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Fantasies of the Knowable Object

Interview with Andrea Fraser by Bennett Simpson

SINCE THE MID-80S, ANDREA FRASER'S DRAMATIZATIONS OF ART'S RHETORICAL AND SYMBOLIC FIELDS HAVE BEEN SOMETHING OF A CAUSE CÉLÈBRE. INFLUENCED BY APPROPRIATION, FEMINISM, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND SITE-SPECIFICITY—THE CRITICAL CULTURE OF ANOTHER ERA INSTRUMENTALIZED IN OUR OWN—FRASER'S PRACTICE HAS OFTEN CENTERED ON A SOCIOLOGICAL PERFORMANCE AND DISCURSIVE PARSING OF ART WORLD POSITIONS: THE CURATOR, THE CONSULTANT, THE DEALER, THE CRITIC, THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR, AND THE CORPORATE LIAISON, TO NAME A FEW. AMONG THESE, FRASER HAS PAID SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE INCREASINGLY MUTABLE PERSONA OF THE ARTIST, TO THE WAYS SUCH A PERSONA IS INSCRIBED OR LEGITIMATED INTO ART.

SINCE 1998, FRASER HAS BEEN SPLITTING HER TIME BETWEEN NEW YORK AND BRAZIL,

A MOVE WHICH HAS DRAMATICALLY AFFECTED HER WORK'S FIGURING OF CULTURAL ROLES AND RELATIONS.

I SAT DOWN WITH THE ARTIST ON THE OCCASION OF HER RECENT SET OF SOLO EXHIBITIONS, HELD SIMULTANEOUSLY LAST JANUARY AT AMERICAN FINE ARTS AND FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY IN NEW YORK—THE FIRST COMMERCIAL GALLERY SHOWS FRASER HAS PRODUCED SINCE 1991. NOT COINCIDENTALLY, THE EXHIBITIONS ALSO MARK FRASER'S FIRST SIGNIFICANT INCORPORATION OF VIDEO INSTALLATION AND PROJECTION.

Bennett Simpson: When did you first begin doing work in Brazil? Andrea Fraser: I first went to Brazil in the Spring of 1998 at the invitation of the curator Ivo Mesquita, who invited me to participate in the São Paulo Bienal. I can't remember whether Ivo thought I needed Brazil or the São Paulo Bienal needed institutional critique—maybe both—but some sense of "need" was expressed in the invitation. In retrospect, after spending a good part of the last three years in Rio, I would say that I needed Brazil. *What did you do for the Bienal?* Based on my experience participating in the Venice Bienal in '93 as a national representative of Austria (it's a long story), I proposed to perform as a journalist and produce news reports about the exhibition, which were supposed to be broadcast nationally on TV Cultura. I remembered being amazed at how many journalists there were in Venice. I also wanted to get back to performance. *Had you stopped doing performances?* I stopped doing solo "live" performances in 1991, although I had already returned to performance with "Inaugural" Speech for inSITE in 1997. The institutional analysis work I did for most of the 90s most often took the final form of installations and involved a lot of archive research and interviews. I also thought of that work as a kind of performance, but per-

formance in the sense of performing institutional functions, such as that of a curator or a consultant, like a corporate consultant in my project with the EA-Generali Foundation, rather than performing as a "performance artist." As an artist I came out of the context of appropriation work of the mid-80s. It was through writing about Louise Lawler's work in 1985 that I started thinking about appropriating not only images and texts, as was prevalent at that time, but also positions and functions.

By appropriating the position of a journalist, I thought I could combine my two approaches by "performing" the interviews that had been the basis of much of my institutional analysis work. But, the whole thing ended up being extremely difficult. I finished a rough edit around the time the show closed, so it was never shown. I call the piece, "Reporting from São Paulo. I'm from the United States," but it remains an unfinished project in my mind. It was probably one of the things that did me in as far as a certain kind of site-specific work was concerned. *So your experiences in Brazil have something to do with the shift in your recent work?* Undoubtedly. Ivo Mesquita once described the Brazilian baroque as a strategy of resistance to instrumentalization. I think Brazil

was the place I rethought a kind self-instrumentalization that I pursued in the 90s within the framework of the project "Services" and what I called my "Prospectuses," documents that defined my artistic activity as a kind of critical service to be rendered to institutions on a contractual basis. By 1998, I felt like I had pretty much exhausted the critical potential of the model. It began to feel very bureaucratized. After the São Paulo Bienal I wasn't even sure that I would continue to be an artist. And there was also the question of what kind of life I wanted to lead. Brazil was a good place to think that question over.

I've always struggled with the question of artistic autonomy. Institutional Critique emerged in the late 1960s as a tendency within a broad critique of the partial and ideological character of artistic autonomy. Artists began to recognize the uses to which their freedom was put and began looking for strategies to resist the instrumentalization of art for economic and symbolic profit. Ironically, however, many of those strategies included the pursuit of at least formally heteronomous procedures, relations and functions. For critical artists, the aim was to take control of presentation and circulation and turn relations of production themselves into objects of artistic intervention. But doing that—with

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site-specificity, for example—also meant making their work dependent on context. At the same time, site-specificity and other post-studio practices effectively eliminated the distance between sites of production and consumption marked by the studio walls. So what began to reappear in post-studio practices were the relations of commission which an autonomous artistic field had constituted itself against. In many cases, this was quite explicit. Heiner Friedrich at the DIA Art Foundation thought of himself as a new Medici. The critical dimension of site-specificity and a lot of institutional critique came to exist within the return of relations which, historically, did not allow for critical autonomy. I see this as one of the fundamental contradictions of art since the 60s. What happened to me was that I started to experience this contradiction more and more intimately. I felt like I was losing control over my life. The extreme self-instrumentalization I pursued in my project with the EA-Generali Foundation, for example, made sense for an investigation of corporate sponsorship. But it did not make sense as a general mode of practice. *At a certain point there also seemed to be a shift in the interests institutions had in site-specific work, from self-critique to self-promotion. That became a very prevalent and diffused cultural dynamic in the 90s, when critique took on a commodity status.* Right, and the critical self-instrumentalization implied in many site-specific practices became increasingly functionalized in the service of institutional interests. And those interests themselves seem to be getting narrower and narrower. Museums have been going through a process of corporatization. Qualitative criteria are being replaced by quantitative criteria. Publics are becoming markets. Museums increasingly see themselves as competing with commercial entertainment complexes, etc. *Is that part of the reason you decided to do gallery shows again? Your "Prospectus" model and "Services" were partly about trying to develop "project work" as an economic alternative to the gallery and the art market.* As museums corporatize they present less of an alternative to the gallery. You

know, the market, the commercial gallery, is more likely to censor formal aspects of art in the sense that you can say whatever you want but you have to say it in a salable form. Institutions have always been more likely to censor content—which site-specific institutional critique has a tradition of challenging. However, what I'm seeing more in institutions is a censorship of procedure. Museums seem less willing to enter into a process with artists or to take on a project with an uncertain outcome. There's also a calculation of risk in the investment of money, time, and symbolic capital and there's also a question of marketability. But in this case it's not about the marketability of the object, as in commercial galleries. It's about the marketability of an experience as entertainment for a broad audience or as a unique event for a specialized audience. *When you finally began to make new works, why did you turn to video installation? Video was something you had never used as more than documentary.* I've made quite a few single-channel, performance- or interview-based tapes. But they were unlimited edition tapes and I always refused to project them. But with the video installation boom at the end of the 90s I began to rethink video. Video installations were everywhere, dominating the Venice Biennial and the Whitney Biennial, etc., etc. For me the status of video really changed when museums started projecting videos about themselves, like the Whitney Museum did for the "American Century" show. That's what made video projection available to me according to my critical model. I wouldn't project video for effect. But I can appropriate video projection as an institutionalized form. *Over the last few years, with the convergence of institutions and artists around spectacle, video has gained a kind of discursive context, a specificity.* Yes, but video projections also belong to rock concerts and corporate presentations and advertising and sports events, not just to art. They have a generalized cultural currency, which the art world now uses.

For corporatizing museums, video installations provide spectacle, sure. But it's also, in many cases, specifically the artist

who is spectacularized, or a body that serves at the artist's proxy, or the artist's "life-style." So very often it's not only about providing the institution with spectacle. It's also about projecting an increasingly commodified and de-realized representation of the artist and, once again, of artistic freedom.

Artists of the 60s discovered that artistic freedom was being instrumentalized in cold-war ideology. Today we are finding in museums—as well as in an art press merging with life-style press—representations of artists that have a very specific function for the "new economy." Art-making is what Bourdieu might once have called a profession of social fantasy, in which economic instability is the price we pay for a freedom from social finitude. Today, I would say that it is no longer only into our own fantasies that artists project our uncertain futures. It seems to me that those fantasies have already merged with what Bourdieu called neo-liberalism's utopia of unlimited exploitation. We've become the poster girls, and boys, for the joys of insecurity, flexibility, deferred economic rewards, social alienation, cultural uprooting and geographical displacement. It's all just one big, sexy, life-style choice.

Of course, it's not really a choice. Not even for artists. I think the new foundation for artistic ambivalence is the fact that these social forms of our autonomy, like the preference for "freedom" over security, for flexible arrangements over contracts, are inscribed, as Bourdieu might have said, in the deepest levels of our habitus—as I myself was forced to acknowledge when I gave up on the "Prospectus" model. *How does your video installation, "Exhibition," which also deals with Brazilian culture, get at these issues?* "Exhibition" was one of five video works I produced for two gallery shows in New York last January. I conceived of the shows themselves, which took place simultaneously across the street from each other in Chelsea, as a kind of performance of artistic visibility (the "career move," the "big show"). At the same time, the works in the show were intended to engage the spectacularization of

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the artist in different ways. A piece called "Little Frank and His Carp" that I produced with Consonni in the Guggenheim Bilbao served as an introduction. I perform the role of a museum visitor listening to the official audio tour, which can be heard as a voice-over in the video. The audio tour is a really outrageous example of the way corporatized museums are appropriating and commodifying artistic transgression, sensuality, transcendence. We are told that the architecture "transcends age and class and education." We are told to caress the museum's sensuous curves. Let's just say that I get carried away while wearing a very short dress.

"Little Frank" contextualizes "Exhibition." Basically, "Exhibition" is an installation of two videos of me dancing the samba. They're projected life-size, opposite each other, on freestanding kiosks that support rear-projection screens. The image is reflected in a mirror so that on each side one actually sees the image three times. Most of the video on the two screens consists of opposite views of me dancing, in a Carnival costume, in the silent, blank, non-site of a black box. But every 43 seconds or so about 7 seconds of loud, live, footage of me dancing in the same costume and framing in Carnival in Rio is cut in on one screen or the other.

You could talk about the piece in terms of gender and cultural performance. You could talk about it in terms of the architecture of spectacle. I have talked about it as a kind of minimalist piece—in terms of site and non-site, being there and not being there, and creating a phenomenological relationship to an image of the body. But for me the juxtaposition of the individual artist and the thousands participating in Carnival, of the gallery and the "street," is really about loss. Not to romanticize Carnival, which in Rio has been quite commercial for some time, but loss in the sense of the impossibility of certain kinds of collective cultural forms within the art world spaces that I occupy. *But it's not just about contrasting these sites of exhibition. Do you think your image in the work - the image of your body, your*

dancing, any image of a scantily clad woman - might short-circuit that intended reflection?

You mean, the fact that it's me and my butt? [laughs] You could say that "Exhibition" is an allegory of artistic exhibitionism and narcissistic satisfaction. But "Exhibition" also exists within another juxtaposition. The image of me dancing the samba in a sequined bikini is also juxtaposed to what it is I've come to represent as, I guess, a particularly uncompromising, critical, intellectual, artist. I intended there to be something grotesque about the spectacle I'm making of myself. In fact, I absolutely love the samba scene and I practiced almost everyday for a year. To a real Carioca passista my samba may still seem grotesque, but not particularly exhibitionistic. I think what produces an effect of the "grotesque" is the stark collision of worlds that are irreconcilable, not just as representations but as fields of interest and practice. And that depends on my real investment in a context that has absolutely nothing to do with my art life. And that investment makes its objectification much more violent. *Your work has always seemed exhibitionistic to me. Not in terms of sexuality, but in terms of the invitation for reflection being predicated on an audience's recognition of your rhetorical, performative, critical position. Maybe in that sense. But in another sense, I always rejected visibility, not only in my work but also of my work. I always thought that critique and self-promotion were incompatible, even in the interest of professional survival. Part of that idea was rooted in a psychoanalytic model of institutional critique I tried to formulate in the late 80s. I always assumed that most interest in my work—in any artists' work—was based on a kind of transference. I assumed that the invitations I received were motivated by interests or conflicts internal to institutions, or by representations that became associated with me more or less by accident, through a process of displacement. I thought there was something unethical about identifying myself with the object of such transferential interest—much less trying to exploit it for professional gains. According to a psychoanalytic*

model, such transferential interest would instead be the basic material for an analysis and an intervention—generalized, of course, to include not only interest in me as an artist but in all the forms of interest produced in and by institutions like museums, galleries, art magazines. Later on, I rethought those principles in terms of Bourdieu's analysis of the production of belief in artists and works of art as a process of the formation of symbolic capital by institutions whose "properly social magic," as he called it, was the ability to constitute anything as an "interest."

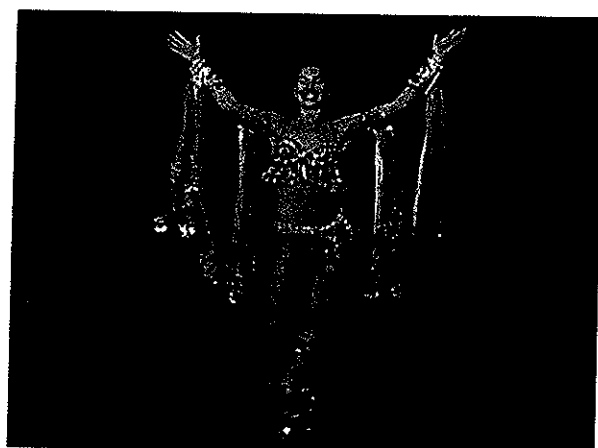
It's still an important principle. While museums are become corporatized, artists are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial, not only in terms of project management, but in the creation of their own reputations, by organizing the interest of those who produce belief in the value of their work, often through social or even economic networks.

Another piece in the New York shows, "Official Welcome," was explicitly about that kind of production of belief. It was commissioned by The MICA Foundation and it takes the form of an honorific speech in which I perform nine different sets of artists and their supporters. Like my other performance scripts, most of the text was "found." But in addition to quoting artists statements, reviews and interviews, I also quote performance, undressing and redressing in the course of the performance. "Official Welcome" may also be a return to engaging some of the more transferential aspects of that process: the way that artists are constructed as knowable objects, for example; the way proper names come to signify not a subject or a life or a body of work but the truth of a subject, the facts of a life as knowable. When I see my last name floating in an article I feel like I'm turning into stone. It's a palpable experience of reification. At the same time, artists seek out historians and critics and curators to know them, to tell them who they are. It's very seductive. But for me it's also very destabilizing. It's a fantasy that to me seems close to delusion.

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1_ *Inaugural Speech*, 1997, video still

2_ *Official Welcome*, 2001, video still, Courtesy American Fine Arts, Co.

3_ *Exhibition*, 2001, video still, Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery

4_ *Reporting from Sao Paulo, I'm from the United States*, 1998, video still

5_ *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001, video still

6_ *Exhibition*, 2001, video still, Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery