

**Andrea Fraser**

Pat Hearn Art Gallery,  
New York  
Friedrich Petzel Gallery,  
New York

Whatever happened to the institutional critique? It's a fair question, if not a particularly original one. It was first posed in 1993 by critic James Meyer, in a catalogue essay for an exhibition at American Fine Arts that included Renée Green, Mark Dion and Andrea Fraser, artists whose various critical practices indicated several possible answers. Meyer argued that these artists confirmed that the scrutiny of art institutions and their supporting structures, begun in the 1960s and 1970s by Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke and others, was alive and well. Building on earlier models, artists such as Fraser and Fred Wilson used the museum itself as primary source material, developing approaches that involved, in Fraser's case at least, new kinds of strategy.

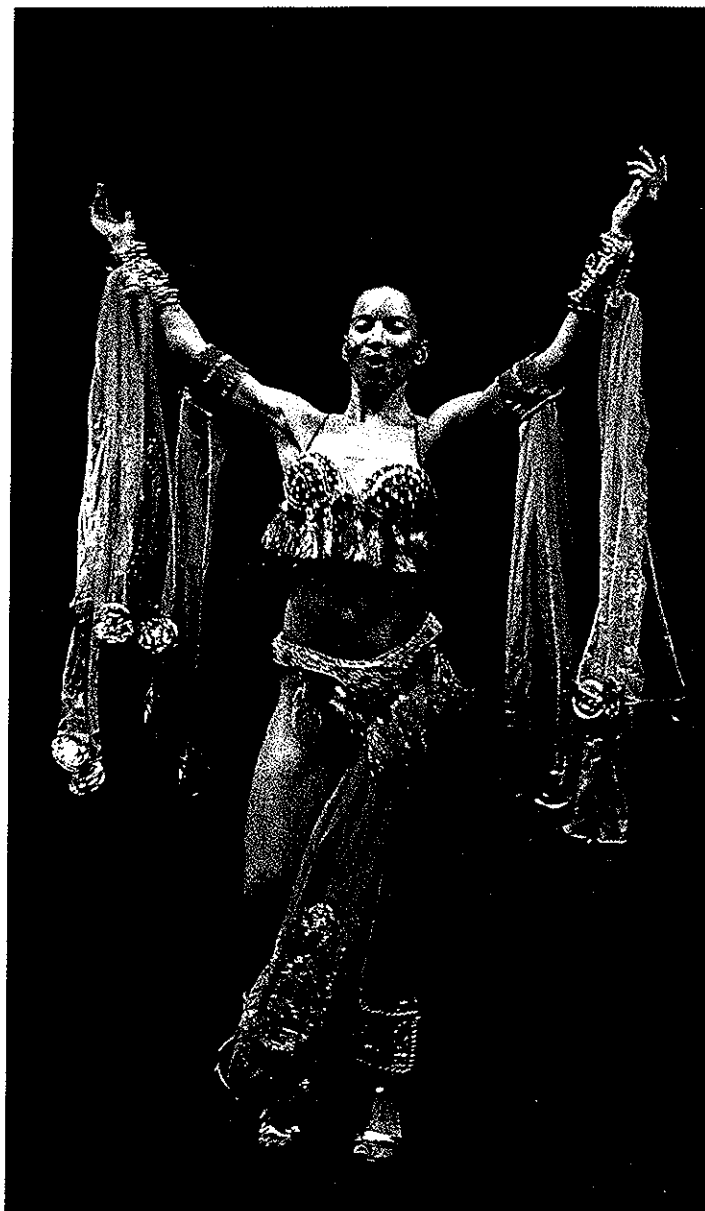
Fraser's practice – or as she has termed it, counter-practice – first took shape with *Museum Highlights* (1989), a videotaped performance in which the artist, in the guise of fictional museum docent Jane Castleton, led visitors on a sly interventionist tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Expertly mimicking the public face of the museum while simultaneously deconstructing it, Fraser came to specialize in deadpan parody, revealing the structural biases, social prejudices and economic underpinnings of established cultural institutions.

Fraser has not had a gallery show in the US since 1997, but her ear for the subtle nuances of various art world discourses still seems nearly perfect. In *Official Welcome* (all works 2001), a video shown at Pat Hearn Art Gallery, documenting a performance commissioned by the MICA Foundation, she deftly imitated the kind of introductory addresses, acceptance speeches and honorific eulogies associated with exhibition openings and award ceremonies. Fraser is seen at the Park Avenue home of the foundation's sponsors, making a

charmingly self-deprecatory speech in acceptance of the commission before a group of invited guests. As she plays the role of Andrea Fraser the Artist, her speech gradually morphs into the laudatory introduction of another artist, which segues into a more chagrined and halting acceptance and so on in a carefully calibrated series of personas riffing on identifiable cultural types – artists and their supporters and patrons. In what is either a commentary on philanthropic egotism and artistic exhibitionism or a manifestation of it, she simultaneously removes her clothes before the nervously giggling crowd.

In an inversion of her familiar role as museum guide, the short and sweet *Little Frank and His Carp*, seen at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, finds Fraser in the unaccustomed position of happy museum visitor. Surreptitiously shot at the Guggenheim Bilbao, it depicts an unannounced performance for which Fraser cheerfully strolls through the atrium of Frank Gehry's building led by the ubiquitous educational tool of the 21st-century museum, the audio guide. Fraser uses the disembodied voice – by turns ingratiatingly celebratory, condescending, sycophantic and authoritative – as a ready-made, a fetish object akin to the TV remote control. Dutifully responding to its emotional cues and manipulative subtexts, Fraser admiringly approaches the abstracted fish-shaped tower at the centre of the hall (which, we are reminded, is a signature of the Gehry mythology). Heeding the blandly eroticized invitation to caress the tower's walls ('run your hand over them ... feel how smooth it is'), at the video's climax Fraser yields to what becomes a comically masturbatory performance, stroking the leading edge of little Frank's over-sized 'carp' as well as her own flanks. Much to the surprised amusement of a nearby clutch of art tourists, Fraser renders unto the museum what its audio guide implicitly demands of the ideal cultural consumer: the unquestioned union of the institution and its public.

The early 2000s are not the early 1990s. Museums have changed, acknowledging and even rectifying many of the shortcomings for which



Andrea Fraser  
*Exhibition (Sam)*  
2001–2  
DVD still

Andrea Fraser uses the museum audio-guide as a ready-made fetish object.

they were once criticized. Yet despite awkward institutional assurances of greater inclusiveness, diversity and, for better or worse, popularity (Bilbao curiously reassures us that its 'sensual curving surfaces have a direct appeal that has nothing to do with age or class or education'), museums – and by extension the rest of the art world – still present what might be considered too easy a target. In repeatedly taking aim at the same sitting ducks, such critiques frequently come off as reduc-

tive, simplistic and a trifle self-serving. While Fraser is undeniably very good at what she does – she knows her material intimately and doesn't flinch at implicating herself as a willing participant when necessary – it cannot protect some of her new work from appearing oddly anachronistic, even nostalgic. No doubt it may be time once again to ask what happened to the institutional critique; only this time the answers may need to be different.

James Trainor