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Review: In Goya's Shadow, Andrea Fraser's Videos Skewer Social Institutions

by Martha Schwendener (July 17, 2016)



Visitors view Andrea Fraser videos at the exhibition "Andrea Fraser: L'1%, c'est moi" at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. Credit: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

BARCELONA — Spain might be the cradle of institutional critique, the brand of contemporary art that looks at how power and money shape art and how artists — often seen as independent operators — participate in this process.

The Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828) made it clear in his paintings and prints that he was not amused by the monarchy or the Catholic Church, which controlled society in this corner of the world for centuries. And now, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) has mounted a 30-year retrospective of the American conceptual artist Andrea Fraser, whose work illustrates the cozy relationship between contemporary art, governments, corporations and wealthy individuals — and might be too incendiary for some American museums.

Ms. Fraser's work has hardly been ignored by museums. This winter, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York mounted "Down the River" (2016), in which Ms. Fraser piped ambient audio recorded at Sing Sing prison into an empty gallery to give viewers a sense of inmates' oppression and social isolation, and a retrospective of her work appeared at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, in 2013.

But "Andrea Fraser: L'1%, c'est moi" here does more than juxtapose the prison-industrial complex with the art complex. It includes work, mostly in the form of performance videos, that shows how art, which supposedly functions as a quasi-independent form of aesthetic thought, has become bedfellows with business and politics. Among over two dozen works there is the infamous "Untitled" video (2003), in which Ms. Fraser has sex in a hotel room with a collector who paid thousands of dollars to participate in her work — the contractual terms elucidated by Ms. Fraser's art gallery. The video suggests a seductive (if oversimplified) system in which the artist is like a prostitute, pimped by an art dealer and sold to a collector-john.

In general, however, Ms. Fraser's work is funny, bold and extremely smart. She comes from a generation for which critical theory matters greatly (the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's writings on art and social stratification are a touchstone in her work), though she is among the few artists who can spin such complex information into art that is accessible, engaging and persuasive. Early political works like "White People in West Africa" (1989/1991/1993) — a series of photographs that show light-skinned people "helping" (as educators or missionaries) the local Africans — are critical in a fairly obvious manner, recreating the positions set up by colonialism.



In her video "Reporting from São Paulo, I'm from the United States" (1998), Ms. Fraser speaks to officials at a biennial in Brazil. Credit: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne

But Ms. Fraser hit her stride in the early '90s by working closer to home, in pieces about the art world. "May I Help You?" (1991) is a classic performance video with Ms. Fraser playing a docent leading visitors at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The script, written by the artist and later published in the journal *October*, careens from snobbish talk about taste and culture to a scathing critique of how 19th-century robber baron gave their money to art institutions instead of the poor. "Orchard Document: May I Help You?" (2005-2006), made with Jeff Preiss, takes the critique to the gallery realm — though the site is actually the New York alternative space Orchard and audience members include prominent art historians and curators.

Biennials proliferated during this period, which some viewed as cities and countries using culture to raise their political and economic status. (Ms. Fraser herself has contributed to the Whitney Biennial, acknowledging her conflicted stance.) In "Reporting from São Paulo, I'm from the United States" (1998), Ms. Fraser plays a television presenter at the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil, questioning officials and sponsors about the nature of corporate involvement in the event. The self-aggrandizing speeches given at art openings and galas — often cringe-worthy performances in themselves — have become another of Ms. Fraser's specialties. "Art Must Hang" (2001) is a brilliant recreation of a drunken speech the artist Martin Kippenberger gave at a post-opening dinner in Austria in 1995, and which demonstrates the excesses allowed — encouraged, really — by Great (Male) Artists. "Inaugural Speech" (1997) finds Ms. Fraser adopting multiple roles with cheerful schizophrenic aplomb: curator, trustee, public official and corporate sponsor.

In many ways, Ms. Fraser works like comedians such as Sacha Baron-Cohen or Sarah Silverman: using comedy as a Trojan horse to discuss politics and social issues. But the art sphere is a special entity. The title of the show, "L'1%, c'est moi," refers, naturally, to King Louis XIV's self-absorbed declaration "L'etat, c'est moi," as well as the assertion by Gustave Flaubert, who identified himself with his own literary subject: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." A work Ms. Fraser made during the Occupy movement and included in this exhibition also points out how the art world is a privileged and tiered system in which Ms. Fraser, despite being a critic of the whole thing, resides at the top stratum.