

The Journal of Religion and Theatre

<http://www.rtjournal.org>

**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

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Blasphemy, Parody, and Running Commentary: Roman Catholicism and the Work of Karen Finley

Written by
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Karen Finley's intensely political, deeply personal art has scandalized the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and won her awards ranging from two Bessie Awards to a MacArthur Fellowship, while attracting the attention of politicians, scholars, and critics. Finley's career has survived a national furor over censorship, obscenity, community standards, and taxpayer funding for the arts. Yet, for all the writing that has addressed the vitality of her art and the raw, challenging subjects she takes on, relatively little has been written about her experiences with Roman Catholicism and its presence in her work. While Finley herself has written short autobiographical pieces touching on her Catholic upbringing, and mentioned it briefly in a few interviews, the analysis and scholarship surrounding her work is missing this crucial element of her identity in its interpretative strategies. This article rectifies that omission by discussing several of her works in light of her Roman Catholic experiences, her rebellion against the church's concepts of sexuality and womanhood, and her creation of new performative rituals.

Born in Chicago in 1956, Finley was raised by her mother, a political activist, and father, a jazz musician; she was the oldest of six children. Her father's family was Scottish and Irish Catholic, while her mother was raised Catholic by family members who had converted from German Judaism. Her recollections of her early experiences with Catholicism included two years spent in Catholic school, in second and third grade: "I went to Catholic school for a couple years and it was fairly liberal and progressive."¹ As previously discussed, there was Catholic history on both sides of her family, although she mentioned that her family was also part Gypsy and had incorporated some of their ritual practices and superstitions as well. She described

¹ Karen Finley, Interview, 4 April 2002.

being exposed to a variety of religions, stating, "There wasn't really a Catholic constancy in my life."²

Does this lack of Catholic constancy, or of active religious practice, mean that it is inappropriate to examine Finley's work against the backdrop of Roman Catholicism? Art critic Eleanor Heartney thinks not; she suggests,

With few exceptions, contemporary artists marked by Catholicism are not necessarily practicing Catholics. However, their imaginations have been shaped by their Catholic training. [. . .] Often, the power of their work comes from their personal struggles with the visual and philosophic seductions of Catholicism and its contradictory messages about sexuality, personal freedom, and social justice.³

As Finley herself reflected in our 2002 interview, "It [Catholicism] obviously shaped me. [. . .] Everyone seems to know that language, and that's where it's useful for me for people to be able to relate to it. It's shared information so I appropriate, I exploit it."⁴ Clearly, Finley would never define herself as a "Catholic artist;" however, she considers herself fluent enough in the language of Catholicism to use it to achieve her various goals. Thus, an analysis of how, when, and why she chooses to use Catholic language, symbols, and rituals in her work is appropriate.

Finley became part of the Chicago Art Institute's Young Artist Studio program in 1968 at the age of 12, where she became fascinated with the idea of privileging process instead of product. Her subsequent education emphasized studio arts; she received her MFA, with a focus in painting, from San Francisco Arts Institute in 1981.

² Karen Finley, Interview, 4 April 2002.

³ Eleanor Heartney, "Blood, Sex and Blasphemy: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art," *New Art Examiner* 26.6 (Mar 1999): 36.

⁴ Karen Finley, Interview, 4 April 2002.

She left San Francisco for Chicago, where she created visual artworks and performed in various clubs until 1983. Finley then moved to New York City and began performing in East Village performance art venues like PS 122, Franklin Furnace, WOW, and the Cat Club. These venues became legendary in performance circles for the showcases they provided for women performers like Finley, Deb Margolin, Holly Hughes, and the Split Britches troupe. Finley also worked in nightclubs such as the Danceteria and the Limbo Lounge, performing brief monologues which she later evolved into a longer collection of character sketches titled *I'm an Ass Man*. These non-traditional spaces for performance attracted audiences whose reactions toward cabaret performers ranged from partial interest to complete indifference to open hostility, which led Finley to develop confrontational tactics for holding their attention that became trademarks of her later work.

In December 1986, Finley's first major solo performance, *The Constant State of Desire*, premiered at the Kitchen. This work won her a Bessie Award; it later toured across the U.S. and Europe, and excerpts from the performance text were published in *The Drama Review* (Spring 1988) and anthologized in *Out From Under: texts by women performance artists* (1990). Other major performance works include *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990), *A Certain Level of Denial* (1992), *The American Chestnut* (1996), and *Shut Up and Love Me* (2001). Finley is also a prolific writer, with several collections of her performances and visual artworks in print. These books include *Shock Treatment* (1990), *Living It Up* (1996), *Pooh Unplugged: A Parody* (1999), and *A Different Kind of Intimacy: the Collected Writings of Karen Finley* (2001).

Given the body of scholarship that already exists surrounding Finley's work, I will focus not only on her well-known performances, but also visual aspects of various gallery installations and lesser-known performances, in relation to the following questions: What are the specific performative tactics Finley chooses to convey her messages? How does Finley attempt to redefine and explore old rituals, or create new ones, through her performances and installations? How have these tactics worked in relation to her audiences and the public? Answering these questions will add a new dimension to the scholarship considering her career. Finley's relationship to Roman Catholic visual and emotional culture will emerge through

juxtaposition of her writings with those of theorists, critics, and theologians, and examination of Catholic cultural touchstones that are evoked by (and sometimes central to) her work.

Early Performance Tactics: I'm an Ass Man

Much critical analysis⁵ debates the sexual content and graphic imagery in Finley's works, specifically in her two best-known pieces *The Constant State of Desire* and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (the performance at the center of the 1990's NEA debates). The performative strategies and subject matter of her earliest pieces make it clear that certain specific themes and strategies at the center of later controversy were present in her work from its beginning.

I'm an Ass Man (1984) contained a collection of characters in scenarios that challenged even the most jaded New Yorker. The title piece was performed in the voice of a man about to rape a woman on the subway, when he stops because he discovers she is menstruating. Other sections included "Mr. Hirsch," in the voice of a small girl who is forced to perform oral sex on her friend's father, and "Yams Up My Granny's Ass," in the voice of a drug addict who celebrates Thanksgiving by abusing his senile grandmother. Even without quoting passages at length, the sexual taboos Finley was putting onstage—menstruation, rape, pedophilia, elder abuse—shocked, confused, and angered audience members. Her subjects were off-limits in polite conversation, their activities the kind "nice" people did not ever speak of. She chose her subject materials not solely for their shock value, but as a way to take the subject of violence against women and discuss it publicly.

The controversial nature of Finley's work sometimes led audiences and critics to overlook her message, and to focus instead on her performance techniques. These included performing naked and smearing her body with various types of food to represent blood, semen, and other bodily fluids. The shock tactics she used to enthrall the crowds and her work on taboo sexual subjects led to a new level of fame. In June 1986, *Village Voice* critic C. Carr chose Finley as the

⁵ For one example, see "Outrageous Performance" in Theodore Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

subject of a cover story, titled "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts: The Taboo Art of Karen Finley." This article and others brought Finley to the attention of the international art community, and she began getting offers to perform abroad and bring her work to new audiences. Carr's review made it clear that Finley's relationship with her audiences was already an uneasy one, describing her performance of *I'm an Ass Man* as "both fascinating and horrifying to behold, because audiences can't help but recognize their own most mortifying obsessions in the fast-flowing bile. Finley rivets, but she doesn't entertain."⁶ The aesthetic tensions of Finley's performer-audience relationship were already established, as were several performance techniques that would soon make her both famous and infamous.

First, portraying both victims and aggressors is a technique that challenges Finley's audiences to face their own preconceptions about the issues she addresses. This strategy gives Finley the opportunity to emotionally involve her audience while raising difficult questions about the nature of blame, the center of the issues she is concerned with, and the deeply internalized nature of violence in American society. Her victims often blame themselves, while her perpetrators rarely challenge their own actions, leaving her audiences asking deeply important questions about societal reactions to crimes against women, children, and homosexuals. Finley raises these questions without spoon-feeding easily palatable answers, leaving her audiences to struggle with possible disjunctures between their beliefs and the realities of violence.

Second, direct address to her audience enables Finley to immediately engage and sometimes enrage her spectators. Audience members are often placed in the position of the attacker while Finley screams, "How could you do this to me?" or accuses, "I'm never enough for you." She embodies a variety of characters, and places the audience in various relationships to those characters throughout the course of any full-length performance. However, the performances for which she has been most lionized by her supporters, and villified by her critics, involve this dangerous relationship established through direct address. By holding the

⁶ C. Carr, "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts," reprinted in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993): 141-151.

audience accountable for the suffering she describes, Finley pushes her way into their consciousness and asks them to confront their own complicity.

Finally, nudity as a performative strategy has also been ever-present in Finley's work. Finley's use of nudity has exposed her vulnerability, her humanity, and her womanhood. I argue that Finley's calculated use of nudity was a conscious artistic technique, meant for more than initial attention-grabbing. In order for her work to transcend commonplace exhibitionism, Finley had to connect the use of nudity to her overall performative purposes. Her usual technique was to combine her own nudity with a symbolic covering of some sort, generally a type of food (yams, chocolate, raw eggs) as a visual symbol for the degradation her characters were suffering. In "Mr. Hirsch," for example, she used ice-cream sandwiches, squeezing them tightly at the end of the monologue to represent the neighbor's ejaculation onto the nine-year-old speaker. This tactic recurred in several of her later works.

Individuals' Rights and National Controversy: We Keep Our Victims Ready

Finley's work directly concerns oppression of individual rights and the activism necessary to end such oppression. At the core of her work is a crusade against homophobia and sexism; these two issues surface repeatedly in all of her major works, including the performance at the heart of the NEA controversy, *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990).⁷

We Keep Our Victims Ready is a stark, openly political work. Like Finley's other performances, it is a collection of monologues, this time loosely connected around the central theme of popular culture's ideas of victimization. While *We Keep Our Victims Ready* is perhaps her most famous work, and definitely her most controversial, its openly political nature involves religious symbolism only peripherally in the performance text itself. When examining

⁷ Various performance and visual art critics have examined the NEA 4 trials in great detail; for Finley's own description, see "Politics" in Karen Finley and Annie Leibovitz, *A Different Kind of Intimacy: The Collected Writings of Karen Finley* (New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001): 99-105. For other artists' takes on being plaintiffs in the NEA 4 trials, see Holly Hughes' performance piece *Preaching to the Perverted* (2000), and Tim Miller's writings on the trials at <http://members.aol.com/millertale/timmillerNEA.html>.

an artist's career in the light of religious experience, it is crucial to remember that religion is only one factor in a complex web of materials that artists draw on to create their work. However, religion became inextricably entwined with the controversy surrounding the performance, as the national argument over whether her works violated standards of decency was rooted largely in a conservative Christian value set. Religion and art analysis intersect at the point of audience reception of a performance, as well as within the process of artistic creation; audience members bring their own cultural baggage to interpretation of a work, and that baggage may include religious beliefs and practices. The consequences of the NEA trials also colored Finley's later work. In a 1990 interview for *Paper*, she described how the religious and political pressures expressed in the media were changing the way she created art:

There is also this sense of self-censorship in terms of knowing what you're going to create and how it's going to be looked at.[. . .] there's still the situation that you think, oh wow, when you go and write this it's going to be looked at in this different light—it's either blasphemy or sacrilegious or obscene. So you're carrying that, and now I always have that thought process when I'm creating work. That just always affects you.⁸

We Keep Our Victims Ready is a necessary inclusion in any critique of Finley's body of work, and already has a considerable amount of surrounding critical literature; this project adds a consideration of the conservative religious right's interactions with Finley as a result of the NEA court cases.

A brief look at one section of the performance will illustrate how it became the center of national controversy. In 1987, the Tawana Brawley case focused national media attention on a young black woman who had been discovered in a garbage bag, naked, and covered in human feces. She accused three white police officers of raping her; the case was later thrown out of court when her evidence was found to be fabricated. Finley was obsessed with the images of this court case, which she eventually used as material for "Can this veal calf walk?" a short

⁸ Interview by Carlo McCormick of Finley and David Wojnarowicz, *Paper*, October 1990.

monologue which later became the centerpiece of *We Keep Our Victims Ready*. Finley recalls the symbolism underlying her choices for the materials in which she covered her naked body:

I decided to use chocolate. It looked like shit. And I liked the idea of chocolate's history, its association with love. . . . I smeared my body with chocolate, because, I said in the piece, I'm a woman, and women are usually treated like shit. Then I covered myself with red candy hearts—because, "after a woman is treated like shit, she becomes more lovable." After the hearts, I covered myself with bean sprouts, which smelled like semen and looked like semen—because, after a woman is treated like shit and loved for it, she is jacked off on. Then I spread tinsel all over my body, like a Cher dress—because, no matter how badly a woman has been treated, she'll still get it together to dress for dinner.⁹

This particular performative use of nudity in combination with foodstuffs would lead to the rescinding of Finley's NEA grant in the summer of 1990. This piece became the source of her nickname, "the chocolate-smeared woman," in the conservative press; certain members of the public¹⁰ clearly interpreted her performance choices differently than with the symbolic meanings she described.

Critic Stephen Holden, after seeing *We Keep Our Victims Ready* at Lincoln Center, added to the debate by giving a specific reading of the symbolism of "Can this veal calf walk?" in his review:

It is during the second act, on a kitchen set, that Ms. Finley strips to her panties and smears chocolate over her body from the neck down. Not a comic or sexual gesture, this ritual signifies the mortification of the body by a psychologically battered

⁹ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2000): 84.

¹⁰ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, for example, in "The NEA's Suicide Charge," 11 May 1990.

character whose self-image is so damaged that she thinks of herself as nothing more than excrement.¹¹

Marcelle Clements interviewed her the same day that the NEA made the grant rejection announcements. It was too soon to know how the label of "obscenity" would affect Finley's work and audience reactions to it, but Clements raised the questions on many people's minds in her story on *We Keep Our Victims Ready*:

Her work is nearly always shocking and invariably - some would say relentlessly - political. It is also sometimes humorous and often fearsome. Her beat is the intolerable. Should public money pay for the expression of the intolerable? Should the intolerable be censored?¹²

In the end, the answers to Clements' questions were "No" and "Yes." The rescinding of Finley's grant marked the beginning of eight nightmarish years of First-Amendment-related court cases. A brief review of the legal, political, and artistic history surrounding the trials is essential to understanding the central issues at hand, as well as their ramifications in Finley's later work.

In 1989, Congress took the NEA to task for providing grant monies to photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and visual artist Andres Serrano, claiming that their works were obscene. Several bills appeared on the House floor seeking to put tighter controls on the types of art the NEA could fund, including the Rohrabacher Amendment, which would have introduced a prohibition on awarding any grant used to "promote, distribute, disseminate, or produce matter that has the purpose or effect of denigrating the beliefs, tenets, or objects of a particular religion."¹³ This bill hinted at the religious roots of conservatives' opposition to the

¹¹ Stephen Holden, "Finley Mocks Her Critics in Her Art," *New York Times* 24 July 1990: C13.

¹² Holden C13.

¹³ *National Endowment of the Arts et al. v. Finley et al.*, 524 US 569, U.S. Sup. Ct. 1998. Lexis-Nexis. Accessed 14 January 2003.

controversial grants in question; it failed, but a compromise bill authored by Representative Paul Henry and Senator Jesse Helms (and sponsored by Representatives Pat Williams and Thomas Coleman) passed in 1990. The Williams/Coleman Amendment added a "decency clause" to the NEA charter, requiring all works receiving grants to meet "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public."¹⁴ Meanwhile, Finley and three other artists (Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes) had received preliminary approval of their Performance Artist grant applications by an NEA panel, but this approval was reversed by the NEA Council four months before the decency clause was officially implemented in November 1990. The artists, believing their grants had been denied because of the decency standards and the prevailing political climate, sued the NEA in 1992 seeking reinstatement of their grants, and attempting to overturn the decency clause as unconstitutional because of vagueness and violation of the First Amendment. The California Ninth District Court reinstated their grants and found the clause to be unconstitutional. The artists' grants were reinstated, but the section of the case pertaining to the decency clause was appealed several times, and finally reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1998. In June of that year, the judges voted 8-1 against the artists, upholding the decency clause and thus instituting new possibilities of censorship over the works selected for future funding.

One of the cases the Supreme Court majority opinion cited was *Rosenburger v. Rector* (1995), which reinstated state university funding for a Christian student newspaper at the University of Virginia on the basis that its denial "would risk fostering a pervasive bias or hostility to religion."¹⁵ The Court opinion then differentiates between unlawful discrimination based on religion, such as that in *Rosenburger*, and selection of winners of open competition, such as that for NEA grants. The majority opinion stated that the definition of "decency" is left up to NEA selection panel members, and that the NEA is thus not discriminatory against any particular kind of speech by mandate of the decency clause.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Finley et al. v. National Endowment of the Arts*, CV 90-5236, CA U.S. District Court 1992. Online. Lexis-Nexis. Accessed 14 Jan 2003.

¹⁵ *Rosenberger v. Rector* 515 U.S. 819, 837 (1995). Lexis-Nexis. Accessed 14 January 2003.

¹⁶ See *National Endowment of the Arts v. Finley et al.*, 524 US 569, U.S. Sup. Ct. 1998, for full opinion.

Some religious conservatives rejoiced at the Supreme Court decision. Michael W. McConnell, in his analysis of the case, suggested that "It is impossible to imagine a 'viewpoint' that would be excluded by the standards of 'decency' and 'respect for diverse opinions.' Even the viewpoint that one should be indecent or disrespectful can be expressed decently and with respect for the sensibilities of others."¹⁷ He also accused Justice Souter, the sole dissenter, of falling "for the idea that the 'arts community' should tap public funds but have no public responsibility."¹⁸ While the conservative press celebrated the decision as a victory, the mainstream media reinforced the stereotypical links between religion and political conservatism. For example, nationally syndicated columnist Alice Thorson decried the Court's decision:

A not unimportant dimension of these public-funded art controversies is their role as lightning rod for the country's philistinism, Puritanism, religion-based intolerance and stultifying ignorance about art's role in shaping culture. Sometimes the way contemporary artists go about it is not very pretty, or downright offensive to some. But the aims of their art are quite different from those of the great art of the past commissioned by the church, the monarchy and the nobility, which is the art that contemporary art-bashers invariably hold up as a standard.¹⁹

Through use of phrases like "religion-based intolerance," Thorson implicates all religious practitioners without questioning precisely whose religions and which practitioners are actively intolerant. Such criticism, while masquerading as liberal, actually reinforces false and divisive overgeneralizations about religion and religious practitioners. Her reference to "great art of the past commissioned by the church," for example, is most likely to refer to the Roman Catholic Church's patronage of arts during the Italian Renaissance (since that was the last time the

¹⁷ Michael W. McConnell, "The Supreme Court in 1998," *First Things: A Journal of Religion and Public Life* 87 (Nov 1998): 38.

¹⁸ McConnell 39.

¹⁹ Alice Thorson, "Recent NEA decision is a defeat for self-expression and tolerance," Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, 15 July 1998. Infotrac. Accessed 14 January 2003.

phrase "the church" referred to a single religious entity). However, the original authors of the Congressional "decency clause" language were both Protestant: Jesse Helms is a Baptist, and Paul Henry was an evangelical Christian of the Christian Reformed sect.²⁰ Specificity thus becomes crucial to arts criticism in relation to religion, because critics otherwise run the risk of alienating arts advocates whose religious views do not result in intolerance.

Critics also noted that the debates over arts funding in the 1990's occurred primarily between the cultural elite and the conservative elite, and the larger battle was over who had the right to define the public and speak for them. Finley's performance style was catalogued and criticized for appropriating the voices of the disenfranchised without doing anything to empower them. Grant Kester argued that, unlike Finley, true public artists must work "not as the shock therapists of some imaginary middle class, but as collaborators and participants in the daily struggles of life under an increasingly oppressive and divisive economic regime."²¹ His critique pointed to a larger cultural shift away from individual, political performance art in the late 1990's; as government monies allotted to the NEA dwindled, economic concerns played ever larger roles in deciding whose artworks would be publicly shown. The Whitney Museum cancelled a show of Finley's shortly after the Supreme Court decision.

Finley's work was under attack from all sides during this time. Liberal critics expected her to act as the poster child of the First Amendment, and denigrated her for the consistency and elitism of her style and subject matter; audiences expected her to be obscene, and were often disappointed; conservatives sought to make her the pinup girl for perversity. Finley describes part of her daily experience during the trials in *A Different Kind of Intimacy* as follows: "One day in Nyack I picked up the local Catholic church's Sunday bulletin, and there was a diatribe against me. [...] The feeling of going to church, or getting into a cab in a distant town, and seeing or hearing yourself being condemned, is difficult to take."²²

²⁰ Information on many past and present politicians' religious affiliations is available at <http://politicalgraveyard.com>.

²¹ Grant Kester, "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public" Originally published in *Afterimage*, (January 1993) <<<http://digitalarts.ucsd.edu/~gkester/Essays/rhetorical.html>>>

²² Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2000): 150.

After the NEA trials concluded, Finley moved to Los Angeles, in an attempt to move beyond the trials and work on new subject matter. In our April 2002 interview, she mentioned that she had been "excommunicated by a bishop in Los Angeles"²³ because of the controversy surrounding her work.²⁴ Clearly, the public condemnation of her work which began in the late 1980's changed the content and form of her future installations and performances. In the 1990's, as she grew more distant from the Catholic Church as institution, Finley began to create rituals for herself and others who had been displaced from traditional forms of religious worship.

Recreating Ritual: Memento Mori and A Certain Level of Denial

Sometimes I pretend to talk to my dead friends on the phone—as if the phone were ringing in heaven.

Sometimes I leave the Rolodex open at your phone number, because
for a moment I forget—
There is no ritual that makes me feel any better.
Praying just doesn't do it.
Praying just doesn't work for me.
Working just doesn't make me forget
The Higher Power never shows up.
Letting go doesn't work, because I ain't got nothing to hold on to.
Crying helps.
Crying helps. . . .
 I'll light you a candle.
 I'll say you a prayer.
Baby we're past hope
past hope . . .²⁵

Finley often refers directly to the many deaths that have surrounded her. Her father committed suicide in 1978, when she was twenty-one, and she has since lost many friends and

²³ Karen Finley, Interview, 4 April 2002.

²⁴ I contacted the Archdiocese of Los Angeles on 14 January 2003 and attempted to verify this statement through the Tribunal Office, but the tribunal official told me that excommunications are kept private between bishop and parishioner unless the Pope performs a public excommunication.

²⁵ Karen Finley, from "In Memory Of," part of Karen Finley, and Michael Overn, *A Certain Level of Denial* (Rykodisc: 1992, 1994)

fellow artists to AIDS. *A Certain Level of Denial* was created in 1992 as part of Finley's focus on gay rights and gay issues, and as a mourning ritual for the arts community hard-hit by HIV. Four years before, in 1988, Finley had created *A Suggestion of Madness*, a piece commemorating the tenth anniversary of her father's suicide. Juxtaposing sections of these two pieces demonstrates their recurring imagery. Compare the earlier passage from "In Memory Of" with this section of her father's suicide note, which she read to close *A Suggestion of Madness*: "To know I have hurt you is to know that I would gladly bear your pain. To know that you have ever been afraid of me is my darkness of night. No sure ever. No infinity."²⁶

Both passages point to the absence of God—"No Higher Power," "No infinity"—but their presence in Finley's performances also involves the creation of rituals for mourning, and the search for hope in the face of tragedy. Finley describes her purpose in using her father's note when creating *A Suggestion of Madness*: "by reading this incredibly private document, I was trying to represent the absurdity of the idea that the theater can truly represent emotional pain, that it can cause the audience to experience emotions that are 'real.'"²⁷ Finley's work often underscores the difficulty of describing human pain, both physical and emotional.

Elaine Scarry's work *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), also attempts to explain this difficulty. In the first half of her book, "The Un-Making of the World," Scarry makes a case for her hypothesis that the more severe human pain becomes, the less able humans are to express their pain using language. She uses torture and war as models for understanding how and why human pain is inflicted, and carefully details the loss of language that the victims undergo. In the second half of her book, "The Making of the World," Scarry examines the imagination, which enables humans to generate descriptive and communicative language. Her theory is that the imagination generates images/thoughts in much the same way that pain destroys them. One of her categories of supplementary examples in Part II involves the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the relationship they show between the body, Christ, and

²⁶ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 65.

²⁷ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 61.

death. She looks at the language used, but more explicitly, at the central symbol of Christianity, the cross:

An act of representation is an act of embodiment. Christ is himself embodied in the scriptures, long before any visual depictions of him. But it is also interesting that centuries of visual representations have made Christ's embodiment more prominent, have made it their central content.

In Western art and culture, by far the two mostly endlessly visualized moments in Christ's life are his infancy and his hour of dying . . . the depicted hours on the cross make visible the inside of the body, the body in its nearly unchallengeable demonstration of its final requirement.²⁸

Scarry's ideas concerning the language of pain and Christian depictions of the crucifixion are linked with Finley's purpose in creating mourning rituals and then representing herself as, and enabling others to become, an intimate part of them. Finley tries to embody the language we lack for the pain of losing a loved one through death. Since traditional Catholic practices are not enough to bring Finley solace—"Praying just doesn't work for me"—she imagines new ways and creates new rituals to provide herself and others with the emotional release that traditional Catholic belief structures and ritual practices used to provide. Critic Edward Scheer describes her work:

Finley's work also exhibits emotion not simply as a personal catharsis but as site of transduction, developing an energy in one symbolic system for use in another, from body to language, from artistic corpus to social body, to generate a shift in potential and a symbolic transformation. Put simply, Finley's work is intended to allow more freedom for the body, however it is conceived.²⁹

²⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 216.

²⁹ Edward Scheer, "Performance art, life crisis rituals." <http://www.realttimearts.net/rt44/scheer.html>, accessed 9/05/02.

As evidence of this search for bodily freedom and emotional release, consider an installation piece Finley created in England in 1991, parts of which later became integrated into *A Certain Level Of Denial* (1992). The installation, titled *Memento Mori*, consisted of several mourning rituals in which the public was invited to participate. These included the "Ribbon Gate," where each visitor could take a ribbon and tie it to the gate in memory of someone they loved who had died of AIDS; the "Carnation Wall," where visitors could take carnations dipped in red paint and place them in the holes of a wall covered with white lace, also to mark the passing of someone who had died of AIDS; and a row of empty beds, each with an empty nightstand and chair, meant to represent the shared ritual of the bedside vigil spent beside a loved one who is dying. A fourth ritual, added when the installation moved to Los Angeles, consisted of a room filled with sand and lit candles; visitors could "enter the room and write the names of those they had lost to AIDS"³⁰ in the sand.

These four rituals, each a method of memorializing the dead through visual, temporal, sensual experience, reveal another layer of symbolic meaning when compared with traditions surrounding Catholic burial rites. The flowers traditionally sent by friends and family members to the funeral home and/or the service, often in wreaths tied with ribbons, are echoed in the first two rituals, the "Ribbon Gate" and the "Carnation Wall." The bedside vigil resembles the Catholic wake, the "sitting with the dead" that occurs in the hours between death and the funeral and burial. Sand is often referred to in the Christian scriptures as a symbol of impermanence and the transience of human life and effort, as in the parable about the man who built his house on a foundation of sand. Candles have many layers of symbolic meaning to Catholics; their light may represent an individual human soul, signify hope in the midst of darkness, and represent the Holy Spirit's presence in the sacrament of Baptism.

Theologian Eugene Kennedy contends that:

Religion as an environment is Proustian in its evocative power, incarnating itself in dramatic events, such as a person's first confession [. . .] or the whisper of

³⁰ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2000): 158.

devotional candles extinguishing themselves in their own melting. They are skin, shell, and silver bowl holding the mystery of a faith powerful enough to infiltrate every crack and fissure of our human experience.³¹

In *Memento Mori*, Finley seeks to tap into this "evocative power" by utilizing the symbolic and ritual language of Catholicism to create a space apart from the outer world for her audiences to contemplate and mourn. Although Finley does not seek a Catholic audience for her works, she is deeply concerned with the spectator's relation to her work. *Memento Mori*, as described above, only succeeds in becoming art through interactivity, through audience participation in the rituals she creates. In selecting certain symbols over others—ribbons, candles, sand—Finley is tapping into the cultural heritage of Roman Catholicism, even as she seeks to provide solace for an audience composed of people traditionally excluded from Roman Catholic rituals, in this instance homosexuals and those who had lost loved ones to AIDS. (In 1987, Pope John Paul II preached tolerance toward all people with HIV, but Church teaching remains unchanged in regard to the immorality of homosexual acts. Fifteen years later, there is still no official Church position on priests with AIDS, who comprise a significant population.³²) Two goals of Finley's work are to reveal the political power wielded by those defining what is sacred, and to encourage her audiences to become active in creating their own definitions.

The Virgin Mary is Pro-Choice

One of Finley's most controversial installations, "The Virgin Mary is Pro-Choice," exemplifies her work in demonstrating the political power owned by those who define sacred ideology. In claiming a traditional Catholic figurehead as a supporter of a controversial feminist issue, Finley directly linked humanity, art, and the sacred in ways that made conservatives very, very nervous. This idea first appeared as a two-story wall mural at the

³¹ Eugene Kennedy, *Tomorrow's Catholics, Yesterday's Church: The Two Cultures of American Catholicism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988): 6.

³² Thomas, Judy. "Homosexuality, AIDS, and celibacy: The Church's views." *Kansas City Star* 29 Jan 2000: Online at <http://www.kcstar.com/projects/priests/doctrine.htm>. Accessed 6 Sept 2002.

Franklin Furnace, in May 1990, as part of an exhibition entitled "A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much." Finley painted related murals on the themes of women's rights and abortion rights on surrounding walls. The feature piece was a two-story image of the Virgin with the caption, "The Virgin Mary is pro-choice."

Relatively few people had the chance to see this exhibition—the Furnace's performance space was closed in mid-May "in violation of fire laws," after the NY Fire Department received a call claiming that the Furnace was an "illegal social club."³³ When the Furnace insisted on keeping the art gallery open, the non-profit was audited by the IRS and investigated by the General Accounting Office at the request of Jesse Helms. The Furnace's board decided to stage a public rebellion against such heavy-handed government intervention, hosting a performance gala at the Public Theatre in July 1990 which featured controversial artists including Finley, Jessica Hagedorn, Eric Bogosian, and the Guerilla Girls. In the end, the Furnace had to move across town to another space in May 1992, where artists utilized sections of its new space for installations and performance events until 1996.

Finley eventually incorporated her idea of coupling the Virgin Mary with pro-choice politics into her performance piece "It's My Body," from *A Certain Level of Denial*. This time, she included the Virgin among other historical female icons:

I saw the Virgin Mary and she carried a sign that read "PRO-CHOICE." I saw Cleopatra and she wore a T-shirt that read, "VAGINAL PRIDE." I saw Joan of Arc and she wore a button that read, "THE POPE IS SATAN." I saw Josephine Baker and she held a sign that read, "U.S. OUT OF MY UTERUS."³⁴

By reclaiming such famous women and incorporating them into her cause, Finley inspired outrage in audiences who had never before considered that such notable historical women might have held controversial opinions on issues concerning women's reproductive

³³ "Franklin Furnace In Time." <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/about/about.html>; accessed 6 Sept 2002.

³⁴ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 134.

rights. While Finley certainly did not claim to know the Virgin Mary's political stance, she jumped at the opportunity to challenge popular understandings of the Virgin, and to demystify the Virgin's allure. As she described it:

"The Virgin Mary is Pro-Choice" might come out of anger or spite or humor, but I'm not putting others in their place; it's my work as an artist. I just look at it as material, the same way I look at the Bush administration. [. . .] I don't really put it like it's that much more special.³⁵

Finley's controversial choices of material often spring from her wish to challenge her audience's preconceptions. Her choice of the Virgin Mary, a Catholic cultural icon with multiple layers of meaning, was meant to foreground the idea of being pro-choice in an unforgettable way. Virtues traditionally associated with the Virgin include meekness, humility, and unconditional love, especially of children. None of these virtues is commonly associated with pro-choice women, who are often vilified as "baby-killers" or worse. Finley chose the most virtuous of Catholic women, and associated her with a political stance considered sinful by a certain Catholic subgroup. Thus, she succeeded in connecting the sacred with the political by asking those believers to examine the connections between women's holiness and their powerlessness, between the sanctity of life and the ability to exercise free will.

A Parodic Look at Ritual: Living It Up

Not all of Finley's works surrounding the theme of death are meant to be serious. In her book *Living It Up* (1996), a parody of the Martha-Stewart inspired home crafts movement, she includes a piece entitled "Do Your Own Casket." The following passage is a sample of the wry humor she uses to deflect our fear of death and illusions of control:

³⁵ See interview transcript in appendix A.

I have come to realize that I just can't trust anyone to correctly organize my funeral after I'm gone. Many people fear death, but my biggest fear is that my last appearance [sic] will be lying in an ordinary, nondescript, unmemorable casket.[. . .] The only way to ensure a funeral to my liking is to plan and rehearse my own funeral. People rehearse for weddings, for birthing classes, where they practice breathing, practice baking a cake till they get it just right. So every year I rehearse my funeral with me center stage. I send out invitations, and it has become an annual event with guests even sending funeral wreaths and flowers. I always update the ceremony to keep up with the latest funeral trends. [. . .] I also cook all the food and decide on the music—I want everything to be just right! And right means *my way*.³⁶ (Finley's emphasis)

Symbolically, we see the trappings of a formal religious funeral—wreaths, flowers, the casket, the food for the funeral dinner, the sacramental music—this time through the eyes of a woman obsessed with making every detail creative, unique, individualized, and consciously chosen. Here, Finley parodies American societal pressures on women to channel their creativity into acceptable domestic outlets, and slyly insinuates that they will be judged on their success at manipulating such time-consuming, largely unimportant details even after their deaths.

From another perspective, the speaker in the piece is seeking to tightly control the ritual aspects that she is allowed to, since she is excluded from participation in the actual practice of the ritual. To draw a parallel: generations of American Catholic women joined all-female Altar Societies, whose members cleaned their parish churches and decorated them for major feast days, and cooked for funerals and church festivals. These societies focused on the virtues of humility and service, and provided unpaid volunteer labor for the beautification of each parish. It was a mark of parish prestige to become an Altar Society president, and competition for such titles could grow heated and hostile, since the officers had the power to allot tasks, choose dates for parish social events, and schedule the other volunteers. Yet Altar Society members—and all women-- were not allowed until after Vatican II to read during Mass, or to distribute the bread and wine at Communion, or indeed to be present upon the upper level of the church containing

³⁶ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 177.

the altar. Altar Societies did not focus on organizing women concerned about these injustices, nor did they provide tasks that utilized women's abilities for leadership. Instead, it could be argued that they distracted women from political and social injustice by focusing their attentions on church decorations and social events, and parish women were to some extent judged by how much time they volunteered. As American Catholicism entered the 1980's, Altar Societies largely disappeared, in part because women who were working outside the home no longer had as much time to volunteer, and in part because they sought more politically active and spiritually satisfying work within the Church.

Like some women in the Altar Societies, Finley's character is taking control of little cosmetic tasks instead of seeking active participation in life. The character's humorous obsession with details surrounding the death ritual indicates a feeling of powerlessness in relation to others' interpretation of her life. Her deepest desire is not to have others remember her accomplishments, but to admire the container that holds her remains: "I want people walking away from my funeral with tears in their eyes, saying, 'That was the most beautiful, amazingly decorated casket I've every [sic] seen.'" ³⁷

Both artistic creativity and self-expression are valuable talents, and interior decoration (of home or church) can provide a welcoming environment that can enhance every task performed in such a space. However, when such decoration is emphasized, to the exclusion of other meaningful tasks, the constant necessity for up-to-date appearances can be used to mask an emptiness of purpose below the surface.

In *Living It Up*, Finley satirizes the same focus on material objects that she parodied in such earlier performance pieces as "Steal Your BMW" (from *The Constant State of Desire*, 1986) and the CD recording "Enter Entrepreneur" (1994). Here, though, is parody with a difference: she has shifted the role of her speaker considerably. In the earlier pieces, the speaking character was an angry woman aggressively pursuing a high-status male and haranguing him with abusive language. By contrast, this speaker (or voice, since the piece is in print) is a female

³⁷ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 177.

desperate to fill the spiritual emptiness in her life with objects representing a particular ritual, and she addresses no one in particular. Finley's shift in strategy marked a move away from her reputation for portraying angry, obscene characters, a direction she pursued even further in her next performance project, *The American Chestnut*.

Birth and rebirth: The American Chestnut

Given the wide variety of subject matter Finley has covered in a career that has spanned three decades, it is interesting to note that she sometimes focuses on birth and creation in the later part of her career, a shift from her earlier works focusing on the violence, abuse, and sexual discrimination many women face daily. While these topics are never completely absent from her work, Finley's more recent pieces contain sections devoted to the possibility of rebirth.

By choosing the title of *The American Chestnut*, Finley chose to honor a species of tree which has survived serious blight; one immediately obvious parallel is to the American arts community, which in the mid-1990's was just beginning to emerge from the devastation of the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars. A section from the title piece:

We have something else to celebrate tonight. A miracle has happened. The American chestnut has bloomed for the first time in over 75 years! You see, the American chestnut was once the most common tree in America. But a blight wiped out nearly every tree. This tree has survived. The disease causes the tree to never mature, but to continually send up new shoots, trying to survive. This is a very special accomplishment for this tree, to be able to bloom.³⁸

A major theme of *The American Chestnut* is survival: surviving AIDS, surviving loss, surviving the aging process. Finley's focus on how humans survive tragedy, and her own recent entry into motherhood, led her down new creative paths as an artist.

³⁸ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 225.

One of Finley's close friends and fellow artists, David Wojnarowicz, died of AIDS in 1992: "Losing David was particularly hard. He and I had both lost our fathers to suicide and we both did political and sexual work and had similar convictions. I felt closer to him artistically than any other artist."³⁹ Wojnarowicz was also raised Catholic, and drew on that language in his own artistic work. In 1993, when Finley began work on *The American Chestnut*, one of the pieces was dedicated to him. The section entitled "David" alludes briefly to the rituals of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, the final confession and anointing with oils that Catholics receive before they die (if circumstances allow). "David" also contains repetition of Finley's earlier, desolate motif of unsuccessful prayers:

Requests, Resolutions, Absolution, Confession.
These are all words of forgiveness, of I'm sorry.
These are things people ask of themselves at death—but you
asked them of us and yourself your entire life.⁴⁰

At the end of "David," the speaker recalls the moment of his death:

Time and emotions stood still in their intensity,
like a floodgate, like a too-full balloon.
I'm disappearing, I'm disappearing, I'm disappearing, he said.
You will become something else, Tom said.
David always said death is just the dispersal of energy.⁴¹

Finley captures what it was like to be at Wojnarowicz' bedside, listening to the final conversation between the artist and his lover, Tom Rauffenbart. In the vacillation between "You will become something else" and "death is just the dispersal of energy," Finley's words suggest a fundamental human uncertainty, a wondering about death that humans are never

³⁹ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 114.

⁴⁰ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 214.

⁴¹ Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2001): 215.

fully freed from at any time in their lives. The Anointing of the Sick, which practicing Roman Catholics use to mark the approaching end of a life, can sometimes provide solace, inner peace, and closure, but it does not always succeed. In writing "David," Finley expressed the lack of comfort sometimes remaining after this final ritual is complete, but also noted a seed of hope in those who remained behind.

Talking with Karen Finley: April 2002 Interview

In April 2002, I saw Finley's latest work, *Shut Up and Love Me*. The interview Finley gave me the day after the performance revealed much about how she wished her material to be interpreted. She was very concerned that I might consider any of her works "and go, 'Oh, it's a crucifix, it's Catholic.'" (Somewhat ironically, a crucifix *is* a uniquely Catholic religious icon consisting of a depiction of Jesus' body mounted on a cross. Other Christian churches use an empty cross as symbol.) In responding to various questions about her religious experiences and how she used them in her work, she emphasized the use of Catholic language as a shared language for parody, and to the Catholic Church as a familiar institution to her audiences. Occasionally, she would begin to reveal personal experiences, but would quickly change the subject. She mentioned that she had had her daughter baptized Catholic, but immediately pulled back, saying, "This [question] seems to be more about my personal life than about my work."⁴² My impression was that she wished to keep any aspects of what she considered her "personal life" separate from our interview, and that any relevance or significance that Catholicism still held for her in its rituals or practices was a private matter outside the scope of our discussion. She was, however, willing to discuss her differences of opinion with the Catholic Church:

I'm just not interested in raising my daughter in a church where they don't allow women to—I can't be hypocritical. I had her baptized as a ritual, but I don't know that I'll even choose, I don't want that burden, that situation where they tell her one thing and I'm doing something different, that confusion. I am pro-choice, I am

⁴² Karen Finley, Interview, 4 April 2002.

pro-gays, and I have certain principles that are very very different. So that's just it.⁴³

Finley has no interest in possible Church reforms, and is unfamiliar with the work of any Catholic feminist groups. Her present-day relationship with Catholicism remains publicly undefined, although her ambivalence is demonstrated in the contradiction between having her daughter baptized and refusing to raise her in the Church.

Finley's disclosures in our interview exemplify ways that some former Catholics feel the need to distance themselves politically from widely-held perceptions of the Church's views. One of these ways is to immediately clarify their own positions on controversial issues such as reproductive rights and homosexual rights. (The success of this differentiation rests on the listener's assumption that no one within the Church shares their positions, which the works of groups like Catholics for a Free Choice and Dignity demonstrate is patently untrue.) The second common distancing method involves a preference not to be classified in relation to religion, or a conscious disavowing of religious components of personal identity.

This analysis includes both a consideration of the influences of Catholicism on Finley's work, and her own self-perceptions and identifications in relation to her career. Without serving as an apologist for the Catholic Church, I respectfully disagree with Finley. While she is wary of connecting herself publicly in any way with her former religion, perhaps for good reasons, I believe that elements of Catholicism appear in several of her works, and that study of these elements should be incorporated into analyses of her performance in order to illuminate the ruptures in belief structures and the creation of replacement rituals that these works exemplify. Religion has also played a role in audience interpretations of her art, especially her earlier, more political works. As exemplified by the Congressmen who authored the NEA decency clause, religious and political conservatism can directly color the public interpretation of artwork and affect an artist's career; however, further research is needed to investigate the complex relationships between American religions and American performance art.

⁴³ Karen Finley, Interview, 4 April 2002.

Conclusion

The performance tactics that made Finley infamous have been integral to her work since her earliest days at the Danceteria. From getting audiences to shut up and pay attention, to *Shut Up and Love Me*, Finley's work derives its confrontational nature largely from her judicious, calculated use of direct address, obscene language, and nudity. There is nothing she is afraid to say, no word too obscene to speak, if it serves her larger purposes. And she does have larger purposes: to awaken, to challenge, to confront, to speak out against a world of injustice. The question has always been: do these tactics work more against her than they do for her?

Their use clearly alienated the religious right and the political conservatives who led the charge in the NEA trials. The liabilities of Finley's methods are several; perhaps the most critical is that potential audiences are sharply divided over her style and content, even before they become aware of her underlying messages. Second, serving as a national flashpoint in the NEA debates has had severe consequences for Finley's health and personal life, including a stress-related miscarriage and a divorce. Because her tactics were calculated to draw attention, and because they succeeded, Finley found herself at the center of a particular historical moment in American culture. She spent eight years fighting a battle for freedom of artistic expression that, in the end, was lost.

Finley's performance tactics have brought her art the rewards of fame, and brought her messages increased exposure. She no longer needs to depend on federal, state, or local grants to make a living as an artist; her political notoriety has added to her desirability as a guest artist and lecturer on college campuses across the United States. Finley's name recognition eases the process of getting her written works published and her artworks shown in galleries and museums. This is not to suggest that the merit of her works is dependent on her fame, but rather to make the point that artists who become famous gain much larger critical audiences who can debate the merits of their works. If Finley fails to win over all those audience members, she succeeds in maintaining the ability to question audience preconceptions about herself, her work, and its interpretation. Studying the Catholic elements in her work makes it

possible to pinpoint her tactics and identify some of her underlying creative motivations. Without such study, any analysis of the body of her work would be incomplete.