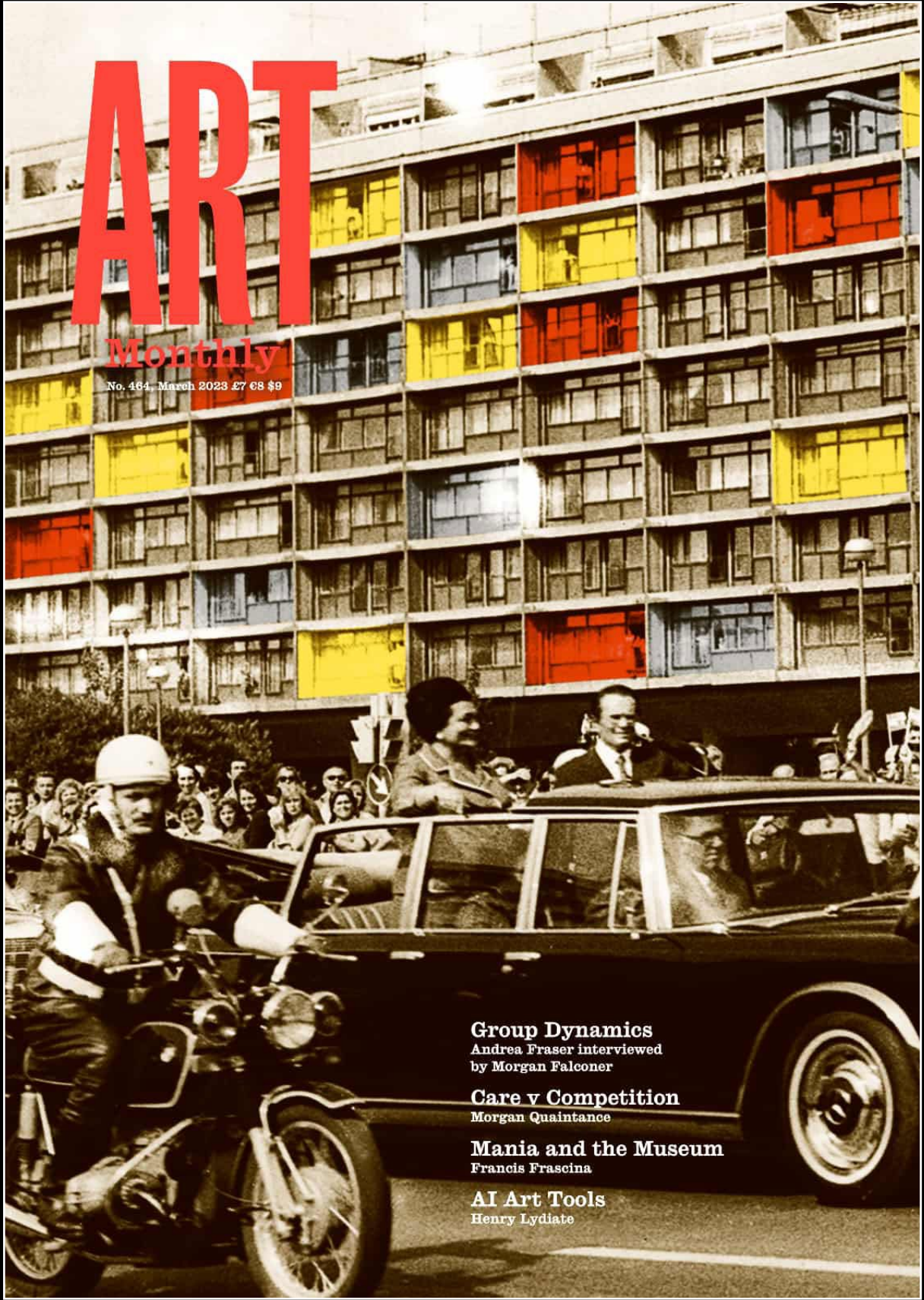


ART

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No. 464 March 2023 £7 €8 \$9



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Group Dynamics

Andrea Fraser interviewed by Morgan Falconer

Morgan Falconer: Your latest video, *This meeting is being recorded*, is a performance-based video that examines race, gender and age with an intergenerational group of seven white women, all played by you and recorded in a single 99-minute shot. Could you tell me about the genesis of this work and the title - why is the meeting being recorded?

Andrea Fraser: I was commissioned by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles to develop a performance, and I was having a really hard time settling on something that felt worthwhile and that would make sense as a performance in the context of the museum. Then Covid hit, and I realised it wasn't going to be live, and then there were all these Zoom meetings, so I was thinking about that as a framework. Then in May 2020, George Floyd was murdered. At the time, I was chair of the UCLA Department of Art, where I'm a professor, and over the previous two years we had been working on ways to address racism and white supremacy and the lack of diversity in our department. With George Floyd's murder that took on a new urgency. So, there I was, a white woman in a position of leadership in an art department with an increasingly diverse faculty and student body, trying to implement a plan of action against racism, and I was experiencing a lot of anxiety in that role.

I was aware that a lot of anti-racism groups were initiated in the aftermath of Floyd's murder - and certainly a lot before that - including groups of white people coming together to try to educate themselves about racism, and to work through their own racism. Sometimes they're called white anti-racist affinity groups. A few of those meetings were semi-public, but the vast majority were happening in private spaces. Part of the logic of having all-white groups and keeping them private is to spare people of colour from the burden of educating white people and the trauma of exposure to white racism in the process - which is often what happens in organisations and elsewhere - but I think keeping those discussions private is also part of a defence by white people against fully acknowledging our racism. One of the underlying premises of a psychoanalytic perspective on racism is that a lot of it is a defensive response to shame and guilt and anxiety, which white people project onto and into people of colour, which then produces more shame, guilt and anxiety. So I see the privacy surrounding a lot of white anti-racism work as a way of defending against the threat of shame while continuing to present our ideal, idealised selves to the world. I think of 'white fragility' as fundamentally a kind of narcissistic vulnerability, the vulnerability of the ideal, idealised fantasy self-produced in white people by white supremacy. So the kinds of defence mechanisms through which white people try to protect themselves from the shame and guilt of racism actually serve to perpetuate central aspects of white supremacy, which include self-mastery and idealisation. In that way, I think those private meetings can only go so far in working through some of

Andrea Fraser discusses her latest work about race and racism which is informed by psychoanalytic writings and her own experience of Group Relations therapy.



This meeting is being recorded, 2021, video

those mechanisms. So, part of my thinking about doing the piece, and calling it *This meeting is being recorded*, is that I wanted to bring some of that into the public sphere.

Did you get involved in those affinity groups while working on the piece?

Well, I have done a number of anti-racism training sessions over the years. I went to New Orleans and did a workshop with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. They developed one of the oldest anti-racism training programmes in the US, called 'Undoing Racism'. I also participated in a workshop with Crossroads, which is one of the other older organisations and I've done a number of anti-bias trainings in the context of institutional work at the University of California (and, by the way, in the language of some anti-racism work, what I'm doing right now might be called 'credentialing'). I think that what The People's Institute and Crossroads and many other

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activist-oriented groups do belong largely in the framework of political education, although there are other aspects to those training programmes as well. Conversely, the 'anti-bias' training programmes I encountered in my academic context – and which are fairly prevalent in other institutional settings, including museums and corporations – tend to be largely depoliticised and rooted in a kind of cognitive behavioural social psychology. They are focused on mindfulness about biases, combating microaggressions and, of course, avoiding litigation. I had done those kinds of training but I didn't think that they were going to help me with the anxiety that I was experiencing. So I started looking for other models.

So your interest in Group Relations was important in shaping the piece?

Right. I've been very involved in Group Relations since the mid 2000s. It's sometimes called the Tavistock method and it's a method for experiential learning about the unconscious dynamics of groups and organisations. It was developed in the UK in the 1950s, at the intersection of systems theory and psychoanalysis, specifically the work of Wilfred Bion and other analysts engaged with Melanie Klein and object relations. The basic form of Group Relations are experiential learning events that are called conferences but don't include lectures or panel discussions. Conference members participate in different kinds of groups and the task is to reflect on and learn about group dynamics as they emerge in these groups. I did my first conference in 2007 and I became increasingly involved after that. I trained and was certified as a Group Relations consultant. I became a board member of Grex, the West Coast affiliate of the AK Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems, the national Group Relations organisation in the US. In the spring of 2020 I became president of that board. Around that time, the AK Rice Institute began convening large group meetings on Zoom, including some oriented toward examining white supremacy within the organisation. There is a pretty long and rich history within Group Relations, particularly in the US, of applying its theory and practice to the examination of social identity and particularly race. I had participated in some Group Relations conferences focused on race. Some of the writing that came out of that work has been very valuable to me, as well as other writings on race by psychoanalysts, especially from the UK. So, I decided to experiment with convening a group of people from the Group Relations community to apply its methods to anti-racism work.

How did you begin the process?

Well, first I reached out to a number of women to find out whether they would join me. I let them know that I would like to record the meetings to generate material for further research – Group Relations is considered research. Six women agreed to join and to record six 90-minute meetings. I generated transcripts and

distributed them to the group as we went along. After those six meetings, I drafted a second agreement asking everyone to give me permission to develop a performance based on the material and to approximate their gestures and voices.

Why did you choose to work exclusively with women?

In my experience in Group Relations, when you have a group of men and women, even if the subject is race, the group is going to be overwhelmed with gender dynamics.

Yet some of the performance touches on divisions among women.

Right. But that's what happens. Group Relations theory and practice reveals that joining with other people in a group immediately activates intense anxiety. One can think about that anxiety fundamentally as anxiety about difference, about the presence of other people who are different simply by virtue of being 'not me'. Those anxieties tend to fasten on the most visible differences: gender and skin colour. When those differences are minimised, the next most visible differences come into play. In our group, that was age. Groups tend to deal with anxiety by attempting to repress internal differences and to project difference – and whatever else is experienced as internally threatening – into outside people or groups in a process that often takes the form of scapegoating. When that doesn't work, members of the group itself are scapegoated. And that also happened in our group.

So the script for *This meeting is being recorded* came directly out of those conversations.

Yes, it was edited directly from the transcripts of those meetings, mostly in chronological order. The transcripts were 62,000 words and the script is about 10,000 words, so it represents roughly one-sixth of the material, or six meetings condensed into one. For me that editing process also was a form of analysis, as was the process of performing the material.

The installation of the piece is interesting – could you describe it?

Sure. It's a life-size projection of video of me performing all seven women in the group. It was shot vertically and is rear-projected on a freestanding screen, surrounded by a semi-circle of six chairs, each of those chairs representing one of the other women in the group who is not currently being performed on screen. Part of the intention is to put the viewer into the group. There are a few films out there of Group Relations events. They all give the viewer a voyeuristic position outside of the group, and outside of the group dynamics. That position is absolutely antithetical to Group Relations. From my perspective, the most important and powerful thing about Group

Relations as an experiential learning model is that, when you're in a group of people and your task is to engage and to learn about the unconscious and emotional dynamics of the group as they emerge, there's no position outside of those dynamics. You are trying to learn about those dynamics as you yourself are participating in those dynamics. There's no voyeuristic position. But then there's the question of how you share that experience outside of a Group Relations event. By performing everyone myself, and performing directly to the camera, I am trying to pull the viewer in. Of course, you're not really in the dynamics, but a lot of people have reported to me that they feel pulled in, they feel engaged in a kind of internal process that is tied into that dynamics of the group being performed.

As you say, you play all of the women's roles - you even play yourself, in some sense, since you were part of the group. Consequently, the voices tend to elide together a little as you shift from one voice to another. Why approach it in this way? Could you not have used actors to voice the roles?

Well, firstly, I almost never work with actors. I think that when artists work with actors it's often exploitative. Art has a very different structure to theatre and film, where you have many different people contributing in clearly defined and collaborative roles with co-equal or at least varying degrees of credit. The artist gets primary if not exclusive credit and everybody else is just material, and that's deeply offensive to me in most cases. Artists tend to use actors as puppets or proxies, or as tickets into celebrity culture. And most artists are terrible directors. Also, it's important for me as an artist, since the work is under my name, to be putting myself at stake - my body, not someone else. I suppose it can be turned into some form of

melodramatic autobiography, which is just horrifying to me. I've only worked with actors twice, first in 1991 for a piece called *May I Help You?*, when I cast three actors to pose as gallery staff for the four-week run of the show, and then again in 2018 at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. *May I Help You?* is also my first multi-voice performance, so even though there were three actors, each actor had the same script which ran through six different voices or 'characters'. Other multi-voice performances include, *Inaugural Speech*, 1997, *Official Welcome*, 2001, *Men on the Line*, 2012, and *Not just a few of us*, 2014, in which I perform about 20 different people, half black and half white. My intention with my early multi-voice performances was to perform a kind of social field, or an institutional field. They were informed by Pierre Bourdieu's work about fields as networks of positions, and the relationships between those positions. More recent works also attempt to perform intersubjective fields.

Because you voice and embody all of the characters yourself, their opinions tend to lose biographical rootedness. We get snippets of their biography throughout. Someone will mention that she grew up in Northern Virginia, or Germany. One is a former DC prosecutor. We meet a woman who says she is head of a graduate programme - presumably that's you. One of them talks about growing up in a white suburb in the Bay Area, having a mother with Puerto Rican heritage. These are the kinds of experiences that lend weight and validity to a person's opinions, yet because you perform all of the roles, and because the voices tend to slide together, the opinions lose that sense of rootedness. So, I experienced their opinions as a series of plausible, free-floating positions. I heard them in a more disinterested fashion than I might if they came from a real, identifiable individual.



This meeting is being recorded, 2021, video installation, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

That's one of the potential outcomes. My thinking with earlier work, such as *May I Help You?*, was that the viewer probably would start out feeling very distant and critical, but then at some point find themselves having a moment of recognition with one of the positions, and in that moment would also recognise their own position within a structure and its dynamics. In this newer work I'm thinking about the group as an intersubjective as well as a social field. Part of that involves thinking about the dynamics of splitting and projection. Those terms are central to the psychoanalysis of Klein, and to Group Relations. Impulses or attributes that somebody might feel in a group, or that are active in the group as a whole, get split off and projected into different people. That process of splitting and projection is essential to how race, racism and racialisation are understood by many psychoanalysts and in Group Relations. Parts of the self and group that are experienced as unacceptable, as a source of shame or guilt or anxiety, or as threatening to individual or group cohesion - especially aggression and hate and also forms of desire - get split off and projected into other people and groups. Centuries of colonialism and slavery and its afterlife have created what one psychoanalyst has called 'powerful projection highways' for these projections, especially for white people and white groups, who use people of colour as containers for the bad stuff that they don't want to recognise in themselves and that threaten their cohesion as identity groups. And that splitting and projecting also happens within relatively homogenous groups. It's exceedingly rare to have a discussion of race, even in an all-white group, in which these defences are not active. You invariably have people trying to outdo each other in wokeness or allyship, criticising and policing others, evoking theoretical frameworks as orthodoxies and litmus tests etc. These are all defence mechanisms and ways of slipping off bad parts of oneself and projecting them in other people, rather than recognising and trying to work through them in oneself. One of the reasons I perform all of the group members is to block or undo those processes, which of course I was part of in the group. It is a way of taking back those projections, which is an important part of transforming those dynamics. Finally, in performing all seven white women as a group, I am lumping myself together with other white women as part of a racialised identity group, which is part of taking back white projections of difference that racialise others while neutralising and universalising white people.

The level of self-reflection among the group is considerable, it's very searching. At one point, one of the characters you are voicing says 'that's what I think that I'm thinking, deep down'. Now, obviously, this depth of self-reflection in some measure serves the agendas of the current drives for anti-racism, to the extent that it sometimes calls for an examination of unconscious racism. Conversely, however, I wondered whether it played into an elite culture of therapy - is it at all narcissistic?

One of the criticisms of the piece that I find most legitimate and most challenging is that it is indicative of the way that white people retreat into psychology and self rather than engaging with political, institutional and social structures.

That doesn't have to be a critique of the piece. Can't it be a critique of the culture?

Yes, it can be a critique of the culture, but I think it is also a critique of the piece to the extent that the piece reproduces that culture, or aspects of it. I think that almost all the works I have done over the course of my now almost-40-year career have been about trying to grapple with and understand the intersection between psychological and social structures. One of my core concerns as an artist has been the question of the relationship and the interplay between internal and external worlds, between psychological and emotional experience and social and institutional and economic spheres. There are many different accounts of that intersection and of the central role it plays in the reproduction of both social and psychological structures, including racism and white supremacy. Racism is often divided into personal or interpersonal racism and structural or institutional racism. I think systemic racism includes both and is fundamentally reproduced through the interplay between the two. The reproduction of structural and institutional racism unfolds through a cycle of people internalising the white supremacist fantasies and sense of self that have been institutionalised and then projecting and enacting what has been internalised. It's part of what I think stops white liberals, or even radicals, from engaging in meaningful action, or even changing patterns of behaviour in their daily lives that lead directly to the reproduction of segregation and institutional racism. To go back to your question about narcissism, yes, I think narcissism is absolutely central to racism and white supremacy. But that term tends to be confused with vanity.

Psychoanalytically, narcissism and the capacity to love oneself is just as essential to being a person as the capacity to love others. Most often, the problem with narcissism is not excessive self-love. The problem is the structures and traumas and wounds that produce narcissistic insecurities and vulnerabilities and how those vulnerabilities produce defences like idealisation and omnipotence as well as splitting and projection. That's what white fragility is. The idealisation and omnipotence fostered by white supremacy is necessarily fragile, because it's a fantasy. It is a widely institutionalised fantasy that is baked into the structures of racial capitalism, which individualises and privatises successes and achievements that are the result of historical and structural white privilege, while also individualising failures. I do think that addressing these structures requires something that may look like therapy that I would call a form of analysis. Many psychoanalysts distinguish between therapy and psychoanalysis, and say that you can't do psychoanalysis if your goal is the alleviation of suffering. Group Relations as a learning method is also sharply distinguished from therapy, such as group therapy, in part because Group Relations can be so painful. I think these practices are the opposite of what is usually implied by the word narcissistic, in that they decentre the self, vis-à-vis the unconscious and the group, in ways that diminish idealisation and omnipotence. And as for being elite, well, maybe, but not as elite as contemporary art.

Andrea Fraser's work was on show at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 12 January to 25 February.

Morgan Falconer teaches at Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York.