

Frames and Implications:

Andrea Fraser's *Official Welcome* (2001–3)

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1. Commissioned by the MICA Foundation and initially performed in October 2001, *Official Welcome* is a critique that relies upon the audience's ability to register and navigate a specific set of social relations. Fraser stands at a podium, enacting the roles of various "artist" and "supporter" characters, using language appropriated from articles by and about established art world figures. Each of these characters represents a known "type" with well-defined parameters (the condescending patron, the bitter mid-career artist, etc.); each functions as a kind of framing device. Fraser marks the shifts between these personas through changes in language, gesture, and intonation, and just as each frame becomes resolved, it shifts. For this performance to be understood and appreciated by the audience, the content must not only be recognizable, conveying meaning, but—crucially—the artist and the audience must hold between them a shared sense of value for these operations.

2. Tzvetan Todorov observed that every utterance is oriented toward a social horizon, and *Official Welcome* demonstrates that its particular social horizon is bounded by an unacknowledged agreement, held in common between performer and audience, regarding the conditioned social reality of art world personas and how they are meant to act and interact with one another. Thus the space of this performance is not just the podium at which the performer stands, but it is the entire room, and indeed, the larger set of social relations that both she and the audience occupy and participate in. At 8'41" Fraser says, "I hope I can implicate people in my work."

3. Fraser's work has often been discussed in terms of institutional critique, but seldom in relation to the practice of appropriation. Yet a similar dynamic of mutually understood social significance operates within both gestures. Institutional critique relies on a sense of shared value, and to achieve its principle goals of defamiliarizing the known—or exposing and problematizing the force behind codified, tacit structures—one must work within communal codes and utilize the signs and signifiers of hierarchical institutional power. Likewise, the energetic thrust of visual appropriation depends entirely on recognition. Condemnation and in-jokes alike depend on shared frames of reference.

4. Fraser alternates between the two categories of "artist" and "supporter" in *Official Welcome*. The piece starts as sober, decorous, and gracious and rapidly lurches toward dissolution: the "artists" begin to stutter, insult the audience, indulge delusions of persecution and grandeur, moon the audience, and disrobe completely; interspersed with these displays, the "supporters" awkwardly stroke egos, smile tightly at gaffes, and flap about trying to recover their own status at the podium by praising these buffoons: "That's great! Isn't she great?! She's great! Exciting work."



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

5. The most famous example of mimicry in the natural world is the viceroy butterfly; to avoid predation, it replicates the colors, patterns, and behavior of the poisonous monarch. The artist who wishes to critique an institution (without being eaten—or worse, ignored) must contend with the necessity to mimic the mechanisms that already exist within the institution in order for the critique to be legible. But such appropriative strategies come at a cost: as with all spectacle, re-performing dynamics of power has a way of legitimizing those dynamics. Fraser herself has admitted that in her work, these energies are "bound up as part of my own ambition to be part of [the] institution." Entomologists tell us that the difference between the viceroy and the monarch is that "viceroy flight is faster and more erratic." The king, assured of his status, is calm; only the imitators thrash about in a nervous stew of ambition and pretension.



Andrea Fraser, *Official Welcome*, 2001–3.
Courtesy: Andrea Fraser and Galerie Nagel Draxler

6. Fraser appropriates the language that invisibly buttresses the art world's monolithic structures. In re-performing it, she lays bare its self-congratulatory, hopeful, oily, angry (and above all, deadly earnest) mechanisms. But in exposing these structures, *Official Welcome* also functions as a shibboleth for the audience's insider knowledge. Are you in on the joke? Do you know when to laugh? Do you get the references to Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, and Vanessa Beecroft? Are you one of us? Like all operations involving power dynamics, the work defines an inside and an outside, a delineation separating inclusion from exclusion. In defining this boundary, however, the work necessarily

policies it. As much as it might be “appropriation art” and “institutional critique,” *Official Welcome* is primarily the performance of a certain shared worldview. Its framing devices have value because the audience has a participatory desire oriented toward the very same network of power relations.

7. It is true that art is a communicative act and that its utterances are always intended to fall on ears that can absorb them. But it is crucial to note that Fraser is using this principle, *art qua art*, to serve up her well-informed audience to themselves. She presents to them the system in which they participate—and thus perpetuate. These tropes have achieved the kind of status occupied by stereotypes: not entirely true and yet all too truthful for having become orthodoxy. That we can take pleasure in our recognition of these frames only illustrates our own collusion in manifesting them. If Fraser’s work falls into the category of “institutional critique,” then we, the audience, might just be the institution.

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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.