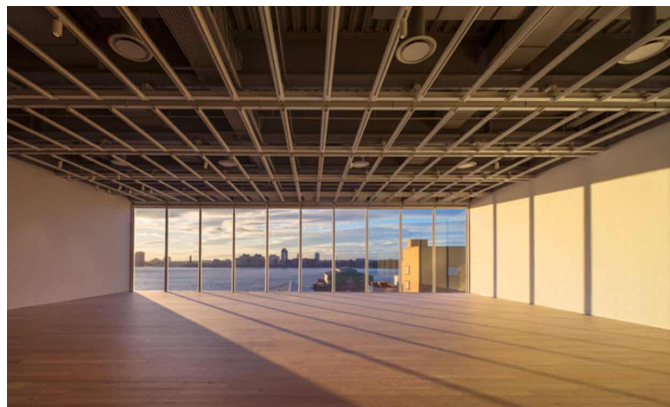


theguardian

Andrea Fraser: the artist turning the Whitney into a prison

The artist and provocateur is filling the New York gallery's immense fifth floor with nothing but sound from Sing Sing jail – drawing a link between two institutions bookending American society

by Charlotte Burns (February 24, 2016)



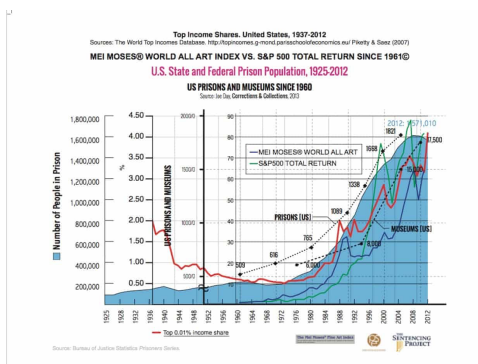
Andrea Fraser: filling the fifth floor of the Whitney with sound. Photograph: Timothy Schenck/Supplied

The average crow takes less than two hours to travel from Sing Sing maximum-security prison to the Whitney Museum of American Art, institutions separated by just 32 miles of land along New York's Hudson river. Yet few humans journey between them – museums and prison are at opposite ends of our society's self-imaginings, and their populations tend not to intersect.

The artist Andrea Fraser – provocateur, professor and performer who famously posed the question of whether art is, metaphorically, prostitution by sleeping with a collector on camera in *Untitled* (2003) – will focus on the relationship between galleries and jails in a new site-specific project opening at the Whitney on Friday. It will be the first in a series of rotating exhibitions, *Open Plan*, whereby the museum turns over to artists its immense fifth floor – a 18,200 sq ft, column-free space with sweeping views of the Hudson.

Fraser's penetrating intellect is her medium of choice, and she uses it to tackle tough topics others would prefer to avoid (she is one of the few artists to have substantially engaged with post-recession income inequality, with the brilliant 2011 text *L'1%, C'est Moi*). Her Whitney project is called *Down the River*, a riff on the slang for convicts sent up the Hudson to Sing Sing. In it, she posits museums and prisons as "the bookend institutions of our increasingly polarised society – institutions that celebrate freedom, and institutions that revoke that freedom".

“They’re really two sides of the coin of social inequality,” Fraser says over tea, taking a break from preparations for the show. “Museums increasingly are warehouses of wealth, capturing surplus in the form of artworks that are no longer financially productive. Prisons are institutions that warehouse surplus labour and populations that have been economically excluded from the labour market.” How, she asks, could our society be behind both “this incredible explosion of arts institutions and also this explosion of prisons and incarceration rates – which have gone up 700% since 1980 in the US?”



Index II, 2014, graph. Photograph: Andrea Fraser

Visually, there will be nothing to see because Fraser is leaving the Whitney’s fifth floor empty. She wants to concentrate visitors’ attention on the ambient sounds of correctional facilities, which she recorded at institutions including Sing Sing. Her intention is not to create a spectacle of the prisoners for museum-goers (“God forbid”), but to put Whitney visitors “into the acoustic space of incarceration”.

The noise of a prison, she says, depend a lot on whether cells have doors or bars. Solid doors create a sound of silence: “You’re hearing the acoustics of an architecture of confinement and the apparatus of incarceration,” she says. “You’re hearing doors and footsteps and a big, hard, cold, empty, confined and containing space. You feel the dehumanisation of confinement through those sounds.”

At Sing Sing, where the cells have bars, prisoners are physically confined but their sounds travel. Unexpectedly, there is birdsong: “There hasn’t been a significant renovation since the 1920s, there is no air conditioning for example – and birds come in the windows, sparrows,” Fraser says. “We were told that the inmates feed the birds.” The sound blew her away, she says. “It’s like a European train station.”

The links between establishments that hold and contain – whether prisoners, art or the insane – was “very important for me when I was thinking about museums in the late 1980s”, she says. It was during this decade that Fraser surfaced as a star of the institutional critique movement, influenced by figures such as art history professor Douglas Crimp and sociologist Tony Bennett (who were in turn influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault).

Two pieces Fraser made during this period will be on show in a side gallery: Museum Highlights: a Gallery Talk (1989) and Welcome to the Wadsworth: a Museum Tour (1991). The former focuses on the relationship between museums, social policy and philanthropy – how and why US museums have always been private nonprofit or public/private hybrids, despite being explicitly based on the public European model. It touches on “the longstanding, deep-seated hostility of Americans to the public sector, which has come back in force since the 1980s”, Fraser says.



<https://youtu.be/kgM-cfV9tZc>

Fraser, who is a professor at UCLA, talks with the steady pace and control of a seasoned academic. She discusses American attitudes to social welfare, noting that there have only really been two periods of expansion – President Roosevelt’s New Deal after the Great Depression, and then with President Johnson’s “war on poverty” in the 1960s. With the rise of neoliberalism, from the 1980s onwards there has been a steady dismantling of those briefly gotten gains. Inequality has spread as politicians have focused on top-end tax cuts and deregulation of industries including finance, all the while encouraging private money to step in where public money has been pushed out.

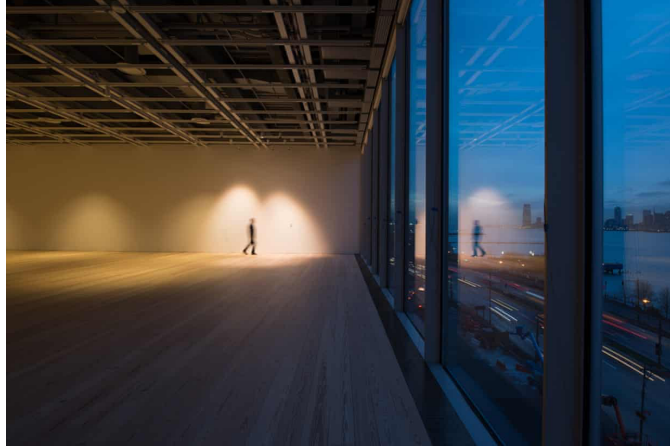
A philanthropic wealthy elite has, to a large extent, made up for the shortfall in the arts – buildings such as the newly opened Whitney bear testament to this generosity. But the increase in cultural and educational giving has not been mirrored in the social sectors, Fraser says, asking whether there is the possibility “that arts institutions, as they grow and expand, are actually draining social services organisations?”

She locates some of this antipathy in the historical opposition of museums and prisons in the imaginations of governments and the ruling class. Museums were created, and are maintained, she says, “as the embodiment of our ideals and aspirations”. Cultural institutions in the US exist “not as entitlements or rights but as gifts from the wealthy members of society” who function as exemplars.

In contrast, prisons and poorhouses have long operated as deterrents, suffering under the belief that “direct public provision – actually taking care of people – would foster laziness and immorality”, Fraser says.

Of course, prisons are also a handy way to keep swaths of the population separate. Fraser cites the law professor Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*, which argues that the prison-industrial complex has “everything to do with a post-civil rights reinstatement of a system of racial segregation and disenfranchisement, with draconian drug laws and sentencing laws directed specifically at poor African American populations”, Fraser says. That “there are more African Americans in prison today than were enslaved in the entire history of slavery in the US is absolutely devastating”.

Fraser talks of her insecurities in tackling a subject that feels as though it’s not hers. “I’ve never been incarcerated. I’m not harassed by police on the street,” she says. “The public institutions that define my public life are the museum and the university.” To some extent, the Whitney project is about trying to bridge her own distance from the “massive prison system that affects such a large swathe of the population in the US, but never touches me at all, at least not directly”, she says.



Fraser: the Whitney's new building 'represents extraordinary wealth'. Photograph: Timothy Schenck/Supplied

She is passionate about this, raising her volume as she questions why “the public lives, social experience and institutions with which people in the US identify can be so radically different”. She wonders if her voice will have any meaning: “So many people have been involved in this issue for a long time – what can I say about it, or add to it?”

But the Whitney is the perfect place to centre her thoughts. “I want to structure reflections on what that space is and what it represents, and it’s hard to encapsulate,” Fraser says. The new building “represents extraordinary wealth” and “presents a certain vision of the city – one has these incredible views of the river and the Statue of Liberty. Look east and you see the new condominium developments and the High Line – real estate, wealth, affluence and power. You’re in an extraordinarily privileged space that’s been enabled by that wealth and power. It’s also an open space, one of possibility.”

She wants to frame that experience in relationship to “other side of New York and America’s reality, of extreme poverty, mass incarceration, racial and class divisions”, she says. “I don’t want to present that space as an idealised space of achievement and possibility without fostering a reflection or recognition of the context of that reality – our privileged access to that.”