

Consuming Performances: Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment

Author(s): Marcy J. Epstein

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# Consuming Performances

## Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment<sup>1</sup>

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*Marcy J. Epstein*

*I'm not hungry. I'll just pick.*

—Gemini by Albert Innaurato (1978)

In June 1994, Ann Arbor-based performance troupes Walk 'n' Squawk and Janet Lilly and Company converged on a theme as well as a performance. *Big Girls* (1994), a title that invokes Lilly's childhood nickname ("Big Janet") as well as the choreographer's shapely postpartum figure, showcases her intrepid female body in a romance with embodiment. Lilly's body, reflecting a maternal ideal, suggests a contrast between the female body as we imagine it—feeding others, inhabiting the feminine space of the symbolic mother—and the body which imagines and nurtures itself. *Big Girls* describes bodies not only big in size, but also big on embodiment itself, with its precarious, gestational connection to full-grown womanhood. A woman who chews gum between dance movements and bares lactating breasts, Lilly reappropriates the grandeur of flesh, thematizing the desire to *be* a body in sequence with the pleasures of *having* one.<sup>2</sup>

One sequence in this venture into womanhood—Hilary Ramsden's comic monolog *Kentucky Fried*<sup>3</sup>—redirects her representation of female embodiment from idealized bodies to real ones, with a peculiar twist. Exploring gest, food, and—as she terms it—a “geography of identity,” Ramsden frenetically plays out her cultural dislocation in the tangible terms of fast food consumption—a heady commentary on American eating. Deluged (by industrial-garbage-bin-and-apron-clad Lilly) with hundreds of McDonald's and Burger King buns, and chewing over how and why Americans would want to eat “a bucket of anything” (1994), Ramsden gags herself with patty buns. Her pleasure and disgust over American mass consumerism parallel her compulsion to enjoy something forbidden to women onstage: something to eat. Like Lucille Ball on a bad day at the confection assembly line, Ramsden talks and gorges, grimaces and ingratiates, until, in hysterical animation, her eyes bulge, her voice cracks. She absentmindedly backs off from the audience, falls into the

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very bucket of food-to-go, and her body disappears: stuffed, deplored, and utterly silent.

Rarely before had I seen a woman actually eat onstage. Tea in parlor plays, water for thirsty monologists, perhaps; certainly, I'd witnessed and performed illusory meal scenes, miming ingestion. If I had seen women performers actually eat onstage, I had somehow erased it from my memory. And had it not been couched in comedy, with self-deprecating gesticulations and familiar props like burger buns, Ramsden's performance might have struck an even more dissonant chord alongside Lilly's celebratory gesture. In that halting moment, however, my critical impulse to "clarify" the piece was overwhelmed by a countercritical *melée* of astonishment, relief, and envy.

Critical and countercritical. Inflected with these celebratory and disturbing everyday acts, contemporary feminist performances embrace a single contradiction: the more images of women and eating we represent, the harder it becomes to tell about the meaning of the eating act in relation to womanhood. *Talking* about eating and *actually* eating make different commentaries about consumption, performance, and the woman's body which interrelates the two. Studies by Judith Butler, Jill Dolan, and Kate Davy have shown with scrutiny that the physicality of female bodies diminishes in the construction of gender for the "sexing" of these bodies; however, actual food acts foreground women's physical bodies in profound ways not captured by performed acts of eating. The contradiction lies in how, in performance, actual consumption and gender construction cooperatively constitute femininity as a preoccupation with food. The contrast between Lilly's romantic embodiment and Ramsden's raw binge echoes how their bodies negotiate between actual ingestion and the meaning of consuming food under theatrical conditions. I explore food use by Women's Experimental Theater, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley (among others)—onstage and in cultural contexts that address consuming practices as kinds of feminist performance—in order to suggest that eating, more than sexing, comments on and *allows* both physical embodiment and the embodiment of women's material conditions, including gender.

Physical embodiment and material bodies offer a seductive similarity when sketching out ways to suggest eating onstage. Indeed, performance critics, feminist theorists, and artists search for an equitable relationship between physicality and materiality, illustrating, from Peggy Phelan, "how thoroughly bodies inhabit signifying systems and how signifying systems are always organized as bodies" (1993:15–16).<sup>4</sup> For every act of eating onstage, and for every material constitution of the female body, there exists a signifying reaction that tells us in no uncertain terms that *that body has just made (or rather staged) itself*. Women's eating, however, makes the matter of the body's constitution significant in itself rather than simply signifying other matters, mere material preconditions to women's sexuality or femininity.<sup>5</sup> In *Teenytown* (1988), Laurie Carlos, Jessica Hagedorn, and Robbie McCauley rage over this deferral of physical need to outside material demands, here coded as their sexuality: "Sex again no mention of food, this time/ [...]sex again not even sex black-eyed peas [...]" (1990:114).

In addition, when eating becomes performance rather than simple biological instinct, some secondary consumption of that performance also occurs for us to perceive those bodies as both open to our desire and seductively interior. As Carole Spritzack suggests, an economy of consumption involves bodies constituted both inside and outside a cultural system: "the 'insides' and exteriors of bodies [are] made visible to [those bodies'] inhabitants and to the larger culture" (1993:16). In bottom-line theatre terms, physical bodies feed material ones: the body must sell itself for

1. "Deluged (by industrial-garbage-bin-and-apron-clad Lilly) with hundreds of McDonald's and Burger King buns, and chewing over how and why Americans would want to eat 'a bucket of anything,' Ramsden gags herself with patty buns." In *Kentucky Fried* (1994) at the Betty Pease Studio Theater in Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Photo by Robin Vincent)



the actor to eat. Bodies must be appetizing, performances in good taste. Thus bodies get packaged, much like Ramsden's patty buns, as consumer desire, consumer sex. And women's material bodies do particularly well in this performance economy of consuming desires, although sometimes at the strict price of forbidding their physical bodies the pleasures foods often suggest.

Clearly, our task in reconstructing a female body through feminist material means is mired in this body/food economy; interrupting the conflation of physical bodies into material effects, we might derive a new context for the ways bodies "inhabit" this cultural system. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Butler attends to the repetitive and mimetic nature of physical bodies, but discounts theatricality as a description for how the actual matter of bodies and the illusion of any given embodied moment are produced. "[B]oundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count" exist, according to the theorist (1993:15), but what bodies do to mark those boundaries and make them livable, "is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated [...]" (12–13, emphasis added). Yet theatrical conditions best describe how acts of consumption and self-constitution relate to the social conditions of embodiment. Theatre confesses its own embodiment. "Theatricality" designates that aspect of performativity in which the boundary between simulated or authentic performance does not matter—only actors matter. Illusion, gest, and body language undermine any *nontheatrical* body by rule rather than by exception. Rather than being the habitually performed

dissimulations that Butler has described, “physical” bodies create the firmament of most theatrical representation, so much so that the expression of embodiment as illusion, projection, role playing, spectacle, and abjection is germane to both theatre and cultural life.<sup>6</sup>

Still, women’s bodies “in-gest” as well as gesture; and here a theatrical term is crucial for thinking about female embodiment: I mean “in-gest” to connote a particular social “gest” that women act out for embodiment. In-gestion describes the process of using food on one hand to generate actual bodies, and on the other to incorporate cultural signs into bodies whose material performances provide the gesture of selves (for, echoes diet culture, “we are what we eat”).<sup>7</sup> At least three groups of performers who use such social (in)gests emerge from this range of performed eating: (1) women performers consumed by their eating acts and thus *disembodied*—the mere material gender—feminine without agency or self-nurturance; (2) performers both consumed and consuming, or performing consumption as a way of depicting a complex, balanced economy between gest and physical *embodiment*; and (3) performers hyperbolically *overembodying* their consumption, in-gesting food to constitute their bodies, but at the same time using food as a cipher for sexual or social selves.

Disembodiment, embodiment, and overembodiment—phenomena which, respectively, the Women’s Experimental Theater, Hughes, and Finley represent—contribute to one outcome: the awesome and potentially liberating movement of performance theories toward bodies before gender. Risky strategies since they put food and physicality before sexuality as the mark of gender, such “feminist” performances prioritize eating over sexing as the denominator of the body’s existence—its nourishment over its sexual pleasures or its reproductive capacity. Robbie McCauley in *Indian Blood* (1988) tells her audience as she passes out apples, Fig Newtons, and women’s wisdom: “[F]ood is at the CENTER of everything” (in Whyte 1993:286). Similarly, for those performers who consciously embody gests, as I illustrate in my readings, physical nourishment (and its inverse: hunger, starvation, or food misuse) is central to the theatricalization of feminine roles; eating means the stoppage of a purely relational body. Lilly’s bigness, Ramsden’s uncontrollable gorging, and other acts of feminist embodiment situate femininity itself as a residual, disembodied aspect of female bodies.

Even above theatricality, then, we must first acknowledge these inward gests of dislocation, compulsion, and self-destruction signified by female eating in our culture at large. Astonishment over women’s eating ranges from the mild confession to the unthinkable: for example, comedian Paula Poundstone jokes onstage that she loves snarfing Pop-Tarts, so hundreds of envious fans send her boxfuls to eat; supermodel-commentator Cindy Crawford reveals a private obsession for the same blueberry treats slathered in butter, and the public is flabbergasted and disbelieving.<sup>8</sup> Pop stars, of course, rarely stage such junk food reveries; their hankerings suffice as a social gest of self-abnegation. Yet Poundstone and Crawford’s confessions differ in humor and credibility for two reasons: Poundstone mocks a slumming in masculine hunger (she can eat all the Pop-Tarts she wants), while in Crawford’s case, contexts shift to a more constrictive, feminine standard (her public wondering how the svelte can do such a thing). As consumers of popular feminist performance, we often catch the acting out of a terrifyingly real sense of collusion, disempowerment, and disembodiment that exists alongside the idea of nurtured “feminist” bodies.<sup>9</sup> We lack a way of bringing women’s gests and the agency of ingestion together; more often spectators see *noneating* women’s bodies—no affront to femininity. And without eating, there’s no body of which to speak. The infrequency of women’s performance of actual

2. "Ramsden talks and gorges, grimaces and ingratiates, until, in hysterical animation, her eyes bulge, her voice cracks" in *Kentucky Fried* (1994) at the Betty Pease Studio Theater, Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Photo by Robin Vincent)



consumption speaks to the disembodiment of feminist gesture, and thus to the disappearance of bodies in a material age.

Among late 20th-century feminist performance troupes, the Women's Experimental Theater (cofounded by Clare Coss, Sandra Segal, and Roberta Sklar) reflected in the late 1970s and early 1980s some of the most radical shifts in cultural attitudes toward eating acts and feminist embodiment. As Vivian Patraka pointed out to me, WET's earliest series, *The Daughter's Trilogy* (1978–1980), for example, offered a traditional construction of women's bodies and eating. In their acclaimed piece *Electra Speaks* (1980–1981), the heroine sanctions Orestes' use of his mother's body as the object of his consumption: "her milk kept him alive/ his mother became his food/ his mother was his nurturance/ food, nurturance, warmth" (in Malnig and Rosenthal 1993:208).<sup>10</sup> Rather than being nurturer-agent, a woman's body becomes object, milk jug, tit—her material essence reduced to the Freudian symbolic of the desired feminine body, fecund and consumable. Reduced to mere femininity, women's bodies seem to be consumed by cultural signs rather than nourished by them.

Segal and Sklar's *Women's Body and Other Natural Resources* (1980–1985) consisted of *Food*, *Foodtalk*, and *Feast or Famine*.<sup>11</sup> This second trilogy, which chronicles Electra's journey into the world, improvised on cast autobiographies and audience participation in order to explore the material contexts which surround food, eating, and women's identity.<sup>12</sup> Juxtaposing pedantic dialog and monolog, Sklar and Segal performed, through food metaphors, the systemic transformation of self-possessed young women into

disembodied ideas of physical hunger, sexual obsession, and obsessed bodies. *Feast or Famine* captures the identity paradox in which women's obsession to nurture others fails to satisfy either's hunger, a paradox of eating and cultural disorders theorist Kim Chernin terms, "the hunger knot," the binding of women's bodies into an immovable relationship with femininity and starvation (1985:xi–xvii).

The effect of *Feast or Famine* at production time was overwhelming—for the women in the audience, food symbolized the very act of becoming oneself in a culture determined to demoralize them professionally and domestically. Unable to "act out" their emotions of being depersonalized, Sklar and Segal represented themselves as "acting in," in-gesting (with) substitutions for their own food intake. Dining room table, scales, even a stalking refrigerator all symbolized women's eating acts as a cultural consumption unrelated to the nourishing of actual bodies. As one character guiltily rages in *Feast or Famine*, "If I weren't obsessed with my body size so/ Well, where on earth would all my energy go?" (in Malnig and Rosenthal 1993:211). If the performers of the trilogy do not eat, their self-denial then takes on the sheer physical force of the energies women devote to reducing their bodies, and thus the physical signs of their oppression.

"I'm not hungry, I'll just pick." The rift between hungering for self-realization and expressing need through acts of self-satisfaction may precede a sex-gender system, but it ultimately depends on the absence or crisis of women as speaking subjects. As Malnig and Rosenthal point out about WET, Sklar and Segal's "fast talk" technique demonstrated the "obsessional nature of women's internal experience" as though to articulate a silenced language (1993:213). In *Women's Body*, the troupe also effectively represented body noise in lieu of feminine reserve, addressing a pervasive cultural taboo having to do with voice and obsessive-compulsiveness. Growing up watching New York television and Broadway tourist favorites of the 1970s, I received one of my early adolescent notions of femininity and women's eating disorders from just such a fast-talk quip with its silent insinuation of illicit consumption. Manically caricatured by a bulimic shoveling spaghetti into her mouth, this essay's epigram by Albert Innaurato, "I'm not hungry, I'll just pick," became the catchphrase among weight-reducing girls my age, young women who sought to emulate the character's comic act of eating too little and hungering for too much. I followed suit.

In *Feast or Famine*, Segal contemplates this woman-as-body paradox with her audience:

What if I didn't lose weight  
 What would happen if I didn't lose weight?  
 [...] This economy needs  
 Me to starve  
 You to binge  
 and the third world to bleed.<sup>13</sup>

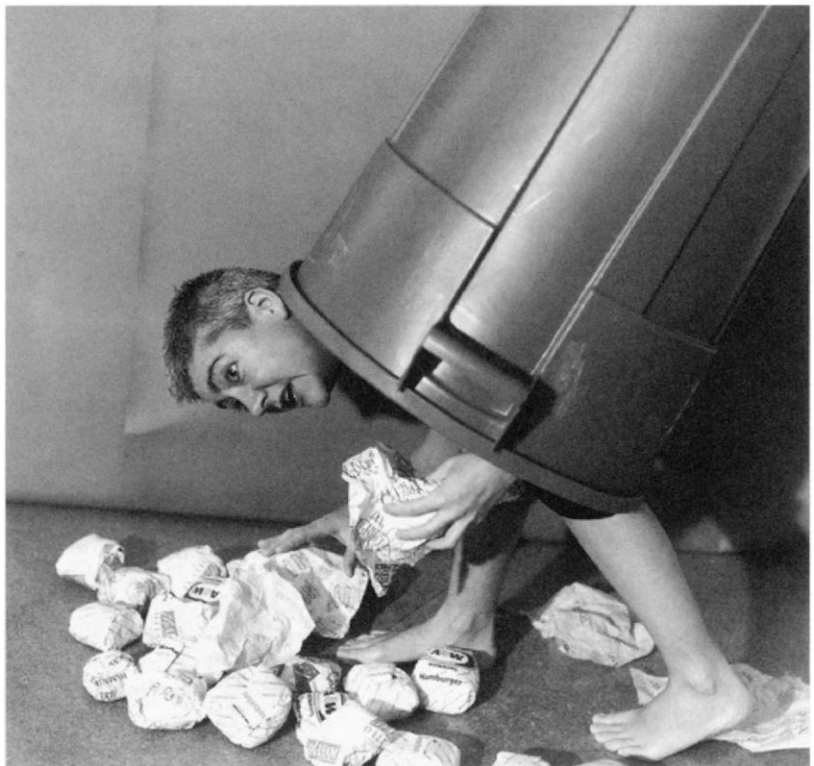
This polemic on bingeing bodies promotes an additional idea: that feminist performance art reflects a dangerous disembodiment through the excessive *overembodiment* of gender. Eating shows how, to adopt Kate Davy's useful discussion of overdetermination and underrepresentation, "the operations of theatrical representation are over-determined, [...] made visible, thereby undermining, paradoxically, the construction of *woman as body*" (1989:158). But given the extreme implications of Segal's act—her refusal to lose weight, her urge to overeat and purge—can the same paradox of "woman as body" and feminist embodiment reconstruct food acts as *resistance* as well as *complicity*?

Holly Hughes' *World Without End*, which premiered in May 1989 at P.S. 122, uses autobiography and gesture to suggest that food and memory occupy one inscriptive domain: the troubled and invigorating site of a feminist body. Because she toured the piece nationally during the NEA controversy, the work appears particularly public and confrontational, its confessional integrity almost repackaged in terms of a public promotion of her censored body. Take, for example, her showy recollection of her mother's sexuality and her "this-is-your-woman's-body" talk: "and my mother is standing in front of me...[She mimes to the audience] NAKED. Uh-HUH. [...] Bigger than life, shining from the inside out, just like that giant jumbo Rhode Island Red Hen in front of the Chicken Palace and Riborama" (1990:19). Hughes' directions specify that the scene should be performed as a sumptuous fertility rite, a "sacred ritual":

And she's smelling of salt, and she's promising me grease, something to suck on, and she's asking me in [...]. And that smell! [...] That smell made me want to do the mashed potato! [...] Her purple lips gave her a certain sympathy for the tomatoes, she could get them to go red when everybody else had a yard full of little green fists of fruit. She knew she was a tomato. [...] 'Holly, this is your clitoris, let me tell you what she does for a living.' (1990:19-20)

Sucking tomatoes, mashed potatoes, grease: confessing and marveling over the sexiness of her mother in terms of food, Hughes indulges the carnal pleasures that stand for sex but create obstacles for one's femininity. In addition, she incorporates, rather than merely gestures toward, female power, libido, appetite—grease, mashed potatoes, fists of fruit—and in her telling,

3. "Ramsden absent-mindedly backs off from the audience, falls into the very bucket of food-to-go, and her body disappears" in *Kentucky Fried* (1994). (Photo by Robin Vincent)



both inhabits and resists the food images she creates with her body, which her audience watches onstage. She knows she must consume and be consumed.

Mervyn Nicholson notes in his discussion of food's mystique in this complex consumer-consumed economy that "[c]easing to satisfy hunger, food becomes purely semiotic, a cipher standing for power" (1992:53). In the quest for self-satisfaction, Hughes' body becomes a cipher standing for its act of embodiment, not exactly food or body itself, but the power to eat and eat anything—including other pleasurable bodies. After teasing her spectators with a steamy story of her carnivorous affair with a grill cook, she fishes for imaginary bodies in the audience with a seductive barb, "Did you have enough to eat?" (1990:12). For her to consume them, they must admit they hunger for food, hunger for her. Echoing *The Well of Horniness* (1985), her camp comedy of table manners and lesbian seduction, Hughes' food gestic in *World Without End* expose the economics of consumption in her performance, a process of individuation by which she becomes her gendered, sexual being. Lost in a swirl of potato salad and fried food memories, she portrays a dinner at a Michigan Denny's during which her mother asks if she prefers sex with men or women. Hughes as stage performer and Hughes as adolescent acting out converge in one titillating food gestic. As though choosing among slut, sauce, and slaw, and with her "[n]ipples grazing the shrimp in a basket," she reports: "Both [...] I like both" (1990:13). The ensuing confusion of gender play, sexuality, and menu—all rudiments of body choice—culminates with an eavesdropping Denny's waitress who, in dumbfounded agitation, throws cocktail sauce and an aside of double entendre back at Hughes, surrendering, "You can have both! Help yourself!" (13). Those old, hoary seafood jokes ("I'm on a sea-food diet. I see food—I eat it"; or as Hughes quips in *The Well of Horniness*: "When you're thinking of sending something special to that special someone, why not say it with fish!" [1987:225]) assume a new and unexpected sexualized dimension.

Predictably, the slippage between a woman's body and edibility, for Hughes, wouldn't provide material for in-gestion unless external cultural paradigms of female complicity were already in place. She coos in an earlier work, *Lady Dick*, that her predispositions for food stand as gestic for her lesbian desire: "I can't eat beef when I've got a taste for girls."<sup>14</sup> In the private exchange that takes place between Hughes and her mother, both take part in exposing the possibility that illicit food-play does not necessarily embody feminist qualities but rather, complicitous ones. True to her reputation, however, Hughes revels in inconsistency: "[T]he birthplace of sin," she reflects in *World Without End*, "IS seeing that your mother's got a pussy and knows what to do with it. That would make my mother just a snake in housewife's clothing, and that apple she's offering me a poison apple. But you know what? I'd bite anyway, I'd bite today" (1990:21).

Hughes' daring eating acts don't always stand as ciphers for sexy womanhood so unequivocally; some of the messages about her use of food-memory and her stature in an adolescent social order appear fairly troubled for all their resilient spirit. As Michigan (played by Lois Weaver) reflects in Hughes' *Dress Suits for Hire* (1989), Hughes, or any woman who puts the "poison apple" in her mouth above the biting constraints of her complex cultural role, gets violently shortchanged by life's candy machine:

Being good don't buy you sweet things anymore [...]. No offer a candy just gives me one hard bite and he's off. [...] All that sugar and spice running down my legs [...]. [...] Felt like touching my new wound but didn't dare. Knew somebody would lose a finger in there and it wasn't going to be me. [...] Staring at those girls that never got bit. The blonde

that would bring out the blonde in me. Take my sweet meat out behind the cheap shoe stores and lay her down in the astroturf and make her mine. Carve my initials on the inside of her thigh with my tongue. (1989:139)

I am reminded of Susan Bordo's essay, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture"; she writes that "for every historical image of the dangerous, aggressive woman, there is a corresponding fantasy—an ideal femininity, from which all threatening elements have been purged—that women have mutilated themselves internally to attain" ([1986] 1992:46). If Bordo's scenario/fantasy rings true, then Hughes' bittersweet feast makes a great deal of sense: the exchange of sugar and spice for sexual sweets fails to correspond to her imagined whole body. Her body loses its dreamy succor, and in its place is the threat of the bodiless, self-destructive woman, the walking wound whose probing finger loses its connection to the rest of her flesh. And the only Blondie she can't quite sink her teeth into is the woman she seeks to possess: her tongue traces the act of bodily possession through the tasting of a lover's thigh—consuming subject desiring her consuming sex object, body making body. Such acts of relish and compulsion describe Hughes' resistance to the role of sexual nurturer and her complicity with the unrequited desire which sweets, sweet meat, and women's flesh all bring her.

Toward the conclusion of *World Without End*, Hughes addresses her spectators lovingly, expectantly, coyly: "When you think of me, why don't you just eat an apple. Chew very carefully, I am still your apple. Lick every drop of juice that drips down your chin and say 'Help me[...]" (1990:31). Still in-gesting power, Hughes' body tantalizes her consumer, not only lending a sensuous realism to her work, but also evincing the audience's role in her sustenance or destruction. A curious similarity emerges between Hughes and Lilly, with her nursing bra, maternal nudity, and oral fixation; the vulnerability of their bodies evokes the issue Bordo raises about external cultural factors which also "make the body": give it form, mother it, feed it, have sex with it, make it malleable and indistinct. To borrow from Bordo, the sexual "body experienced" by Hughes' spectators and the physical female body onstage jointly approximate "the lived body" of a feminine gender in culture. Bordo extends Hughes' sarcastic "tastefulness" to a feminine knowledge of embodiment in order to reinstate the body as a distinctively *feminist* presence, one standing in critical contention with destructive cultural cues.

When Hughes stages her body as a sign of a highly complex feminist body, even without actually eating she *over-embodies* eating acts in order to counter the overdetermination of misogynist cultural cues. Making her body passive—"Do you know who you are porking?" (1990:31)—she knows that her body can be "porked" and chooses the role of fuckable meat; regardless of her body's use to others, she retains a simple right of agency, the "who" resisting total passivity in a consuming sexual economy. And perhaps that is the essential function that feminists' bodies perform, withholding themselves from culture's determination of them.

*SCHECHNER: But how does this relate to, say in The Constant State of Desire, turning men's balls into candy?*

*FINLEY: I'm talking about abuse.*

—Schechner (1988:153)<sup>15</sup>

If food means power incorporated as a woman's body, then few contemporary performers have worn power as well as Karen Finley. The

notorious “chocolate-smeared woman” manipulates food from performance to performance in order to plunder its gestic codes: chocolate (objects of sexual desire), gelatin-laden corset (body texture), sprouts (bodily health), and wieners and kraut (membership). Even her self-discovery as a performance artist at 21 confronted standards of women’s body size; assigned a project which used food, she put melons in her brassiere to resemble the 38D breasts she had when she was heavier, an exaggeration that empathizes with her body’s change but also invokes irreverent concepts of women’s bodies (see Clements 1990).<sup>16</sup> Vomiting or staging epileptic fits in front of restaurants, Finley as a teenager pressed the limits of expected behavior to see if her body might interrupt the eating of others.<sup>17</sup>

Finley’s performances—which, as C. Carr reports her grandmother as saying, start out as “toilet-mouthed” and then degenerate from there—expose her entire body as confrontational fodder. Her foul-mouthedness and “tasteless” inversion of women’s many body holes creates a perverse orality (Carr 1993:143). She shrieks in raspy monotone, smothers her butt with yams, evacuates her diarrhea at the edge of the stage, dollops her nipples with sauerkraut. In contrast with the antiseptic perforations in Megan Terry’s *Body Leaks* (1990),<sup>18</sup> this orality offers the entrances of her digestive and reproductive tracts as the ingress to a female sensibility, at once powerful and degraded.

So I gather [these Wall Street executives’] balls, scrotum, testicles and stick ‘em in my mouth. I roll ‘em around my mouth and I feel like a squirrel in heat. [...] I take the balls home and boil them. [...] After I boil the balls I roll them in my own dung, my manure. ‘Cause I’m the Queen of the Dung Dynasty. Then I roll the Dung eggs in melted Hershey’s Kisses. [...] Now I’ve got gourmet Easter egg candy to sell. (Finley 1990:62–63)

No light-snack revenge fantasy this: as Caryl Churchill’s Dull Gret grunts over dinner in *Top Girls*, Act I: “We come into Hell through a big mouth” (1982:67). When Finley moves to food ritual coded in incest memories of a father’s refrigerator or the anal rape of the mother, she makes physical the female body’s hellish reduction to a mouth and that orifice’s consequent embodiment as feminist emblem (Finley 1990:59). If not for her intense, emotive anger, Finley’s (in)gest(ion) would seem to echo Sartre: “To eat is to appropriate by destruction; it is at the same time to be filled up with a certain being. [...] We do not limit ourselves to knowing certain qualities of this being through taste; by tasting them we appropriate them” (1966:30). The eating in Finley’s work represents taboos of consuming food beyond proper or nutritive eating, in, most often, a reaction to sexual destruction through rape, sodomy, and incest.

What is terrifying about the overembodiment Finley self-consciously produces through improper eating acts, is how closely this augmentation resembles the very difficulty of consuming her performances. It’s difficult to witness and analyze the analization in her gests of self/food immolation. As Carr explains, Finley’s enraged orgies represent “the desperate want for something, the hole in all of us that nothing ever fills” (Carr 1993:149). Few critics can ignore the barrier her physical body presents to theatrical interpretations. Her orifices become the critic’s mouthpiece or the critic’s constipation.

A case in point: in their dialog “Divinity: A Dossier/A Performance Piece/A little Understood Emotion,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon envision the icon of the fat woman in a “shadowbox theatre of commerce”—a performing body like Sedgwick’s own, or like political economist Thomas



4, 5, & 6. *The new disposable body: Hilary Ramsden takes-it-away and throws it out in Kentucky Fried (1994).* (Photos by Robin Vincent)

Robert Malthus's robust and offensive body (1990/91:14). As an end-point fiction of material accumulation, the fat body precipitates, for Sedgwick and Moon, "a kind of cul-de-sac blockage or clot in the circulation of economic value [...]. The fat female body functions both as a disruptive *embolism* in the flow of economic circulation [...] and more durably [...] as the very *emblem* of that circulation" (14–15).<sup>19</sup> Offering explanation for Finley's pairing of body-as-food and body-as-waste, this image of the clotted, countereconomic body corresponds to the one taken captive by its own overproduction. Using stuffed animals to smear smashed boiled eggs on herself, Finley despairs,

So I put my head in the oven and nothing happened.  
 So I fucked you all night long and nothing happened.  
 So I went on a diet and nothing happened. [...]  
 You are the reason, Mr. Entrepreneur, why David's Cookie McDonald's  
 is the symbol of my culture. (1990:61)

The overdetermination of her food metaphors of candy balls, fertile eggs, and commercial foods suggests that no matter the extent of her actions—whether she eats her food or exploits it in protest—culture still has her physical body at its disposal.

In *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, which premiered in 1990 at San Diego's SUSHI Gallery, she uses emblem as gest to represent the female body caged within material political ideologies. Her hand-drawn figures for Act II of *Victims* show two pendular breasts dramatically crossed out in favor of emblematic Playboy bosoms (1990:n.p.). This image accompanies a drawing of a pathetically bound calf: Finley's visual gest about women's bodies is conjoined with the pathos of meat production. "Why Can't This Veal Calf Walk" becomes her feminist emblem/embolism for women's incapacitation over body image, mirrored in her self-mocking gowns of tinsel, sprouts, and red candies; her gestures signify the disempowerment thrust upon women as a result of their bodies' abuse and sexual consumption by men. So while society may overdetermine the meaning her body produces in performance with food, she may react to this overdetermination with equal force: her body using food to constitute a body different from the one that the demand side of a consumer economy intends.



Moving from staged eating acts back to a theoretical consumer economics, I have tried to demonstrate here not only the preeminence of eating in the struggle for selfhood in feminist performance, but also how eating-bodies shape our cultural sensibility about a female subject in, to borrow from Hagedorn, a “dog-eat-dog” world (1990:108).<sup>20</sup> E. Ann Kaplan lays out the paradox which the eating act poses in a dogma-eat-dogma world: feminist bodies, balancing the gestic emblem of self-representation with the embolism that an insurmountable physicality represents, “violate the paradigm pitting a classical narrative against an avant-garde anti-narrative, the one supposedly embodying complicit, the other subversive, ideologies” (1988:36). Similarly, Finley’s protest against Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, based on her objection to representing women’s achievements as vaginal plate sculptures, pits feminist gest against feminist in-gest. Since Finley’s use of food overembodies, which meaning can be applied: the dinner as celebration for women, or simply women for dinner? The feminist act of the eating gest becomes hotly debatable in terms of its emblematic or embolic nature, its direction or counterdirection of a cultural narrative about women’s food and women as food (see Carr 1993:149).

Deeluxe mourns over Little Peter’s letter at *Dress Suits*’s conclusion: “in the future, women will start collapsing the world thick with babies who can’t talk and only daughters who live alone on Oreos” (1989:152). One might infer from WET, Hughes, and Finley that “in-gestion” moves easily between such moral and oral extremes, particularly when women cannot control external events and so, overextend fantasies of emblematic bodies. Finley overextends these fantasies onstage to the point of breakage, mediating and rejecting the cultural abjection played out in the trend toward performing increasingly disembodied genders.

Working on this essay during the 1994 Women and Theater Program conference in Chicago, I considered Hilary Ramsden’s commissioned performance, which I had seen one morning—an expressionist movement

piece about “feminist laments” that disintegrated with the watermelon pieces she kept plunging into her mouth. “I love watermelon,” she repeated, adding one condiment after another. “No, that’s not right.” She doused and engulfed each biteful as feminist theatre critics wandered onstage and scribbled frenzied self-critiques about feminist overproduction on poster sheets. In between bingeing and hacking melon slices, Ramsden transformed into a silent, sightless body that climbed over her spectators, one feminist body over another. Nothing was quite right. Ramsden’s raw critique seemed painfully indi-gestible. Suggesting the difficulty of maintaining the integrity of a body with intellect in an age when feminist ideals of embodiment are being questioned, Ramsden’s melon-soaked body was reaching for what she could not find, grabbing deep handfuls of overripe fruit and ranging widely among the other female bodies who represented the feminist institutional economy that had brought her to Chicago. Ultimately, like Finley, Ramsden submitted herself to physical food and self-use, submerging her whole head (her brain, her mind) in the melon’s gaping orifice, flesh and flesh. No easy fulfillment, no feminist platitudes about resolution, only a complex, consuming performance.

Hughes has joked in one interview that the trouble with feminist critique will subside when “the object becomes the subject in women’s desire, but it’s not all clean cut and whole wheat berries” (in Schneider 1989:171). Yet the very contention, for women, over food and eating offers feminist strategies for reworking a gendered abjection into a new kind of recuperative cultural agency for women. I would hope, while staving off new essentialisms about women’s food pathologies, that we might develop a feminist performance criticism which empathetically redirects the material sensibility that most women in the Western world develop alongside—at times in lieu of—healthy and pleasurable bodies. A common thread runs from consuming performances of the past to those of the present, from Lucille Ball to Bobbi Baker, from feminist theatres to kitchens, from women’s self-abnegation to in-gestion, from repressed bodies to liberated selves. Wound around the tines of this feminist dilemma of performance, both the material words and the embodiment of “I’m not hungry” nonetheless indict a culture still obsessed with its own material excesses and disposable bodies.

### Notes

1. The generosity of an Andrew Mellon Dissertation Candidacy Fellowship first made this project possible. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Patricia Plunkett.
2. Here I recall Nancy Mairs’ discussion of self-possession and embodiment in *Carnal Acts*:

This for me has been the most difficult task of adjusting [... to a body with signs of multiple sclerosis, and] the fact that it has rammed my “self” straight into the body I had been trained to believe it could, through high-minded acts and aspirations, rise above. [...] I *have* a body, you are likely to say if you talk about embodiment at all: you don’t say, I *am* a body. (1994:269–70)

3. A Walk ‘n’ Squawk production, coproduced and written by Ramsden and Erika Block. Before Walk ‘n’ Squawk, Ramsden worked with Jude Winter (of Sirens) on Dorothy Talk’s *Fried or Boiled* (1990–1991). Currently, she and Block are finishing *They Do It with Mirrors*, a full-length work that uses food for sleight-of-hand magic.
4. I distinguish physicality from materiality because the condition of physical presence onstage, the *physicality* of performing as biological organisms, differs significantly from philosophies of material essence. Materialism and materiality suggest the almost exclusive search for external and relational factors in the constitutions of body, the chain of signifying systems from which the body is manifested, or, as Judith Butler points out, *made to matter*. Physicality specifies body conditions which presuppose, as Phelan points

out, an “inhabited” and internal system—what it means, from a feminist standpoint, to be *made to body*.

5. My interest in physical eating acts as organizing material understandings of consumption pivots on this polemical split between external and internal forces. I am not, in my use of Phelan’s economy between body and sign, in search of an “essentialist materialism,” *per se*; rather, the material preconditions we assign to bodies primarily refer them to outside cultural meanings and away from any potential agency for the subject inhabiting the system. For female inhabitants, this constant deferral obfuscates a feminist agency. And since agency seems necessary for bodies to cope from within and from without a repressive signifying system, or even in a cultural vacuum, this obfuscation, in my opinion, runs contrary to the feminist politics and sensibility necessary to this study.
6. I say *most* theatrical representation, though, since the notion of theatrical representation can be extended to staged events where actors are not present or even suggested—such as Marinetti’s *Gun Shot* or Beckett’s *Not I*—or where the body seems obliterated by an emphasis on the mouth. The Amer-European tradition is just beginning to rethink theatricality, orality, and the notion of “constituting” the body onstage as an embodiment. Richard Schechner’s work-in-progress on “rasaesthetics,” for example, favors mouth over eye in the task of understanding the transference between performer and spectator. His shift from a visual to an oral mode also significantly parallels my own twist from “gest” to “in-gest,” a point I turn to next.
7. This term “in-gest” invokes notions of both physical ingestion of food and *gestus*, the more performative root of Brecht’s technique in his “Short Organum for the Theatre.” Elin Diamond’s article on the topic of feminist gest amply expands the term to enable liberal usages of Brecht’s technique, such as “in-gest,” as disruptive tools for feminist criticism. See her “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism” (1988:83); and Brecht’s “Short Organum for the Theatre” ([1949] 1964:179–205). The language of embodiment surfaces even in Willett’s translation of Brecht’s discussion of gest as theatre practice:

Splitting [...] material into one gest after another, the actor masters his character. [...] It is only after walking that he can [...] leap, seize, and fix his character, complete with all its individual features [...]; the ‘story’ [...] is the *heart* of the theatrical performance. For it is what happens *between* people that provides them with all the material they can discuss, criticize, alter. (200)

8. Both performers discussed this in interview on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the pastry (Hymon 1994:6).
9. While beyond this project’s scope, the idea of nurtured “feminist” bodies can apply to the collusion and abjection of feminine male bodies and male feminist critics, a commentary which playwright Nicky Silver makes with *The Food Chain* (1993) and *Fat Men in Suits* (1994). In another essay-in-progress, I explore the phenomenon of male eating and men’s cultural performance as an intriguing correlate to this project, especially in terms of male eating disorders as represented by women playwrights and performers.
10. I am grateful to Malnig and Rosenthal for such a useful history of WET, since two major obstacles to analyzing women’s eating acts are the unavailability of chronicles of troupe backgrounds and the lack of published manuscripts.
11. By this time Coss had left the troupe.
12. Several audience members—Vivian Patraha, Malnig and Rosenthal, Deborah Margolin—later treated these pieces in feminist theatre criticism and performances.
13. From WET’s unpublished manuscript, excerpted in Malnig and Rosenthal (1993:211–12).
14. *Lady Dick* was originally performed at the WOW Cafe in 1985, its script reproduced in *TDR* (Hughes 1991); excerpts are reprinted in Davy (1993).
15. Finley’s *A Constant State of Desire* was first performed at The Kitchen in New York, December 1986, and first published in *TDR* (32, 1 [T117], Spring 1988).
16. In *Out from Under*, the précis to *The Constant State of Desire* attributes the artist’s sensibility to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (Finley 1990). Friedan asked the question appropriate for Finley’s era: “What if the terror a girl faces at twenty-one, when she must decide who she will be, is simply the terror of growing up—growing up as women were not permitted to grow before? What if the terror a girl faces at twenty-one is the terror of freedom to decide [...] the freedom and the necessity to take paths

women before were not able to take?" (in Chernin 1985:21). According to Chernin, who uses this quotation in *The Hungry Self*, this terror is one of the roots of most body/food quandaries for women. Misusing food is an extremely effective way to stop their movement into the world. Finley's matured performances would seem to formalize this stoppage onstage—what women's bodies cannot do with food, her performances accomplish with gest. I will return to this momentarily, in terms of Sedgwick and Moon's theory of the female body as embolism.

17. As C. Carr notes, Finley's (ab)use of food has spanned her career. At the 1981 Theatre for the World Festival, for example, she and then partner Brian Routh (of the Kipper Kids) fouled up their performance space with rotting beef carcasses and Finley's diarrhea, and then rubbed chocolate pudding on their asses. Another Finley piece, *Deathcakes and Autism* (1979), charts Finley's horror after her father's suicide, when sympathizers brought food to her family and alternated between gorging themselves and describing the graphic minutia of the death. Sensitive to the "bulimic landscape of consumption and expulsion," Carr details Finley's performances, from natural to unnatural acts, in "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts: The Taboo Art of Karen Finley" (1993:141–51).
18. In Omaha Magic Theatre's Fall 1990 performance at Bowling Green University in Ohio, Terry and coproducer Joanne Schmidman explored the anxieties of the abstract, incontinent body and its reconstruction as cultural consumer.
19. Sedgwick and Moon argue that "fatness" emblemizes culture not through "either production or reproduction but rather through waste management" (1990/91:14). Invoking for me the scatological flavor of Finley's oral fixations, this characterization of women's fatness (the condition which one could estimate represents a liberatory discourse seen in WET's projects and E. Ann Kaplan's subversive narratives) triggers the troubling interconnectedness between cultural excess (too much body, too much criticism, too much waste, too much material to incorporate into the physical or cultural body) and cultural withholding (female abjection; the wasting, anorexic body; hunger artists).
20. Carlos, Hagedorn, and McCauley construe women's bodies and feminist sensibilities more in terms of the politics of race in American culture and the conditioned response of ethnic starvation. In *Teenytown*, before Carlos dons her waitress uniform splattered with fried eggs, they recite, "Dog dreams chew me raw/ Africa rumbles in response/ and she's/ not even hungry" (1990:115).

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**Marcy J. Epstein** has a *PhD* in English Literature and a Certificate in Women's Studies from the University of Michigan. This article is drawn from her dissertation "Eating the Text: Food Use and Identity in Women's Performance." Recipient of the Neubacher Prize, she is coediting a special issue of the Michigan Quarterly Review on disability art and culture. Her play, *Lacunae*, is in its first stages.