

POO-POOING

the Phallus

She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being...And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion...she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say...Men, her reason told her would be shocked...She could write no more." (Virginia Woolf, *Professions for Women*, 1931)

The late-night club lewdly darkens as a woman in a long robe finds her way onto the stage. Coming to stand in the smokey stream of light next to the microphone, she pauses and smiles -- almost shyly. Then, not a moment later she tears off her robe in a gesture which is quick, mechanical, mundane. She adjusts the top of the slinky blood red corset, throws back her long dark hair and grabs the microphone with both hands. Her eyes closed and her legs slightly apart, she appears the more or less perfect encapsulation of male erotica -- the woman alone in the dark but really on stage, with her eyes closed, quietly dreaming, silently moving...that is, until she opens her mouth.

KAREN FINLEY WRITES

An explosion, foam and confusion -- a stream of obscenities pours out of her mouth, she is your worst nightmare: *woman as speaking subject*. Like blood on a switchblade, the microphone relays her shrill screech of words, piercing the room with her stilleto voice. The cat calls and whistles, cries of encouragement, slowly fade into an uncomfortable hum:

"I mean feel my nubs mister, just feel my nubs, spit on these nubs, oh suck those nubs, oh suck those amputated parts, feel those parts baby...Hank and I were in the nursing home and we saw this ninety-three woman sitting in her own piss and shit stenching like nothing, she was nothing before I raped her." Or: "I go down on that ass with my mouth, my penis still kinda high and hard and I suck suck suck my own cum outa your butt juice with a little bit of yum yum yum baby liquid shit mixed up with that cum baby. You can jerk off on my pancakes anytime..."

Karen Finley, a New York performance artist, has been working the clubs and alternative gallery circuits since 1979. In other performances she has been known to smear food on herself, to take a bath, to vomit, and to shit. On stage there are no limits to her teratologic exuberance, except: "No, Herr Schmidt, I will not shit in your mouth, even if I do get to know you..."

Finley claims that her performances are rarely rehearsed, and that her monologues are mostly spontaneous. This is not difficult to believe for Finley's monologues appear to emanate from the cavities of her unconscious; they resemble bilious eruptions connected openly through the logic of dreams and they both fascinate and repel.

What differentiates Finley's excesses from other forms of nihilistic art whose shock value is always short lived, is precisely the depths of her narcissism in the act of 'speaking', in speaking as a woman. Through a complex array of short narratives Finley inhabits and cuts across a variety of different characters both male and female. Often her semantic garters become so completely fluid so that it is difficult to distinguish gender: "You're fuckin' your granny, you're fucking your sister too...suck my dick, bastard bitch...I want your weiner in my mouth...get me off." ¹

Finley is dirty in the worst sense of the word -- she is contaminated, she is a double-agent who plays doctor in the pornographic arena of desire. Unlike the narrator in a Kathy Acker story who never forgets that the position from which she speaks is female and dominated, Finley's discourse transgresses the boundaries of gender. Through a kind of automatic writing, or rather a *speaking in tongues*, her work reveals the profound antimony underlying all strategies grounded in the utopic desire for origins, the *truth of woman*: the always already written paternal presence (or as Finley might put it, the weinerlogocentric inscription.)

The history of women who speak their minds in public, who openly embrace the obscene, who entertain and extend the abject, has been the history of witches, of women possessed by phallic demons, of bizarre circus acts and/or women suffering from one mental disorder or another. That is to say, women who for one reason or another were not properly socialized, who did not learn to fear the Law of the Father. Fearlessly and shamelessly, Finley attempts to speak the unspeakable, to exhaust the limits of the perverse, but like Molly in *Ulysses* who can only express her sexual ecstasy by saying "shit and piss", she is imprisoned within *arse nals* of a male language.



Confined to this lexicographic *dung* eon, Finley spits, sucks, bleeds, scratches, screeches, shits, cums, pounds, punches, pukes, pisses -- that is, she redecorates but also reflects her surroundings. In the process she does a lot more than simply break a few Oedipal taboos. Finley's excretions effect the reorganization of the language as sex -- a language which excludes women. At the same time she mirrors the problematic of female subjectivity and desire, and the paradoxical difficulties inherent in attempts to find and define that specificity.

As Finley stands on stage *looking like she wants it*, she appropriates a male point of view and in this way speaks her contradiction -- women's formation in and subjugation by the symbolic:

"I mean I'm ass man honey, oohh I'm an ass man...I had my hand inside a rump roast but just before I was gonna push my tool inside her, I wanted to get some good butt action...and I got my arm inside that butt...and when I took my elbow out...I took it out and I looked at it and it was all red and gooey with menstruation. I mean bitch you on the snatch...how could you be on the rag woman...how could you be on the period be the best fuck in your life, be the best rape in your life ... ooh I wanted to wash those hands, that menstruation off of

my finger nails...but it wouldn't wash out, it wouldn't wash out of my finger nails... out of my life line...It'd be a long time before I use that hand to shake my dick after I piss."

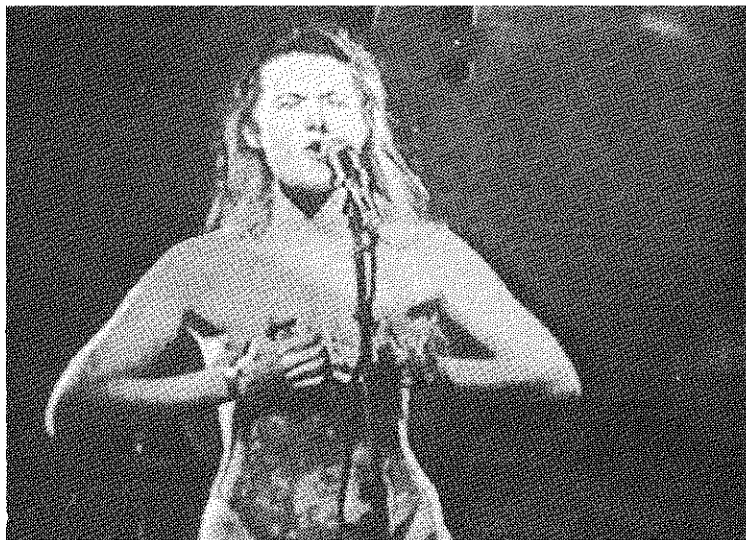
Alienated from her own body, re-enacting the ejection of woman from the realm of her own sexuality, Finley's defilement becomes grossly transsexual. She becomes a living text made only of quotes, a human quotation stepping outside the reassuring affectations of parody.

If subjectivity is relational -- 'I' exists through its opposition to 'you' -- then Finley's self collapses, folds in on itself for her persona incorporates both the 'I' and the 'you', oppressed and oppressor into one body. With the collapse of a clear identity, of a clear division between inside and out, Finley turns her *insides out*.

In her writings on abjection, Julia Kristeva describes such a process: "It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents."² Finley's work foregrounds the wound we all carry, *the hole in the psyche*, the hankering that nothing ever satisfies, by unmasking the limits of its exhaustion. Blood, urine excrement, sperm, saliva are

made to come in a freakish orgy of bodily functions. The fluids and the activities they are made to serve are not placed within a hierarchical scheme and are left undifferentiated as Finley's vernacular locutions operate their de-erotization. The language of pornography is in this sense disarmed, deconstructed -- laid out to dry.

By digesting food on the outside, by discharging verbal fluids, by emptying herself, Finley strives to articulate the unthinkable, to exhibit the intolerable, to decanonize, to explore the centrifugal powers of language: to boldly go where no man has gone before. However, in her rummages through the dump pile of significations she comes to expose *the dark truth* of man: the turgid circularity of his language. Woman is constrained within this obstinate sphincter enclave and there can be no one point of departure. She might learn the different ways to penetrate its margins by developing new forms of deconstructive laughter, by using it to suit her own ends. What Karen Finley's performances propose is that it is only by speaking from within the recesses of male desire that any transformation of desiring language itself can be affected and the ground for a new eroticism be laid: *"Oooh, you call that passion, you call that romance, honey you don't know what it's like for a woman to get cystitis!"*



1 This is an excerpt from a disco song Finley wrote and recorded with Mark Kamins, who recorded Madonna's first album. Needless to say the radio stations didn't pick it up.

2 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 53.

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