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Performance art rides again

The National Endowment for the Arts is back, though this time without the taxpayers' money funding exhibits of the celebrated bullwhip of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Now that the Bush regime is defunct — which struggled valiantly if not particularly successfully with the quandary of whether to keep taxpayer money out of the hungry grasp of peddlers of pornography parading as artists — the enlightened days of the Clinton era are here. And among the things the Clintonians rectified was the running of the NEA.

The four "performance artists" whose grants were cut off under the Bush administration (which awarded them the grants in the first place) because of controversies over their performances have had their grants restored. Two of the artists (we use the word loosely) also milked the taxpayer for another \$8,000 each on the grounds that their rights were somehow violated when they didn't get the public funds their consciences informed them they were entitled to get. Each of the four also scooped up a cool six grand as well as damages for invasion of privacy. How you can invade the privacy of people who make their living by performing in the nude is a question we'll leave to the lawyers to explain.

The four — who became known as the "NEA Four," just like dissidents in China or something — are now the heroes of the hour among the artsy set, and last Sunday The New York Times had a big profile of them and of how terrific and sensitive they are. The four are Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller; three are homosexuals and all of them use homosexuality in the performances that you now help pay for. None of them seems to have improved in the several years since a weary world last had to put up with them, their "art" and their well-funded and ever-louder "consciences."

In explaining the aesthetics behind Miss Finley's theatrical performance of smearing chocolate all over her nude body, the Times, with its customary patience for us lesser folk who can't be expected to understand things like art, writes that the chocolate-body smearing was really a scene from Miss Finley's "We Keep Our Victims Ready," in which

she applied chocolate cake frosting to her bare torso as a symbol of the violation of women's bodies." Presumably Miss Finley wrote "We Keep Our Victims Ready" all by herself, just like a grown-up dramatist. Nevertheless, Eugene O'Neill she's not.

Now, she complains, "I became a household joke" because of the publicity given her act. "I was depicted as some raving lunatic. . . . I lost my sense of humor and felt enormous anxiety." Poor, poor Miss Finley. No doubt the several thousand dollars she and her lawyers have skimmed off the taxpayers will make her smile once more.

As for the others, each of them has a similar tale of woe. Mr. Fleck, for instance, whined on the Oprah Winfrey Show that he "was made to feel like a disgusting pervert leeching on the taxpayers' money. After that, I flew home in a fetal position." But not everything Mr. Fleck does is connected to sex, homosexual or chocolate-frosted or whatever. One of his masterpieces is a skit called "All I Know Is What I Read in the Newspapers," which (aside from grossly exaggerating the degree of Mr. Fleck's knowledge) consists entirely of what the Times describes as "other people's quotes about famous people, as they appeared in publications from True Confessions to People magazine." What genius!

Of course what is embarrassing about these artists, more so than the obscenity or indecency of their work, is that all of them are so profoundly, amazingly and totally untalented. That's not their fault, and they shouldn't be blamed for it. Those who should get the blame are the characters — in the last administration and this one — who actually gave them any money at all and those in the media and the art world who are brazen enough to claim that what these "artists" inflict upon the public is worth doing for any reason, let alone deserving of taxpayers' money and the encomia of the literati. Robert Mapplethorpe, whatever his excesses with his famous bullwhip, was at least a photographer of some ability, and it tells you a lot about the state of the arts in this country that the performance art of these four fraudulent mediocrities makes you pine for the good old days when Mr. Mapplethorpe was still among us.