

Projecting onto Andrea Fraser, or “Why Not All Labor Is Created Equal” Karen Fiss

When is a professional academic seminar an economic exchange? When Andrea Fraser decided not to share specific artworks with the “On Our Mind” group, it launched a discussion about the production of value, refusal as performance, and the nature of generosity.

The intended structure of the “On Our Mind” seminar was to focus on a close reading of one artwork by Andrea Fraser at each meeting. Tanya Zimbardo and I were asked to select the first artwork and readings for the group. We chose Fraser’s 2008 video installation *Projection*, which neither of us had had the opportunity to view before. On the morning of our seminar meeting, however, we were told that the artist had decided not to share the work. In the absence of the video, the group read a previously published transcript of *Projection*. Though we spent some time talking about the transcript in conjunction with a short clip of the piece available on Tate Modern’s website, neither proved a sufficient substitute.¹ In the end, the seminar discussion, which took place on April 20, 2015, veered toward the topic of Andrea’s refusal itself. I decided my contribution would take the form of a transcript as well—what follows this brief introduction is an edited excerpt of that evening’s discussion.

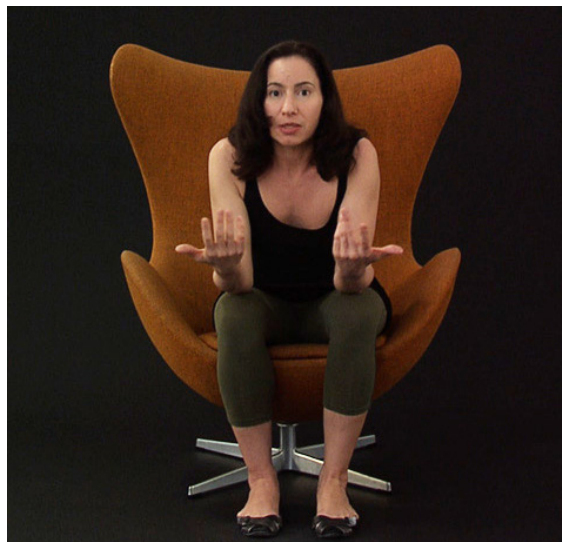
Fraser’s initial explanation for not lending *Projection* was that she intended it to be viewed as a dual-screen installation. We understood her concern, though as “arts professionals” (curators, artists, professors, writers), we had watched preview copies of installation works before. Perhaps we could have arranged to install the work for a private screening at the Wattis, which has the proper equipment, space, and other technical requirements. Fraser offered the group access to some other titles, but she also stipulated that any additional works we wanted to view would be released only if the Wattis agreed to buy some of them. Fraser’s acquisitions proposal ended up complicating our response to her stated concerns regarding the viewing conditions for *Projection*. It also prompted us to reevaluate the nature of our academic seminar and the contradictions and complicities involved in the kind of work Andrea and we were performing. In the end, the Wattis and CCA’s library jointly purchased five unlimited-edition DVDs from Fraser. The acquisition, however, was not finalized until April 2016, after our year-long project was over.²

The capacity of artists to develop an economy around their work is challenging for all but the 2% who sell to the 1% via blue-chip galleries and art fairs.³ This is particularly problematic for female artists, and even more so for those working in performance (perhaps this is one reason why Fraser stopped making videos

¹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/andrea-fraser-conversation-chris-dercon>, accessed June 8, 2016.

² The five unlimited-edition DVDs purchased from Andrea Fraser were: *Official Welcome*, 2001/2003; *Welcome to the Wadsworth*, 1992; *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989; *Inaugural Speech*, 1997; and *May I Help You?*, 1991.

³ Statistic, though a bit dated, from a report by Columbia University Research Center for Arts and Culture; quoted in Nato Thompson’s interview with W.A.G.E. “Labor Movement,” *Artforum*, March 2011.



Andrea Fraser, *Projection*, 2008. Two-channel, high-definition video projection, 50 min. Courtesy: Andrea Fraser and Galerie Nagel Draxler

as unlimited editions and started selling her video pieces through commercial galleries as limited editions around 2001). The range of issues brought up by the encounter between Fraser, the Wattis, and the participants could be placed in the broader context of W.A.G.E certification (in which Fraser is involved)⁴ and legislative attempts to establish artist resale royalty rights.



Andrea Fraser, installation view, *Services: The Conditions and Relations of Service Provision in Contemporary Project Oriented Artistic Practice*, Kunstraum of Lüneburg University, 1994. Courtesy: Andrea Fraser and Galerie Nagel Draxler

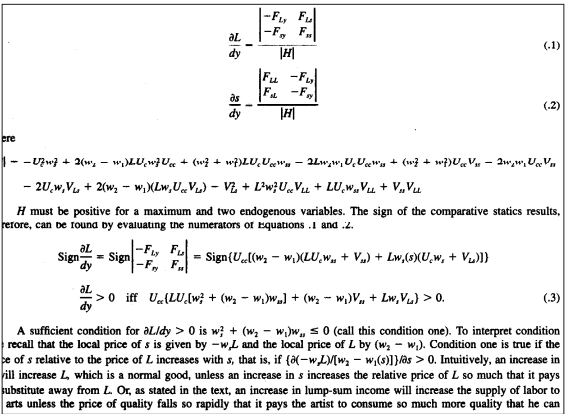
Participation in the Wattis seminar was by invitation and required a year-long commitment. I was interested in the project because I wanted to revisit some of Fraser’s earlier work and view pieces I hadn’t seen before. Fraser and I were formed in part by the same downtown New York City art scene (in the years I worked at the New Museum and hung out at the Whitney Program). The politics of institutional critique in which I was invested during my twenties hadn’t held up to my middle-aged self. Aside from a bit of nostalgia, I wanted to think about whether any of it was salvageable.

Some may wonder why the participants agreed to devote so much time to an endeavor for which we didn’t get paid (though for full disclosure, I am receiving a \$100 honorarium for this essay). As an academic and sometime curator, the Wattis seminar provided me a regular forum to meet with interesting colleagues—a kind of faculty seminar not otherwise supported by CCA. The lack of predictable art world “deliverables” was also appealing to me. There wouldn’t be the typical one-person exhibition and catalogue to organize at the end of the project. It was a loose format but also relatively long term,

⁴ W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) is a New York-based activist organization focused on regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit art institutions and establishing a sustainable labor relation between artists and the institutions that contract them. For more info, visit wageforwork.com.

which allowed for more in-depth and creative exploration. I was invested in the notion that a certain generosity is implicit in this kind of intellectual and creative exchange.

Or was the seminar format actually exploitative? Was the Wattis using our cultural capital to produce programming without compensating us as consultants? I find that line hard to argue given that, with the exception of Fraser’s *Men on the Line* performance, the lectures and events were primarily organized by us and for us; they were open to the general public but attracted a relatively small and specialized audience. Did the seminar instead exploit Fraser by expecting her to perform some kind of free “artistic service” for the Wattis? Fraser was paid for performing *Men on the Line*, but the loan of our “study materials” was anticipated as a professional courtesy. Fraser and I are both tenured professors with steady paychecks, meaning that we don’t have to piece together adjunct positions, type for dollars, or take on unrelated work like many others in our field. Should this shared institutional privilege have influenced the nature of our exchange? Would providing the seminar with access to her video work fall under the rubric of scholarly reciprocity? Most academic work is expected to be done for “free,” whether publishing an article in a journal or presenting a paper at a conference. When Fraser established the expectation that her work should be bought, did it in turn expose us as consumers rather than producers ourselves?



Detail of equations diagram from Tyler Cowen and Alexander Tabarrok, “An Economic Theory of Avant-Garde and Popular Art, or High and Low Culture.”

Issues of remuneration and exploitation relate directly to what the Italian sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato terms “the value of immaterial labor” and what American economist Tyler Cowen describes as the trade-off between “pecuniary vs. non-pecuniary” benefits. They both speak to the kind of social relations set in motion by creative/aesthetic work in the new economy, albeit from opposing ideologies. Lazzarato identifies immaterial labor as central to both the “global organization of production” and the “process of valorization” in our fluid post-Fordist economy. Workers and artists become entrepreneurs in a labor market characterized by precariousness, hyperexploitation, and mobility.⁵ Cowen, on the other hand, attempts to explain why artists might choose to reject the market in order to “derive non-pecuniary returns from particular forms of labor.” This phenomenon occurs in other creative industries as well, where

⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato et al., “Immaterial Labor.” *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Ed. Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, and Michael Hardt. NED—New edition. Vol. 7. University of Minnesota Press, 1996: 133–48.

professionals choose to shift from “earnwork” to “volwork”—a move that represents an initial decrease in earnings, but in fact functions within a postindustrial system as “the major story of economic growth.”⁶

Cowen’s libertarian-based theory is crass and simplistic despite the comparative statistics and elaborate proofs. Yet the idea that people might want to wrest notions of value away from a reductive capitalist logic has been fueling much of the conversation in the art world around social practices, and gift and sharing economies. To follow the logic of Lazzarato’s immaterial labor, much of what passes as relational art these days is really just another high-yield means of satisfying the desires of the experience economy. Academia, as a supposedly alternative symbolic economy of free exchange and opportunity, can also be critiqued for its role in this totalizing system. This is particularly true in the private sector where prohibitive tuition costs and outdated admissions criteria favor an already existing elite. Just as the appearance of transgression in artistic practice is essential to the cycle of exchange between cultural and financial capital, so can it be similarly harnessed in academia (though it is often referred to as the friendlier-sounding “innovation”).

Fraser has questioned on more than one occasion how artists can continue to rationalize their participation in this economy. At the same time, she has encouraged curators, critics, art historians, and artists to “withdraw their cultural capital from this market.”⁷ My takeaway from that brief moment of Fraser’s refusal was that she did not think our seminar qualified as a sufficient act of withdrawal, nor did she regard our exchange as mutually beneficial. Requiring us to buy a work for the purposes of study eliminated the possibility of a symbolic exchange of legitimacy. The time we spent this past year focusing on Fraser’s artistic practice didn’t qualify as an even trade-off in terms of “professional consecration,” with all the unsavory associations this label implies.⁸ Our affective investment in the seminar could be described as negation, to cite the Freudian term Fraser often employs—an anamnesis on our part, as well as hers, as to what we’re all doing and for whom.⁹ Or finally, as one seminar member suggested, maybe it was simply a case of benign neglect. Maybe Fraser was too busy to deal with our low-profile project, and we’re just overthinking it.

Transcript of Fraser “On My Mind” seminar, April 20, 2016

Present: Wattis curator & head of programs Jamie Stevens, Wattis associate curator Leila Grothe, Karen Fiss, Jacqueline Francis, Ben Furstenberg, Jeanne Gerrity, Bean Gilsdorf, Patricia Maloney, Ross Sappenfield, Tanya Zimbardo, and Anonymous.

⁶ Tyler Cowen and Alexander Tabarrok, “An Economic Theory of Avant-Garde and Popular Art, or High and Low Culture,” *Southern Economic Journal* 67,2 (2000): 232–53.

⁷ Andrea Fraser, “1% c’est moi,” *Whitney Biennial*, 2012. http://whitney.org/file_columns/0002/9848/andreafraser_1_2012whitneybiennial.pdf

⁸ This concept is discussed in relation to Pierre Bourdieu by James Meyer in “The Strong and the Weak: Andrea Fraser’s Conceptual Legacy,” *Gray Room* No. 17 (Fall 2004): 96.

⁹ Andrea Fraser, “There’s no place like home,” *Whitney Biennial*, 2012: 32–33.

JS: The idea for this seminar is to present close readings of individual works, and Karen and Tanya have identified *Projection*, a two-channel video installation as the work by Andrea Fraser that they wanted to talk about today. In her initial reply, it seemed like we would gain access to the videos, but ultimately Andrea indicated that she's not prepared to give us this work to view, and I think there are fair reasons for this decision. I'll let Leila describe what Andrea said and where the situation stands in regards to access to her work in general.

LG: Installation works are generally off limits, although she has given us her biography, a complete list of works, a bibliography, and a list of all her unlimited edition titles. She has suggested that the group come up with a list of works we'd like to focus on in our seminar and would like to request. She's hoping that through the CCA library, we might be able to work out an acquisition, and then in response to that, she would open up some titles as preview copies.

JS: Andrea seems to be very open about this potential acquisition process. It's not like she named her price, and we must meet it. We can talk about which titles we want, and we'll negotiate a suitable fee structure—we'll send an email encouraging you all to read this list and for those leading the upcoming seminars, or even for our own research, if there are titles that would be particularly valuable, let us know; otherwise we'll decide ourselves.

LG: Despite her turning down this particular request, if we really want an excerpt of a specific work, I think we could convince Andrea to share something with us. What's confusing to me is that in the taped conversation on Tate's website, she shared a four minute segment of the piece [*Projection*]. Maybe it's because the actual work was in the same building, and people could see it in its proper context, but she has extracted other moments before.

JS: One final comment. If it was another medium we were talking about, I think we'd still give ourselves permission to produce close readings of the work—for instance, if it were a painting or a sculpture. So I hope that we all feel empowered to talk about this work without that intimacy or unfettered access.

LG: Andrea gave us a list of titles that she suggested the library acquire, but by no means is she making that decision for us, it's just the pieces she thought would be interesting to us.

KF: I should explain why we are being taped. That was my request for today, because we got the news about Andrea not lending *Projection* in the eleventh hour, and I thought it could tie into last week's discussion about institutional critique. As institutional critique became historicized, I think it was also framed nostalgically; it's as if we're talking about the historical avant-garde all over again. I was disappointed and annoyed by Andrea's decision, but also interested in what it might say about the position of the artist within the discourse of institutional critique. It hasn't been sufficiently discussed or theorized, so I thought of using the transcript of

this seminar as the basis for my contribution, or as a collaborative effort, for our final writing project. I am interested to hear everyone's perspectives about the terms set for our seminar to view work. For me, as a professor of contemporary art, who teaches a lot of time-based and installation art, it is a constant challenge in the classroom—not being able to show students many of the artworks I think are important for them to know. I feel like my hands are tied in terms of what I can expose them to. Also in terms of my current book project dealing with globalization, I'm interested in how artworks circulate, or get pulled out of circulation, for the purposes of the market.

TZ: For today's discussion, Karen and I wanted to choose a more recent work that neither of us had seen before. Since we aren't going to be able to view *Projection*, we found two related resources: one is a talk by Andrea given in conjunction with the presentation of the work at the Tate; the other is an essay by Andrea that elaborates in more detail her interest in Bourdieu and psychoanalytic theory at that moment—the essay was written at the time she was producing the transcripts for *Projection*.¹⁰

BF: I read the script—it's not a perfect emulation of the work, but the article talking about the friction between Bourdieu and psychoanalysis was really interesting. One also always wonders whether the transcript is literally accurate, is it complete?

A: I saw *Projection* installed in a big museum environment. The acoustics left a lot to be desired: you could hear the conversations outside, and the projection was hard to see—so can one really assume that because it's a prestigious organization, it would necessarily provide the best venue?

JS: You bring up an interesting issue about the promise of an institution delivering the right level of care...

BF: To provide the perfect environment.

JS: I don't feel that critical of Andrea for our situation now. I don't mind artists feeling a bit overprotective about the environment in which their work is seen, it doesn't really bother me that much, but I do think that in making these kinds of demands, you rarify other spaces.

TZ: This seminar isn't a public panel or talk. It's a private conversation and it's a group of people who for the most part are not only often engaged in looking at, studying, and showing work, but we are also familiar with preview copies for research purposes. We understand the spatial considerations and that we would not have been looking at an ideal presentation. So this was surprising.

KF: I would understand if we were whipping up a public exhibition or screening of the piece, but we're meeting in a gallery space, we are all arts professionals, and most of us curate exhibitions.

¹⁰ The essay read by the seminar was Andrea Fraser, "Psychoanalysis or Socioanalysis: Rereading Pierre Bourdieu," *Texte zur Kunst*, December 2007: 139–50. The video link can be found at <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/andrea-fraser-conversation-chris-dercon>

Given the terms of what this group is doing, I find it problematic. I guess I'm always wary of that kind of control over what works will and will not be seen. I don't know what is actually at play here—if it is just about meeting the expectations of proper installation.

A: Do you think it's about wanting to create an economy around the work? This is what I've been thinking. Andrea plays on this dual sense of investment. I'm sure we're willing to make the intellectual investment in the work, but she's insisting on the other kind of investment. In the Tate talk, she went into feelings of shame attached to *Untitled*, particularly in the way it couldn't achieve the same kind of economic value as her painter friends' work. No matter how much personal sacrifice she made for the work, she could still never reap the same rewards. I don't know, I was just thinking about it in those terms.

KF: These are all interventions in the public sphere. They are all ways of defining the public sphere and engaging in a set of relations. Is there an inconsistency between Andrea's psychoanalytic reading of Bourdieu, and the conceptual thinking behind her decision not to give us access to her work?

A: Maybe it's also about intervening into this situation here, which is about her as a potential site for work. Maybe not a work with a title, but a site or a position. The supposed generosity of us investing intellectually in her work as a group might be interpreted as beneficial because we're at an educational establishment. Maybe she's trying to intervene in that with a different kind of gesture, one that we wouldn't expect.

BF: The withholding you mean?

A: I don't know what that produces, but maybe it's worth considering.

BF: We're sensing some resistance, Andrea, let's work through that. [laughter]

PM: I'm wondering since she's also an academic, by withholding, is she making us hyperconscious of the privilege this discussion has over the work itself? Is it the facilitating factor for this conversation, rather than existing as an entity in and of itself?

KF: Or is she saying her time is more valuable than ours?

JG: If she isn't letting us have the videos for economic reasons, that seems consistent with her work. I agree that artists are often taken advantage of by institutions, but it doesn't sound like that's where Andrea's taking issue. It sounds like she doesn't want *Projection* to be seen outside of an installation context.

BF: There are multiple issues here. One is the question of financial value and whether that is really something she believes in, but also the question of ownership, authorship, and control. Who does art really belong to? Is it the possession of the artist?

Someone may own it as a commodity, but should artists have control over their product? On the other hand, art is this intersubjective site of social production, so why should the artist get to be the entrepreneur, the owner of the process?

JS: I agree that there are contradictions at stake with these questions, but I wonder if there is any such thing as consistency between a political position or perspective and an approach to being an artist participating in the art world. I think that it's a struggle to be an artist, to survive as an artist, to create any kind of economy around your life as an artist. Andrea Fraser is a teacher and all this other stuff...

KF: True, although speaking also from the security of an academic position, Andrea is not one of the artists I necessarily worry about in those terms... Perhaps it has to do with differing levels of "investment" of acceptance of academia as a platform for knowledge production...

A: Maybe it's not about the person's struggle. Maybe there is a consistency, in fact, in making any situation reflexive. I mean she's not letting us get away thinking we're on the right side here.

JF: I don't think we can underestimate self-editing. I've been thinking about self-editing because I'm currently writing about someone destroying his work of the 1940s as he enters the 60s and 70s. Separately, Chris Dercon and Andrea get into it at the Tate—in their taped conversation. He's calling her out saying she is inconsistent, and she replies that he's right—that she is inconsistent. She's been getting it here from us too—what she hasn't done, what she's not doing, how she's letting us all down, etc. Maybe we can just put it out there and then move on!

A: When I heard that she refused, I also felt really pissed off, and then I started thinking why is she doing this. ... But what I mean is, why turn this into an issue about her personality...it's not an interesting way of dealing with it. Why do we need her to be generous? Why do we need that?

BF: But we're not necessarily doing that, and she's doing that as an artist. She's willfully blurred those categories quite a bit.

PM: But it is also ascribing a lot of intentionality to one act. Maybe she just got up and was like "No." Today I'm gonna say no. [laughter]. Not to be dismissive, but maybe she just had low blood sugar or something. In the realm of inconsistencies, that's how inconsistencies happen, by being very human.

JF: Yeah, very human.

JS: I have two conflicting feelings about this: on the one hand, for me a really important part of this group is to give ourselves permission to think about Andrea as an artist and think about the formal components of her work, and not to rely on the text. And in this instance, she's basically telling us to go to secondary material, where actually the work comes off as hyper intentional and determined. In

my experiences of seeing Andrea's work in person, a sense of vulnerability seems to be such a crucial ingredient. By going to the secondary material, that vulnerability is withheld.

PM: We can't dismiss the idea that her refusal is a performative gesture. This is where we enter into a negotiation with her, which is such an essential element of her work.

JG: So much of her work is scripted. She obviously wants to have control over the situation.

KF: I suppose by joining this group, I assumed I was entering into some kind of informal agreement with Andrea. What is considered reasonable or equitable under these circumstances? The nature of the relationship between artists and curators, artists and critics, is never really vetted. It also calls attention to the question of access. Who gets access to what artworks, limited-edition DVDs ... what is the balance between artists "trying to make a living" and work only being seen by those who can travel to select exhibitions or art fairs or, of course, who have the means to buy it for themselves.

JS: These are pertinent questions, and it's our responsibility as an institution and as a group to engage in this discussion. I think it's important to state that although we did get a "no" in this instance, Andrea has in fact been extremely supportive and collegiate, and our exchanges are not at all antagonistic.

KF: I also think there are many instances where institutions completely exploit artists and writers. What was appealing to me about this format was that it was about sharing knowledge locally. None of us participants are being paid or compensated in any way—though you do feed us potato chips and the occasional beer. For me, this loose format foregrounds creative exchange and sharing ideas; there has to be a certain generosity in the spirit of us coming together. If not us, then in what other intellectual and professional contexts would one be granted the privilege to view original work?

BF: I like that those issues are coming up and that there is a prismatic effect. Who knows whether she's scripting this; she didn't script what we're talking about, but I imagine it's somewhere in between. I like that it's an opportunity not just to look at Andrea's work, but to look at relationships between institutions, or between figures at different sites in the production not just of art, but art discourse. I was cracking up when Wattis staff described her communication because it becomes almost some weird artwork that's a description of "a communiqué from Andrea Fraser," and it's this affective object that you're mediating.

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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.