

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

Complicity and Contestation: On Andrea Fraser at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne

by André Rottmann (June 2013)



"Andrea Fraser. Wolfgang Hahn Prize 2013", Museum Ludwig, Cologne, exhibition view

Prizes for art are a curious thing. Of course, financial support and visibility in the form of publicity, exhibitions, and publications are a welcome form of approbation. But what are the conditions determining their bestowal?

Although rumor had it that Andrea Fraser, winner of this year's Wolfgang Hahn Prize, turned her attention from performative strategies questioning such conditions to psychoanalysis and academia, she recently appeared on stage and seemed as committed to her performative work as ever. This kind of homecoming – at least given her return to the city in which she had her first solo exhibition – was delightfully fitting.

Any attempt to critically assess the substantial retrospective of Andrea Fraser's work at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne – mounted on the occasion of this year's Wolfgang Hahn Prize – must ultimately be an experiment in art writing. Firmly bound to the strategies of Conceptual Art and "institutional critique", Fraser has developed a distinct methodology of site-specific interventions since the mid-1980s. On the one hand her practice is predicated on the appropriation, montage, superimposition, and excessive enactment of the conflicting discourses subtending and propelling the field of contemporary art in terms of its economic and affective investments, social relations, and interests. Art criticism's tropes and methods, its claims and judgments, are thus largely the material that her live performances, videos, and audio pieces consist of – if they are not explicitly the objects of her self-reflexive ruminations. On the other hand the Los Angeles-based artist has produced an immense body of criticism (primarily published in *October* and *Texte zur Kunst*) informed by psychoanalysis, feminism, and perhaps most importantly the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Instead of merely supplementing her appearances and exhibition projects in museums, commercial galleries, and the so-called public sphere, these texts form an integral part of her exacting yet often humorous oeuvre. It would even seem that Fraser's

challenging essays – on topics such as the genealogy and pertinence of artistic engagements with institutions since the late 1960s; the potential repercussions of a psychoanalytic rather than Marxist model of negation for the anti-aesthetic; issues of (self-)censorship; or the abysmal entwinement of financial speculation, museum trustees, and rising art market prices during the credit crisis – have taken precedence over the production of new installations or performances in recent years. [1] Accordingly, most of the catalogue accompanying her retrospective compiles Fraser’s own texts, scripts, and transcripts. [2]

Fraser’s patently ambivalent mode of analysis has scrutinized nearly every facet of the interplay between artists, collectors, critics, curators, audiences, administrators, and corporations, as well as the attendant mechanisms of identification, recognition, recuperation, disavowal, and exclusion within the realm of contemporary art. Her work as an “institutional critic” is one of relentless self-implication and incessant self-reflection. As the artist inhabits and incorporates the roles, positions, and rhetorical patterns that she sets out to explore and critique with impressive ease and virtuosity, [3] her work oscillates between the seemingly incompatible registers of confession and dissection, disclosure and calculation, mimicry and estrangement, exacerbation and empiricism. In this sense one of Fraser’s radical contributions to the discursive formation and practice of “institutional critique” lies in the almost audacious embodiment of the irresolvable tensions between the lingering promise of epistemic, cognitive, perceptive, and mnemonic complexity in advanced art and the practical, social conditions, and economic relations constituting its symbolic systems of value, taste, privilege, and distinction. By the same token, her specific method shifted the attention to the image, desire, and entanglements of the artist – not as a persona (as was the case in Fraser’s early performances as museum docent Jane Castleton), but as a site at which the forces putting artistic practice under duress in the present become manifest in defense of its ancestral critical dimensions and institutional scaffolding. Surely, this specific condition and configuration of Fraser’s oeuvre is one reason why art-historical writings addressing it (irrespective of exhibition reviews like this one, or monographic studies) are comparatively rare, especially considering the indisputable status that her work has acquired over the years. [4] After all, how can critics adequately respond to the practice of an artist who only recently stated that, given the economic and political conflicts and contradictions structuring the field of art, current academic and critical discourse around aesthetic production – including her own writings and art works – with all its claims for negation, subversion, and transgression, would seem delusional and “little more than a rationale for some of the most cynical forms of collaboration with some of the most corrupt and exploitative forces in our society?” [5]

As the exhibition at the Museum Ludwig makes tangible, however, Fraser’s practice is far from indulging in the kind of critical endgame or negative narcissism that such an uncompromising statement may suggest. Rather, the works gathered mainly on the museum’s lower floor – from early book and poster works, gallery talks, and collaborations with the “V-Girls”; to the prospectuses and “Services” (with Helmut Draxler); to the more elaborate lecture-performances and film installations of the past decade – attest to the dialectics of complicity and contestation that her practice has registered, explored, and made palpable in varied institutional contexts. The Cologne retrospective refrains from establishing a chronological order or even an art-historical argument regarding this oeuvre’s development in phases (even though such an argument could surely be made). Instead, site-specific installations and archival presentations structure the exhibition. In the museum’s atrium, visitors encounter video works depicting Fraser’s visits to the Vatican and Guggenheim Bilbao museums, respectively; in both “A Visit to the Sistine Chapel” (2005) and “Little Frank and His Carp” (2001), the artist performs a trenchant critique of the transformation of art institutions into sites of mass tourism and spectacle culture through excessive

overidentification with the values and behavioral models promoted by the museum's supposedly awe-inspiring and infantilizing audio guides. The performance results in emotional as well as libidinal outbursts that, here, substitute for the promise of aesthetic experience.

Upon entering the exhibition downstairs, a vitrine containing the artist book "Andrea Fraser, 15. November–15. Dezember 1990, Galerie Christian Nagel, Köln, 1990" and facsimiles of its pages mounted on the adjacent wall document Fraser's very first gallery show. In a juxtaposition of clippings from newspapers and art magazines, this work chronicles the reception of American art in the Rhineland after 1945 as well as later protests against United States foreign policies in West Germany. Fraser's project thus relates the ideological functions of the values associated with modern art in the reconstruction period and their subsequent contestation in social movements – leading up to a renewed orientation toward the art then produced in New York, which in hindsight would participate in the mythical construction of the Cologne "scene" of the 1990s. More importantly, this early work evidences the formative influence that postmodernist art's "allegorical procedures" exerted on Fraser's methodology. [6] Other works included in the current exhibition likewise attest to Fraser's modalities of appropriation and montage. In "Four Posters" (1984), Fraser fuses gift shop items in the form of reproductions of paintings, for example of a Vermeer from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with celebratory wall texts and information about the respective collection's patron in order to blur the boundaries between philanthropic, educational, and advertising tropes.

As George Baker has noted, by engaging in a "collision of the disparate," these early forays into the formats and rhetoric of museum brochures and posters prefigure the later convolutions and constellations of irreconcilable social positions and discourses in Fraser's performative works. [7] This fact is both starkly visible and audible in "Hello! Welcome to Tate Modern" (2007), a cacophonous remix of elements from the museum website's "Multimedia Tour", which is on view in a single gallery space. Two of Fraser's large-scale film installations seem especially pertinent in the context of an exhibition on the occasion of an award bestowed in Cologne: The first is "Kunst muss hängen / Art Must Hang" (2001), for which Fraser reenacted one of Martin Kippenberger's infamous extemporaneous dinner speeches verbatim, inhabiting in every gesture and utterance the contrary posture of the bohemian male artist – which nevertheless seems comparable to Fraser's own positioning in terms of the fundamental doubts articulated toward the rituals, expectations, and social tenets of the art world. And "Official Welcome" (2001), for which the artist performed a seemingly soul-searching, even exhibitionist, opening monologue based on statements by the likes of Benjamin Buchloh, Gabriel Orozco, Thomas Hirschhorn, Mel Brooks, Dave Hickey, and Larry Gagosian. Not surprisingly, Fraser quoted and alluded to portions of these scripts in her acceptance speech for the Wolfgang Hahn Prize on the night of the opening. Her most notorious work, "Untitled" (2003), for which the artist was taped having sex with a male collector in a hotel room, was not only presented as a soundless, one-hour video on a small monitor on a pedestal in an otherwise empty space, but was here complemented by a separate room with a loudspeaker inserted into a wall; only in close proximity could one hear the tape's audio track, from which the collector's voice had been elided. This dual mode of presentation rendered all the more transparent the dialectics between the spectacularization of the artist figure under the conditions of a biopolitical regime of power and the banality of art market transactions at the core of this work.

The central space of Fraser's retrospective contained a comprehensive archive of her practice, including nearly all of her videos and investigations of particular private or corporate collections, museums, and public spaces, as well as publications either displayed in vitrines, laid out on tables (to leaf through), or presented as wall texts. Notes, excerpts, and reading materials related to the artist's earliest gallery talks

(“Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here” and “The Fairy Tale: A Gallery Talk”, both 1986), which mark her leap into performance, are exhibited here for the first time, shedding light on the impact on her tactics of critical theory and the corresponding academic and activist milieu of mid-1980s New York. This accumulative approach brought another salient feature of Fraser’s practice into relief: Whereas other practitioners of “institutional critique” have programmatically defined the impact of the material exhibition apparatus and its framing devices as a central concern of their site-specific investigations, Fraser has always opted for a nonhierarchical arrangement of documents, be they written or recorded. As a result, these arrangements can appear deliberately inconsistent, since it sometimes remains unclear why certain texts are made available as printed matter while others are treated as traditional artworks, i.e., protected under glass or rather conventionally installed as exhibits on the wall.

Despite this impulse toward archival nonchalance, one work emerged as the defining moment of Fraser’s career thus far: “May I Help You?” (1991) is presented in no less than five variations within the exhibition. For this “polylogue” (Baker) of a gallery assistant addressing exhibition visitors, the artist compiled, edited, and arranged passages from auction catalogues, museum guides, and press interviews with dealers, artists, and collectors (some of which are taken directly from Bourdieu’s book “Distinction”). She then performed it either by herself or with the help of three actors in an installation of Allan McCollum’s “Thirty Plaster Surrogates” (1982–1990) at American Fine Arts, Co. in New York. At Museum Ludwig, Fraser reenacted it once; actors will stage it on a weekly basis throughout the exhibition’s run in a gallery on the second floor, where McCollum’s installation is on view. It is presented as photographs showing the artist at Galerie Nagel’s booth at the 1991 Cologne art fair; and it is included in the form of three videos, one of which shows Fraser at a newly renovated Schindler house in Los Angeles, so that the complete architectural environment becomes the reference point of this multifaceted performance (“It’s a beautiful house, isn’t it? May I Help You?”, 1991/2011). The work can be regarded as the epitome of Fraser’s conflicted analysis of the art field as it produces a continuous collision between claims for art’s critical and self-reflexive dimensions (both sincere and exaggerated); its actual (and probably inevitable) denigration at the hands of distinction, taste, and privilege; its role in the consolidation of class difference; its repudiation and rejection as elitist and hermetic (especially in the face of monochrome abstraction and repetition); its ideological function in processes of identification and biographical self-mirroring; and its economy of value and desire. Complicity and contestation once more. In one of the work’s most potent moments, Fraser recites a quote from a 1985 interview with McCollum, about whose work she penned her first catalogue essay, also on display in the exhibition: “You know, if you’re not one of those people who affect history – and most of us are not – then how are you supposed to enjoy looking for personal meaning in the souvenirs of that class of people who manipulate history to your exclusion? I think it takes a pretty blind state of euphoric identification to enjoy another’s power to exclude you.” [8]

Faced with yet another statement destined to implant severe doubts as to the current state, possibilities, pitfalls, and impasses of art-critical discourse and its dissemination, it cannot be but with hesitation, ambivalence, and reservation that one can in all sincerity acknowledge Fraser’s outstanding achievements and cordially congratulate her on the recognition entailed by this much-deserved award and the exhibition accompanying it. “It’s a very risky work. It’s critical. That’s the kind of work she dares to do.”

“Andrea Fraser. Wolfgang Hahn Prize 2013”, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, April 21–July 21, 2013.

NOTES

[1]

See for instance Andrea Fraser, “Procedural Matters. On the Art of Michael Asher”, in: *Artforum*, 10, June 2008, pp. 374–381, p. 464; “Psychoanalysis or Socioanalysis. Rereading Pierre Bourdieu”, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 68, 2007, pp. 139–150; “There’s no place like home”, in: Whitney Biennial 2012, ed. by Elisabeth Sussman/Jay Sanders, New Haven 2012, pp. 28–33.

[2]

Andrea Fraser. *Texts, Scripts, Transcripts*, ed. by Carla Cugini, Cologne 2012 (forthcoming). The volume will also include essays by artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz and curator Barbara Engelbach as well as the transcript of Fraser’s most recent performance, “Men on the Line”, the European premiere of which will take place after the publication of this review.

[3]

Cf. Alexander Alberro, “Introduction. Mimicry, Excess, Critique”, in: *Museum Highlights. The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. by Alexander Alberro, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, p. xxvi.

[4]

The first in-depth analysis of the formation of Fraser’s practice was offered by George Baker on the occasion of the artist’s first survey show; see George Baker, “Fraser’s Form”, in: Andrea Fraser. *Works: 1984 to 2003*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior, Cologne 2003, pp. 50–77. Apart from the aforementioned introduction by Alberro, see also John Miller, “Go for It! (2002)”, in: *The Ruin of Exchange And Other Writings on Art*, ed. by Alexander Alberro, Zurich 2012, pp. 76–89; James Meyer, “The Strong and the Weak: Andrea Fraser and the Conceptual Legacy”, in: *Grey Room*, 17, 2004, pp. 82–107; Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Berlin 2009, pp. 218–220; Sabeth Buchmann, “The double-life of Kunstkritik”, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 81, 2011, pp. 134–137.

[5]

Fraser, “There’s no place like home”, op. cit., pp. 30–31.

[6]

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures. Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art”, in: *Artforum*, 1, September 1982, pp. 43–56.

[7]

Baker, “Fraser’s Form”, op. cit. p. 52.

[8]

Andrea Fraser, “May I Help You?”, in: *Andrea Fraser: Works from 1984 to 2003*, op. cit., p. 270.