

Maiden' could be easily discerned in the academic background of the work. The background was arcanelly academic in a literal sense, for an apocalyptic warning about the inevitability and finality of death (quoted from the morality play *Mankind*) was neatly letrasetted on a clear plastic screen behind the performer. Above the moralizing sign was an inscription in neon, alternately flashing the words 'expiration' and 'expiation.'

Alward, dressed in a long white satin robe, her lips scarlet, her black hair cropped, a silver cross hanging from her neck, looked every inch the virgin bride or sacrificial victim – it may amount to the same thing – as she quietly poured a chalice of semen into a pail of blood in a private ritualistic prelude to the performance. When the precious bodily fluids were well mixed, the media and the public (who numbered well over a hundred on opening night) were invited to crowd in around the two doorways of the performance space where they stood to witness, if they could stand the overpoweringly carnal stench, a five-hour enactment of the strangest allegory of pollution and purification ever to hit the boards in Winnipeg. And hit the boards it literally did: a flood of inseminated blood poured forth from Alward's pail onto the waxed floor, creating massacre-like splash patterns and plumes of garish droplets that dully dried under the pitiless white gallery lights. Something or someone very mortal had evidently died to give us immortal art: the expiration theme was expressed with doomsday subtlety to the nose as well as to the eye.

But what was the expiation part? It appeared to be Alward's very domestic response to the mess: she started to clean it up, supplying herself with sponges, rubber gloves, and a can of brand-name disinfectant cleanser. Not minding what the job would do to her gown, which by the end of the performance was sticky with heavy flow, she quietly knelt down and scrubbed her heart out – pausing only for an occasional brow-mopping breather. It was hard work, this 'ora et labora' ritual, though the visual artist under the stained gown seemed to be playing at times with the artistic possibilities of her sanguinary medium. As the blood coagulated, fan-like designs recording the rhythmic sweep of her sponge over the floor were left in her purifying wake. Watching her clean up after this imaginary bloodbath became, among other things, a meditation on the bone-





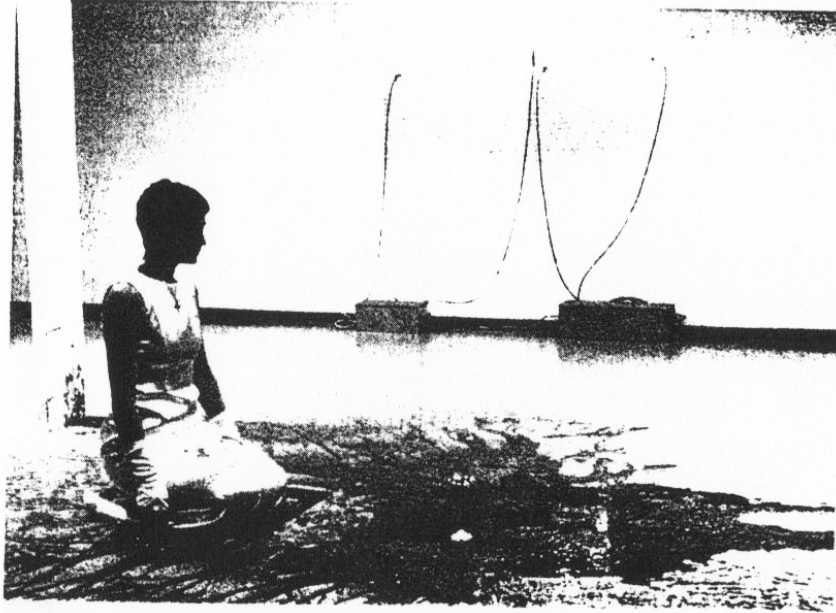
Totentanz (performance), Sharon Alward.  
Ritual of pouring semen into blood in bowl. Photograph by Sheila Spence.

aching boredom of what used to be known as Woman's Work.

I doubt very much whether this perversely retro-Christian allegory of expiatory martyrdom would have stirred up anything like the storms of controversy in the local and national media that it did if it had not been presented as part of the Plug In Gallery's 'Art Over AIDS' series. In such a context the bodily fluids on the floor were infected not only with centuries of sacramental and sacrilegious symbolism but with all the new horrors of the potently mythical AIDS virus. If the traditional meanings of the sacred fluids were safely deconstructed in the fluid post-Christian mentality, the seamier semiotics of the epidemic could not be easily subverted or resisted in that tight space: dangerous possibilities of reactionary

we are deconstructed in the fluid post-Christian mentality, the seamier semiotics of the epidemic could not be easily subverted or resisted in that tight space: dangerous possibilities of reactionary and prejudicial meaning literally coagulated, dried into fixed inescapable designs, on the gory stage of our collective plague fantasies.

Like a martyr welcoming the pain inflicted by her political foes, Alward invited a projection onto her body of all the fearful and vengeful counterimages of the media-hallowed 'AIDS-victim' that



Totentanz (performance), Sharon Alward.  
Plug In Gallery. Ritual prior to pouring five gallons of blood and semen  
onto gallery floor. Photograph by Sheila Spence.



Totentanz (performance), Sharon Alward.  
Plug In Gallery. Photograph by Sheila Spence.



Totentanz (performance), Sharon Alward.

Detail of wringing blood soaked hem of dress into pail of blood.

Photograph by Sheila Spence.

activists have been protesting for years. And what she invited, she got. The first projections were predictably misogynistic, springing from the deep-seated Judaeo-Christian belief that women are weak vessels of sexual incontinence overflowing with corrupted blood. In the week leading up to the premiere, Alward received several threatening telephone calls prompted by articles on her piece in the Winnipeg dailies. 'Some women were saying I was a prostitute,' she complained in an interview, 'Most were saying I was a vulgar slut.'<sup>11</sup>

51

Sluts, as every good tabloid reader knows, are prime vectors for the transmission of the AIDS virus from the polluted streams of the sexually degenerate underground into the circulatory system of the general public. After sharing infected needles and bloodied dildoes with wicked bisexual pimps, they delight in spreading AIDS (among other evils of the Flesh) to their unsuspecting tricks who then spread the corruption to their innocent wives and unborn babes. Alward's polysemous act of spilling blood was, from the viewpoint of a born-again misogynist, anything but ambiguous: it highlighted the blame Woman must bear for the spread of mortality to the Sons of Adam. No wonder the good Christians of Winnipeg went wild over her performance.

The tabloid image of the predatory gay villain, the Patient Zero who spills his fatal seed into the theatre of modern sexual liberation, was also projected erotophobically onto Alward's sacrificial body. When the dailies misleadingly reported that she was using 'real' blood and semen in her performance, the general public in its infinite wisdom concluded that 'real' meant 'human.' Outraged calls for the censorship and cancellation of 'Totentanz' (along with demands that Alward be dismissed from her teaching position) poured into the gallery, the press offices, and the city hall. Whom had this vulgar slut murdered for her act? What babies had been sacrificed for the sake of AIDS awareness? Why would a nice straight white married woman professor get mixed up in all

madams vulgar slut murdered for her act? What babies had been sacrificed for the sake of AIDS awareness? Why would a nice straight white married woman professor get mixed up in the polluted fluids of wanton homosexuality?<sup>12</sup>

Try as she might to gloss her own allegory as a respectably feminist work, to distance it from male-dominated constructions of the AIDS crisis, Alward was of course unable to prevent the conflation of 'Totentanz' with the sensational mystique of the Gay Plague. 'In the past,' she explained defensively, 'the focus of this

52 issue was given to homosexuals and drug abusers. Very little was paid to women... Women are talking about it now. We're the educators of the young, and we're not immune.' Alward found out the hard way that she wasn't immune to the slings and arrows of outrageous homophobia. The public reflex was not only to chasten her through threatened censorship but to declassify her as a woman, lowering her ontologically to the Grand Guignol status of a gay vampire. Her experience of the underlying interdependence of all prejudicial discourses in our society confirms the sneaking suspicion of Aparth-AIDS zealots that gay ontogeny follows misogyny.

That her performance caused 'a sensation' is undeniable given the volumes of ink spilled over the real blood controversy. (It was real beef's blood purchased at a local abattoir, Alward assured me at a Sunday dinner with her husband soon after the premiere. Modesty prevented her from disclosing the source of the semen.) For me, the truly sensational part of her succès de scandale was not the use of bodily fluids as an artistic medium – performance artists have been doing that for years, turning the dross of vomit and suppurating organs into the gold of art. It was, rather, the shocking serenity with which Alward conflated or simply confused the usual categories of discrimination polarized around (or by) the AIDS crisis in her symbolic outpouring of Woman's Woe.

'I'm re-combining new issues so we don't become numb,' she declared with poignant vagueness. 'We tend to compartmentalize issues.'<sup>13</sup> So we do. But her act did far more than recombine new issues like AIDS-hysteria and AIDS-discrimination with very old ones like original sin and the metaphysical freak-out that medieval poets used to call 'timor mortis.' It mixed plagues past and present into one bloody mess; cleaned away all signs of medieval or modernist artistic design from the symbolically overdetermined space of postmodern chaos; and blew to hell all the rigidly moralized compartments of mainstream media commentary on the epidemic as Human Condition. Who could say whether the cleaning lady at the centre of the mess represented a guilty carrier or an innocent victim, a vulgar slut or a valiant feminist, a wonderworking saint or a wanton homosexual in bridal drag?

Just as all efforts to 'contain' the AIDS crisis within nationalist,

racist, or sexist categories only succeed in spreading the theory and practice of Aparth-AIDS across nations, races, and sexualities, so all efforts to censor works like 'Totentanz' by segregating the private world of Art from the wide open spaces of Nature or Business or Public Life only result in explosive publicity about the artist's cultural transgressions. The second and final performance of 'Totentanz' (on December 13, 1990) literally, if accidentally, identified the uncontainableness of the pandemic with the indeterminacy of the performance.

'A performance on AIDS,' reported the *Winnipeg Free Press* the day after, 'became a debate on taxpayer support for the arts after blood and semen from the show rained on a luggage shop two floors below. Peter Thiessen's McDermot Avenue store suffered about \$2,000 damage when the 23 litres of beef blood and animal semen trickled along a support column and heating duct.'

Bad blood will out. Imagine how disturbing it must have been to the capitalist soul, which likes its art passive and pricey and packaged up in the gallery shop, to find activist art raining down on its consumer products in a space policed for the general public! "We're trying to sell luggage so we can pay our taxes and then support the gallery," Thiessen said sardonically as he pointed out blood-spattered leather bags, purses and portfolios at U.N. Luggage Ltd. His desk, telephone and notebooks also were covered in drops of blood. "What are you going to do? How can you make up a bill [with blood on your desk]? This is all for the sake of art. It's a disgrace."<sup>14</sup>

What was disgraceful to him was the devaluing of his capitalist world-order on contact with the chaotic world of 'Art Over AIDS.' And the contact had been 'casual' in its original sense. It had simply 'fallen' out that way. But it proved to be a fortunate fall for the artist – who easily worked the accident into an act where ritual formality was equated with fatality. 'Somehow it seems fitting,' she told the reporter: 'When one deals with blood, either in performance art or with AIDS, one has to deal with a media circus. There's just no getting around it.'

So it might as well have been planned as part of her act for the media circus, of which she was for a few hours the star. If anyone had any doubts that AIDS was just another form of performance art,

54 they were surely dispelled by Alward's spectacular confusion of seropositive human blood with its theatrical simulacrum in her act. Whether the reporter realized that he was now part of her act, too, didn't make it onto the front page: it was perhaps too self-critical a reflection for an extra in the public chorus of the AIDS tragedy.

The social disgrace felt by Thiessen was, of course, an aesthetic grace for Alward – a blessing of more ludicrous publicity (and hence more serious significance) for her artfully staged and critically mediated controversy. Wouldn't the general public just be appalled

more serious significance) for her artfully staged and critically mediated controversy. Wouldn't the general public just be appalled to learn that the monstrous menstrual flow of the madwoman in the attic, mixed with the liquefaction of homosexual pleasure and panic on the heating ducts, had drenched the sacred sales room of straight patriarchal consumerism? If Art in general belonged to a space apart from Business, then AIDS-Art in particular (with its mad fantasy of victory over the virus) needed to be quarantined off from the same dominion of the Dollar.

So many cherished binarisms were violated by the transgressive rain of Alward's unclean fluids that cries for censorship were inevitable. While the artist was doing her best to mop up, the reported noted, Thiessen's censorious views on her act were being reiterated by customers and people who phoned the shop and used the accident to blast government-supported art. Thiessen had been invited to Culture Minister Bonnie Mitchelson's house for a Christmas party, where he said he plans to tell her about waste in her department. 'When we moved in here, we never applied for a grant,' his wife Elsie said. And Elsie no doubt told Bonnie that the government has a social duty to cut off funds to good-for-nothing freebooters who claim to be artists but produce nothing but disgraceful messes on other people's property. Bonnie seems to have passed the buck to the city health department, for a public health inspector was sent to the leaking gallery to sniff out any trace of contagion.

'We have no business sticking our noses into whether a performance is proper, morally or ethically,' said chief inspector Garry Solkoski: 'We're simply looking at it from the perspective: is it a public health problem?'<sup>15</sup> It's clear from Garry's embarrassed but duty-bound appearance at the Plug In Gallery (no doubt his first) that Winnipeg's civic establishment takes the threat of AIDS-

Art as seriously as it takes the threat of AIDS itself. When AIDS-Art fails to keep within its culturally quarantined limits, all the practitioners of Aparth-AIDS have to do to censor it is to reclassify the deconstructive passion-play as a public health hazard.

In its confusing denouement, 'Totentanz' deviously pulled its marginal moralists – the TV crews, the newspaper reporters, the gallery members, the bewildered spectators, the appalled shoppers – into the vortex of its indeterminate controversies. The allegory of the AIDS Apocalypse literally bled into its exegetical borders: you couldn't stand on the margins of the mess for long without getting sticky feet. With the collapse of traditional distinctions between text and gloss, between the literal level and the allegorical, traditional religious readings of the martyr's passion had to be abandoned along with the media's exegetical harpings on the agony of the AIDS victim. No authoritative clarifications were allowed to reign in the room of blood. What Alward dared to reveal in 'Totentanz,' perhaps unwittingly, was the unthinkable muddle behind our thoughtless moralizations of the Facts on AIDS.

- 1 John Bentley Mays, 'Strong Poison,' *The Globe and Mail* (April 14, 1990) C1.
- 2 Robert Gallo, 'The AIDS Virus,' *Scientific American* 256 (January 1987) 47-56.
- 3 See '“Lunatic” AIDS tract denounced,' *The Toronto Star* (January 17, 1990) A26.
- 4 A photograph of this poster appeared in Christopher S. Wren's article 'AIDS Cases Spreading Rapidly Among Black Heterosexuals in South Africa' in *The New York Times* (September 27, 1990) A7.
- 5 Sifris is quoted in '“Lunatic” AIDS tract denounced' (see note 3). His denunciation of 'Facts on AIDS' was the basis for the AP wire story behind 'Racist AIDS claims' in *The Toronto Sun* (January 17, 1990). My understanding of the impact of racism on AIDS discourse in Africa has been aided by Renee Sabatier, *Blaming Others: Prejudice, Race and worldwide AIDS* (London, Paris, Washington: The Panos Institute, 1988); Richard C. Chirimuta and Rosalind J. Chirimuta, *AIDS, Africa and Racism*, (Bretby, UK: Chirimuta, 1987); Douglas A. Feldman, ed.,

*Culture and AIDS* (New York: Praeger, 1990); and Alfred J. Fortin, 'AIDS, Development, and the Limitations of the African State,' in *Action on AIDS: National Policies in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Greenwood, 1990).

- 56 6 The police spokesman is quoted in '“Lunatic” AIDS tract denounced' (see note 3). The tract also urged whites 'to have their black servants tested for AIDS,' an Apartheid employment policy which the police insisted 'had not caused any problems.'
- 7 On March 19, 1987, South Africa Foreign Affairs Minister Pik Botha told a political rally in Johannesburg that insurgents entering South Africa 'don't just bring bombs, they also carry the killer disease AIDS.' The guerrillas live in refugee camps 'teeming with AIDS' which they surreptitiously bring into South Africa. See 'Insurgents transmit AIDS, Pretoria says,' in *The Globe and Mail* (March 21, 1987) A6.
- 8 Oakland Ross, 'AIDS in Africa,' *The Globe and Mail* (August 10, 1991) D1. For a radical critique of such journalism, see Simon Watney, 'Missionary Positions: AIDS, Africa, and Race' in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) 89-103.
- 9 Philippe Rushton and [graduate research assistant] Anthony F. Bogaert, 'Population Differences in Susceptibility to AIDS: An Evolutionary Analysis,' *Social Sciences and Medicine* vol. 28, no. 12 (1989) 1211-20. All subsequent quotations from Rushton are from this source.
- 10 Mackie, 'The color-blind disease: Rushton's theory that Africans are prone to AIDS doesn't add up,' *The Globe and Mail* (June 8, 1989) A7.
- 11 From an interview with Sharon Alward by Jeff Zuk in *The Manitoban* LXXVIII, 15. I attended the first performance of 'Totentanz,' but not the second. See also Wayne Baerwaldt's interview with the artist in C

- LXXVIII, 15. I attended the first performance of Totentanz, but not the second. See also Wayne Baerwaldt's interview with the artist in C (Summer 1991) 36-40.
- 12 For a clear Aparth-AIDS blast against 'the irresponsibility of wanton homosexuals,' see 'The One Way To Stop AIDS,' *The Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton, NB: July 3, 1990). The editorial ends with a stirring recommendation for the Final Solution: 'AIDS has to be treated like the plague it is. If isolation is the answer, so be it.' The complaint lodged by AIDS New Brunswick concerning this editorial was dismissed by the Atlantic Press Council with the usual homophobic rationalizations.
- 13 Zuk, 'Art over AIDS,' 15.

- 14 George Nikides, 'AIDS show splatters blood on shop,' *The Winnipeg Free Press* (December 14, 1990) 1, continued on page 4 under the headline 'Accident "fitting" artist says.'
- 15 Solkoski is quoted by Nikides in 'AIDS show splatters blood on shop,' *The Winnipeg Free Press*, 4.