

The Work of the Artist in the Age of
Mimetic Reproduction:
Andrea Fraser's *Official Welcome* (2001–3)
Ross Sappenfield

*“In some way or another one can protect oneself from
evil spirits by portraying them.”*

– Erland Nordenskiöld and Ruben Pérez Kantule,
quoted in Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity:*
A Practical History of the Senses

1. Magic, specifically sympathetic magic (to use J.G. Frazer's term from *The Golden Bough*), or mimetic magic (to use Horkheimer and Adorno's term from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) is probably not the obvious category in which most would place Andrea Fraser's art. When artists are compared to shamans, Joseph Beuys is the more likely subject. But possibly many of Fraser's works could indeed be described as mimetic magic.

2. Fraser's body of work created in the period 1986 through 2001 consists most prominently of performances that enact a critique (or “analysis” to use her preferred term) of the institutions that frame art and artworks. While in that same period she also made works of visual art, organized seminars, and researched corporate art programs, the performance pieces are what she is most known for, and are in number the most prolific form. Fraser's performance technique, especially dating back to *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), uses mimetic appropriation of discourse—specifically of the discourse of the individuals who compose art institutions. These works almost always include: Fraser as performer, a montage of appropriated texts as scripts, parodic impersonation of various participants in the art patronage system (museum officials, docents, patrons, collectors, viewers), and finally, in *Kunst muss hängen* (Art must hang) (2001) and in *Official Welcome* (2001–3), parodic impersonation of artists.

3. In *Official Welcome*, Fraser begins by stepping up to a podium and delivering a standard version of an artist's thank-you remarks at an exhibition opening, addressed to the public and to patrons, in this case the founders of the MICA Foundation—which, in fact, did commission the work. As the piece progresses, though, Fraser begins to assume different personalities and voices, alternating between patrons' hagiographical introductions and artists' self-congratulatory responses. Along the way the performed voices get more and more histrionic, Fraser ends up stripping naked, and then finally bursts into tears after delivering a weepy closing speech.

4. The comic, specifically parodic, aspects of Fraser's work until 2001 are clearly important, especially because, after *Official Welcome*, she effectively abandoned the parodic mode. There is a clear rift in her body of work after *Official Welcome*: in that performance, she at long last brings the figure of the artist under the attack of parodic mimesis. Also important is *Kunst muss hängen*, the performance that immediately preceded *Official Welcome*, in

which Fraser renders verbatim (in German) a drunken rant originally delivered at an opening by the artist Martin Kippenberger. In the works that followed *Official Welcome*, *Exhibition* (2002) and *Untitled* (2003) the figure of the artist and the artist/collector relationship continue to be foregrounded. But the humor is abandoned, or at best becomes so deeply dark that it is at the limit of humor. In *Exhibition* Fraser literally put the artist—herself—on display, in a video showing her dancing (depicted from front and rear) in a skimpy samba school costume. Next, in *Untitled*, she enacted the trope of artist-as-prostitute in a literal sense: in a room at the four-star Royalton Hotel in New York, she has a sex with a collector intermediated by her gallery, an act documented in grainy surveillance-camera style. Can *Untitled* be seen as comic? Possibly, when the silent sex video is taken together with the separate connected work, a short excerpt of the excised audio track for the original video that excludes the collector's voice. In that recording, Fraser laughingly tells the collector that, when she lost her virginity at age 16, she ruptured an artery and had to be taken away in an ambulance. But there is a clear trajectory up to *Official Welcome*, and then a break after it. Fraser's works after *Untitled* become much more overtly deadpan and serious, ranging from the auto-mimetic analytic discourse of *Projection*, the political essays of *L'1% C'est Moi* (2011) and *There's No Place Like Home* (2012), up to and including her recent return to the mimetic mode in the much more somber works *Men on the Line* (2012) and *Not Just a Few of Us* (2014). Interestingly, those last two performances use their appropriated texts in a straight, seemingly verbatim approach, unlike *Official Welcome*'s wild *mélange* of sources.

5. Walter Benjamin's idea that mechanical reproduction destroyed the cultic “aura” of the artwork could ground one understanding of *Official Welcome*. As Benjamin put it (in one of his many formulations of the concept) in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), “To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.”

6. Aura is important to *Official Welcome* because, as noted, in it Fraser turns her focus from the institutional framework of art to that of the social figure of the artist. Or, more precisely, she examines the artist/patron antinomy from both sides. If the aura was destroyed for the work of art, the aura was nonetheless retained by the artist. Art lost its aura; the artist did not. Fraser's turn to the artist in *Official Welcome* finally subjects the character of the artist to the same amputation of aura. She does this by reproducing the public dialogue of artist and patron in a brilliant montage, revealing and exploding in excessive amplification the commoditized nature of both halves of that dialectic, in a way that echoes Benjamin on the movie star: “The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of the commodity.”

7. As a return to the comic and the parodic, *Official Welcome* is Fraser's best execution of those modes. It is laugh-out-loud funny. It might make sense to discuss the sublime here. For Longinus in *On The Sublime*, the sublime is whatever produces a specific effect, specifically, *ekstasis*, which is a loss of the self. Relevant is his brief digression on comic ekstasis, in which the work of art takes us out of ourselves, takes us out of analytical reflection—in the case of the sublime by awing us, in the case of the comic by making us laugh. Another characteristic of humor, though, is that of distantiation. If one accepts the research of psychologists McGraw and Warren in their paper "Benign Violations" (2010), a key aspect of humor being seen as such includes an aspect of perceived harmlessness. Perhaps one could read Fraser's move away from the comic as a recognition that, while the comic has the potential for *ekstasis*, it is also inherently distanced, effectively harmless, and therefore perhaps of doubtful political efficacy.

8. Why does Fraser get naked at the end of *Official Welcome*? She has joked about her finally joining the ranks of "nudie performance art" in the piece. First there is the stripping down to Gucci lingerie (specified by brand name in the script), the motive of which is clear as in that part of the script she quotes artist Vanessa Beecroft. The next move to full nudity is less obvious but can probably be explained



Andrea Fraser, *Official Welcome*, 2001–3. Single-channel video, color, sound, 30:00 min.
Courtesy: Andrea Fraser and Galerie Nagel Draxler

by its proximity in the script to a reference to Karen Finley, whose nude body is a tool and medium in her graphic performances. But another, and maybe more essential part of the move could be read as an attempt to retain a distantiation in the work, to retain the aura. As Theodor Adorno noted in his *Aesthetic Theory*, to some extent Walter Benjamin celebrated the demise of aura, perhaps to the point of celebrating the demise of art: "Identifying with the aggressor, he all too promptly allied himself with the historical tendency that remands art to the empirical domain of practical ends. As a phenomenon, distance is what in artworks transcends their mere existence; their absolute nearness would be their absolute integration." *Official Welcome* is presented as a work of art, and the work of an artist, and specifically as a live performance. Benjamin wrote: "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return." Under this definition, live performance should invest a work with aura particularly effectively, and this effect is heightened when enacted by the simultaneously bold and vulnerable nude performer. In *Official Welcome*,

the artist—despite commoditization, despite being fixed in a social position—after dispelling the aura of the empowered (patrons, artists) by mimetically reproducing their discourse, in fact retains the aura by defiantly looking back at the viewer.

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Andrea Fraser is on our mind.

An interdisciplinary research group of CCA faculty members and colleagues reflects on the work of Andrea Fraser for the entire 2015–16 academic year. Public events are held each month.

*,) The Wattis Institute