

How Andrea Fraser Turned Institutional Critique Into a Lifelong Practice

The artist reflected on the politics of making art, teaching with purpose and holding museums accountable in a spectacle-driven culture.

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Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989; performance, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery and Nagel Draxler Gallery.
Photo: Kelly & Massa Photography

"I sometimes say everything was performance or I don't believe in fiction. Everything that people do can be understood as performance, either in terms of the performance of social roles and relationships or the performance of psychological and emotional roles. Those forms of social and psychological performance are going on all the time in institutions in particular ways," artist Andrea Fraser tells Observer. When the practice she is associated with, institutional critique, first developed, it was within the framework of an avant-garde concept that pitted the artist against the institution and the tradition of anti-institutionalism, where institutions of art like museums could be conceived of as separate and separable from artists, critics and historians.

However, Fraser's relationship with institutions shifted as her artistic practices developed. "I started to understand institutions, not only as entities that we enter into, but also as entities that we take into ourselves, internalize and embody them. Then we perform or enact them in the roles we take up in institutions and in relationships we develop within and around institutions." For her, those institutions might be specific museums, though she also interrogates the field of art as a whole. What she does is, in her own words, "put a frame around some aspect of life in order to be able to think about and reflect on it."

In *Museum Highlights* (1989), Fraser performed the fictional character of Jane Castleton, a guide at the Philadelphia Museum of Art who describes facilities like a water fountain in the museum with overly dramatic and somewhat irrelevant terms. "Psychologically, Castleton is a container that I created as part of my relationship with institutions that I didn't want to own or identify with publicly," Fraser says. That relationship is complex: it includes the desire to rebel against those institutions because she feels dominated, delegitimized and marginalized by them. But there are also parts of her that identify with institutions and want to be legitimized and recognized by them, which informed what was embodied by Castleton.



Andrea Fraser, *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001 (Video Still); SD video transferred to digital format, sound; 6 min. 8 sec. Courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery and Nagel Draxler Gallery

Museum Highlights also explores class and race in engagement with institutions. Castleton is dressed explicitly as an upper-class lady. In the performance, Fraser as Castleton described the person who named the gift shop, Andrea. The descriptions of Andrea were actually taken from a museum publication dedicated to a museum docent who passed away, which was an honorific and idealized description. Fraser explains, "One of the parts of the description is that I'm a blonde medium-height lady, so for me, that very much has to do with race, as I'm not blonde and half Puerto Rican. The museum is, therefore, a locus of class and with a long history in the U.S. of assimilation of whitening or passing within a set of racial hierarchies."

When making those early museum tours, Fraser was referencing the videotapes used to record and broadcast museum walkthroughs at the time—specifically, Masterpieces of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Philippe de Montebello, the longtime director of the Met. “When I recorded my performance, I was performing directly to the camera, and viewers of these videotapes are not the second-order audience.” Otherwise, the audience of the original performance becomes part of the spectacle of the performance, which creates an opportunity to not identify with the audience and to differentiate and distance oneself from the experience from a safe distance, especially if embarrassing or uncomfortable. She also has performances documented with live audiences, but she’s very careful about that.

In *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001), which was shot with hidden cameras at the Guggenheim because she didn’t get the museum’s permission, Fraser posed as a visitor navigating the lobby with the audio tour. A voiceover tells the visitor that one might want to touch “the sensuous curves of the building, which is pretty suggestive,” Fraser says. “I touched the building, got a little carried away, started rubbing up against it, and pulled my dress up. At that moment the camera cuts to a shot of people in the museum watching me. That’s the moment when people laugh the most when they watch the videotape.” It’s a form of humor that she tries to be very, very careful with. “I don’t want to let my audience off the hook. I want them to grapple with being embarrassed, guilty or culpable.

“Performance-based video installations are very different from live performances, in Fraser’s opinion, because the direct address to the camera is so important. In one of her most recent performance-based video installations, *This Meeting is Being Recorded* (2021), she is looking directly in the eyes of everyone watching the video, which is something that can’t be achieved in person. There are limits to this approach, however. “I’m a bit reluctant to give people access to view these videos because, again, you’re viewing it on a monitor, and you don’t have the experience of a video installation.” This tendency for information technology to reduce everything to just an image rather than a physical experience is the opposite of what she aims for. She typically doesn’t edit her videos much because she is “still fundamentally minimalist” in her aesthetics. “I don’t respond to gratuitous manipulation of video effects: I feel that you’re trying to manipulate me, and I don’t want to be manipulated.”

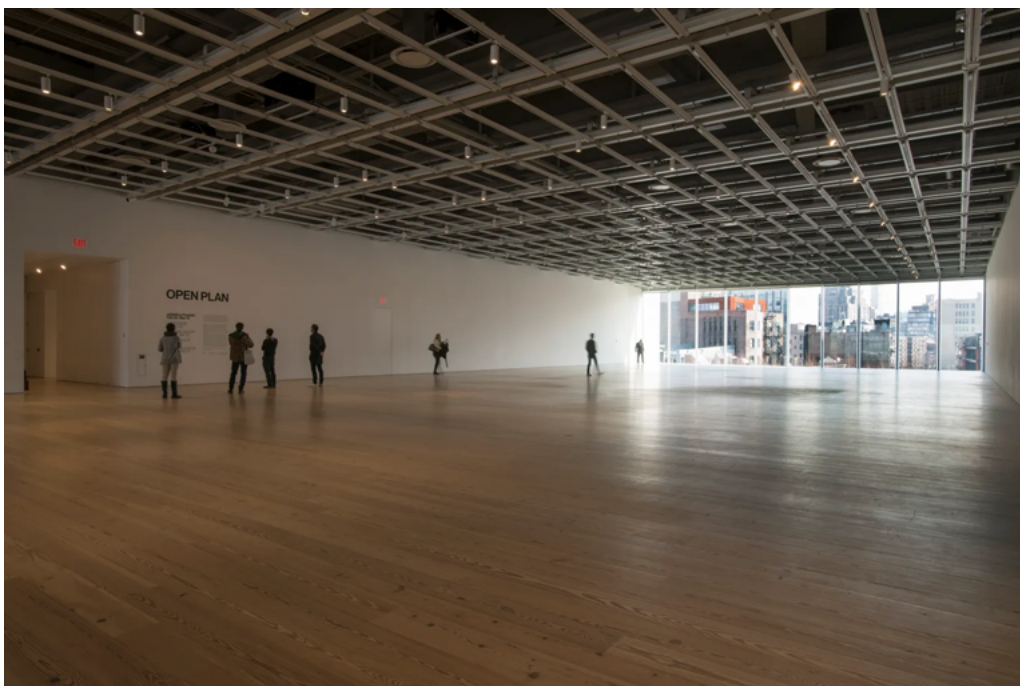


Andrea Fraser, *This meeting is being recorded*, 2021; UHD video installation with six chairs, color, sound; 99 min. Installation view: “Andrea Fraser,” Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Alex Yudzon

Fraser's most recent site-specific project for a museum was *Down the River* (2016) at the Whitney. It was part of a series of two-week exhibitions that the Whitney conceived for the fifth floor of the museum—a space designed by starchitect Renzo Piano to showcase new art and architecture. It provides a spectacular view with a full wall of windows looking onto the Hudson River and another wall of windows facing Manhattan. Thinking about the location of the museum, Fraser went to Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison built in the 1820s about 32 miles up the Hudson River from the Whitney Museum's new location. Fraser's recordings come from its Cell Block A, which dates back to around the 1920s. "There is this very New York phrase 'being sent up the river,' meaning going to prison, and also there's a movie called *Up the River*. I brought the sounds of Sing Sing Correctional Facility to the Whitney Museum and wrote a wall text explicitly linking the twin boom in museum and prison buildings," Fraser says.

The phenomenon was documented by architect Joe Day in a book called *Corrections and Collections: Architectures for Art and Crime*. This polarization reflects and represents economic and racial polarization, as the majority of incarcerated people are people of color. It also creates geographical polarization because prisons tend to be built far from urban centers—out of sight and out of mind for people who are not impacted by the criminal justice system, and consequently very far from the families of incarcerated people. "I went through many different rounds with the museum on that text and there was a tremendous amount of involvement by the museum in getting that text to a point where they felt comfortable having it on the wall," Fraser says. "For me, it's part of the process."

In 2012, she was invited to participate in the Whitney Biennial and proposed a text for the catalog, *There's no place like home*. It is about the contradictions in the material situation of the art market and of museums' and artists' claims for the radical, revolutionary, critical and subversive power of their works. "When I wrote that, I was really worried that the museum wouldn't like it and wouldn't want to publish it," Fraser admits. "In fact, they were very clear with me that it was an artwork and they were not going to intervene with regard to content." The 2012 text developed on an earlier essay, *L'1%, C'est Moi*, written in 2011, which explored the direct link between income inequality, wealth concentration and the art market boom. It begins with details about some of the top 200 collectors at that time, including their involvement in the subprime mortgage crisis, and it was very critical of collectors, trustees and the art market.



Andrea Fraser, *Down the River*, 2016; sound installation. Installation view: "Open Plan: Andrea Fraser," Whitney Museum, New York, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: Bill Orcutt

For Fraser, the '90s marked the beginning of a phase of globalization, neoliberalization, privatization and corporatization during which museums that may have once been public institutions became increasingly privatized. That period also brought a massive expansion in the number of museums, contemporary art galleries and international survey exhibitions, which required curators and institutions to maintain a relentless global schedule. The sheer number of exhibition venues turned art into an industry that demanded a constant supply of product and, ultimately, increasing spectacle as museums competed for funding from corporate, individual and public sources. Responding to the values of those funders, museums became part of the attention economy. That shift dramatically changed the relationship between artists and museums, as artists increasingly felt compelled to produce massive installations that filled massive spaces. "There are very few alternatives because if you refuse to do that as an artist, then you're not going to be in those shows and will disappear," Fraser clarifies. When she started making art in the 1980s, she didn't realize she was part of a just-emerging field that was growing alongside institutional critique, which started in the '60s.

Since 2022, Fraser has been represented by Marian Goodman Gallery—her first U.S. commercial representation since 2012. Marian Goodman Gallery was a good fit for her because "it has a long history of working with and supporting conceptual artists and moving image artists," she explains. It is also one of the last galleries of its size and reputation that still maintains an artistic program. "At a certain point, instead of having artistic programs, galleries had market positions and became a mixture of photography, paintings, installations and conceptual arts. It then comes down to the question of why commercial galleries show video when video represents only 0.5 percent of the art market by value." Marian Goodman is one of the last significant galleries still rooted in conceptual art, minimalism and the moving image, which provides a strong context for her work.

Fraser takes a heavily research-based approach to her explorations of social structures, which is rooted in the history of contemporary art methodologies. "I don't produce that much," Fraser says, laughing. "It's partly because I don't want to be producing products and spectacle for the market and the attention economy." For her, research-based art practices and research as an artistic methodology are associated with a very specific history tracing back to the '60s—to artists like Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula, who conducted rigorous research as part of their works. "The idea of artistic research is that artists are producing knowledge, which to me is a pretty high bar. It's more than summarizing primary or secondary literature, which is what lots of artists end up doing as a way of generating content for products and spectacles, I'm afraid."

When Fraser embarked on the project *L'1%, C'est Moi*, there were numerous articles about the art market booming and wealth concentration. There was obviously a connection between the two, but nobody was talking about it. Similarly, in 2016, when she started to develop *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*, people were discussing the donor class—describing wealthy political donors who, after the deregulation of campaign finance, were having increasing influence on politics—but they weren't linking the political donor class to the cultural donor class or philanthropy more broadly. Fraser saw opportunity. "My assumption is, from a psychoanalytical perspective, if there's something that nobody's writing about, it's because it's repressed in some way." Part of her practice has been to pinpoint things people don't want to talk about and figure out how to talk about them without alienating anyone, which is not always easy.

This Meeting is Being Recorded is a project about white racism and the role of women in white supremacy. With this piece, she hopes to contribute an approach to thinking about race and racism from a psychoanalytic perspective, because she believes most of the anti-racist methodologies that are out there are either political education or cognitive behavioral social psychology. Social psychology, which focuses on bias, is often very depoliticized. Both models presuppose a kind of conscious control, which, to her, is actually part of white supremacy and self-mastery. "I think ultimately that a lot of racism is a defense against anxiety. The piece was about developing a methodology for getting at the unconscious and emotional dimensions of white supremacy and racism."



Andrea Fraser, *There's no place like home*, 2012; text. Installation view: "Andrea Fraser," Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria, 2015. Courtesy of the artist, Museum der Moderne Salzburg and Nagel Draxler Gallery. Photo: Rainer Iglar

In addition to being a practicing artist, Fraser teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles. "But I don't really teach institutional critique," she clarifies. "I did in the past, and the undergraduate students said afterward, 'I was so depressed after your class that I decided not to be an artist anymore.' It was not fair." Fraser's approach to teaching now is to create a context and a framework for students to figure out what they care about and how to make art about what matters to them. "I was hired in an area called New Genres, and now I'm in an area called Interdisciplinary Studio, and my approach to teaching is not about medium. The primary question that I ask students always is, what do you want the work to do, not what you want it to be about. Do you want the work to activate a thought process, an intellectual process, an associative process, a process of imagining? Do you want it to activate a physical experience or an emotional and psychological experience? Do you want it to activate mechanisms or shifts in social and economic structures?" Fraser has students write not an artist statement but what she calls a purpose statement that they read aloud in class. "If you're afraid to share what you care about, then it is going to be hard to make art about it. I try to create a space that holds vulnerability for students, and I think it can be very powerful for students to realize they survive the anxieties of that exposure and vulnerability. It gives them courage to put more of themselves in their work."

<https://observer.com/2025/04/arts-interview-artist-andrea-fraser-performance-art-installation/>

Fraser makes a diagram of contemporary art to help them determine where they want to be located in its three primary subfields: exhibitions (artists producing experiences), the art market (artists producing value) or academia (artists producing knowledge). There are also other subfields, like community-based art producing communities and activism, where artists are (ideally) producing social change. "When you're an artist, you're always making one decision after another: how do I determine the idea, size and medium of my work? The values underlying the criterion for these decisions are very political, as people keep producing bigger art products that become more of a spectacle," Fraser says. By way of example, she points to Venice Biennale exhibitions that have a mix of old and new art, where everything made after 2020 is twice or three times the size of older works for the purpose of grabbing attention.

"The problem that I find in a lot of work by younger artists and, frankly, by all artists, is that they're trying to do too many things at once. Part of that is a lack of clarity about what they want the work to do, and part of it is trying to satisfy different expectations." She says that if an artist wants to say something, they should start with the most direct way to say it, and every step an artist takes needs to have a good reason.

Fraser's works continue to inspire people to reevaluate their relationship with art institutions and social institutions in general. From sarcastic museum highlight tours to rigorous research-based articles about the economy and wealth concentration in the art world, her output is well-reasoned and continues to challenge assumptions about institutional power, supremacy, privilege and individuals' struggles with systems and labels. In an increasingly spectacle-oriented art market, her nuanced work holds its own.