

Performance Art, Censorship and Psychoanalysis:
Theorizing the Outrageous Acts of Karen Finley

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 2003

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0-612-78010-4

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ABSTRACT

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Lynn Beavis

The psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva, particularly her ideas concerning abjection and the subject in crisis, is used as a lens through which the work of American performance artist Karen Finley is analyzed. Finley's work is placed in the context of the governmental and social debates that took place concerning the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) in the United States in the late 1980s. Contemporary art was characterized in terms of obscenity and fraud by the "New Right", who portrayed themselves as the voice of the American public. On the other hand, the art world maintained the artist's right to challenge cultural standards and the constitutional right to freedom of expression. Finley became the cause célèbre of the NEA crisis. This study reveals the psychoanalytical impulses behind both Finley's art work and the fulminations of the "Neo-Conservatives".

This thesis is dedicated to my dear friend Andrew Elvish, whose support, encouragement and sense of humour were sustaining forces from start to finish.

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Introduction

Abjection, like the two-faced god Janus, stands at the doorway of the symbolic, guarding both entry and exit. Janus, however, is associated with the masculine – law, state, morality – while abjection is aligned with the feminine – ambiguous, unnameable, and other. The abject lies within that space Julia Kristeva designates the semiotic, anterior to meaning, the locus of drives, where neither subject nor object are distinct or discrete. The semiotic is irretrievably bound up with the maternal body, where drives circulate unarticulated. It is the underside of the symbolic, that which seeks to repress the *jouissance* of the maternal body in order to function (and which functions through order). But as Freud points out, everything repressed will return. The semiotic, according to Kristeva, surfaces in ambiguity, repetition, silences, rhythms, and nonsense and it can be heard in the avant-garde text – art, literature, and poetry. But disruptions of the symbolic can also occasion acts of censorship, that symptom of the symbolic order which attempts to prevent the unthinkable from entering consciousness.

The work of American performance artist Karen Finley reveals the play of the abject across the surface of the female body. Although several contemporary artists deal with this notion in their work, I have chosen to focus my thesis on Finley on account of the controversies which brought her production under public and government scrutiny. Karen Finley was censured in the press and

the U.S. Congress in 1990 when she was identified as one of the "NEA 4", a group of performance artists who had their public funding rescinded due to the nature of their artwork. Her performance, *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989-90), was singled out by the news media as an example of the obscenity and fraudulence funded by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) at the taxpayers' expense. The debate over her work was framed in terms of the non-sense of her actions in performance, when she would layer viscous substances such as chocolate, egg, and candied yams, onto her body. Her intent was to make the cultural coding of the female body apparent, but it was conveyed to the public as the senseless act of a lunatic.

The controversy around Finley, viewed on a strictly surface level, amounts to little more than a combination of philistinism and political grandstanding, and should on that account warrant minimal consideration. And while the political implications of this event raise it to only "bread and circus"¹ status, the ramifications for the art world were more serious. Not only was the notion of arm's length² public funding not honoured, the idea of public funding itself

¹ *Panum et circenses* was the Roman satirist Juvenal's estimation of the means of pacifying the public and distracting them from politics. This term seems appropriate in reference to the "NEA crisis," as will be detailed below, as it appears to me (and other commentators) that they were an attempt to deflect attention away from other, more pressing issues such as unemployment and crime rates.

² Arm's length is a principle of public funding which distances the government from the allocation of funds. In regard to arts funding this is accomplished through a peer review panel which decides on the distribution of funds according to artistic merit. This system was

came under attack. In addition, the demonstrated will of politicians to impose regulatory and punitive measures against the artists and sponsoring institutions was an untenable prospect. However, it is in an examination of this situation, through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, that perhaps the most interesting aspects become apparent.

On a material level, the work under consideration is far from threatening; it, in fact, makes use of a fundamental element of human existence – food – but, by making the female body a close referent, it has forced the work to abrade the surface of the unconscious, bringing it into conjunction with the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies the three main sites of abjection: waste (including excretion and the corpse), food, and sexual differentiation. All of these categories are representative of what Kristeva calls the me/not me,³ which marks the ambiguity of that which is of the body but cannot be fully separated from it. Abjection occurs at that point where the subject/object separation takes place. The crisis of abjection results from the indistinguishability of the one from the other.

The artist in this study represents the female body – not a new topic in Western

maintained at the NEA until the events described in this thesis.

³ This notion is fully explained below, on page 31

art history, yet one that is still capable of initiating a powerful response. The female body is traditionally represented within prescribed limits, which shore it up and make it safe. Within the patriarchal economy inherited through the Judeo-Christian tradition the danger posed by the female body is reduced by harnessing it to reproduction.

Her function is to assure procreation – the propagation of the race... she has no direct relation with the law of the community and its political and religious unity ... woman's knowledge is corporeal, aspiring to pleasure rather than tribal unity...⁴

It becomes a threat when represented outside the control of the heterosexual hierarchy. When the body becomes possessed, occupied, by a woman who makes claims to civil, economic, and most importantly, sexual freedoms she is breaking the boundaries of the "natural", crossing pre-defined limits and putting definitions of masculinity into question. Woman is seen to still function as Other to the masculine norm theorised in psychoanalysis.

This thesis was undertaken in response to a series of experiences I had while working in a Canadian artist run centre.⁵ The controversy that arose around a

⁴ Julia Kristeva, "On Chinese Women," in Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p 140

⁵ While working at Artspace in 1994 an artwork was displayed in a street level window, depicting a naked woman in a kneeling position. Though rather abstract in representation, a controversy ensued over the image. It was called indecent by some (including the City's Mayor) and deemed perfectly acceptable by others. The media and public response to this (to me) rather unexceptional artwork became a subject of fascination for me. Public debates, petitions, letters to the editor, guerrilla art responses to the event, discussions at City Council and many other incidents, played out in small the same events

particular work of art compelled me to think a great deal about why and how an inert object, fashioned for symbolic or aesthetic reasons, can offend, disturb and anger members of the public. It also made me think about issues such as public funding, media response, and censorship in relation to art. Above all, I wondered at the power the artwork holds and the hidden psychological reasons beneath the sometimes extreme responses that are elicited by a controversial work.

In attempting to solve this riddle I have looked at psychoanalytic thought, particularly focussing on the work of Julia Kristeva and her theory of the abject. I have also found it necessary to tour through some of the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in order to bring Kristeva's writings into focus. Various feminist and cultural theorists such as Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*) and Lynda Nead (*The Female Nude*), and Elizabeth Grosz (especially her examination of Kristeva's theory, as appears in Fletcher et al) have been instrumental in my understanding of these issues. In addition I have looked at both the negative and positive response to Finley's work, in both the liberal and conservative media, accessing articles from sources as diverse as specialised art journals and daily newspapers.

which took place around Karen Finley and the NEA. The "Artspace Controversy" passed in a little over a month, the Centre emerging stronger and more focussed as a result, while the American situation had less salutary effects. After the NEA crisis several attempts were made to have the Endowment defunded, and ultimately the category of grants to individual artists was canceled.

As my thesis deals with contemporary art issues, the materials I have chosen to examine are concentrated between 1981 to 1995. The bulk of what has been written on the subject has been in journals, with two excellent references bracketing this period. These are *Censored! Only in Canada* (1981), and *Arresting Images* (1994), both of which review a variety of issues, events and ideas about art and the controversies it has inspired.

Two other pieces of writing have critically affected my thinking in regard to censorship. One is drawn from a Marxist text (by R.E. Warner), the second is by anthropologist Mary Douglas. Although neither of these works deals with censorship, they do comment on power, its application and its dangers, and can be applied to the situation of the artist versus government in the current debates over freedom of expression.

According to Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, Marxist discourse is divided over the articulation of cultural theory. Because neither Marx nor Engels fully articulated their notions on this subject, subsequent thinkers have elaborated it in terms of their own understandings of the Marxist social dynamic. One tradition, which corresponds to the Socialism of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, sees culture as dependent upon the processes of social change which accompany economic and social

development. This argument avows that cultural transformation must await the revolution before it becomes valued by society. In the other view, which Williams sees as incorporating Romantic notions of the role of the artist, art does not wait passively for its coming of age, but has a vital role to play in the transformation of society.

Between these two opinions, however, is R. E. Warner, who put forth an articulation of the theory of vested interest, which suggests that insistence on traditional and conventional standards in cultural production are not concerned with the preservation of time honoured cultural ideals of “good taste” but rather represent the attempt to maintain a system of values which reflect and uphold the hegemonic interests of the moment. This theory is particularly striking in light of the censorship debates witnessed in the USA. This argument may be traced as an undercurrent in the writings of several commentators in the censorship debates.

Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, explores social structures, the places where structure begins to break down and the boundaries start to blur. She writes of the power which lies in the margins, and which is vested in those who inhabit the spaces on the edge of or outside of the confines of society. It is in the spaces where the borders are indistinct, undefinable, that magic resides or is conferred. The individuals who are on the “outside” survive without the

structure (and safety) afforded by the social order, and so can pose a direct threat to society because their power cannot be controlled.

Some powers are exerted on behalf of the social structure; they protect society from malefactors against whom their danger is directed... Other powers are supposed to be a danger to society and their use is disapproved; those who use them are malefactors, their victims are innocent and all good men will hound them down... Where the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers.⁶

In my reading of the censorship debates, I have noted a tendency on the part of the religious and political right to subscribe to this type of thinking. In the eyes of Reverend Donald Wildmon and Senator Jesse Helms, as figures of authority, they occupy the first position in which they have the authority to expose and decry "deviants" from the social order, while the artist clearly occupies the position of dangerous "malefactor" who must be hounded down by "all good men."

Many of the writings reviewed in researching this study could be termed 'reportage.' In these articles the authors have engaged less in political speculation regarding the events they covered, providing instead detailed, chronological information or an analysis of a particular aspect of the debate, and allow the reader a fuller comprehension of the events. In mainstream

⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 1966), p 100

news coverage of these events, details were often elided in the interest of brevity, or, some would say, sensationalism, effecting a curtailment of informed debate, furthering the right-wing agenda.

It is my hope that this thesis will provide an entry point to the issues surrounding art censorship and, in uncovering some of the impulses that govern it, bring some comprehension to a complex issue. I believe that some controversy is culturally productive, though for those caught at the centre of the storm, such an event can be distressing. It also irretrievably changes the reading of the artwork.

My interest in this subject, as has been indicated, is not entirely objective and the course I have plotted has taken me through territory that tends to be divided politically into right and left. To the extent that I find this is a true characterisation, I place myself on the left. As an art historian and a contemporary cultural worker, heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, I treat art as a symptom of the cultural unconscious given symbolic form. Finally, as a feminist I am interested in how the female body has been encoded and made to stand symbolically beyond the material body.

Chapter One of this study provides an introduction to the main psychoanalytic concepts employed in my analysis of the Finley/NEA controversies. I begin with

an interpretation of key Freudian and Lacanian theories that are essential to the formation of Kristeva's thought on the abject.⁷ I also provide a preliminary discussion of Kristeva's theory, the various points of which are expanded in subsequent chapters. At this juncture I also provide a brief discussion of anthropologist Mary Douglas's ideas about the socially inscribed boundaries between purity and pollution.

Background on the events leading up to and surrounding Karen Finley and the NEA are discussed in Chapter Two. I also provide a description of Finley's work. I look at the discussion which arose around her work in the art press and examine both the work and the discourse around it in terms of the abject. I have attempted on several occasions to contact the artist through her dealer (now defunct) and various museums, galleries and other venues where she has presented her work – all without success. I have provided what little information I was able to gather regarding the venues in which *We Keep Our Victims Ready* was presented, and have appended some of the texts, as they appeared in her book *Shock Treatment*.

In the past sixty years a number of psychoanalytic terms and concepts have

7. Explanatory note: the reader will find that several terms are shared between Lacan and Kristeva, such as "semiotic" and "symbolic." In using these terms I have capitalized them in Lacan's case, but not when discussing Kristeva. I have done this because, although Lacan does use the upper case, Kristeva does not.

entered the public domain – expressions such as *neurotic, psychotic, delusional, paranoid, hysterical, antisocial, and alienated* are in common usage. In addition, notions concerning the sexuality and psychology of women have been circulated and absorbed into “common knowledge.” Karen Finley’s work tends to pick up on and re-present some of these concepts, but it would be difficult to claim that her work has psychoanalytically-based theoretical underpinnings. In fact, a look at interviews conducted with the artist after the NEA crisis reveal that her approach to her art is rather oriented toward humanism. Here we find that Finley insists on a standard of morality which contrasts with that of her critics. Her system of morality can be traced through humanism, relying on the tradition of ethics (which presumes a universal code), oriented towards civil responsibility or duty, but not bound by the Christian code of shame and denial.⁸ Finley has also described her performance as channelling, and herself as a medium for the characters she portrays. From the point of view of the artist, conjoining her work with Kristeva’s theory would be seen as artificial, though perhaps not unwelcome.

Chapter Three is an in-depth analysis of Karen Finley’s work, particularly *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, in light of Julia Kristeva’s theories of the abject and

⁸ See for example Margot Mifflin “An Interview with Karen Finley,” *High Performance*, vol. 11, no 1 - 2 (spring-summer 1988), pp 86 - 88 or Andrea Juno, *Angry Women (Re/Search #13 1991)*, pp 41 - 49

the avant-garde. This work is given additional illumination through the work of other cultural theorists such as Mary Douglas, Lynda Nead, Lynda Hunt and Jonathan Dollimore. In addition, I look at the audience reception of Finley's work in psychoanalytic terms.

I find that Finley's performance art can comfortably rub shoulders with Kristeva's theory in a few key ways. First, the main point I have taken from Kristeva is the fact that the abject is a disruption within the order-loving symbolic realm. Additionally, language is an entry into and is essential in the functioning of the symbolic, as it facilitates the authority of its institutions. At the same time, however, language can also be a symbol of crisis when its use fails to comply with prescribed patterns and when it is used to speak the taboo. Finley's performances, audio recordings, and even her written texts, display these elements. With an awareness of Kristeva's theory, these aspects of Finley's work obscenity and absurdity can be seen to have a particular logic.

Chapter 1: Theory

the body and the senses are socially constructed, in various ways by different populations, as are the various organs, processes and attributes of the body. The problem is to demonstrate how the body is constructed ... The body is not a 'given', but a social category with different meanings imposed and developed by every age, and by different sectors of the population. As such it is therefore sponge-like in its ability to absorb meanings, but also highly political.⁹

One of the central issues in feminism is the construction and meaning of femininity in western culture. This concern is one shared by psychoanalysis and it can be traced from Freud's early work with female hysterics to his essay *On Femininity*, through the reworkings of the question by Karl Jung and Melanie Klein, to Lacan, and Kristeva. Many contemporary feminists have engaged with psychoanalysis in order to show the constructedness of femininity in an attempt to unhinge it from social and biological determinism. What has not changed is its dualistic placement in relation to the masculine. Feminists and psychoanalysts are agreed on this one point: the masculine is still placed as the norm in Western culture.

To find the reason for this phenomenon it is necessary to examine the significance of the feminine in the Western social psyche. Of necessity, Freudian theory must be explored for some of these answers, but in respect to

⁹ Anthony Synott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p 1

this particular discussion Kristeva will provide key concepts. The primary sources under consideration will be Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in which he outlines the Oedipal complex; "On Femininity" which appears in *The New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*; and Freud's essay on "The Uncanny". Using feminist criticism of psychoanalysis I will look at Freud's construction of woman as uncanny, and therefore the source of fear/fascination. I will show how depictions of woman's body which refuse or transcend pre-established expectations represent a threat in that they draw attention to the uncanny, the difference which must remain masked. The key texts by Julia Kristeva are *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, and *Revolution in Poetic Language*, where she lays out her theory of the avant-garde. In order to comprehend her psychoanalytic formulations, it will be necessary to trace Kristeva's intellectual make up, which comprises elements of linguistics, post-structuralism, Marxism, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, philosophy and literature.

Julia Kristeva builds on Mary Douglas's work on pollution and boundaries when she theorises the abject, that which marks the boundary between the me and 'not-me'. Similar to the process of separation learned in Lacan's 'Mirror Phase', the abject teaches the child to distinguish the objects expelled from the body as separate. This process leads the child to discern its autonomy from the mother, marking the point where it can begin to enter the symbolic (the Law

of the Father). The "abjection of the mother", her renunciation, is effected in order that the child might become a unified subject in the symbolic order. But, just as the body can never be completely separated from what it expels, a break from the mother can never be fully accomplished.

Kristeva's theories of the symbolic, the semiotic and the role of abjection in ego formation provide a critical framework for the examination of Finley's work. The conscious positioning of these works within the realm of the abject opens an alternative space for women's subjectivity, and through art, creates a theoretical redemption for the 'feminine' position within the patriarchal structure.

Julia Kristeva came to psychoanalysis through structuralism. Born in Bulgaria, she arrived in Paris in 1966, armed with a remarkable intellectual background which included knowledge of the Russian formalists, such as Mikhail Bakhtin (whose work she and Todorov helped popularise in the West), Marxist theory, and an understanding of Hegelian thought, from which she inherited the notion of negativity. Kristeva began working with the Semiologist Roland Barthes at this time and soon became involved with members of the *Tel Quel* group, that was to become the hub of French post-structuralism. From about 1974, when she published *Des Chinoises*, Kristeva became increasingly interested in the problems of femininity and the maternal as approached through psychoanalytic

theory, and at age thirty-eight she became a practising psychoanalyst.¹⁰ During the late 1970s Kristeva became disillusioned with Marxism and moved away from political involvement. At the same time her encounter with French feminism as a political movement (which she rejected) and her entry into psychoanalysis led her to focus on the individual. Kristeva's rejection of feminism is indicative of her theoretical approach; her distrust is based on the suspicion that feminism seeks to replace one "master discourse" with another one. In her writings one finds a desire to straddle alternative positions without situating herself in one or the other. This is reflected in her use of language which allows her position to remain unfixed, shifting definitions between clinical and common usage.

her consistent and fundamental project: the desire to produce a discourse which always confronts the impasse of language (as at once subject to and subversive of the rule of the Law), a discourse which in a final aporetic move dares to think language against itself, and in so doing knowingly situates itself in a place which is, quite literally, untenable.¹¹

Toril Moi suggests that this same thread runs through Kristeva's writings on Semiotics. In theorising the subject she is at the same time trying to deconstruct and enfold its nature. Yet Kristeva's concern is with the care of her patients and the need to help them maintain a subjectivity (if only that of a

¹⁰ Moi, *ibid.*, p 6 - 7

¹¹ Moi, *ibid.*, p 10

“subject in process”). As Lynne Layton points out in her article “Trauma, Gender Identity and Sexuality,” the cultural studies celebration of fragmentation as a strategy of resistance is impossible from a practitioner’s point of view, as it denies the real pain of the patient suffering this condition.¹²

In 1979 Kristeva set up her own practice, in which she began “a more psychoanalytically oriented examination of the problems of femininity and motherhood.”¹³ In her psychoanalytic theory Kristeva pays homage to some of Freud’s writings (particularly in regard to his work on monotheism/religion) and builds on Lacan, but refocuses it in order to theorise the feminine. *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* was first published in 1980, with the English translation appearing in 1982.

Kristeva's theory of the abject rests on the acceptance of two key Freudian concepts – the unconscious and the Oedipal complex, though significantly reformulated through Lacan's linguistically based interpretation, and her own

¹² Lynne Layton, “Trauma, Gender Identity and Sexuality: Discourses on Fragmentation,” *American Imago*, vol. 52:2 (spring 1995), p 107 - 8. In this article, Layton (a practising psychoanalyst) discusses the valorisation of fragmentation in current cultural theory. She discusses its use as a strategy of resistance in postmodern discourse, where fragmentation of the self is seen as a new position outside of the prescribed cultural norms, carving out a recuperative space. When “deviant” identities are assumed in this model, the individual is read as having control over his or her identity. In fact, psychoanalytic practice shows that the fragmented subject is in pain, suffering from incomplete negotiation of good and bad affects (i.e. autonomy and attachment). The fragmented subject is always threatened with a potential loss of self.

¹³ Moi, *ibid.*, p 7

interest in the feminine position. In addition, though Kristeva disavows it to some extent, traces of the uncanny also lurk under her notion of the abject.¹⁴

The Oedipal complex is integral in that it posits that first, essential state of being, the dyadic relationship between mother and child. At this moment the child exists in a condition of libidinal bliss, unaware of the boundaries of its own existence and in which the pulsions and drives of the body flow unrestricted. However, around eighteen months a third figure, the father, enters and begins to break the dyadic union. In so doing the child recognises that its mother is an autonomous being with her desire focused outside the mother-child union. In this manner the child begins to understand itself as a separate individual. This is also the stage at which the child recognises the mother's 'castration', and begins to turn to the father, accepting his authority as the possessor of the Phallus. In forming an identification with the father the male child is also forced to renounce his desire for the maternal body through that which Freud terms the incest taboo. His reconciliation with paternal authority is helped by his recognition that he will one day occupy the father's position and possess the maternal body. The female child also renounces the

¹⁴ In *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press), p 5, Kristeva states "Essentially different from 'uncanniness', more violent too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory." However, like the abject, the uncanny provokes a reaction in the subject when he or she encounters a representation of the other. In the case of the abject it is through the problem of me/not-me differentiation, in the uncanny it is through the resuscitation of forbidden desires. In both accounts there is recognition, and in both instances it takes place at an unconscious level. The abject is the repressed element in relation to the Law of the Father and to order.

mother, not on account of paternal prohibition but upon her recognition of her own castration. She blames the mother, and begins to focus her desire on the father,¹⁵ as a means to attaining the Phallus. Eventually, however, she reluctantly turns back to the mother, forming an identification with her and taking up a gendered position. In effect, the girl is renouncing her active/masculine identity in favour of a passive/feminine one.

The boy realises that only the father can possess the mother, but the girl realises that she, being like the mother, cannot possess her but rather must be possessed, in the passive mode... The masculine attitude toward the mother, which prior to paternal intervention was held by both boy and girl, is submitted to the incest taboo in the case of a boy. In the case of a girl, it becomes psychologically impossible. Her problem is to become passive instead of active, feminine instead of masculine, and to change her love object from her mother to her father.¹⁶

The formation of the unconscious grows directly out of the paternal prohibition, as the repression of desire necessitates a receptacle to contain it. The unconscious is thus a component of ego formation, in that it appears at the insistence of repression mechanisms which are the path through which the subject is led to occupy a position in society. Thus a functioning, autonomous subject necessarily embodies the elements disruptive to his or her own unity. The repression contained by the unconscious, however finds release through

¹⁵ I will leave the problem of the daughter's seduction of the father aside as it is not integral to Kristeva's thinking and unrelated to my analysis of Finely's work.

¹⁶ Judith van Herik, *Freud on Femininity and Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p 130

that which Freud termed parapraxis, instances when the unspeakable (wishes and desires) manifests itself in "Freudian slips", memory lapses, displacement, and misreadings. Along with the notion of the dyadic union (which she calls the chora), the unconscious will come to inform an important component of Kristeva's theory of the semiotic. Her use of the Oedipal complex, more clearly articulated through Lacan, lies in the enforced dissolution of the mother-child relationship, with the consequent movement of the child into the realm of the Father. However, where the father is a motivating force in Freud, Kristeva accords more agency to the mother.

Another Freudian theory, which requires some examination here, is that of the uncanny. Freud called the uncanny (or *unheimlich*) "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar".¹⁷ Freud illustrates his conception of the uncanny through the etymological continuity between *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. In the first point Freud defines *heimlich* as that which is "friendly, intimate, homelike" but notes that it also contains its converse, that which is concealed, secret – kept at home or in the family.

Among its different shades of meaning the word *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich*... In general we are reminded that the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different... Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in *On Creativity and the Unconscious*, edited by Benjamin Nelson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p 132 - 124

develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite...¹⁸

The word *unheimlich* operates in a manner similar to the process of the uncanny – it doubles back on itself, contains its own opposites, denoting a state of ambiguity. In psychoanalytic terms the uncanny would find its ultimate expression in the maternal body. The *unheimlich* is recognised in those moments when the conscious mind senses the immanent surfacing of repressed desires; the sense of dread evoked by this event is triggered by the incest taboo, and by extension, castration anxiety.

If...every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny... This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore to understand... the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.¹⁹

Freud traces the uncanny to an animism which has survived in contemporary man, as evoked in the Gothic tale or as witnessed in the dread one feels at the occurrence of supernatural phenomena such as premonition or belief in the evil eye. Freud ascribes this to "omnipotence of thoughts" or magical thinking. The two most common sources of the uncanny, however, are the double and

¹⁸ Freud, *ibid.*, p 129 – 131. Italics original

¹⁹ Freud, *ibid.*, p 148

the corpse. The double confounds stable identity, recalling primary narcissism when the ego is not sharply differentiated from the external world. A sense of unease is evoked because the double suggests a personification of the superego;²⁰ it is found in reflections, shadows, spirits, and the *doppelgänger*. By unhinging secure identity and returning the ego to narcissism, the double becomes "a harbinger of death".²¹ The corpse is an even more profound reminder of this state.

To illustrate his theory of the uncanny Freud turned to various literary sources, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sand-Man* (1817). He also believed that artworks could be used as documents to interrogate the psychic state of the artist. In his theory of the pleasure principle, Freud suggests that humanity must engage in labour and that the Oedipal complex is a step toward creating a productive member of society. In order to become productive, however, the individual must repress, temporarily, the pleasure principle and delay gratification. And yet, a too thorough repression of desire can lead to neurosis. The individual must therefore sublimate, channelling unfulfilled wishes into a socially acceptable outlet such as art making. In this way Freud sees art as a form of social safety valve for drive energy.

²⁰ Freud, *ibid.*, p 142

²¹ Freud, *ibid.*, p 141

Kristeva alters this notion so that in her theory, though art continues to be a form of release, it ceases to be the fetish (an object onto which drives are focussed). Instead it becomes a *process* through which drives are channelled and by which the individual is constituted as a speaking subject. It is not important that s/he be a productive member of society (such as a bridge builder or artist) in Freud's terms, but productive *in* society (becoming more fully a part of/subject to it). Drives circulate in opposition to and disrupt the law of the father, so by directing them into the creative composition of a new subjectivity, they are harnessed and their danger is thus reduced. In speaking, the individual recognizes him/herself as belonging within the symbolic (the Word).

Many of Kristeva's notions are inherited from Lacan's reformulation of psychoanalysis in which he speaks of the subject (rather than man, woman or child) constituted through and in language, moving the understanding of psychical development away from the Freudian notion based on individual experience.

Lacan permits us to explore the relations between the unconscious and human society... he makes us recognize that the unconscious is not some kind of seething, tumultuous, private region inside us, but an effect of our relations with one another...[F]or Lacan the unconscious is a particular effect of language, a process of desire

set in motion by difference.²²

In Lacan's hands the unconscious is still a key concept which develops as a result of the Oedipal drama, however it is now redefined in accordance with structuralist theory. The infant still shares a dyadic space with the mother in its earliest existence, where it cannot distinguish between subject and object (self and other) – experiencing the world as an extension of itself and its own needs. This phase is termed the *Imaginary* and continues into the *Mirror Phase* which can take place between six and eighteen months. At this time the child, through the mediation of the mirror, comes to recognise its body, previously experienced in a fragmented manner, as being complete. But this experience is in fact a misrecognition (*mé-connaissance*) as the child cannot distinguish fully between its image and the actual body. This also begins the subject's alienation, as self-recognition is accomplished only through the mediation of the external, empty mirror image.

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image... The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted...in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. Thus this Gestalt... Symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at

²² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) p 173

the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination.²³

This moment also marks the beginning of the subject's entry into society, as it is here the child begins to acquire language and the third term, the Law of the Father, also enters and begins to break up the mother-child dyad. Entry of the father signals an awareness of sexual difference, which Lacan terms the Phallus. As in Freud's Oedipal Complex the child's desire for the mother is sublimated, and the father's presence alerts the child to the pre-existing social structure into which it must be integrated. The child comes to realise that it has an identity and social position which is externally pre-defined within the Symbolic order. But the separation from the mother and entry into the Symbolic are also alienating experiences because henceforth the object of desire (the maternal body) can never be attained; the search for the elusive object can only result in moments of pleasure, never satisfaction. This parallels the operation of language, in that words are always only empty signifiers for the objects they represent, slipping away from their signifieds in an endless chain. We can never say what we mean, nor mean what we say.

This potentially endless movement from one signifier to another is what Lacan means by desire. All desire springs from a lack, which it strives continually to fill. All human language works by such lack: the absence of the real objects which signs designate... To enter language, then, is to become a prey to desire: language, Lacan

²³ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: As Selection* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1977), p 1 - 2.
Italics original

remarks, is what hollows being into desire.²⁴

As the web of words, meanings, implications and inferences, nuance, connotations and denotations affect understanding, so the subject is entered into society where roles, gender definitions, relationships, and rules of conduct simultaneously create a stability and uncertainty through the constant renegotiation of the self. The subject, according to Lacan, is constituted in and through language. But the acquisition of language is simultaneously loss, as it marks the end of the dyadic state and entry into the field of empty signifiers and desire for the absent other.

For Lacan there are three realms the individual may occupy, all essential to "I formation", and all of which significantly inform Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. These are the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Lacan recasts the unconscious as the realm opened up in the subject, not as a result of individual experience, typified by Freud's Oedipal drama, but as an effect of larger social constructs, the web of relationships the subject is implicated in through his or her movement out of the Imaginary into the Symbolic.

The Imaginary corresponds to the Mirror Phase, when ego formation is beginning, and the child reconciles the incomplete experience of the body with

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *ibid.*, p 167 - 8

its perceived wholeness by identifying with images. It is through an ongoing series of such misrecognitions that the ego is built up and maintained.

The ego's identifications with others, particularly the mother, secure it in the illusion of a corporeal coherence which belies the child's own lived experience. This forms the basis of Lacan's understanding of the mirror stage and the mode of imaginary identifications which structures its narcissistic relations with others. Through the fantasy of a cohesive, stable identity, facilitated by its specular identification with its own image, it is able to position itself as a subject within the space of its body.²⁵

The mirror image is combined with the discourses surrounding the body to complete the imaginary anatomy, positioning it in the Symbolic structure through the language that defines it.

Ego formation is the threshold to the Symbolic – the realm of the father, the sphere of governance, logic, and order; law, religion, state, morality and language. Yet the Symbolic realm is the product of that which is missing, it is landmarked by empty signifiers – words without objects, the forbidden maternal body, the Phallus and the other, which are the sites of desire (never to be attained), and the gap at the centre of being, which the subject attempts to fill with the object.

The Symbolic arises out of the naming of things. A word functions

²⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body of Signification" in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1990) p 82

to block an identificatory sense of a thing once it is named. Naming the body alienates it, castrates its momentary pleasure of an object. In linking names to things, the word kills the thing as immediate presence. Language as a system imposes rules upon the human organism's chaotic identifications with objects and gives rise to the desire for the linkage of body, image and word; it gives rise, that is, to the social order.²⁶

The Real functions outside of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, working not to maintain these systems in any fashion, but to disrupt them. The Real is the reminder and the remainder of Thanatos – drives, pulsions, the raw state closely associated with the body and nature. The Real returns in desire, but the object of satisfaction is never attained – the pursuit of the object is always interrupted by the Real, which insists on the object's essential emptiness. Lacan says that desire signifies an absence, and although it may be fixed on an existing, achievable object, its true focus is that which can never be attained – for this reason *jouissance* (transient pleasure), not satisfaction, is the only possibility.

the Real bespeaks its own impossibility... A conflict comes from our seeking the object of satisfaction in things or in others, despite the fact that the aim always misses its goal; the object is really the satisfaction of Oneness. We seek satisfaction because we always lose what we think we had in a prior moment. The Real appears as a blockage when we seek to re-possess an object that has disappeared.²⁷

²⁶ Elizabeth Wright (ed), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), p 421

²⁷ Wright, *ibid.*, p 375

This concept of the Real correlates to Freud's death drive but in Kristeva's hands it will be revised and made more redemptive in the guise of the semiotic.

For the most part, the dyadic union, the Oedipal drama and the unconscious remain stable concepts in Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, though her understanding of their significance has been altered. One of her concerns is to create a psychological space for the feminine, equal in importance to that of the masculine. She identifies the feminine with the semiotic and the chora, while the symbolic is aligned with the masculine. These three primary states operate with and through the abject, which acts as a catalyst to drive the subject out of one realm into the other.

The chora is a term Kristeva borrows from Plato. Meaning womb or receptacle, she designates it the undifferentiated 'space' shared by mother and child, which exists prior to the child's recognition of other. In infancy it corresponds to the Freudian notion of a shared (dyadic) psychic space which involves the blurring of physical boundaries. However, Kristeva sees this as a sort of psychic body that persists as a remainder, into which the matured subject is always liable to lapse during periods of crisis and psychological upheavals. Carved out by pulsions, the fluctuation of drives, it is 'receptacle, unnameable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the father, and consequently

maternally connoted'²⁸ and as such, the foundation for the semiotic.

Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange place that I shall name, after Plato...a chora, a receptacle. For the benefit of the ego or its detriment, drives, whether life drives or death drives, serve to correlate that "not yet" ego with an "object" in order to establish both of them. Such a process, while dichotomous (inside/outside, ego/not ego) and repetitive, has nevertheless something centripetal about it: it aims to settle the ego as center of a solar system of objects.²⁹

It is the chora's purpose to bring together the subject and the object, and it is desire which sends the subject in search of its objects.

The chora itself is animated by the semiotic, the bodily energy that circulates through it, the libidinal drives and impulses that exist before meaning is attached. It is equated with the maternal because it exists in the time before the separation of self from mother. Kristeva's version of the Oedipal drama has the father of personal pre-history enter the relationship around four months, figuring as the object of the mother's desire. In this way he becomes the child's ego ideal, and helps to direct the child out of the maternally identified chora into the symbolic, the realm of the Father and social relations. According to Kristeva, the mother has no natural reason to want to cause primary separation, so the third party (father) is necessary in order to force it, beginning

²⁸ Moi, *ibid.*, p 7

²⁹ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 14

a process which allows the identification and rejection which precondition entry into the symbolic.³⁰

This symbolic realm is governed by logic, unity, representation, and knowledge. It is the sphere where organising social institutions exist, and entry into these institutions requires the repression of semiotic impulses (Kristeva's notion of "the clean and orderly body" is an example of this; the mother "disciplines" the child's body before it enters the realm of the Father). Although it is necessary for the symbolic, the semiotic cannot be articulated within it or acknowledged by it, as the semiotic threatens to undermine and destabilise the rule-governed operations of the symbolic, resisting its structures and norms. Governed by the primary processes, which seek immediate gratification of what may be anti-social impulses, the semiotic is the raw data of corporeal forces and energies. This raw data is the fuel that feeds the law-abiding, secondary-process activities of the symbolic, and yet the symbolic cannot acknowledge it without disrupting its own order.

Kristeva's formulation of the semiotic and the symbolic retain close correlation to Lacan's notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, but she gives his concept of the Real a significant new turn. The Real, itself based in Freud's notion of

³⁰ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 13

the death drive, is that which draws the subject away from the Symbolic and reminds him or her of the archaic state before individuation (Symbolic death). In Lacan's theory the subject flees the Real in order to live, but Kristeva attempts to understand the value of this state, which she names the abject. In her hands the abject both forces subjectivity and provides a nexus for oppositions, opening the possibility for healing.

Essentially, abjection positions the subject in the symbolic by creating the distinction between exterior and interior, me and not-me, the subject and the object. Kristeva uses the example of the skin that forms on the top of milk to introduce this idea. The child understands the parents' desire that she consume the milk as an expression of their love – but, that their desire and her desire should be the same threatens the child's autonomy because it confuses the boundaries. Her revulsion is an expression of her revolt against this, by which she reclaims an autonomous position. It is not the milk that causes the repulsion, however, but the skin on top – that which is of the milk, but at the same time not-milk; in consuming it she must ingest ambiguity. Ambiguity is a borderline that causes fear and abjection.³¹ The abject is ambiguous because, while it preserves the "archaism of pre-objectal relations" it also carries the memory of separation, and is thus both painful and reassuring.

³¹ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 2 - 3

The ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entail the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social. The subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and open to breakdown and instability.³²

In Freud's theory, the Oedipal structure rests on a divergence from the relationship between mother and child, caused by the intervention of the father, while in Lacan the intervening factor is the child's entry into language. Kristeva accepts Lacan's structure, but at the same time sees that the passage into the symbolic is never complete. The object is the "object of desire" in the Oedipal triangle. Here the father acts as the mainstay of Law, while the mother signifies the archetypal object. All survival needs and yearnings are focussed on her, and she guarantees the subjectivity of the child. The object is part of a clear binary formed in distinction to the subject, but the abject is that which brings the two parts back into association, thereby upsetting subjectivity. The abject is necessary as a device to drive the subject into the symbolic, but it also returns to disrupt it. Abjection's recall of the maternal body raises a loathing for the (m)other that dwells within, helping to mark out the boundaries of self – this repression/loathing causes flight from the maternal body, and allows psychic separation to take place – out of the arms of mother into the hands of the father.

Abjection is first formed through the training of the body. Maternal authority is

³² Grosz, *ibid.*, p 86

exerted during toilet training when the child's body is mapped into territories delimiting the clean and unclean through frustrations and prohibitions. In this way the child is brought into the social order. Immersed in language, the child experiences maternal authority as a reiteration of the laws of language. It is the mother's social role to move the child out of the semiotic and into the symbolic, and through this conjunction all things abject are brought into association with the maternal.

Through frustrations and prohibitions, [maternal] authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where...the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-unclean...is impressed and exerted. Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws with which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape. ³³

The entry into the symbolic/language is effected through maternal authority, but the order it establishes requires that maternal authority and its lessons in corporeal training be repressed.

Delimitation of the unclean causes loathing, experienced as physical symptoms, and as such, creates a bodily defence that halts reversion, and secures autonomy. If the object...through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning...what is abject...is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses...the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards.

³³ Kristeva, *ibid*, p 72

The primers of my culture.³⁴

These twin affects of fear and fascination exerted by the abject illustrate how delicate the balance is between the symbolic and the semiotic. On the one hand the abject thrusts us away from the maternal, on the other, its siren-call pulls us back.

Kristeva, being a practising psychoanalyst, is concerned with the subject in crisis. For her the theory of abjection helps to explain the estrangement of the subject from its objects and therefore the incomplete occupation of the symbolic. For Kristeva the "borderline" subject (or subject in crisis) takes refuge in the abject which acts as a transitional object situated between inside and outside, between "indifferentiation" and the discrete subject.

I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, "all by himself," and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him – all gifts, all objects... Even before things for him are – hence before they are signifiable – he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject... What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father; that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly.³⁵

In this way the abject is a bitter balm to the wounded subject who has not

³⁴ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 1 - 2

³⁵ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 5 - 6

negotiated objectification of the mother or identification with the father.

Because object is necessary to defining subject, the individual must necessarily recognise it as external to self, and therefore missing from self. However, the subject in abjection incorporates the object into self as an "alter ego" – thus when s/he strays toward the semiotic, the incorporated other resorts to 'tough love' measures, and pushes the subject, through abjection, back toward the symbolic.

[The abject] is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant.³⁶

Here *jouissance* is finally attained, but is untenable because the completion of the subject is an impossible proposition for the symbolic which has to keep the two separated in order to perpetuate.

Abjection is not a thing or condition, rather it is a site, a doubled space, a territory that the subject retreats to in crisis. It is a forbidden realm, a fluid space, without fixity, replicating the chora. It is impossible because it is the place where both masculine and feminine come together, a place of

³⁶ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 9

unification, and therefore outside of the symbolic (where the subject normally seeks but does not find the object). In abjection it is seen that the object is within after all, the remainder of the mother that lives in the semiotic. The abject relocates the object on the inside, thereby forcing a union between subject and object which undermines the symbolic. Although a position within the symbolic means suffering (on account of the lost object), a position in the abject brings anguish (for the lost subject).

Abjection is the recognition of the 'want' on which being, language, and desire (essential components of the symbolic) are founded. The abject individual recognises the truth we must always conceal from ourselves – that the object is always lacking. To recognise the absent is to lose hope, an acceptance that brings an end to the search for the missing signifier.

phobia does not disappear but slides beneath language, the phobic object is a proto-writing and, conversely, any practice of speech, inasmuch as it involves writing, is a language of fear. I mean a language of want as such, the want that positions sign, subject, and object...a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges. The one who tries to utter this "not yet a place", this no-grounds, can obviously only do so backwards, starting from an over-mastery of the linguistic and rhetorical code.³⁷

Language becomes fetishised to mask the truth located in Thanatos; the subject builds a word-bridge to span the abyss.

³⁷ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 38

Entry into language marks the moment when the Oedipal structure is instituted. Primary to this construct is the notion of prohibition (specifically incest prohibition which goes to found ego formation). Kristeva makes special mention of this point on introducing the concept of defilement. She refers to the notion put forward by Claude Lévi-Strauss, that prohibition sets up the logic of the discrete unit, "thus establishing social order and the symbolic."³⁸ Prohibition, then, assures the autonomy of the subject. She looks to anthropology and finds that religious prohibition also sets up an exclusionary line by which defilement is constituted. "Defilement is what is jettisoned from the "symbolic system." It escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which... constitutes a classification system or a structure."³⁹

The establishment of filth delineates what is considered to be clean, and allows for the "clean and proper self". Kristeva draws on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas who argues that social structures and their purification rituals are replicated in the treatment of individual bodies. In both instances the margins are monitored because, being ambiguous, the margin represents the greatest danger to order. Like the skin of milk referred to by

³⁸ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 63

³⁹ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 65

Kristeva, the margin is the locus of ambiguity – that which confounds order.

[A]ll margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape fundamental to experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body.⁴⁰

To keep the body pure that which passes its borders must be monitored.

Pollution is socially created. As Douglas points out nothing is inherently dirty, it only becomes so when it is out of place, where it has the ability to defile or disrupt the careful structure of order and expose its vulnerability. However, the disruptions caused by pollution can be both dangerous and powerful, depending on the social capacity to control them. Pollution can be socially productive when it brings truths that originate outside rationality, but such knowledge must be limited as excess (in any form) reasserts danger by overflowing order.

Mary Douglas suggests that the “attribution of dangers and powers” are constitutive of social form.⁴¹ Social structure, concerned with the articulation of

⁴⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966, reprint 1995), p 122

⁴¹ Douglas, *ibid*, p 102

power and danger, creates positions of authority and vests in them “explicit spiritual power, controlled, conscious, external and approved – powers to bless or curse,” while those placed in dangerously ambiguous roles are credited with “uncontrolled, unconscious and dangerous powers.”⁴² Purification rituals are instituted to expose and contain the power of the unclean and incorporate it into the social body. This is accomplished through the temporary isolation of the pollutant, followed by its ritual cleansing, and reunification with the social order. This process sanctifies that which does not fit into categories, rationalizes it, and makes it subject to the law.

Douglas looks at Levitical abomination, where a system of exclusions are laid out in order to ensure purity. In her discussion of dietary prohibitions Douglas concludes that abominations are those elements which defy strict classification – fish without fins, birds that do not fly. Being ambiguous, they are necessarily unclean. “Formlessness is also credited with powers, some dangerous, some good. We have seen how the abominations of Leviticus are the obscure unclassifiable elements which do not fit the pattern of the cosmos. They are incompatible with holiness and blessing.”⁴³

42 Ibid

43 Douglas, *ibid.*, p 96

Kristeva notes that the biblical text is concerned with separations. As in all binaries, one facet is privileged over the other, whether culture/nature, man/woman, mind/body, or pure/defiled. Through an examination of the Levitical text, Kristeva locates the main sites of the unclean in food, bodily waste, and gender differentiation, all of which may find their definition in the threat of the maternal body.

Food provides a site of abjection in that it reminds the subject of his or her own corporeal limits. It represents danger through incorporation, crossing the boundary and penetrating the clean and proper body. As an "oral object, [it also] sets up an archaic relationship between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce."⁴⁴ Its threat lies in the corporeal pleasure that pulls the subject toward the semiotic.

Abjection can also be located in bodily waste, its most extreme manifestation being the corpse. Corporeal waste is a direct reminder of the subject's material limits, an intolerable notion, as it forces a recognition of the semiotic, its debt to nature, and to the mother.

Corporeal waste is Kristeva's second category of abjection. Bodily fluids, waste products, refuse – faeces, spit, sperm, etc. – provoke cultural inability to accept the body's materiality, its limits, its 'natural'

⁴⁴ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 75 - 76

cycles and its mortality. Faeces, for example, in signifying that opposition between the clean and the unclean draws on the distinction between the body's inside and its outside. Inside the body, it is the condition of the body's ability to regenerate itself; as expelled and external it is unclean, filthy. The subject is implicated in this waste, for it can never be definitively and permanently externalised.⁴⁵

Waste signifies that separation from the semiotic is never complete; permanent loss is the price the body pays to become clean and proper. The corpse is the most dramatic reminder of this condition – it is the body without speech, permanently located outside the symbolic. It marks the very boundary of existence, insisting that the margins are indeed permeable, and that the semiotic has the last word.

The final site of abjection is gender differentiation, with its most horrifying sign, menstrual blood. What emerges in gender differentiation is a recognition of the archaic mother, the one against whom the incest taboo is erected, toward whom the subject is pulled, and away from whom the subject flees in order to live.⁴⁶ Her menstrual blood is a signifier of the human being "*manqué*", ultimate reminder of the subject's debt to the maternal body.

Because abjection represents the chaotic, unpatterned semiotic state where

⁴⁵ Grosz, *ibid.*, p 91

⁴⁶ Kristeva, p 100

the subject finds the bliss of inarticulation, it also represents the threat of loss of self, autonomy and identity. This is the foundation of Freud's incest taboo and Lacan's Law of the Father; abjection moves the being into subjectivity and discourages the retreat to that zone once the transition has been effected. The social function thus comes to be seen as the catalyst and the safeguard of subjectivity.

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva examines purity and the ritual used to shore up its boundaries. Just as pollution defines purity, abjection defines order. She sees that ritual encloses defilement and brings it into the Law, thereby bringing the threat it poses under control. In this it acts similarly to art, which brings abjection into the symbolic.

Kristeva's thoughts on the purifying power of art rest in Aristotle's concept of poetry, which through rhythm and song sends the soul into a state of orgy and purity simultaneously. "Rhythm and song arouse the impure, the other of mind...but harmonize it, arrange it differently – soothe the frenzied outbursts by contributing external rule which fills the gap between body and soul."⁴⁷

Through language the semiotic forces are brought under control of the

⁴⁷ Kristeva, *ibid*, p 28

symbolic order, and through naming, are given significance. The artist uses the semiotic pulsions, harnesses them, and brings them into the work of art. Where language is the force that brings separation, poetic language represents a reconciliation with the feminine.

Kristeva claims that the abject is "perverse" because it acknowledges the symbolic but refuses to live by its prohibitions and rules. Through art, abjection is brought into and recognised by the symbolic, yet it is simultaneously fended off through naming. Art looks at the rules laid out by the symbolic order, and allows itself to question and criticise them, thereby transcending them. Kristeva aligns purification rituals with art, because in both instances the abject is signified and purified.

The various means of purifying the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity.⁴⁸

Through symbolisation the abject is brought into logic.

In bringing the semiotic forward into the symbolic realm, the artist allows it to be heard. This is a circumstance which the symbolic attempts to repress, as

⁴⁸ Kristeva, p 17

the semiotic must remain the unacknowledged source of symbolic power. By bringing abjection into social production, the artist allows the semiotic to scratch up against the surface from within, and helps to disrupt the symbolic order. This is a worthy project to Kristeva, coming from a Marxist background.

The underlying thesis Kristeva presents in the last third of *La révolution du langage poétique* is that to make real headway in the social and economic transformation of Western society, the very basis of the social has to be confronted.⁴⁹

Constituted inside the symbolic, art proposes a challenge to its foundations. It questions and exceeds its limits, and analyses its own origins and lineage. In this way art picks at the symbolic structure and provokes change. In a somewhat positivist sense then, Kristeva's main concern is to challenge stasis, imagining an order which makes room for different forms of subjectivity. For Kristeva, art has an ethical function.

⁴⁹ John Lechte, "Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva" in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*. *ibid*, p 28

Chapter 2: Political conservatism and the censorship debate

Many [contemporary artists] routinely push boundaries – artistic, moral, and sexual; those of decorum, order and propriety. Artists are significant symbolic deviants in our society, their work calling out negative responses from large numbers of people...Deviance signals that something is awry, and can contribute to society's flexibility and growth. But if a society mobilizes its defenses to stave off challenges to the status quo, deviance may also unwittingly lead to rigidity. Deviance therefore has a dual character. It is transgressive yet positive...⁵⁰

In psychoanalytic terms, censorship is the process by which the unthinkable is blocked from entering consciousness, and which inhibits impulses and actions that are socially unacceptable. In cultural practice, censorship replicates this process, attempting to block the emergence of objects or ideas that conflict with the official truths of a society. The concept originated in ancient Rome, where the Censor was appointed to oversee public morality. Censorship and the arts have been linked from the extremes of Byzantine iconoclasm through to the recent spectacle enacted around the *Sensations* exhibition⁵¹ in 1999.

The events that took place around the work of Karen Finley in the late 1980s are

⁵⁰ Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic art and uncivil actions* (New York, Routledge, 1992), p 2

⁵¹ *Sensations: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. This exhibition, particularly the work of Chris Ofili, became the centre of Rudolph Giuliani and the Catholic League's scorn when the exhibition was brought to the Brooklyn Museum. Giuliani threatened to have the Museums' funding cut off if the exhibition opened.

interesting in the way that they manifest the faces of the censorship debate. Censorship in the arts works on a paradigm of power, with a contest taking place between state sanctioned expression and private freedoms. The debate is typically argued in terms of morality, with artists insisting on an independent domain where the higher truths of art are weighted against authority's notions of public good. The argument for art's moral dispensation has its roots in the modernist notion that art is inherently truthful. Secular and religious charges against art are based ostensibly on the necessity of preserving standards of decency and the protection of those too weak to withstand exposure to these products. Both the proponents of free expression and of regulation use public rights to disguise their vested interests: where authority seeks to perpetuate its hold on the public through restriction, the artist sees the acceptance of any limit as the beginning of an unending erosion in expressive freedom.

In the late 1980s, this battle was played out in the United States where debate focused on the "degenerate" artwork of people such as Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Karen Finley, and the institution that was perceived to encourage their 'obscenities', the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). The New Right's attack on art came at a time when the conservative mask of moral rectitude was slipping – given witness by the Iran-Contra Affair, Senatorial misdealings, and the disgrace of the religious right's two Jimmies (Bakker and Swaggart). In addition, the disintegration of the Communist Bloc meant that

America's traditional scapegoat had slipped the noose. The New World Order was spinning out of their grasp and their lack (of solutions, control, validity) was becoming apparent. The anxieties of the nation required a new object on which to focus, and the degenerates who inhabited that outer world of art were identified as a convenient symbol for society's problems. Amongst these perverts were to be found the godless (Andres Serrano), sexual deviants (Mapplethorpe), and a madwoman who did not understand the proper uses of food (Finley).

The NEA controversies began in 1989 when the American Family Association (AFA) headed by Rev. Donald Wildmon, brought Andres Serrano's work, *Piss Christ* (1987) to the attention of several members of the U.S. Senate – most notably, North Carolina Republican Representative, Jesse Helms. The AFA objected to what they perceived as “anti-Christian bigotry”⁵² and, on the basis that the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) had presented Serrano with a financial award, lobbied to have it denied future funding. While this debate was in full pitch the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. decided to cancel its presentation of Robert Mapplethorpe's travelling exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*. This *a priori* capitulation to the prevailing political environment thus brought the spotlight to Mapplethorpe's work and indirectly engendered

⁵² As quoted in Donald Kuspit, “Sexual Censorship and the New Authoritarianism,” *New Art Examiner*, vol. 17, pt. 2 (September 1989) p 42

the prosecution of administrators at The Cincinnati Art Center who carried through on the scheduled presentation of the show later that year. In the months following these events numerous other incidents took place, and a climate of cultural vigilantism developed. From the destruction of an image displayed in a New York City bar to the denunciation of puppet shows and alternative adaptations of Shakespeare, members of the public felt justified in decrying and suppressing art which they found personally offensive. This atmosphere was fostered consciously by the 1986 *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography*, commonly known as the Meese Commission. "The Commission recommended that citizen activism – boycotts, public pressure, and withdrawal of public funds – be directed against sexually explicit materials that could not be removed by using obscenity law."⁵³

Leading many of the battles in this war on art were conservative journalists writing in publications ranging from *The New Criterion* to *The New York City Tribune* and *The Washington Post*. In fact, it was *The International Herald Tribune's* description of Serrano's *Piss Christ* as "a picture of a crucifix submerged in a jar of urine"⁵⁴ that alerted Donald Wildmon to the insidious dangers of visual art. It was also two journalists for *The New York Post*,

⁵³ Carole S. Vance, "Photography, Pornography and Sexual Politics," *Aperture*, vol. 121 (fall 1990), p 52 - 53

⁵⁴ Kuspit, *ibid.*

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, who noted the possibility that Karen Finley was likely to receive NEA funding in the then upcoming National Council meeting.

The conservative media appealed to a segment of the American public and their beliefs about art, espousing the “down home” logic that art supported by public money should necessarily be art the public supports.⁵⁵ This type of logic assumes a unified “public” that can be represented by one voice. The entire arts debate, however, illustrates that such a univocal body does not exist. In its more radical forms, the media capitalized on the twin aspects of sensationalism and hostility towards art. This hostility is born, on the one hand, of the belief that art is irrelevant, and on the other, that the nature of art discourse has become increasingly esoteric and has led to alienation between public and art. At the same time, art has become increasingly threatening to some as it has ranged into the field of politics, actively questioning the rules and assumptions on which American culture and politics are founded.

⁵⁵ “the NEA's decision has raised the usual cries of of alarm, and the usual suggestions tha the dark night of fascism is about to descend on the United States... Most Americans, we suspect, will recognize these forebodings as blather of a familiar sort... Americans who look at a work offered as art, and who decide, on the basis of their tastes, discrimination and view of community standards, that it is a piece of garbage not worth funding, are also entitled to the right of free expression.” Editorial, “Review and Outlook: NEA Storm Still Rising,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 1990, p A8

The conservative media (represented *par excellence* by *New Criterion* editor, Hilton Kramer) have long been clamouring for an art which situates itself inside the confines of propriety.

For every Carolee Schneemann, there are a hundred Karen Finleys, prancing about naked on a stage somewhere, smeared in chocolate and skirling about the evils of patriarchy and the stinginess of the [NEA...and] a hundred Andres Serranos...or Robert Mapplethorpes registering horrific scenes of sexual torture and excretory perversions for the delectation of the art world's "cutting edge." ... It is clear, at any rate, that the moral collapse on view in the advanced precincts of the art world is not confined to the art suffered by society at large.⁵⁶

The move to censorship is right to Kramer and his ilk, who resist the notion that art might explore the boundaries of sociality, as this is at the basis of cultural deterioration.

The NEA's conservative opponents are, of course, primarily concerned with art as a vehicle of moral and social education. Their understanding of "good art" has less to do with artistic value than with "decency" and the promotion of a certain (largely Christian fundamentalist) conception of ethical life. From this perspective, modern art reflects the spiritual degeneracy of 20th century America.⁵⁷

The opinions of the art-hostile public found themselves articulated in the public proclamations of both the conservative media and their elected officials. Equal

⁵⁶ Roger Kimball, "The Repeal of Reticence," *The New Criterion* vol 15, no5 (January 1997) as found at <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/15/jan97/reticence.htm>

⁵⁷ Mary Devereaux, "Protected Space: Politics, Censorship and the Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51:2 (Spring 1993), p 208

air time was given to the opposing argument in more liberal media and arts publication, but ironically, this was often considered to be the voice of the “art community,” not that of another sector of the “public.” Through some magical act, the public came to be constituted as united against art, and the arts community defined as an entity existing outside its borders. The concept that artists and art supporters were also taxpayers and citizens rarely entered the conservative discourse or consciousness.

It is interesting that remedies could not be found in the law. The courts returned to the Miller Decision, and found that charges of obscenity were insupportable. Claims to First Amendment rights, guaranteeing freedom of speech, were staked by the the arts lobby. As a result, the Conservative powers turned to economic penalties.

Reinforced by the conservative press, Senator Jesse Helms pressed on and introduced an amendment to the appropriations bill that would disallow the use of federal funds to “promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials.”⁵⁸ He also proposed a \$45,000 cut to the NEA and a five year ban

⁵⁸ The full text proposed to ban funds to artists deemed to “promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sexual acts; or material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or nonreligion.” A significant difficulty exists in the interpretation of broad terms such as “engaged in sexual acts” (which might conceivably include hand-holding and kissing), and

on funding SECCA and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (ICA). Ultimately Helms managed only to receive approval on the \$45,000 penalty to the NEA, with concessions on the other two points.⁵⁹ In the 1990 reauthorization statute, however, it was decreed that the NEA take into account “general standards of decency” when making funding decisions.⁶⁰ These circumstances caused a sense of panic at the NEA and led to self-monitoring on the part of the organisation.

Rather than standing true to its institutional mandate, the “decency clause” was adhered to and program directors were asked to “flag” potentially contentious recipients in their reports to Chairman John Frohnmeyer. A peer recommendation jury had approved eighteen grants in the solo performance section of that year, but at the May board meeting the National Arts Council

“religion or nonreligion”

⁵⁹ ICA, as co-sponsor of the Mapplethorpe exhibition, was targeted for funding cuts along with SECCA. These were not passed, but a restriction was placed on the NEA requiring them to notify Congress before awarding grants to either institution. In regard to the phrasing of the Helms amendment, the words “indecent” and “denigrate” were dropped, but “obscene” was retained. Any application of the word “obscene” would then be held to the test under the 1973 Supreme Court ruling, *Miller vs. California*. This ruling established the definition of obscenity to be predicated on three inseparable tests. The first stated that the average person applying community standards would take the work as a whole to appeal to prurient interests, next that the work depict or describe sexual conduct in an offensive way, and third that the work taken as a whole lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

⁶⁰ The NEA no longer provides support to individual artists. In October 2000 the US Senate granted the NEA the first increase (\$7 million) since 1992, but all funding now goes to special programs and art organisations

voted to table the category until August. In June, however, Frohnmeyer polled the Council members, then went ahead with the approval of fourteen of the original eighteen grants. When the results were announced, Karen Finley became a *cause célèbre*, as she and three other performance artists (Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller) were denied funding due to the 'controversial' nature of their artwork. Although all of these artists dealt with sexually explicit material in their work, it was Finley who became the most notorious.

The art community quickly rallied around the cause and voiced opposition to the rescission. Finley, Fleck, Hughes and Miller launched a suit against the NEA, and the National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO) joined the complaint. At issue was the 1990 decency clause which they contested as a violation of the First and Fifth Amendments.⁶¹ The case was settled in 1993 when the artists were awarded a settlement equal to the amount of their original grants⁶² plus \$6,000 each in compensatory damages, and court costs

⁶¹ The First Amendment to the US Constitution forbids Congress from interfering with religion, free speech, free press, the right to assemble peaceably, or the right to petition government. The Fifth Amendment guarantees due process of law, including double jeopardy, and provides that no person be compelled to bear witness against himself in a criminal case.

⁶² Finley: \$8,000; Fleck: \$5,000; Hughes: \$8,000; Miller: \$5,000

to the amount of \$202,000.⁶³

Discovery documents pertaining to the case reveal that President George Bush had personally intervened into NEA decision-making, and had exacted a promise from Frohnmeyer that grants to controversial projects would be denied.⁶⁴ Under pressure from senior Federal government officials and placed on trial-by-media, the administrators of the NEA had become fearful for the institution's survival, and acted in a miscalculated attempt to forestall disaster. Frohnmeyer clearly demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding his institutional mandate to support artistic excellence, and failed to recognise the unconstitutionality of the government's actions. The whole NEA affair provides a case study that illustrates how regulation of free expression becomes perpetuated through self-monitoring.

Because acts of self-censorship encourage the censor's belief in the correctness of his cause, Frohnmeyer's decision to override the peer recommender panel only reinforced the conservative forces ranged against the

⁶³ Although two lower courts ruled the decency clause unconstitutional, the 1998 challenge (*National Endowment of the Arts et al v. Finley et al*) brought before the Supreme Court, saw the lower court decision reversed. The judgement stated that 20 U.S.C. 954(d)(1) "is facially valid, as it neither inherently interferes with First Amendment rights nor violates constitutional vagueness principles." Quote drawn from the Notice from the Reporter of Decisions, as it was reproduced in the Freedom of Expression at the National Endowment for the Arts website, <http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/doc28.html> (October 14, 2000) p 2

⁶⁴ David Mendoza, "Update," *New Art Examiner*, vol. 21 (September 1993), p 51 - 52

institution. This had the further effect of entrenching the public perception of the “NEA 4” as unworthy, and backed up the public's conviction that Congress was justified in its war on art.

Many authors have attempted to explain the NEA circus, several naively focussing on the Right's claim that issues of aesthetics (the delineation of good art from bad) are central to the whole event. This argument, whether issuing from authors or politicians, relies on the notion that aesthetic value can be discerned in an artwork independently and inherently, in such a way that any competent viewer may see it⁶⁵. The genesis of the NEA controversy has also been seen as originating in the Right's profound denial in the face of societal change, and has been viewed as an effort to deflect attention away from other, more pressing issues. A sociological approach to the NEA debates looks at the role culture plays in maintaining the entrenched values of the privileged classes.

At the turn of the century Marxist theorist R. E. Warner proposed that the stagnancy attending a capitalist system necessarily leads to the disavowal of culture in its progressive forms, and that vested interest only promulgates

⁶⁵ The difficulty with this argument is that it drastically simplifies a number of ideas such as “the public” presumed to be a homogeneous body, or that the “aesthetic value” of and object can be agreed on by a group of people. The argument only works if these reductions are accepted without question.

culture in so far as its definitions can work to reinforce existing power structures:

change and progress in society have always been resisted for as long as possible by those interested persons who, being for the moment at the top, stand to lose by any readjustment within the whole. We find that, at those periods of history when a change of social organisation is necessary, culture comes into opposition to the time-honoured standards of society, standards which by the way were elevated and properly honoured by the culture of the past, but which have proved inadequate and uninspiring for a further advance into the future.⁶⁶

These thoughts can be found echoing through Richard Bolton's analysis of the Neo-Conservative attack on art.⁶⁷ He exposes the tactics employed by the Republican governments of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, which systematically limited free access to information and worked to erode the tradition of dissent while claiming to uphold the founding principles of American democracy. In this context, instances of state-imposed censorship may be seen as an extension of policies introduced in an attempt to manipulate "the habits of the political system."

Censorship has long been a cornerstone of conservative cultural policy; the conservative attack on art is part of a much larger attempt to regulate public expression and identity and so diminish challenges to the government's authority... Censorship...indicates a much larger crisis within American democracy – the failure of

⁶⁶ R.E. Warner as quoted in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p 271

⁶⁷ Richard Bolton, "The Cultural Contradictions of Conservatism," *New Art Examiner*, vol. 17, pt. 10 (June 1990), p 24: David Stockman, President Reagan's first budget director, once pointed out that the success of conservatism would depend not on "budget policy, or economic policy, but [on] whether we can change the habits of the political system."

democratic institutions to manifest and defend the complexity and diversity of the American public.⁶⁸

Bolton and other writers also believe that the NEA debates may be viewed as a smokescreen set up by the right wing to create easy consensus and divert attention away from more pressing, but unresolvable (within the matrix of conservative policy) social problems. The 'sound and fury' of the arts debate was sensationalized through the media, conveyed to an anxiety-ridden public in need of a (fictive) return to an American Golden Age, when decency reigned.

When Christian crusaders started to rage against art with sexual and religious themes, it was an ideal issue for Helms...the timing was propitious. Helms faced re-election in 1990, and controversial art was a diversion from conditions back home... The Senator's concern about artistic degeneracy was a way to deflect attention away from his own responsibility for abysmal local conditions, and project blame for the state of the social world onto so-called radicals and deviants.⁶⁹

By identifying art as the enemy, the American public was allowed a new object on which to focus its fears and prejudices; a simple act of transference for a public weaned on Cold War rhetoric. In fact, it may be noted that the art debate arose at precisely the right time, when the "Evil Empire" could no longer be evoked as the enemy of the American way. More cynical observers have noted that this smokescreen also went up coincidental to a number of public

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Dubin, *ibid*, p 243

scandals over the misdeeds of government and fundamentalist leaders.

The Saved are always a minority among the Damned... For a while in the '80s it looked as if the right might sell their moral majority idea and transform the culture into some Heritage Park version of *The Handmaid's Tale*. But the Saved lost their Ronnie; their grip on prime time, if not Congress; even their moral high ground. How will they erase those sex-crazed Jimmies (Bakker/Swaggart) from our minds? Regroup around some unseen enemy. And wouldn't ya know, fresh outta godless Communists, they've discovered the art world – a rich new motherlode of sinners.⁷⁰

Wildmon and Helms worked hard to represent their campaign against art as an unmasking of fraud, perpetrated by the art world against the American public at the taxpayers' expense.⁷¹ They portrayed themselves as the representatives of an outraged public, defending "good taste" and "decency." Both of these arguments were based on the notion of a concrete definition, commonly shared, commonly understood, while in fact being based solely on the delimitations and prejudices of an authority group openly hostile to contemporary art production. Violence was done to the work under attack every time it was evoked, not only through castigation but through decontextualisation and a radical reduction of its meaning. An "I know it when I see it, and that ain't it" attitude passed for informed debate.

The Right has used the NEA controversy as an opportunity to air

⁷⁰ C. Carr, "War on Art," *Village Voice*, June 5 1990, p 26

⁷¹ the taxpayers' contribution to culture at the time of the NEA debates was 77 cents per capita.

their deepest prejudices...most of the public beyond the art world has been “informed” about the debate over the arts through extreme pronouncements by legislators and editorialists, and through one-line “summaries” of the works and artists in question slipped into the evening news.⁷²

By decontextualising the work they silence not only the artist, but close down the possibility of debate over meaning (and by extension deflect the original criticism). They pretend to engage in aesthetic criticism by making pronouncements on what may or may not be considered art – but their manipulation of the term does not operate on any real understanding of aesthetics – they use the term to denote taste (a very nebulous thing) – and whatever fails to fall within the canon of their own ‘taste’ is deemed to be “not-art.” Added to this, politicians raised the issue of elitism, charging that artists were creating work that was irrelevant to the “average” American. This placed artists in the position of defending the value of contemporary art in the face of an anti-intellectual discourse veiled by the rhetoric of American pragmatism.

Central to much of the rhetoric in the “art wars” was the notion that the work in question was obscene. The history of this idea ties it to pornography, but pornography prior to the nineteenth century used sexual escapade as an accompaniment to an underlying criticism of the political and religious

⁷² Bolton, *ibid.*, p 27

authorities of the day.⁷³ However, in the nineteenth century this discourse changed, and what was considered to be pornographic became manifestly linked to sexually explicit materials. The production and circulation of such materials increased, and for the first time were more available to the lower classes.

Although 'obscene' materials had been suppressed for centuries, it was not until the nineteenth century that non-governmental associations for the preservation of moral standards were formed. Essentially, these groups acted as lobbyists and morality brigades who brought charges of obscenity against the manufacturers and distributors of pornographic materials. Several laws were enacted concerning the display and import of such objects, and the empowerment of officials to seize them.

This era also witnessed new legislation against prostitution and renewed social inscriptions around the family, sexuality, and domesticity. Entering into the discussion at this time was the idea that pornography was morally deleterious and those most at risk must be protected.

73 "From the days of Aretino in the sixteenth century, pornography was closely linked with political and religious subversion...political pornography was continuous with other forms of political commentary and not always easily separated out as a genre." Lynn Hunt (ed), *The Invention of Pornography* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), p 35 - 36

It was not the possession of obscene materials by the educated upper classes that was of concern, but the possibility of the circulation of these materials among those who were morally vulnerable to its poisonous influences. The *Hicklin Test* [on which American obscenity legislation is based] was intended to protect the morals of the lower classes and other vulnerable groups [women, children and the uneducated], and thereby promote a public morality that was based on the Victorian discourse of sexuality as a dangerous force to be controlled and repressed.⁷⁴

The obscene was thus bound to patriarchal notions of protection.

The New Right understands that few Americans support censorship.⁷⁵ Circumscribing the notion, they framed their actions in terms of protection of the public; they argued that the artist's right to free expression was not in question, merely the public's responsibility to support it.⁷⁶ Avoiding the word censorship, they dressed their actions in a manner that allowed them to represent themselves as the defenders of decency and good taste. They were not suppressing 'free expression', merely 'protecting' the sensibilities of the public and decrying the fraud practised by the art world at the taxpayers' expense. The aim was not to stop artists from expressing themselves; rather the politicians

⁷⁴ Brenda Cossman and Shannon Bell, *Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism, and the Butler Decision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p 12

⁷⁵ Carole S. Vance, "Misunderstanding Obscenity," *Art in America*, vol. 78 no. 5 (May 1990) p 49 - 55

⁷⁶ The principle of arms' length funding is precisely to remove art production from economic, political or other pressures, thereby ensuring artistic freedom

were concerned with limiting or removing the mechanisms that allowed them to do so. The granting system frees artists from their subordination to the marketplace and creates a relatively safe space where alternatives can be envisioned. It has consistently been the arms' length nature of granting which has infuriated the Right wing, and in which they have attempted to intervene. In their argument, to fund the production of "obscene" and "indecent" work was to deny the free market (where validity is equated with consumer demand) and to encourage the nation's moral decay. "The State raises itself to the status of the sole possessor of the truth of the social order...and seeks to control all the networks of sociability...this involves an attempt to re-impose an absolute center, and to re-establish the closure which will thus restore unity."⁷⁷

In situations such as this one, power is manifested through the simultaneous excitation of sexual anxiety and the provision of a defence against it. Thus decency becomes a metaphor for the suppression of sexuality and functions as a cover for the rubric of power which relies on the Oedipalised body to maintain social order. Although in every instance the Right attempted to represent the arts as a marginal activity without real significance to the structure of society, their obsession with art (to the point where it dominated discussion on the Senate floor) belies their assertions. "They want to halt the

⁷⁷ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as quoted in Bolton, *ibid.*, p 29

development of a heterogeneous, multiracial, multisexual public because they fear their own power will not survive the arrival of such a public. Thus censorship is as much a sign of decline as it is a sign of authority.”⁷⁸

Their lack of sensitivity to the demands of a new age, and their inability to respond in a forward-looking way forces them into denial. They hearken back to another era when their policies had a semblance of potentiality. Art threatens because it is not only a space that re-presents culture, it embodies the sphere in which change takes place – beyond juridical and legislative control.

Why is art a target? Because political change does occur in social spaces located outside the control of the government. Much of the impact of feminism in recent decades, for example, was achieved outside the realm of legislation... Recent campaigns against art and popular culture aim to destroy the possibility of these independent social spaces. The government having married the political and the economic, is now attempting to join the political and the civic, thus bringing all social experience under the government’s watchful eye.⁷⁹

This fear of the changing society, in which ‘others’ are demanding a voice, is motivated by the recognition that it will be attended by a loss in traditional privilege. The voices of this changing society are represented in the work of artists like Karen Finley, who, through work that transgresses norms and

⁷⁸ Bolton, *ibid.*, p 29

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

expectations, criticise the patriarchal order that maintains such systems of privilege. Such work, by literally embodying cultural disaffection, exposes the status quo. The New Right's insistence on the loss of decency in this work may, in fact, be viewed as a mask (fetish) for their perhaps unconscious realisation that the real loss would be their own position of authority – in this light, a form of cultural castration anxiety.

That art objects can still disturb in this media saturated culture, attests to what Walter Benjamin called art's "aura" and its genesis in the ritual object, which as he pointed out, helps facilitate submission to authority.⁸⁰ Conservatives, insistent on maintaining certain culturally prescribed icons, recognise both their power and fallibility. As Régis Debray says in *Vie et mort de l'image*, "monotheisms are iconophobic by nature, and iconoclastic by moments," art being considered either decorative and inessential, or too far from official dogma. Yet Christianity has a patron saint of painters (Saint Luke), implicitly acknowledging art's ability to manifest the interiority (spirituality) of Man in the visible. The destruction of images imposes a threat on those who stray too far from the Word and re-establishes the borders of respectability. Again, as Debray states, "It took very little for Byzantine iconoclasm...to bring the stray

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", as excerpted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.) *Art in Theory: 1900 - 1990*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p 514 - 15.

sheep back into the flock and within the norm."⁸¹ Iconoclasm, then, attempts to reassert orthodoxy.

Restated in Freudian terms, art is tenable because, though it channels drive energy, it is expressed in terms which reassure the viewer. The pleasure principle states that people find reality essentially unsatisfying and so turn frustrated id energy inward, creating a compensatory fantasy life in which they find wish fulfilment. However, the superego monitors the drives and compels the individual to engage productively with society as those unable to turn fantasy into success are likely to become neurotic or psychotic. One of the ways that desire can be effectively channelled is artistic production, which translates private fantasy into a public medium. Ordinarily the individual is repelled by another's fantasy, but art offers a consolation because the artist transforms it into symbol, capable of awaking real emotions, where reality and wish fulfilment meet. Art satisfies because others have similar wishes which can find gratification in the art object. This formula relies on classical aesthetics by which art affords pleasure to the viewer.

[Fantasies] only become a work of art when they have undergone a transformation which softens what is offensive in them, conceals their personal origin and, by obeying the laws of beauty, bribes

⁸¹ Free translation. Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p 101 - 2

other people with a bonus of pleasure.⁸²

At issue is the structure of the artwork itself. Nicos Hadjinicolaou's examination of the ideological foundations of the artwork reveals that class structures and systems of belief are embedded in art.⁸³ Art's role, in this context, is to reflect ideas of social unity and to help maintain the status quo. This bourgeois notion of art allows the work to become the repository of social concern, and by functioning as an object of contemplation, ultimately leaves the viewers free to go about their business. In this way art serves a purpose but does not infringe on life.

The aesthetic discourse that informs certain definitions of Modernism insists on art's special status as separate from life – an argument that was elaborated in American art criticism by Clement Greenberg and his contemporaries in the 1970s.⁸⁴ This divorce of art from the quotidian led to the concept of art as essentially useless, which in turn lent art an autonomy.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, "The Claims of Psycho-Analysis to Scientific Interest" (1913) in Mark A. Cheetam, et al (ed.), *The Subjects of Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p 199

⁸³ Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "Art History and Class Struggle," in James M. Thompson (ed.) *20th Century Theories of Art* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), p 239

⁸⁴ The notions of purity that run through this discourse, themselves make an interesting study in terms of Kristeva's theory. An elaboration could be made on the ideas of boundaries, purity, and masculinity all in relation to American political ideologies. This however, falls outside the scope of the present study.

Until recently, the uselessness of art, its pure negativity, ensured its freedom to function as critique, since it rested beyond (and therefore was incapable of infecting) the horizon of everyday life. However, with the erosion of the autonomy of aesthetic practices and the broadening of the scope of reception (once encouraged by the avant-garde), art can no longer hold the privileged position that was the sign of both its freedom from constraint and its lack of utility.⁸⁵

Art, within at least the past twenty years, has broken out of its self-imposed isolation and has re-engaged itself with the everyday by probing social and political conditions. Herein lies the problem. Through this active questioning art has entered the realm of politics, and it may be argued that politicians feel the threat of this surveillance. In response, controversies such as those enacted around Finley and the NEA, may be read as politicians marking their territory. To threaten the autonomy of art is then an attempt to re-impose control.

⁸⁵ Kevin Dowler, "In Defence of the Realm: Public Controversy and the Apologetics of Art," *Theory Rules*, Jody Berland et al (eds.), (Toronto: YYZ Books and University of Toronto Press, 1996), p 82

Chapter 3: The outrageous acts of Karen Finley

I went into a museum but they had taken down all the art. Only the empty frames were left. Pieces of masking tape were up with the names of the paintings and the artists, stating why they were removed... Toilets were locked up in museums because people might think someone peeing is art. Someone might think that pee flushing down that toilet is art... And the government pays for that pee flushing down that toilet. There were many bladder infections among those who inspected the museum making sure that there was no offensive art. They might lose their jobs. It's a good life when no one thinks that you ever piss or shit...⁸⁶

During the last decades of the twentieth century the art world's dialogue with the theories of postmodernism forced an interest in the confrontational and the problematic. Yet while this disruptive tendency was tenable within the esoteric milieu of the museum and art journal, the public mainstream remained largely entrenched in a modernist discourse about the purposes and nature of art. In the work of artists such as Karen Finley, the gratification anticipated in the art object fails to materialise, instead bringing pulsion energy into contact with the symbolic realm. Such a disruption, in Kristeva's terms, is the basis of the avant-garde art object as it challenges conventional expectations, bringing a transformative energy to symbolic representation.

In psychoanalytic theory, representation is meant to be a guarantee of the subject's identity, because in an image the self can find a correspondence that

⁸⁶ Karen Finley, "It's Only Art," *Shock Treatment* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1990), p 69

reassures the subject of his or her own coherence. In finding an image of the self externally, the subject apprehends his or her own subjectivity as a reflection. The gaze is implicated in Lacan's mirror theory, as identity is seen to be externally defined, through interaction with an outside agent (the mother/mirror/other). The gaze is a two-party process that involves a subject observing and an object being observed. However, at any time, the individual occupies both these poles, making his/her position ambiguous. By being both subject and object s/he is pushed back into the primal state of indifferentiation (the Real) where identity ceases, thereby constituting a crisis. In order to resolve the threat of dissolution the Symbolic order interposes in the form of the screen, a mechanism that operates like language, placing the subject and object at a remove from one another, stopping the free-flow meaning and allowing a stable identity to be re-established.

This screen mediates the object-gaze for the subject. But it also protects the subject from this object-gaze, for it captures the gaze, "pulsatile, dazzling and spread out," and tames it in an image...to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real.⁸⁷

The other/object needs to be tamed into an image in order to make it safe for the subject and the archetypal other in Western culture is Woman. The feminine as a category has little to do with women, however, and more to do

⁸⁷ Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (Fall 1996), p 109. Quotation drawn from Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

with that which is not-Man. Western cultural traditions established dichotomies that placed the feminine on the side of body, nature and passivity, while the masculine team recruited mind, culture and activity.⁸⁸ Woman becomes the negative term in the Symbolic order. Because her difference is defined through lack, Man comes to represent plenitude; thus the phallus becomes the signifier, while femininity remains unrepresented. Because of the patriarchal values attributed to the gendered body the subject comes to understand him/herself as either having or being the Phallus, a position corresponding to subject or object in the symbolic order.⁸⁹ Woman can only be the Phallus (symbol of loss and potency), and so represents the object of (male) desire, while female desire and femininity are impossible to represent in the phallic order. And yet, femininity cannot be completely expelled from the Symbolic; it is a vital term, pushed to the border between the Symbolic and the Imaginary where it guarantees masculinity. Woman then, in a paradoxical move, comes to embody negativity, the object that defines subject, the lack that guarantees plenitude. For this reason Woman is the ideal representation – she is man's negation, the site of difference, his mirror and reassurance, but also because she occupies an evacuated position, it can be filled, layered over with meanings.

⁸⁸ Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1996) p 13

⁸⁹ Grosz, *ibid.*, p 85

In art, where symbolisation takes its supreme form, this translates into a rigorously controlled image of Woman that must appear to be perfected so that notions of the masculine will not be unsettled. Through artistic perfection, a defence is provided against feminine difference, at the same time that compensatory pleasure is provided. In light of this notion, Karen Finley's work offers an intriguing study, as her work contrives to undermine the stability of established categories and denies the opportunity for pleasure.

Karen Finley, a painter, installation and performance artist, moved to New York City in 1984 after receiving her MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute. Her performance work is true to the tradition as an outgrowth of visual art, where developments in Dada, Futurism, Conceptual art and Happenings can be counted as part of its pedigree. The theatricality of the performance event owes little to theatrical conventions: it rarely follows a traditional narrative, and visual artists (rather than professional actors) usually perform the piece. Beyond these generalisations, performance art is difficult to define, having no set rules relating to duration, action, repeatability, or script.

The work for which Finley became most notorious was entitled *We Keep Our Victims Ready* which she toured throughout the USA and Europe in 1989 - 90. As with most of her work, this piece was a solo show, comprised of a series of short vignettes and performed with only a few props such as a table, various

foodstuffs, and a chair or stool. The piece itself was inspired by a real event, in which a 16 year old girl “was found alive in a Hefty bag covered with feces near her home in upstate New York.”⁹⁰ The key issue for Finley was the fact that the victim was accused of staging her apparent abuse. The investigation into the crime had all the signs of a police cover up, including disallowed evidence, witnesses not called to testify, and accusations that legal and law enforcement officials were the perpetrators of the crime. A Grand Jury ultimately dismissed the case as a hoax.

In this work, as is characteristic of her performance art, Finley cuts to the quick, drawing the themes of sexual abuse, violence, and suicide into the realm of politics. Finley's process involves careful scripting though she does not rehearse her work, always leaving the performance open to local influences and current issues. Generally her work is characterised by three elements: text, social/political engagement, and food. Her style of delivery has often been described as incantatory, likened to evangelical preaching, stream of consciousness, and channelling. The texts of Karen Finley's performances⁹¹ are scabrous, and delve into issues of social injustice and violence.

⁹⁰ Beth Potier, “Karen Finley Provokes, Reveals in Lecture,” *Harvard University Gazette*, February 14, 2002, <http://www.new.harvard.edu/gazette/2002/02.14/06-finley.html>

⁹¹ A collection of Finley's texts has also been published under the title, *Shock Treatment* and audio collections of her work have been released on cd.

The title of the piece...is taken from a larger text that equates America's right-wing fundamentalism and narrow-minded bigotry with Nazi Germany: "In principle, we are not very different...it's just that our ovens are at a slower speed. We keep our victims ready." Women, gays and lesbians, people of colour, the poor, the disenfranchised – these are the victims of the institutionalized authority and cultural myth to which she refers and with whom she empathizes compassionately.⁹²

The target of Finley's rage is American patriarchal culture, which she sees as indifferent to both the suffering of the disenfranchised and the violence directed towards women. Her strategy is to assault the audience with stories of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and pain, which she delivers in rhythmic waves, marked by repetitions, changes in cadence, random shifts from a female to a male 'voice', young to old, first person to third. But she combines horror with humour to keep the audience from being alienated by the text, and intersperses the recitations with more playful audience interaction which allows her to reengage the audience as an artist/individual.

We Keep Our Victims Ready specifically relates the stories of women who have been brutalised by men; rape, incest, homophobia, and AIDS all engulf the audience in a field of pain.

And the menfolk say as I pass –
I prefer small women
I like to dominate women
I enjoy the conquest of sex

Some women are asking for it
I get excited when a woman struggles
I'd like to make it with her
I hope I score tonight.

And when the last man said his violence
I knew I couldn't do anything to them
so I'd do something to me.
I went and took a knife and I cut out my hole
but it just became a bigger hole
and all the men just laughed and said
She's too big to fuck now
And I felt relief, but then they said,
We can all fuck her at the same time.⁹³

Underlying each of these stories is Finley's anger at the culture of complacency that exists in America, and governments which fail to address social problems with socially relevant policy.

Throughout the piece Finley tears at the skin of taboo subject matter with raw language – language that so offended her right wing critics, who “discuss[ed] this work in metaphors of chaos, dissolution, sewage, [and] engulfment.”⁹⁴ Her recitations often start on an explosive note, then weave back and forth between the banal and the brutal. The texts build both in anguish and cadence, repetition is frequent, and the anger which fuels her work manifests itself fully in accusations of complicity. In the penultimate act of *We Keep Our Victims*

⁹³ Karen Finley, “Why Can't This Veal Calf Walk” from *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, as published in *Shock Treatment*, p 130 - 31

⁹⁴ C. Carr, *ibid.*, p 26.

Ready, Finley won her reputation as “a chocolate-smearer woman.” Here she moves from the personification of an abandoned wife to the embodiment of Woman in Western culture.

With a nonchalance that robs the act of eroticism, Finley strips down to her underpants, and as she delivers a monologue concerning the cultural coding of women’s bodies, covers herself first in chocolate (“I cover myself up in ways that I feel society covers up a woman – as in the ritual where I put chocolate all over myself...because it’s a visual symbol that involves eating as well as basically being treated like shit”), candy hearts (“because after we’ve been treated like shit, then we’re loved”) alfalfa sprouts (“symbolizing sperm, because in a way it’s all a big jack-off...we’re just something to jerk off onto, after the ‘love’”), and finally, a layer of Christmas tinsel, giving the overall appearance of a cocktail dress (“because after going through all that, a woman still gets dressed up for dinner”).⁹⁵

The artist does not abandon the audience at this point though, rather she offers a final redemptive act in the form of a poem. After wiping her face, feet and hands, and wrapping herself in a clean sheet, Finley recites “The Black Sheep,”

⁹⁵ Karen Finley, interview with Andrea Juno, *Angry Women* (San Francisco: Re/search Publications, 1991), p 49

a poem that speaks of hope, survival, and love. In this poem the figures who have been abandoned, outcast, and denied the love and support of their families are able to find community amongst themselves:

We're related to people we love who can't say
I love you Black Sheep daughter
I love you Black Sheep son
I love you outcast, I love you outsider
But tonight we love each other
That's why we're here –
to be around others like ourselves –
So it doesn't hurt so much.
In our world, our temple of difference
I am at my loneliest when I have something to celebrate
and try to share it with those I love
but who don't love me back ...
Black sheep can be family to strangers
We can love each other like MOTHER
FATHER SISTER BROTHER CHILD.⁹⁶

The obvious targets of her critics' scorn are the "food smearing" activities and brutal language that characterise Finley's work, but at a deeper level it is her enactment of the female body that most disturbs the cultural unconscious.

It is interesting to note at this juncture, that audience reaction to Finley's work

⁹⁶ Karen Finley, *Shock Treatment*, p 142 - 143

rarely elicits the type of shock and outrage expressed by her critics – perhaps not so very surprising, as (particularly at that time) her audiences were to be found in performance art venues such as the Kitchen or Franklin Furnace in New York City. These audiences were typically aware of the discipline and its conventions, and often had at least some expectation of what they would witness in a Karen Finley performance. After the NEA controversy, however, her notoriety paved the way to more mainstream venues such as large public art museums and universities.

With her entry into public awareness, the cause of offence in Finley's work came to be widely theorised. An article by Lynda Hart, "Karen Finley's Dirty Work: Censorship, Homophobia, and the NEA," takes a psychoanalytic approach to the controversy, proposing that its gender-transgressive nature is at the crux of the issue. Hart situates Finley within the NEA 4's perceived identity as a group of gay and lesbian artists, justifying her presence there by revealing the categorising practices of the homophobic reaction (though Finley is heterosexual). Psychoanalytic feminism provides a fascinating reading of the public response to women's artwork, particularly in its articulation of the female body. While the materialist account of the NEA debate explains the hidden mechanisms of power, a psychoanalytic approach is required to account for the excessive response this work elicited. Lynda Hart states that

“the NEA controversies have been insistently concerned with policing displays of the body...the conclusion seems inescapable that sexual anxieties permeate these debates.”⁹⁷

Behind this policing of the body is the desire to regulate all sexual life. Long on the Neo-conservative agenda, this desire to suppress sexuality includes efforts to restrict or abolish sex education, abortion, distribution of condoms, and sexually explicit representations. It aims at a rarefied, non-threatening body. Behind the call for a “New Decency”... – in effect the enforcing of a “people’s fantasy,” with the same heightened banality as a people’s art – is the effort to control and manipulate the unconscious attitude toward, and aesthetic articulation of, the body.⁹⁸

In the worldview of the political and religious conservatives the female body is a threat, particularly when represented outside the control of the heterosexual hierarchy. When that body becomes possessed, occupied by a woman who makes claims to civil, economic, and most importantly sexual freedoms she is breaking the boundaries of the ‘natural’, crossing pre-defined limits and putting definitions of masculinity into question. Hart suggests that Karen Finley’s grant was revoked because of a homophobic reaction to her work. She inserts Finley into the definition by defining homophobia in reference to the New Right’s fear of bodily presentations which transgress the traditional boundaries and binaries set up by compulsory heterosexuality. These boundaries must be

⁹⁷ Lynda Hart, “Karen Finley’s Dirty Work: Censorship, Homophobia and the NEA,” *Genders*, no. 14 (Fall 1992), p 1

⁹⁸ Donald Kuspit, “Sexual Censorship and the New Authoritarianism,” *New Art Examiner*, vol. 17, pt. 2 (September 1989), p 43

tightly controlled in order to be maintained. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, homophobia is an indicator of the precariousness of (hetero)sexual identity.

The homophobe reacts with hostility to the “otherness” of the homosexual, a reaction which psychoanalysis accounts for as a fear of sameness.⁹⁹ According to Freud, all children have a bisexual nature, which they are taught to repress in favour of a heterosexual orientation as they mature. The homophobic response is a recognition and abhorrence of that which is “supposed” to remain repressed.

Furthermore Hart believes that “the gender transgressive” nature of Finley’s performance art reveals the constructedness of gender identity, and so causes affront. Positioned within heterosexuality, she fails to keep up appearances, revealing its contradictions, and so breaches the walls from within the fortress. Hart contends that inserting Finley into a group otherwise homosexually-identified helps reveal the logical contradictions in the New Right’s agenda, which must remain hidden in order to operate. Finley, being the piece that cannot be accounted for, is therefore the greatest threat.

One of Finley’s ‘indecencies’ was the embodiment of “anal eroticism”

⁹⁹ Hart, *ibid.*, p 4 Jonathan Dollimore also suggests that homophobia is a strategy that “secure[s] a dominant cultural definition of masculinity...[and] is also used to keep women within the confines of a certain notion of femininity.”

(performed in *Yams Up my Granny's Ass*) which Hart argues was conflated with gay male sexuality, an area without markers in the discourse of Western heterosexuality. This assertion is difficult to maintain if one begins to examine the history of male fantasy as articulated in (heterosexual) pornographic literature (*Fanny Hill* and *The Story of O* being two fairly “mainstream” instances) and cinema, where one can find numerous instances of anal sex. However, the point may be made that by metaphorically enacting anal rape, Finley is drawing attention to the contradictions (repression) and contravention of taboo. It is, in other words, the rendering of her body as indiscreet, a violation of the female body's naturalised seamlessness, and a manipulation of her body as malleable, that has aroused so much controversy.

The knowledge/acknowledgement that anal sex is a homosexual practice adds urgency to the New Puritans' anxiety over the subject, but it is Finley's unwillingness to maintain the fiction that anal sex does not exist within the lexicon of heterosexuality which makes her an object for their disgust. Much of Finley's performance involves the “transformation of her natural flesh into artifice,” exposing society's mistrust of the female body. When she removes her clothing and covers her body in successive layers of chocolate, candy hearts, sprouts, and tinsel she is revealing the cultural coding of woman's body. The necessity of mediating the female form also bears witness to the cultural will to control it.

The ordering of the female body is treated in Lynda Nead's book, *The Female Nude*, where she examines Kenneth Clark's insistence that "The transformation from the naked to the nude is...the shift from the actual to the ideal,"¹⁰⁰ which of necessity requires the sublimation of sex drives in order to arrive at a successful aesthetic experience. Nead argues that this containment is necessary in order to shore up the boundaries that inscribe masculinity/patriarchy, providing reassurance that the male body will not degenerate into the formlessness of the natural female body.¹⁰¹

The *cuirasse esthétique* describes a kind of muscle-architecture, a formal and schematic disposition of muscles which was used in antiquity for the design of armour. It symbolized the heroic male body – powerful and in, as well as under, control... [By comparison] the body of woman is perceived as unstructured. It represents the flood, the human mass; it is soft, fluid and undifferentiated. The warrior male insulates himself from the threat of dissolution into this mass by turning his body into an armoured surface that both repels the femininity on the outside and contains the 'primitive', feminized flesh of his own interior...¹⁰²

The containment of the female body is also socially necessitated. For Woman, the price of entry into the symbolic order is the renunciation of the maternal body, where she must either forsake its jouissance or harness it to procreation

¹⁰⁰ Linda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992) p 14

¹⁰¹ Nead, *ibid.*, p 17 - 19

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p 17

(The Name of the Father). Her body is necessary to the continuation of the tribe, but her desire is a danger to its association.

What Christianity recognizes in a woman, what it demands of her in order to include her within its symbolic order, is that by living or thinking of herself as a virgin impregnated by the Word, she should live and think of herself as a male homosexual... If on the other hand...a woman is not a virgin, a nun, and chaste, but has orgasms and gives birth, her only means of gaining access to the symbolic paternal order is by engaging in an endless struggle between the orgasmic maternal body and the symbolic prohibition.¹⁰³

In this sense, Finley's creation of an artificial body is unsatisfactory as it is hyper-artificial, un-idealised, uncontained (without discernible, reassuring boundaries), and uncontrollable. While much of Finley's work is about sex, it runs no risk of "too much sex" (in Sir Kenneth Clark's terms)¹⁰⁴. Clark's concern unconsciously runs parallel to Kristeva's formulations. His fear of "too much sex" reflects the fear of jouissance, pleasure at the spectacle of the female nude. This scopophilic pleasure, involved as it is with the semiotic, runs counter to the reasoned aesthetic experience. The ordered and properly contained body of the artistic nude is another defence instituted to guard

¹⁰³ Moi, *ibid.*, p 14

¹⁰⁴ The full quote reads: "Clark evokes the process, postulated by Freud, of sublimation... According to Clark, however, sexual instincts cannot (and possibly should not) be displaced in the creation and contemplation of the nude. The process of sublimation in this case is incomplete, for the originating sexual drives remain apparent and are part of the viewer's responses to the image. Nevertheless, Clark seem unhappy with the responses that are stimulated by the nude; they are 'dragged' into the open and 'risk upsetting' the kinds of reactions that may be more appropriate to a work of art... The pure and independent aesthetic experience is thus seriously compromised by the nude. If the transmutation of sexual drives into artistic creation is impossible then the nude also present the risk of too much sex... The triumph of a 'successful' representation of the nude is the control of this potential risk." Nead, *ibid.*, p 13

against the infiltration of the symbolic from the semiotic. Finley's use of nudity makes a radical split from the scopophilic, frustrating what should conventionally be the opportunity for pleasure, when she reasserts her subjecthood by consciously assuming the cultural meanings layered onto her body. The mastery and pleasure in these acts lie with Finley alone.

In the NEA dispute the aspect that was most fixated on in Finley's work was her use of food. The substances she employed – chocolate, raw hamburger, candied yams, eggs, tomato juice, canned kidney beans – all have a viscosity which make ready allusion to bodily products. Spreading on her body what should properly be contained by it, Finley breaks order and highlights woman's abjection in society. Placed outside the norm of masculinity, woman circulates around man, necessary but (r)jected. As other to man, she is equated with body and nature, but her body must be kept in control so as not to pose a threat to the structure, because, as Mary Douglas reminds us, disorder has great power: "disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it... We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power."¹⁰⁵ The abject occurs on the borderline between the semiotic and symbolic, threatening the stability of the symbolic with its unruliness.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Douglas, *ibid.* p 95

To Douglas, the site of greatest threat is the margin, where seepage may occur, threatening the centre with contamination. As with the social body, the physical body must have its borders policed, and necessitating that the processes of incorporation and excretion be governed by rules of behaviour. Because the abject occurs on the borderline between the semiotic and the symbolic, the stability of the symbolic is threatened by the unruliness of the semiotic, which in turn gives rise to rituals of purification.

According to Mary Douglas, rituals of purification are instituted to bring the polluted back into order, by first setting it apart, then reintegrating it. She claims that there is not a natural division between the sacred and the impure; rather, by definition dirt is merely that which is out of place. Holiness, on the other hand, is an attribute of God, and by extension is characterised by order. Order requires that categories be clearly defined, so it is in the places where ambiguity exists that danger is most likely to be found. The argument follows that by keeping order blessings will be bestowed, while contravention is dangerous. Douglas illustrates this point in reference to Levitical proscription, where abominations are those elements that defy classification and notes that each "injunction is prefaced with the command to be holy... Observing them draws down prosperity, infringing them brings danger."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Douglas, *ibid.*, p 50 - 51

For Kristeva, fear of the maternal body is precisely a fear of being overwhelmed by it. The threat of the maternal body, containing all of its associations with the outside and the impure, is combated by the institution of purification rituals which Kristeva claims lay the foundations for the institution of sexual difference and hierarchical social order.

monotheism represses, along with paganism, the greater part of agrarian civilizations and their ideologies, women and mothers... Consequently, [Judaic] civilization seems to have made the principle of sexual difference...crystal clear: between the two sexes a cleavage or abyss opens up. This gap is marked by their different relationship to the law... For without this gap between the sexes, without this localization of the polymorphic, orgasmic body, desiring and laughing, in the *other* sex, it would have been impossible, in the *symbolic realm*, to isolate the principle of One Law.¹⁰⁷

Like Douglas, Kristeva also examines Leviticus in *Powers of Horror*, and locates the threat of the unclean in the maternal function; taboo forms the border control into no-man's land. In the Jewish faith, says Kristeva, the Temple is Law and purity can be found in relation to it. For both Douglas and Kristeva, cleanliness is next to godliness, and purity can only be found in the logic of the symbolic order, which can transform the unclean by subjecting it to language/ritual. Ritual represents a reconciliation with the Law of the Father. The unclean is the negative side of purity, and falls into line with the divisions that place woman, body, semiotic in opposition to man, mind, symbolic. The Law, according to both authors, requires delineation, and as Kristeva points

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, "About Chinese Women," in *Moi*, *ibid.*, p 141

out, all separations are representative of the separation from the Mother.¹⁰⁸ The abject works against all of these requirements, signalling ambiguity (me/not-me), the semiotic, and the impure.

Purification rites point to the border between body and order/semiotic and symbolic – the difference between the pure and impure which Kristeva claims is a coding for differentiation, and by extension represents a striving for identity. Separation is intrinsic to purification; exclusion of the abject inscribes the border between the Paternal Law and Maternal Authority through such signifying practices.¹⁰⁹ But these practices also re-institute the power of the Maternal Authority, what Kristeva terms women's power of horror. In this way the abject is, paradoxically, shown to have a purifying quality – making it apparent by comparison. In working all of these threads together, Kristeva shows how defilement, connoted with the maternal and thereby the taboo, comes into association with guilt, and thereby comes to represent sin.

As a woman Finley sits uneasily in relation to the symbolic order, only provisionally situated within the realm of the Law of the Father. Unable or unwilling to renounce her jouissance, her body-knowing, she acts through her

¹⁰⁸ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 91 – 95

¹⁰⁹ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 75

body in a manner that disrupts the order of the Father (thereby upsetting those who govern, who, like stern fathers, wish to discipline the unruly daughter). She retreats to the chora and allows the primary impulses of the semiotic to emerge through it into the symbolic realm. Although as a performance artist she manipulates language, to formulate concepts from the drives she experiences in her body and to relate her ideas to the audience, she does so in ways that depart radically from the structure and coherent utterance of the symbolic.

In deliberately transgressing the requirement for a 'clean and proper body', by reversing the rituals of purification, Finley subverts the Oedipal structure's expectations. An examination of her work reveals that she employs the abject (on the female body) in situations that the Oedipal structure attempts to repress – the taboo (incest, rape). Her effrontery then, is in calling attention to their existence by reverting to the Pre-Oedipal/unclean body through a double articulation – foul language and a befouled body.

As mentioned earlier, in psychoanalytic theory the Oedipal structure rests on a divergence from the relationship between mother and child. Reformulated into the chora, the semiotic and the symbolic, Kristeva sees that the passage from one into the other is never complete. She accepts Lacan's emphasis on the role of language in psychic development, but reinvests the body with an equal

weight. She accepts the male/female mind/body split, but acknowledges the essential importance of the body in the subject's psychic make-up. This does not deny woman's ability to occupy the symbolic, a necessary aspect of becoming a unified subject, but her position there is more provisional than man's because the Word, the organising principle of his community and his codes, belongs to man. Once located in the symbolic the subject still experiences the chora, which makes itself heard in the manner in which it disrupts language, but control of the body helps to stifle this enunciation.

Once the subject has entered into the symbolic order, the chora will be more or less successfully repressed and can be perceived only as pulsional pressure on or within symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences. The chora, then, is a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory.¹¹⁰

In one sense, Karen Finley's performance texts can be examined as a symptom: the 'rhythmic pulsions' of the chora press through into the symbolic in both the style of delivery and in the messages that are relayed, signalling repression. Art critics often describe these performances in terms of madness, a condition Kristeva claims often propels a subject in crisis to fetishize language. In this state the subject has come to realise that there is no possibility of attaining the object, but subjectivity cannot survive in light of this

¹¹⁰ Moi, *ibid.*, p 13

truth, thereby driving the subject to use of words as a distraction, staving off the real. But Finley's texts also carry out the function described in *Revolution du langage poetique*, namely to bring the semiotic into the symbolic in order to effect a transformation.

This idea is inherited from Kristeva's mentor, Roland Barthes, who challenged what he termed the *doxa*, those given truths which make up reality. He believed that, by denying the *doxa*, the text could undermine conventional understandings and subvert social norms.¹¹¹

In this broad perspective, changing the novel seemed to be much the same thing as changing the world. The position rested, of course, on the assertion, firstly, that the conventions regulating the traditional novel were the same as those maintaining the political and social status quo; second, that one could therefore identify a central legislative norm, common both to literary texts and to the social whole, which could be breached by an act of textual disobedience.¹¹²

To transform the text (novel) was to bring transformation to society.

Kristeva's notion of the avant-garde goes further than this, however. For her the avant-garde text does not merely disrupt the status quo, it brings together the semiotic and the symbolic in a dynamic manner. Again, the genesis of this

42 ¹¹¹ Leslie Hill, "Julia Kristeva Theorizing the Avant-garde?," in Fletcher et al, p 141 -

¹¹² Ibid., p 143

idea seems to lie with Barthes, who found a remembrance of the body contained in the text.

The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs... I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing... I shall not judge a performance according to the rules of interpretation...but according to the image of the body given me.¹¹³

Essentially, Kristeva's theory of the avant garde states that the tools of the semiotic are employed by artists to dislodge the traditional, and to unsettle received meanings. The semiotic enters the text as a play of drives – uncontrolled, indistinct, ambiguous – it refuses to be fixed in meaning, it creates provisional truths (or denies truth completely), and revels in undermining established signs. The reception of the work necessitates that the viewer abandon the stability of what has gone before, what s/he accepts as reality, and begin a process of refashioning knowledge.

Kristeva believes the text to be like the subject in process, creating its own set of provisional truths in making itself, which may in turn reveal new discourses.

avant-garde texts produce statements which have their own truth value and can therefore serve as a means of analysing the symbolic structure of the culture or society within which those texts were produced.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), p 188

¹¹⁴ Hill, *ibid.*, p 146

In her practice Kristeva refuses the notion of healing the patient by attempting to construct a new subjectivity. She helps them to this position by turning them into works in progress, accomplished through the creation of imaginative texts which allow the subjects to channel the forces of the semiotic into the realm of the Father without requiring them to assume a rigid new (and possibly false) identity. This is to create a new imaginary where possibility exists, perfect worlds are envisioned, and healing can take place. But the subject in progress is also valorised by Kristeva because the subject is disruptive. In failing to occupy a stable position in the symbolic, and in constantly remaking him or herself, the subject-in-process affects the culture by refusing its demand for stasis.

In this way the semiotic intervenes directly into language (the symbolic) through the body of the individual and opens the possibility for new understandings. When Karen Finley “channels” her characters, she can be understood to be performing a parallel act. When she invokes a series of fragmented subjects in a non-continuous framework, in chaotic, body-driven language, she interrupts the traditional narrative format, and puts raw pulsional energy into words so that her audience can be moved away from cognitive knowledge into a body-knowing.

In dealing with her outrage, Finley creates imaginative texts (performance art), allowing her to construct a variety of identities, but these texts are overrun with the rhythms of the chora, the meaninglessness, contradictions, repetitions, silences and absences of the semiotic that abrade the surface of the symbolic. She gives voice to the rage she *feels*. In these acts she constantly shifts identities between abuser, narrator, and victim, from first to third to second person and back again. In a voice which fluctuates wildly, she screeches, incants, harangues, preaches – her words assault the audience – voice patterns associated with madness. Finley also uses humour in her work like a blade, scraping away the skin, leaving the audience raw and exposed where she has touched them. This laughter, according to Kristeva, is a means of placing or displacing abjection. Kristeva sees laughter as bound to jouissance, and as such it forms a retreat from the Law, a lapsing back into the corporeal. The impulses of the semiotic are also visited *on* Finley's body in acts of abjection, acts which signal the failure of the Father to master her body, bearing witness to the continued presence of the maternal.

However, the abject makes its most insistent appearance in Finley's art in the visible acts she performs. As mentioned in Chapter One, Kristeva divides the abject into the categories of food, waste and sexual differentiation. In her performance Finley brings all three of these elements to the stage. Food constitutes a danger in that it is a close referent to the maternal body; it

signifies the original relationship to the maternal body as a source of food, as well as the sense of corporeal pleasure that pulls the subject toward the semiotic. It also represents the territory where the child struggles to separate herself from her parents, when incorporating food means accepting a position in non-differentiation and rejecting it signifies autonomy. The second category, excrement, confuses the distinctions between inside/outside, me/not-me. This causes a crisis because it is unsettling to identity and reveals its precariousness. In marking ambiguity, waste reminds the subject of the margin's permeability. Similarly, the abjection Finley performs on her body reverses the requirements of the symbolic realm, not only to maintain the clean and proper body, but to maintain the delimitations of gender. When she messes with her own body, Finley is not only blurring the boundaries between the me/not-me, she is undoing the differentiation of the sexed body and confusing the order by which masculinity (and the symbolic) maintains itself.

Kristeva suggests that woman's knowledge is a corporeal one: unarticulated, grounded in ironic common sense, oriented toward bodily pleasure and laughter. However the symbolic requires that the physical sensations that recall the mother, the pleasure of the body's rhythms that will not be ordered, must be educated out of the body because of their chaotic nature. Finley's acts of abjection return the maternal body to consciousness, creating a state of crisis, as the maternal body recalls the lost object (the centre of all desire), that

from which the subject must flee in order to exist, and reminds the subject of the debt owed for life.

The critics are correct in thinking that Finley's work is perverse, but not for the reasons that they espouse. They speak of her acts as non-sensible in terms of social habits, corresponding to the laws of the symbolic, claiming her work bespeaks of the decline of society. But they fail to acknowledge the threat it poses to their sense of identity. Such acts put identity in question because they create confusion – we look to the other to guarantee our subjectivity, a mirror in which we find our reflection – and when that mirror is literally muddied we recognise the possibility that we are seeing the hidden/disavowed part of ourselves. Kristeva says that the abject is perverse because it neither rejects nor accepts prohibition, rule or law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses, takes advantage of them, all the better to deny them.¹¹⁵

It is interesting to note that most of the “public” response to Karen Finley's work was formulated and interpreted by members of the media and politicians, among whom few had actually witnessed it. On the other hand, those commentators who defended Finley's art, usually artists and art critics, had first-hand experience of her performances. In this respect it may be said that

¹¹⁵ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 15

her critics were not responding on an aesthetic or intellectual basis; rather, the requirements of the symbolic dictated how they responded. To them, situated comfortably within the symbolic, it was enough to know that Finley's acts did not conform to a bourgeois notion of art, or to accepted notions of femininity. Unsettling the certainties of the symbolic was the sin her art stood for, and for which she was punished.

Finley also defied the limits of femininity by refusing to occupy the object's position within the defined structure of the gaze. In reasserting her subjectivity she unsettled that of others who look to the female body as a reassurance. Such response to her work, then, is characterised by fear; the abjection of the artist's body is a terrifying sight because the guarantee sought through art gives way, in this instance, to the repressed. When the audience looks on abjection, "the more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognise myself...sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed."¹¹⁶ When this repression is disturbed the ego is set adrift, at which point it begins to stray back to the limits of the semiotic.

Abjection is a site that the exile occupies, the place where a regrouping happens and a new subject can be formed.

¹¹⁶ Kristeva, *ibid.*, p 13

The body's inside...shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guarantees the integrity of one's "own and clean self," but...[gives] way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject.¹¹⁷

Recognition that it is impossible to be completely separated from the abject is a recognition that the threatening is impossible to exclude. It is a necessary element of socially validated activities such as art, literature, and knowledge as much as it is a part of the socially unacceptable sexual drives. The problem with what Finley does is that it reminds the viewer of the socially unacceptable, opens a space in which change might occur, places the dictates of order in question, and allows something different to become visible. Absolution comes through the act of confession, where the sin of the flesh is converted into word, bringing it into signification and under control. Art is one means of bringing the flesh to the symbolic order and Karen Finley's art is a way of making sure it does not feel overly comfortable there.

¹¹⁷ Kristeva, *ibid*, p 53

Conclusion:

Freud, Lacan and Kristeva all accept the idea that an essential early union (dyad) is the original state from which subjectivity springs. The three theorists agree that the child experiences this state as undifferentiated and that the entry of an exterior force – the father, the alienated image, social institutions – force the child into awareness and gradual acceptance of his or her autonomy. Again, all three understand this period as one of crisis (some variation on the Oedipal Drama) essential to the creation of the unconscious which is formed to contain repressed desire. This desire itself is understood differently by the three but essentially all agree that it represents a life-long struggle to retain subjectivity. To lose the battle means that the subject loses him or herself and slides back toward the dyad (which is subjective death).

While Freud's theory endeavoured to explain ego formation and the genesis of neurosis, Lacan attempted to explain the cause of psychic pain through the Structuralist understanding of language processes. Kristeva came to psychoanalysis through Semiotics, predisposing her toward Lacan's interpretations. However, Freud and Lacan set out theory that failed to adequately acknowledge the importance of the feminine in psychical development. Kristeva's theory attempts to redress this absence, yet she refuses to align herself with feminism, which she sees as an attempt to

replace one metanarrative with another. This point is important in understanding Kristeva, who is consistently concerned with preserving ambiguity, opening up possibility, and encouraging ongoing transformation.

Where Kristeva departs most radically from her male predecessors is in her elaboration of the theory of abjection. Here she privileges the feminine by insisting on its importance in the formation of the subject, its continual presence in the life of the adult, and its power to attract and repulse. Equated with the feminine, she demonstrates how it is essential to (though disavowed by) the masculine realm of the symbolic. It is the abject's power to force subjectivity (its horror pushes the subject toward order) and provides the energy that brings about social transformation. The abject is understood as feminine because it is, in the first instance, the mother's role to train the child's body, transforming it into the 'clean and proper body' of social acceptability. But on a deeper level, the three categories of abjection are identified directly with the feminine: food, waste, and gender differentiation.

In defining the orders of abjection, Kristeva turns to anthropologist Mary Douglas and her work on purity and pollution. Douglas is important to Kristeva because she demonstrates the social inscription of purity and the means used to control pollution. Turning to the rules of Levitical prohibition, Douglas

illustrates the point that pollution is only that which defies logic and order. Likewise, Kristeva examines Leviticus and finds that the categories of prohibition correspond to her classes of abjection. Because the impure/ambiguous threatens purity/order rituals are instituted in order to neutralize the danger it poses. In drawing this back to Kristeva's theory, rituals of purification can be seen as functioning in the same manner as the symbolic, which siphons off the power of the semiotic/object/feminine in order to fuel the symbolic/masculine.

This theoretical background is intended to provide a means to comprehend society's fear of the feminine. I have attempted to show that this fear manifests itself in various ways, demonstrated, for example, in the work of Lynda Nead. Nead uncovers this dread in the subtext of writings on the female nude in art. These writings are concerned with ordering and taming the female body, making it safe for male consumption. As with Douglas and Kristeva, she sees that the unruly, unidealized female body poses a threat that must be controlled through aesthetic purity.

I have suggested, within the framework of this study, that it is these same issues which animated the hysteria around Karen Finley in the late 1980s. I believe that Finley's performance art manifests the forces of abjection and

displays the characteristics of a subject in crisis, as theorized by Julia Kristeva. This is witnessed in Finley's use of language, which careens between different subjective positions, cadences, repetitions and silences, and in the way language forms a surface across which she transports a cargo of pain. But Finley also represents abjection by layering it on her own body through the use of viscous substances which recall bodily waste. Additionally she uses her own naked, female body as its base, recalling the aspect of gender differentiation, while the cultural association between the female body and food is more directly embodied in her "smearing" activities.

That Finley's manifestation of abjection goes beyond these superficial similarities can be seen in the response elicited by her work. On a purely factual level the elements comprising her performance art – a monologue (albeit one containing a good portion of foul language), a small amount of uneroticized nudity, and food – are all relatively unthreatening. I believe that the forces of conservatism were in fact troubled by her presentation of the impure/unordered, as the centre must remain undisturbed and untroubled by pollution. It was necessary that her work be brought under control, and so the instruments of social and economic pressure were used in an attempt to first contain it, then nullify the threat. This was accomplished through a variety of means, including framing the work within a reductivist, hostile discourse (in the

media and in senate deliberations), and through (ultimately unsuccessful) judicial and legislative actions.

The other characteristic common to Julia Kristeva's theory and Karen Finley's performance art is the element Kristeva terms the avant garde. She means by this the representation of semiotic forces within the art forms found in the symbolic realm. These art forms have a tendency to become moribund in time, revitalized only through the avant garde/forces of semiotic energy. Within the avant garde the artist manipulates the tools of the symbolic (such as language or representation) but departs radically from the trajectory formed by artistic convention. It is in the grating against tradition that the semiotic makes itself heard, and it is also here Kristeva believes society is transformed. Politically and intellectually Kristeva is in favour of such transformations, as stasis is death – for the individual, for art forms and for society.

Within this study I spent a good deal of time analyzing the specifics of the NEA controversy. I believe this was necessary in order to illuminate the context in which Finley found herself, and to illustrate the both the mechanisms deployed against her and the seriousness (though disavowed) of the threat her work presented. In this light we see that censorship functions in the manner described by Douglas and Kristeva, namely it attempts to “purify” society by

removing the “pollution” that endangers it.

In bringing together the works of Julia Kristeva and Karen Finley I have attempted to explain the psychoanalytic functions I see underpinning Finley's work, as well as those motivating her critics. I also hoped to illustrate an instance of the social abjection of the feminine (in Finley's performances) and the possibility of creating a recuperative position for the feminine (as seen in Kristeva). I believe that Kristeva's work offers interesting opportunities beyond the relatively narrow parameters I have followed; though worthy of the attention it has been paid, abjection has been “done to death” in the past decade. As I see it, the more exciting possibility is presented in expanding on Kristeva's desire to redefine the place of the feminine. Unlike “traditional” feminism, Kristeva refuses romanticised or untroubled definitions of the feminine, but insists on a slippery, irritatingly elusive category that is open to continual transformation and reinterpretation, and most importantly, unending possibility.

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Appendix:

Text from: Karen Finley, "We Keep Our Victims Ready",
Shock Treatment, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1990

**SHOCK
TREATMENT**

by

KAREN FINLEY

with illustrations by the author

**CITY LIGHTS
SAN FRANCISCO**

© 1990, Karen Finley

Book and cover design by Rex Ray

Parts of this book have appeared in *The Drama Review*, *Blatant Artifice*, *ArtForum*, *The Whole Earth Review*, and *City Lights Review*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Finley, Karen.

Shock treatment / by Karen Finley

p. cm

ISBN 0-87286-252-6

1. Title

PS3556.F486S57 1990

818'.5409—dc20

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10 9 8 7 6 5

Special Thanks

To my editor, Amy Scholder, for her strength and her generous belief in my book before it was even completed.

Thank you Rex Ray for introducing me to Amy.

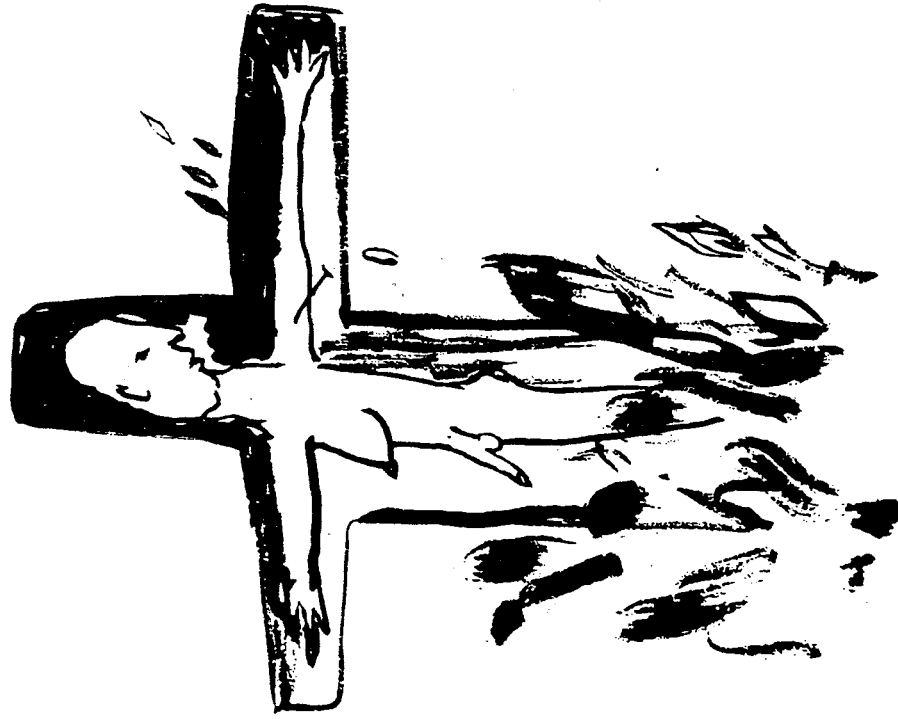
To Nancy Peters, for her guidance and wisdom.

To Dona Ann McAdams, photographer.

To David Hershkovits at *Paper*.

To Art Matters and Anne Marie MacDonald for their support in helping me realize this book.

**WE
KEEP OUR
VICTIMS
READY**



**WE KEEP OUR
VICTIMS READY**

instead of serving, nurturing for pay that most men would never work for. For a waitress there is no pregnancy leave, maternity leave. Bearing a child can mean the end of a career, a woman can be abandoned by society, and the government wants to make it impossible for women to have a fair share along with men. Waitressing, which is shiftwork, doesn't correspond with day-care hours, and a sitter costs more than half a woman's salary. No insurance. No sick leave. No paid vacation. Restaurants are paying below minimum wage. In fact, many upscale hotels and restaurants hire men, not women, to work the dinner shift, which brings as much as three or four times more money. I keep all this to myself because I was not expected to be talented.

I WAS NOT EXPECTED TO BE TALENTED. You see, I was not expected to be talented. That's why I wanted a daughter, who I could encourage, who could lead, who could eventually leave this god damn domestic cycle. But I've been told by the doctors that I could not have anymore children. I worked too hard and long into my pregnancy even though most waitresses stop working when they "show" since most customers find a pregnant woman serving food unappetizing.

Yeah, you tell me I'm supposed to stop thinking about everyone else's problems and start thinking about my own. Well, as soon as I start doing that everyone else's lives collapse and I'm left to pick up the pieces. Just smile, act pretty, open the door, and clean the toilet. You say, "One day at a time." Well, it's a slow death! I'm told to remember those who are less fortunate than myself. Remember the homeless, the poor,

I WAS NOT EXPECTED TO BE TALENTED

I have never been out of the county nor have I ever been to New York City even though my husband goes to work there every day. I am a committed waitress and mother, who looks forward to purchasing a new thousand dollar sofa set. Isn't that what working is for?

Last night I cried till dawn. I cried because I want a daughter but instead I have had three sons. I feel if I have a daughter I can give her chances I never had. This is something perhaps only women would understand—that up to this very day, girls, daughters are killed for being just that. Girls. Daughters. Females. No wonder the entire psyche of women is universally coached to be as desirable as possible, as boring as possible, as cute as possible. Obviously, it's for the survival of the female species.

Yes, maybe my daughter could have the chances I never had. Maybe she could get another kind of job

the suffering. Well, I'm suffering inside! Anytime I see someone caring or sharing, I burn up inside with envy. You know why I only feel comfortable around the collapsed, the broken, the inebriated, the helpless and the poor—'CAUSE THEY LOOK LIKE WHAT I FEEL INSIDE! They look, they look, they look like what I feel inside!

You see, I WAS NOT EXPECTED TO BE TALENTED.
And when I see you
after you beat me
after you degrade me
and you stand on top of me
in some god-awful museum
you say to me,
There are no great women artists!
There are no great women artists!
There are no great women artists!
We are always the exception.
I was not expected to be talented.

Instead of going to church
I walk past the sites in Central Park
where women have been raped and murdered
And think about the men who just walked away
after they performed their deed
And then I think of this country's heroes
and how they treated their women
Like the Kennedys
how they treated their women
Marilyn Monroe—they killed her, left her for dead.
Mary Jo Koppechne—they killed her, abandoned her
like shit.



**I WAS
NOT EXPECTED
TO BE
TALENTED**

And I barf when I see William Hurt—
He thought he was so cool when he played a queen
When he made love to a deaf woman
For the world to see.
But we're used to it.
We can only fuck to get access to power
And if we don't we're raped anyway.
All single women with children
with no health care, no child care, no child support—
We're used to it.
It's a life of Lies
It's a life of Selling Out

And the last time I saw my mother she had a skillet
above my head.

Why should I pretend to stop drinking? For the children? Shit, they're the reason I drink! My so-called daughter hasn't called me in years because of my so-called intoxicated lifestyle, my liquor-motivated decisions. No one cares about me. Why should I care about me? Let's see how low they'll let me fall before they'll pick me up. Besides, I can stop whenever I want. And you know children, as soon as they're in trouble they call on you to bail them out.

I know everything, that's my problem. I'm too smart for this world. My analysis can be so deliberate that I'm known for my psychic pain. Clever, smart, driven pain. I'm always right.

I feel you shiver when you suspect me drinking, but you'll never find my vodka behind the kitty litter box! 'Cause I'm the only one who works around here. No matter how much I drink I always make it to work on time! I'd like for you to feel pain, to feel my pain of

raising a family alone. I don't get any widow benefits. People and family members are scared of me. They don't know what to do with a widow. Everyone blames his life on me. Everyone blames his death on me, even though he pulled the trigger. And the only consoling words I ever receive are, "You're so lucky he didn't kill you and the children too." Or, "You're so lucky he blew his brains out in the garage and not in the living room." Yeah, I'm lucky. I'm so lucky. I hate people who rationalize suffering. I hate people who have to have a reason for everything. They can't just accept the fact that bad things happen to good people because if they did they'd be like me—out of control. Out of control. Yeah, I admit it. I'm out of control.

I deserve the right to drink. No one else rewards me for going to work everyday, for cleaning this damn house. I had five kids, three miscarriages and one abortion. I've been a mother, a whore and a slave. I've been needed, rejected and desired, but never valued by anyone.

Soon my words will slur, my muscles and facial expressions will drop. My head will bob, my sentences will run on and on and on. And I'll tell those god damn repeated stories over and over and over and over again and I'll never stop even though you'll want me to. I'm a living Hell and I intend to keep my devil out.

I live in a state of never getting better

I live in a world of caving in

I live in a life where

pleasure means death

I hate REHAB

I hate DENIAL

I hate Queen Victoria.

Why is it I hate independence?
Independence Day?
I want Dependence Day.
I want to be dependent on drugs, alcohol, and sex
again
I want dependency
This country takes all my independence away
They are trying to take abortion away
and freedom of speech
Because this country spends more time on this stupid
burning flag
When our own citizens' stomachs are burning with
hunger
When people with AIDS are burning with fever
Let me tell you, God has failed
And God is bureaucracy
God is statistics
God is what you make and not what you feel
We've been oppressed
We're only tolerated
And they say we're lucky cause we don't live in China
But they don't even care about the people of China
I want more than a biological opportunity
I want more than a biological opportunity
Listen to me . . .

AUNT MANDY

I grew up to the stories of my Aunt Mandy.
In public it was cancer of the uterus, in private
Aunt Mandy died because she was butchered.
She died from an abortion,
a hatchet job.
She lay dying in the basement.
They found rats eating her insides out,
in fact all of her blood drained out of her.
All of the women bowed their heads
at the story of Aunt Mandy
'Cause they knew it could have been them.
It could have been them.
It was talk amongst women, mothers
mothers
a chance you took to be a mother
to be a woman.
Whatever the reason, the decision
a woman would make the decision knowing

she could die

Because in this world a woman isn't worth much

Sometimes it's a hanger—

sharp, rusty, bleeding

Sometimes it's a knife—

to cut out our soul.

Sometimes it's fire, falling from buildings,

stairs, drowning or suicide.

Like I said, a woman isn't worth much

A woman's life isn't worth much.

And as a child I would sit with the women

whose lives were as mothers

only valued as mothers

grandmothers who remembered when

women couldn't vote

mothers who remembered not having credit

couldn't buy her own car, house or dream

A woman can't be president

But a mother never abandons her children

Children are her life

She'd die for her children

war, famine, plague and drought.

A woman must always be a mother

Children are her life

They never talk about a woman who can't

be a mother, it doesn't matter what else a woman

accomplishes for

A WOMAN MUST ALWAYS BE A MOTHER

A WOMAN MUST ALWAYS BE A MOTHER

A WOMAN MUST ALWAYS BE A MOTHER

'Cause a woman isn't nothing if she isn't a mother

A woman must always be loved but never treated

like her own body is her own.

There is mother earth who creates famine and plenty
calm and storm.

It's my body

It's not Pepsi's body

It's not Nancy Reagan's body

It's not Congress's body

It's not the Supreme Court's body

It's not Cosmopolitan's body

It's not George Bush's ugly-conscience, never-be-
responsible, let-the-world-rot body

It's not Cardinal O'Connor's Catholic church-

homophobic-hate women-hate queers-oppressive-

DEVIL-SATAN-no children body

IT'S NOT YOUR BODY

You know nothing about God—

God is dead

God is death

If he cared about life

He wouldn't kill with AIDS, he wouldn't allow

Chinese students to be executed and die

And be forgotten a year later.

He wouldn't allow Jennifer Levin to die

Yeah, god is death, god is dead

I want my body

But it's never been mine

It's only for creating babies

with a man's name on it

'Cause my name is never good enough

My name is not good enough

'Cause if I use my name its real name is

BASTARD BASTARD BASTARD

I ain't got health insurance

'cause I refuse to take the HIV test
and, baby, I can't afford it.
My body is the government's, let them pay me
My body is paid in full by me.
My body is mine.
It's funny, but in this country if you test positive you
ain't gonna be covered.
It's the sick that need the insurance.
We have no-fault car insurance.
So why not no-fault health insurance?
'Cause we care more about cars than we do people.

One day, I hope to God, Bush
Cardinal O'Connor and the Right-to-Lifers each
returns to life as an unwanted pregnant 13-year-old
girl working at McDonalds at minimum wage.

And she's on the floor of some rat-scum alley
screaming with a rag in her throat
with no anaesthesia
nothing clean

and the doctor is not a real doctor.

Who cares—she's dead

Who cares—she's dead anyway

Who cares—she's already dead

Who cares—she's a goner

Who cares—she's poor trash anyway

To be slaves to our biology

so we aren't successful

so we make the beds and vacuum the carpet

Slaves to biology.

But the abortions will never stop
Aunt Mandy watches us from above
There will always be Aunt Mandys

Who are

BUTCHERED LIKE A PIG

BUTCHERED LIKE A PIG

BUTCHERED LIKE A PIG

and forget God and religion

for all they do is represent fantasies of men

that perpetuate hatred of women and gays

I want a homosexual god

I want a female goddess

I want a lesbian god

I want a Black god

I want a brown goddess

I want a yellow god

I want a red goddess

I want a god in the image of real humans, here, now.

Remember, we have the right to feel

But all I'm hearing is

Are my tits big enough?

and then I puke it all up
I take laxatives
and shit and shit and shit and shit
I'm afraid I shit a long time
for I'm nothing but shit
My life is worth nothing but shit.

I've had my share of love letters.
I'm writing to tell you that I love you but I don't ever
want to see you again.
I never want to talk to you again, hear your voice, smell
you, touch you, hold you.
I want you out of my life. I love you but I want you out
of my life! But remember, I will never love anyone as
much as I love you!

I'm beating you with this belt, this whip, this stick
because I love you.
You talked back to me and your mother. Your bloody
back, your scars, are evidence of my love.
I beat you as a child because I loved you.
The only emotion I ever saw from my parents was
anger.

I'm sleeping with your best friend because
I want to make you jealous
and make you realize that you love me.
I make you jealous because I love you.
I sleep with your best friend because I love you.
I am hurting you because I love you.

I ignore you because I don't want you to know that I
love you till you show me that you love me. I ignore you
because I love you.

ST. VALENTINE'S MASSACRE

I was afraid of being loved—
so I loved being hated
I was afraid of being wanted—
so I wanted to be abused
I was afraid of being alone—
so I alone became afraid
I was afraid of being successful—
so I successfully became nothing
I was afraid of not being in control—
so I lost control of my own life
I was afraid that I was worth nothing—
so I wasted my body to nothing
I was afraid of eating—
so I eat to my heart's content
so I drink to my heart's content
I party to my heart's content
I fuck to my heart's content
(always with rubbers)
I spend to my heart's content
I eat to my heart's content

I tied your hands together as a child because you were touching your penis too much. I tied up your penis because I love you.

I put you down as a child because I didn't want you to expect too much out of life. I ridiculed you, I belittled you because I loved you.

I abused my children sexually because I didn't want someone else who didn't love them to do it. I don't hate them, I love them. I show them love.

I shot myself because I love you.

If I loved myself I'd be shooting you.

I drink myself to death because I never loved myself. I love you. But I love my liquor more.

Yes, I know love. That is the reason I hate the people I love.

My whole life is untangling what was hate and what was love.

My whole life is falling in love with those who hate me while loving me.

I always fall in love with the cruel, the sadistic

For it's better to feel abuse than to feel nothing at all. It's better to feel abuse than to feel nothing at all.

In commemoration of St. Valentine's Day Massacre that killed violently sixty years ago today America commemorates this event by killing thousands of its citizens.

The first plan of death will be called
THE YEAR OF THE CHILD

—all policeman will use infants and toddlers as bullet-proof vests

—all six-year-old children will be issued guns upon entering school

—all ten-year-old children will be required to sell crack to sponsor after school programs because of limited government funding.

We are happy to report the plan is working.

Other forms of death are the following:

freezing, starvation, homelessness, AIDS, lead poisoning, poor healthcare, no drug rehab programs, no free needles, AIDS, no prenatal care, child abuse, rat bites, polluted lakes rivers seas oceans and air, toxic waste, AIDS.

Grab your dick

grab your maleness.

Girls, grab it.

Girls, grab your energy
fucking pussy

tie bandages to your pussies.

I like to cut off the ears of males, he said.

I like to cut off naughty male bits
string foreskin as necklaces.

Sure, I've eaten a doggie out

'Cause I'm a man. Nothing better.

I'll eat dog pussy 'cause I'm a pet lover.

I'll eat chicken hearts

bite snake heads.

I'm a military kind of guy.

I saw a guy shoot himself
happened to be my dad.

I saw a man go berserk
happened to be myself.
I saw a child cut herself with razor blades
never knew her name.
I saw a guy beat up his wife
just for the hell of it.

'Cause I'm a man—a man doesn't have friends like a
woman does.
We don't tell our feelings like women do.
We don't show our feelings like women do.
The only feelings we show are no no feelings at all.
Ain't got a friend, but I got a drinking partner.
Ain't got a confidante but I got a hunting buddy.
Ain't got a shoulder to cry on, but I got a shoulder to
carry my gun.

Everything smelled like an adult diaper
Everything smelled like an adult diaper
The whole world was rotting away.
Everyone's soul was rotting
Everyone's heart was decaying
Everyone's spirit was dead.
But the old people knew what was going on.
They say, hate's got a bad smell. You can tell whenever
it enters a room.
But there were some people who weren't smelling bad
Like good hearted ones
Like people with good feelings
Like people with soul
Hate got a stink about it
Hate got its own type of odor
Old people know.
You might be rich, baby, got everything you want

but you got a stink, baby, you got your kind of odor
Greed's got its own kind of smell
Hate's got its own kind of smell.

At fourteen her white baby was kidnapped by the Nazis.

It isn't your penis that gives me pleasure, it's my clitoris, she'd say as she masturbated and sucked her arm and pretended she was sucking her own breast.

You said that you don't lift your son for the potty at night. When he wets the bed, what do you do?

I BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF HIM!

When your son cries?

I BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF HIM!

Berlin, 1938: The campaign toward the elimination of Jews and the handicapped intensified.

November 10, 1938: Night Of Broken Glass—Jewish shops were demolished, synagogues set on fire.

Germany, 1938: Jews were not allowed to own property, have businesses and live in certain areas. Civil rights were taken away. This was the beginning, a movement toward setting up death camps, ovens for the Jewish people.

America, Now: Many people think that junkies and people with AIDS deserve to die. Women who are dependent on the state should be sterilized because they are unproductive citizens, say the zealots. In principle we are not very different. We keep our victims ready.

What is our form of 1938 Nazism? Who are our zealots with evil ways?

Our Christian holymen preach as if all homosexuals will burn in hell.

Our politicians allow the homeless to rot on the pavement.

WE ARE THE OVEN

Hitler likes to have Eva Braun shit on him. That's what Eva likes, too. Adolph wants Eva to take a big, brown, hot steamy shit on him. Shit in my mouth. I want a blonde Arian shit in the Führer's mouth now.

The Führer has a fear of pubic hair. It looks like sperm. I don't like pubes, that's why I like to fuck big, hairy ears.

Don't be alarmed, I have a small penis and Eva has very large ears and the Führer never comes.

The Führer's first dream was of attacking his mother's womb and destroying his brothers and sisters. He blamed his disturbing dreams on being delivered by ice tongs.

At eight she was molested by her brother
At ten she was fingered by her daddy

At twelve she was beaten by her mother

Many believe HIV carriers should be branded like those in concentration camps.

Many believe that by giving IV drug users clean needles we are giving them the wrong message.

**WE KILL BY NOT DOING ANYTHING
AND ALLOW DEATH FOR NO APPARENT REASON.**

We have our own SS—the 700 Club.

We have our own Himmler, our own Goebbels—William Buckley, Patrick Buchanan.

Evans and Novak—our conservative columnists who maliciously condemn artists for expressing themselves.

Our religious fanatics who try to destroy and distort the artist, the gay, the lesbian voice—Wildmon, Robertson and Helms.

Now they can't kill the commie

So they are out to kill the soul of America—me and you.

IT'S JUST THAT OUR OVENS ARE AT A SLOWER SPEED.

IT'S JUST THAT OUR OVENS ARE AT A SLOWER SPEED.

We keep our victims ready.

These religious fanatics want only a voice that is their voice

Not a voice of diversity, a voice of difference, a voice for choice

A voice of strength for togetherness.

You see the wall is beginning to crumble for white male power.

They will have to share the power, share the planet, and they don't want to.

If they could still have slavery they would.

But I cry at night knowing that someone is dying. Remember: you can still die because of the color of your skin.

We have our fascist state, our Auschwitz, our racist attacks—

Howard Beach, Bensonhurst, Tawana Brawley, and never forget Michael Stewart, although they want us to.

We keep our victims ready.

We don't have time for statistics

We don't have time for studies

We don't have time for presidential inquiries.

People are homeless, hungry.

Bodies are walked over in Grand Central Station.

Trump would rather build the world's largest building than provide the world's largest low income housing project.

Some folks who call themselves Christians

Would like to put all homosexuals and people with AIDS in concentration camps.

It's not surprising since America had concentration camps for Japanese Americans, where people went insane or died.

We keep our victims ready.

We whites condemn other races for not being like us.

Thank god they are not like us.

And in the coming years, after 1938 in Germany

Music would be made of

murdered childrens' bones.

Exhaled breath burnt with martyrs' cries.

Lampshades, from human skins.

IT ONLY TOOK A ZEALOT AND A FOLLOWER

I'll never forgive Adolph Hitler and the Nazis.

There are some things that I'll never forgive—

I'll never forgive Robert Chambers for committing
murder

I'll never forgive Cardinal O'Connor

I'll never forgive the whites in power in South Africa

I'll never forgive our constitution for including slavery

I'll never forgive our constitution for including slavery

I'll never forgive our constitution for including slavery

I'll never forgive us for stealing this land from

the Indians

There are just some things I won't forgive.

We are the oven

Our homeless, the victims

and our narrowed American minds

wish to exterminate people with AIDS

instead of exterminating the disease

Wish to exterminate the poor, the suffering, the dependent

We'll happily pay for their deaths but never their lives

No, we aren't decadent

We are violent, cruel and deliberately unjust.

What's at the end of this night?

Oh, I try and come here to have a good time.

'Cause outside it's only a bad time.

What's at the end of this long night?

Where people can enjoy their sexualities.

Where the sick and suffering are comforted.

What's at the end of this long long night?

Where the homeless are housed.

Where humanity is more valuable than money.

Where the soul, the heart and mind meet.

Where every empty hand is held.

WHY CAN'T THIS VEAL CALF WALK?

You sold my soul before I could speak.

Raped by an uncle at eight

Known addiction all my life

Let me dance for you

My daddy was a preacher

preached the bible

beat my mama

I sell my babies

I sell my bodies.

To keep 'em from stealing the women had to strip and
had to work naked.

It looks bad, but to me it looks normal.

Why can't this veal calf walk?

'Cause she's kept in a wooden box which she can't turn
around in. She's fed some antibiotic-laced formula.

and she sleeps in her own diarrhea,
chained in a darkened building, immobilized and sick
and then we kill her and eat her.

Him hurting me is not my fault.

Your hurting me is not my fault.

After I was raped by my doctor

I didn't want to be close to anyone.

I cut off my hair

I cut off my breasts

I cut off my hips

I cut off my buttocks

nothing revealing, nothing tight
neutered.

You say I got what I deserved

I let the doctor examine my crotch

My legs were in the stirrups pinned down

And you gave me a shot

I couldn't see you but I could feel you. I couldn't do
nothing.

Everyone always told me I couldn't do nothing my
whole life

Just seeing the veal calf now.

Everyone says I deserved it—

I'm a hussy, I'm a tramp

I'm a whore

'Cause I wear lipstick?

work at night?

and drink bourbon straight?

I'm a preacher girl

Daddy, teach me right.

When I said NO
you didn't listen to me.
When I said NO
You fucked me anyway
When I said NO
I meant no
When I said NO
I wasn't playing hard to get
And I never meant yes
You raped me
I took a shower, a hot one
but I couldn't get clean
his sweat his semen
his skin smells near
Another bath another shower
my whole body was covered with hickeys
I just cried, I just cried.
When I reported it
Policeman said, "Hey, slut, you led him on."
The doctor cleaned me up, stuffed me with gauze
I bled three days with the morning-after pill.
And when they returned my empty wallet
Mr. Policeman said, "If you don't suck me I'll blow your
brains out."

GET ME USED TO IT! GET ME USED TO IT!
But I can't. I want something better for my sisters my
daughters. And everyday I hear them laughing at me
from street corners. Sizing me up. They don't say it,
though, when I walk down the street with a man 'cause
then I'm his property.
And the menfolk say as I pass—
I prefer small women
I like to dominate women

I enjoy the conquest of sex
Some women are asking for it
I get excited when a woman struggles
I'd like to make it with her
I hope I score tonight.

And when the last man said his violence
I knew I couldn't do anything to them
so I'd do something to me.
I went and took a knife and I cut out my hole
but it just became a bigger hole
and all the men just laughed and said
She's too big to fuck now
And I felt relief, but then they said,
We can all fuck her at the same time.
But I was bleeding so they left me alone
Men don't touch women when they bleed
It's unclear, unless they cause the bleeding.

And then I hoped I would die but of course I didn't
I heard a sound, a whimper
and I realized I was in the same room as the veal calf
And veal calf walked over to me
Veal calf limps. Veal calf stinks.
And I look into veal calf's eyes
and I know veal calf's story
And I said I was sorry for her
And she said I got to keep trying
And she asked why I was there, too
And I spoke my story:

When the big man like a big daddy like a big uncle, big
uncle whom I loved, when the cop, the teacher, the
country doctor, the date, the neighbor, the authority

man whom I trusted and respected visited me in my own bed, broke into my own house, lived with me, on my own street in my own car, looked at me, grabbed me, mangled and hurt me, slapped me and pushed me, touched my privacy, destroyed my feminine instinct, entered and took and hurt and screams and bruises, new colors on my skin . . .
Whenever I see a rainbow in the sky I only see an angel being raped.

When I said NO I meant No

But you did it anyway

When you were gone your body, your stink remained
Tried to wash you wash you off me, my body, my skin in me in me in me

Wash it off me, still not gone, scrub it off, burn you off me

Try to kill me, I don't like me, 'cause I smell like you.

I'm hurt, abused, I slice me.

I burn me. I hit me. I want this body to die. I want to be old and undesired.

I want my body back

I want my personhood back—

society, culture and history
media, entertainment and art

I'm more than a hole

But you hate us because we can have babies and you can't.

I'm more than a hole

But you envy us because we can have children who love us unconditionally.

I'm more than a set of tits

But if I don't have the right size for you

I'm never enough for you

So, we make implants and surgery just for you.
We create a woman that never existed.

It's survival of the female species.

And I'm more than a pair of legs

But if they don't do more than walk
I'm a dog.

If I nurse my babies and my tits sag

And I'm told you won't desire me

You can't be a mother and a whore

No one loves a smart woman

I'm more than a piece of ass, a good fuck and lay

For the woman—our society only relates and values you for your desirability.

The Woman Is Private Property.



departure

DEPARTURE

Tell me what to say when I visit
And my sick friend says
When am I going to get better?
And all I can say is
If we could make you better we would.

And your lover says
I want you to find someone after I die
And you say
Don't talk like that
Let's not think about it
I'll never forget you.
Just hold your lover's hand
And keep holding it
But it's too weak
And that hand is inside you now.

Your friend says

I'm going to die but I'm not ready to die.
And you say

Well, even though you're young you've led a full life.

Or, there is a time for everything

Or, it's not easy for you now

Or, just hold your friend's hand

look into your lover's eyes

and think to yourself

GOD IS DEATH

And the friend tries to make you feel better and says

I'm going to get better, aren't I?

I'm going to walk right out of here.

I can feel it.

And you hold your friend's hand

harder HARDER

And in time your friend says

I see the light

I'm going to die now

I'm going to die now.

And after they've died, there's something in me that
dies. Something is always lost.

I have something more in common with
the other side than with this side.

And I think about ending it all

but I don't because someone else needs me.

And I do different things, different rituals—

the friend who is left behind, the widower, the widow,
the lover who is left behind.

For some, the passing to the other side means
we burn, we burn, we burn their clothes

'cause we are cold inside without you.

Sometimes we destroy their memories because our

lives now mean nothing.

We give everything away that was theirs.

'cause we have been giving and giving and giving
and we want to continue

that lost continuation, that thread, that same feeling.

That feeling that if we become as good, as good,

as good

maybe we could make you better

and maybe if we keep on giving

we'll get you back one day.

When you were holding the departed

you were whispering in their breath

You smelled that last breath

You tasted that last breath

You feel you failed, and you became mother, father

You became the only connection

with the outside world.

When you were holding the body—

we know we still have to bid the soul farewell.

And sometimes the spirit stays for days—

scared and tired from bodies that wouldn't give up.

Lives that had to make it, be the best.

Some souls deny death while the living deny life.

At first you're gentle—

Release, child, release into clear blue, into the soft
world of fragrances, of musk.

Become the first words of a child, become the first
feelings of love.

Become the reasons for me to go on living.

or I'll go on dying.

And you know it's not over

for you still must scatter ashes

at some place which, as you pass by in the future, will
make you relive the loss all over again.

You laugh, too.

He planned it that way.

Sometimes you place them in coffins with gifts and
charms and talismans.

Beds of silk and brocades, and smells of oriental
jasmine.

But once the coffin door is closed

you don't sleep with doors closed ever again.

Your sides where his arms held you

like two spoons as you slept now ache.

When you hear sand and earth shoveled

you relive the saddest time again

and then you are empty.

And so you run home and open his closet

and wrap your arms around his clothes,

you take all the sleeves

and wrap them around your neck,

and you breathe your lover's smell

and you cry and cry.

All the lights flicker in the house,

butterflies follow you and sit on your shoulder,

birds fly into windowpanes,

mirrors shatter and you realize

you've lost your most prized possession.

Not a ring, a token of his love

but him.

His initials appear on license plates

on cars in front of you.

He was always so good at leaving messages.

THE BLACK SHEEP

After a funeral someone said to me

You know I only see you at funerals

it's been three since June—

been five since June for me.

He said I've made a vow—

I only go to death parties if I know someone

before they were sick.

Why?

'cause—'cause—'cause I feel I feel so

sad 'cause I never knew their lives

and now I only know their deaths

And because we are members of the

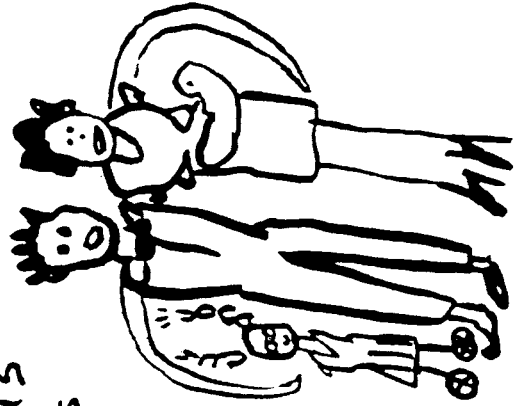
Black Sheep family.

We are sheep with no shepherd

We are sheep with no straight and narrow

We are sheep with no meadow

There is
always
one
black
sheep
in
every
family



We are sheep who take the dangerous pathway through
the mountain range
to get to the other side of our soul.
We are the black sheep of the family
called Black Sheep folk.
We always speak our mind
appreciate differences in culture
believe in sexual preferences
believe in no racism
no sexism
no religionism
and we'll fight for what we believe
but usually we're pagans.
There's always one in every family.
Even when we're surrounded by bodies
we're always alone.
You're born alone
and you die alone—
written by a black sheep.
You can't take it with you—
written by a former black sheep.

Black Sheep folk look different from their families—
It's the way we look at the world.
We're a quirk of nature—
We're a quirk of fate.
Usually our family, our city,
our country never understands us—
We knew this from when we were very young
that we weren't meant to be understood.
That's right, that's our job.
Usually we're not appreciated until the next generation.
That's our life, that's our story.
Usually we're outcasts, outsiders in our own family.

Don't worry—get used to it.
My sister says—I don't understand you!
But I have many sisters with me tonight.
My brother says—I don't want you!
But I have many brothers with me here tonight!
My mother says—I don't know how to love
someone like you!
You're so different from the rest!
But I have many mamas with me here tonight!
My father says—I don't know how to hold you!
But I have many many daddies with me here tonight!

We're related to people we love who can't say
I love you Black Sheep daughter
I love you Black Sheep son
I love you outcast, I love you outsider.
But tonight we love each other
That's why we're here—
to be around others like ourselves—
So it doesn't hurt quite so much.
In our world, our temple of difference
I am at my loneliest when I have something to celebrate
and try to share it with those I love
but who don't love me back.
There's always silence at the end of the phone.
There's always silence at the end of the phone.

Sister—congratulate me!
NO I CAN'T YOU'RE TOO LOUD.
Grandma—love me!
NO I DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOVE
SOMEONE LIKE YOU.
Sometimes the Black Sheep is a soothsayer,
a psychic, a magician of sorts.

Black Sheep see the invisible—
We know each other's thoughts—
We feel fear and hatred.

Sometimes some sheep are chosen to be sick
to finally have average, flat, boring people say
I love you.
Sometimes Black Sheep are chosen to be sick
so families can finally come together and say
I love you.
Sometimes some Black Sheep are chosen to die
so loved ones and families can finally say—
Your life was worth living
Your life meant something to me!
Black Sheeps' destinies are not necessarily in having
families, having prescribed existences—
like the American Dream.
Black Sheeps' destinies are to give meaning in life
to be angels
to be conscience
to be nightmares
to be actors in dreams.

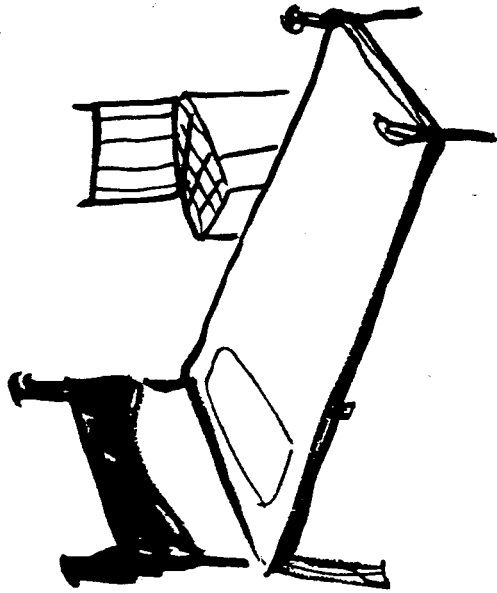
Black Sheep can be family to strangers
We can love each other like MOTHER
FATHER SISTER BROTHER CHILD
We understand universal love
We understand unconditional love
We feel a unique responsibility, a human responsibility
for feelings for others.
We can be all things to all people
We are there at 3:30 AM when you call
We are here tonight 'cause I just can't go to sleep.

I have nowhere to go.
I'm a creature of the night—
I travel in your dreams—
I feel your nightmares—

We are your holding hand
We are your pillow, your receiver
your cuddly toy.
I feel your pain.
I wish I could relieve you of your suffering.
I wish I could relieve you of your pain.
I wish I could relieve you of your destiny.
I wish I could relieve you of your fate.
I wish I could relieve you of your illness.
I wish I could relieve you of your life.
I wish I could relieve you of your death.

But it's always

Silence at the end of the phone.
Silence at the end of the phone.
Silence at the end of the phone.



The End

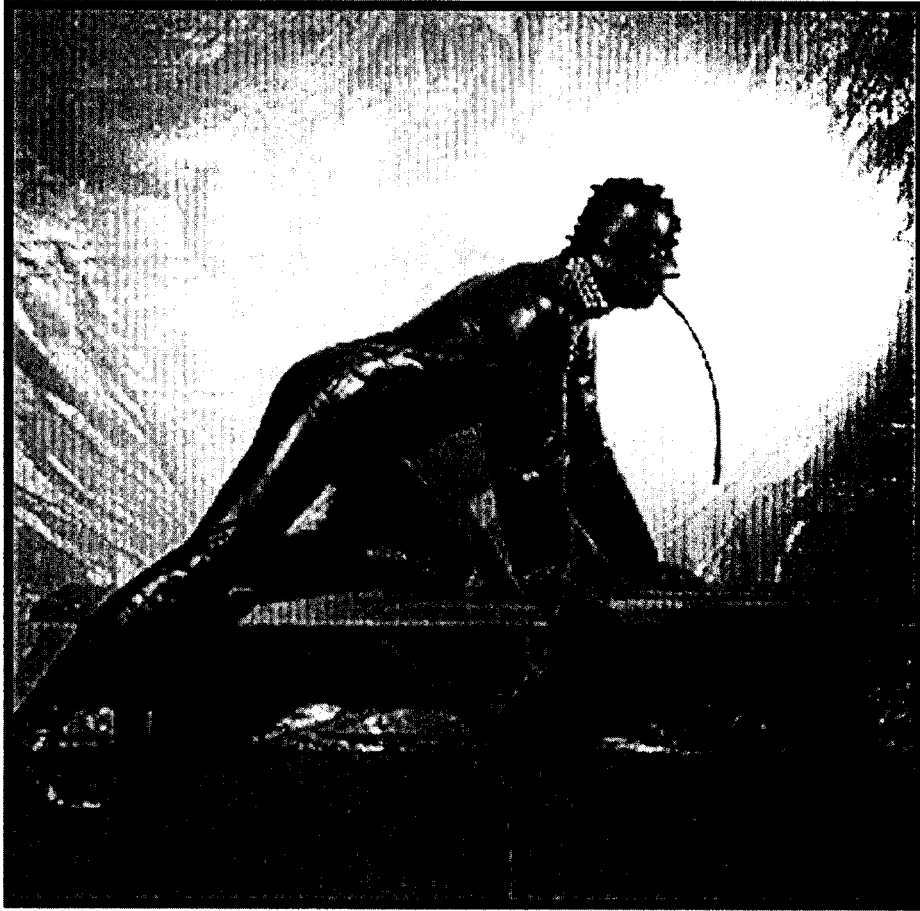


Figure 1. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Joe* (1978)



Figure 2. Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ* (1989)



Figure 3. Karen Finley at home



Figure 4. Karen Finley, performance still from *We Keep our Victims Ready* (1989)



Figure 5. Karen Finley, performance still from *We Keep our Victims Ready* (1989)



Figure 6. Karen Finley, performance still from *We Keep our Victims Ready* (1989)