other fashion models in prams? If the 1980s were about power lunches and dressing for success, the stock market crash of 1987, the recession, and downsizing in the 1990s have made many long for Mommy—not to *be* a mommy, to *have* one. Advertising has seized this trend: Volvo appeals to “all those who continue to be a kid, even when they have one”; Keds pastes childhood photos over adult faces. Even Nuveen Municipal Bonds gets in on the act, promoting “the human bond”: “Sometimes she holds me like she did when I was a child.”⁵ Pop psychology’s promotion of “the inner child” has migrated to Madison Avenue.

Visiting Hours explores head on what fashion and advertising explore at one or more removes: the fulfillment of childhood wishes *un-idealized* by Madison Avenue. Those childhood wishes turn out to be considerably more sexual than even advertising is willing to admit. Flanagan places particular emphasis on the preoedipal stage, before the infant is socialized, before the unconscious is censored.

Mike Kelley explores this same stage. In Kelley’s universe, however, the infant seems to have crawled away momentarily, leaving the detritus of his existence (toys, excrement, bottles, messes), whereas Flanagan installs himself firmly, like all babies, at the center of the universe. Kelley shops in secondhand stores for stuffed animals, then sews them all together, as if to suggest the Mirror Stage of oneness, harmony, wholeness. His found objects and threadbare stuffed animals are normally considered too trivial or unworthy to be art—they have been called low, infantile, white trash.⁶ Mike Kelley and Bob Flanagan have worked as collaborators, dedicated to dismantling the penis’s prestige and the phallus’s authority. Kelley photographed Sheree Rose, eerily humping a stuffed toy rabbit (appropriately, since she is dominant, she is on top), while Bob, a “bottom,” is smeared with excrement, wiping his bottom (Fig. 1).

Flanagan revels in narcissism and exhibitionism. He is a psychic omnivore: everything revolves around his needs, his demands, his libidinal dynamism. He is aggressive in his passivity. All his life, Flanagan confesses, he has been “nothing but a big baby and I want to stay that way, and I want a mommy forever, even a mean one, especially a mean one; because of all the fairy tale witches, and the wicked step mother.”⁷ The “mean mother” is the phallic mother who punishes, spansks, disciplines. Far from being terrified of her, Flanagan wants to be her slave. When he met Sheree, he got his wish. Instead of ostracizing him, she relished her



Figure 1 Mike Kelley, study for diptych *Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects / Nostalgic Depiction of Innocence of Childhood*, 1990, black and white photo. 8 in. × 10 in. In *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (San Francisco: Re / Search Books, 1993). Courtesy Mike Kelley, Re / Search Books, Bob Flanagan, and Sheree Rose.

role. Who wouldn't let a man who lusts to vacuum have his way? He scrubbed the floors with a toothbrush (inspired, perhaps, by *Mommie Dearest*).

Signs of infantile existence litter the museum: a port-a-potty, pacifiers, blankets, a crib that seems more like a cage, toys like a Superman doll and Visible Man, which is designed to teach children anatomy, although this one excretes shit, mucus, and sperm. *Visiting Hours* evokes a scene that the spectator has visited long before, but as with the psychoanalytic session, its buried content comes to the surface only when restaged. Everything about the exhibit is uncanny, at once strange and disturbing, hysterical and hilarious. A toy chest that contains sadomasochistic paraphernalia and stuffed animals sits in one corner. The writing on the toy chest confirms the exhibition's fairy-tale quality:

Mine is the bittersweet tale of a sick little boy who found solace in his penis at a time when all else conspired to snuff him out or, at the very least, fill his miserably short life span with more than its share of pain, discomfort and humiliation. The penis seemed to thrive on whatever shit the rest of the body was subjected to and rose to the occasion of each onslaught, soaking it up like a sponge or, to be more succinct, the corpus spongiosum became full of itself and my stupid prick danced in the spotlight of sickness and suffering. That first swat on the ass from the obstetrician's skilled hand not only started my diseased lungs sputtering to life, but it also sent a shock through my sphincter, up my tiny rectum, and straight into the shaft of my shiny penis, which ever since then has had this crazy idea in its head that pain and sex are one and the same.

Flanagan satirizes the quest for rational explanations of his twin "maladies," CF and SM, by using medical language ("corpus spongiosum"), comic colloquialisms ("snuff him out," "whatever shit"), and puns (the penis's crazy idea in its "head"). Flanagan's narrative evokes the Hobbesian notion of life as "nasty, short, and brutish," as well as Tristram Shandy's account of a prolonged and difficult quest for and through birth. In Flanagan's case, the journey toward inevitable death is equally prolonged and painful. Linguistically, the chest (of toys) parallels the chest (of the body).

Metaphorically, the toy chest suggests Pandora's box—the vehicle that will unlock all the mysteries (and miseries) of sexuality—female sexuality, that is. By identifying with Pandora, he deftly disposes of the stereotype of man as oppressor and woman as victim, the antiporn crusade's founding premise. Reading *The Story of O*, Flanagan identifies not with Sir Stephen but with O herself: "How desperately I wanted to be her."

Such reversals raise the following questions: Is Flanagan's sexuality "feminine" because it is masochistic? Or has male masochism simply received short shrift in the discourse of sexuality?

Visiting Hours is thus saturated with a strange sense of initiatory power, an initiation that begins in childhood. Neither money, success, fame, nor possessions bring happiness, Freud warned; the only source of satisfaction comes from the fulfillment of *childhood* wishes. *Visiting Hours* evokes scenes of infantile satisfactions (oral and anal, passive and aggressive). Since antipornography activists always argue that pornography must be banned so as not to sully the "impressionable minds" of children, it is particularly interesting how much *Visiting Hours* concentrates on childhood. Childhood, the exhibit implies, is tinged with sexual curiosity. Children concoct their own theories to explain birth, sexuality, and sexual difference, as Flanagan illustrates in vivid detail. One of the many fascinating things about Flanagan is that he seems to have almost total recall about the images in popular culture that sexually excited him in early childhood: he remembers cartoons of Porky Pig in bondage, force-fed, with his bare bottom and open mouth, always being punished for his insatiable orality; and of Cinderella, sexily disciplined by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters. As a child, Flanagan instinctively recognized the latent obscenity and violence in fairy tales and cartoons. They turned him on and he turned his "play" into art.

Freud was among the first to take child's play seriously. He showed how fantasy functions on three temporal levels simultaneously: (1) the *present* provides the context, the material elements of the fantasy; (2) the *past* provides the wish, deriving from earliest experiences; (3) the dream imagines a new situation in the *future*, which represents the fulfillment of the wish. Fantasy is a unique concept in psychoanalysis, first because it refers to a psychic process which is both conscious and unconscious, and second because it juxtaposes the social with the psychic.⁸

Speaking of the trend toward "babyism" in the commercial sado-masochistic industry, Anne McClintock notes: "Babyism may also grant men retrospective control over perilous memories of infancy: nightmares of restraint, rubber sheets, helplessness, inexplicable punishments, isolation, and grief. . . . In their secret nursery for Goliaths, babyists ritually indulge in the forbidden, nostalgic spectacle of the power of women. . . . The land of Fem-Dom is frequently described by men as a 'feminist' utopia, a futuristic paradise in which women are 'fully liberated and universally recognized as the Superior Sex.'"⁹ Ironically, such a world (which sounds exactly like J. G. Ballard's dystopic novel, *Rush-*

ing to Paradise [1994]) may be what Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin want, but the laws they have drafted would ban Flanagan's art as degrading to *women*. The foundation of the antipornography campaign is that man is the oppressor, woman is victim. Pornography is the theory, rape the practice. Flanagan turns such clichés on their head. If sadomasochism is the practice, Flanagan's art is the theory: he places our assumed ideology before our eyes. Femininity and masculinity are cultural constructs, neither innate nor natural. Flanagan's art audaciously exposes the *process* of gender construction, particularly its weird ridiculousness. Rather than disavowing castration anxiety, Flanagan acts it out—he *performs* it. Rather than fetishizing the female body, he pokes and pierces his own. He was inspired in part by Rudolf Schwarzkogler, who “had himself photographed (supposedly) slicing off pieces of his penis as if it were so much salami.”¹⁰ Schwarzkogler's acts, however, are fake, whereas Flanagan's actions are real. He pierces the penis, attaches weights, clothespins, and nails it to a board. His acts are at once too literal for art, too visceral for porn. While Camille Paglia worships the penis and Andrea Dworkin damns it, Flanagan deflates it and them both.¹¹

Needless to say, Flanagan's masochism is equally threatening to men. At a pro-choice benefit, he shows up naked, impersonating Randall Terry (leader of the antiabortion Operation Rescue campaign). Toy babies dangle from fishhooks in his flesh and penis, to show what it would mean, and how it would *feel*, if men had to bear children. But even here, his role is feminine, for being “attached” to babies by flesh is very different from the abstract concepts of paternity and patriarchy, which are what Operation Rescue really wants to shore up. The fetus has come to symbolize everything that is Right about America.¹² (Not surprisingly, this was one of the photos that the Christian Action Network found most objectionable.) It should be clear by now that CAN's research targeting transgressive artists did not come from the bottom up, but from the top down, as illustrated by Sen. Jesse Helms's letter to former NEA chairman John Frohnmyer in 1989 (Fig. 2). Helms's list is particularly interesting because it employs the same tactics of harassment used by the Meese Commission (see Chapter 9): it targets not only individuals, but also corporations, funding agencies, sponsors, and publishers. Among the latter, V. Vale and Andrea Juno are especially notable, for they published not only *Modern Primitives*, but also J. G. Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition*, J. G. Ballard, Bob Flanagan: *Supermasochist*, and *Angry Women*, which features (among others) Annie Sprinkle, Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley, Kathy Acker, and Diamanda Galas. The bias against homosexu-

als that provides the momentum for both CAN's and Helms's campaign is evident in the letter's request for information about "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing."¹³ Item 2, a grant to the Durham/Chapel Hill chapter of the American Institute of Architects, reveals that even *affordable housing* is suspect (as Communist?). Items i and k refer to Sheree Rose and Bob Flanagan ("comedian Bob F."). In the late 1960s, Bob and I attended the same high school in Orange County, California—cradle of crackpots, including the ultra right-wing John Birch Society. Senator Helms is from the *other* Orange County—in North Carolina.

If Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger are "living phalluses," displaying the pumped body in/as excess, Flanagan's display of his puny body is a Freudian textbook definition of "the uncanny." Freud defines the uncanny as ambiguity about the extent to which something is, or is not, alive. But even while satirizing macho bravado, Flanagan's acts require endurance: in *Visiting Hours*, a pulley occasionally hoists him from his bed to the ceiling, where he hangs upside down and naked (Fig. 3). On opening night at the New Museum, an awed hush fell over the crowd of jaded New Yorkers as Bob slowly ascended to the ceiling. Was he a combination of a tableau vivant and a nature morte, or a cross between Mantegna's *St. Sebastian* and Chaim Soutine's butchered carcass?

Flanagan identifies with "ordeal artists," like Chris Burden and Vito Acconci. In *Seedbed* (1971) Acconci masturbated under a ramp, while amplifiers projected the sound of his breathing throughout the museum. In 1990, his *Adjustable Wall Bra*, consisting of two mammoth cups, permitted visitors to curl up in the fetal position and watch cartoons. The cups pulsed with music or with the sound of a woman breathing. Acconci, like Flanagan, brings babyism into the art museum.

Flanagan's transformation of physical pain into sexual pleasure might be understandable from a clinical perspective, but is it art? Put another way, how do fantasies work personally and for a public audience? By acting out his fantasies, Flanagan preempts the psychoanalyst (the *authorized* interpreter of fantasy). First, he evokes fantasies that involve original wishes which are widely shared (the wish for health, sexual satisfaction, Mommy, and so on). Second, they are contingent. This is where the emphasis on everyday life becomes crucial, for Flanagan demonstrates how we draw on events of the day to produce our own fantasies. Third, we also adopt and adapt the ready-made scenarios from cartoons, television, and movies, as if their contingent material had been our own.¹⁴

Flanagan exposes the regimes of medicine as well as those of psychoanalysis. He builds a wall of 1,400 alphabet blocks juxtaposing the letters

United States Senate

WASHINGTON DC 20510

November 7, 1989

Mr. John E. Frohnmayer
Chairman
National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am curious whether any of the institutions or artists listed below have received Endowment support since 1982, particularly for the enumerated projects or works, and if so, I'd like to receive the purpose and amount of the support granted.

- 1) Southern Exposure at Project Artaud - 401 Alabama Street, San Francisco, CA -- exhibition entitled "Modern Primitives." (see enclosed pamphlet) - A visual exhibition and series of live events on Contemporary Body Modification, curated by Andrea Juno and V. Vale, featuring photography by Bobby Neel Adams.
 - a) Andrea Juno
 - b) V. Vale
 - c) Bobby Neel Adams
 - d) Center On Contemporary Art (COCA) in Seattle Washington - original organizer of "Modern Primitive" show.
 - e) Project Artaud or Project Artaud Corporation
 - f) Art Matters, Inc.
 - g) Allied Arts of Seattle
 - h) RE/SEARCH PUBLICATIONS
 - i) Sherree Rose - video work featuring genital piercing/ photography of tattooing, piercing, sacrifice (sic) combined with a provocative bondage & discipline bloodletting ritual.
 - j) Leslie Gladstone - video entitled "Modern Primitives."
 - k) Comedian Bob F. (sic) - emotional presentation of his autoerotic scaffold.
 - l) Don Ed Hardy - master tattooist.

(6)

Figure 2 Letter from Sen. Jesse Helms to NEA chairman John Frohnmayer, November 7, 1989.

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* 2) Karen Brubaker - South American scholarship.

* 2) Durham/Chapel Hill Section of North Carolina Chapter of American Institute of Architects - grant to produce a document on an Affordable Housing Competition for the benefit of the Habitat organization.

* 3) David Strong, 73225 S. W. Corbett, Portland, Oregon 97201.

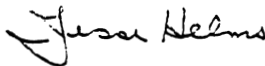
* 4) "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" - show put on by Artists Space involving 23 artists containing sexually explicit homosexual photographs. A catalogue of this show is requested.

* 5) "Trouble in Paradise" - show by Jay Critchfield which opened October 5, 1989 at the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which sponsored the show.

I thank you in advance for your assistance in this matter. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call Ann Dotson or John Mashburn of my staff at 224-6342.

Kindest regards.

Sincerely,



JESSE HELMS:ad

Enclosure

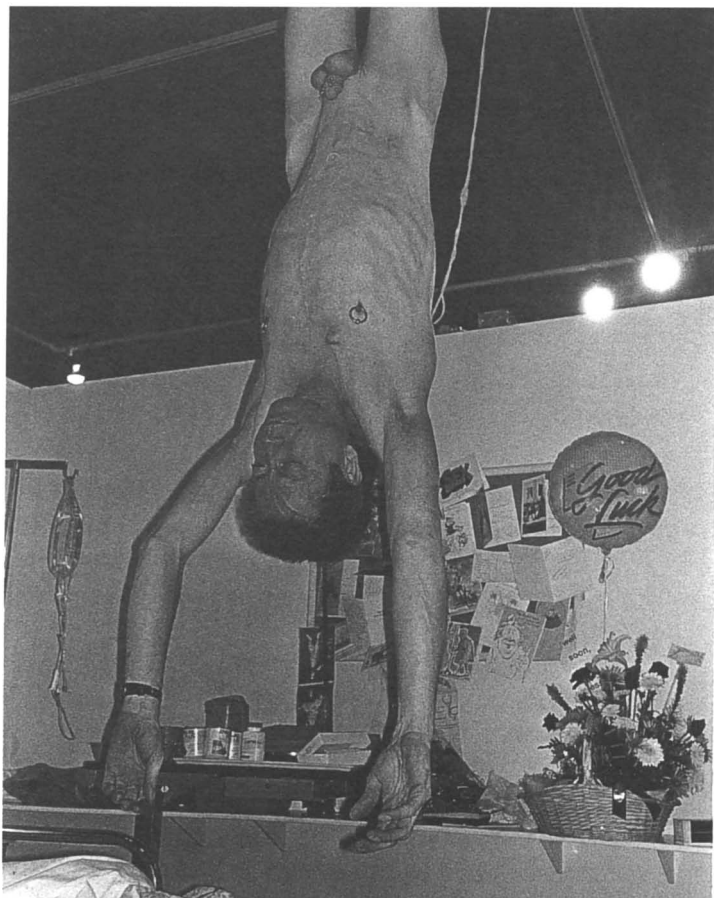


Figure 3 Bob Flanagan in *Visiting Hours*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, December 1992. Photo: Scott Boberg, 1992. Courtesy Bob Flanagan.

CF and SM, as if to evoke the DNA codes, the letters that have become crucial in the gene therapy that will one day provide a cure for cystic fibrosis. The alphabet wall also reminds us that pornography (from the Greek *pornographos*) has a linguistic component. The alphabet blocks memorialize two simultaneous landmarks in childhood: the acquisition of language (a system built on differences) and the discovery of sexual difference.

I learned better how to read Lacan by writing about Bob Flanagan, particularly what Lacan means in "The Mirror Stage" by libidinal dynamism, narcissism, and aggressivity. Lacan refers to man's "organic insufficiency in his natural reality"; in Flanagan's case, cystic fibrosis makes literal the notion of "organic insufficiency." What Lacan calls the fragmented body's "aggressive disintegration" recurs not only in Flanagan's dreams but in his art. Lacan describes a Hieronymus Bosch landscape symptomatically, with its "inner arena and enclosure . . . dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle."¹⁵ Flanagan's art is similarly divided into two opposed fields of contest between confinement and escape, descent and ascent, reflected in his twin obsessions with such confining apparatuses as cages, ropes, coffins, and his invented persona as a sexualized Superman (Fig. 4).

Flanagan thus fuses medicine with sadomasochism to problematize the relationships between the social and the psychic, between disease and desire. The sterile medical environment is itself a "perverse implantation." That is an important point, because, as J. G. Ballard suggests, "Bizarre experiments are now a commonplace of scientific research, moving ever closer to that junction where science and pornography will eventually meet and fuse. Conceivably, the day will come when science is itself the greatest producer of pornography. The weird perversions of human behavior triggered by psychologists testing the effects of pain, isolation, anger, etc. will play the same role that the bare breasts of Polynesian islanders performed in the 1940s wildlife documentary films."¹⁶ As if confirming Ballard's prophecy, Flanagan was to be the subject of a forthcoming photo-essay not in a porno magazine or even an art one, but in *National Geographic*, which planned to devote an issue to the phenomenology of pain. (The project was eventually canceled because the magazine capitulated to the climate of fear that Jesse Helms created.)

The antipornography campaign is sometimes called "the redemptive sex project." That is why Bonnie Klein's exposé of the sex industry on Forty-second Street in New York City was called *Not a Love Story*: sex



Figure 4 Bob Flanagan:
Supermasochist (San
 Francisco: Re/Search Books,
 1993). Courtesy
 Re/Search Books.

should be about love, though this film is *not*. Ironically, one point every commentator who sees *Visiting Hours* fails to mention is that Flanagan's and Sheree Rose's relationship *is* a love story too. To defend sado-masochism as "consensual" does not begin to describe the subtlety of their dynamic, shaped by *two* strong wills, two wicked wits. Rose's contributions to Flanagan's art are indispensable; far more than muse, she deserves recognition as cocreator. Sexually, Flanagan points out, "I am ultimately (this is what every masochist hates to hear, or admit) in full control" (BF, 32). Before meeting Bob, Sheree was in a traditional, constraining marriage, so part of her pleasure with Bob had a "certain revenge aspect of ordering a man about." While dominating him, Bob reports with a laugh, she gets a little smirk on her face. Sadomasochism,