

Foreground: Mariano Chavez, *Twinnings*

On wall, left to right: Fred Stonehouse, *Sensitive*, 2002 Greg Porcaro, *I'm Falling (Apart)...* Who Will Save Me? 2001, *The Agony In The Garden*, 1996, and *Deus ex Machinam or A God (played by Frangi)* Out of the Machine, 2002, Jeanne Dunning, *Flaw*, 1992, *The Extra Hair*, 1994, *Untitled Hole*, 1992



Vulnerescence

I was a midnight brain surgeon. — DANNY HOFFMAN

> by Jeremy Biles

Before turning to a discussion of “Zounds,” a show which addresses wounds, I would like to dedicate this essay to a man named Danny Hoffman, to whom I dedicate most everything I do. Danny Hoffman was a man I knew, a man who suffered from schizophrenia, and who was perhaps the most truly and deeply and brilliantly wounded person I have ever known. Danny Hoffman had the peculiar and, as it would turn out, fatal habit of swallowing things that are not normally taken to be edible. He died on October 20, 1996, having choked on a chip of green tile which, he had previously explained, he believed would turn his eyes green, thereby enabling him to seduce prostitutes in his dreams. The absurd conditions of his death would be enough to motivate my repeated dedications to him. But it is the fact that I failed to speak at his funeral, that I failed to speak for this man when no one else could, that animates what can only be called my incessant supplication before the memory and image of Danny Hoffman. “He was a good man.”¹

I provided care for Danny Hoffman for a year in Columbus, Ohio, and one of the lessons I learned there has carried over into my recent curatorial work for the Hyde Park Art Center. I learned from Danny Hoffman that to care is not always to cure, and often not even to try to cure, but rather simply to see. It is true that “curate” and “cure,” according to their shared Latin root, mean “care.” But in the case of this show, as in the case of Danny Hoffman, curating or caring may mean to let wounds remain uncured, because it is through these wounds that Danny, on the one hand, and these artists, on the other, are communicating. A philosopher once wrote, “Our wound supposes no cure.”² It is with this in mind that I would suggest that for this show, at least, “curate” must contain antithetical meanings; it must mean to care for by *not* curing, by allowing the wounds to remain open—by exhibiting them.

The title of this show is “Zounds,” a term that was current in the early seventeenth century. The word is an oath which contracts the phrase “God’s wounds.” While many of the pieces in this show are not overtly religious, I would suggest that a certain divinity inheres in wounds, if looked at from a certain perspective. It seems to me that

wounds exhibit a peculiar capacity to rouse and captivate our attention. But this attention is inseparable from the repulsion that is the equally familiar reaction elicited by a wound. This simultaneous attraction and repulsion issues in a sense of fascination that has often been attributed to sacred objects. The wound, in short, makes you want to look, to keep looking, compulsively, either despite or because of the discomfort it engenders. In a sense, a collage collaboration of the poet Frank O’Hara and the artist Joe Brainard asks one of the motivating questions of this essay: Why are we always staring at wounds?³ More precisely: What is the nature of this fascination?

The fascination is, to begin, noteworthy for its power to gather and unite people in what one scholar calls “the sociality of the wound.”⁴ It is this character of wounds that calls to mind the etymological root of the word “religion,” which is *re-ligare*, meaning to re-connect, to bind. What exactly gives rise to the religious power of wounds? One resolutely unscientific hypothesis that I have been entertaining in regard to this question is this: perhaps wounds emanate a light all their own, a light at once attractive and repellent, lucid and blinding—a sacred aura that incites fascination. It is a light that communicates vulnerability, wound-ability, and that I would therefore call “vulnerescence”—the light of the wound. And if this light communicates the wound, then it is, in this sense, a light that wounds those who see it. Plotinus once wrote that “no eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like.” I would suggest that no eye ever sees a wound without becoming to some degree wounded; no eye is stung by vulnerescence without being marked, stigmatized.

I see this vulnerescence at work in many religions or spiritual movements—in the Sun Dance of several Native American societies, in which the flesh is hooked and torn in an ecstatic trance; in mystical devotion before the wounds of Christ; in the scarification practices of many African peoples; and in the drastic body modification of so-called “modern primitives,” to name a few. In what follows, however, I will be focusing on the vulnerescence that I see issuing from the work of the “Zounds” artists.

One final word before really beginning. Theme-based shows sometimes run the risk of paying for conceptual coherence with a loss of individual artistic variety or innovation. So I want to emphasize here that whatever notion of the wound that I began with, contact with the work of these artists has rendered that concept drastically altered. While certain questions still persist for me, and while what I say below relies on the language most familiar to me, these questions and this language have been transformed by what I have seen. What follows, then, is not an attempt to develop an overarching concept of the wound; and, not being an art historian, neither do I approach the work in the manner proper to art history. Above all, I do not mean my comments to suggest authoritative interpretations of these works. Rather, they are meditations on how these instances of vulnerescence have affected *my* eyes. The wounds you see here may strike your eyes very differently.

¹ To quote one of Danny’s several tattoos.

² Henri Pastoureau cited in Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*, 127.

³ “Why Are They Always Staring?” Collage by Frank O’Hara and Joe Brainard.

⁴ Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture*.