

The Editorial Notebook

Annapolis and Karen Finley

Last Dec. 8, some male Annapolis midshipmen carried a female colleague into a bathroom and handcuffed her to a urinal. Then, laughing all the while, they photographed her. She was smiling. It was either that or cry, which is about the last thing a woman who wants to be accepted in a man's world (there are 400 women and 4,000 men at the academy) would do in public.

"Nobody but my roommates knew why I was smiling," Gwen Marie Dreyer said. "To get through it."

"I thought she was having a good time," said John Hindinger, a third-year midshipman and author of the hilarity. It "started out as a good-natured exchange," said the academy's superintendent, Rear Adm. Virgil L. Hill Jr., "but they overstepped a boundary."

Mr. Hindinger and one fellow jester were punished with demerits and loss of leave. The other six got written warnings. Ms. Dreyer eventually left the academy. "After what I have been through and have seen," she wrote in her resignation letter, "I no longer have any desire to... pursue a career in the Naval Service."

Six months later, the proper authorities are at last exhibiting the proper rage, and Admiral Hill has ordered two special inquiries. Meanwhile Jane Good, who's dean of advising and counseling at Annapolis, defines the central issue as "How do you distinguish what is an acceptable part of indoctrination from what has a right to be considered sexual harassment?"

If the question concerns shackling a young woman to a urinal, then making the distinction ought to be easy. A urinal is used for elimination, and only by men. Handcuffing a woman to one is symbolism of the highest, and the lowest, order.

Smiles and Chocolate? No: Women Demeaned

Coincidental with the furor over Ms. Dreyer is the furor over the performance artist Karen Finley, who has used her own naked body on stage to confront male phobias and longings. Her work is angry, sometimes shocking. It is also, as the Times art critic Michael Brenson said, "vehemently opposed to obscenity and pornography." Ms. Finley, he added, is "a serious and highly moral artist."

Recently, one of Ms. Finley's performance pieces, "We Keep Our Victims Ready," in which she daubs herself with chocolate, was characterized by the columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak as "the Mapplethorpe case of 1990." Ms. Finley has asked for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which has been criticized for supporting a show of Mapplethorpe photographs that included sadomasochistic, homoerotic themes.

Ms. Finley wrote to The Washington Post protesting that Mr. Evans and Mr. Novak had written about "Victims" without considering its context or intent. "My work is against violence, against rape and degradation of women. ... When I smear chocolate on my body it is a symbol of women being treated like dirt."

Mr. Evans, Mr. Novak and countless others may not get Ms. Finley's message. But it's safe to say that a woman who was once handcuffed to a urinal while eight young men laughed and took her picture understands it all too well.

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