# Performance Artist Holly Hughes: Advocating for Queer Voices and Artistic Freedom



In 1990, performance artist Holly Hughes garnered national attention as one of the "NEA Four," artists who challenged the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) after it revoked their funding, a case that reached the Supreme Court. Hughes, renowned for her 1985 play, "The Well of Horniness," taught performance at the University of Michigan and discussed her experiences and insights in an interview with Hyperallergic.

Hughes recounted that in 1990, being one of only three queer artists funded by the NEA during the height of the AIDS epidemic, was a challenging time marked by discrimination and censorship. Despite criticism from both right-wing and certain left-wing groups, the last decade has seen a positive shift with more queer artists openly addressing their identity in their work.

Hughes was mentored by Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw in New York City, where she moved in 1978. She benefited from the feminist collective WOW Café Theater, fostering an environment that encouraged artistic risks and deep exploration.

Hughes reflected on the '90s East Village as a cultural hub with a thriving art scene that facilitated artistic experimentation. However, she noted the predominantly White nature of the experimental avant-garde movement at the time and highlighted the recent increase in visibility for artists of color as a significant shift.

Hughes struggled with feminist movements initially, particularly during the so-called "sex wars." Her work, which often included erotic representation, faced censorship and pushback, even from within the lesbian community. This experience pushed her towards a broader exploration of gender and sexuality using comedy and camp humor.

Being part of the NEA Four brought Hughes significant, albeit challenging, national attention, with media scrutiny and personal attacks impacting her ability to work. The politically charged accusations and negative publicity had lasting effects, diminishing her fearlessness in creating art.

For Hughes, Pride Month carries complex significance. While she acknowledges commercial aspects, she emphasizes its importance for community, celebration, and resistance. She observed resemblances between today’s anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and the stigmatization she experienced decades ago.

Currently, Hughes is organizing a symposium called "Gender Euphoria" at the University of Michigan, featuring queer artists and exploring gender and sexual identity. She is also developing a solo piece tentatively titled “The Indelible in the Hippocampus is the Laughter,” which will tackle the persistence of sexual violence in society through a comedic detective story.

Hughes' career continues to focus on supporting queer art-making and fostering dialogues around gender and sexuality.