Shot with hidden cameras inside the Bilbao Guggenheim, Andrea Fraser’s seven-minute video, *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001), documents an unauthorized intervention into the museum designed by the architect Frank Gehry, the “Little Frank” of the work’s title. During the course of her visit, cameras follow Fraser as she rents the museum’s official audio guide—which doubles as the video’s soundtrack—and listens raptly to the British male narrator as he describes the sensuous grandeur of Gehry’s building. As she obeys the instructions to surrender, in amazement, to the genius of the architect and the power of his titanium and glass structure, she begins to vigorously rub her body against a pillar, experiencing an intense and physical identification with the museum. The video is a send-up of contemporary museological seduction that takes as its target an institution that has, since the 1997 opening of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, become the pioneering model for global, supranational museum brands and neoliberal ideals.¹

¹Under the leadership of Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim 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). Fraser is just one of many critics to address the positive and negative aspects of museum-driven urban revitalization, what is called the “Bilbao effect.” For further perspectives see the excellent essays published in *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, ed. Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, 2005).
Fraser’s work is closely associated with the conceptually driven artistic practice known as institutional critique. Throughout her now twenty-year career, she has questioned art’s institutional and economic relationships through humorous, performative interventions that often center on the critical analysis of various art world positions, functions, and didactic forms: the docent, the curator, the collector, the artist, as well as the museum brochure, the exhibition catalogue, and the audio guide. After first examining the manner in which Fraser’s sensual performance at the Guggenheim disrupts and critically exposes the affective command of the museum’s official audio guide, this essay will focus on the unstable position of the video’s viewer.

Unlike Fraser’s earlier works, such as *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), in which she assumed the role of Jane Castleton, a fictitious docent, and presented a subversive tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art based on extensive research culled from archival sources and the museum’s publications, *Little Frank* was inspired by the over-the-top institutional “voice”—complete with sexually suggestive language, anecdotes and grandiloquent descriptions of technological prowess—presented by the Bilbao Guggenheim. As the artist excessively demonstrates in *Little Frank*, the aural affect of audio guides can be intensely influential, even to the extent of displacing the viewer’s own inner dialogue and intuitive responses. Museum audio guides involve the

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2 The practice of institutional critique first 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, practitioners of institutional critique are 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 particular practice is also strongly influenced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s exploration of the conflicts and hierarchies of the art world and the role of culture in the wielding of symbolic power as a source of social differentiation.

3 In *Museum Highlights*, Fraser superimposed the discourses of the nineteenth-century art museum and the poor house, producing a witty critique of the museum as an institution for the discipline of classes without taste. Fraser’s script for this performance was first published as “Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk” in *October 57* (Summer 1991): 104-22, and includes stage directions, epigraphs, and extensive footnotes.
viewer in the alluring climate generated by the sound script through the tone of the spoken voice and the sense of presence it generates, directly engaging the viewer’s emotional sensibility. The soundtrack of *Little Frank* not only compels particular reasoning and identifications on Fraser’s part, but actually puts her body into motion, drawing her through a series of suggestions, emotional states, and sensorial experiences. During her visit to the Guggenheim, the artist internalizes the amplified rhetoric of the museum and exaggerates, to an absurd extent, the manner in which the prepackaged tour champions Gehry’s genius, the inspiring power of his architecture, and the freedom of its unprogrammed flows. Visitors to the museum are encouraged to understand their experience as a unique and highly intimate one despite the fact that the Guggenheim is an international tourist destination and has become something of a global franchise.

“Isn’t this a wonderful place?” the guide suggests in reference to the museum’s atrium during the first few minutes of the audio tour. “It’s uplifting. It’s like a gothic cathedral. You can feel your soul rise up with the building around you.” As the recording rambles on about the glories of this revolutionary architecture, never mentioning the art it contains, Fraser mockingly enacts a series of exaggerated emotional states in direct correlation to the tour’s prompts: she appears variously amazed, pensive, relieved, perplexed, and reassured. As the audio guide continues, the voice of the male narrator invites Fraser to reach out and touch the “powerfully sensual” curves of the atrium’s

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5 The script of the audio guide makes a clear distinction between the structured and rigid format of museums of previous ages versus Gehry’s atrium, which is described metaphorically as a pumping heart through which people freely pass.
6 Lucy Lippard recently addressed the mass appeal of the Bilbao Guggenheim, stating, “Like its contents, the often-forgotten art, it will be as familiar to international visitors as other franchises have become—upscale McCulture, like Armani or Prada.” See Lippard, “On Not Having Seen the Bilbao Guggenheim,” in *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, 68.
walls. The camera follows her as she willingly obeys, becoming so excited by the invitation to feel the walls of the building that she is driven to perform actions the museum never intended.

In analyzing Little Frank and His Carp’s humorous critique of the museum’s inflated rhetoric and its affective architecture, there is another element that must be taken into account, namely, the role of the viewer. To understand this role we need to consider the choices that the artist made in the conception and production of the video. Four individuals with hidden cameras shot the footage, which was then carefully edited and pieced together.⁷ The perspective of the video frequently shifts so that the viewer is continuously placed in various positions of identification—with the protagonist, the passerby, the onlooker, and, in one instance, that of museum surveillance—while also being displaced through the use of wider, less intimate shots. At moments when the camera is focused solely on Fraser’s body or actually assumes the artist’s viewpoint, there is a seeming neutralization of the medium. As the camera enters the building’s atrium, for example, the viewer does not follow behind the artist, but rather sees what she sees: a sign detailing the procedures for renting the museum’s audio guide. In other instances, the camera follows closely behind Fraser as she moves through the atrium and begins to feel the smooth surface of a pillar. One of the most humorous shots of the short video comes after Fraser stops rubbing up against this pillar and returns her dress to its normal position. As she looks behind her the camera zooms out and pans to the right to reveal a large crowd of onlookers watching from a few feet away. Seeing the audience displaces the spectator, for the viewer can no longer assume a direct identification with

⁷ María Mur, Arantza Pérez, José Luis Roncero, and Alfonso Toro employed hidden cameras to tape the artist’s visit to the Guggenheim Bilbao. Several takes were necessary to produce the final version.
the crowd. This is a key moment in the film, as the artist is caught in the act, yet no one from the museum staff or the general public intervenes. Eventually, an older man walks by and, apparently unaware of what just transpired, strokes the surface of the same pillar at the suggestion of the audio guide, thus comically validating the motivation for Fraser’s outrageous actions.

In recent years, Fraser 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 and performances, the manner in which cultural producers not only expose but also participate in the reproduction of relations of power in the art world. The artist’s analytic practice does not express certainty or transparency—what once defined politicized artistic practice—but rather pointedly articulates and exemplifies the contradictions and complicities, ambitions and ambivalence, of which institutional critique is often accused. The destabilizing potential of Little Frank and His Carp is located precisely in its ability to make manifest the complex and often overlooked social, psychological, and economic relations that subtend today’s art world, prompting critics, curators, artists, and visitors alike to reflect on their role within this system and to question what it is they really want from art.