

Andrea Fraser in Conversation with Sabine Breitwieser

Sabine Breitwieser (SB): Your exhibition at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg (MdMS) is your first retrospective in Austria, but you have a long history of working in this country.

Andrea Fraser (AF): Yes, I sometimes think of myself as an honorary Austrian. Support and opportunities in Austria were central to my development as an artist. The first invitation came in 1990 from Brigitte Huck to do something at MAK, which didn't work out, unfortunately. The script of *Museum Highlights* was published in German by the magazine *Durch* in Graz that same year, thanks to Elisabeth Printschitz—even before it appeared in English. Then came projects with the museum in progress, Galerie Metropol, collaborations with Austrians Helmut Draxler and Ulf Wuggenig, and, in 1993, at the invitation of Peter Weibel, a project for the Austria pavilion at the Venice Biennial together with Swiss artist Christian Philipp Müller and Austrian Gerwald Rockenschau. Then came *Project in two phases* (1994–95) for the Generali Foundation in Vienna, when you and I worked together for the first time.

SB: *Project in two phases* continues to be a reference in critical discussions of artistic autonomy and shifting economic structures of museums and private collections, particularly corporate collections. It was evoked recently in connection with criticism of the partnership between the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and the Generali Foundation. How do you view this partnership and the move of the Generali Foundation collection from Vienna to Salzburg?

AF: From my perspective, any move from the private sector in the direction of the public sector is a positive development. I find the criticism of the move duplicitous. It is couched as critique of privatization and corporate patronage but implies a defense of the previous status quo of a corporate art collection and program. The absence of public discussion of the plan was unfortunate, but was itself symptomatic of the problems with that status quo: the limited obligations of corporations for transparency and public accountability. As important as the Generali Foundation was for me personally as a source of support and an opportunity for research, I would never defend it as such. The Generali Foundation collection, on the other hand, is one of the most important archives of critical art practice ever put together. I don't believe the collection was secure in Vienna. I do believe that it is more secure in Salzburg and is now less likely to be dispersed in the future.

Institutional critique, as I understand it, always begins with a critical reflection on one's own interests. So the question I would ask of those discussions is how did our own interests become so invested in a corporate entity that we would defend it—even while we claim to critique what it represents?

SB: In addition to being identified with the practice of institutional critique you have theorized it in your writings, some of which are included in this catalogue. As institutional critique and other critical art practices become increasingly institutionalized, archived, and historicized in museum collections and exhibitions—like your thirty-year retrospective at MdMS—do you think the critical impact of the work is affected?

AF: Of course it is. One of the most basic premises of institutional critique is that the meaning, significance, experience, and impact of any art work is largely determined by its frame, which includes social, economic, institutional, discursive, and, above all, historical contexts. So of course art's impact changes with time and place; of course it will be “archived” and “historicized.” Daniel Buren recognized this already in 1968. This recognition was the basis for the development of site- and situation-specific practices of critical intervention and the understanding that they must be continuously rethought. As I wrote in 1992, a critical intervention can only effectively impact what is “actual and manifest” in the “here and now” of its site of operation¹. I've also argued that all art is already “institutionalized” because the field of art is the condition of its very existence: it is a question of what *kind* of institution.² To suggest that art can or should exist outside of the institution that defines it is not critique but escapism. To suggest that art's impact would not change over time, even under the guise of bemoaning this, is idealist and antithetical to the materialist foundations of institutional critique. It is also an idealization in a psychological sense, a kind of magical thinking that believes art can and should transcend social and historical forces—and then blames art, institutions or society when this fails. The failure is in the mode of thinking itself, which denies the ambivalence, complexity and limitations of our own positions and the objects we invest in. These arguments drive me crazy. They're like Zombie arguments that just won't die.

SB: With that in mind, how do you think your work functions in a retrospective such as the exhibition at MdMS? Do you consider the exhibition or the works in it to be site-specific? If not, can they still function critically?

AF: Some of the work can function in a site- or situation specific way and have a critical impact; others can't. It depends on whether the structures and conditions engaged by the works are present in the frame of MdMS, Salzburg, Austria, Europe, the art field today, 2015, etc. Most importantly, it depends on whether what the work engages is at stake for the people who encounter it here, and whether the work can activate those stakes and a reflection on them in an effective way.

SB: Is that how you understand critique?

AF: Partly, yes. In talking about art, we rarely define what we mean by critique. For me, critique is a verb above all. It is an active process that takes place in an encounter and that involves investigation, analysis, negation and also recognition and reintegration. An artist may engage in a critique of an object, structure, institution, etc., but the *result* is only critique to the extent that it can activate that process for others in an immediate, immanent, "here and now" way. Because that "here and now" always includes the encounter itself, that critical process is necessarily reflexive. For me, activating a process of reflexive engagement is much more important than the particular content of any critical analysis.

SB: What about the works that won't function critically at MdMS?

AF: I've never considered all of my work to be institutional critique, even at the time I made it. There are works that developed out of less programmatic impulses. There are also works that are so specific that they no longer activate a critical process. And there are works that never did so very effectively. Some of these works may activate other things: intellectual engagement, historical reflections, even visual pleasure. All together they form an archive of a critical practice, which I understand as an on-going process of imagining, testing, and critically evaluating what an effective critical intervention might be.

SB: We have organized the exhibition and catalogue thematically as well as chronologically. Your earliest works in the show, the artist book *Woman 1/Madonna and Child* and *Four Posters*, both from 1984, involved superimposing found images and texts from museum wall labels, catalogues and gift shops. These works seem strongly influenced by the practices of "The Pictures Generation" artists like Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Louise Lawler. When did

you become aware of this work and how did it impact your development? What were other early influences?

AF: I was very influenced by the “Pictures” artists, especially their strategies of appropriation associated and its theorization by critics like Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, and Benjamin Buchloh. Buchloh linked some of these artists to artists of the 1960s and 1970s, whose work was later associated with institutional critique and who were also major influences on me: Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher and Marcel Broodthaers. Owens made the connection with feminist artists, writers and film makers like Yvonne Rainer, Mary Kelly and Laura Mulvey, whose critical engagement with psychoanalysis was extremely important to my development. The divide between these practices was quite stark at the time. One can see this in Buchloh’s essay “Allegorical Procedures,”³ which focuses largely on female artists but never reflects on this or mentions feminism at all. As a young artist with a feminist and anti-establishment background, I saw it as my task to bridge this divide. I did that by combining the “Pictures” strategy of appropriation with the site-specific and research-based investigation of social and institutional structures developed by Haacke and Asher, and the investigations of subjectivity, sexuality, and identity developed by feminists like Rainer and Kelly. And also the engagement with the “indexical present” practiced by Adrian Piper, who is in a category by herself.

SB: Two years after your first works in print media you introduce “Jane Castleton,” the name you used in early museum tour performances starting with *Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here* (1986) at The New Museum. At that time you wrote that you consider Jane Castleton neither as a character nor an individual but as “an object, a site determined by a function.”⁴ What led you to performance and how does it relate to your role as an “institutional critic.”

AF: I approached performance first of all from appropriation, moving from the appropriation of images in my very early work, to museum formats like posters and exhibition brochures, thanks to the examples of Haacke and Lawler. It was also the influence of Lawler's work, which I wrote about in 1985, which let me to think of appropriating institutional positions and functions. The way I developed on that idea was indebted to Rainer's films, feminist performance practices, and my early engagement with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, as is evident in the text that you quote. “Jane Castleton” continues to be misunderstood as a character, persona or alter ego. I did not use that name in my second performance. When I did use it again in *The Public*

Life of Art (1988) and *Museum Highlights* (1989), the approach was completely different. Above all, the name served as a “not-me,” that is, to distance what I was performing from myself and to frame it as constructed. By 1991 I turned to other strategies to accomplish those things.

My thinking about institutions and institutional critique always has been deeply intertwined with performance. First this may have been due to the influence of Brecht, both directly and via the Frankfurt School and British film theory. That connection also developed through the influence of psychoanalytic theories of transference repetition and transference analysis, which are still present in my use of the term “enactment.” But perhaps the strongest theorization of this connection was in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of how institutions and social fields are internalized embodied and performed as *habitus*. Today I would say that “Jane Castelton” is determined less by a function than by a *habitus*.

SB: You may perhaps best known for your critical examination of museums within these performances and for other works that focus on tours, from audio tours in *Recorded Tour* (1993), *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001) and *A Visit to the Sistine Chapel* (2005), to interactive multimedia guides like *Hello! Welcome to Tate Modern* (2007). Does this focus reflect the growing participation of museums in what has been called the “experience economy”?

AF: My engagement with these forms of art mediation probably has more to do with my focus on art discourse, which may be the most powerful and least examined “institution” of art. However, I often do find myself making a distinction between discursive and experiential forms. I may be attracted to tours because they combine the discursive and experiential. The term “experience economy” was developed by marketing people and taken up by the art world as the big new thing. In fact, museums have been purveyors of experiences since the nineteenth century, from big expositions to avant-garde sensations to blockbuster exhibitions to contemporary performance festivals. Museums and museum education always had a strong experiential and participatory component, first of all, in the focus on the physical encounter with the art work. The concept of “experience economy” is useful to describe the packaging of those encounters to promote attendance and the financial interests of museums. However, it's a big mistake to dismiss everything experiential as an alienated corporate product. Approaches to art as experience (John Dewey wrote a book with this title in 1934) have a much longer and richer history, and the concept of experiential learning—particularly as developed by Wilfred Bion and his followers—is extremely valuable to me and a significant influence on my approach to teaching and performance.

SB: “Experience economy” has also been linked to the explosion of performance in museums. Can you share your experiences of performance as an artistic medium in the museum context?

AF: I have performed in museum auditoriums as well as museum galleries and these are very different experiences. They share the characteristic of being events, but not much more. When I perform in a gallery I am occupying the same space as spectators, and interact with them directly. I aim to put the bodies and subjectivities of spectators at stake in way that links the experience to a specific social space and a set of social relations, and hopefully enables spectators to experience those relations differently. Like a lot of art performance, these performances make a contradictory demand on spectators: to be physically present and engaged and, at the same time, self-contained and distant. Spectators are required to play the role of the spectator—to perform as spectator—even when that does not imply active participation.

My perspective today is that all art can and should be engaged as performance or enactment (a psychoanalytic term that I prefer)—which for me also means experientially. All art activates structures and relations that are then enacted, perhaps by the artist, but above all those who engage with it. This conviction developed more out of my experience in teaching—which has been a primary arena of research for the past decade—than out of theories of performativity. From this perspective, performance as an artistic medium is distinct only in that it is consciously framed as such. Unfortunately, specifying some art as “performance” also can distance the enacted aspect of all art, and may disable our capacity to reflect on what is enacted in performance art itself beyond the “live” aspect. The artistic conceptualization of a work as “performance” tends to repress its unconscious, un-thought, compulsive or compulsory aspects, which for me are central to the concept of enactment.

SB: Another body of your work is organized around issues of “Class, Taste and Collecting,” including works like *May I Help You?* (1991), or your project *A Society of Taste* (1993) for the Kunstverein München. How did these issues become central to your work?

AF: Psychoanalysis tells us that only interpretations made at the “point of urgency” have potential for real impact. I absorbed this principle early on, and it became the basis for my practice of trying to approach every project from that “point of urgency.” This is to be found not only in the situation but where my own investments, the investments of those who invite me, and the investments of those who encounter the work, intersect at a particular site—usually as they

are organized by the history and structures of that site. The nexus of class and taste is one of the most prevalent “points of urgency” in artistic sites. Bourdieu's research has been central to my understanding of this nexus and the urgency it represents, for me personally and broadly, in terms of legitimacy and symbolic violence. He analyzed how cultural consumption is predisposed to manifest and legitimize social differences and social hierarchies, performing symbolic violence in the production of legitimacy and illegitimacy. His account resonated powerfully with my own experiences of art institutions. The class basis and biases of the art field are glaring to most people. Only art insiders somehow manage to become blind to them.

SB: Less evident even for those who know your work is your focus on “Globalization and Tourism,” which emerged as a grouping in the exhibition and this publication. Here we have included works such as your early *Cologne Presentation Book* (1990), your audio installations for the Venice Biennial, your performance *Inaugural Speech* (1997), and the television broadcasts you created for the São Paulo Bienal (1998).

AF: Yes, this was a concern throughout the 1990s with the rise of global cultural tourism, the biennial boom, and globalization. It was also driven by my own experiences of traveling constantly throughout that decade, as required by site-specific work. Of course, that aspect of the art field has only intensified since then, even while “globalization” has largely fallen out of discussion.

SB: This section also includes the photographic series *White People in West Africa* (1993), based on photographs you produced while traveling through Africa and participating in touristic and, one could argue, neo-colonial activity. Do you run the risk of performing what you aim to critique with this work?

AF: This is another one of those *Zombie* arguments that just won't die. Again, I've long argued that one can only effectively impact structures and relations as they are made “actual and manifest” in their performance or enactment. Of course one runs the risk of simply reproducing them, but this is what we do everyday. The greater risk is of using critique to deny the fact that we are performing and reproducing structures that we also judge negatively, as I argue in *There's No Place Like Home* (2012). And this is why critique must be reflexive and aim to activate reflexivity in others. One of the difficulties is that critique also activates those negative judgments in others, which may be disowned and seen only in the artist or work, rather than

reflexively. That's a psychological version of what Bourdieu described as the law of objective lucidity and reflexive blindness. Indeed, my first impulse in Africa was to project all of my judgments about my own activity onto other tourists, who I could see enacting neo-colonial structures so clearly. At least it seemed better to use the camera to objectify other tourists than the African "other," as they were doing. But my awareness of those structures in itself does not allow me to escape them, especially not the racial identities they produce. My experience in Africa showed me the limits of critical consciousness and how we sometimes use it to deny forces of determination we are subject to, denials that are often also linked to racial and economic privilege.

SB: The "Projects and Initiatives" section starts with the *Preliminary Prospectuses* you launched in 1993 and which became the basis of a number of commissions, including *Project in two phases* for the Generali Foundation. It also includes your work on collaborative and collective projects such as *Services*, with the artist group Parasite, and with Orchard, a cooperative gallery in New York. Your work with the feminist group The V-Girls is in a separate section in the book, but is also related. Do these projects represent an effort to move beyond the critique of existing institutions to their transformation, or even the creation of new institutions?

AF: Institutional critique is sometimes criticized for only criticizing, and contrasted with cultural activism or social practices. In fact, many of the artists associated with institutional critique have also been engaged in collective, activist, and Productivist activity. For me, the important point is that if one proposes to develop new structures without a rigorous and reflexive critique of existing structures, one runs an even greater risk of simply reproducing those structures. But in fact, even if one does manage to change some structures, one is always reproducing others. With the *Prospectuses* and *Services* I hoped to develop an alternative to the booming speculative market for artistic commodities by embracing a fee-based service economy. But that move was also in sync with the historical forces of post-Fordism, which I did not want to embrace. Orchard developed as an alternative to the Wall-Street-driven Chelsea art scene, but it also became part of the gentrification of the Lower East Side by privileged art types. Recently I joined the board of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), an organization founded in 2008 by a group of New York-based artists, and I'm very optimistic about its impact. But one must always keep one's eyes open to a whole range of consequences, and keep trying. It should never be about congratulating ourselves on the work we do, but rather about interrogating that work to find a better way forward.

SB: We have grouped much of your work from the past 14 years under the heading “The Subjective and the Social.” This period is marked by a renewed focus on live performance, often presented on video, together with critical writing that you sometimes present in exhibitions. Your celebrated recent performances, *Men on the Line* (2012) for *Pacific Standard Time* in Los Angeles, and *Not Just a few of us* (2014) for *Prospect 3* in New Orleans, demonstrate your amazing skill and influence as a performer, but unlike almost all of your previous they work, have very little to do with art. How do you account for the developments in your work over these past 14 years?

AF: I often characterize all of my work as vacillating between the social and economic interests invested in the art field and the very intimate, sexual, psychological and emotional interests we invest in art. These two areas also tend to correspond to two different types of investigation. The former focuses on the external, social world and often develops through research that leans on social-science—this came to the fore in the 1990s. The latter focuses on the internal, psychological world and develops more through introspection (sometimes described as the form of research specific to psychoanalysis), which has become more prominent since 2001. Feminism established the need to engage the social and the psychological together as one of the basic requirements of progressive change—this grouping could have been called “The Personal and the Political.” I can't always do that in every work, but keeping psychologically intense works like *Untitled* (2003) and *Projection* (2008) together with data-driven works like *You Are Here* (2010) and *Index* (2011) is a way of insisting that psychological and social, personal and political, inward and outward investigations must never be separated.

This also is the link to *Men on the Line* and *Not just a few of us*. The former is based on a radio broadcast with four men discussing feminism; the latter on a New Orleans City Council hearing on desegregation. Performing these group discussions as an individual is a way of engaging the everyday process of internalizing the social world and then externalizing it again in our projections and enactments. That process is always fractured by social and psychological structures that produce and reproduce internal and external divisions and hierarchies. These performances aim to overcome some of those divisions by performing groups across the boundaries of gender and racial identity.

SB: We should also take your work as a teacher into consideration. In review of your works as grouped within the context of the exhibition, how would you evaluate your critical practice today?

AF: My goal as a teacher is to help students to understand their own primary values, aspirations, and investments and to develop practices that can lead to further development. My aim is not to produce institutional critics but to spare them practices rooted in conflicted investments that can lead to naive, idealizing or cynical denial and self-defeating struggle.

In many ways, my own work has been thirty years of grappling with the conflicted investments I brought to the field of art and also internalized from it. I became an artist for a range of reasons, many of them in conflict, but also discovered that art was an arena in which those conflicts could be explored and potentially transformed. I understand all of my work as research into the conditions of the possibility of that transformation. Critique and critical art practice are hypotheses to be tested. On most levels they fail. However, they also serve to expand and maintain a field of practice that is also a field of possibility. As such, they can challenge the field of art as a whole. Ultimately, the transformation of a field can only happen through a transformation of dispositions and practices on a broad basis, and that can only happen by transforming the institutionalized values and aspirations that drive participants to invest their energies in that field.

¹ Andrea Fraser, “An Artists Statement,” published on pp. ##

² Andrea Fraser, “From Critique of Institutions,” published on pp. ##

³ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” first published in *Artforum International* no. (September 1982): 43–56.

⁴ Andrea Fraser, *Damaged Goods Gallery Talk Starts Here*, script published on pp. ##