

**FRIEDRICH PETZEL | GALLERY**

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**GO FOR IT!**

**ANDREA FRASER**

**"Arma Virumque Cano"**

**American Fine Arts, Co. at P.H.A.G., Inc.**

**and**

**Friedrich Petzel Gallery**

Anyone familiar with Andrea Fraser's work up until now must be surprised by her new posture as a player on the gallery circuit. As a leading proponent of institutional critique, in 1994 she championed service work. Services downplayed individual authorship and offered a basis for compensating project work in lieu of the usual return on "transferrable products." What is more important, it promised a means of dissolving the identity of the supposedly autonomous artwork. Yet staging a double gallery show seems to be a classic, 80s-style power play that has everything to do with defining an oeuvre and selling it. This, however, betokens less an embrace of the mainstream than it does a change in tactics.

*Official Welcome* (2001), a two-channel video of a performance commissioned by the MICA Foundation, amounts to a flanking maneuver on critique-as-usual. The setting for the event was intimate: the living room of New York collectors Howard and Barbara Morse, who started the foundation. Fraser enacted nine exchanges between artists and their sponsors, playing all the various parts. These greetings and thank yous, formalized and over-polite, are an obligatory – therefore quickly forgotten – byproduct of humdrum institutional existence. Because they mark the exchange of cultural capital for financial capital, however, these are crucial – crucially embarrassed – moments. Mimicking them affords an almost surreptitious look at the muffled antagonism behind the ill-expressed shame. The sponsor wants public recognition as a benefactor while the artist wants to appear uncompromised by money. Thus, welcoming is one of the uneasy rites of transgression and

assimilation that go on between artists and their patrons, one that converts – to cite Brian O’Doherty – mutual animosity and suspicion into a proto-appreciation. To script her monolog-as-dialog, Fraser quoted or paraphrased many sources, including artists Matthew Barney, Ross Bleckner, Kara Walker, Chris Ofili, Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, Thomas Hirschhorn, Penny Arcade, Shirin Neshat and Damien Hirst, critics Benjamin Buchloh, Jerry Saltz, Dave Hickey, Michael Kimmelman, Arthur Danto, and Katy Siegel and celebrities Mel Brooks, Bill Clinton and Dennis Hopper – among others. For the gallery presentation of this work, Fraser juxtaposed a video projection and a monitor, respectively showing front and side views of the event.

Fraser began with her own thanks, remarks whose artifice and reality, given the context, were pointedly recursive. More sober than what followed, these nonetheless initiated proceedings with the profane spectacle of an artist singing her own praises – albeit in the guise of a legitimizing authority. Next, a series of competing, even irreconcilable, discourses converged on one and the same “annunciator,” heightening their often ridiculous disparities. Even so, the styles of artists’ self-presentation are familiar: the analytical, “my work speaks for itself,” the defiant, the traumatic, the sarcastic, the emotional, the defensive . . . and so on. Likewise for the patrons: the “roast,” the pompous, the vulgar, the jocular, the gushing, the condescending . . . Some artists’ disclaimers verged on bathos: “I think that’s why they gave me the MacArthur! To shut me up!” (Kara Walker?) or “I think the only interesting people are the people who say ‘Fuck off’” (Damien Hirst? Dennis Hopper?). As phonetic material, the “slips of the tongue” Fraser rendered – pregnant pauses, redundancies, compulsive “ums,” grandiloquent flourishes, stuttering and nervous laughter – hinted at wholly other discourses: Tourette’s Syndrome or glossolalia. (These recall the hysteria that chronically threatened Fraser’s recurrent docent persona, Jane Castleton.) Conversely, the sponsors’ addresses – and their various modes of address – all hail (interpolate) their subjects as subjects just as surely as the abrupt injunction, “Hey, you!” As an ideological model, *Official Welcome* invites comparison with Jenny Holzer’s *Truisms*. If Holzer uses a uniform graphic format to suggest a neutralization of conflicting ideologies, Fraser instead examines hegemony. Even allowing that the speaking subject may be ideology’s stooge, all these speeches represent bids for distinction. Their aim is exclusionary, not democratic as Holzer might have it. Of course, as the master scripter, Fraser takes the privileged position, leaving it an open question what parts of this social field she has, inadvertently or not, repressed.

*Exhibition (Samba)* (2001) and *Soldadera (Secens from Un Banquete en Tetlapayac, a film by Olivier Debroise)* (1998/2002) are more oblique. Both are two-channel video projections. In the first, Fraser dances the samba in traditional costume. Mostly, she appears isolated against a black backdrop. This she intercuts with flashes of a Brazilian carnival parade in which she does the same steps. The montage provokes consideration of the self as nonsite vis-a-vis exoticism, on one hand, and commercialization on the other. *Soldadera* concerns, among other things, the uneasy convergence of leftism and esthetics. This installation juxtaposes scenes from Debroise' film about Eisenstein in Mexico. In it, Fraser played the parts of a revolutionary peasant and of Frances Flynn Paine, an associate of Abby Rockefeller's. In the most telling scene, she cracks a smile that throws off the iconography of an otherwise perfectly social realist tableau. Through research, Fraser also discovered that Paine once wrote to Rockefeller that artists "will cease to be reds if we get them artistic recognition."

Recently, Fraser has taken to describing herself, half-facetiously, as "a formerly hard-core practitioner of institutional critique" and her new work as "more focused on artists than institutions." What this means, in practice, is examining the artist not as a point of origin, but as a point of destination. The artist is a figure whose subjectivity is the product of overlapping educational, market and exhibition systems. Collecting and exhibition practices instantiate and reinforce an understanding of art production as a matter of authorship. Conversely, art education not only sanctions the legitimacy of art as a profession but also helps prefigure the artwork's very makeup and recognizability. That student must begin by articulating her or his own position within a professionalized field and by differentiating this from that of others. In this way, the institution of art exists most powerfully as an acquired competence. Such a competency exerts a reciprocal effect on the understanding of art history. To cite Hal Foster's analysis, modernist history for better or worse "is conceived on the model of the individual subject, indeed *as a subject*."<sup>ii</sup> Monographic art criticism especially, as Fraser has noted, produces a particular, retroactive effect: ". . . to recover from a

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<sup>ii</sup> Hal Foster, "What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October*, No. 70 (Fall 1994): p. 29. Philip Rief, further, sees allegory replacing conventional narrative in Freudian texts: ". . . the case history, is indeed, a history – but not in the sense familiar to readers of the novel or any of the classic forms of written history. Precisely at this point Freud may yet alter the way in which both the novel and history will be written. We see in the "anti-roman," as well as in older experiments with the expression of interior consciousness (e.g., Joyce, Woolf), efforts to break beyond the narrative art form. The historians have been slower to learn from Freud: more precisely, they have learned the wrong lesson. So far as it has been influenced by Freud, the writing of history has merely added a checklist of symptoms and their social expressions to the personal factor, as a category of historical causation, instead of using Freud to open up the possibility of reorganizing the structure of historical writing on other than a linear basis." Philip Rief, "Introduction," *Sigmund Freud, Dora: an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, (New York: Norton, 1963) p. 9.

heterogeneous practice a unified ego – the subject of a signature.”<sup>iii</sup> For these reasons, the representation of “being an artist” has become ideal fodder for Fraser’s salvoes.

[ The position of the contemporary artist as one straddling critique and the culture industry necessarily distinguishes the neo-avant-garde from its forerunner: the so-called historical avant-garde. Abandoning claims to autonomy, according to Hal Foster, allows for productively reworking the bases of prior “aesthetic forms, cultural-political strategies, and social positionings..”<sup>iv</sup> Thus too, the role of the individuated artist now doubles back on itself. At first, Fraser’s new posturing might seem to fulfill Peter Bürger’s dire prophecy that the neo-avant-garde is condemned to repeat the historical avant-garde. But mimicry and repetition are hardly the same. Foster, moreover, makes it clear that Marx’s oft-repeated dichotomy between tragedy and farce is too totalizing and too final to hold up as a valid historical principle.

Two levels of mimicry inform Fraser’s current practice. Both the allegorical and practical modes of appropriation arise from the reanimation, through technology, of a long-dormant, mimetic faculty. If the former concerns the testing of reified subject positions, the latter concerns an economy of means; it is always more efficient to reproduce something than to have to start from scratch. Here, video – lacking the auratic quality film has acquired – is a demonstrative medium *par excellence*. First, Fraser’s characterizations within individual works are imitations of others. These come close to conventional acting. Second, Fraser holds out for scrutiny her nascent para-career as a maker of exhibitions and installations, i.e., state-of-the-art, autonomous works.<sup>v</sup> This amounts to playing out a real-life role while draining away its credibility: a kind of mummery.<sup>vi</sup> It offsets the hypocrisy of critical distance, hypocritical because the prestige attached to critique yields a gain in symbolic capital that always can be redeemed later for financial capital. As a precedent, the “Pictures” sensibility subjected the art object to a similar “going through the motions”: Tom Lawson’s strategic version of painting-as-Trojan Horse, Sherrie Levine’s Walker Evans prints or Allan McCollum’s Surrogates (which, in fact, served as props in Fraser’s *May I Help You?*).

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<sup>iii</sup> Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) p. 448.

<sup>iv</sup> Foster, pp. 22-26.

<sup>v</sup> As a kind of body art, these works reiterate and reappropriate the sex appeal of the commodity.

<sup>vi</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines mummery as “Ridiculous or ceremonial play acting . . . Often applied to religious ritual regarded as silly or hypocritical.”

Toward the end of *Official Welcome*, Fraser took off her clothing in stages, stripping first to a Gucci bra, thong and high heels, then removing those too. Odd as it was, this was entirely legible gesture. By the mid-1960s, nudity had become the avant-garde's most well-worn cliché. The naked body served as an index of truth, i.e., that of the natural individual uncorrupted by society. The allegorical implications of nakedness include both commitment (putting one's own body on the line) and demystification (the Emperor's Clothes). Fraser's version is perfunctory. Throughout, she continued her *schtick* without missing a beat – even when mooning the audience and taunting it to kiss her ass. Her composure, like the supposed freedom of a nudist colony, was uncanny. It suggests that naturalism is a form of disavowal. The audience, for its part, was blasé, too. For everyone in attendance, the conditions of nudity were mutually understood. Even so, the effect was to radically *disembody* her speech, underscoring how language superimposes subjectivity onto otherwise disarticulated bodies. Compared with this, Vanessa Beecroft's objectification of live performers comes off as a puerile fantasy. Just before concluding, in the performance's decidedly quirkiest moment, Fraser put her dress and shoes back on. Because dressing in public fails to rise to allegory, it is symbolically inscrutable. One might have expected her simply to exit naked, as did Living Theater actors in *Paradise Now*, but she sidestepped what has become a facile appeal for liberation.

*Art Must Hang* (2001), *Official Welcome*'s immediate precursor, elaborates the mimetic substrate of Fraser's approach. In what is another performance video, she appeared in drag as Martin Kippenberger. She reenacted an impromptu speech he gave for a show of Michel Würthle's drawings at the Club an der Grenze in Austria. Then, as on many other occasions, Kippenberger served as master of ceremonies and, in so doing, usurped the curator, critic or patron's usual prerogative. Kippenberger's style, often dismissed as drunken antics by even his friends, subjected the bad faith of "the cultured" to existential doubt through direct provocation. These kinds of interventions made plain Walter Benjamin's dictum that "every cultural artifact is also a record of repression." Fraser's performance, painstakingly and painfully rendered in a barely understood second language, yields an unforeseen redundancy: farce repeating itself as farce. As a stand-in, her reduced physical stature offset any vestigial bravado her stilted words might still convey. Benjamin Buchloh once argued that, "The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless, docile, and entertaining figure performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on

utopian thought.”<sup>1</sup> For Kippenberger, however, it was the honorific, business-as-usual artist who was the biggest clown. Not surprisingly, Kippenberger’s prime target was Gerhard Richter. If Kippenberger “played at” – rather than embodied – the role of the artist, his confrontations raised the game’s stakes to a point where acting out trumped the dominant reality of everyday life. Through her second-order mimicry, Fraser exposes the sad conversion of Kippenberger’s existential dissent (via his burgeoning legend) to a transitive, assimilated, logic of cultural distinction.

The over-receptive viewer is the object of *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001). Here, a visitor to the Guggenheim Bilbao takes her audio tour utterly to heart. For this, Fraser enlisted several assistants to videotape her inside the museum with hidden cameras. Extolling the wonders of Frank Gehry’s quasi-organic architecture, an ostentatious Acousti-guide voice suggests that the building might even comfort viewers faced with difficult or demanding art. At this prospect, Fraser’s “gullible” brow furrows until she accepts the Acousti-guide’s invitation to reach out and touch one of the museum’s hi-tech columns. Physical contact at once establishes a libidinal bond between viewer and building. Lightly stroking the panel gives way to passionate caresses. The male voice of the audio guide persists; it’s as if the woman is hearing voices. Now swooning, she hikes up her dress and – butt thrust out for all to see – begins humping the column itself. Clearly, the idea that the museum’s building provides a refuge *from* artworks, instead of *for* them, is an odd one. Nonetheless, it is consistent with Frank Lloyd Wright’s avowed hostility toward painting and sculpture. Accordingly, Wright designed his Guggenheim building to be an artwork to compete with those it housed. Gehry, in contrast, maintains a close rapport with sculptors such as Oldenburg, Heizer and Serra. In this spirit, he thinks of his own work as sculpture. Even so, the Guggenheim Bilbao, like Wright’s antecedent, ends up as an assertion of the museum’s primacy over artist and viewer both. Ironically, it is the pliant (over-dominated) visitor’s unbridled passion that disrupts the museological decorum. Bystanders do double-takes, then pretend not to notice. Fraser’s conceit of being too innocent to know better approximates Jerry Rubin’s insurrectionary call (*Do It!*) for students to fuck in the classrooms. The enthusiast, however, simply smooths down her dress and proceeds to the exhibits.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 118. Here, Buchloh referred to the *Commedia della Arte* figures in the paintings of Picasso, Beckmann, Severini vis-a-vis the motifs of Neo-Expressionism – not to the professional artist’s profile as a public figure. Even so, if artists identify with clown figures as representations, acting out is clearly the next step – as Salvador Dali clearly understood.

Even more a propos is Colin de Land's style as an art dealer, namely as the consummate professional whose demeanor hints that the profession itself is a sham. In an interview, de Land once told Fraser that he pursues "another kind of pragmatism . . . in a relation of opposition to a business that makes no sense." Seeking profound distinctions in subtle displacements (in the hodge-podge collection of knick-knacks and gifts littering his office), he stressed, "It's kind of sleight of hand. The process is more interesting than the displacement per se . . ." <sup>vii</sup> Fraser began her MICA talk, conceding she'd have "a tough time topping" de Land's last appearance there. With an outlook akin to his, she considers given representations of being an artist – not least those she inhabits – to be grotesque deformations. Such representations derive not only from commercialization and co-optation, but also from the discourses and practices of resistance. Both play an equal part in forming the actual institution of art.

Since the 1980s, the term appropriation has stood for a well-rehearsed polemic concerning the death of the author and a rupture in formalist genealogy. This second sense of appropriation exemplifies a Baudelairean poetics, but it is no less politicized than the first. Systemic plagiarism and imitation can be traced back as far as Lautrémont's *Maldoror* and *Poesies*. These are the devices of a dissident, counter-history. In his analysis of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*, T.J. Clark noted that Courbet painted his friend, poet and revolutionary Max Buchon, taking part in a special Corpus Christi procession ordered "to atone for Proudhon's blasphemies." In light of his beliefs, Buchon's very presence was, of course, a provocation. Clark argues that "Buchon's joke plays on his audience's doubts about history; he puts the unexpected in contact, confuses codes; instead of an argument he uses an act and its ambiguity," concluding that, be it wisecrack or masterpiece, what counts is what is done to historical material. This kind of displacement, in short, compels the audience to seek "the work itself" in "curious, unexpected places; and, once disclosed in a new location, the work may never look the same again." <sup>viii</sup>

Mummery implies a certain silence, a certain cessation of meaning: to keep mum, a dumb show. Dave Hickey, in his tirade against "the therapeutic institution," claims that the feudal church never demanded belief from its subjects, only participation in its rituals. This suggests why the effects of "going through the motions" are always refractory, not to be deciphered by simply reading the intentions of the mummer back into a supposedly originary gesture. The observer is, at least at first,

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<sup>vii</sup> Andrea Fraser, "Another Kind of Pragmatism," *Forum International*, No. 11 (January 1992): pp. 64, 67.

<sup>viii</sup> T.J. Clark, "On the Social History of Art," *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 17-18.

dumbfounded. Fraser herself characterizes the process as confronting the mechanisms for the production of belief and value by performing those mechanisms without belief. Consequently, the interests of the artist – whatever those teleologies may be – drop out of the equation. What counts, as the gesture recedes from memory, is what activates the interests of the audience and how these issue from the audience as a collective.