

**An Interview with
Interdisciplinary Artist Karen Finley:
Censorship and The Oppression of the Artist**



Interview written and conducted by: Cortney Connolly

**Portrait of Karen Finley by © Timothy Greenfield-Sanders
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An Interview with the Impossible to Ignore Interdisciplinary Artist Karen Finley: Censorship and The Oppression of the Artist: Interview written and conducted by: Cortney Connolly

In the examination of the Grotesque, phenomena such as taboo and censorship are often surfaced. Their unraveling reveals how American society oppresses its values of free speech and expression. When thinking of artists who question these subjects, Karen Finley comes to mind. Her art has historically revealed the conflict that exists in American values. Free Swim had the privilege to interview the legendary interdisciplinary artist to examine how the Grotesque reveals the systematic oppressions embedded in our American Culture.

Since the 1970s, Karen Finley, NYU Professor of Arts and Public Policy, has questioned the censorship of subjects such as sexuality, female identity, politics, AIDS, and domestic violence. Through provocative interventions of poetry, performance, music, and fine art, Finley creates controversy to surface taboo and evoke social and political commentary. Her work is impossible to ignore.

In *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990 performance art), Finley notoriously smeared chocolate over her nude body while delivering monologues to uncover the horrors of violence against women. In her foreword to *Shock Treatment* (25th Anniversary), she describes this process of bodily reclamation, “I displayed my body while voicing hysteria and rage. I showed what it’s like to lose control while being in control.” The style of her monologue with

Blessed be the Name.

John Newton, arr.

Arr. by Ira D. Sankey

1. How great the name of the Lord, Bless-ed be the
 2. In all the world, His glory, Bless-ed be the
 3. By the prayer of the saints, Bless-ed be the

GOD

... of the Lord, His glory, Bless-ed be the name,
 ... of the Lord, His glory, Bless-ed be the name,
 ... of the Lord, His glory, Bless-ed be the name,

COUNTS

REFRAIN
 Bless-ed be the name of the Lord, Bless-ed be the name,
 Bless-ed be the name of the Lord, Bless-ed be the name,
 Bless-ed be the name of the Lord, Bless-ed be the name,

ON

Bless-ed be the name, Bless-ed be the name,
 Bless-ed be the name, Bless-ed be the name,
 Bless-ed be the name, Bless-ed be the name,
 of the Lord,

CUNT

Karen Finley
God Counts on Cunt
Ink on paper.

statements such as “I own my body, but it’s never been mine” paint a chilling narrative of abuse, control and anxiety women feel in a male dominated society.

After being removed from both funding and exhibition due to indecency, Finley, in collaboration with John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, sued the NEA claiming their actions violated their constitutional rights to Free Speech. The lawsuit ultimately made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. National Endowment For The Arts v. Finley addressed the issue of whether funding should be given to artists whose work was deemed ‘obscene’. The lawsuit was so controversial, that Finley’s work on *We Keep Our Victims Ready* was torn apart by far-right leaders, headlining news organizations and even the floor of Congress. Senator Jesse Helms famously attacked and patronized her work:

“Karen Finley, you know her, she’s the woman who appeared on stage, in public, nude. After having smeared her body with chocolate and bean sprouts. Oh boy, that’s great art.” Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the NEA’s action did not interfere nor violate the first amendment, the lawsuit posed the question of whether obscene and indecent expression could qualify as art and receive benefits. Over two decades later, we are still asking the same question.

Why is femininity so political? How has society’s perception of female indecency, mind, and body inspired your work?

KF: The first thing that comes to my mind is thinking about a female identified as a ‘dirty woman’. The emotions being projected onto women today are confined to hysteria.

To be menstruating in terms of society, women were and are expected to leave the area, they are considered to be disabled. Just that idea is so mysterious, the idea of reproduction is so indecent.

My work always began first with the recognition of an issue, then I researched ways to be in dialogue or have an intervention with the subject. When I started, I realized that my body got in the way due to its innate desire. It made me think about how the female body was being represented. I discovered my role as the ingénue.

I fought against society by performing in ways that weren't considered in the spectrum of the normalcy of feminine behavior. I wanted to use my body as a canvas, where I was in control of the gaze. I also did this with speech. First I chose the words, and the subject matter, then I constructed a performance by using my voice in a demanding tone.

What do you find grotesque?

KF: In terms of thinking about Grotesque, I look at the world and the events going on to be shocking and horrific. Whether it is violence that is constantly normalized, or the fact the US is built on the Grotesque of horror. For example, there is a sense of casualness in the depiction of examples- such as the images of Saddam Hussien hanging, in a cinematic sense, the female is always being killed or raped, or souvenir postcards of lynching and murder. [In films] we see her body cut up or disassembled, which violates the victim by showing what exactly happened to her. We have a society that takes these

que bajo la dirección de Mussolini dominó en Italia (1922-1943). En 1919 se fundó en Milán el primer partido del Cominternismo. Después de la caída de Mussolini, Víctor Manuel le volvió a gobernar. En 1928 fueron prohibidos los partidos y abolida la libertad de prensa. El fascismo se opuso al marxismo y al socialismo y a la Constitución de 1924. Por la Ley de Defensa de las Leyes (1925) se luchó contra la prensa y el Estado. La vanguardia fascista estaba encuadrada dentro de las fuerzas armadas. La juventud estaba organizada en los Batallones y los Asesgos. El uniforme fascista se caracterizaba por el color negro. Tenía de común con el nazismo el socialismo, la organización y el culto al Estado, el respeto de la disciplina y el deber. Sin embargo, existían diferencias notables en la concepción: no tenía un programa de algunas fallas de la economía capitalista; su posición frente al estatismo era favorable; creía en la superioridad de la cultura italo-occidental. Estas diferencias fueron el punto de partida para la colaboración de los dos regímenes. Al tener que abandonar Mussolini el gobierno, quedó hecho desfiló el fascismo.

FASCISTA, adj. Perteneciente o relativo a fascismo. || Partidario de esta doctrina o movimiento social. U. t. c. a.

FASCH (JUAN FERNANDO). Mús. Compositor alemán (1878-1958), autor de dos óperas, 42 sinfonías para orquesta, misas, motetes, cantatas, etc. También compuso la ópera *Paavo de Gama*, cantada 4 veces y una Misa a 18.

FASHER (EL). Geog. Cap. de prov. en el Sudán angloegipcio, a unos 12.000 h. Fue fundada en el siglo X por el sultán Abderrabán.

FASIA, fr. (lat. *fasia*; it. *Fasia*; a. *Fasce*, *Fasclung*, etc.) m. pl. gr. párv. de palerón; aparición de algunas con que se dejan ver la Luna y otros planetas según los humos al Sol. || Cada uno de los diversos tipos que presenta un fenómeno astronómico, como la nebulosa.

FASIBLE, (de *fasia*.) adj. Que puede ser cumplido, de moda. || m. Placerío, entretenido.

FASHA, Geog. Pobl. de Egipto, cab. de dist. de la prov. de Mítra; 18.400 h.

FASHADA o **KODOK**, Geog. Desde 1905 Kordofán, región del Sudán angloegipcio, cap. de la Alta Nila, sit. en una isla del Nilo. Es una población de relativa importancia. En 1898, llegó a ella desde el Congo el vapor francés *Marchand*; pero fue obligado a retirarse por el general (después Lord) Kitchener. Este incidente, llamado de Fashada, estuvo a punto de provocar una guerra entre Francia e Inglaterra, pero quedó liquidada al renunciar Delcassé, ministro de Negocios Extranjeros de Francia, a una región.

FASIS. (Del gr. *féois*, río en la Cólquida.) Mít. Niño a quien Baco convirtió en fuente. || Dios río, hijo del Océano y de Tetis.

FASNIA, Geog. Muz. de la prov. de Santa

Cruz de Tenerife (Canarias), Esp., p. 3. de Granadilla de Abona; 2.927 h.

FASOLA CASTAÑO (FRANCISCO). Dip. General, político y diplomático argentino (1894-1940). Fue agregado militar a la embajada argentina en París, durante la guerra 1914-18. En 1918 tomó parte activa en el movimiento que se opuso al presidente Sáenz Peña. Escribió libros de táctica militar y de táctica política.

FASOLATO (FRANCISCO). Mús. Compositor italiano de fines del siglo XVII, conocido principalmente por el grupo *La scuola de los doges*, que conserva en Padua.

FASOLES. (Del lat. *fasolus*, y éste del gr. *βίβλος*.) m. pl. Frijoles o Judías.

FASOLINO (NICOLÁS). Dip. Sacerdote argentino nacido en 1887, Arzobispo de Santa Fe. Autor de trabajos históricos, entre los cuales se destacan en *Historia de la Universidad de Buenos Aires*.

FASTA ALAND, Geog. Isla del archipiélago báltico de Aland (Suecia), la mayor del grupo. Tiene 40 kms. de largo por 35 de ancho; 12.000 habitantes.

FASTENRATH (JUAN). Mús. Pesta o hispanista alemán (1869-1928). Escribió en alemán y en español entre

El libro de más éxito de España; *Un estudio de romance español*. Otras villas hispanoamericanas y hispanoamericanas. Otras es *El arte de la Academia*. También escribió un libro de historia musical. Otras obras de su autoría mencionarse *La historia*.



Juan Fastenrath

FASTIAL, fr. Fada, somnet; it. Cima; l. Top summit; a. Spitz, Giebel. (Del lat. *fastigium*, remate de un edificio.) Arq. Piedra más alta de un edificio.

FASTIDAR, fr. Ennuyer, assommer, dégoûter; it. Infastidare, annoiata; a. To disgust, loathe; a. Ankehn, anwiden. (De *fastidio*.) Causar asco o hastio una cosa. U. t. c. a. || Enfadar, disgustar o ser molesto a alguien.

FASTIDO, fr. Dégoût, ennui; it. Fastidio, Disgust, fastidiosità; a. Widerwillen, Unlust. || Fastidioso, m. Fastio o disgusto, molestia, etc. || m. Placerío, entretenido.

FASTIDIOSAMENTE, adv. m. FASTIDIOSAMENTE.

FASTIDIOSO, SA. (Del lat. *fastidiosus*.) adj. Enfadoso, impertinente; que causa disgusto, desazón y hastio. || Fastidiado, disgustado.

FASTIGIO. (Del lat. *fastigium*.) m. Lo más alto de alguna cosa que remata en punta; como una pirámide. || fig. CUMBR. || Arq. Faucón.

FASTO, TA. (Del lat. *fastus*.) adj. Aplícase al día en que era lícito en la antigua Roma tratar los negocios públicos y administrar justicia. || Dícese también, por contraposición a nefasto, del día, año, etc. feliz o venturoso. || m. FAUSTO.

FASTOS, fr. Feste, festes; it. Feste, festi; a. Festé, annals; a. Annalen, Jahrbücher. (Del lat. *fastus*, ann. de festi, -jura.) m. pl. Entre los romanos, especie de calendario en que se anotaban por meses y días sus fiestas, juegos y ceremonias y las cosas memorables de la República. || fig. Anales o serie de sucesos por el orden de los tiempos.

FASTOSAMENTE, adv. m. FASTOSAMENTE.

Beware of Fascist Feminist

Karen Finley
 "Beware of Fascist Feminist"
 Ink on paper.

traumatic instances and makes them into a keepsake, collectible, or entertainment. That's what is grotesque- the part of the media, the industry, and what American society is based on.

How does the male objectification affect female perception? How does this phenomena inspire your work?

KF: I saw all of these instances and phenomena. I wondered how I could put this into art to address and deal with the subject matter. Responding to some of the words you have been using: disgust. I performed as Trump, and in my book *Grabbing Pussy* (2018), Trump is saying "disgusting, disgusting" he called women 'nasty women'. There is this expectation that women are to look like barbie dolls. Then you look at Trump and his fetish, on a larger scale, and the monstrosity of it all is a living nightmare.

In terms of my own life and terms of obscenity with my censorship issues, being involved with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Supreme Court case that I was named plaintiff of, was in the context of decency. My work was called indecent and it questioned whether the government can fund what is considered indecent art. First, we won, then eventually we lost.

I am considered an 'indecent' artist. I have been told outside of the sole context of art is when a woman is getting dressed or she has been exposed, people ask "are you decent?". I remember when I was performing at the American Repertory Theater at Harvard and the director was knocking on my door asking, "Are you decent? Are

you decent?” . These situations and the life experiences that I have been through and the tension that I have with my own body. My body can be a weapon, but also is a place of violence.

But nudity has always been depicted, hasn't it?

KF: Yes, but the way that it is different is when you go to the museum it is normally represented with the artist [Male]. I was disturbing the male gaze, and I was taking command of it. I wasn't being passive, I was being the director. That is what is challenging, it's more than just the body, but the fact I was speaking. In England, a woman can strip nude, but she can't speak at the same time. It's fascinating how the laws are designed to suppress women, I mean there's a fetish about it as well.

I am working on digitizing my previous work, and there's a video where Jesse Helms (many years ago) was talking about my work on the Senate floor. He is using me by name and is talking about my work in disgust, "oh she's smearing chocolate on her body." He seemed very fascinated and interested in me, which unravels a sense of sexual tension. I feel there was sexual abuse of power and relation of public that he was inflicting onto me. I had to work through that idea and I didn't have to be in the relationship with him and those projections.

If you were to show your younger self what today looks like for a woman, would you be disappointed?

KF: I think that is hard for me to get around. I feel like there has been a lot of progress that has been made.

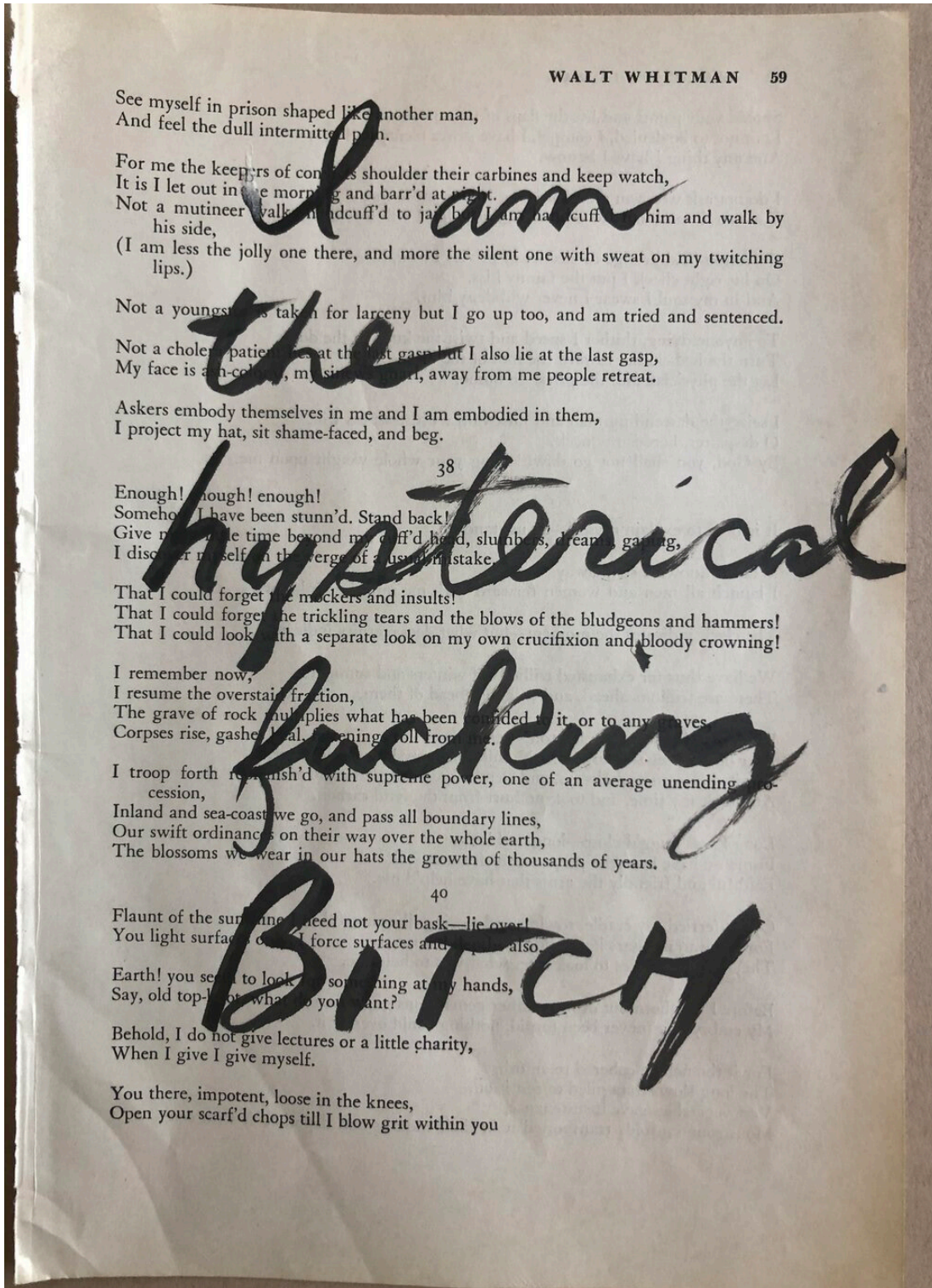
When I went to school, there was only one full-time female faculty member. When I asked if we could have some female faculty, they said they didn't know of any. I think that's another reason why I am so happy to be in education. But, I have a lot of privileges and opportunities for censorship that were given to me because of that privilege. I was heard and even had a space to be censored and many people are not even recognized and are not able to have those opportunities.

I am certainly not a victim, but I am a political artist, and it's important to realize that when artists create work that they can have these challenges, and that there are repercussions in terms of support. When we look at what is happening for reproductive rights for women now. I wouldn't think that in these years we would still be arguing about these rights. I am not naive about that. I am very glad to see MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the environmental movement grow and take place. I'm moved and inspired by the youth of today.

What are three existing thoughts that linger in your mind?

KF: I don't think I have three persisting thoughts. I try to live a poetic life, I feel joy and to be humanist- responding and also listening. Then in a circumstance when I am blessed with a response that could be helpful, I create work. I look at my work as being a historical recorder. I look to see what is in the world, and how I can be responding or helpful. This week, I am so inspired by my students and the work that we are doing together. I am also working on digitizing my archive, especially when I was working for the

AIDS cause. It makes me think about intertwining the past and the present - what that means, and how it applies to today. Another thing I am doing is working with graffiti, and I write words over found images from books. That is a very destructive act, that's the subtext of speaking over someone because many times, women are spoken over. We are either interrupted, or 'mansplained'. I have very feminine handwriting and I let the words in ink bleed over the text. I like to have art in everyday life, I would like for it not to be compartmentalized. Because I am a conceptual artist, I prioritize not making and sitting with things, because that is a part of the process.



Karen Finley
I am the hysterical fucking bitch
Ink on paper.