

CONVERSATION WITH ANDREA FRASER—

HIUWAI CHU

Hiuwai Chu: Your name is inextricably associated with institutional critique, a practice that has its roots in the 1960s with work that aims to expose the frameworks of art institutions. How have approaches to institutional critique changed since the first generation of artists who pioneered this practice?

Andrea Fraser: Institutional critique is often linked to the names of a few “first-generation” artists who began working in the ’50s and ’60s—Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Michael Asher. In fact, none of these artists identified themselves with the term. I was one of the first people to use “institutional critique” in print, under the influence of critics like Peter Bürger, Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, and Craig Owens, in an essay I wrote about Louise Lawler in 1985. While those “first-generation” artists were important to the approach I developed, so were many others who are not often associated with institutional critique—Yvonne Rainer, Mary Kelly, and Adrian Piper, most notably—and artists who emerged in the ’70s, like Louise Lawler and Martha Rosler. I drew deeply from the site-specific and/or research-based investigations of social, economic, discursive, and architectural contexts of art associated with Broodthaers, Haacke, Buren, and Asher. But equally important to my development were the investigations of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, desire and fantasy, by feminist artists of the ’70s in work that often took the form of performance, film, and video. And of course, feminists were also engaged in a critique of art institutions, as were artists associated with other emancipatory movements in the ’60s and ’70s. So, while the term “institutional critique” emerged in the ’80s primarily within the artistic framework of Conceptual Art and theoretical frameworks associated with the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault, its development not only expanded on those frameworks but also revealed how narrow they always were.

HC: How has feminism impacted your work?

AF: In many, many ways. The artistic revolution brought about by feminism was immense and remains vastly under-recognized. Feminism opened (or reopened) art not

only to sexual politics, but also to symbolism, narrative, affect, the body, and the psychological. People forget how deeply formalist most art still was in the early '70s, including Conceptual Art. It was feminist performance that provided the model for my early museum tours and collaborative work with The V-Girls (active 1986-1996). And while I found models for social and archival research in Conceptual Art, it was in feminism that I found the model for introspective research: research into one's own experiences, desire, fantasies. Most important, as a second-generation feminist who grew up in the women's movement in California, the belief that one must always engage the personal and the political, the psychological and the social together, may be the fundamental principle of my work. Sometimes my work swings to one extreme or the other, but on some level both are always there.

HC: What are the other frameworks that have been important to your development?

AF: Drawing from feminist art and film theory, psychoanalysis also became central to my work and, in starting in the late '80s, so did the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory of social fields contributed to my shift away from a focus on art institutions in the narrow sense of organizations like museums to the institution (or field) of art as a whole. Bourdieu's work also led me to reject early formulations of institutional critique that were built on avant-garde mythologies of radical-artist-against-co-opting-bourgeois-art-institution. Of course, artists and art (and avant-garde traditions) are as central to the field of art and its reproduction as museums are. From Bourdieu I also understood that fields are not only institutionalized in organizations like museums, or objectified in things like artworks, but are also internalized, embodied, and performed by people. Feminism, psychoanalytic approaches to "here and now" analysis, and Bourdieu's methodology of reflexive sociology have all been central to my approach as it evolved from a site-specificity that focused on specific institutions (in the narrow sense) to what I've called situational or relational-specificity, which encompasses a whole range of field-specific practices, discourses, structures, and relations, including those we have internalized. And psychoanalysis—most recently perspectives identified with object relations, Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion—has informed more recent attempts in my work to engage mechanisms of projection as well as internalization in the interplay between social fields and inter-subjective fields.

HC: Appropriation is a method that you have employed since your early works and continues to be an essential part of your practice, from your 1984 *Four Posters* to your 2014 performance, *Not Just a Few of Us*, which is based on transcripts of New Orleans city council hearings. Why is it important for you to use real, existing material?

AF: Everything is “real” in one way or another. I don’t believe in fiction. Fiction is just a construction through which we distance and de-realize our realities, whether those are social or psychological realities (i.e. fantasies and emotional states). Appropriation developed as a central strategy of critical art practice out of Brechtian traditions as another kind of distancing and de-realizing. Artists began to use appropriation to transform reality and our relationship to it by displacing, reframing, and thus “alienating” the familiar. But appropriation exists in a double movement of taking something in (to one’s work, practice, self) as well as distancing. I first understood that double movement strategically, with appropriation serving as a kind of mobile site-specificity. It allowed critique to be immanent by making its object present in the work wherever the work was. From early on I also understood this strategic value on the model of psychoanalysis which, as Freud put it, only effectively works on what is made “actual and manifest” in the “here and now” of analysis through the mechanism of transference—that is, when patients are not only talking about their relationships with their parents, etc., but reenacting them. I understood appropriation as a kind of transference that made transformative intervention possible. It wasn’t until I went to Brazil in the late ’90s and was exposed to Anthropophagia—and Kleinian perspectives on Anthropophagia—that I began to consider the double movement of critical appropriation as an enactment of ambivalence. I realized that even critical appropriation always includes desire as well as critique, affirmation as well as negation, love as well as hatred of the appropriated thing and what it represents. Eventually, this led me to understand institutional critique itself as an enactment of ambivalence: not only of a profoundly ambivalent, love-hate relationship to the field of art and its institutions, but also of what I’ve called the structural ambivalence of the field of art itself. The social dimension of that structural ambivalence was captured by Bourdieu in his formulation of cultural fields occupying dominated positions in what he termed “the field of power.” I can’t elaborate on this perspective here, but I have in a number of essays, mostly notably “There’s no place like home” (2012).

As my understanding of appropriation evolved, its role in my work also changed. I started out appropriating images in the early '80s, moved on to appropriating text and what I call "museum forms and formats" like brochures and posters in the mid-'80s, and then to appropriating "positions and functions" with my museum tours and other performances. I tried to leave the strategy behind with *Untitled* (2003) and *Projection* (2008). While recent performances return to the use of found language, they have not involved the appropriation of positions or institutional forms of speech, so I'm not even sure they should be understood in terms of appropriation.

HC: That brings us to the question of performance, which you also started using early in your artistic career. Was your approach to performance also influenced by Brecht?

AF: Actually, I studied acting before I became focused on visual art. I read Stanislavski and was exposed to the Stanislavski-based "systems" and "methods" of realist acting in my early teens. By the time I started performing in the mid-'80s I also had read Brecht and absorbed his critique of realist acting. But Lacan may have had more impact than Brecht on my early approach to performance. While realist acting methods developed in the United States under the influence of depth psychologies, I tried to develop an approach to acting rooted in Lacanian theories of subjectivity: rather than digging deep to find desire and motivation, I looked for them in language and symbolic systems and had a profound distrust of anything like a coherent character, an autonomous ego. My idea of performing institutional discourses and relations, rather than narratives, was also partly inspired by Lacan. In the late '80s, Bourdieu began to influence my approach to performance and I began to think in terms of performing internalized, incorporated social structures—what he calls "habitus." Bourdieu's work also inspired the idea of performing social fields as structured sets of relations between positions, which is how I started with multi-voiced or multi-position performances like *May I Help You* (1991), *Inaugural Speech* (1997) and *Official Welcome* (2001). With *Projection* (2008), my approach to performance swung back to the psychological, but influenced less by Freudian (and Lacanian) than by Kleinian, object-relations and relational perspectives. This work develops on my early thinking about transference, but as this term is understood much more broadly in these perspectives: not as the re-enactment of some original but repressed relationship, but as the enactment of whole range of intra-subjective relations—that is, internal or internalized relations to people and other

objects of emotional investment—that in turn produce inter-subjective relations through mechanisms of projection as well as introjection. I hope this isn't getting too technical. Enactment emerged as a technical term in Anglo-American psychoanalysis in the '80s and has become very important to my thinking about performance. We are always enacting our intra-subjective relations inter-subjectively in ways that seduce or compel others to play roles in those enactments, whether in therapeutic, personal or professional relationships, or as performer and audience. I'm never really performing other people. I'm performing relationships to other people, parts of people, or fantasies of people, including people I've internalized and people I project as audience.

HC: Is this why you almost always perform your own work and rarely use actors?

AF: I want to be in dialogue with acting and theories of acting, but for me performance is very different from acting, particularly realist acting. It's not about achieving identification, or a suspension of disbelief that I am another person, or being "convincing" as a character within a fictional narrative. But nor is it simply about a Brechtian distancing of such identification, including through over-identification, as Alex Alberro and others have suggested. In a funny way my approach is a combination of Stanislavski and Brecht. Stanislavski sought psychological realism in the service not only of fiction but also as a kind of emotional transformation. Brecht rejected that psychological realism in favor of critical social realism in the service of social change. I want to get at both the social and psychological reality of performance as enactment, which may include the enactment of fantasy and fiction, but only as these are also social and psychological facts. The idea that I am not performing other people but a relationship to other people is very Brechtian. But for me that relationship is not only a critical relationship, a relationship of critical distancing. It also includes the identification and empathy usually associated with Stanislavski's approach. It includes both—which brings us back to ambivalence.

HC: Even if it's not realist acting, the way you embody different roles in your work looks extremely demanding, physically and psychologically. How do you prepare for your performances?

AF: Not like most actors. Most actors start by developing characters and relationships through improvisation. Memorizing the text comes last. For me, the text comes first, whether I'm writing it, constructing it from quotations, or transcribing and editing it. That process is itself an enactment of a whole range of relationships. With written and constructed texts, the voices develop with the text and I usually have it memorized by the time I'm done putting it together. With transcribed texts, the transcribing and editing is an important part of the process. With works based on transcripts, I've always had audio and sometimes also video of the source material, so I edit it as an audio track as well as on paper. Then I listen to the audio over and over and over and over again as I memorize the text. The memorization is actually muscle memory more than ear or eye memory: it's my mouth, throat and lungs that remember the words. It's very physical. But the audio is important in how I take these voices into my body. Both psychologically and socially, I am reluctant to draw a line between what I take in specifically for a performance and what I find in myself that is already internalized. I understand my last two performances, *Men on the Line* (2012) and *Not Just a Few of Us*, as challenging the social and psychological processes of social identity formation—gender identity, racial identity—through the splitting apart of different aspects of ourselves and our society and confining those aspects to particular bodies with which we are then identified or not.

HC: In performance, the body is always a vehicle for artistic production. It is a central focus in many of your works, but perhaps most intensely in *Official Welcome* (2001) and *Untitled* (2003).

AF: Or perhaps it is that we are most intensely *aware* of the body in performance when that body is sexualized and physically exposed. We may be aroused by it, ashamed of it, or anxious for it. We may resent its exhibitionism and the attention it demands. Through those responses one feels something at stake, for the performer and perhaps also for oneself. But the sexualized body can also activate responses that overwhelm our capacity to reflect on what we're experiencing as well as the other aspects of a work.

HC: Do you see that reflection as essential to a work's critical impact?

AF: “Critical” may be one of the most often used and least defined words in contemporary art discourse. Despite remaining deeply committed to institutional critique, I try to avoid using the terms “critique” and always challenge my students when they describe a work as “critical.” What do we mean by that? What is it about the work, or our experience of it, that evokes that term? Critical of what, exactly? To what end? Answers to these questions are often sought in content—what an artwork *means* or what it *says*—which reduces critique to a statement or a stance. I would rather understand critique as what art *does*. I believe that what all art does is activate structures and relations. Some of these may be produced by the work in some particular form, but most are just there: social and historical structures, economic structures, psychological structures, as well as physical, symbolic, and perceptual structures that art works exist within. As we engage the work, it brings us into those structures and activates them around us and in us as experiences and processes. To some extent, everything we engage with does that. What is particular about art, inseparably from its institutional modes of presentation and reception, is that art and its frame enable and encourage a reflection on the experiences and structures activated in and around us. But thinking and feeling, reflecting and experiencing at the same time, is extraordinarily difficult, especially when the experience is intense, complex, and not entirely pleasurable. For me, a work is critical only when it activates and enables a reflection on immediate experience in a way that allows unthought structures in that experience to be recognized—hopefully with some complexity.

HC: You have argued that institutional critique is not anti-institution, stating: “It’s not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.”¹

AF: Social structures and institutions may exist abstractly and impersonally, but we reproduce or transform them with our own bodies and minds, through our own individual and collective investments. So the first question is: What matters to us and why? Institutions play a central role in making things matter. They collect and orient a whole range of investments, including both material resources and psychological

¹“From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum*, September 2005.

energy, by offering particular kinds of benefits, establishing values, safeguarding standards, and creating models of achievement that we aspire to. And they objectively reward those who invest in them, whether that reward comes in the form of a job, social status, group belonging, personal fulfillment, some other satisfaction or relief from deprivation. But institutions don't only represent our ideals and aspirations; they also may hold anxiety, frustration, failure, violence and bad conscience. In this sense they exist for us as fantasies that serve as containers for the parts of ourselves or society that we want to disown. There are forms of critique that also serve as a mechanism for that disowning and distancing. That's why I understand institutional critique as defined not by any particular object—whether museums, the art field, or art institutions—but as a practice of critical reflexivity that aims to activate critical reflexivity in others.

HC: Do you think that institutional critique has contributed to greater self-awareness and critical reflection in museums?

AF: I hope so. For me that would be about creating a culture, a practice, perhaps a “habitus” of critical reflexivity in museums. It's not about congratulating ourselves on how radical, critical or self-aware we are, or for being on the right side of history or fighting the good fight. It's about constantly looking for our blind spots, self-censorship, complicities. It's about interrogating our own myths and fantasies, our own power or desire for power. And it's also about being mindful of how we use people, things, and institutions as containers for the parts of ourselves that we judge critically.