

Body Staging(s) on the Margins of Feminist Politics and the Avant-garde: Reviewing Carolee Schneemann and Karen Finley

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Abstract

We have come quite a long way from the 1960s, when, perhaps, for the first time, performance artists staged upon and over their own bodies the historical drama of gender, sexuality, and race. Feminist performers, in particular, have been deploying and bending speech, gesture, gaze, movement patterns, as well as the ambient space, in a politically and aesthetically driven attempt to challenge established ways of perceiving, knowing, and being-in the (female) body and the world. Two of the most provocative artists and performers of the contemporary era, whose artistic trajectories share substantial conceptual and methodological territory, namely, Carolee Schneemann and Karen Finley, have fused verbal and performance registers in performative acts in which the visceral, material, erotic body literally becomes the stage and the artwork, thus teasing daringly the slippery, porous, and much-contested borders between art and pornography. The mytho-erotic performances of Schneemann and the overtly literal, wickedly-humorous, and, at times, self-effacing exorcistic trance monologues of Finley have engendered a number of disparate responses, as many laudatory as condemnatory. Located in the margins of feminist politics and the avant-garde, in-between the “alternative” and the mainstream, the two performance artists have, despite—or even because of—their notoriety, contributed to the forging of a new vision of art that is confrontational and overtly political. Their vision is concerned with denouncing histories of female victimization, with interrupting, even when flirting with, the domination of our lives by commodity culture, and with commenting on art’s transformative relation to lived experience.

Keywords: explicit body performance, Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley, feminism, avant-garde

The rise of the counter-culture in the second half of the twentieth century was also accompanied by the emergence of explicit body theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. Dramatic nudity and the staging of sexual acts for public viewing were seen by many as constitutive of a new and necessary alternative to conventional drama. The erotic and even obscene theatre would act out an intellectual position that endorsed elements in human life hitherto suppressed. As a reconsideration of eroticism in avant-garde theatre gained in bravado within scholarly circles, performers and audiences were pushed to the boundaries of excess in “eroplays” exhibiting unflinching eroticism, sexual frankness, and cool defiance of limits. Performance art, loosely distinguished by some from “avant-garde and/or experimental drama, both of which usually rely on some form of narrative, however unconventional, to tell stories,” welcomed the erotic as an object of performance and went on throughout the 1960s and 1970s to connect pornographic impulses with cutting-edge drama (Slade 452-53). Initially within the contours of “happenings,” which “frequently fostered mild sexual contact, nudity, and obscene language,” male and female performers explored contiguous aspects of the erotic body (453). Increasingly dominated by female artists, from the early 1960s onwards, explicit performance art adopted “the classic posture of pornography, which historically has been to subvert established conventions, values, and tastes,” in order to violate taboos and undermine dominant ideologies—even if it sometimes seemed to victimize women performance artists by the same sexist syndromes they were attempting to deconstruct by appearing nude or in explicit postures (454). In the decades that followed, explicit body performers, of which Carolee Schneemann and Karen Finley are two of the most discussed, would inhabit this liminal space between art and porn; a space transversed by underground (in-appropriate) and popular (appropriate) mainstreams and vanguards.

Throughout the 1970s, women performance artists, many of them advocates of feminism, sought to strategically break down artistic and bodily protocols, claiming the right to self-representation and attempting to expose the omissions and absences perpetrated within and by the dominant, male-authored visual tradition.

At a time when the agenda of feminist art practice and theory was re-formulated towards a self-conscious engagement with and representation of a diverse range of subject positions, feminist performers tried to effect an intervention within patriarchal culture and its structures of male and female sexuality and pleasure through the proliferation of female-authored visual images featuring the female body nude and sexual. Although, interpretation of images “cannot be guaranteed and feminist art that draws on the female body is open to a range of interpretive possibilities, including reappropriation into the voyeuristic structures of the [patriarchal] tradition of the female nude,” this risk, as will shall see, “may be seen as productive,” at least of new “possible viewing positions for its audience” (Nead 61). Insofar as the feminist performance art of that timeframe worked to “question the basis of existing aesthetic norms and values whilst also extending the possibilities of those codes and offering alternative and progressive representations of female identity,” it could be positively argued that it was necessarily deconstructive, even if, at times, ambiguously so (62). It marked the beginnings of an era when female subjectivity, inextricably bound to and not apart or beyond the body, would be reaffirmed as neither impossible nor similarly victimizing as the typifying, normative male one. Structured over and around the female body, the politicization of aesthetics and aestheticization of politics that it enunciated functioned as antidotes against the noxious effects of circulating regressive, masculinist consensus myth(s) of all sorts, but especially against those that included the female body only to contain, harness, and profit from it. As both practice and discourse feminist performance art produced ways of acting and thinking that effectively valued aspects of the human condition and experience systematically excluded both from vociferous mainstreams and from male-dominated, myopic vanguards.

Thus, feminist performance artists of the 1970s, of which Carolee Schneemann is, albeit debatably for some, a representative example, oriented their art towards a host of topics including (sexual) violence, menstruation, sadomasochism, and fetishization; they seized a “vulgar” form, deconstructed it, and reconstructed it as a new form of discourse. Schneemann’s body language and experiments with sexual shock point emphatically to the fact that she brought together in her work the strand of counter-culture practice and that of feminist praxis, creating new and progressive meanings for them both as she was doing so. Within a period of approximately two decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s—a period when a particularly significant shift in feminist cultural practice and the representation of the (female) body can be identified—other performance artists, such as Karen Finley, attempted to undermine cultural phobias about woman’s bodies and sexuality, to combat sexism, homophobia, and racism, and to break the male gaze by returning control of women’s bodies to themselves (Nead 63). This politics of subversion become “even more emphatic in performances created by a number of women in the 1980s,” in whose work the celebratory notion of the female body of the 1970s is replaced by an exploration of the obscene body and of transgressive aspects of female sexuality (69). The element of transgression in Finley’s crafted and staged performances is intended to have specific “consequences for personal and social consciousness” and to progressively bridge ruptures between women with considerably different views of sexuality (Slade 456).

Opposing obscenity and pornography by utilizing the very ways people construct the two, Finley’s work accommodates a paradox that can only be comprehended if one considers the fundamentally paradoxical character of both culture and pornography: the fact that they can as easily offend *and* educate, degrade *and* exalt. Ultimately, and in spite of their all but neglectable differences, a number of shared, recurrent themes undergird Schneemann’s and Finley’s work and create conceptual and methodological affinities between the two artists: they both “critically engage ways of seeing, specifically perspectivalism, which has inscribed women as given to be seen but not as given to see”; they both tug “at the plumb lines marking bodies for gender, race, and class in order to expose their link with representational structures of desire in commodity capitalism”; and they are both insolent towards precedent terms of avant-garde art transgression, as they raise “questions about modernist ‘shock value’ and the particular fascination with a ‘primitive,’ sexual, and excremental body” (Schneider 3). “At base,” the explicit body in both Schneemann’s and Finley’s work “interrogates socio-cultural understandings of the ‘appropriate’ and/or the appropriately transgressive—particularly who gets to mark what (in)appropriate where, and, who has the right to appropriate what where—keeping in mind the double meaning of the work ‘appropriate’” (3). The violent and sexual embodied scenarios of the two do not only engage in a playful tug-of-war between sublimation and desublimation of the “human” but prove the two pulls as immanent to the human condition betraying efforts at settling the game as suspiciously insecure.

Carolee Schneemann’s work constitutes a definitive, luminous point upon a philosophical continuum that insists upon the phenomenal authority of the body.

She has expressed her philosophical standpoint with a potent mix of erudite theory and sixties sensibility calling for the marriage of art (object) and action (body). The influence of Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty and of Wilhelm Reich's sublimating psychological theories of human sexuality and orgasm on Schneemann can be detected less easily in her neo-dada-inflected, early paintings and far more neatly in her later experimental compositions, films, and explicit body performances. Firmly embedded within discourses on the body, sexuality, and gender, Schneemann's mature work ritualizes a blending of ocular muscularity, Abstract Expressionist gesture, and the excesses of the unconscious. Although she has worked in a variety of media throughout her career, Schneemann has not only been more closely associated with feminist explicit body art but has also gained notoriety for her intermedia performances, in which her body literally becomes part of the artwork and in which the sensuous flesh is celebrated in all its aspects. In these performances the artist implodes preexisting forms of social and political critique, instead of employing them to structure her work, all the while playing with notions of sexual decorum in a radically scandalous manner. Using her body as a pleasurable weapon—a missile she sends into a repressive culture to blow it apart—in her vanguard expressions, Schneemann has managed to achieve an iconic status in her artistic milieu. In spite of the fact that, since the late 1960s, she found her erotic aesthetic repeatedly dismissed by militant feminists, who found it an insufficient response to feminist issues, and herself officially excommunicated from the Fluxus group in the mid-1960s, her visionary art continued to make explicit the “scene” of the body and its relation to visual perspectivalism in the decades that followed.

Schneemann's introduction of everyday objects and images into her “painting-constructions,” in the early 1960s, constituted a way to express her concern with the expansion of the two-dimensional canvas into space and time and her interest in exploring the properties of materials, including flesh and the moving body; a concern and an interest that led to a series of transmutations of her painted works to a “hybrid” piece entitled *Eye Body* (Kubitza 16, 15). Largely unnoticed by the avant-garde during the sixties, despite its affinity to works by Jackson Pollock, Rauschenberg, and Yves Klein, this work, in which Schneemann “established her body as visual territory, interacting with various materials such as paint, chalk, ropes, plastic sheeting, mirror glass, animal fur, a bull's horn, and two live snakes,” was re-contextualized within the feminist project of the 1970s and identified with feminist explorations of the female body (15). Her first pioneering body action, *Eye Body*, was only the prelude to the artist's path of composition, along whose length Schneemann struggles to transcend the limits of her media and her body by actualizing the stroke, or mark, or space, or arcane eroticism; by being the (erotic) nude and by also holding the paintbrush.

Schneemann's body art in her next work, *Meat Joy*, first performed at the First Festival of Free Expression in Paris in May of 1964, came to integrate an erotic aesthetic “that was quite different from the emotionally detached representations of sexuality by other avant-garde artists in the 1960s,” which depicted body and sexuality in a depersonalized, ironic, theatricalized manner, curiously void of passion (Kubitza 16, 17). Affirming the idea of an “unmediated,” “organic,” or “natural” sexuality, *Meat Joy*, Schneemann's literal body collage, is not only marked by an emerging awareness of the social constructedness of gender and sexuality and its political implications, but is also injected “with joyful, heterosexual passion,” an erotic passion that detaches the work from a narrowly defined feminist politics and from poststructuralist-driven, vanguardist dialectics (17). In that piece Schneemann articulated an independent sexual and aesthetic politics that distanced her from both her feminist and her vanguardist contemporaries. *Meat Joy* was intended as a celebration of the flesh and/or as exorcism against the evil of “non-sensuousness” both in the theatre and out; as a multi-sensual ritual, a staging of erotic, revelatory pleasure principles in the arena of performance.

Accompanied by a sound-collage of Paris street noises and latest “rock n' roll” hits, a group of four men and four women, clad in trunks and elaborately decorated bikinis, danced and writhed around with each other on plastic sheeting, while rubbing raw fish, chicken, and sausage, as well as wet paint, onto their bodies. Aspects of feeling, smelling, hearing, seeing, and even tasting, as well as the bodily smells and secretions that were created in the process of the performance by performers and audience members: they were all welcomed. The familiar, or rather conventional, heterosexual erotic pattern that was structured in the first two sequences of *Meat Joy*, according to which the men had a more active part than the women performers, had collapsed by the end of the piece following the conceptual stripping-down or progressive reduction of the flesh to the status of any ordinary object and as the initially plotted interactions (d) evolved into an ecstatic, playful orgy.

Although, this 1964 “kinetic action” of Schneemann was criticized by many as essentialist, retrograde, and naïve—as was *Fuses*, her next work—it was successful in its design to “alert the total sensibility” of the audience and enlarge its “basic responsive range of empathetic-kinesthetic vitality,” by combining Walt Whitman’s “most interiorized, tactile, plastic-poetic” images with Allan Kaprow’s art of “concordance” in an abject choreography that resists a strictly formalist, an aestheticist, or a sensibly political apprehension (Schneemann 246, 250).

The artist’s first experimental film *Fuses* (1965)—a proto-feminist film that reacted against male-oriented pornography—consisted of interspersed graphic shots of her companion James Tenney and herself making love, of views of her ever-watching cat Kitch and the surrounding landscape, and of images of the domestic environment, which anchored “the couple’s sexuality in their everyday life” (Kubitza 18). In that film, “Schneemann attempted to communicate the sexual experience through an elaborate, highly innovative post-cinematic editing process,” transporting the intense emotions between the lovers directly onto the celluloid and manipulating the original footage by fragmenting and superimposing the images, by scratching and painting on it, and by exposing it to weather, acids, and, finally, to heat in an oven (18). What developed through this process was an abstract image in which male and female body parts fused into a flow of colors and movements as in an impressionist rendering of lovemaking that could not be more dissimilar from the climactic structure of the sexual narrative in typical porn-movies. With her imaginative treatment of the explicit sexual imagery in *Fuses*, imagery rhythmically yet integrally structured from a woman’s point of view, “Schneemann undermined the objectifying mechanisms of fetishism and voyeurism heavily at work in conventional cinema” (19).

Her erotic self-portraiture upsets sociocultural cipherings and codings of desire and, quite effectively, questions the representational premises of commodity capitalism, within the framework of which the creation and dissemination of sexualized representations of women is the exclusive domain of men. The reception of the artist’s experimental filmic erotic study, its censorship by authorities and the caustic criticism against it by New York vanguardists such as George Maciunas, once more affirmed Schneemann’s ambivalent role within the avant-garde and hinted at her successive marginalization within the feminist movement. The artistic risks—involved issues of artistic distance—that Schneemann took by starring herself in an exploration of sexuality that uses a vocabulary of images shared by male-authored pornography—albeit in a fundamentally different, transcendently emotional/erotic way—put her on the Procrustean bed by many contemporary and later-day feminists. Many of them saw in it an exploitive, narcissistic appropriation of male scopophilia and not a disruption of the scopophilic gaze of film history by a fellow feminist who attempted “to reproduce the whole visual and tactile experience of lovemaking as a subjective,” phenomenon that is as female- as male-centered (Rick 28). It was not the sexual explicitness of her work per se but her injection of her work with heterosexual sexual passion what alienated Schneemann from other feminist militants and artists since it, purportedly, made her work more vulnerable to co-optation by the patriarchal order(s) of desire. In fact, however, Schneemann crafted (dramaturgical) experiences that operated within a new poetics; within a nebulous zone where female desire plays freely across the “stage” in sounds, images, and intersections of fantasy and reality and where the patriarchal order of desire (expressed via patriarchal narrative structures, traditional forms of representation, and sadomasochistic dynamics) is disarmed and etiolated.

It may be true that Schneemann aligned her 1960s work with later feminist ideas and practices, but while feminist paradigms have provided a welcome and useful frame for the reception of her oeuvre, the simple regrouping of the artist’s pieces with various trends in later feminist art frequently “impeded a contextual, in-depth examination of her unique sexual aesthetic” (Kubitza 17). Thoroughly grounded in the artist’s ideological and philosophical beliefs, Schneemann’s breach of decorum has posed a number of problems for feminist critics who are alert to the fact that “[w]omen who use their bodies in performance art could easily be reappropriated for the purposes of male sexual arousal” (Nead 67). Her 1960s work as well as her 1970s *Interior Scrolls* (performed twice in 1975 and 1977) may call for sexual freedom and for the deculpabilisation of embodiment yet they are caught in the debates within feminism concerning the representation of the body between “those who fear the inevitable recuperation of the female body to the patriarchal spectacle of woman and those who see its potential as a way of building a new cultural presence for the female body by reversing the gaze and enabling women to become the speaking subjects of discourse” (68). In *Interior Scrolls*, Schneemann begins by undressing, continues with painting herself in large strokes defining the contours of her body and face, then reads from an earlier text, and ends with dropping the book and reading the script from a scroll she unravels from her vagina, all the while adopting a series of life-model “action poses.”

The performance was met with severe criticism on the grounds that it constituted an overly feminine, erotic, and narcissistic piece, which, in its foregrounding of the female body as a source of interior knowledge and patriarchal power, did not deconstruct the gendered terms of the mind/body dichotomy but simply inverted them (70). Although this kind of criticism does credit to its structuralist and post-structuralist *termina a quo*, one must not forget that these qualities of the piece most vehemently criticized is how it was supposed to resist being categorized or objectified within the terms of both structuralism and post-structuralism and their Freudian and Lacanian cradles. By expropriating and redefining ideas of ownership, authorship, and otherness as related to the body and language Schneemann sought to create a much-needed distance between the female/feminine and *all* that sets out to confine it. As, simultaneously, subject, performer, and artist, Schneemann created with *Interior Scrolls* a highly resistive relationship between author, art, and text. Ultimately, she mounted a feminist critique that, however inconclusive, challenged the dominant paradigms of (post)modernist thought thereby developing a new role for the female artistic subject and a psychosemiotic approach to the dramatization of female desire—desire to love, to know, to speak. Schneemann's 1960s and 1970s work, as well as her 1980s installation *Vulva's Morphia* and 1990s *Known/Unknown: Plague Column*, might not have redrawn the lines of the (hitherto normative) category of "the female body" but have certainly broken pre-existing boundaries, initiating an awareness of some of the issues surrounding representation, sexuality, and the female body, unimagined in previous times (69). As Linda Nead pointedly remarks, "[i]t seems too easy now, with the advantages of hindsight, to dispatch women's art based on female sexual imagery" (66). The problems posed by essentialist undertones present in Schneemann's work should not obscure the radical intervention it made in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Largely influenced by the erotic aesthetic of Carolee Schneemann and by the contributions of other explicit body performance artists to the cultural praxis of the 1960s and 1970s, Karen Finley took up the former's cause of interrogating "a cultural scenario in which a 'woman' striving to be other than representative of the phallic order" can end up "striving to appear invisible, to *appear as disembodied*—a paradoxical drive which resonates with the recessive logic of the vanishing point and infinite deferral of desire in commodity capitalism" (Schneider 100). Partaking of the premises of feminist performance art, Karen Finley played out and made explicit the paradox of disembodiment across her literal body, taking "the bodies of modernist dreamgirls" onto herself *as if* she herself was disembodied, "only to wield those dreamscapes with a voluble, 'in your face,' embodied vengeance" (100). Finley's work responded to the need to free the female body from its overdeterminations as a body saturated with sex, site of pleasure for (an)other, subjected and devoid of subjectivity, and to the critical effort of the 1970s and 1980s "to recover, or postulate a prediscursive [female] body" (Hart and Phelan 5). As a single feminist performance artist, Karen Finley had, probably, the highest profile of any woman working in the field of feminist performance studies in the 1990s. Even before her notorious troubles with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the mid-1990s, when her grant was vetoed under decency issues along with that of other three artists, her performances had elicited heated reactions. Her brief career as a stripper, the "NEA controversy," as it became known, and her appearance in sex-oriented magazines, such as the *Playboy*, which unsurprisingly misrepresented by "eroticizing" her works, contributed to her being established as a controversial figure. Scholars in the late 1990s reclaimed her history and asserted her presence in the field as an artist whose daring performances have always been located on the margins of what constitutes "the front" of feminist politics and of the vanguard.

Although New York-based Finley is best known for her performance art career, and especially for her confrontational monologues, often performed in night-clubs and bars, she has exercised her talents in virtually every creative medium, publishing several books of prose and poetry, displaying collections of visual art, acting in several films, and recording albums of poetic musings with dance-based backing tracks. Her performance pieces combine the dynamics of "Happenings" with the playful shock tactics of explicit body performance art in an effort to interrupt the decorum of everyday life. At the same time, they are infused with Finley's desire to put emotion into performance, her need to make work that people could comprehend, and the concept of not having a final(ized) product. Finley's raw, highly charged pieces enact a politics of disruption through the poetics of the body and they have been sexually tabooed despite the artist's insistence that she is really never interested in the sexual point in her work but in its *pathos* (qtd in Carr 2). Her often appalling, usually hilarious, trance monologues of obscenity constitute "an attempt to express emotions for which there are perhaps no words; an attempt to approach the unspeakable," to find words and gestures to make the seething emotions just below the surface audible, visible, and absolutely unavoidable, to give voice to those who have been deprived of one (Carr 121).

They relate to issues people deal with within dominant codes of desire, questioning everything from patriarchy to compulsory heterosexuality to governmental responses to the AIDS pandemic, and accurately conveying the shocking messages of reality. They often leave the audience in a state of confusion, after they have sown in it the seeds of hysteria. Her “meta-reflexive gesture[s]” of sharing with the audience “her body’s hysterical symptomatology” prior to her performances (in the double sense of the phrase), contribute to Finley’s undermining of audience expectations and reversal of “the traditional spectator-performer relationship; a reversal that renders the audience members the nervous and jittery ones” (Pramaggiore 269). Indeed, her taunting performance narratives push both supporters and detractors of Finley out of their “comfort zone” demanding a reading that will transcend the limitations of post-structuralist exegeses on the *performative* (in Judith Butler, for example) and will espouse the new set of codes for *performance* that Finley herself determines. In her attempt to create social accountability within and without the artistic milieu, she sets the example by accepting both good and bad publicity in as far as it allows her to reach audiences outside the art world and to distribute her bodily articulated and verbalized messages to a wider (and wider) spectrum of society. Although, given the subject matter of her performances, everyone seems to have an opinion on her work, she has done well in turning her struggles into successes, successfully marketing her work in the process.

In order to create a work, Finley does research about a subject that interests her (for instance, behind her play *The Constant State of Desire* is Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*) and then enters a state of deep concentration, her work coming from an emotional commitment to something she feels very urgently about and that, she is convinced, needs to be changed now (Champagne 57). During her staged pieces of the 1980s and 1990s, pieces such as *The Constant State of Desire* (1987), *The Theory of Total Blame* (1988), and *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989-90), she shifts from a casual seemingly improvised chat with her audience into the wor(l)ds of her characters. *The Theory of Total Blame*, Finley’s first full-length, multi-person play, depicts the day-to-day interactions of a completely dysfunctional family. In an outrageously raunchy and darkly funny way, Finley presents us with each one of the members of the Bickerson household—herself as the hysteric, sorceress-mother Irene, “self-consciously performed rather than unwittingly inhabited,” corporealized, taking on a body that assaults the Freudian model from which she was constructed (Hart 101)—and gives vent to the full dynamics at work in the complex relations among them. In the solo performance of her play *The Constant State of Desire*, Finley occupies different voices and creates a disordered collection of nameless, faceless, almost transparent personas, abused, and in a state of want that is never fulfilled.

In that, her “scatological monologue, combined with parodized nude self-display,” in which she “mixes standup comedy, sex shows, dada, and body art,” Finley launches a cultural critique of language and its relationship with power, exposing myths created by history and media that have secured women into domesticated, secondary positions and that have sequestered aging, pregnant, or irregular gendered-bodies (Wiles 112). In 1990’s *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, Finley dared to play both sides in an abusive relationship, revealing in her white-hot monologues not only the contradictory emotions the sexually-harassed daughter feels toward her father, but also the father’s twisted feelings of love, hate, sexual attraction, and self-loathing. As she stands before her audience and ushers forth an onslaught of identities she enacts and critiques the cultural dramas of disembodied bodies; of the objectified, the feminized, the colonized. In the course of these extraordinarily visceral performances “[s]he takes on multiple personas as she screams out against hatred and injustice. She can become male or female, victim or victimizer. . . . In New Age parlance, she appears to be ‘channeling’ other beings through herself” (Dubin 151). The tension generated by her playful manipulation/appropriation of both feminine and masculine “masquerades” (of behavior) creates an ambivalence that places gender normativity in question. Eventually, the rush of identities across Finley’s bodily stage is never apologetic; although the personas that pass across her may be mangled, multiple, and even manic:

[m]ore like testimony or religious/political witnessing than aesthetic performance, Finley’s monologues, both by the ribald content and her testimonial style, disallow conventional distance by which a spectator sits back and suspends disbelief or “appreciates” art. . . . In an almost complete inversion of naturalism, disbelief rather than belief is put forward like a dare (Schneider 101)

During one segment of *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, Finley romps on the stage in red rubber boots, her hair tied up with a red cloth evoking Lucille Ball masquerading as Sasquatch, both in her look and comic manner; when she partially strips her clothing off, pours gelatin into her bra and then giggles around, she confirms herself as a physical comedienne, a body artist (Dubin 151).

In the fantasy piece “Cut Off Balls,” one of the monologues Finley performs in *The Constant State of Desire*, she castrates Wall Street bankers, rolls their testicles in manure and chocolate, and then sells them in gourmet shops, while in “Refrigerator” she unwinds a lurid tale of rape and incest in the family kitchen (Dubin 151). In these performative acts wicked humor attaches to desire which itself attaches to disgust as the artist ecstatically moves beyond rage to the trigger for that rage: to damage and longing, the desperate want for something, the unfulfillable yearning (Hart and Phelan 149). While she consistently presents herself in the roles of the housewife, mother, rape victim, or incest survivor: the daughter whose father rapes her with vegetables from the icebox bin; the woman tormented by her decision to abort a fetus conceived through incest; the girl whose gang rapists throw her under the wheels of a train when they discover that she was born without a vagina, Finley “deploys these positions with a violent humor that does not play to the spectators’ sympathy for the victims, as radical feminist performers often do” (Hart 96). “Rather, her graphic enactments of sexual abuse and her scatological rage assault the sex/gender system that produces these damaged female bodies by historicizing it” (96). Although “Finley’s performance scenario context is one of violently overstated claims and negatively exemplary scatological anecdotes which do not depict many characters overcoming their thrall to her picture of a culture of sexual violence,” the irony in all her stories makes women anything but simple and pure victims and has her rapists ridiculed during their predations (Wiles 119).

Accuses of essentialism, misogyny, and misandry against her that centre of the graphic depiction of expressions of rage and despair in her performances crumble when one considers the fact that Finley does more than depict rage and despair: she is making them part of a performance of transgression in the course of which Finley is “doing” the things she describes to the audience; “[t]his gesture of including all of *us* in the abuses she exposes moves her act from being a simple and gender-biased rant against one sex or class of people” (my emphasis, Wiles 119). The abject figures she embodies in her confrontative pieces constantly cross the borders between permissible and impermissible, legitimate and illegitimate, porn and art. During and over these crossings the very consecrated divide between porn and art is thrown into relief. The sexually transgressive woman as object, abject, offender, and artist straddles as it challenges deeply ingrained gender and aesthetic divides thus confronting long-defended boundaries separating female sexuality from artistic authority. The fact that Finley does not create desirable sexual images recuperable by the masculinist imaginary and the fact that she denies us empathy towards her characters, the careful construction of her images, which, no matter how grotesque, are full of irreducible resonance, and her insistence in not only exposing but in adding more holes on the already porous lines separating high from low and woman from artist belie disavowals of her work as essentialist, (self)indulgent and exploitive.

Finley has used food as a main device for conveying her message. She uses food in a similar way to how other artists used instruments and other devices; not only to test their physical limits, but also to demonstrate their materiality. Moreover, Finley’s use of yams, chocolate, and breast milk, to mention a few, as central props in her performances has contributed to her incorporation of both male and female roles in her performative work. Excessive food is no longer a demonstration of profusion and survival in Finley’s work but a means to enact the role of the male consumer while still embodying the role of the consumed (female) physically. Further, she is using outside force (food, in her case) to convey the severity and physicality of the situations that her characters are in. “Food provided a primitive, visceral, almost gruesome element. It helped to convey to the audience the ways in which the characters I portrayed were being violated,” Finley explains (23). By manipulating the food’s (un)consumability Finley “forces the spectators to reexamine their own literal and metaphorical hungers” (Geis 231). One has only to consider the fact that in most of her pieces anal penetration is associated both with food and the flesh; it is penetration as both desire to connect and the desire to punish. “Objects inhabit the place of bodies by a contract Finley makes violently explicit—they are driven into the *satiated* body as she says ‘I’ll show you the burden of private property . . .’ The symbolic, here, is translated with a ferocious and unsettling literality of over-satiation” (Schneider 103). Interestingly, the use of food props consistently allows the artist to also address, and attack, the myths of women as clean, “natural” beings. In *The Theory of Total Blame*, for example, “Finley uses food loathing as a trope for boundary confusions, and utilizes this trope in concert with the maternal body to make patent cultural constructions of the female body as always already maternal” (Hart 113). The big bulimic landscape of consumption and expulsion that Finley militates against, as well as the constant fetishization of food and female flesh that takes place within it, make the performer that monster of orality, the devouring woman; a woman that through parody and travesty and through excessive renderings of stereotypes swells the models to their limits and explodes them” leaving only waste products behind (Carr 130; Hart 114).

In her eccentric pieces [t]he consumption of commodities as stand-ins for identity, the notion that purchased objects are purchased self-hood, indeed the Marxist notion that commodity capitalism makes social relations appear ‘as relations between material objects’ is translated . . . literally—with all the threat to symbolism that literality entails. . . . (Schneider 102)

Finley insists on her literal body as the exigent stage across which the codes of insatiability have been manipulated and she relentlessly drives home the abusive impact of that body staging(s) (Schneider 102). Her indomitable cries against commodity culture, within which the desire to know and love is equated with the desire to possess and consume, and her intransigent dissent from all sorts of antiseptic positions, literally and metaphorically, could hardly be more explicitly coupled and/or rendered manifest.

Food and blatant sexuality combined together “dirty” Finley’s performances as much as to make them imperfect and quite resistant to prurient intellectual and/or political obsessions with knowing, understanding, and mastering. Finley takes full advantage of the subversive space that performance art offers. Disconnected and decentralized, her narratives of desire inhabit *topoi* of loss and reclaiming. As such, they defy fastidiously delineated feminist courses of thought and action, yet they, simultaneously, transgress centralized constructions of gender; they are rendered vanguardist-ly marginal, yet they are performatively efficient in their exposure of the integral, hidden mechanisms that build misleading aesthetic representations of American culture. In her challenges of feminist proscriptions and vanguardist prescriptions Finley may have been marginalized within certain intellectual and artistic circles but has certainly met the challenge of voracious appropriation simply by not caring much about it. Employing a kind of twisted “sly civility,” a subversive perversion of authority, upon and across the stage of her body she has managed from the “margins” to lift a high brow on the face of those who, back in the 1990s, suspiciously proclaimed that “transgression is necessarily failed, impossible, defunct” and who curiously “suggest[ed] that nothing shocks anymore” albeit “in an age of conservative right-wing anxiety over the ‘appropriate’ cultural limits of aesthetic expression” (Schneider 4). As in every age so in the 1990s many hastened to overestimate people’s abilities to conform at the same time when entire groups of these (non-white, homosexual, tricontinental, etc.) people(s) had only recently awakened to their ability to act upon their non-conformism.

In re-viewing the 1980s and 1990s work of Finley the intention is not—and should not—be to compose an encomium of the artist. The intention is to attract the attention of a 2013 audience—an audience shock-proof according to many—is the ways in which she, as Carolee Schneemann before her, managed, for more than two decades, to sustain a flirtatious relation with most—if not all—compromising positions she has found herself in as when she was cancelled out in the 1980s, when she was officially vetoed in the 1990s, or when she was photographed as the quintessential alluring yet fragile seductress on the cover of the *Philadelphia Inquirer’s* Sunday magazine in 7April 1991. The intention is to remind ourselves of the historical precedent(s) to all that we take for granted in the “seemingly limitless horizon of multinational capitalism,” as Philip Auslander has put it (23). Both artists contributed to a shift in the terms of the politics of (erotic) transgression within a terrain where feminism, avant-gardism, and postmodernism are all tangled. By (re)performing (with) the “already primitive, already transgressive” female body, they not only teased out of this tangled terrain “the link between ways of seeing the body and ways of structuring desire” that lie at “the cultural foundations of shock,” but they also tampered with it productively and in a quite empowering way too (Schneider 5). This experience of transgression not only makes both the performing and viewing subject “recognize the presence and function of prohibition” on the sociopolitical realm, but also effects a violation at a cultural level, “as the protocols of both the ‘legitimate’ and the ‘experimental’ theatre are pushed to their limit and seem to dissolve into the realm of burlesque, peepshow and porn” (Nead 69). The two explicit body performers have contributed to the “dissolution of moral categories such as the obscene and the pornographic, as a realization of Bataille’s theories of erotic transgression,” cunningly manipulating “the erotic excess of pornography [that] shatters the illusory unity of the viewing subject and [that] thus forces a critical attack in the system of bourgeois values” (Nead 69). Schneemann and Finley, as well as other performance artists of that period, paved the way for successive inroads of feminist art in the larger culture and for incisive changes in the study of that culture.

Carolee Schneemann has, by employing her own body as visceral template for cultural criticism in a new *mise-en-scène* of the socially engendered body, shattered accepted conventions of art and broke open the sanctioned boundaries of the feminist praxis, making “visible aspects of the female body that could not easily be accommodated within the existing protocols of connoisseurship” (Nead 63).

Karen Finley, taking a step further, has helped redrawing the lines of the category “woman” in a “move away from the invocation of ‘woman’ towards the recognition of the diversity of standpoints among women, formed by other aspects of identity such as class, race, sexual preference and so on” (Nead 63). Rather than falling from contradiction, the two performers/artists installed doubt and crisis at the very core of their work. Rather than a grand feminist and/or artistic meta-narrative, they favored heterogeneous proliferations of difference within intermedia, multimodal narratives, seen not as embodiments of a single truth but as energizing political and aesthetic forms of communitarian self-construction.

The work of both uncovers some important issues confronting the manipulation of the explicit female body in politicized (feminist) art contexts. It also raises questions about the (in)escapability of co-optation and about contemporary fascination with the decadent (aesthetic, sensibility, etc.) and the figure of the sexually deviant woman—both linked in important ways to the roots of performative avant-garde dating to nineteenth century Europe—within our own post-postmodern and post-postcolonial, or neo-colonial contexts.

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