

Karen Finley

THE ART OF ACTIVISM AND CEREMONY

By Christopher Busa

KAREN FINLEY RETURNED to town last fall after a decade-long absence, thrilling her audience at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) with bone-vibrating passion in readings from her reissued classic *Shock Treatment*, published by City Lights Publishers in a twenty-fifth-anniversary expanded edition of her performance monologues, essays, and poems. Certainly, her Provincetown audience was greatly moved by her performance, as she spoke her own words with such passion that she seemed to be experiencing them for the first time. Can we call her something of an actress? When she was on the cover of *Provincetown Arts* in 1996, we quoted Finley's insightful distinction between acting and performance: "What I do is ceremony. It would be acting if someone else could do my performances."

Perhaps this isolates the crucial difference between acting and performance art. An actor plays a role that could be performed by other actors. Finley is also not impersonating, in the way Tina Fey might channel Sarah Palin; rather, she is revealing her deeper self, in the service of creating a persona that is unique in the moment of expression. While performing, she slips into a trance, buoyed by the eddying currents of her surging emotions, voicing the pleas of victims worldwide. She is rather Whitman-like in containing multitudes within herself. A performance artist is ceremonial in the tribal manner of a spiritual shaman, invoking sacred powers in an intimate setting for general social good. This is also a type of performance she listened to in the sixties, particularly at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where the speeches shocked her into thinking about how politicians were actually performance artists, expressing their personal mission to the masses. This was a way to transform politics into an art form.

Finley visited Provincetown for a string of summers in the nineties. In our interview in 1996, we discussed the NEA controversy that made her a national figure; now all that is in the past. When she returned to town from New York last fall, she had just performed her current work, *Unicorn Gratitude Mystery*, at the Laurie Beechman Theatre on West Forty-second Street.

Her first impression upon renewed acquaintance with Provincetown: "The light behind the landscape, the water—it's the same. I saw a beautiful moon last night. The brine air. That's the same. But I'm a different person. I'm older. I'm looking with memory and feeling the same feeling."

Finley told me that she got a relaxed feeling when she saw same-sex couples walking, hand in hand, down Commercial Street. She remarked that we in Provincetown lived in a zone free of censorship, which is palpable in the ease of people comfortable with each other.



"He's Our President, He's Our Problem" performed by Karen Finley at La MaMa, February 2017

PHOTO BY CAROLINA RESTREPO

A big change in Finley's career came when she started to teach regularly at New York University in 2000, becoming a professor of art and public policy at the Tisch School of the Arts. "I think I am suited for this," she said. "In whatever class I teach, basically, it's about that intersection between art and society—how art can influence cultural changes. It may not be a class on performance, but on gender or cultural activism. I also teach research—how to prepare a point of view in order to create a social movement or participate in a social movement with your artwork."

Perhaps Finley's fiercest driving force is her raw passion to inspire her audience to actual action. A lot of aesthetic theory insists that art is non-kinetic: it doesn't force a person to do anything. But activist art, a relatively new thing, aims at stirring social action, demands a shared

community experience that can develop into spectacle as art.

"Here," Finley told me, when we spoke about activist art after her reading, "I would have to disagree with you about whether this is a new art form. My latest piece happens in a cabaret setting, looking at the election process and how that political stage offers a safe place for aggression in manners. A yoga mat could serve as a safe place for aggression, as well as other spaces that are supposed to be sacred or spiritual."

I mentioned that I've thought a lot about how society creates privileged spaces—the psychiatrist's couch, the lover's bed, the boxing ring—spaces that society sanctions. I asked her to elaborate on how she perceives the importance of space in terms of activism and art.

"I'm saying that a cabaret, a space where you can have disobedience, can be a political space

as well. Art happened on the walls of the caves of Lascaux, in the cadences of the great Negro spirituals. These are forms of political activism. These models of protest, the basic impulse to voice oneself, have existed since the beginning of time. To confront, escape confinement, redirect society. I also wanted to speak about the difference between acting and performance. You mentioned the psychiatrist's office, the lover's bed—we are performing while on our job, wearing costumes. I come from a visual arts background, and I spent some time looking at paintings at PAAM while I was here. All of those paintings were created by individual artists, and they are not copying someone else's painting. That can happen within Conceptual art, but these are moments that matter, like a poet writing a poem, a painter painting a painting, a performer performing. When I perform, I am not trying to be someone else—it's not even about me being me. It's about a moment in events happening in time."

It seems clear to me that when Finley is actually performing, she appears to have entered an altered state of consciousness—something I would call a "creative trance." Her voice changes. Her stage voice has a cultivated Southern accent, immediately unlike the Midwestern accent she has retained since her upbringing in Illinois. Her projection is bone-rattling. Her voice explodes in staccato rants, and rolling, long, rumbling thunder, like Whitman's own phrase-after-phrase listing of injustices in his free verse diary, *Specimen Days*. Finley's voice change seems to signal a psychic shift, in which she is granted unfettered, direct access to a private channel. It seems she needs the occasion of performance to inspire the performer.

At the PAAM event, during questions from the audience, Finley was asked, "How do you channel your rage?"

Finley responded, "You turn your pain into compassion."

In *Unicorn Gratitude Mystery*, Finley plays Donald Trump in drag, satirizing his Hollywood beehive hairstyle and wearing a blue suit the color of Monica Lewinsky's dress. An absurdly long red tie hangs from his neck like a noose, draped all the way to his knees, the material selected to be both limp yet surprisingly springy, and calling subtle attention to the vanity of our country's leader. Her monologue comments on Trump's appearance, but also goes deeper into the psychological and political dynamics of the persona:

I am afraid you will find out about my vulnerability—my hair helmet is my vulnerability—my pussy, my page boy, my spit curl, my teased hornet's nest, my hive as the queen bee, as Twiggy, as Eva Gabor in a mink coat, as Debbie Harry on the town eating at the diner on 23rd. I am with her. I am Madonna riding the elevator at Danceteria and later in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. I want to be Madonna.

excerpt from "The Black Sheep"

We are sheep with no shepherd—
We are sheep with no straight and narrow
We are sheep with no meadow
We are sheep who take the dangerous
pathway thru 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—

from *Shock Treatment*

Don't you find me beautiful? . . .

Let me be the woman in the pantsuit—
Let me woman up
Let me be hysterical
I am with her
Who's wearing the blue dress now?
Who's wearing the blue dress now?

Finley discussed this performance: "I want to go back to the issue of rage and pain, which I think are very different. Pain is something that you hold on to. Rage is something expressed, an action. I try to funnel that into my creative process. My cabaret piece *Unicorn Gratitude Mystery* takes place in a space much like the cabarets in Provincetown, safe spaces, where you can be laughing or impersonating. That's what I'm doing. I'm doing drag. I'm taking on a male persona. What I'm showing in this work is a Hype 360 of the feminine component of the presentation. Trump is preoccupied with his hair, and cruel toward people like Rosie O'Donnell and other women. He is fascinated with the blondes he has around him—and then he has this preoccupation with his own hair. It becomes a female beehive, like the hair of Grace Kelly, Carrie Underwood, Britney Spears. He's presenting the female on PMS. Hillary has a space where she is not being accused of being a woman out of control. It's a dark performance. Donald is taking on the role after Bill, thinking about returning to their shared bedroom. Then there's the blue dress of Monica Lewinsky. We are seeing these psychosexual politics between Trump, Bill, and Hillary."

I asked Karen if she knew how Donald combs his hair, since I could never unravel which parts go which way.

"Exactly," she said. "Those are the questions you would ask a woman. I am very interested in people's stories that are related to their psychic drives, in terms of speaking power and healing power, especially the losses in their lives. Obama lost his father. Clinton lost his father. Reagan's father was an alcoholic. There's Bush and Bush. I was thinking about the politeness of polite society and the aggressiveness and hostility within those spaces, in passive-aggressive manners, in the way we present ourselves.

"I would like to talk about abstraction, because I think abstraction is very political. I feel my work is both experimental and abstract. Abstraction is political precisely because it refuses to have a linear narrative. Abstraction allows the audience to project onto the work, and I think abstraction comes out of war, an expression of war, the bursting, and the destruction. There is a reason so many men bond together in the experience of battle, why there is a camaraderie."

Therefore, Finley told me, "My goal is to feminize the planet." ❏

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Robert Longo, Sheba, 2006. Collection of Damon Gorrie & Stephanie Watson

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