American performance artist. Finley is noted for her controversial pieces and her work has been called “obscene,” “lewd” and “vulgar” because she has graphically examined such subjects in her art as politics, sexuality, scatology, identity, violence and abuse, among other divisive topics. Her works are also called theatrical solo shows. She explored feminist content through her performances, which were often derided by the public, even after she developed her audience within the art world. In her art, she combined monologues with manipulation of her body, including pouring substances onto herself. Using her partially or fully nude body, she entices the viewer, but then quickly subverts the experience of looking at her by pouring, smearing, or otherwise covering parts or all of herself. Her writing is well-crafted and provocative both in subject and form.

Finley studied art as a child at the Art Institute of Chicago’s Young Artist Studio program in 1968 and eventually received her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1981. She began performing in 1979 in San Francisco, then in Chicago. By the mid-1980s she had moved to New York and established herself in the world of performance art using her incendiary voice and transgressive language with her own body, especially in venues in the East Village with its burgeoning avant-garde scene. She collaborated with the performing duo Kipper Kids: Brian Routh and Martin von Haselberg. Finley made You Killed Me First (1986), a film with artist David Wojnarowicz, directed by photographer/filmmaker Richard Kern. She rapidly became a central figure in the world of performance art.

Finley utilized her body and her direct, often confrontational texts in her performances to explore the frequently forbidden and little discussed ways that sexuality and power are viewed in contemporary American society. The first performances she did took the perspective of the patriarchy, utilized it and then lambasted it. Performances such as I’m an Ass Man (1984) reflect such an approach. Because Finley was examining the complicated negative attitudes society has about women and food, she willingly smeared her nude or semi-nude body with food, such as chocolate.

Finley’s career trajectory took a strange turn when she became one of the “NEA Four,” four performance artists—Finley, Tim Miller (b 1958), John Fleck (b 1951) and Holly Hughes (b 1955)—whose individual artist’s grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had been promoted by the peer review panel process, only to be vetoed by chairman John Frohnmayer in June 1990, in response to claims of a lack of “decency” by Senator Jesse Helms of North
Carolina. This situation occurred as public attention was drawn to arts funding in a period which became known as the Culture Wars. Three of the artists were gay, all dealt with political content. This process was fueled by two columnists, Rowland Evans and Robert Novack, who scorned and demeaned Finley’s work, calling her “the chocolate-smeared woman,” prompting an outcry against her performances. Under pressure, the NEA ceased funding individual artist’s grants. The artists went to court in 1993 and received awards equivalent to the grants they originally were to have received. The case went to the Supreme Court in 1998 and the majority decision said that the NEA had the right to take standards of decency into consideration in providing grants.

The particular work that brought Finley into the public eye was her notorious performance *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989). This work was first performed at the Kitchen in April 1990. It is a three-act, 90-minute performance without intermission during which the artist strips off most of her clothes, shouting a monologue about a world ruined by white heterosexual men oppressing women, minorities and gays. She screams profanity, speaking from the position of the woman victimized by a society that defiles and degrades her and, ultimately, her body, showing that the victimization is rooted in fear about blood and excrement, which are connected to abjection. In the second act, the artist covers her mostly naked body with chocolate syrup, evoking excrement. The third act consists of the artist reciting a poem about death next to a bed of an AIDS patient who has recently died. Rather than being seen as commentary on the current state of gender politics or sexual identity, the work was censored on the basis that it involved explicit treatment of the artist’s body.

In addition to her performance work, Finley also made installations, books and conceptual works that continued many of the issues examined in her performance works. Often political in content, Finley has been consistent in her message of examining society and culture. Her paintings have been shown at galleries in New York City and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. Her visual work is in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary in Los Angeles and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

Finley received numerous grants and fellowships from the NEA, New York State Council on the Arts, Art Matters, Inc., New York Foundation for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation, Guggenheim Fellowship, two Bessie Awards, an Obie Award and was named the Ms. Foundation Woman of the Year in 1998.

See also: Feminism and art and Women and performance art.

**Writings**

*Shock Treatment* (San Francisco, 1990)

*Living It Up: Humorous Adventures in Hyperdomesticity* (New York, 1996)
A Different Kind of Intimacy: The Collected Writings of Karen Finley (New York, 2000)