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Survival of the Sickest: On Decadence, Disease, and the Performing Body¹

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Decadence and sickness are proximate concepts so long as sickness is understood not just as a physiological disorder, but as a metaphor for aesthetic or moral transgression. They are also protean concepts. ‘Decadence’ is referenced in the puritanical condemnation of ‘sick’ pleasures, identities and relationships, just as ‘sickness’ is embraced in transgressing the bulwarks of social conservatism. But decadence and sickness are also more than just concepts; they are seen to be embodied by specific, and often ostracized, people or groups. This is why theatre and performance lend themselves to exploring decadence and sickness as embodied phenomena, and it is also why decadence and sickness have been associated with the discursive production of the performing body as a threat.²

This article explores how performance makers in the 1990s and 2010s staged their experiences of physical sickness, specifically cystic fibrosis, in ways that appropriated and undermined the perceived ‘sickness’ of unconventional desires, including queer and sadomasochistic desire. My approach is informed by two studies in particular. The first is Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1991), initially published as two separate essays in 1978 and 1989. The second is a lesser-known book by Barbara Spackman called *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (1989). Both deal with illness metaphors, although their arguments lead in different directions. Where Sontag asks us to jettison metaphors that warp lived experiences of illness, Spackman explores how fin-de-siècle writers associated with decadence worked with metaphors of sickness in subversive explorations of physiological and cognitive difference. My own argument resides between the two, as it is not content with either.

Spackman considers approaches to sickness in decadent literature as the ‘ground of a new consciousness, a new interpretation of the body’s relation to thought’.³ This will become an important point of reference in what follows, only I choose not to limit this ‘ground’ and ‘interpretation’ to rhetoric and narrative. Theatre and performance ‘do’ things with metaphors. As Meredith Conti recognizes in a recent study of illness on the nineteenth-century stage, the performing body evinces or stands in for ‘the transfiguring, holistic, enculturating experience of illness, of an illness *lived*’.⁴ I share Conti’s interest in the fleshy presence of performers, but rather than focusing on performers who are bio-medically normative at the time of performance, this article considers how sick performance makers choose to stage and engage with metaphors of sickness. This is not necessarily to valorize the ‘authenticity’ of a given performance; rather, it is to acknowledge the institutional, discursive, and cultural production of sickness metaphors and narratives by learning from those who traverse and explore their bio-medical, cultural and counter-cultural frames of reference.

Like tuberculosis – which Linda and Michael Hutcheon describe as ‘an affliction of the sensual decadent’⁵ – cystic fibrosis ‘is a disease of liquids – the body turning to phlegm and mucus and sputum [...] – and of air, of the need for better air’; however, where tuberculosis was thought of in the nineteenth century ‘as a decorative, often lyrical’ illness, cystic fibrosis takes on something more akin to Sontag’s description of cancer, where ‘it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease’.⁶ Through analyses of the collaborative work of Bob Flanagan and fellow artist, dominatrix, and lover Sheree Rose in the years leading up to Flanagan’s death in 1996, and Rose’s collaboration with the British live artist Martin O’Brien in the 2010s, I will be looking at how the ‘unimaginability’ of aestheticizing cystic fibrosis might also become a platform for reclaiming punitive or demeaning illness metaphors. Moreover, I argue that they go much further than Spackman’s analysis permits in recalibrating how a sick body relates to desires that escape majoritarian preferences.

‘Decadence’ is not a term that has come into the orbit of the discourse surrounding O’Brien’s work, save for a short blog post,⁷ although the term has been used by conservative commentators to condemn the collaborative work of Flanagan and Rose, among others, as I explore in the following discussion. For its critics, especially its right-wing critics, the concept of decadence refers to a dangerous process of moral and cultural decline that arises as a consequence of endemic perversity, degeneracy, the undoing of classical traditions, societal decay, a threat to ‘good old-fashioned values’, and the enfeeblement of body, mind, and culture. Decadence usually means all of these things for those willing to embrace it as well – both historically and globally, whether keyed in the vein of European, Japanese, or Ottoman decadence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for instance), or in the sensualist poetry of writers in the last years of the Ming dynasty in China⁸ – only they see each in a different light, pitched less in a mode of castigation, and more as an opportunity, or tool, for exploring and expressing unconventional attractions, tastes and desires. This is why it is so important to acknowledge decadence’s protean qualities, as without recognizing how it has been invested with a whole host of different meanings – especially with regard to sickness – one risks validating its more nefarious utilization.

The US culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s offer one of the most instructive contexts for considering the work of Flanagan, Rose, and O’Brien,⁹ particularly the furore surrounding the work of performance artist Ron Athey. Athey’s work engages with a range of themes, but the ‘specific pains, pleasures, rages, and ecstasies’ of living as a white, HIV+, gay male during the AIDS crisis has played a particularly important role throughout.¹⁰ While a very different illness, the controversy surrounding Athey’s queer staging of sadomasochistic rituals in the 1990s makes explicit how multiple connotations of sickness and decadence can be harnessed for political ends by those who view ‘sick’ performance as the decadent progeny of cultural renegades and social pariahs – just as it makes clear how decadence might be embodied and enacted as the basis of a transgressive or transformational practice.

There is no shortage of studies addressing how decadence and sickness were explored as proximate concepts over the course of the European fin de siècle – Spackman’s monograph is an example – but the mythologization of sickness, the risks associated with falling ill, the perception of illness, and the codification of illness metaphors do not transcend historical boundaries unscathed. There are of course correspondences, such as the synergies between decadence and sickness in right-wing diatribes condemning a broad range of transgressions in art, literature, and performance, as well as how artists and writers responded to their own ostracism or marginality by embracing decadence; however, these synergies are also protean in ways that demand engagement with the specific historical and geographical contexts in which an artist is working, as these contexts impinge on both the production and reception of a work. The Introduction to this issue of *Volupté* offers a more expansive engagement with decadence, but the present article journeys instead from the US culture wars, which saw commentators and politicians decrying the ‘sickness’ and ‘decadence’ of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, and performance makers including Flanagan, Rose, and Athey, to a historical juncture cast in the increasingly long shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, which has deeply affected what it means to be staging and engaging with decadence and sickness.

In addressing coughing bodies, this article is intended as an opportunity to ruminate, from a distance, on our own viral moment. It is not ‘about’ the pandemic – it is about how artists have chosen to stage cystic fibrosis, and the relevance of the culture wars in understanding these stagings – and nor is it drawing a line between societal decadence and a virus that has already claimed millions of lives. If anything, it is an attempt to call out the short-sightedness of attempts to pathologize the ‘decadent society’,¹¹ which fail to recognize decadence as a form of ‘perennial decay’,¹² and which fail to engage in any meaningful way with the cultural politics of decadence. Nonetheless, my hope is that it might contextualize how notions of health and propriety relate to thought, embodiment, and sociality, emphasizing the extent to which these have been harnessed

as punitive moral concepts, as well as examining the space available for charting configurations of decadence and disease as the ground of an alternative consciousness.

‘An unmistakable decadence’: decadence, sickness and the culture wars

In December 1988, the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective exhibition *The Perfect Moment* opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which was meant to be the first in a seven-stop tour of museums in Chicago, Washington DC, Hartford, Berkeley, Cincinnati, and Boston. While the bulk of the exhibition centred around Mapplethorpe’s celebrated portraits, floral compositions, and classical nudes depicting black and white male bodies, two photographs of nude children and five images of gay men in bondage soon drew the attention of neoconservative and fundamentalist Christian critics. The controversy escalated after the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC cancelled its staging of the exhibition in light of public and political backlash (although the Washington Project for the Arts took it on with the help of private donors), and came to a head in 1990 – a year after Mapplethorpe’s untimely death from AIDS-related illness – when a grand jury issued two criminal indictments against the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), and two against its director, Dennis Barrie, ‘for pandering obscenity and illegal use of a minor in nudity oriented materials. Seven of Mapplethorpe’s photos were deemed obscene – two portraits of children and five of explicit male sexual behavior’.¹³ The matter was settled in court, leading to the acquittal of both the CAC and Barrie on 5 October 1990 after the prosecution was unable to persuade the jury that Mapplethorpe’s photographs were bereft of artistic merit.

This well-documented episode in the cultural-political history of North America’s most recent fin de siècle entrenched positions in a culture war that reached fever pitch by the early 1990s, following hot on the heels of another controversy centred around the exhibition of Andres Serrano’s photograph *Immersion (Piss Christ)* (1987), which depicts a wood and plastic crucifix immersed in Serrano’s own urine. The exhibition of *Piss Christ* prompted readers of the pious and

highly conservative American Family Association newsletter to lobby congressional representatives about its supposed indecency, leading the Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato to describe it on the floor of the Senate as a 'deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity'.¹⁴ That Serrano was also the beneficiary of a \$15,000 grant supported by the NEA prompted D'Amato to implore the Acting Chair of the NEA, Hugh Southern, to prohibit the funding of 'shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving art', with a \$30,000 grant supporting the travel and exhibition costs for Mapplethorpe's show suffering similar scrutiny.¹⁵ By June 1990, performance, too, was under fire after the newly-appointed NEA chairman John Frohnmayer vetoed grants that were due to be awarded to Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes, who became known as the 'NEA 4' after seeking to challenge the decision in the courts.

That the work of these artists and performance makers was funded with taxpayers' money (despite the NEA budget being only a tiny fraction of its west-European counterparts) formed an important point of departure for how the culture war played out in print and broadcast media, and in the political arena – although allegations about the supposedly profligate distribution of public funds only tells a part of the story. Mapplethorpe, Miller, Fleck, and Hughes were all known to identify as gay or lesbian; Finley was both an ally and a feminist; and Serrano was a self-professed Christian of Honduran and Afro-Cuban heritage using a range of bodily fluids to explore his religion. As such, they represented what New Right critics regarded as the threatening deviancy of a left-liberal arts establishment that was in desperate want of purgation. Hence, there was more than money at stake; freedom of artistic expression, the visibility of marked bodies, the enjoyment of non-normative desires, and gay rights at the height of the AIDS crisis were all on trial, in some cases quite literally.

These events are now a canonical point of reference on Performance Studies programmes, but the specific rhetoric that was mobilized by key commentators has received less attention. 'Sickness' and 'decadence', as well as their converse – 'health' and 'vigour' – played vital roles in how critics and advocates of the art bound up in the culture wars were being thought of as

threatening, or revealing of an exclusionary horizon of taste, decency, and appropriateness, depending on the perspective of the commentator. For instance, the conservative critic Patrick Buchanan set the tone for a raft of attacks against the NEA on the basis that it was supporting a ‘polluted culture’ that threatened to poison ‘a nation’s soul’ if left to ‘fester and stink’, imploring that ‘[w]e should not subsidize decadence’.¹⁶ Senator Jesse Helms also spearheaded attempts to gut the NEA through the so-called ‘Helms Amendment’ (No. 991), which was proposed in October 1989, defeated in 1990, revived in a form akin to the original proposal in 1994, and defeated again that summer. As these events suggest, Helms and his allies doggedly pursued and condemned the ‘decadence’ of ‘disgusting, insulting, revolting garbage produced by obviously sick minds’,¹⁷ citing Flanagan, Rose, and Athey in a series of vitriolic attacks¹⁸ – but not without staunch opposition.

A point that often goes unnoticed in scholarship dealing with the culture wars is that important advocates of artists subjected to such hyperbolic diatribes also made recourse to a similar rhetoric. For instance, the performance scholar Peggy Phelan responded by insisting that ‘the health of art influences in a direct way the health and wealth of the nation’, imploring that the art community ‘must articulate the connection between vigorous artistic expression and the values of democracy’.¹⁹ In other words, the perceived ‘health’ and ‘vigour’, or ‘sickness’ and ‘decadence’, of art or a specific artist were not incidental to the controversy, for either side of the culture war; sickness and its relationship to decadence *was* the controversy. As Phelan puts it, ‘bodies soak through language’;²⁰ but equally, language sticks to bodies, and this stickiness had important ramifications for how the centre and the margins were configured and perceived.

Decadence scholars may well be reminded at this point of two relatively well-known events in the United Kingdom that drew connections between decadent art and lifestyle, queerness, and the threat of societal decadence and degeneration: namely, the trials of Oscar Wilde for ‘gross indecency’ in 1895, and the 1918 Pemberton-Billing trial, in which conservative MP Noel Pemberton-Billing used a libel claim against him to smear and effectively ruin the careers of theatre makers J. T. Grein and Maud Allan (Pemberton-Billing took their staging of Wilde’s *Salomé* (1891)

as an excuse to condemn what his own newspaper dubbed ‘The Cult of the Clitoris’, which, the paper claimed, was bound up with seditious and treasonous plots at a pivotal point in the war effort).²¹ Where the Helms Amendment failed, the victorious legal teams in both the Wilde and Pemberton-Billing trials used condemnation of literature and performance as ‘evidence’ for condemning queer lifestyles and practices that were deemed to be socially and morally corrosive. However, Helms’s staunch opposition to gay rights, political liberalism, and freedom of artistic expression was closely indexed to a rising tide of New Right politics, as well as the AIDS crisis, which are specific to the late twentieth century (as is the erosion of public subsidy and the size of the state that came to define the emergence of neoliberalism, although for Helms this took a back seat relative to the policing and protection of a rigidly-defined moral high ground).²² It is these contexts, then, particularly once read in light of Christian fundamentalism, that are the most pertinent to consider in addressing Helms’s critique of ‘sick’ performances and the social and moral ‘decadence’ that they represent and threaten.

Although Flanagan and Rose had a role to play in Helms’s attacks on the NEA, it was Ron Athey who came under closest scrutiny, not least when Helms lambasted Ron Athey and Company’s *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993-1996) on the floor of the US Senate. Helms focused on its incorporation of scarification rituals, bloodletting, and the queer staging of Pentecostal evangelism and Christian martyrdom in a truncated version of that performance, titled *Excerpted Rites Transformation*, that was presented at a small 100-seat cabaret venue by Minneapolis’ Walker Art Center on 5 March 1994 (performance scholar and Athey collaborator Dominic Johnson has provided an authoritative overview of the event and its context, and documentation of an earlier version can be found on Vimeo).²³ It was a thinly-veiled attack on queerness and its expression during the AIDS crisis, as well as the very idea of public arts funding. Helms claimed that to fund such art – however inconsequentially²⁴ – was to participate in a dangerous process of cultural erosion. However, ‘[t]he broader issue’, he argued,

is the sober realization that for the past two decades, an unmistakable decadence has saturated American society. A furious assault on the traditional sensibilities of the American people has taken its toll. So many have become afraid to stand up and declare the difference between right and wrong, what is ugly and what is destructive and what is noble and what is degrading. No wonder [...] there has been a cultural breakdown.²⁵

In one sense, Helms is appealing here to a conservative ‘common sense’ in strict opposition to Athey’s ‘uncommon sense’, a term that David Weir identifies as a key characteristic of artistic and literary decadence.²⁶ However, while the judgement of taste played an important role throughout the culture wars, Helms’s primary concern in this particular passage is moral, not aesthetic. He expresses worry about the decline of values that have supported people like him since time immemorial. In other words, Helms’s moral critique of societal decadence casts Athey’s uncommon aesthetic sense as ‘decadent’.



Fig. 1: Video still featuring Jesse Helms on the floor of the US Senate on 25 July 1994. Next to him is an image of Ron Athey as St. Sebastian in *Martyrs & Saints* (1992). Public domain.
Available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4520996/user-clip-jesse-helms-ron-athey>.

This is not to say that Athey's work is decadent merely because it is accused of being so. The image that Helms uses to illustrate his point finds Athey depicting an arrow-strewn St. Sebastian in a scene from an earlier work, *Martyrs & Saints* (1992-1993), that was partly inspired by the decadent writer Mishima Yukio, and the fact that St. Sebastian was prayed to by devotees in times of plague (fig. 1).²⁷ Hence, what Helms's diatribe really stages is the cultural politics of decadence: on the one hand determined by the fears and prejudices of a puritanical senator intent on ostracizing Athey, the art he produces, and the communities he affiliates with, and on the other demanding acknowledgment of Athey's body and actions as sites for exploring a queerly decadent hagiography.

This pivotal moment in the culture wars captures much of decadence's complexity in relation to performance and politics by making clear that the concept of decadence is as much a weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of the Right as it is an attribute of counter-cultural practices aligned with the Left. To begin with, Helms's attack underscores how the 'threat' of decadence – keyed in a derogatory mode that holds individual 'degenerates' responsible for societal and cultural decline – can be made to stick to particular kinds of bodies: in this case, a queer, suffering body. However, it also illustrates how these very same bodies have been centred in practices that refuse and seek alternatives to mainstream and repressive attitudes toward crisis (particularly the AIDS crisis), memorialization, grief, sociality, desire, and pleasure. Helms's attack also extends theatre and performance's long-standing associations with contagion.²⁸ The perceived threat of physical contagion was linked to the erroneous claim that Athey exposed audiences to his own HIV+ blood in a scene that he dubs the 'Human Printing Press', although it was not Athey's blood but his collaborator's, Darryl Carlton – aka Divinity Fudge, who was HIV-negative – that was used in this scene.²⁹ Although Athey's blood was shed in other scenes, this was at some distance from the audience. Hence, we might see the contagion at stake as being not only linked to the perceived threat of biological infection, but exposure to uncommon practices. In this, as Johnson recognizes, 'both Athey and Helms held true to their own equivalent (though morally divergent) convictions

that a work of art can be a force for social change, primarily through disruption'.³⁰ The difference in these convictions can be found in how both understand decadence, or in Athey's case concepts adjacent to decadence. Where Helms is content with the metaphorical punch of decadence, condemned as biomedical and moral sickness, Athey can be seen to embody decadence as the basis for a transformational or transgressive practice, refusing to be a silent witness to the ascendancy of moral and behavioural puritanism.

The impulses underpinning Helms's agenda have not gone away, just as they are cast in the long shadow of history. They resonate with historical attacks on socio-cultural decline and individual 'degeneracy' – especially Max Nordau's infamous railing against fin-de-siècle culture, *Entartung [Degeneration]* (1892) – as well as recently published critiques of societal decadence coming from the religious Right, such as Ross Douthat's *The Decadent Society* (2020).³¹ This makes Athey's first retrospective exhibition all the more timely. 'Queer Communion: Ron Athey' (2021) was curated by Amelia Jones, presented at New York's Participant Inc, and featured, among other events, a live-streamed recreation of *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* on 16 February 2021.³² The exhibition and especially the re-staging of this performance, given the controversy surrounding it, prompts reflection on the importance – and urgency – of taking decadence and related concepts seriously, especially as they pertain to performance and performance makers in a precarious contemporary moment. Arguments about the 'decadence' of art and public arts funding, as well as the 'decadence' or 'degeneracy' of particular kinds of body, orientation, appearance, and behaviour, are set to be key points of reference in the months and years ahead as governments struggle to deal with the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as resurgent right- and far-right-wing sentiment.

What Buchanan and Helms stood for, in Sontag's words, was a 'Kulturkampf against all that is called, for short (or inaccurately), the 1960s':³³ gay liberation, radical politics, pleasure activism, sexual experimentation, exploring new forms of social relationality, and the undermining of traditional institutions and values, including heterosexual and monogamous marriage. Morally

‘decadent’ lifestyles and practices were regarded by their critics as symptomatic of narrowly-defined moral, social or cultural ‘sickness’, with the expression of non-conformist desire in contemporary art serving as a scapegoat and platform for redressing societal ‘decadence’. Equally, though, as Athey’s work can be seen to illustrate, decadence as a praxis of spectacular transformation or transgression can also be seen to have been embraced by artists who sought alternatives to the dogmatism of reproductive futurism, the resurgent power of the puritanical New Right, and the insistence that art must contribute to ‘the health and wealth of the nation’.

‘Fight sickness with sickness’: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose

Flanagan and Rose moved and cut their teeth (and skin) in the same circles as Athey at venues like Club Fuck! and Sin-a-Matic in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s. They were also friends and occasional collaborators in S&M contexts, and were bundled together by Helms as part of the same decadent cabal during the culture wars. A toxic rhetoric of decadence and sickness in the political diatribes of the New Right were explicitly and thoroughly queered in their hands in ways that make clear what an ‘uncommon’ decadent sensibility has to offer to our understanding of the cultural politics of the culture wars, and to the cultural politics of decadence in performance.

Flanagan’s collaborative work with Rose – too often overlooked as such³⁴ – might best be described as a praxis of sickness grounded in Flanagan’s experiences of living with cystic fibrosis, their sadomasochistic relationship, and Rose’s memorialization of Flanagan’s legacy in the years leading up to, and after, his death from the disease in 1996. Multiple connotations of sickness and decadence underpin their artistic experimentation, cultural-political outlook, and way of life. While committed to a heterosexual relationship, Flanagan and Rose’s championing of sadomasochism in both quotidian and aesthetic practice was more closely aligned with queer artists like Mapplethorpe and Athey than with the normative institutions and values that underpin majoritarian perspectives and relationships. Hence, they posed a particular threat to heteronormativity at a point in time – the height of the AIDS crisis – when heterosexuality itself was producing what Amelia Jones calls

‘queer effects’ in the eyes of conservative commentators, as much as those willing to embrace those effects.³⁵ They revelled in the ‘degeneracy’ of which they were accused, reading queerness through sickness and sickness through queerness, and brought metaphors of sickness back to the bodies they effaced, demeaned, or ostracized.

For Rose, Flanagan’s life ‘was like the story of Camille reversed. Instead of the dying young woman with the cough it was the story of the dying young man with the cough.’³⁶ This is an interesting analogy to make. It references Alexandre Dumas *fils*’s play *La Dame aux camélias* (1852), based on his novel of 1848 and the real life and death of the nineteenth-century French courtesan Marie Duplessis. Duplessis was famed at the time for her literary salon and relationships with the political and cultural elite (including Dumas), although she is now better known through her rendering as the play’s eponymous ‘Camille’, and for Dumas’ squeezing of her biography’s melodramatic potential, especially the romanticization of a death from tuberculosis. As Sontag acknowledges, tuberculosis is one of the diseases most ‘encumbered by the trappings of metaphor’, not least with regard to its associations with intensified sexual desire, a ‘liveliness that comes from enervation’, and ‘physiological decadence or deliquescence’.³⁷ Hence, while a romantic melodrama and not a decadent play per se, *La Dame aux camélias* still plays into the mythologization of tuberculosis as ‘an affliction of the sensual decadent’, to recall Hutcheon and Hutcheon. Also, various stagings and adaptations have been contextualized or critically received in light of decadence, be it the decadence of those performing the work, or the decadence of its interpretation. Examples range from Sarah Bernhardt’s wildly successful touring productions in the 1880s (which effectively saved her from financial ruin after leaving the Comédie Française),³⁸ to *Camille (A Tearjerker): A Travesty on La Dame Aux Camélias* (1973), which was one of Charles Ludlam’s and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company’s more lucrative productions.³⁹

The analogy that Rose draws between Flanagan and Camille is an acknowledgment of how a very particular lung disease found itself caught up in a decadent mythologization, for which theatre makers must claim some responsibility. Although Bernhardt and Ludlam’s associations

with decadence emerged more through the writing of their critics, they were also drawn to a plotline that finds Camille succumbing to a ‘noble’ martyrdom that helped to cement the trappings of metaphor that circulate around tuberculosis as a disease of the lungs, and those bodies that succumb to its influence.⁴⁰ In contrast, Flanagan and Rose resisted the beautification of disease. They turned instead to the performing body to ‘fight sickness with sickness’,⁴¹ to borrow one of Flanagan’s best-known dictums that aligns the realities of an afflicted body with a queering of the metaphors that frame sickness as abjection. Both connotations were at once in Flanagan’s ‘nature’, as he put it, while at the same time *à rebours*, or ‘against nature’.⁴² As with Phelan’s reading of Mapplethorpe’s *The Perfect Moment*, this is what led them to be perceived by moral puritans as threatening, because they insisted upon the possibility ‘for one’s body to demonstrate love – or at least desire – by enduring the other’s infliction of pain’, upsetting the alchemy of the ‘natural body’.⁴³

Flanagan articulates his attraction to masochism in an oft-quoted poem called ‘Why’, but his journals offer a slightly different perspective. ‘*It’s not just the pain that I want*’, he writes; ‘*there has to be an atmosphere of eroticism, of decadence, of meanness, of sincerity, of understanding, of control. Without some of these things it’s more like having a headache or toothache.*’⁴⁴ Decadence is not simply the inverse of a body *in extremis*; for Flanagan, it became a part of how he conceptualized the practice of masochism, immersed in the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Pauline Réage (Anne Cécile Desclos), as much as the Los Angeles BDSM scene that he and Rose helped to establish in the 1980s.⁴⁵

Flanagan and Rose’s best-known body of work, *Visiting Hours* (1992), offers an example of such sickness at work. It was presented just a few years before Flanagan’s death at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992, before moving to the New Museum in New York City in 1994, and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1995. They transformed the exhibition space into a paediatric hospital ward, recreating the context of Flanagan’s medicalization in a space that he and Rose both designed and controlled. It was saturated with generic medical

accoutrements including a hospital bed (his ‘home away from home’, as Linda S. Kauffman puts it),⁴⁶ an oxygen tank, drips, a visitor’s chair, X-Rays of Flanagan’s lungs that also highlighted his pierced nipples, token cacti to give an otherwise drab waiting room a bit of a lift, and so on. Alongside this, the installation was filled with toys and objects from Flanagan’s early childhood, such as a wall of 1400 alphabet blocks spelling CF [cystic fibrosis] and SM [sodomasochism] over and over again, a toy chest, pacifiers, and a barred crib, as well as bondage equipment (resonating with some of the childhood paraphernalia just mentioned), television screens displaying bondage-like scenes culled from Hollywood films and cartoons, and a coffin with a screen that replaced Flanagan’s head with that of the viewer if they looked inside.⁴⁷ Hospitalization, childhood, and sodomasochism were thus drawn together as disease, development, and discipline.

As examples like this suggest, Rose and Flanagan sought to reclaim the positioning of what Jennifer Parker-Starbuck calls ‘the medical body’: a body that is ‘acted upon’ by medical diagnoses and treatments.⁴⁸ In doing so, Flanagan’s marking as both ‘abject’ and ‘object’ by medical institutions and the perceptions and discourses surrounding them were treated as creative resources, and as the basis of a way of life – but on terms defined by Flanagan and Rose. These creative resources can also be seen to take on a therapeutic dimension in what has been dubbed both ‘Sadomedicine’ and ‘aesthetic self-medication’, acknowledging the twin ‘pathologies’ of cystic fibrosis and S&M without being limited by the disembodied medicalization of either.⁴⁹ This is not simply about reclaiming illness from a medical frame; the discourses themselves were being appropriated, while at the same time rubbing up against the public presentation of lifestyle practices more usually conducted in private or in shared subcultural spaces. Flanagan and Rose were recontextualizing the disciplining of the medical body as a masochistic compliance with the demands of a lover and mistress, queering abjection and objectification in the service of desire and creativity.

It is important to emphasize the centrality of Flanagan’s body in this work. He would lie in the hospital bed as visitors related their own experiences of sickness, or Rose would laboriously

pull his body from the bed feet-first and upside down via a pulley mechanism attached to the ceiling, causing his hospital gown to slip off. Rose's manipulation of Flanagan's body in *Visiting Hours* queers the view, held by none other than Sigmund Freud, that tragedy is founded upon the pleasure to be found in the suffering of others. For Freud,

a person physically ill is possible on the stage only as a property, but not as the hero – excepting as some particular psychic aspect of illness is susceptible of psychic elaboration, as for example of the abandoning of the sick Philoctetes [the eponymous role in Sophocles' play], or the hopelessness of the sick in the plays of Strindberg.⁵⁰

Contra Freud, it was precisely in his own objectification that Flanagan searched for both autonomy and a new lease of life, as well as the foundations upon which his mock-super-hero status was built as a self-confessed 'supermasochist'. This was a far cry from the 'heroism' so often attributed to the embattled sick and the disabled; it was a crippled take on the attribution of heroism to a sick performing body that found pleasure in 'super' masochism.⁵¹

Flanagan's manipulated performing body, then, played a central role in *Visiting Hours*; however, its manipulations were subject not just to Rose's whims, but the choreography of his illness as well. In a compelling study of this piece, the scholar and live artist Martin O'Brien, who I will be returning to later as key to the study of Flanagan's legacy, imagines what it must have been like to visit Flanagan while he was dangling upside down, making his body appear 'almost lifeless and reminiscent of a piece of meat hanging in the slaughterhouse. The only sign of life is his coughing'.⁵² Here, the cough – erupting from a suspended, naked and supplicant body – becomes a sign of both terminal finitude and convulsive life. It is what choreographs cystic fibrosis, and it is what animates Flanagan's willingly submissive body as it hangs in all its glory. To put it another way, he makes a spectacle of his sickness in ways that anticipate and riff on its double edge – the product not just of the kind of 'obviously sick mind' bemoaned by Helms, but of an obviously sick body. Flanagan finds meaning in this sick body, indeed harnesses his body – both literally and figuratively – as a basis for reorienting its place within an environment that he and Rose both craft and manipulate. Upside down, and appealing to an uncommon as much as an anti-aesthetic taste,

Flanagan's 'sickness' comes across as deeply, profoundly decadent: decadent because of the ways in which sickness is foregrounded as a means of orienting and finding meaning within a carefully-crafted environment, and because of how the spectacularly sick body, presented in a way that re-contextualizes the fulfilment of queer desire in sub-cultural spaces, appeals to the gaze and appreciation of a spectatorial public.



Fig. 2: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose on the anniversary of their wedding, 1995.
Photo by © Michel Delsol, all rights reserved. Courtesy of Sheree Rose and ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

If we are to take seriously the task of tracing decadent genealogies, and of approaching the sick body as the ‘ground of a new consciousness, a new interpretation of the body’s relation to thought’ – to recall Spackman’s framing of sickness in the decadent imagination – one wonders what better place there might be to start than with the ‘*atmosphere of [...] decadence*’ explored by Flanagan and Rose. Moreover, it seems a particularly compelling moment in which to return to a corpus that draws as much on ‘the laboured breathing of CF’ as it does on ‘the controlled breathing and ecstatic breathlessness of BDSM performance’.⁵³ One cannot help but wonder how Flanagan might have responded to the coronavirus pandemic, which poses a particular acute threat to those living with CF, and to the ways in which it has deprived so many of the capacity to breathe easily, or to breathe at all.⁵⁴ However, Flanagan’s fatally-laboured breathing and ecstatic breathlessness was not simply appropriated in the name of art; it became the basis of a praxis upon which he built his approach to survival, a praxis that was deeply rooted in Flanagan’s own autobiography and the particularities of the world that he and Rose had built together (fig. 2).

Only the sick will survive: Sheree Rose and Martin O’Brien

The collaborations of Flanagan and Rose provide instructive context for considering other artists who have since made work about their experiences of living with cystic fibrosis, such as the British performance maker Jill Hocking (who died of the disease in 2004), and the Los-Angeles-based Dominic Quagliozzi. Organizations like Sick of the Fringe and Unlimited Festival have also been doing much to propagate the idea of fighting sickness with sickness, as did the late performance maker Katherine Araniello. However, it is O’Brien who has most explicitly sought to honour Flanagan’s legacy. Like Flanagan, O’Brien’s work stages and explores his own cystic fibrosis, and usually incorporates masochistic acts including cutting, piercing, spanking, binding, and breath restriction (fig. 3). He has been collaborating with Rose since 2011, although all of his work pays homage to Flanagan by ‘punctur[ing] the abjection of his condition with glitter and gunge’, as performance scholar Gianna Bouchard so evocatively puts it.⁵⁵ In O’Brien’s work, sickness is the

starting point for working through the contingencies and uncertainties of his own life – approaching it as ‘a way of talking about the temporal experience of a life lived longer than expected’⁵⁶ – just as it is the starting point for imagining an apocalyptic, though quasi-utopic, world ‘in which only the sick can survive’.⁵⁷ O’Brien made one such depiction – a short film he developed with Suhail Merchant called *The Unwell* (2016) – freely available online during the pandemic. It is a riff on the zombie movies of filmmakers like George A. Romero in which we find staggering zombies, all played by O’Brien, that crawl and lurch to the sound of a relentlessly hacking cough.



Fig. 3: Martin O'Brien, *Last(ing)* (2013). Toynbee Studios, London.
Photo: Guido Mencari. Courtesy of Martin O'Brien.

As O'Brien puts it, *The Unwell* 'seems to speak to the times we are living in. I'm currently trying to understand how to speak about [the pandemic], which poses such a big threat to me personally, but which also means sickness is something everyone is having to face.'⁵⁸ It certainly resonates when watched in conditions of a national lockdown in the United Kingdom, with images of deserted streets and shut-up shops, and labourers in high-visibility jackets dressed for work, but with nowhere to go, and that sound – the hacking cough – periodically erupting from the distorted recesses of a speaker. But it is also a highly personal rumination on living with CF, depicting a sick interpretation of the body's relation to thought as much as action, desire, and relationality. It reads as being at once familiar in the generalization of symptoms and the imagination of deserted streets, and strange in the idiosyncrasies of an illness that renders the CF-zombie, inhabiting the 'zombie years' of a life lived longer than expected, particularly susceptible to succumbing to a rampant virus.

The Ascension (2017) is O'Brien's most visceral and compelling honouring of Flanagan's legacy. It was a collaborative piece developed with Rose that was presented as part of a group show at the Jason Vass Gallery in LA, called 'Every Breath You Take'. It was intended as a 'channelling' of Flanagan's spiritual presence, with Rose acting as a Kali figure, and O'Brien embodying both Flanagan and Shiva. Documentation has recently been made available in Yetta Howard's edited volume *Rated RX: Sheree Rose with and After Bob Flanagan* (2020), which is an invaluable resource for piecing together Rose's collaborations with both Flanagan and O'Brien. The performance begins with two dominatrixes partially dressed as nuns sprinkling tiny, confetti-like photos of Flanagan over O'Brien's naked and flogged body as he crawls his way in a kinky procession toward a shrine memorializing Flanagan's life and death. O'Brien then delivers a 'Sermon on Sickness' before Rose and Athey – another important mediator of Flanagan's legacy – baptise him in water, glitter, and rose petals. Rose carves a zig-zagged letter 'S' (for Sheree, as well as, perhaps, for sick, slave, superman/supermasochist, sadomasochism, and survival) onto O'Brien's breast, mirroring the marking that she had made on Flanagan's body over twenty years

previously. The piece culminates with members from a specialist artistic collective called Embrace Chaos piercing his skin with hooks to facilitate a crucifixion-like ‘ascension’ of O’Brien’s limp, suffering body: the righted counterpart to Flanagan’s being winched feet-first in *Visiting Hours* (a scene that also went by the title ‘The Ascension’). The ‘apotheosis’ of the piece, as Amelia Jones puts it, finds Rose embracing and then briefly hanging from O’Brien’s suspended, supplicant body, reopening ‘wounds for those who lost Flanagan as a friend’ in ‘a state of emotional release that is almost ecstatic in its catharsis’.⁵⁹

Alongside the ‘S’ marking, one of the ways in which O’Brien’s body serves as a medium for the channelling of Flanagan in this performance is the thematization of the cough. Far from ‘purifying’ sickness of its metaphorical baggage, O’Brien’s ‘Sermon on Sickness’ imagines ‘that other place’ – famously explored by Sontag as ‘the kingdom of the sick’ – as a world in which only the sick survive, both referencing and subverting the ‘punitive and sentimental fantasies’ that tend to dominate figurations of illness.⁶⁰ In O’Brien’s hands, this world depicts not a kingdom, but a small town anywhere known for the health of its inhabitants – at least to begin with:

No one ever coughed in this town and anyone that sneezed was put into quarantine. [...] The town was full of health food shops and people seemed to live off salad. [...] There were never any orgies, and no one liked BDSM. Sex was done once a week with the lights off, missionary style, mainly by younger people in order to have children once they were in stable relationships. [...] This was the perfect town if you were healthy, pretty, and rich.⁶¹

That is, until the day that a prophet and their ‘twelve disciples of sickness’ rode into the town, their coughs echoing through the streets and the residents bolting their doors for fear of becoming ill. “‘Only the sick will survive’” preached the prophet. “‘We are here to spread the good word: fight sickness with sickness’”.⁶² One by one the inhabitants approach the prophet to be cured of their health, and one by one they begin to cough:

With the cough came a new take on life, a new understanding of existence. [...] The hospital, which once was a place for rich people to get plastic surgery, soon became a place of care. The town hall was transformed into a disco for the infected. [...] Everyone started experimenting sexually. The prophet and the twelve disciples of sickness watched as the town collapsed and a new society started to form. [...] Only the sick can survive in this world. Being sick becomes a lifeline, a way to live in a hostile environment. It becomes the only way to be.⁶³

The cough, as a sound and physical action, resides at the centre of O'Brien's practice, and especially the exacerbation of illness through feats of physical endurance. The cough in question is not just 'a small polite cough', although regular clearing of the throat is a hallmark of O'Brien's performances; rather, it is 'those lung-racking, bone-shaking coughs. You can almost hear phlegm. It is the sound of cystic fibrosis. It is the sound of disease.'⁶⁴ It is this cough that forms the point of departure in O'Brien's 'Sermon on Sickness', just as it forms the basis for a wry utopia in which 'only the sick can survive'.

O'Brien's thematization of the cough has been his principal means of paying homage to Flanagan since his first durational work, *Mucus Factory* (2011): a performance that was mentored by Athey through the Live Art Development Agency, that was first presented at LADA's two-day *Access All Areas* programme at London's Club Row Gallery in March 2011 (which Athey also attended), and that was followed, as part of the same programme, by O'Brien's first collaboration with Rose (*Thank You Ma'am, Please May I Have Another*, 2011). Aside from sharing a space with Athey and Rose, *Mucus Factory* inaugurated O'Brien's honouring of Flanagan's legacy by appropriating and re-situating medical paraphernalia in a mode reminiscent of *Visiting Hours*, including a trampoline and a physiotherapy table used by O'Brien and his co-performer, Becky Beyts, to loosen mucus in O'Brien's lungs; referencing Flanagan in the title of the performance ('I am a factory of mucus as thick as pudding'); and transforming a performance space into 'one of both discipline and *jouissance*', echoing Flanagan's incorporation of kink in his actions, and the 'queer use' of medical paraphernalia.⁶⁵ In this case, O'Brien uses his phlegm, which also adorns his beglittered body, to lubricate a nebuliser so that he can penetrate himself with its mouthpiece. The performance is oriented around the sound and choreography of coughing, the affordances of phlegm as a material, and the queer use of medical equipment. These all become media – both artistic media, and a spiritual medium – for channelling Flanagan. In other words, the cough, the appropriation of its disciplining, and the cough's secretions form the bases of a queerly decadent

genealogy in a performance attended by those whom Flanagan's life and work had touched, and performed by one who Helms and his allies would no doubt have judged to be an 'obviously sick mind'.

The visceral and audible presence of O'Brien's coughs in performance signal a kind of decadence that is concerned as much with the pathology of a body's sickness as it is with the passive undoing of its objectification as such. As with Flanagan, this is not as simple as rejecting the bio-medical subjectification of the sick body. Rather, as O'Brien says of his own work, 'the cough establishes itself as the voice of illness';⁶⁶ it speaks louder and more clearly than the voice by altering the medium through which sickness is defined, apprehended, understood, and felt by witnessing bodies 'dis-eased'⁶⁷ by the presence of a sick sickness. What results is a fraying of 'the representational edges of the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and the sick', to borrow from visual art scholar Janice Hladki.⁶⁸ The cough may still be an abject sign of the healthy body's 'constitutive outside',⁶⁹ but O'Brien values it *as* abjection, and as the basis of a 'new interpretation of the body's relation to thought'. It is this refusal to pull the margin to the centre, and to revel instead in that which is ordinarily stifled or 'cured', that enables O'Brien to breathe new life into a queerly decadent genealogy.

Conclusion

In concluding, it is worth drawing attention to the ways in which ideas of legacy and alternative kinship have been performed and passed on by Flanagan to O'Brien, with Athey and especially Rose serving as vectors of transmission. Cystic fibrosis is not contracted by infection – it is a genetic condition – but Flanagan, Rose, and O'Brien nonetheless exploit metaphors of illness by spectacularizing and embracing the sick body as a foreign body with a contagious influence. Where Athey's work and Flanagan and Rose's collaborations during the culture wars were diagnosed as being symptomatic of societal decadence, participating in a process of cultural decline that threatened the 'health' and 'vigour' of a nation, O'Brien plays on the fears that stick to the coughing

body as an abject and contagious Other, which is what makes his penchant for the zombie so compelling: a coughing, cannibalistic embodiment of a figure who does not just survive, but thrives in the apocalyptic kingdom of the sick. O'Brien's tongue is of course firmly in cheek; he is not inviting those who recognize themselves as healthy to contract a disease, and his quasi-utopic vision is certainly not inviting his audiences to fetishize viral outbreaks. Rather, the invitation he offers – and, in their own ways, the invitation offered by all of the examples considered in this article – is to reflect on how bodies inherit, are subsumed within, or might potentially reconfigure narratives and metaphors of sickness that rehearse spurious and exclusionary notions of health and propriety.

The utility of health and propriety as moral concepts in cultural and political discourse risks detracting from the corporeal, as well as intersubjective spaces of affective exchange that make metaphors of sickness meaningful in the first place. The invitation at stake is to recognize how easy it is for metaphors of sickness to serve the policing of 'proper' behaviour, 'appropriate' sexuality, 'legitimate' tastes, and 'productive' abilities. Rather than simply succumbing to demeaning metaphors of decadence and sickness, the artists considered in this article encourage us to reorient ourselves in the terrain of the specific illnesses that they experience. They invite us to explore unconventional performing bodies and desires not merely as symptoms of societal decadence and decline, but as that which might challenge its more puritanical harbingers. Most of all, they prompt us to consider not just *what* we inherit through cultural transmission, but *how*, and what it might mean to live by metaphors on terms that elude their punitive frames.

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² For an overview of examples framing the performing body as a threat, see Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

³ Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. ix. See also Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Decadent Tropologies of Sickness', in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Christopher Nissen and Maria Härmänmaa (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85–102.

- ⁴ Meredith Conti, *Playing Sick: Performances of Illness in the Age of Victorian Medicine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 16. Emphasis in original.
- ⁵ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Disease, Desire, Death* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 43.
- ⁶ See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 14, p. 20.
- ⁷ Adam Alston, 'On sick performance and theatre's chronic maladies', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 11 February 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/on-sick-performance-and-theatres-chronic-maladies>> [accessed 12 May 2021].
- ⁸ You can find examples across this special issue of *Volupté*. For a study of decadent poetry in the twilight years of the Ming Dynasty, see Li Xiaorong, "I Sliced my Flesh into Paper, and Ground my Liver into Ink": Wang Cihui's (1593-1642) Sensualist Poetry as an Alternative Route to Self-Realization', *Ming Studies*, 67 (2013), 30–53.
- ⁹ The term 'culture wars' refers to numerous contexts, including the 'two cultures controversy' of the 1960s. This article focuses on debates circling around public funding of the arts in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. See Dominic Johnson, "'Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?": Ron Athey and the Culture Wars', in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. by Dominic Johnson (London: Live Art Development Agency; Bristol: Intellect, 2013), pp. 64–93 (p. 65).
- ¹⁰ Amelia Jones, 'Introduction: Queer Communion and the Worlds of Ron Athey', in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. by Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), pp. 1–23 (p. 12). For instructive insight into the range and nature of these 'pains, pleasures, rages, and ecstasies' in 1980s and 1990s Los Angeles, where Flanagan, Rose, and Athey were based, see Brian Getnick and Tanya Rubbak, eds, *Final Transmission: Performance Art and AIDS in Los Angeles* (London: *Native Strategies* and the Live Art Development Agency, 2021).
- ¹¹ Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).
- ¹² Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
- ¹³ Alex Palmer, 'When Art Fought the Law and the Art Won', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2 October 2015, <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/when-art-fought-law-and-art-won-180956810/>> [accessed 12 May 2021].
- ¹⁴ Alfonse D'Amato quoted in Peggy Phelan, 'Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You: "Money Talks": October 1989', *TDR*, 34.1 (1990), 4–15 (p. 6).
- ¹⁵ D'Amato quoted in Phelan, 'Money Talks', p. 6; see also p. 5.
- ¹⁶ Patrick Buchanan quoted in Richard Serra, 'Art and Censorship', *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991), 574–81 (p. 578).
- ¹⁷ 'Congressional Record: July 25, 1994', 140.98, <<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1994-07-25/html/CREC-1994-07-25-pt1-PgS17.htm>> [accessed 10 February 2020].
- ¹⁸ Jesse Helms's letter to NEA chairman John Frohnmayer, dated 7 November 1989, is reprinted in Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 28–29; Louis Elovitz, '4 Scenes in a Harsh Life RON ATHEY October 15 1993 L.A. Center Theater', 9 August 2012, <<https://vimeo.com/47239842>> [accessed 14 May 2021].
- ¹⁹ Phelan, 'Money Talks', p. 8, p. 10.
- ²⁰ Phelan, 'Money Talks, Again', *TDR*, 35.3 (1991), 131–41 (p. 131).
- ²¹ For an instructive summary of these events, see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, 'Perverts in Court: Maud Allan's *the Vision of Salomé* and the Pemberton-Billing Trial', in *Salomé's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 83–124.
- ²² Elaine Showalter draws a parallel between outbreaks of syphilis and AIDS at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, as 'apocalyptic forms of sexual anarchy [...] that seem to be the result of sexual transgression and that have generated moral panic'. However, this parallel risks obscuring the ways in which AIDS was weaponized as a war on gay rights, liberation, and survival. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago Press, 1990), p. 188.
- ²³ Johnson, 'Bloody Towel'; see also Elovitz, '4 Scenes in a Harsh Life'.
- ²⁴ The performance in question only received \$150 in sponsorship from the publicly funded Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis. The total amount is variously cited as \$150 or \$100. See 'Congressional Record'. See also Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion*, p. 420.
- ²⁵ 'Congressional Record'.
- ²⁶ David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219–28 (p. 221).
- ²⁷ Ron Athey, 'Deliverance: The "Torture Trilogy" in Retrospect', in Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, pp. 100–09 (p. 102).
- ²⁸ For a study of relevant examples, see Fintan Walsh, ed., *Theatres of Contagion: Transmitting Early Modern to Contemporary Performance* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). See also Miriam Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

- ²⁹ Ron Athey, 'Polemic of Blood: Ron Athey on the "Post-AIDS" Body', in Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion*, pp. 55–58 (p. 57). See also Dominic Johnson, 'Divine Fire: Ron Athey in Europe', in Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion*, pp. 294–303 (p. 295).
- ³⁰ Johnson, 'Bloody Towel', p. 93.
- ³¹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 296–337; Douthat, *The Decadent Society*.
- ³² For an overview of the exhibition and its surrounding events, see Tavia Nyong'o and Coco Romack, 'Glory in Our Sufferings', *Artforum*, May 2021, <<https://www.artforum.com/print/202105/tavia-nyong-o-and-coco-romack-on-ron-athey-at-participant-inc-85473>> [accessed 13 May 2021].
- ³³ Sontag, *Illness*, p. 149.
- ³⁴ See Tina Takemoto, 'Love is still possible in this junky world: Conversation with Sheree Rose about her life with Bob Flanagan', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 19.1 (2009), 95–111 (p. 100).
- ³⁵ Amelia Jones, *In-Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), p. xvi.
- ³⁶ Takemoto, 'Love is still possible', p. 106.
- ³⁷ Sontag, *Illness*, p. 5, p. 13, p. 26. For a more Foucauldian approach to the discursive production of illness, including tuberculosis, see Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- ³⁸ John Stokes, 'Sarah Bernhardt', in John Stokes, Michael R. Booth and Susan Bassnett, *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The actress in her time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 13–63 (pp. 20–21).
- ³⁹ Contemporary accounts picked up on its 'aura of decadence'. See Charles Busch, 'Charles Ludlam in "Camille"', *Back stage – National Edition*, 53.12 (2012), 10.
- ⁴⁰ The deaths of both Bernhardt and Ludlam were distantly linked to tuberculosis, albeit very obliquely. Bernhardt died of uremia, although a pathologist initially diagnosed 'tuberculosis of the joint' after amputating her leg in 1915, and Ludlam died of AIDS-related pneumonia, which is another disease of the lungs. For more on Bernhardt's leg amputation, see Conti, *Playing Sick*, p. 67.
- ⁴¹ See C. Carr, 'The Pain Artist', *Village Voice*, 18 November 1997, <<https://www.villagevoice.com/1997/11/18/the-pain-artist/>> [accessed 27 January 2021].
- ⁴² Bob Flanagan, 'Why', *Art Journal*, 56.4 (1997), 58–59 (p. 59).
- ⁴³ Phelan, 'Money Talks, Again', p. 132.
- ⁴⁴ Flanagan, quoted in Mary Ann Davis, 'Oatmeal and Shit: Some Notes on Mundanity', in *Rated RX: Sheree Rose with and After Bob Flanagan*, ed. by Yetta Howard (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), pp. 159–71 (p. 160). Emphasis in original. See also Flanagan, 'Why'.
- ⁴⁵ See Flanagan, 'Why'; Howard, 'Sheree Rose, Martin O'Brien, and Rhiannon Aarons on *Philosophy in the Bedroom and The Viewing*', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 135–51 (p. 140); Takemoto, 'Love is still possible', p. 101; Adam Alston, 'Sheree Rose – Interview for Staging Decadence', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 23 March 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/sheree-rose-interview-for-staging-decadence>> [accessed 12 May 2021].
- ⁴⁶ Kauffman, *Bad Girls*, p. 21.
- ⁴⁷ For an account of the exhibition, see Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose, and Ralph Rugoff, 'Visiting Hours', *Grand Street*, 53 (1995), 65–73.
- ⁴⁸ Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, 'A Cabinet of (Medical) Performance Curiosities', in *Performance and the Medical Body*, ed. by Alex Mermikides and Gianna Bouchard (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 23–36 (p. 24).
- ⁴⁹ Kauffman, *Bad Girls*, pp. 20–37 *passim*; Jean-Thomas Tremblay, 'Aesthetic self-medication: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose's structures of breathing', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 28.3 (2018), 221–38 (pp. 238–39).
- ⁵⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 4.3 (1960), 144–48 (p. 146).
- ⁵¹ The term 'crippled' borrows from 'crip theory'. See Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
- ⁵² Martin O'Brien, 'Lie Back and Take It: BDSM, Biomedicine and the Hospital Bed in the work of Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose', *Body, Space, Technology*, 15 (2016), 1–12 (p. 9).
- ⁵³ Tremblay, 'Aesthetic self-medication', p. 225.
- ⁵⁴ Another factor at stake, though more tangential to the core focus of this article, can be found in the aftermath of Eric Garner's killing at the hands of the NYPD in 2014. Garner's dying words – 'I can't breathe' – have since been immortalized in national protest movements and in the global news media.
- ⁵⁵ Gianna Bouchard, 'Introduction: With Diseased Affection', in *Survival of the Sickest: The Art of Martin O'Brien*, ed. by Martin O'Brien and David MacDiarmid (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2018), pp. 6–8 (p. 6).
- ⁵⁶ Martin O'Brien, 'Zombie Time', <<https://www.martinobrienart.com/zombie-time.html>> [accessed 30 December 2020].
- ⁵⁷ Martin O'Brien, 'The Unwell', <<https://www.martinobrienart.com/the-unwell.html>> [accessed 30 December 2020].
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.

- ⁵⁹ Amelia Jones, 'Rose/Flanagan/O'Brien: The Aesthetics of Resurrection', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 98–109, pp. 107–08. See also 'The Ascension (2017)', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 301–07.
- ⁶⁰ Sontag, *Illness*, p. 3. Pirjo Lyytikäinen explores a similar notion in an illuminating study of decadent literature in Scandinavia, in which maladies tend to serve 'as a sign of distinction separating the world of the Decadents from that of appalling normality, that is, the bourgeois idea of health'. Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Decadent Tropologies of Sickness', in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Marja Härmänmaa (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85–102 (p. 85).
- ⁶¹ Martin O'Brien, 'Sheree, Bob, and Me: Performing Painful Histories', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 89–97 (p. 94).
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.
- ⁶⁴ Martin O'Brien, 'Cough, Bitch, Cough: Reflections on Sickness and the Coughing Body in Performance', in Mermikides and Bouchard, *Performance*, pp. 129–36 (p. 129).
- ⁶⁵ Martin O'Brien, *Mucus Factory*, in *Access all Areas: Double DVD Set*, ed. and produced by Andrew Mitchell and Paula Gorini. Available in Lois Keidan and CJ Mitchell, eds, *Access all Areas: Live Art and Disability* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2012). The term 'queer use' is taken from Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 26.
- ⁶⁶ O'Brien, 'Cough, Bitch', p. 133.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136. For an illuminating study of spectatorial 'dis-ease', see Janice Hladki, 'Thresholds of the Flesh: Disability and Dis-ease and Producing "Ability Trouble"', *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 27.3 (2005), 265–85 (p. 268). See also Patrick Duggan, 'Unsettling the Audience: Affective "Dis-ease" and the Politics of Fear and Anxiety in Contemporary Performance', *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, 15 (2017), 40–54.
- ⁶⁸ Hladki, 'Thresholds of the Flesh', p. 268.
- ⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 140.