

ARTnews

The ARTnews Accord: Artists Lorraine O'Grady and Andrea Fraser Talk Art World Activism and the Limits of Institutional Critique

by Alex Greenberger (June 17, 2021)



Lorraine O'Grady, left, and Andrea Fraser. ILLUSTRATIONS: SCOTT CHAMBERS

Lorraine O'Grady was born in 1934 in Boston. Before becoming an artist in the 1980s, her jobs included translator, intelligence analyst, writer, teacher, and rock music critic. Starting in 1980, she began performing as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, a middle-class Black persona that stormed art openings and opined about Black art; she retired the persona in 1983, the same year she staged *Art Is . . .* at the African American Day Parade in Harlem, for which she created her own float. Fifteen helpers left the float periodically to hold out gilded picture frames in which parade attendees were invited to pose. Her art since then has taken the form of performance and photo-based works dealing with Egyptology, Michael Jackson, Charles Baudelaire, and her family and personal life; her work is currently the subject of a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum. Last year, Duke University Press published *Writing in Space, 1973–2019*, an anthology of her writings.

Born in 1965 in Billings, Montana, **Andrea Fraser** was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. After dropping out of high school, she moved to New York, and later attended the School of Visual Arts, the Whitney Independent Study Program, and New York University. Starting in the '80s, Fraser pioneered a style known as **institutional critique**, making artworks, usually in the form of performances, whose subject is the very museums, galleries, and other spaces in which art is presented. In making these pieces, Fraser took on the guises of gallery assistants, curators, and even a therapist. Her writings on Minimalism, institutional critique, and museum architecture were assembled in *Museum Highlights*, an anthology released by the MIT Press in 2005.

In February, O'Grady and Fraser joined *ARTnews* for a Zoom conversation focused on the limits of institutional critique and the continued importance of activism in the art world.



Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two) is part of a photographic series documenting O'Grady's participation in the 1983 African American Day Parade in New York. O'Grady and her assistants invited attendees to pose in gilded picture frames. COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK/ ©2021 LORRAINE O'GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

ARTnews: What do you recall about your first experiences with museums?

Andrea Fraser: The first museum that I remember going to was the Exploratorium in San Francisco, which is this amazing experiential science museum in this huge, cavernous space. You could interact with experiments and put your body into them. I think that probably influenced my sense of the most valuable thing to me about museums, which is the opportunity for experiential learning in an embodied way, in a space about culture, identity, and social interactions. And the first art museum I remember going to was an exhibition of hard-edge minimalist painting at SFMOMA. I was reading the wall labels, and I was running around from label to label, saying, "Mommy, Mommy, all these paintings have the same name! It's *Unifield*." But it was *Untitled*.

Lorraine O'Grady: My experience was so different because my mother was, in a way, an artist. She had a little home clothing business where she basically designed and styled clothes for her little cadre of women. When she first came to this country at 18, she was a [Jamaican middle-class] immigrant, and she had come to study mathematics, but she hadn't been able to do that for various reasons, so she had gone to work [at] the only paying job that you could get at the time, which was as a lady's maid, and the lady's maids didn't have to do anything. So, when my mother got married and had a baby, she was able to take all that [work] home. Actually, my first memory of being in a museum-ish space comes from the fact that we lived about six blocks from the Museum of Fine Arts and a couple more blocks away from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. For me, it was as if our little apartment had this big backyard with all these great buildings in it.

During those early years, my mother would have to take me with her when she delivered her packages to these ladies on Beacon Hill. She would park me at the Boston Public Library. She would leave me in the children's room, but I would very quickly go exploring on my own. I went up to the third floor, where the John Singer Sargent paintings were. This had a big effect on me. When she was in Jamaica, my mother used to grow roses. At our home in Boston, there was never space for a garden, at least in those early years, so she would sit in the rose garden, in the Fenway. On Sundays, we would usually go there, and on the way back, either we would go to the Gardner Museum and sit in the atrium there or go around and look at the furnishings and so on. At the Museum of Fine Arts, I really fell in love with the sarcophagi.

Fraser: That came back into your work, right?

O’Grady: Yes. And also, up at the top of the stairway was at that time one of the really important pieces for the MFA, the Gauguin [*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*]. It was the only thing I saw with people who looked remotely like me, along with the work on view in the Egyptian wing. But I can’t say that I was going to these places to be educated.



In her 2003 performance *Official Welcome*, Andrea Fraser undressed and announced, “I’m not a person today. I’m an object in an artwork.” COURTESY NAGEL DRAXLER GALERIE

ARTnews: Andrea, how did you receive your art education?

Fraser: I dropped out of high school before I turned 16, and I moved to New York. I mean, I was a hippie kid. Lorraine, you said you weren’t going to educate yourself, but that is absolutely what I was doing. I would go to the Metropolitan. When I first moved to New York, it was pay what you wish. I was there four times a week and I would just be there all day, and by the time I started art school [at the School of Visual Arts], I knew that place like the back of my hand. [*Laughs.*] I think it had a lot to do too with coming to New York from a lesbian feminist household that was half Puerto Rican. I was encountering this powerful, normative, legitimate, elite culture that I wanted something from, but that I also felt crushed, alienated, and dominated by.

O’Grady: Most of us feel that way.

Fraser: That love/hate relationship to art museums and to what they represent is really what defined the course I took as an artist with institutional critique, so I feel like I can relate to what you’re saying.

ARTnews: When did you both feel that you had to critique the art world from inside it using your work?

O’Grady: I have a bit of a correction to make: I was not an insider. I was not critiquing from within. I was very much critiquing from an outsider position. It’s funny, I thought Andrea and I had more in common than we may actually have, in the sense that I think we entered different art worlds. I know that Andrea’s practice has evolved in some large extent to making presentations at the invitation of the institution and then turning them into something else. But at least the institution was inviting her. My situation was that I was performing guerrilla actions. Nobody wanted me. Nobody even knew why I was there.

By the time Andrea entered the art world, the context had been established, and the context was that of institutional critique, in the sense of the kind of work that Hans Haacke did, which was following the money, literally. I think that Haacke’s object-based critique of the museum is extremely important, but it is addressing the *how* of the museum. It is explaining for all the uninitiated who just go and see the pretty pictures that there is all this other machinery behind this. I was much more concerned with the *why* of the museum. You know, why does this institution exist in the first place? I was addressing the institution as the servant of Western culture and what I see as the dualism of Western culture—the either/or binaries on which it is based.



Andrea Fraser’s wall-piece 2016 in Museum, Money, and Politics documents political contributions made by trustees of American art museums, as seen in the 2018 SITElines biennial at SITE Santa Fe in New Mexico. PHOTO ERIC SWANSON/COURTESY SITE SANTE FE

Fraser: I think you’re absolutely right that we are very different in that way. I started to absorb the art world when I was 16, and actually even before that in some ways, because my mother had some relationship [to it]. She stopped painting when I was about three because she got one too many racist, sexist rejections, and then she turned to doing performances and to writing. She continued to make art, but there was the pain of exclusion. Her pain from those hierarchies is something that I also internalized. And it is one of the reasons that I hated the art world too in a way, but I found myself on the other side, at a time when the art world had absorbed at least enough from white feminism to make a space for me to enter it. But I entered with this kind of ambivalence.

The ’80s was an “end of everything” decade. It was the end of painting, the end of the avant-garde, the end of modernism. Everything was ending. I think one of the challenges was: What parts of those avant-garde traditions against the institution can be carried forward, and what parts of those were just myths? What parts of them were just narcissism? I did absorb that there was a potential for internal critique that had been established by avant-garde traditions. But there was also this component of rejecting an aspect of avant-garde narratives that are rooted in the Oedipus complex of the boy—that we have to overthrow our predecessors.

O’Grady: There is no either/or here. There is always a both/and.

Fraser: That’s right, exactly.

O’Grady: We are probably always doing somebody else’s job, right?



In her performances, Andrea Fraser has inhabited numerous personas that she thinks of as “not-me containers.”
In *Art Must Hang* (2001), she reenacts a drunken tirade by German artist Martin Kippenberger. COURTESY NAGEL DRAXLER GALERIE

ARTnews: You both have often mounted your respective critiques through performance. Why this medium, and not another one?

O’Grady: I was drawn to performance because I thought I could do it. I felt that a medium like performance allowed the ultimate freedom of exploration of ideas because it had almost no history. I started teaching [a course at the School of Visual Arts] about artists who created performance in the 20th century, the Futurists and the Dadaists and the Surrealists, but I didn’t see them as inhibiting me. They were young people in the early 1920s, but they had been formed in the 19th century. They all thought that Europe was a rational civilization, only to discover that World War I was the most irrational war ever fought. They had no choice but to question their own culture, and the way they did it was by accessing chance and randomness. They were trying to create what they called *surréalité*, some sort of reality that was on top of the presumed reality.



To make the pieces in her ongoing series “Cutting Out the New York Times,”
Lorraine O’Grady uses strips of text from the newspaper to create poignant and poetic collages.
COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK/©2021 LORRAINE O’GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

I was trying to do something quite the opposite of that. I was trying to create a *sousréalité*, an under-reality, to take back this language, something I had already started to do with my series “Cutting Out the *New York Times*.” When I worked at the State Department in 1963 I had to read 10 newspapers a day, plus 3 transcripts of the radio. By the time you do that, language can start to melt. For those of us who are still on the edges of Western civilization, because we have been kept there, the techniques of Surrealism, Dadaism, and Futurism offer a way [forward]. I’m basically saying that performance, to me, was freedom from art history. I feel pretty strongly that unless art history can forget the institution, and unless the institution can come to grips with its own limits, the same thing is going to happen to it that has already happened to disciplines like anthropology and comparative literature. Art history is just going to implode. It will implode because the truth quotient that it contains is too low.

Fraser: I think art history has been one of the most conservative disciplines in the humanities, frankly. Lorraine, do you agree?

O’Grady: Oh, I do.

Fraser: I think it is finally starting to change, but there was so much resistance within the field of art history in the United States to cultural studies, visual studies, postcolonial critique, decolonial critique, and critical race theory.

O’Grady: You think it is starting to change? There is a sign of hope for you? I’m happy to hear that.

Fraser: I think so. I think, in terms of the art field, we have all these different sub-fields that are competing with each other and challenging each other. But I think one of the primary institutions of the art field is the institution of art discourse. Art discourse is one of the most powerful institutions in the art field—and the one that is hardest to examine, because it doesn’t have a building or a collection. It is sort of an archive in the mind. It is the institution that in some ways is most responsible for policing the boundaries of legitimacy, for maintaining and reproducing hierarchies. Art discourse does that much more than art institutions by defining what is legitimate to talk about, what is legitimate to reflect on, what is legitimate subject matter, how we engage with art, what we are allowed to think. And artists play a central role in that, because at this point, most wall labels and museums, if the artist is alive, they are just ventriloquizing the artist.

O’Grady: In my case, when they are not controlling that, I gotta fight!

Fraser: I mean, I know I want to control that. *[Laughs.]*



In her 2010 work *The First and the Last of the Modernists*, Lorraine O’Grady juxtaposed images of Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson.
COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK/©2021 LORRAINE O’GRADY/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

ARTnews: What role has writing played in your practice? How has that helped you critique institutions?

Fraser: I started writing performance scripts, and I started dealing with language. In the context of performance, I was also dealing with the language of institutions in art discourse. But I think the part of my work that I value most is making meaning. It is not just about intellectual content but is also connected to lived reality. Language is sometimes the best way to make meaning. Writing an essay is not very different for me from writing a performance script because I'm thinking of voice, I'm thinking of context, I'm thinking of roles, I'm thinking of audience, I'm thinking of what the text does, and not just what it means. In some ways I think of everything as performance. Lorraine, your writing is very performative too. It has a very strong voice and a very powerful connection to the reader.

O'Grady: Well, I wasn't actually drawn to writing. It was more that I was a writer who was drawn to art.

Fraser: Right, and I'm the opposite.

O'Grady: After I was drawn to art, I discovered: Oh, I really need to do something here. I needed to change something in myself as an artist, and that was the capacity to understand what I was doing. Andrea, you did have a context. I didn't have that. I used writing to make the context of my work, to lay the foundations of understanding for my work.

ARTnews: Lorraine, you've written some pretty amazing performance scripts, though, particularly for your character Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, who invaded art openings wearing a dress made of white gloves and held forth about Blackness and class. How did you come up with her?

O'Grady: I had two audiences—the white audience and the Black audience. The Black audience shared enough of my contexts to be able to misunderstand the work. Mlle Bourgeoise Noire translates into English as “Miss Black Middle Class.” The Black artists at Just Above Midtown and others, they understood that there was a Black middle class—because they were from it, most of them, though they never seemed to speak of that. They thought this performance was glorifying the Black middle class! The problem with the white audience was that they didn't know there was a Black middle class. That led me to the “why.” Why on earth did you have to make a whole class invisible?



In the early '80s, Lorraine O'Grady attended openings as the character *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, wearing a dress of white gloves, a sash, and a white cat o' nine tails. COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM, NEW YORK

At the time [during the 1980s], entertainment and sports wealth started to enter the situation, and that is what translated as the Black middle class for the white audience. Whereas the Black middle class was, you know, people like you and me and others. It had existed since before the Civil War. It consisted of the same kinds of people in any middle class—the doctors, the lawyers, the teachers, the people who have to struggle to maintain the life of the mind. We learned about ourselves the same way everyone else learns about us, which is through the white media. This class was almost invisible, even to Blacks who were not part of it. To lay a theoretical foundation for the work in the face of this opacity, this was a hard job. And I felt that really only language, direct and unmediated language, could do it.

ARTnews: Andrea, you have performed as Jane Castleton, a museum guide, and other characters. How did you invent those?

Fraser: Well, I hate the term “character.” [Laughs.] I came to performance in part through appropriation. In the early ’80s, everyone was appropriating images and text, so I thought about appropriating positions, functions, and roles. I was also very aware of how I was always performing. I was always trying to make people think I was older than I was, that I was more educated than I was, that I had more money than I had, that I was whiter than I was, that I was more legitimate than I was. When I started doing these museum tour performances, it was about being able to get on top of that, and being able to do that self-consciously. I think of them as not-me containers. This is a concept that comes out of psychoanalysis. It’s to provide just enough distance from me so that I can put it out into the world and look at it. Lorraine, I see Mlle Bourgeoise Noire as the middle-class part of yourself. It’s connected to your mother, right?

O’Grady: Yeah. I shopped the city out of used white gloves—about 360 pairs altogether. But I was dishonest. I didn’t put my own gloves on her dress.

Fraser: For *Museum Highlights*, my suit was bought for me by a stylist. All the other costumes that I have worn in performances were just clothes that I took out of my closet, and that’s really important to me. It’s like, yeah, these are all part of me. [Laughs.]

O’Grady: I would say you have more courage than I did to look at yourself that way.



In her 1989 performance *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, Andrea Fraser played Jane Castleton, a fictional tour guide at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. COURTESY NAGEL DRAXLER GALERIE

ARTnews: Was this meant to be parody?

Fraser: I think parody is a defensive response. Parody is just a way of disowning what parts of it you actually want or are invested in. I always bristled at the description of my performance as parody. It has to do with the way that I'm defending against my ownership of what I put out there. But I also think describing my work as parody is a kind of defensive response by audiences, of not seeing what is at stake and not being able to own some of the parts of themselves that they might see in the work.

O'Grady: One of the lessons that politics has taught us is that if you let them off the hook, they will get off the hook.

Fraser: Exactly. I mean, parody is a chicken-ass critique.

O'Grady: It defeats the whole purpose of doing the work.

ARTnews: Where is institutional critique going today? How can artists remain critical of institutions now?

Fraser: I can speak to institutional critique, but I do feel like it's a pretty narrow framework, in a way. I am a professor [at the University of California, Los Angeles], so I'm working with graduate students who are incredibly smart—smarter than me—and more engaged than I am. I do sense a shift away from the traditions that defined my approach to things, which came from European Marxist thinking. It was colonial, and it was white, and it was partially male. What I'm seeing among the younger generations of artists now is a radical turn away from those sorts of frameworks of negation and critique as a set of values and as a framework for politics toward a politics and ethos of inclusion, of affirmation and radical care that is coming out of queer feminist, Black feminist, and disability and decolonial theory. And I think it is very powerful, and I feel very challenged by it.

O'Grady: One thing I see as a problem is that, for young artists now who do critical art very well, there is an obligation to represent sectors of society that they themselves do not belong to. There is a pressure on every young Black artist to somehow represent the working-class Blacks of America, and that is simply not something that they can do effectively, or without condescending on some level. Most Black artists today are second-, third-, and even fourth-generation bourgeois. They are very far removed from these areas of experience. It is unfair to the work that they do. When you think about it, what other middle class gets asked to do that?

I don't think that institutional critique at all its various levels is going to continue for some time. The capacity of white culture and its instruments to change, to negate criticism, and to deflect any real threats is infinite. It is some sort of strange octopus that keeps growing new arms. And I don't see white culture going down easily or being displaced easily. It is going to be a very long struggle. For the participants in the struggle, the challenge is to somehow learn how to redefine joy, to think of joy as pleasure. We're going to have to keep the struggle up, and we're going to have to find ways of enabling ourselves to continue it. Because that is the hard part, you know: How long can you fight? But there's no reason to give up hope, even though the distance is long.