Giving the Past Presence: Andrea Fraser's *Not just a few of us* (2014)

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An authoritative female voice with a thick New Orleans accent stuns the packed auditorium into silence. It is the opening weekend of Prospect.3, New Orleans' biennial of contemporary art, and Andrea Fraser's hour-long performance *Not just a few of us* (2014) at the New Orleans Museum of Art immediately commands an audience that includes curators and critics who have jetted in from New York and Los Angeles. Dressed in a black blazer and pants, Fraser acts out nineteen different roles captured in a recording of a 1991 New Orleans City Council hearing on a proposed ordinance to desegregate Mardi Gras krewes. The ordinance passed unanimously, but the systemic racism revealed behind closed doors is shameful. The heated discussion, which represents only a fraction of the eight-hour hearing, is fueled by discriminatory viewpoints disguised as economic concerns. The argument that Mardi Gras will collapse if krewes are forced to end discrimination, resulting in a huge loss of financial support for the city, is not only spurious but also overlooks the lack of funds diverted to African American communities.

Perhaps the most distressing realization though is how the topic is as relevant today as it was in 1991. Michael Brown and Eric Garner have been killed by police in the last four months, and racism is at the forefront of American minds. By exposing a new audience to a conversation that helped shape contemporary New Orleans, Fraser sets the tone for a biennial that seeks to engage with the city's complex recent history and its impact on the present. Historical reenactment is au courant among politically minded artists, but it is not without its shortcomings, which *Not just a few of us* takes care to avoid. Operating within the histories of theater, performance art, and site-specificity, the mesmerizing work is undoubtedly germane, but can it also be transformative?

In the past two decades, many artists have turned toward historical reenactment in service of making sense of the present through the past. In the catalogue accompanying the 2005 exhibition *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* at Rotterdam's Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Sven Lütticken draws a lineage from appropriation art to historical reenactment in contemporary art, noting their shared effort to "generate difference from extremely literal repetition . . . pushed to an extreme to show how the de- and re- contextualization of a seemingly unchanged image is able to effect a profound change."[1] Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), a restaging of a violent struggle during a mining strike in Britain, is often cited as an exemplary work in the fledgling genre. However, in her trenchant book on participatory art *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop criticizes the project for reopening a wound rather than healing it.[2] Mark Tribe commissioned actors to perform seminal speeches from the Civil Rights and New Left Movements at their original sites in *Port Huron Project* (2006-2009), and the endeavor willfully lives on through performance documentation available on a website. While praised by many for reinvigorating the reform spirit of the 1960s and 1970s, academics such as Paige Sarlin and Julia Bryan-Wilson have criticized it as nostalgic and ineffectual.[3] *Not just a few of us* differs from the two aforementioned examples in its verbatim adherence to a moment in history that has not been canonized (at least outside its immediate locale). Its potency derives not from a visual spectacle or from an appeal to collective memory, but instead from a visceral affect drawn from performance itself; Fraser is informed by her own experience of using her body as a tool to instigate change.

History has a complicated relationship to the present in capitalist culture, and performance art—and specifically the use of the body—has become the most authentic medium for reproducing the past. *Not just a few of us* is firmly rooted in a consumerist environment, with one dissenter to the anti-discrimination ordinance claiming that "Mardi Gras generates over 400 million dollars of economic activity" and "we should not kill Mardi Gras." A city councilman then takes the commitment to capitalism a step further by concluding that "If we tamper with legislating socio-economics, we have become a socialistic county and we are founded as a democratic capitalistic society." This appeal to consumer culture apparent in the script itself is counteracted by the means of expression employed by Fraser.

Andrea Fraser, *Not just a few of us*, 2014. Performance at the New Orleans Museum of Art, October 25, 2014, as part of Prospect.3: Notes for Now. Courtesy: Andrea Fraser and Galerie Nagel Draxler

The concept of contemporary art, and more specifically performance art, as an antidote to capitalism is well-theorized, and *Not just a few of us* fits neatly into this trajectory. In his essay *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art*, Dieter Roelstraete laments current culture's obsession with the New and the Now, but finds redemption in art, which "is there to 'remember' when all else urges us to 'forget' and simply look forward—primarily to new products and consumerist fantasies—or, worse still, inward."[4] Performance art arose in defiance of capitalism, working with the one medium that has not yet been commodified: the body.[5] As Jennifer Allen notes, "While a reenactment may depend on historical documents and artifacts… the body remains the vehicle that can carry the past into the present, that can give the past presence."[6] Erin Hurley and Sara Warner have argued that time-based performing arts have the most affective power of any cultural form, due in part to the bodily and sensorial entanglement inherent in performance.[7] Fraser's work has always

relied on her own physicality as an instrument of transformation, and in *Not just a few of us*, her ability to embody a host of different characters without a change of actors or even costume reveals a rejection of superficial tropes in favor of a deeper engagement with the content itself. Fraser's oeuvre is intimately connected to Conceptual art, and much of her work focuses on the primacy of the body over visual spectacle. With *Not just a few of us*, she continues a conscious shift in her practice and rhetoric over the past few years away from critiquing the art world and misogyny, a reaction to the bastardization of the term "institutional critique." Instead she uses her spartan style to emphasize the impassioned opinions expressed at the hearing.

"Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Curator Franklin Sirmans asks in his introductory text for Prospect.3 (sentences borrowed from the title of an 1898 Gauguin painting). Fraser answers these questions literally, speaking as nineteen individuals—from a white Republican councilman to an African American NAACP chapter president—who occupied positions in very recent New Orleans history. Performance documentation is sometimes criticized as a betrayal of the authentic unmediated event, and part of the power of *Not just a few of us* derives from its existence as part of this biennial at this specific site. Because of Fraser's proprietary hold on documentation of her work, it is unlikely that an audience outside of the 500 plus attendees of her two performances at Prospect.3[8] will ever see the video recording of this work. Unlike *Port Huron Project*, which manifests most significantly as a teaching tool through videos and a website, *Not just a few of us* occupies a unique moment in time and space.

Not just a few of us marks a return to a more theatrical mode of expression for Fraser that is highly effective. Her excellent acting skills and inimitable physical presence remind the audience why theater continues to thrive even in today's media-saturated culture. Her adroit manipulation of historical documentation by means of her own body has an immediate impact. Far from seeming regressive, the subject matter keeps *Not just a few of us* relevant. As the Black Lives Matter movement burgeons, the piece reminds us of the systemic racism of our collective past. Fraser's work has never been deliberately didactic, like that of her contemporaries Mark Tribe or Tania Bruguera, and yet her work is undoubtedly political. Moving her attention from Institutional Critique to a broader condemnation of social ills, Fraser is able to both engage with local history and an international art audience, the formidable goal of many a biennial artist. Outside the context of Prospect.3, however, the lasting impact of the performance remains to be seen, and perhaps that is perfectly fine by Fraser.

[1] Sven Lütticken, ed., *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005), 59.
[2] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 32.
[3] See Paige Sarlin, "New Left-Wing Melancholy: Mark Tribe's 'The Port Huron Project' and the Politics of Reenactment," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 50, No. 1 & 2 (2009), 139-157; and Julia Bryan Wilson, "Sounding the Fury: Kirsten Forkert and Mark Tribe," Artforum International, Vol. 45, No. 5 (January 2008), 95.
[4] Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux journal*, no. 4 (March 2009), at: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/
[5] Ironically, Fraser's *Untitled* (2003)—an editioned video of Fraser engaging in a sexual act with a collector for an undisclosed sum of money—is one of the few exceptions.
[6] Jennifer Allen, "'Einmal ist keinmal' Observations on Reenactment" in *Life, Once More*, 181.
[7] Erin Hurley and Sara Warner, "Special Section: Affect, Performance, Politics," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2012), 99-107.
[8] The performance was reprised on January 21, 2015.

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