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ART

Reviews

Real-life reruns

Andrea Fraser and Mark Kostabi take a familiar path to art-world respectability

By **Howard Halle**

Scandal in Washington, Tina Brown on page one, contestant-torment game shows at the top of the TV ratings: It really looked, a couple weeks ago, as if we'd returned to a September 10 sense of normalcy. We haven't, of course, but it is true that in a culture like ours—saturated with media images and saddled with short attention spans—the natural tendency is to move on to the next distraction, especially if it's something familiar and also affords the opportunity to distance oneself from horror. The French philosopher Guy Debord described the basis for this phenomenon some 35 years ago in his tome *The Society of the Spectacle* when he wrote, "a complex society...conscious of time devotes itself to negating it because it sees in time not what passes, but only what returns." Or, as Yogi Berra might have put it, it's déjà vu all over again because we prefer it that way.

Debord's book, the *Das Kapital* of postindustrialism, postulated that capitalism in modern culture had moved beyond the confines of the trading floor or the factory to become another thing entirely—a Circus Maximus of manufactured imagery and consent. "Society is an accumulation of spectacles...in which all things move towards representation," he wrote, and anyone who's visited Vegas or Times Square or their local cineplex would instinctively understand what he meant. The book's influence on artists over the past generation has been enormous—not a surprise, given the art world's emphasis on spectacle. And for two artists cur-

rently exhibiting in Chelsea, Andrea Fraser and Mark Kostabi, it has a bearing, if only in this respect: Both of their shows seem to be about coping with the society of the spectacle by making a spectacle of themselves.

Fraser's supporters would probably be appalled at the mention of her name alongside Kostabi's. (And who knows? Kostabi's peeps might feel the same about her.) After all, Fraser, who is known for her fictional docent-tours, is the reigning diva of Institutional Critique, that subset of late Conceptualism which takes the art world itself as a subject. Kostabi, meanwhile, is generally perceived as a Warhol manqué: a sub-Koonsian purveyor of kitschy paintings populated by featureless everymen. Whether Fraser has been given too much credit and Kostabi too little, is hard to say. But at least in this context, they seem to share common traits. Both artists skewer art-world narcissism by foregrounding their own. In this respect, they burnish their artistic egos precisely by appearing to puncture them—Fraser by disappearing into her videos as the "character" of Andrea Fraser; Kostabi by eschewing the brush altogether, and extolling the virtues of paying assistants to paint his canvases.

Each artist has also laid claim to outsider status, according to how his or her art has been accepted. A fave of the crowd surrounding

such insider-y journals as *October* and *Texte zur Kunst*, Fraser's work is seen by many collectors as being too esoteric—therefore, she's been able to say that her approach possesses critical integrity. Kostabi, on the other hand, sells well, but to the wrong sort of buyer. His work is seen as too broad to be taken seriously; therefore, he has been able to say that it's misunderstood. Both truth and self-serving rhetoric stand behind each of their positions. But what's truly fascinating is that for both artists, these latest shows represent a conscious move toward the art world's center, where money and respectability await. And to get there, they've both resorted to a degree of self-exposure unusual in their respective oeuvres.

For Fraser, that self-exposure takes a literal form, as one of the video installations here offers views of the artist as a scantily clad samba dancer during Carnival in Rio. A pair of rear-screen projections face each other across a narrow aisle; you walk between them, which affords you the opportunity to simultaneously watch Fraser front and rear as she grinds and pumps to a festive beat. Another video shows her at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, listening to an Acoustiguide device as it sings

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Left: Mark Kostabi, *LH00Q*, 2002. Right: Andrea Fraser, image from the video *Little Frank and His Carp* (detail), 2001, on view at Friedrich Petzel Gallery.

the praises of Frank Gehry's design. In response, we see Fraser hiking up her mini-dress to hump one of the building's curvaceous walls. A third piece, which naturally pales in comparison, shows Fraser impersonating the late bad-boy artist Martin Kippenberger. Known for his fondness for drink, Kippenberger once delivered a lecture before an art-school audience while totally drunk. Somebody bothered to transcribe it, because Fraser reenacts the lecture in suitably slurred German. If you don't speak German, don't worry; Kippenberger apparently spouted nothing but gibberish in the first place.

The show at Petzel is only half of an ambitious two-gallery effort which includes another pair of video installations at American Fine Arts at P.H.A.G. Inc. One work in the back room features Fraser stripping bare while spouting art-foundation platitudes before a roomful of Upper East Side types. The show's *pièce de résistance*, however, is in front, and stars Fraser in a revolutionary epic shot in Mexico. Set in the '30s, its story line, such as it is, includes actors playing Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Sergei Eisenstein, and Fraser herself in dual roles as a foxy revolutionary on horseback and a stuck-up factotum of the Rockefeller Foundation.

In comparison, "KOSTABI?—Mark Kostabi Revisited" is a quieter affair, and the artist's self-exposure more figurative than real. With this exhibition, Kostabi has abandoned the ArtWise International chain of galleries for a "real" art-world venue, Stefan Stux. "I'm tired of being a joke," he recently told *artnet.com*—and here proceeds to portray himself as the *Mona Lisa* wearing an idiotic grin. The corker, though, is his version of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, from 1632; in it, Kostabi assumes the role of the surgeon dissecting the arm of the cadaver, who turns out to be a very surprised-looking Warhol.

As the question mark in the show's title seems to indicate, Kostabi is no less ambivalent than Fraser is about what it means to be an artist, and just as passive-aggressive in expressing that view. Still, both of these shows are more enjoyable than fulfilling. Ambivalence may be the perfect response to a world where "every individual becomes unable to recognize his own reality," as Debord also wrote, but it's not very nourishing as art. Sometimes an artist has to choose. Or as Yogi put it, "When you see a fork in the road, take it."

Andrea Fraser's work is on view at Friedrich Petzel Gallery through February 9; the artist's "Arma Virumque Cano" is on view at American Fine Arts at P.H.A.G. Inc. through Saturday 2 (see Chelsea & vicinity). "KOSTABI?—Mark Kostabi Revisited" is on view at Stefan Stux Gallery through February 9 (see Chelsea & vicinity).

LEFT: COURTESY OF STEFAN STUX GALLERY; RIGHT: COURTESY FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY.