



Holly Hughes, Tim Miller,
John Fleck, Martha
Wilson and
Karen Finley at NYU,
April 15, 2004

Photo by Jim Costanzo

**Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck - the 'NEA Four' -
at New York University, April 15, 2004.**

by Robert Ayers

It is perhaps difficult to believe, but until this week, and this forum set up by the enterprising partnership of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, The Fales Library, and the American Studies Program at NYU, the celebrated NEA Four - Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck - had never sat in the same room together. Not even at the Supreme Court itself, because, as he laughingly recalled, John Fleck was at that time auditioning for a television role!

So this was quite an event: the 'icons' (Karen Finley's word) of the epochal and much debated 'Culture War' of the 1990s 'gathering for the first time to discuss whether art is more "decent" now, and how the [1998 Supreme Court] ruling affects artists today.'

The culture war in which Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, John Fleck, and Tim Miller found themselves caught up is widely acknowledged to have fundamentally changed for the worse the climate in which artists in the United States make art and seek to have it funded. Its history - for those of us who experienced it (and for many other people as well who have studied it subsequently) - is an infamous chronicle of the lack of comprehension and trust between radical artists and a government that is threatened by their work. This history was tellingly (and somewhat chillingly) recounted for us at the beginning of this forum by C. Carr of the Village Voice, who had of course not only lived through it, but played a somewhat heroic role in it. Perhaps it might need retelling here.

In 1990, during the presidency of George Bush Senior, and at a time when political conservatives were becoming increasingly perturbed by what they thought of as 'obscenity' in the work of artists dealing with the body, identity and sexuality (only months earlier, Ms Carr reminded us, an Andreas Serrano catalogue had been literally torn apart on the floor of the Senate!) the solo performance peer panel of the National Endowment for the Arts - the government's principal agency for arts funding - awarded grants to these four artists. However, their grants were subsequently revoked by the director of the NEA. The artists then sued the federal government for violation of their right to free speech under the first amendment to the Constitution. In the face of their legal challenge (and, even more discouragingly, now during the Clinton administration) the NEA's charter was revised to include the consideration of 'general standards of decency' in the awarding of funding. Despite the fact that in a series of hearings that took place between 1993 and 1996 both district and circuit courts found in favor of the artists, and ordered the US government not only to reinstate the artists' grants in full, but also to pay their court costs, the NEA Four, as they were dubbed by the media, continued to challenge the so-called decency clause. Eventually, the Supreme Court delivered a verdict in 1998 that reversed part of the lower courts' rulings, and reaffirmed that the decency clause was after all constitutional. Along the way, the National Endowment for the Arts

was itself nearly abolished, and has ever since been critically weakened. C. Carr called it no more than 'a shell of what it used to be.'

The issues raised by their case are clearly crucial to anyone with an interest not merely in the radical arts, but in intellectual freedom of any sort. So there was a lot of ground to be covered in the couple of hours that NYU had set aside for the forum. Personal recollections needed to be heard; respect, and a certain sort of celebration, needed to be accorded the four artists and others who had played their part in the case; on the other hand, people wanted to put the record straight about who had not played the role that might have been expected of them; comparisons were made between the situation in 1990 and the one that pertains today; a rallying call of sorts seemed in order; and for some of us at any rate, some pretty knotty questions needed asking about the assumptions that we tend to bring to this sorry episode.

Perhaps it is understandable that we did not get all the way through this agenda. Certainly there were recollections aplenty. Mr Fleck, for example, was forthright: 'It politicized me. It made me realize that there are these lines,' and that you have to decide, 'which side you are on.' By contrast, Mr Miller reminded us that for him at any rate, 'when all this shit hit the fan,' it was already an extremely political era, and his engagement with the ACT UP movement meant that he was being 'arrested repeatedly.' Ms Finley went further, making it plain that the case was less about four individual artists than about freedoms in general: 'this was a collective battle,' she said, 'this was America working ... and the reason why [the conservatives] were so angry with us was that progress was being made.' But at the same time we were reminded of the heroic role that the four had played: Marvin Taylor (Director of the Fales Library and Special Collections at NYU) who moderated the event, spoke of them, 'fighting for the rights of us all,' and William Pope L, who, with the poet and performance artist Sapphire, was also on the platform with them here, talked of them 'taking fire,' so that, 'their work allowed me to do what I did.' Briefly Ms Hughes recalled a 'painful' (and, it might be added, shameful) aspect of the whole episode: 'the failure of the left to engage with the issue - because anxieties about work that was provocative, anxieties about sexuality, the body, and race, are not just anxieties of the right, they are anxieties also of downtown artists.' ('They didn't have the support of the mainstream art world,' Ms Carr added. 'The artistic society decided to cave in.')

From this Holly Hughes began to tease out deeper-seated issues, reminding us of the 'long tradition of censorship in this country' and what she called people's 'willful unwillingness to make connections' and the 'unwillingness to see [this episode] as anything other than a problem for a number of individual artists' which she pointed out were particularly unfortunate as 'the NEA situation' had served as a 'template' for other occasions when the government had withdrawn its funding, in areas as diverse as education, housing, and health care. So for Ms Hughes, and for the vast majority of people in the room, lessons for this election year were crystal clear. 'I hope that you're giving money and time to get rid of George Bush!' she urged us. 'It's not enough to vote!' 'We have to go and continue the fight,' Ms Finley added.

In many ways the prospects seemed gloomy, and it is almost as though precisely the same issues that had to be tackled in 1990 loom large again in 2004. Tim Miller admitted, 'This is the question that I wake up with every morning - usually angry - "What the fuck are we going to do?"' And Ms Carr reflected, 'It's very disturbing to me. It's insidious. They change a lot of little things. They do it the same way. They tell lies.'

Despite all this, people wanted to remain positive, and the overall mood of the evening was upbeat, with a lot of jokey self-deprecation. You have to 'keep a sense of humor,' was how Karen Finley put it, and for Ms Hughes, dwelling on the worst aspects of their experience, 'puts us in an unproductive place.' Who can blame them? They've paid their dues, these people, and if any of us were in their position, perhaps we too would be reluctant to get into too detailed a discussion of what Ms Hughes called, 'the pain, the trauma' that this episode clearly caused them, or some of the thornier intellectual issues that their experiences raise. It was William Pope L who made the simple point that 'radical art has to be the enemy of the State ... It's the job of artists to mess with the State,' but there did not seem much of an appetite among the audience for a consideration, for example, of whether it isn't something close to naïve to expect a government to fund art that is openly critical of its values.

In his introductory comments, Marvin Taylor, had voiced the hope that we might 'develop wisdom' from this forum. We did, I think, and it is perhaps carping to feel frustration that all of the debates were not pursued. It is probably more appropriate to share these remarkable artists' positive mood - the inspiration, for example, that Tim Miller finds in his students' work, or Ms Finley's no-nonsense conclusion about freedom of speech: 'With the first amendment, you're going to get offended. People have to get used to being offended!'

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