

Andrea Fraser: An Examination of Culture

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Culture (from the Latin *cultura* stemming from *colere*, meaning "to cultivate") generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance. Cultures can be "understood as systems of symbols and meanings that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another".

Findley, Carther Vaughn and John Alexander Rothney (2006).
Twentieth-Century World. Sixth edition.

Andrea Fraser defines culture similarly as a symbolic system.

*I understand culture, in the broadest sense, to be, first, the symbolic systems that provide for the integration and reproduction of social groups and, secondly, the process of acquiring the competences and dispositions that compose those symbolic systems.*¹

In this paper I will show how Andrea Fraser applies this idea of culture to the arts industry and criticizes its ethical dimension through her performance piece *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Tour* (1989), performed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA.

To understand how she applies this notion of culture and criticism to the art industry, we must first understand how she sees herself as an artist in practice. Her belief is that artists are producers of culture because the art work that they produce (whether it be sculpture, painting, photography, video, performance, installation, etc), are manifestations of the attitudes and discourse of both the artists and those that consume it. In her essay "Notes on the Museum's Publicity" Fraser explains:

"If culture consists of the narratives, symbolic objects, and practices, with which a particular group represents its interests and its experience, its history and possible futures, fine art represents the interests and experiences first of the professional community of primarily middle-class artists who produce it, and second of the bourgeois patrons who collect it and re-present it in museums with their names alongside those of its producers".²

In this respect she recognizes at least two spheres of influences on her as a producer not only of art but also of culture. The first is the artist sub-culture of which she is a participant, and second the bourgeois culture that patronizes the arts. It is with the latter that Fraser takes issue: She argues that museums are ethically dysfunctional because their primary function is to take bourgeois culture into the public sphere and legitimize it as public culture. In doing so, it discriminates by legitimizing the cultural view of an economically privileged class.

It is in reaction to this principal argument that Fraser's frames her critical practice. In her essay "An Artist Statement" she draws parallels between herself and Freud on the point of critical practice. In describing his practice, Freud identifies a set of relations between patients, analyst and the institution of psychoanalysis. He believes patients are victims of this set of relations because it creates a framework for them to perceive and accept themselves as mentally ill. As an analyst, he believes

¹ Andrea Fraser, "It is Art When I Say its Art, or...", in Alexander Alberro (ed.), *Museum Highlights: The writings of Andrea Fraser*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 2005, p. 39.

himself to be an agent of the institution, reinforcing its power and authority by reproducing these relations. In this regard, he is a function of the problem. As a way to free his patients and himself from these relations, he offers "critical practice"³ in which he aims to "transform social, subjective or economic relations"⁴ within the institution. He believes the most effective way to do this is through an intervention using enactment and limited interpenetration. This means interpreting his role as analyst with limited effectiveness in such a way that it would expose the malignant nature of these relationships. It would subsequently allow the enlightened patient to overthrow his/her destructive self-perception, and heal.

As an artist and producer of culture working within the symbolic system, Fraser sees herself as an agent of the institution of the museum, and thus is in a position of authority like Freud. As a result, she is invested with the legitimizing power of the museum and finds herself in a position of privilege and dominance. She explicitly states that she wants to transform the relations in which she feels dominated or in which she is dominant. Forfeiting the power of the institution by working outside the system would be problematic, since the culture that she produces is desolate without the institution's economic and intellectual capital required to consume it. This leaves her in an awkward predicament: having to critique the very institution and system while being a part of it.

The similarities with Freud end here, since in his case both the institution of psychoanalysis and he himself as analyst both desire to heal the patient. A critical practice with the aim of healing the patient would not put him at odds with the institution. So his position is hardly compromising. In Fraser's case, however, her aims of disarming the museum of its legitimizing power sets up an ideological conflict of interest between her and the factions within the museum that benefit from this power.

Fraser's art as critical practice can be identified with two main strategies: "provocative performance that focuses insistently on the body of the artist herself, and incisive institutional analysis."⁶ After completing the Whitney Independent Studies Program in 1985 she gained prominence in the art field for her institutional critique work. Among her most notable performances are *Official Welcome* (2001) in which she enacts an acceptance speech while undressing herself to the nude before the audience, *Untitled* (2003) where she has a sexual encounter with an art collector who paid close to \$20,000 to commission the art work, and *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001) performed at the Guggenheim Bilbao, where she reacts with dramatic and suggestive gestures to the instructions of the audio-guide which encourages touching "the curves and sensual textures of the building's interior".⁷

In *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Tour* (1989), Fraser assumed the persona, Jane Castleton; an upper class, non-expert volunteer museum guide. Commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of its "contemporary viewpoints Artists Lecture Series", Fraser meets unsuspecting visitors at the west entrance hall of the museum and leads them on a tour through its galleries, as well as through its cafeteria, store, and restrooms. In her signature style, she over-dramatizes the role, for example describing the water fountain and cafeteria in lofty and overly expressive terms. This tactic quickly and deliberately exposes to the tour group that this is a performance and not a typical tour. Throughout it, she touches on a range of topics including, the museum's sponsorship, the role of its donors, and draws up on the museum's history and present to address the conflicting demands on the institution.

Historically this kind of work is a direct descendant of critical practice known as "institutional critique" that matured in the climate of the 1960's and 1970's where rampant activism questioned long standing institutions across many fields. Institutional critique is a part of this wave of activism that focused on art institutions. One of the prevailing struggles that dominated the discourse of this

³ Fraser, "An Artist's Statement", in *Museum Highlights*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁶ Meredith Malone, *What do I as an Artist Provide?*, Exhibition Catalogue, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum 2007, p. 3.

movement was the autonomy of art (and cultural production as Fraser would also include) from the influences of commoditization. Groups like the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) argued that the autonomy of the work of art was being influenced too much by commercial forces. In order to combat this, several forms of resistance took shape. Among the most common strategies were to use legal avenues to reform the art institutions and the controlling commercial apparatus. Another was to change the way art is practiced so that it would be difficult to be owned and profited from as a commercial item. This chiefly meant de-materializing the art object by making temporary and site specific art works. At the center of this discourse were artist and writers such as Hans Haacke, Dan Graham, Michael Asher, Lucy Lippard and Daniel Buren who saw the museum as both subject and object, "target and weapon"⁸.

Within this historical context, Fraser's aims align with her predecessors in that they are all rejecting the influence of commoditization on cultural production, and that they are willing and active producers in the system that they criticize. The difference is that Fraser has little interest in deterring the art-work from being possessed in the monetary sense that they do. Although her performances are temporary and consistent with de-materialization practices, her works are often commissioned and further proliferated in other media forms such as video tape, film, etc. The fact that *Museum Highlights* was commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, further proliferated as a video piece and is owned by the Tate Museum in London, is testament to this notion.

Further departures from this historical context can be found in her perception of the institution. She sees it as a matrix of social and power relations rather than a tangible place where institutional power is seated. Within the institution of the museum for example, she recognizes a plurality of social entities with separate and sometimes conflicting agendas. Among them are its professional staff that advocates a "scholastic" or academically informed relation to culture and a volunteer sector; comprised of the museums patrons, board of trustees and volunteer museum guides. Since the members of the volunteer sector are traditionally educated and economically privileged, they can appropriate art and culture both materially and symbolically. In other words, they are capable of reading the codes and symbols in an art work and/or are likely to own art and have a relation to it that is beyond the academic. Fraser classes their relation to culture as "domestic".

In *Museum Highlights*, she interprets the guided-tour programs of museums as a manifestation of the struggle between the domestic and scholastic relations to culture. In playing the role of museum-guide Jane Castleton, she overstates that Castleton is of the upper class volunteer patron sector. Her character is meticulously described in the script version of the performance as outfitted in "a sliver and brown hounds-tooth check double-breasted suit with a skirt just below the knee in length, an off-white silk button-down blouse, white stockings, and black pumps. Her brown hair is gathered into a small bun held in place with a black bow."⁹ As such, she fits the stereo-type profile of a well-to-do-lady. This sets the perceptual tone of her and the class she represents for the rest of the performance. Further clues are given to support this assertion throughout the tour such as when she points out that: "Uh, I am also, like the Board of Trustees and the Museum Guides, a volunteer. It is thus my privilege, my privilege, as a guest, as a volunteer".¹⁰

Fraser, also, plays out her observation that volunteer guides typically have limited academic relationships to culture and are trained by the professional staff of the museum. In that regard, their presentations are generally scripted monologues. So as Castleton walks past some of the works in the gallery, she describes them with profusely superfluous adjectives and moves on to the next in the same manner. In addressing *The birth of Venus* by Nicolas Poussin she states: "Resplendently...amazingly flawless...sumptuous.... This figure is among the finest and most beautiful creations...An image of exceptional rhythm and fluidity".¹¹

⁸ Hal Foster, "Subversive Signs" in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press 1986, p 99.

⁹ Fraser, "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk" in *Museum Highlights*, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

One of the most memorable moments in the performance comes where she stops at a water fountain and addresses it as "a work of astonishing economy and monumentally".¹² This is the high point in her series of condescending blows towards the audience. It is meant to be so conspicuous that it should serve to interrupt any lingering relationship of complacency that the audience may have with the museum-guide.

This is an exemplification of the Freudian tactic of limited interpretation that aims to free people from their dysfunctional relationships by exposing the hidden repressive conditions of such relationships. This and other absurdities in Fraser's performance should implore the audience to question the relationship to culture that she represents. The fact that museum-guides are part of the museum's education program should also force one to give pause to the museum's scholastic relationship to culture as well.

However, one might ask; does the performance "Museum Highlights" meet her goal of liberating herself and the audience (the museum's public) from the relationship of dominance that the museum-guide represents? Does it transform the relationship between herself, the museum, and the museum's public in any way, and if so, to what extent?

To the casual museum-goers, it clearly expresses a sense of absurdity, perhaps it may even stimulate them to ponder the absurdities of the guide's role and by implication the museum's attempt to control and proliferate its own notion of culture. However, I believe it does not significantly transform how they perceive the museum. There is no evidence to show that the Philadelphia Museum has changed any of its policies, or attitudes towards artists, or how they relate to, or proliferate culture. For the advanced artists, theorists, historians, and critics who can fully appropriate this work; they are already likely to be aware of the dysfunctionalities that the performance attempts to intervene on, so limited interpretation is a mute ploy.

But this is just to examine the performance from the theoretical objectives that Fraser creates for herself. As a work of art, it does not need to satisfy these parameters to be successful. To look at it purely as an artwork in the genre of institutional critique, it is certainly an interesting experiment. However, it falls into the cross-hairs of one of the most formidable arguments against institutional critique; namely that it's complexity engages only the academic class and leaves the casual museum-goer either alienated or marginalized.

Fraser of course recognizes the exclusivity of her own work. Pertaining to her academic writing she states the following: "Incorporating academic discourse with an aim to produce an artwork as a theoretical text, whether this text is purely linguistic or presented in the form of a rebus to be decoded by the viewer I produce a work that demands a double competence in the perception of aesthetic form and a knowledge of, or mastery of, the field of discourse out of which the text is constituted. The work is thus doubly alienating, doubly exclusive."¹³

The general argument can be applied to this performance as well. She addresses the issue in this way: "If you don't experience yourself as being in possession of the particular authority for which I ask, then my demand for recognition turns in to a demand simply that you have it, or rather, have the competence that defines it."¹⁴

Although the performance rightly falls prey to the criticisms of institutional critique, in that it engages only a select group of scholars, and alienates the casual viewer, I don't find this problematic. An artwork doesn't need to engage every audience group, neither is it required to play down to the casual viewer if it exceeds their capacity to understand it at that moment, just as a work of literature does not need to engage every prescribed sector of society or level of competency.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹³ Fraser, "An Artist's Statement", in *Museum Highlights*, p.12.