

**KAREN FINLEY**  
**THE KITCHEN.**  
**FRANKLIN FURNACE**

Mixing futurist aggression, Brechtian political performance strategies, Artaud's sensualism, and Allen Ginsberg's hypnotic zeitgeist-attuned chanting, Karen Finley's work has always elicited impassioned response. Her recent performance, *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, and her first site-specific installation at Franklin Furnace, entitled *A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much* proved no exception. If Walter Benjamin were tracking the condition of art today, he might well retitle his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Tyrannical Misrepresentation," thus describing the fate of Finley's art at the hands of conservative religious leaders, politicians, and journalists. Of late, Finley's work has been distorted, misrepresented, and categorically dismissed in order to support polemics on the subject of obscenity that frequently seem little more than projections of the discomfort her critics experience when confronted with material dealing with issues such as AIDS, homophobia, abortion, rape, and the degradation of women.

Overwhelmed by the throbbing force of Finley's theatrical, preacherlike delivery, it's easy not to recognize the power of her words in their own right. Though in performance her texts take on a singularly agonizing quality due to her careful inflection, crescendos, and despairing singsong intonation, in script form, her words reveal a honed intensity all their own: "Because in this world a woman isn't worth much/sometimes it's a hanger/Sharp, rusty, bleeding/Sometimes it's a knife/to cut out our soul/Sometimes it's fire, falling from buildings/stairs, drowning or suicide/Like I said a woman isn't worth much/A woman's life isn't worth much..."

Handwritten on the walls of Franklin Furnace in the company of other texts, painted figures, and scenes, all in some way referring to the oppression of women, these same words provided an entirely new experience. Her handwriting seemed to propel the cadences into a realm somewhere between reading privately and listening to her perform. Other components of *A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much* combined the blunt wit, audacity, and political street-smarts that constitute Finley's trademark, and her challenge. Together, the various texts and images, like the sequence of monologues comprising *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, offer an experience of profound catharsis that is simultaneously emotionally draining and rejuvenating; distressing and eye-opening.

—Melissa Harris



Karen Finley, *A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much*, 1990. Installation view.

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