

Pollack, Barbara, "Baring the Truth", *Art in America*, July, 2002, pp. 86, 87

# Baring the Truth

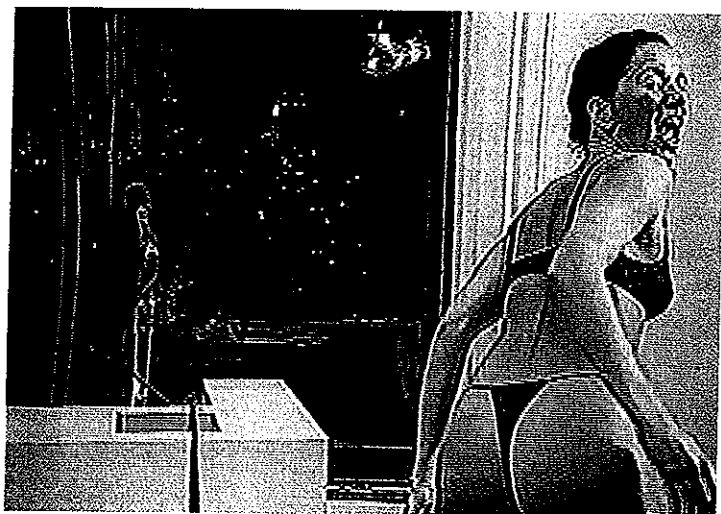
BY BARBARA POLLACK



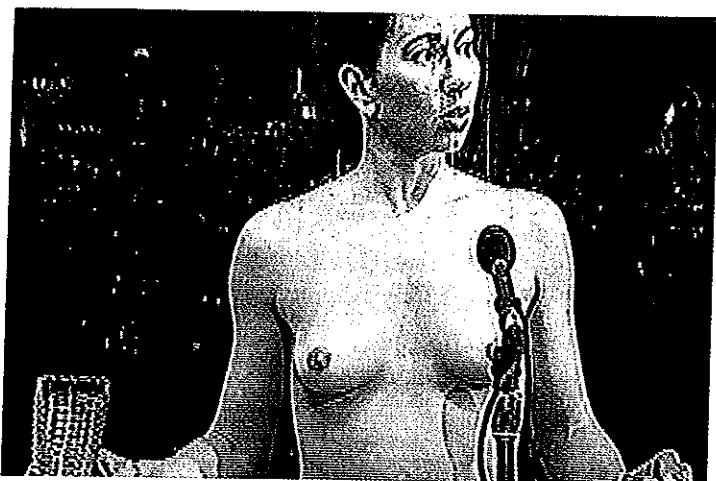
**“W**hat do I, as an artist, provide? What do I satisfy?” are the opening remarks of one of the characters in Andrea Fraser’s tour-de-force video *Official Welcome* (2001). Taped during a live performance at the home of the private collectors who commissioned the work, Fraser (who plays all the characters) stands at a podium and delivers monologues that mimic the banal comments and effusive words of praise uttered by presenters and recipients during art-awards ceremonies. Midstream, assuming the persona of a troubled, postfeminist art star, Fraser strips down, Vanessa Beecroft-style, to a Gucci thong, bra and high-heel shoes, and says, “I’m not a person today. I’m an object in an art work.” In this outfit, she continues to switch back and forth between the roles of art supporter and award-winning artist, finally removing the rest of her clothes.

*Official Welcome* is an apt introduction to Fraser’s work. In her videos and performances over the past 10 years, she has made dissection of the art world into a personal project, often using the seemingly harmless apparatus of viewer appreciation—Acoustiguides, gallery talks, educational videos—as her surgical tools. In two recent New York exhibitions, she presented five new video installations. At American Fine Arts at P.H.A.G., *Official Welcome* was shown on two video monitors, offering a front and a side view—like a full-length mug shot. The piece is humorous, since it is impossible to watch Fraser alternatively embodying the awards presenter (“If he is the most important artist of his generation, and I believe he is”) and the artist (“Where’s my check?”) without imagining whom she could be referring to. In addition, her nakedness, perfectly suited to the part she plays when she disrobes, becomes downright discomforting when she resumes her stance as yet another pompous presenter.

Fraser has more on her mind than stand-up comedy for art-world insiders. Her performance, commissioned by Howard and Barbara Morse, a.k.a. the MICA Foundation, could be read as biting the hand that feeds her, especially since her audience, a roomful of collectors, can be seen, reflected in the wall of windows behind her, giggling nervously. In *Official Welcome*, she raises our consciousness of the symbiotic relationship between well-meaning avant-gardists and well-moneyed patrons.



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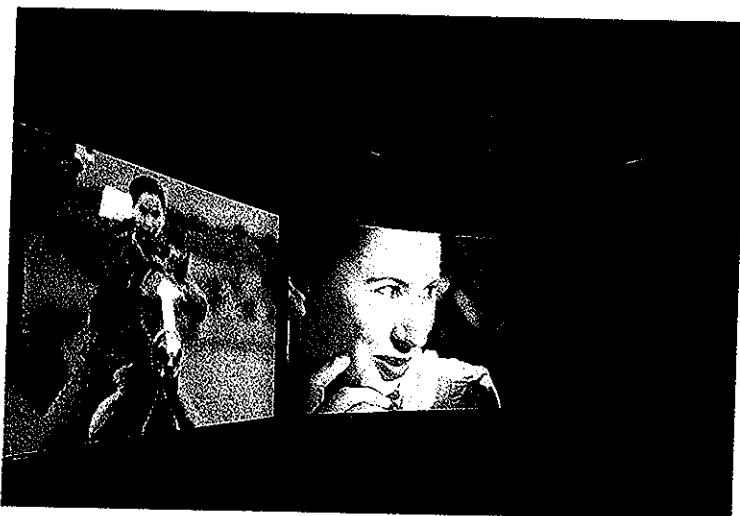
Fraser's *Soldadera* (Scenes from "Un Banquete en Tetlapayac," a film by Olivier Debroyse), 1998/2002, is a two-channel video that was projected onto a pair of large screens at American Fine Arts. The turbulent sociopolitical conditions of Mexico in the 1930s are the backdrop. This work interrogates art patronage in a different way. In Debroyse's 1998 docudrama *Un Banquete en Tetlapayac*, which is based on Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's filming of *Que Viva Mexico!* at Hacienda Tetlapayac during the summer of 1931, Fraser plays arts patron Frances Flynn Paine, a progressive who urged Abby Aldrich Rockefeller to support such artists as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti.

Fraser created *Soldadera* from several parts of Debroyse's raw footage taken in Mexico, recombining a total of eight minutes of borrowed film for her own purposes. One scene of herself as a peasant

*This page, stills from Andrea Fraser's Official Welcome, 2001, DVD installation. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy American Fine Arts at P.H.A.G., Inc., New York.*

*Known for her energetic videotaped performances parodying the excesses of the art world, Andrea Fraser recently presented new works in which she lampoons an art-awards ceremony, impersonates a drunken German artist and has an erotic encounter with the Guggenheim Bilbao.*

revolutionary riding on horseback through the landscape (which was not used in Debroyse's film) was repeated frequently on one or both screens. The right screen often showed an audience composed of the famous historical figures featured in Debroyse's film watching a performance—which is, in this piece, Fraser's projection on the other screen. In researching her role, Fraser found a letter Flynn Paine wrote to Rockefeller in 1930, which is spoken during *Soldadera*: "I feel sure that most Mexican artists, though 'Red,' would cease to be 'Reds,' if we could get them recognition." Such evidence strongly suggests that arts funders are seldom without ulterior motives.



*Soldadera* (Scenes from "Un Banquete en Tetlapayac," a film by Olivier Debroyse), 1998/2002, DVD installation.

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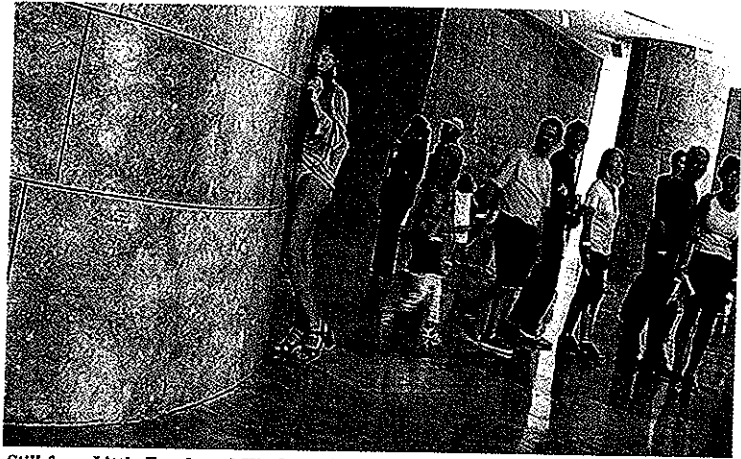
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In Fraser's worldview, Rockefeller's support, politically inspired in part, for Mexican modernism was a precursor of contemporary cultural globalism, especially the kind propounded by Thomas Krens. The Guggenheim Bilbao, located in the heart of Spain's Basque region, is Fraser's target in *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001), a video presented on a monitor at the entrance to Friedrich Petzel Gallery. Acoustiguides have long been grist for this artist, most notably in *Introduction to the Whitney Biennial* (1993), her contribution to that exhibition. Here, instead of creating an Acoustiguide for gallerygoers, Fraser embodies a museum visitor using a real one. Filmed in the lobby of Frank Gehry's "masterpiece," she listens raptly to the words on the tape, which form the soundtrack for the video. The recording rambles on about the glories of the architecture, barely referencing the works of art. Fraser literally writhes with pleasure as the recorded voice draws attention to the undulating curves and textured surfaces of the surrounding space. At one point, she lifts her skimpy sweater dress, exposes her bare bottom, and bumps and grinds against one of the curvaceous columns as if humping the very architecture. This is art appreciation taken to an extreme. We can see the real museum-goers watch her performance, not too shocked or confused, as if they already understand—"Ah, yes, so transgressive"—that this must be "just contemporary art."

Making a spectacle of herself is one of Fraser's most effective strategies. In *Art Must Hang* (2001), also at Petzel, she plays artist Martin Kippenberger delivering a drunken lecture at the Club an der Grenze in 1995, a lecture that was recorded on videotape by an art student. Her parody of this event, in incoherently slurred German, underscores the German artist's grandiose pretensions. The technologically flashy *Exhibition (Samba)*, 2002, juxtaposes two videos of Fraser dancing in a skimpy samba outfit. Mirrors centered on the rear of two scaffolding structures bounce projections onto each screen, where the videos can be seen on both front and back. In one, she performs in the streets during Carnival among Brazilian dancers; the other shows her doing the same dance against a black background. The work pokes fun at the way art often removes culture from its context and turns the viewer into a voyeur. Fraser will continue to find worthy targets for her work, since the art world will inevitably continue to provide rich terrain. □

Andrea Fraser's exhibitions were on view at Friedrich Petzel Gallery [Jan. 12-Feb. 9] and American Fine Arts at P.H.A.G. [Jan. 12-Feb. 2].

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Still from *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001, video. Photo courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.

Exhibition (*Samba*), 2002, DVD installation.

