Have We Finally Caught Up With Andrea Fraser?

For over 30 years, the artist has waged a conceptual battle against the murky ethics of the art world. Now, finally, the larger culture is taking cues from her.

By Zoë Lescaze
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IT WAS NEARLY closing time at the museum: Long shadows had already devoured most of downtown Los Angeles and the hangar-like space was hushed. Andrea Fraser stood before a small TV watching “Official Welcome,” one of her landmark performances. Onscreen, she appeared in a tasteful black dress at the opening of her 2003 exhibition in Hamburg, Germany, making remarks from a lectern. She thanked the curators who had made her retrospective possible; she thanked her mother, who had flown all the way from California for the event. The crowd clapped on cue. But then the woman went rogue, as though a computer virus had infected her gracious-artist software. “Thank you, Andrea,” she boomed in a deep male voice, morphing into the first of more than a dozen art-world personae who take over the speech — a piratical dealer, a fawning patron, an artist best known for pickling a shark. Before it’s over, she has shed her dress and then her Gucci bra, thong and stilettos to address the audience fully nude. “It takes a lot of courage to do what she does,” she said, assuming the voice of an approving critic. “She goes far beyond where most artists have the intelligence or audacity to operate.” The 30-minute piece — funny, brash and often excruciating — ends after the woman, back in her dress but somehow more exposed than ever, breaks down in sobs.

Tears pooled behind Fraser’s glasses as she watched her younger self. But the moment passed quickly, and she returned to critiquing the work on view, at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, with cleareyed detachment. “I could have given that a little more time,” she said, catching herself rush a beat.

“Official Welcome” is a case study in the intellectual rigor, physical bravura and satirical wit Fraser brings to diagnosing the collective delusions, material excesses, fraught politics, grandiose rhetoric, bumptious egos, ingrained biases and sundry pretenses of the art world. For the past 30 years, she has reigned unchallenged as the doyenne of institutional critique, a branch of conceptual art concerned with the internal machinery of museums and other social constructs. Lately, that machinery has been the subject of intense public scrutiny. This year alone, activists have stormed the exhibition halls of elite museums, targeting their private funding sources. The Louvre scrubbed the Sackler name from one of its wings following demonstrations condemning the family’s ties to the opioid crisis just months after the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as the National Portrait Gallery and Tate in London, embargoed Sackler donations. This summer, the businessman Warren Kanders resigned from the Whitney Museum of American Art’s board of trustees amid outrage over his company’s production of tear gas canisters used on migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

A still from Fraser’s “Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk” (1989), with the artist in character as a docent at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Kelly & Massa Photography, courtesy of the artist

Fraser is a fierce critic of the status quo, but her approach is different from that of most artist-activists. For most of her career, she has fused archival research, psychoanalysis, sexuality and humor in diverse projects that examine the art world’s subconscious — the web of desires that shape its economy, power dynamics and social relationships — and her own place within the

system. In 2001, she spoofed the museum world's fetish for glitzy new buildings by grinding sensuously against the curvaceous limestone walls of the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Bilbao, her acid-green dress hiked up around her waist, driven to ecstasy by the audio guide. Two years later, she filmed a sexual encounter with a collector to create her most notorious work, "Untitled," a piece some praise as the ultimate comment on art as empty commerce and others dismiss as an attention-grabbing stunt.

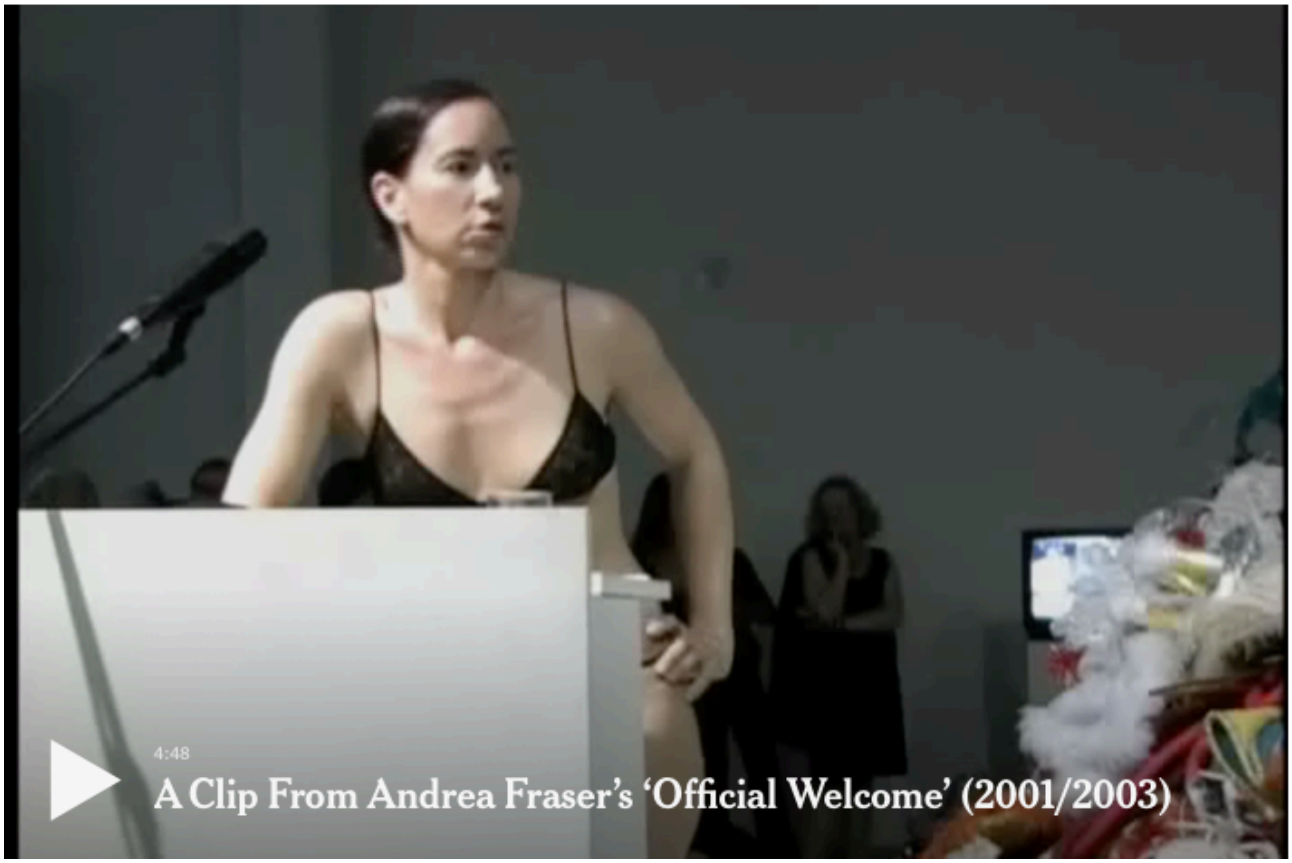
Fraser's occasional bouts of nudity often eclipse her careful choice of costumes, reflecting a savvy that extends to her civilian life — clothes are the only belongings Fraser accumulates other than books. They are props people use to perform themselves, and Fraser's eye for the subtle ways that they broadcast self-assurance or camouflage fragility helps give her work its bite. In the language of her art, clothes serve as verbs — active and dynamic forces. Her outfit at the Geffen that hot day in late September — a floral jumpsuit, suede mustard-colored mules and violet toenail polish — delivered a jaunty riposte to the little black dress she wore in the video. Fraser swears at parking meters like a New Yorker (she was based in the city for 25 years) and rhapsodizes about gardening like the Los Angeles transplant she has become (she's lived there since 2006 and currently shares a home in the San Fernando Valley with her husband, Andy Stewart, and their toy poodles, Winnicott and Bowlby).

All of Fraser's works combine a trenchant and unsparing intellect with a magnetic physical presence. She stands with the alert posture of a dancer and passes through the world with the kind of fluid, feline awareness that makes it difficult to imagine her tripping or dropping her keys. At 54, her face is practically unlined. Intently impassive when she is listening to others, her features fly into motion when she is discussing matters close to her heart, from psychoanalytic theory to samba dancing. Listening to Fraser speak in the measured timbre of a veteran academic, as she often does, is a bit like listening to an opera singer softly hum a tune — it can be suspenseful, knowing just how much power she is capable of unleashing, how much voltage is being kept under control.

In "Official Welcome," Fraser's physical powers are on full display as she stomps and strips and mimics the gestures of recognizable art-world figures. (For the script, Fraser culled excerpts from actual speeches and interviews, seamlessly melding them with her own writing.) "You know, it's fun to sell big artworks — and it's profitable. In the end, a good artist is a rich artist," she bellows as she swaggers across the stage as an unmistakable heavyweight dealer. Minutes later, she morphs again: "Most of the work we collect is about sex or excrement," she chirps in the perky tone of a prominent West Coast collector. "We like to think of ourselves as connoisseurs of art's subculture."

The art world is easy to roast — its most absurd characters are often the most oblivious — and it tends to skewer itself without any outside assistance. But Fraser's work is not mere polemics or parody. She bares her own insecurities as she examines those of museums, galleries, viewers and patrons. "Official Welcome" may mock the art world's rituals of florid praise and faux humility, but the performance also reflects Fraser's lifelong sense of being an outsider — a position she consciously draws upon in her work. "Yeah, it was fun to write," she said, "but to some extent, this piece was driven by my sense of resentment and envy of my professional peers about whom all these great things were said." To Fraser, this sort of vulnerability and self-examination is crucial if a work is going to engage viewers. "Art functions through empathy. … [When you] see someone else

who's struggling with something and grappling with something, that creates a space for finding that in yourself," she said. For her, these performances are not idle exercises but dogged attempts to change audiences and the larger ecosystems they inhabit. And, if the events of the past year are any indication, these provocations have worked — even if most audiences don't fully realize that the world has caught up to Andrea Fraser.



A Clip From Andrea Fraser's 'Official Welcome' (2001/2003). The artist's physical powers are on full display as she stomps and strips and mimics the gestures of recognizable art-world figures. Courtesy of the Artist

"WHAT DO YOU need to know about me to understand my work?" Fraser asked six of her graduate students. It was the first day of fall classes at the University of California, Los Angeles, where Fraser is a tenured professor in the Department of Art. They sat in a half circle in a stark white room illuminated by the eye of a large projector. Fraser, in a black dress and multicolor Issey Miyake scarf, was explaining early sources of her critical approach, and the lecture had the riveting, unpredictable atmosphere of one of her performances. "That I was the youngest in a family of five," she continued. "It was extremely competitive, and fairness became extremely important to me from that position. I had to defend my little share, right? My little piece of the pie." Her obsession with equity, she said, again tearing up, partly "comes down to that, to being the runt."

Fraser was born in Montana in 1965 and grew up on the West Coast. Her parents married two months after they met in New York, where her father, the son of a cattle rancher, was studying philosophy at Columbia University and her Puerto Rican-born mother was taking painting classes at the Art Students League. The family moved to the Bay Area in 1967. "Pretty quickly, the context of Berkeley began to unravel the family," Fraser later told me, over a tray of chicken and rice at a tiny Jamaican spot in Culver City. "We became hippies very quickly, my mother got involved in the

women's movement, became a lesbian a bit before that. My brothers, I think, were selling drugs when they were 10, 11? We were all pretty precocious."
The artist grew up memorizing Adrienne Rich poems, browsing "Our Bodies, Ourselves" and crafting banners for gay pride marches in her mother's kitchen. She remembers cutting class and catching a bus into San Francisco to see Judy Chicago's major feminist installation "The Dinner Party" at the age of 13. Two years later, she quit going to school altogether (her mother wrote her a note) and made her way to New York's East Village, where she applied to the School of Visual Arts. While she waited on her acceptance, Fraser visited the Met three or four times a week. "I was pretty freaked out about having dropped out of high school and what was going to happen to me," she said. "I had to sort of redeem myself." Soon, Fraser knew most of the museum by heart, from the lavish period rooms to the Greek and Roman marbles. She was attracted to "East Coast cultural institutions and status codes," despite feeling, or precisely because she felt, "deeply illegitimate — as a high school dropout, as a hippie kid, as a half-Puerto Rican kid … I think I was able, from the very beginning, to recognize, even if I couldn't use the words 'ambivalence' or 'conflicted investments,'" she said, assuming a deep professorial register to mock her own preferred terms, "how much I wanted from these institutions … and that I could find a kind of legitimacy in that world. And, at the same time, I did feel absolutely crushed by it."

For Fraser, her performances are not idle exercises but dogged attempts to change audiences and the larger ecosystems they inhabit.

At S.V.A., Fraser found her tribe: a group of young artists, including Mark Dion, Tom Burr, Gregg Bordowitz and Collier Schorr, who gathered around Craig Owens, the art critic and gay activist, among other postmodernist teachers. Fraser stood out from the start. "Andrea was scary brilliant," said Bordowitz, who became Fraser's boyfriend. "Frighteningly brilliant, very intimidating. And at the same time, very fragile, because I think she even scared herself sometimes with what she saw and understood about the art world and its terrible contradictions." At 18, Fraser left S.V.A. for the Whitney Independent Study Program, then a theory-intensive boot camp. There, she studied with the artist Barbara Kruger, whose work critiques systems of power and control and the cultures they create. (They now teach together at U.C.L.A.) Kruger praised Fraser's "incredibly brilliant mind," but Fraser saw herself quite differently. "At the Whitney program, my image of myself was that I was just, like, hiding under the seminar table in fear," she said.

BEFORE FRASER CAME along, institutional critique was the domain of older, mostly male European artists who had launched the movement in the late 1960s amid the protests sweeping the Western world. In 1969, activists wrestled in a pool of bovine blood inside the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art to censure two trustees, Nelson and David Rockefeller, who had wartime manufacturing ties to jet fighters and napalm. The German artist Hans Haacke made these demands for accountability his very practice by presenting a mordant installation in an exhibition at the museum the following year. His piece, "MoMA Poll," asked viewers to drop ballots into boxes to indicate whether Nelson's failure to denounce President Nixon's Indochina policy would be grounds for them to vote against him (he was up for re-election as governor of New York). By the end of the exhibition, nearly twice as many participants had answered yes than no. Haacke's

project reflected the broader anti-establishment ethos of the time, but he and the other architects of institutional critique, including the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers and the French conceptualist Daniel Buren, were also reacting to a specific transformation in the history of museums and the art world at large.

If the old museum was a mausoleum safeguarding dusty treasures for the enjoyment of the educated few, the new museum that emerged in the 1960s and ’70s courted broad audiences with blockbuster shows, expensive advertising campaigns, new wings, after-hours events and gift shops. The methods of Thomas Hoving, the freewheeling director of the Met between 1967 and 1977, exemplified the tactics museums began deploying to ratchet up their attendance and revenue. A 1969 multimedia exhibition titled “Harlem on My Mind,” for instance, was unabashedly intended, Hoving wrote in his 1993 autobiography, “to chronicle the creativity of the downtrodden blacks and, at the same time, encourage them to come to the museum.”

This was also, and not coincidentally, the moment when the contemporary art market exploded. As early as 1960, the dealer Peggy Guggenheim was lamenting how “the entire art movement has become an enormous business venture.” Collectors, she wrote, were spending “unheard-of” sums “merely for investment, placing pictures in storage without even seeing them, phoning their gallery every day for the latest quotation as though they were waiting to sell stock.” This approach became

Fraser’s work is not mere polemics or parody: She bares her own insecurities as she examines those of museums, galleries, viewers and patrons. Michael Christopher Brown

Fraser’s installation "Um Monumento às Fantasias Descartadas" ("A Monument to Discarded Fantasies," 2003) at Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Photo: copyright Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler

a method in 1973, the year a New York-based collector named Robert Scull flipped 50 works by American artists for $2.3 million (about $12 million in today's dollars) that he had bought several years earlier for $150,000 (about $860,000). These figures seem minuscule by today's standards, but the sale nonetheless announced a new era: the age of art collecting as investment strategy. As museums chased mainstream audiences, they assumed a paradoxical role as the seemingly moral counterparts to the marketplace — temples to art untainted by dollar signs — but were hardly immune to the wealth reshaping the industry as they pursued funding streams for high-profile expansions and big-ticket exhibitions.

Fraser wove her predecessors' critical threads into her own practice but with two key differences: None of the early practitioners of institutional critique had used his own body as his primary medium, or acknowledged his own stake (emotional, economic or otherwise) in the systems he examined. Fraser made herself the site of her art and explored her own fragility in the process, effectively redefining the genre. "I think phrases like 'institutional critique' can have the whiff of academic theory," said Scott Rothkopf, the chief curator of the Whitney, "and one of the things that makes her work so important is that the clarity and the depth and the rigor of her thought is matched by tremendous emotional breadth." Fraser emerged from the Whitney program armed with strategies plucked from feminist performance, postmodern theory and psychoanalysis that she used to form a fresh, hybrid approach. Her great innovation was a "radical empathy," said Connie Butler, the chief curator of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Fraser can, and is willing to, probe "difficult, complex issues" by fully assuming diverse, and sometimes repellent, voices and positions. "I can't think of anyone else who does that," she said. By inhabiting the figures and roles Fraser saw as legitimate, she also discovered a means of negotiating her own fraught participation in the systems they represent. "It was an artistic strategy, but it was also a life strategy," Fraser said.

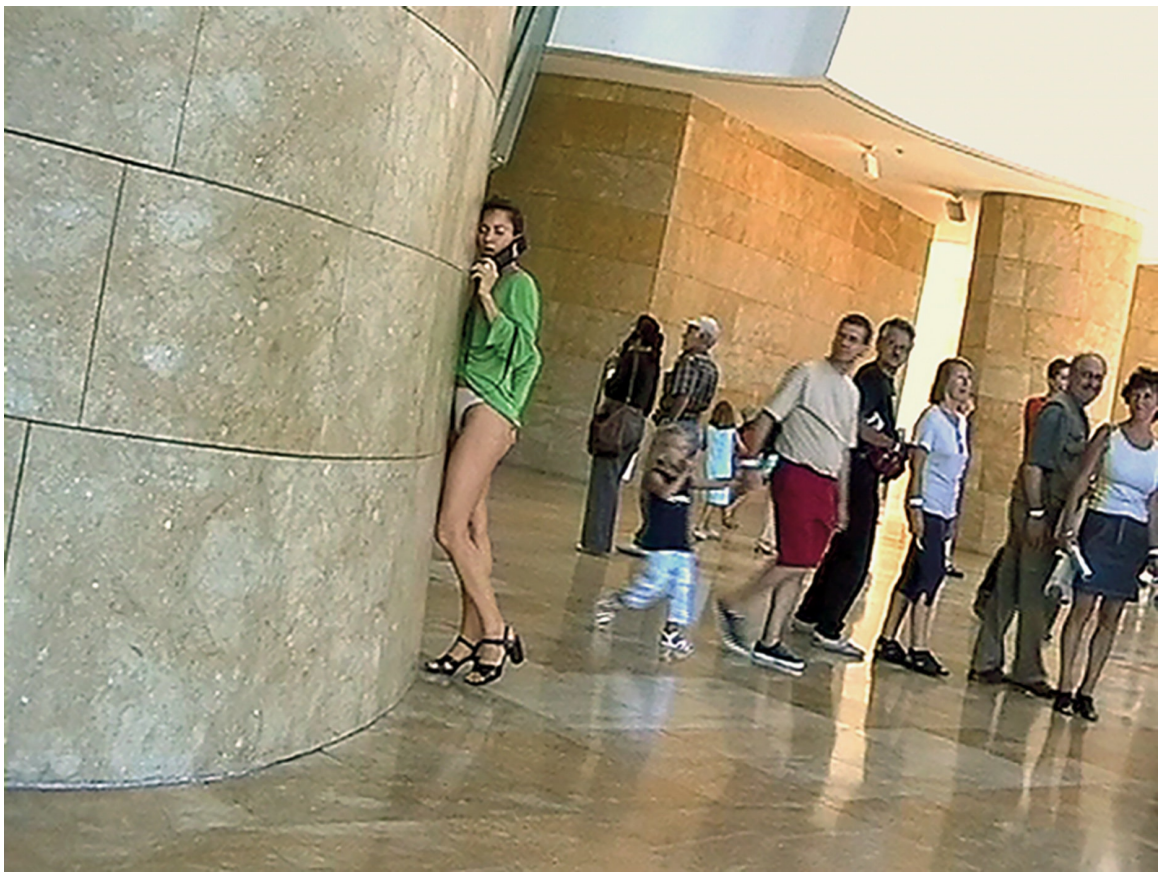
Her big break came in 1989, when she was invited to give a lecture at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and proposed a subversive performance instead. Leading the camera through the august galleries, Fraser (in the guise of a ladylike docent named Jane Castelton) shifts seamlessly between lofty praise for the masterpieces on display ("resplendently amazingly flawless") and the museum itself ("a place apart from the mundane demands of reality" that provides "a training in taste") to grim accounts of the squalid poorhouses that appeared in America at the same time that the country's oldest art museums were being established ("The inmates are lodged in rooms of about 22 feet by 45 feet … and are classed according to their general habits and characteristics, separating the more deserving from the abandoned and worthless"). The video, which is roughly 30 minutes long, is a disturbing, spellbinding portrait of a country whose long history of inequality haunts its cultural institutions. At the time that Fraser made "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk," that inequality was approaching its present levels. Reagan- and Bush-era cuts to cultural funding meant that museums increasingly had to seek corporate sponsorship and private donors. Fraser's piece ostensibly targeted the robber-baron philanthropy of the Gilded Age, but she was also implicating museums' current embrace of free-market capitalism.

Soon, Fraser was participating in prestigious biennials and working with a New York dealer, Colin de Land. (Later, in 2002, she started showing at Petzel, a larger New York gallery.) But participating in the gallery world sat uneasily with Fraser, who continued to dissect its systems from the inside. She produced her videos in unlimited editions, undermining their value as rarefied

commodities, and occasionally renounced making salable objects altogether. “I’ve been in and out of strategies of trying to manage my conflicted feelings about the market, about selling art,” Fraser told me. She then shook her head, a little amused, perhaps, by the self-inflicted agony of her struggle against a commercial sphere in which countless artists are glad, even grateful, to exist at all.

ONE OF FRASER’S (many) problems with the art world is that relationships are rarely genuine, and much of her work deals with questions of authenticity. Artists, dealers and patrons often “perform” fictional friendships, she said, “but fundamentally, they’re transactional.” Fraser described collectors who believed certain artists and dealers were their friends, only to get hurt when they hit a rough patch and couldn’t afford to keep buying. “That’s not something I want to participate in,” she said.

She mined her conflicted feelings about the market to create “Untitled,” which, to the artist’s exasperation, is often seen as her defining work. In the video, Fraser has sex with a collector, who prepurchased a copy of the recording. Shot from a single camera mounted near the ceiling of a New York hotel room, the unedited footage shows Fraser greet the unidentified man and offer him a glass of wine. They appear to talk a little (there is no audio), and then they undress, sleep together and talk some more. The piece avoids pornographic clichés — there are no close-ups; it’s as though the encounter had been secretly filmed by a security camera. The whole thing takes an hour. “You see, like, a penis!” Fraser exclaimed, baffled by the scandalized reactions that “Untitled” continues to inspire. “You see a teeny, tiny, little speck for about two seconds like three times. You see boobs.”



Fraser in her 2001 video “Little Frank and His Carp” at the Guggenheim Bilbao. Courtesy of the artist

When the video went on display at Petzel in 2003, the work shocked the art world. The press was harsh. There were gratuitous comments on Fraser's appearance — Jerry Saltz noted in Artnet Magazine that Fraser is "in excellent shape for a 39 year old" and "gives an attentive blow job." "I think some people felt that the piece was almost too literal and didn't have the complexities of some of her other performances, and I think she felt very misunderstood," said Tom Burr. "There's an emotional, personal side to it, where you get battered and hurt by all of these kinds of conditions that you're trying to speak about. You still want to be liked."

Fraser considered the backlash a compliment to the work. "For me, one of the clearest signs that 'Untitled' is a successful piece is that it didn't only upset people outside of the art world but a lot of people inside the art world as well," she told The Brooklyn Rail the following year. Today, she'll admit that the experience was harrowing, mostly because the price the collector paid became an obsession for viewers. For Fraser, the amount was symbolic, which is why she will never disclose it; the piece was about the desires and fantasies that drive artists, patrons and dealers to collude in a market that reduces art to a transaction and a meditation on the experience of selling intimate parts of one's self. "Untitled" can be read as a comment on the exploitation artists suffer at the hands of profiteering collectors and opportunistic dealers, but ironically, Fraser was worried about the patron. "I had a tremendous amount of power in that piece," she said. "I used to joke it started out as a prostitution piece and could become an extortion piece — I have a videotape of a man having sex in a hotel room with a woman who's not his wife." But the price, which was widely, incorrectly, reported as $20,000, overwhelmed any considerations of Fraser's agency. "So that's what was the most painful for me," said Fraser, "being exposed publicly in the art economy as cheap."

The experience was alienating in other ways as well. In the two years Fraser spent formulating "Untitled" and exhibiting it at Petzel, she remembers only two people asking her about the work directly. "And this was a period when I would hear secondhand that people were having heated arguments about it, everybody was talking about it. Nobody talked to me about it." One of the paradoxes of "Untitled," she said, is that while it is, in part, about intimacy, "the experience of doing it was incredibly isolating."

The United States, Fraser writes, has become a plutocracy, and its museums have effectively become pay-to-play country clubs for millionaires.

"Untitled" occupies an uneasy place in the contemporary canon. On one hand, it followed in a long tradition of radical feminist performance and video art that includes the late Carolee Schneemann's "Fuses" of 1964-67, a montage of the artist and her husband having sex, shot from the perspective of their cat, and Martha Rosler's footage of a male doctor measuring and clinically reporting the dimensions of her naked hips, limbs and breasts in "Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained," from 1977. Women had long used their bodies to critique social relations and hierarchies, but the fact that so much of Fraser's work had existed within an intellectual framework, steeped in discourse and terminology, meant that no one really knew how to contextualize her more explicit use of her sexuality. By 2003, critics and audiences alike had essentially decided that women

artists could use their bodies, or they could use their brains. Fraser never felt that she had to choose between the two.

These days, Fraser warns her students against including five kinds of content in their art — cute animals, babies and young children, popular music, sex and certain kinds of violence — because they tend to overwhelm viewers' ability to think about art in nuanced or complex ways. She acknowledges the consequences of breaking her own rule. "Artists are responsible, I believe, on some level for … what their work activates in other people," she said. "And so on some level, I'm responsible for the responses — to 'Untitled' and to other works of mine — that I abhor."
What continues to unsettle people about "Untitled" isn't the sex, though — the art world likely lost that last bit of innocence in 1991, when Jeff Koons exhibited a series of graphic works portraying himself in flagrante delicto with his porn-star wife — it's that the piece calls out art-world commerce for what it is: commerce, plain and simple. People in almost any industry would prefer not to dwell on the transactional basis of their relationships with others, but that's what Fraser asked her peers to join her in doing when she took up the old metaphor of artist as prostitute, and implicated everyone involved: the dealer as pimp, the collector as john, the viewer as voyeur. The work threatened the high self-opinion of the art world, which rarely questions its own integrity. Fraser tried, however bluntly, to tear down pretense and expose the ways in which intimacy is performed. In the end, it was the piece that got torn apart.

The artist performing "Official Welcome" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2012. Photo: Suzy Poling, courtesy of the artist

A still from "Projection" (2008). Two-channel video installation, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler

BY 2006, FRASER was on the brink of quitting. “I was really fed up,” she said. “I was fed up with the art world, but I was also fed up with being poor and being broke and being in debt and struggling to live in my own apartment in New York.” She was considering pursuing a Ph.D. in anthropology when salvation came in the form of U.C.L.A., where she has taught for the past 13 years. Tenure alleviated the financial strain of operating outside the commercial art world. She cut ties with Petzel in 2011 and never signed with another American gallery. But Fraser’s work has always made more sense in museums, her contentious muses — especially now as these institutions reinvent themselves all over again.

Today, museums are scrambling to redefine the canon and compensate, as much as they can, for centuries of exclusion with a surge in exhibitions devoted to women and artists of color. Tokenism and hollow attempts at mere correctness abound, but so do real revelations, as every exhibition season brings overlooked artists to light and recognizes neglected icons: Most recently, a remodeled MoMA opened its fall season with shows by two black artists, the 64-year-old performance maverick Pope.L and the pioneering assemblage artist Betye Saar, who, at age 93, was also getting her first solo show at the museum. For these overdue efforts to continue, and for museums to ensure that they, as institutions, remain relevant to contemporary audiences (in more profound ways than as selfie backdrops), curatorial and staff diversity is essential. In New York, diversity reporting has become requisite for museums to receive city funding. Trustee diversity remains elusive, however. A 2017 study commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums found that 46 percent of all American museum boards are 100 percent white. Meanwhile, institutions’ acceptance of questionable money hasn’t changed much since Haacke’s day. The inherent hypocrisy of museums — as protectors of culture, funded by the very people compromising that culture’s values — is increasingly unacceptable to audiences. This is a transitional moment, and it isn’t yet clear what museums might become, only that they are changing. As galleries increasingly display work representing a breadth of backgrounds, boardrooms are the last parts of the museum in need of urgent reconsideration.

Recently, Fraser’s analysis of museum governance has become more explicitly political. When Steven Mnuchin, a trustee of MOCA in Los Angeles at the time, became the national finance chairman for the Trump campaign, Fraser began to wonder what the politics of other museum patrons really were. The result was a 950-page study titled “2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics.” The book breaks down the donations of 5,458 museum board members to party-aligned organizations during the general election. Fraser was horrified, she said, by the realization that people who supported institutions professing diversity and equality could simultaneously fund candidates with conservative positions on issues like immigration. (Steven Cohen, the billionaire hedge-fund manager who sits on the board of MOCA and MoMA, for instance, gave an estimated $6,793,500 to Republican causes — including Paul Ryan’s congressional campaign — in 2016 and in the first half of the 2018 midterm election cycle.) “She uncovered the false notion that museums are Democratic,” said Cuauhtémoc Medina, the chief curator of the University Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City, who organized Fraser’s 2016 exhibition there. “She discovered that we’re in serious trouble.” But Fraser came away from the project convinced that the bigger issue is that the super rich — political affiliations aside — run the country. The United States, she writes, has become a plutocracy, and its museums have effectively become pay-to-play country clubs for millionaires.

Critics of the book tend to state that Fraser “doesn’t offer solutions” or “doesn’t go far enough.” And while she doesn’t propose specific reforms, she has been busy pursuing answers to the problems that have underscored her practice. She believes, for instance, that museums need to democratize internally, and would benefit from artist, staff and community councils with board representatives. She has sought these roles herself. “I’m on three boards and two councils, so it feels like I’ve gone to seed or something,” she said. “But it’s sort of the part of the evolution of what I do and institutional critique — realizing that you also have to step up.” She believes collection artists should call “not just for a protest, but for a meeting” with the board members and staff of the museums that hold their work, to discuss how boards might come to include more people who are not “defined by their wealth.”

The piece ostensibly targeted the robber-baron philanthropy of the Gilded Age while also implicating museums’ embrace of free-market capitalism. Courtesy of the Artist

In the wake of recent protests — including one in October at the new MoMA’s opening party where people picketed an entrance over the board member Larry Fink, whose company invests in private prisons in the country on behalf of its clients — other museums are anticipating their own day of reckoning. “You can’t possibly know everything about where every cent of every donor’s money is invested,” said Butler, the chief curator of the Hammer, where Fraser sits on the artist council. At a moment when more boycotts seem inevitable, Fraser has become one of the artists that museum people will occasionally call to get off-the-record advice on difficult issues — including where, or how, to draw a line when it comes to patronage. “We have to think differently about who our supporters are and where those funding streams come from,” said Butler. Previously, when it came to accepting donations, “the line seemed to be like, unless you could prove criminality and murder,

you would take the money, you know? I think the fact that we're having a more nuanced discussion about this has a lot to do with the research that Andrea has done."

NOW THAT HER study is finished, Fraser is preparing two new performances, including a museum tour — her first since 1991 — for the Art Institute of Chicago. She had been invited to do a tour there but didn't have a hook until she began thinking back to her earlier work. In 2016, Fraser created an audio installation at the Whitney's recently opened building in Lower Manhattan on the Hudson River, playing sounds she had recorded in a cell block of Sing Sing Correctional Facility 32 miles north. That piece, as well as her early reflections on poorhouses, was on her mind when she found a focus: "Prisons are the new poorhouses," she said. The tour might limn the unlikely parallels between museums, which encourage transgression, and prisons, which punish it. Since the 1970s, the number of both institutions has tripled in the United States.

Another new performance, this one for the Hammer, may involve Fraser assuming an array of disparate voices with the chameleonic prowess she brought to "Official Welcome." As we left the Geffen, we passed the monitor playing that ferocious piece one last time. Fraser originally thought she would still be performing "Official Welcome" at 60 and that, as she continued to shed that Gucci thong, the aging of her body would become part of the work — a means of confronting the way the art world deals, or doesn't, with older female artists. But the last time Fraser performed the vitriolic monologue was in 2012. By then, her position had changed, and even she had to admit she had secured a spot in contemporary art Valhalla. "Performing it," she said, "just began to feel kind of sour and ungracious."

Watching it, though, is still a poignant experience, partly because Fraser doesn't want to give up on the art world, no matter how disagreeable it gets. "I want to believe that it means something," she said, as she opened the door to the warm California air. "It's something that I hold on to, testing the art world to be true to my hopes for it."

Correction: *Dec. 4, 2019*
An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of Andrea Fraser's husband. He is Andy Stewart, not Steward.

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/t-magazine/andrea-fraser.html