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### “What do I, as an artist, provide?”

“If you haven’t already done so, walk away from the desk where you picked up this guide and out into the great, high space of the atrium. Isn’t this a wonderful place? It’s uplifting. It’s like a Gothic cathedral. You can feel your soul rise up with the building around you.” These are the first words of the official audio guide at the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum as heard on Andrea Fraser’s video *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001). Shot with hidden cameras, Fraser’s seven-minute video piece documents an unauthorized intervention into the museum designed by the architect Frank Gehry, the “Little Frank” of the video’s title. During the course of her visit, Fraser listens raptly to the words on the audio guide and experiences what can be described euphemistically as an intense identification with the museum. As the recording rambles on about the glories of this revolutionary architecture, never mentioning the art it contains, Fraser’s face expresses a range of exaggerated emotional states [FIG 1]. When the guide discusses how the great museums of previous ages made visitors feel as if there was no escape from their endless series of corridors, Fraser frowns and looks pensive. When she is told that at the Guggenheim “there is an escape,” she smiles and appears reassured, but soon furrows her brow when the guide admits that “modern art is demanding, complicated, bewildering.” She quickly bursts into a grin of relief when she is told that “the museum tries to make you feel at home, so you can relax and absorb what you see more easily.” The less than subtle implication here is that instead of providing a refuge for contemplation, the museum now moves away from discussing art to turn narcissistically to itself and its affective architecture,

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FIG 1: Stills from *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001

physically and emotionally overwhelming the visitor with its spectacular spaces and grand scale.

As the tour continues, the male voice on the audio guide invites Fraser to reach out and touch the “powerfully sensual” curves of the atrium’s walls. The camera follows her as she willingly obeys and soon, what began as light strokes gives way to a passionate connection with the architecture [FIG 2]. She lifts her dress up above her waist, revealing only a white thong, and begins humping one of Gehry’s hi-tech pillars. Eventually, other museum-goers come into view, stopping and staring with mild interest at this overtly sexual display. However, they appear more perplexed than shocked, as if they were the unsuspecting participants in a gag akin to those played out on *Candid Camera* or *America’s Funniest Home Videos*.<sup>1</sup>

*Little Frank and His Carp* is a send-up of contemporary museological seduction that highlights two of Fraser’s most identifiable strategies: provocative performance that focuses insistently on the body of the artist herself, and incisive institutional analysis. Since the mid-1980s, Fraser has achieved renown for her work in critiquing institutions and dramatizing a desiring relationship between art and its audiences. Influenced by feminism, psychoanalysis, appropriation art, and site-specificity, her practice has often centered on sociological performance and discursive analysis of various art world positions and postures: the docent, the curator, the visitor, the collector, the critic, the art historian, and, as the title of this exhibition suggests, the artist.

Fraser is associated with a third generation of practitioners of institutional critique, a practice that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in reaction to the growing commodification of art and the prevailing ideals of art’s autonomy and universality. Closely related to conceptual and site-specific art, institutional critique is concerned with the disclosure and demystification of how the artistic subject as well as the art object are staged and reified by the art institution. Fraser’s work is differentiated from a first wave of critical practitioners—Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke—in that she treats the institution as a set of positions and social relations rather than a physical site in which institutional power can be clearly located. Her practice answers to a more sociological and psychoanalytic model than the phenomenological and spatial models proffered by her predecessors. Fraser’s

1 Helen Molesworth previously noted the gag effect of Fraser’s video. See Molesworth, *Image Stream* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2003), 15.

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FIG 2: Stills from *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001

earliest works emerged out of 1980s appropriation art, as practiced by Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, and Louise Lawler, among others, yet she extends this gesture to include not only the appropriation of objects, images, and texts, but also positions, forms, and functions.

In an era marked by the rise of the corporate mega-museum and the global art market, the notion of the “institution” has been vastly expanded to include corporate sponsorship, international biennials and art fairs, the increasing professionalization of the art field, and the rise of supranational museum brands.<sup>2</sup> Artists who endeavor to pursue a politicized artistic practice are forced to ask themselves, On what basis is it now possible to evaluate, let alone critique, let alone resist, these trends? If the historical avant-garde’s models of resistance now seem untenable and the critical engagements of the 1960s and 1970s are no longer applicable, what strategies might be found to navigate the artistic field as it exists today?

These questions abound as artists, curators, critics, and theorists continue to reassess the viability of a practice of institutional critique in light of the staggering proliferation of the institution brought about by both public demand and by politicians and corporations.<sup>3</sup> French artist Daniel Buren recently suggested that through global proliferation, art institutions have actually lost their definitional power and authority, as they are no longer the chief administrators of value, but rather assume a central role in an ever more diverse culture industry.<sup>4</sup> Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, in accordance with Buren, has asserted that we are living in a moment when there is no “outside” and when the museum has become “a meaningless context in which to perform critical exercises.”<sup>5</sup>

Fraser’s position echoes that of Buren and Eliasson in that she too recognizes it is no longer a question of being against or outside of the institution, for, in fact, “we are the institution.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of simply relinquishing a belief in maintaining a practice of resistance, however, Fraser turns institutional critique upon itself by enacting its inherent contradictions and complicities. In recent years, she has taken to describing her particular practice of institutional critique as an ethical one in that she does not work in opposition to the institution so much as within it, interrogating, through strategic interventions, the manner in which cultural producers not only critique but

2 The Guggenheim stands as the pioneering model for the global, corporate museum. Under the leadership of Thomas Krens, the museum has set out to become an international chain of satellite institutions operating in semiautonomous fashion. Abu Dhabi’s \$27 billion tourist and cultural development on Saadiyat Island is currently set to include a Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry, as well as a Louvre Abu Dhabi, designed by Jean Nouvel. See

Alan Riding, “The Industry of Art Goes Global,” *The New York Times* (March 28, 2007).

3 This discussion has been played out in numerous contemporary art magazines and journals and has been debated at several conferences and symposia. In 2005 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art hosted a conference on institutional critique in which Fraser participated. This resulted in the recent publication *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C.

Welchman (Zürich: Jrp/Ringier; Southern California Consortium of Art Schools, 2007).

4 Daniel Buren, “In Conversation: Daniel Buren & Olafur Eliasson,” *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (May 2005): 210.

5 Olafur Eliasson, “In Conversation: Daniel Buren & Olafur Eliasson,” *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (May 2005): 210.

6 Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 283.

also participate in the reproduction of relations of power.<sup>7</sup> Fraser does not flinch at implicating herself as a willing participant in this system and eschews the notion of critical distance. By inhabiting rather than idealistically transcending the ambiguities associated with contemporary manifestations of institutional critique, she makes this conflict an unmistakable part of her work.

What we are left with is an artistic practice that no longer expresses certainty or transparency—what once defined politicized artistic practice—but rather one that pointedly articulates and exemplifies ambivalence and contradiction, leaving the question of meaning somewhat open and malleable. Indeed, after watching *Little Frank and His Carp*, one may find it humorous and engaging, while overlooking the critical intent that underpins the work. In her 2003 essay, “‘Isn’t This a Wonderful Place?’ (A Tour of the Guggenheim Bilbao),” the artist perceptively examines Gehry’s museum as an inevitable example of the success of museum-driven urban revitalization plans and the effects of global tourism, yet there appears to be a disjuncture between the rigorously theoretical position she conveys in her text and the alluring video.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, this essay will examine the complex relationship between theory and practice that has come to define Fraser’s particular brand of institutional critique. Specific focus will be placed on the manner in which the artist productively holds certain dichotomies in tension—concepts / seduction, intellect / emotion, affirmation / resistance—creating provocations that challenge and expose contemporary systems of artistic production and consumption from within.

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As demonstrated in the range of works making up this exhibition, Fraser’s primary strategies have included the parody of various subject positions and institutionalized forms within the art world (the exhibition brochure, the museum tour, the welcome speech), the superimposition of images, texts, and interests to produce often discordant results, and the excessive enactment of affect and intense emotional experience as evidenced in contemporary art and art discourse. In order for her analytic strategies to remain relevant for a contemporary context, she continues to revisit, revise, and pursue new approaches that parallel shifting sociocultural, economic, and political contexts.

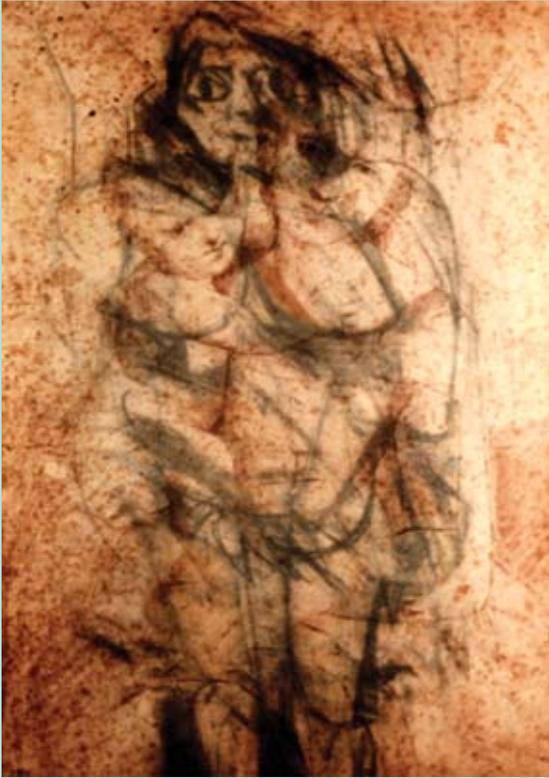
7 Andrea Fraser, “Art at the Intersection of Social Fields,” in *Visual Worlds*, ed. John R. Hall, Blake Stimson, and Lisa Tamiris Becker (London: Routledge, 2005), 72.

8 Andrea Fraser, “‘Isn’t This a Wonderful Place?’ (A Tour of a Tour of the Guggenheim Bilbao),” *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 233–60. Fraser’s writings are an inherent part of her artistic practice that span several genres, including art criticism, performance scripts, tributes, essays that examine public and private institutions, and more theoretical investigations.



Turner

FIG 3: *Woman I / Madonna and Child 1506–1967*, 1984



**FIG 4:** *Untitled (de Kooning/  
Raphael Drawing) #3,*  
1984/2005



**FIG 5:** *Untitled (Pollock/Titian) #4,* 1984/2005

One of the earliest works of Fraser’s career took the form of an artist’s book entitled *Woman / Madonna and Child 1506–1967* (1984) [FIG 3], a parody of an exhibition brochure meant only for distribution in museum and art bookstores. To produce the brochure she wove together appropriated fragments from art historical monographs on the work of Willem de Kooning and Raphael. The cover superimposes the signatures of both artists, while the seven color plates include “reproductions” created by layering slides of de Kooning’s paintings of “Women” and Raphael’s paintings of the “Madonna and Child.” The book calls attention to and disrupts the normative representations of unified artistic subjects and, in particular, how that construction is articulated in relation to representations of women. In layering these stylistically opposed paintings she visually collapses the Madonna / whore dichotomy running throughout much of Western art and directly targets the patriarchal veneration of Renaissance and Modern masters. This project was also most certainly prompted by the return of neo-expressionist painting in the 1980s and the often inflated macho rhetoric surrounding the associated practices of gestural painting.

Until very recently, the images created in association with this project were explicitly never intended to be reproduced and reified as discrete photographic prints. However, in 2005, Fraser returned to these images and produced a series of editioned C-prints for sale through a commercial gallery.<sup>9</sup> By reappropriating her own appropriations, she internalized her earlier critique while simultaneously working to upend it. While the juxtaposition of a Pollock painting with one by Titian in *Untitled (Pollock / Titian) #4* (1984/2005) [FIG 5] results in an undeniably sensual image, other works, such as those juxtaposing Raphael and de Kooning images [FIGS 4,6,7], read as overtly violent distortions of canonical images of women painted by men in different artistic eras. What Fraser successfully creates with these images is a palimpsest of irreconcilable interests, resulting in a deliberately constructed form of dissonance that she aptly describes as “grotesque.”<sup>10</sup>

Fraser gained early fame with her parodic performances as Jane Castleton, a volunteer docent with a dilettante’s knowledge of art, whose tour of collection highlights at the Philadelphia Museum of Art superimposed the discourses of the nineteenth-century art museum and the poor house, producing a witty critique of the

9 In preparation for her 2003 retrospective, Fraser went through all of her works and rediscovered this early series of superimposed images. She decided to produce those images that were not originally included in the 1984 exhibition brochure as C-prints. These include juxtapositions of works by Jackson Pollock and Titian as well as de Kooning and Raphael. (Andrea Fraser, in a telephone conversation with the author, April 4, 2007.)

10 Bennett Simpson, “Fantasies of the Knowable Object: Interview with Andrea Fraser,” *Purple*, no. 12 (Summer 2002): 146.



**FIG 6:** *Untitled (de Kooning/Raphael) #2, 1984/2005*



**FIG 7:** *Untitled (de Kooning/Raphael) #1*, 1984/2005

museum as an institution for the discipline of classes without taste [FIG 8]. Instead of manipulating a presentational format produced by the museum, Fraser's docent performances involved the complex activities of scripting, rehearsing, and exaggeratedly enacting the conflicted position of the museum's representative. *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989) extends the mode of art-as-critical research developed by artists such as Hans Haacke and Louise Lawler in that it exists as a performance, a videotape, and an extensively researched text constructed of quotations from archival sources and museum publications.<sup>11</sup> Although she appears knowledgeable, Jane's tour effectively negates the didactic function of the institution in that she refuses to convey to the public what it is they want or desire from the museum. Instead, Jane offers a seemingly schizophrenic yet subversive layering of disparate descriptions of the art in the museum, of the museum building, of the people of Philadelphia, of the museum's founders, and of the museum's mission. Fraser's tour exists not only as an ironic re-presentation of institutional discourse, but also as a strategic move away from the work of art and towards the social relations that surround art objects.

While Michel Foucault's work on prison systems and Sigmund Freud's concept of psychoanalytic transference provided the theoretical foundations for Fraser's docent performances, it is French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on the role of culture in the wielding of symbolic power as a source of domination and social differentiation that most profoundly informs her practice to date. Between the mid-1960s and his death in 2002, Bourdieu explored the hierarchies and conflicts of the art world. In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), his most comprehensive text on the subject, he depicts the art world as a "field of struggles" where agents—artists, critics, curators, dealers, collectors, academics—engage in competition for control of interests and resources, and where "belief in the value of the work" is part of the reality of the work.<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu understood the work of art as a manifestation of the cultural field as a whole, "in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated."<sup>13</sup>

It was Bourdieu's reflexive methodology, perhaps even more than his account of the cultural field, that turned Fraser into an enthusiast. Reflexivity is one of the major tenets of Bourdieu's sociological practice, and Fraser has openly credited this

11 Fraser's script for "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk" was first published in *October* 57 (Summer 1991): 104–22, and includes stage directions, epigraphs, and extensive footnotes.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 37.

13 *Ibid.* Although Bourdieu is recognized for his published book in collaboration with

Haacke (*Free Exchange*, 1995), few scholars of contemporary art have engaged with his theories of the art world. While some see his work as an attack on the discipline of art history, others note an implicit circularity in his theories, claiming his approach is better at analyzing how culture works to legitimate a status quo than at examining the complexities of social change or rupture, and thus induces at times a sense of political paralysis. See Richard

Hooker, Dominic Paterson, and Paul Stirton, "Bourdieu and the Art Historians," in *Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture*, ed. Bridget Fowler (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 212–27; and Nick Prior, "Having Ones' Tate and Eating It: Transformations of the Museum in a Hypermodern Era," in *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies and the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 61.



**FIG 8:** Still from *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989

aspect of his work with convincing her of “the fallacy of any attempt to think of art outside of or opposed to its institutions.”<sup>14</sup> According to Bourdieu, failure to objectify and analyze the relationship between the analyzer and his or her object of analysis can result in the analyzer (read: artist, curator, art historian) assuming a privileged position and effacing relations of power that may be inherent in the relationship. In her extensive writings, which are a central part of Fraser’s critical practice, the artist repeatedly reveals just how thoroughly she has internalized Bourdieu’s methods.<sup>15</sup> “Every time we speak of the ‘institution’ as other than ‘us’ we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions,” she explained in a 2005 article in *Artforum*. “We avoid responsibility for, or action against, the everyday complicities, compromises, and censorship...which are driven by our own interests in the field and the benefits we derive from it.”<sup>16</sup> In turning institutional critique upon itself, she brings psychological depth to Bourdieu’s sociological analysis by constantly asking what it is we want from art. “All of my work is about what we want from art, what collectors want, what artists want from collectors, what museum audiences want,” she recently explained. “By that, I mean what we want not only economically, but in more personal, psychological and affective terms.”<sup>17</sup>

With her turn to project-based work in the 1990s, Fraser abandoned the character of Jane Castleton and moved away from her singular focus on the context of the museum and gallery. In her *Preliminary Prospectuses* (1993), she attempted to formalize a model of artistic practice as “service provision,” explicitly rejecting the production of discrete art objects in favor of a focused engagement with the social relations that subtend the production of works of art. Paralleling the emergent service economy, Fraser as “herself,” meaning as an artist, offered consulting services to be rendered to institutions on a contractual basis. Her four preliminary prospectuses functioned as both contracts and performance scripts in that they announced her availability for critical services on a per-project basis to individual collectors and corporations, as well as to “cultural constituency organizations” (foundations) and “general audience institutions” (public art programs). The consult involved two phases, the first being “interpretive,” including a site visit to the client’s home or office, and the second being “interventionary,” which included concepts for a private or public installation and additions to a given collection, among other possibilities. For the contracts, Fraser

14 Andrea Fraser in Gregg Bordowitz and Andrea Fraser, “What Do We Want from Art Anyway?: A Conversation,” *Artwurl*, no. 6 (August 2004), [http://artwurl.org/aw\\_past\\_interviews.html](http://artwurl.org/aw_past_interviews.html).

15 Although Fraser’s texts can be read on their own and are published in academic journals, art magazines, and numerous edited volumes, they are intimately bound to her performances and videos, building a rich dialogue among the many facets of her critical practice.

16 Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions,” 283.

17 Andrea Fraser, as quoted in Guy Trebay, “Sex, Art and Videotape,” *The New York Times* (June 13, 2004).

self-consciously appropriated aspects from the field of professional consulting—its forms and dry language—and achieved a humorously illogical result based on the exaggerated use of the very excesses of rationalized bureaucratic organizations.<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the following passage from her prospectus for corporations:

Corporations developing art collections—whether directly or through corporate foundations—often find that this activity becomes a source of discord within their organization. Conflicts arise between the consultant or staff member in charge of the collection and his or her corporate board of directors. Employees with an otherwise strong identification with the corporate culture resist the installation of art objects in their workplace. Clients are intimidated or confused when confronted by works outside of their cultural frame of reference.

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This passage reads as both subversive and comical in its unflattering depiction of the client, yet also highlights one of the fundamental contradictions of avant-garde tradition: artistic transgression is often aimed at the same individuals and institutions that provide artists with support. Unlike so-called “hardcore” traditions of institutional critique that attempt to position artistic freedom against institutionalization, Fraser entered into direct collaboration with corporations in order to find out how art’s autonomy functions or fails to function within such a context. What she found was that the relative autonomy of the artist was the very condition of the symbolic profit derived from corporate sponsorship. While Fraser gained professional prestige from having her name publicized by a particular organization, that organization acquired an equal amount of public prestige by having its name associated with a particular kind of art. In the end, what she offered her clients (museums, corporations, private collectors) was the symbolic value of legitimacy produced by artistic status, what Bourdieu distinguishes as “cultural capital.” By presenting these various interests in such a straightforward manner, Fraser not only exposed the systems that distribute, present, and collect art, but also expressly implicated her own desire for professional recognition as a crucial part of the process as well.

Fraser’s critique of art’s autonomy as a specialized field should not be construed as a rejection of it. While she is one of the toughest critics of autonomy she is also,

18 Fraser’s *A Project in Two Phases* (1994–95), undertaken for the Generali Foundation in April 1994, remains her central project-based work concerning artistic autonomy as a basis for artistic legitimacy. See Fraser, “Art at the Intersection,” 72–79.

paradoxically, one of its most determined defenders. Fraser actively interrogates the partial and ideological character of artistic freedom and the uses to which it is employed—by artists, institutions, and others—in order to secure the relatively autonomous field of artistic production as a possible locus of resistance to the logic, values, and power of the market. Her work does not register a melancholic loss of autonomy, but rather attempts to articulate the different relations, as she puts it, “within which it is caught in the hopes of disturbing, if not facilitating a transformation of these systems.”<sup>19</sup>

At the end of the 1990s, as institutional interest in site-oriented practices such as Fraser’s grew, a strange reversal began to take place in which the artist came to approximate the “work,” instead of the artwork functioning as surrogate for the artist, as is commonly assumed.<sup>20</sup> The analytical self-instrumentalization implied in many site-specific practices became increasingly functionalized in the service of institutional self-promotion. For example, after the critical and popular success of Fred Wilson’s initial site-specific project *Mining the Museum*, undertaken at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, the commissioning of artists to rehang permanent collections as a form of subversive service became a familiar museological practice.<sup>21</sup> Under these conditions, criticism turned into spectacle and marketing, and the idea that one could resist commodification by refusing to produce art objects appeared increasingly untenable.

By 2001, in a move that some have described as selling out, Fraser began producing self-contained video pieces for exhibition and sale in commercial art galleries. This shift, however, was less a transparent embrace of the mainstream art market than a change in strategy whereby the artist adapts her practice and assimilates contemporary developments in the cultural field in order to effect a change from within. “If you want to transform relations,” Fraser explains, “the only chance you have is to intervene in those relations in their enactment, as they are produced and reproduced.”<sup>22</sup> In her recent works, the artist walks a rather precarious line between resistance and participation, holding this contradiction at play and thus making it a key part of her work.

Just as her initial engagement with images was triggered, in part, by the rise of neo-expressionist painting, Fraser’s current production of video work has been prompted

**19** Andrea Fraser, as quoted in Miwon Kwon, “What Do I, As an Artist, Provide?: A Conversation,” *Documents*, no. 23 (Spring 2004): 32.

**20** See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 47.

**21** In that same year, Fraser was invited by Lawrence Rinder, the curator of contemporary art at the University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, to create an installation with objects from the museum’s permanent collection. *Aren’t They Lovely?* (1992) was developed using objects that were part of a bequest by Thérèse Bonney.

**22** Andrea Fraser, interview by Andrew Hunt, “Is This a Site-specific Interview?,” *Untitled*, no. 32 (Summer 2004): 2ff.

by the boom in video installation in the late 1990s. Although she produced several single-channel performance-based tapes earlier in the decade as unlimited editions, she always refused to project them. It was only at the point when video projection assumed a particular cultural currency, used not only in the context of sporting events, rock concerts, and corporate presentations, but by museums as a form of dramatic self-promotion and by artists as a means of creating spectacular, immersive experiences, that Fraser felt free to appropriate it as an institutionalized form.<sup>23</sup>

Since this latest shift in practice, she has started to describe herself as a “formerly hardcore practitioner of institutional critique” and her new work as “more focused on artists than institutions” in that it takes as its subject the art world’s production of and the market’s appropriation of particular kinds of artistic subjectivity.<sup>24</sup> The video *Official Welcome* (2001) [FIG 9] most directly articulates this change in approach. The piece is fundamentally about the ambivalence of artists, Fraser included, who want to be wanted and loved for what they do, even in their transgressions and critiques. *Official Welcome* was originally a thirty-minute performance commissioned by the MICA Foundation in New York City. MICA’s program includes the commission of one major project a year, which is then introduced with an “official welcome” at the private home of the founders. Fraser appropriated this traditionally convivial practice for the project itself and presented the piece in front of a room full of collectors and patrons. The actual performance was conceived to be adapted to different sites, and in the video shown at the Kemper Art Museum, Fraser performs within the exhibition space of her 2003 retrospective at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>25</sup> She begins by thanking everyone for attending while matter-of-factly explaining to the audience how these kinds of introductions are among the rituals of incorporation and exchange that so much of her work is about, and that she facetiously wishes, at times like these, on the occasion of her first major retrospective, that she could perform these rituals without distance and without reflection. As she speaks, her video installation *Soldadera* (1998/2001) plays in the background, which also focuses on the complicated ties between artists and their benefactors, thus layering not only her critique, but her physical image as well.<sup>26</sup>

When experienced as a video projection in the gallery space, every viewer who enters the room in which *Official Welcome* is shown is simultaneously implicated in the

**23** Helen Molesworth notes that “the reciprocity between what might be defined as art world concerns and spectacle culture is a defining characteristic of contemporary projected images.” See Molesworth, *Image Stream*, 14.

**24** Andrea Fraser, as quoted by John Miller, “Go For It!” in *Exhibition: Andrea Fraser* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2002), 45.

**25** The introduction is rewritten for each live performance based

on press materials generated for the specific event.

**26** *Soldadera* (*Scenes from Un Banquete en Tetlapayac, A Film by Olivier Debroyse*), produced and directed by Andrea Fraser (two channel DVD installation, 1998/2001). The source of Fraser’s imagery is the experimental documentary *Un Banquete en Tetlapayac*, written and directed by Olivier Debroyse and photographed by Rafael Ortega (DVD, 1998). Debroyse’s film stars, among

others, Andrea Fraser as a revolutionary peasant / woman in the audience (Frances Flynn Paine), Cuauhtémoc Medina as a revolutionary worker, and Lutz Becker as a revolutionary intellectual. For more on *Soldadera*, see *Andrea Fraser, Works: 1984 to 2003*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: DuMont, 2003), 222–27, and James Meyer, “The Strong and the Weak: Andrea Fraser and the Conceptual Legacy,” *Grey Room* 17 (Fall 2004): 82–107.



FIG 9: Stills from *Official Welcome*, 2001 (Hamburg version, 2003)

work, physically drawn in by the life-size projection of Fraser’s body and effectively becoming part of her audience. Unlike some contemporary video projects that follow an exacting installation format, *Official Welcome* exists in an unlimited edition, expressly undermining the creation of an unreproducible, singularized viewing experience.<sup>27</sup>

Following her introductory remarks, the artist quickly and imperceptibly shifts roles, mimicking the personae of nine different pairs of artists and their supporters. Her carefully scripted performance, culled from fragments of artists’ statements, interviews, critics’ essays, and curators’ speeches, is at once funny, disruptive, engaging, and, at times, downright discomfiting.<sup>28</sup> Halfway through the piece, she assumes the persona of a troubled post-feminist art star, begins to undress, and flatly states “I’m not a person today. I’m an object in an art work. It’s about emptiness.” She then steps out from behind the podium and poses for a few seconds in her bra and underwear in the style of a Vanessa Beecroft model. Thus, in addition to appropriating artist statements and interviews, she also parodies performance art. Just before concluding, Fraser puts her clothes back on, both closing her quote and mitigating the subversive power once associated with the avant-garde act of public denuding and its attack on the boundaries traditionally separating what is public and what is private. The shock factor appeared lost on the audience as well, which looked unmoved and devoid of affect, as if the conditions of Fraser’s nudity and her overtly seductive and objectifying performance were self-evident to everyone in attendance.

After spending most of the 1990s focused on the social and economic interests invested in art, work like *Official Welcome* brings the focus emphatically back to the artist’s body and can be interpreted as a reengagement with the more subjective and gendered aspects of the art world. The figure of the irreverent “bad boy” artist, epitomized by Damien Hirst, is juxtaposed with the likes of so-called “bad girls” Tracey Emin and Kara Walker. Fraser’s performance also brings our attention back to the symbiotic relationship between avant-garde transgression and its patrons. Mimicking not only the words, but also the postures and affectations of both contemporary artists and their supporters, Fraser frankly exposes avant-garde transgression as a necessary element in the perpetuation of established rituals of exchange between cultural and financial capital.<sup>29</sup>

27 All of Fraser’s scripted performances are issued in unlimited edition videos. The fact that these works are distributed as unlimited editions is intended to undermine future speculation. The videos are not produced for mass distribution, but rather exist within a system of licensing.

28 Fraser quoted or paraphrased numerous sources, including artists Matthew Barney, Kara Walker, Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Damien Hirst; critics Benjamin Buchloh, Jerry Saltz, Dave Hickey, and Arthur Danto; and celebrities Mel Brooks, Bill Clinton, and Dennis Hopper.

29 See Miller, “Go For It!,” 38.

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FIG 10: Stills from *A Visit to the Sistine Chapel*, 2005

In *Little Frank and His Carp* and in her most recent video, *A Visit to the Sistine Chapel* (2005) [FIG 10], Fraser no longer presents complex scripts constructed from meticulous research, but more simply lets the museum speak for itself via its audio guide. As a visitor to the Guggenheim and the Vatican, Fraser is immersed in the affective climate generated by the audio guides, which support and augment, through epideictic rhetoric, her immediate, physical experience of a given exhibition. The soundtracks presented by each museum not only induce particular reasoning and identifications on Fraser’s part, but also put her body in motion, drawing her through a series of suggestions, emotions, and moods.<sup>30</sup> In both videos, she expresses an excessive receptivity to the museums’ methods of seduction, performing actions that, as the introduction to this essay made clear, were never intended.

*A Visit to the Sistine Chapel* is a fitting pendant piece to *Little Frank and His Carp*. Whereas the audio guide at the Guggenheim Bilbao compelled an overtly sexual response, the Vatican Museums’ elicits a more chaste and pious character. This proves to be a challenging task, as the camera captures the artist’s attention being constantly diverted by the ubiquitous museum gift shops that pop up around every corner and by the sheer mass of tourists surrounding her, wearing headphones, taking pictures, and making their own videos of their art experience. Fraser’s videotaped visit to the Vatican effectively highlights the disparity between the type of religious and contemplative encounter suggested by the audio guide and the actual experience, which, due to the effects of mass tourism, is more akin to that of an amusement park, complete with immense crowds corralled into long lines leading up to the main attraction.<sup>31</sup>

Fraser’s radical move away from her earlier project-based works and toward her recent production of self-contained videos, with their focus on her body within the affective museum environment, may also be interpreted, in part, as a reaction to the current institutional promotion of “relational aesthetics” as well as to what Fraser has derisively termed the “affective turn” in contemporary art and art discourse. Coined by French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in the late 1990s, “relational aesthetics” describes artistic practices that engage with “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”<sup>32</sup> Artists such as Vanessa Beecroft, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija,

30 Jennifer Fisher’s introductory examination of the function of museum audio guides was very helpful here. See her “Speeches of Display: The Museum Audioguides of Sophie Calle, Andrea Fraser, and Janet Cardiff,” *Parachute*, no. 94 (April/June 1999): 24.

31 The notion that major art museums have become entertainment centers that must compete with malls, movie theaters, and other leisure complexes is a prominent one in current museological discourses.

32 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002), 14.

Philippe Parreno, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres are frequently cited as practitioners of relational aesthetics based on their creation of “free areas” and time spans whose rhythms work against those that lead to increased social fragmentation and alienation in everyday life.<sup>33</sup> The prevalence of these relational practices has been framed as both a response to the shift from a goods-based to a service-based economy in the 1980s and 1990s and a direct reaction to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization. The emphasis on immediate experience, collective spectator participation, and conviviality recalls works from the 1960s, but Bourriaud explicitly distances contemporary work from that of previous generations by claiming that today’s artists have a different attitude towards social change: instead of trying to radically alter their environment, he argues, artists create “various forms of *modus vivendi* permitting fairer social relations;” social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to “everyday micro-utopias.”<sup>34</sup>

While Fraser’s service-based works of the 1990s were nominally related to the practices just described in that they actively engaged with social relationships and an art of discourse rather than an art of individual contemplation, she has since explicitly positioned her own procedures in direct opposition to what she calls the “neo-Fluxus practices” of relational aesthetics.<sup>35</sup> According to Fraser, the contemporary institutionalization of relational aesthetics demonstrates the degree to which “the avant-garde’s aim to integrate ‘art into life praxis’ has evolved into a highly ideological form of escapism,” resulting in merely compensatory spaces for what is lacking in everyday human relations.<sup>36</sup> Fraser is just one of many dissenting voices that have questioned Bourriaud’s framing of a diversity of artistic procedures in recent years for his seemingly nondialectical attempts to equate hospitality with democracy and for his hopes to rebuild social infrastructures by providing moments of reciprocity and inclusiveness. As suggested by art historian Hal Foster, for all its discursivity, relational aesthetics and its emphasis on social experience may simply aestheticize the more convivial procedures of our service economy—such as invitations, meetings, and appointments—reproducing rather than critiquing its logic.<sup>37</sup>

Bourriaud’s emphasis on micro-utopian communities and nonconflictual models of social interactivity pursues a project of affect that relies on what some see as a regressive return to a notion of authentic experience, disregarding postmodernist

**33** *Ibid.*, 15. Most of the artists mentioned in Bourriaud’s book were featured in his exhibition *Traffic* at the Centre d’Arts Plastiques Contemporain in Bordeaux in 1993.

**34** *Ibid.*, 45.

**35** Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions,” 283.

**36** *Ibid.*

**37** Hal Foster, “Chat Rooms (2004),” reproduced in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel Ventures Limited, 2006), 195. For more recent critiques of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, see Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79; and Walead Beshty, “Neo-Avantgarde and Service Industry: Notes on the Brave New World of Relational Aesthetics,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 59 (September 2005).

attempts to dismantle just such a notion.<sup>38</sup> The “affective turn” in contemporary art and art discourse, in Fraser’s mind, merely provides a jargon of authenticity and shared humanity in the face of an overwhelming alienation resulting from the total commodification of the artistic field now free from local and national constraints.<sup>39</sup> As is typical of Fraser’s practice, even while she denigrates this turn her videos are simultaneously implicated in it, sustaining a tension between collusion with and performative critique of the elevated status of emotions in art and art experience. During her visits to the Guggenheim Bilbao and the Vatican Museums, for instance, she exaggerates to an absurd extent the manner in which these prepackaged audio guides substitute sensuousness for concepts and emotions for intellect. She thus amplifies the contradictions inherent in recent artistic and discursive developments while consistently presenting herself as a self-conscious participant. The destabilizing potential of Fraser’s work is located precisely in her ability to make the social, economic, and psychological relations that subtend the existing artistic field manifest, thus complicating one’s ability to simply perform the role or fulfill the function of the visitor, the docent, the curator, the art historian, and of the artist within the changing structures of today’s art world. As she has done throughout her career, Fraser asks us to actively question what it is we really want from art.

**Meredith Malone**

Assistant Curator

**38** There are a wide range of practices and theories that are summarily grouped under the rubric “relational aesthetics.” In some relational projects, affect or affective reciprocity and harmonious human exchange are seen as the central methods of achieving the micro-utopia of which Bourriaud speaks. Rirkrit Tiravanija’s food-based events are among the most prominent examples in which participants are asked to negotiate between the status of

passive consumers and that of guests and protagonists. For an insightful and critical reading of Tiravanija’s work, see Janet Kraynak, “Rirkrit Tiravanija’s Liability,” *Documents*, no. 13 (Fall 1998): 26–40.

**39** Andrea Fraser, “The Economy of Affect,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 65 (March 2007): 156.

# Biography

Born 1965, Billings, Montana

School of Visual Arts, New York, 1982–84

Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program,  
New York, 1984–85

New York University, New York, 1985–86

Lives and works in Los Angeles

Andrea Fraser's work is exhibited in both the United States and internationally. She has had numerous solo exhibitions, including a mid-career retrospective, *Andrea Fraser, Works: 1984 to 2003*, organized by the Kunstverein, Hamburg, in 2003, and a survey of her video work presented by the Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, in 2002. Fraser's work is in public collections worldwide, including the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery, Berlin; and Tate Modern, London. She was a founding member of the feminist performance group, The V-Girls (1986–96); the project-based artist initiative Parasite (1997–98); and the cooperative art gallery Orchard (2005–present). In 2005, the MIT Press published *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*. The artist recently relocated from New York to California to join the art faculty of the University of California, Los Angeles.

This exhibition is the second in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum's Focus exhibition series, which explores a theme, a single work, or a group of works by a single artist from the permanent collection. Support for *Andrea Fraser, "What do I, as an artist, provide?"* was provided by the Hortense Lewin Art Fund and members of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

**Andrea Fraser, "What do I as an artist, provide?"**  
**Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum**  
**May 11–July 16, 2007**

# Exhibition Checklist

***Woman I / Madonna and Child 1506–1967*, 1984 (Ill. p. 7)**  
Artist book, color offset printing, 8 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub>"  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***Untitled (de Kooning / Raphael) #1*, 1984 / 2005 (Ill. p. 11)**  
Digital C-print, ed. 5, 40 x 30"  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***Untitled (de Kooning / Raphael) #2*, 1984 / 2005 (Ill. p. 10)**  
Digital C-print, ed. 5, 40 x 30"  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***Untitled (de Kooning / Raphael Drawing) #3*, 1984 / 2005 (Ill. p. 8)**  
Digital C-print, ed. 5, 40 x 30"  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***Untitled (Pollock / Titian) #4*, 1984 / 2005 (Ill. p. 8)**  
Digital C-print, ed. 5, 40 x 61"  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, University purchase, Parsons Fund, 2006

***Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989 (Ill. p. 13)**  
DVD, 29 min.  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***Preliminary Prospectuses*, 1993**  
Presentation of various documentation materials: "For Individuals,"  
"For Corporations," "For Cultural Constituency Organizations," and  
"For General Audience Institutions"  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001 (Ill. pp. 2, 4)**  
DVD NTSC, ed. 25, 6 min.  
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, University purchase, Parsons Fund, 2006

***Official Welcome*, 2001 (Hamburg version, 2003) (Ill. p. 18)**  
Video installation of videotaped performance, 31 min.  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

***A Visit to the Sistine Chapel*, 2005 (Ill. p. 20)**  
DVD, ed. 8, 12 min.  
Courtesy of the artist and Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

**MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM**



**Washington University in St. Louis**

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