

## **"What do we want from art, anyway? A conversation"**

**Gregg Bordowitz and Andrea Fraser**

*The following text developed as an email correspondence following the opening of Andrea Fraser's exhibitions "Um Monumento às Fantasias Descartadas" (A Monument to Discarded Fantasies/Costumes) at American Fine Arts, Co., and "Untitled" at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, both in New York City, in June 2004. Much of the conversation revolves around Fraser's Untitled (2003), a project initiated in the winter of 2002 when the artist asked Friedrich Petzel Gallery to arrange a commission with a private collector that involved a sexual encounter documented on videotape. The resulting videotape was being presented in New York for the first time.*

**Gregg Bordowitz:** Considering your recent work, I've been thinking about the role of repetition and return in psychic economies, as well as their function in current capitalist modes of production. The use of nudity in your recent performances does not seem sensational. It doesn't seem to me that you are trying to be scandalous or controversial through the use of your own naked body. In fact, as has been noted by yourself and others, the use of your own naked body refers to past feminist artists and their preoccupation with the female figure in the history of art. Further, the identification of the artist with the figure of the prostitute that occurs in *Untitled*, similarly refers to an ongoing and time-honored association between the artist and the whore that goes all the way back to Baudelaire. I understand these moves in your work as repetitions arising out of the continuing impasse we still face within modern art—the failure of the artist as laborer to be self-determining. As artists we continue to be alienated from our labor; our work, our art continues to be captured from our intentions. Our artistic labor is used to make profits for others in a system largely hostile to creativity; a system which institutes conformity by reducing the meaning of our work and the products of our labor to exchange value—the equivalent value of countless products in a vast market.

Even my description of the market can't avoid repetition and cliché. That the evils of capitalism can only be described as a set of asked-and-answered-questions is not necessarily a flaw of Marxist analysis. Rather, the "boring" nature of the analysis shows the intractable, endlessly adaptive nature of capitalism and its ability to absorb any critique.

**Andrea Fraser:** One thing I've found particularly symptomatic in the reception of *Untitled* is the insistent interest in the question, *how much?* I answer that the *specific* amount is not part of the piece and is not being disclosed. To which a number of people, most recently a stranger at party, have responded, "Well, I hope it was a lot!" A lot? Is that to suggest that I should be worth "a lot"? Or that it was a sacrifice I should only have made for "a lot"? Do they realize what they're suggesting? That there might be a price, a "fair" or "fairer" price? For what? For me? For my body? For my love? Is that what they think I was selling? If so, what would a "fair" price be?

The hole left by the absence of a precise figure has gotten filled up with hearsay. Someone at *The Daily News* published the number \$20,000 in a gossip column. Since then

it's been repeated and repeated with no regard for truth, even in *The New York Times Magazine*. So \$20,000 it's become—even though in reality it was quite a bit less.

Is \$20,000 "a lot"? Too much? Not enough? According to what economic theory? Is there a "fair" price that could be calculated from production costs plus the market value of my labor? According to what market? Or the cost of reproducing that labor? According to what standard of living? Or according to a market demand? For what product? Relative to supply? Offered on the basis of what rational choice? Or desperation? Arising from what kind of need?



*Andrea Fraser, video still from Untitled, 2003, project and DVD, 60 minutes.  
Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery*

This is the crux of the issue in so many ways.

One reason I've refused to disclose the price is precisely because it *is* absolutely arbitrary with respect to what took place between the collector and myself in the hotel room. In terms of that encounter, it has a purely symbolic function. The amount was not set as a "price" for sex with me. It was set according to what the dealer who brokered the commission thought a single-channel videotape by Andrea Fraser produced in an edition of five would be worth at that time—irrespective of content. It was for the first exemplar of

that edition that the participating collector was billed. The real question is: is that amount any less arbitrary than if it were a price put on my body for a night? Is it any less alienating? Or any less reifying? Is it any less exploitative in its insufficiency—or scandalous in its excess? And am I any less mercenary to accept it for an artwork? On the contrary, I would say I am more so.

The fact is, we are always selling ourselves—whenever we work for pay. Artists are sometimes considered exempt from the alienation entailed by the commodification of labor because of the control we have over our production. The personal investment we make in our labor is rewarded by the privilege of being recognized and recognizing ourselves in and through its products. However, to the extent that those products themselves circulate as commodities, prostitution has also been evoked as a metaphor for the sale of something as personal and dear as art should be for artists: parts of ourselves, our creations, our children, our labors of love.

Selling art has always been objectionable to me. Between 1994 and 2002 the only salable artworks I produced were unlimited-edition performance-based videotapes that I distributed myself. My experience with *Untitled* was that the symbolic character of the exchange with the participating collector actually transformed aspects of selling art that have been so problematic for me in the past. What I was doing in the hotel room was not selling myself but producing an artwork that I own. In that encounter, the participating collector was less a buyer or a john than a collaborator without whom that work could not have been made. He contributed not only by entering into an economic but also an interpersonal and a physical exchange, and finally, by performing in front of the camera himself, along with me. I've said that what he paid for the DVD was a lot more than money. He paid with his body just as I did. He paid by taking a huge personal risk. The level of exposure involved in doing this work has been terrifying for me at times. My life is built for these kinds of risks. His is not.

Selling the other four DVDs to people or institutions who did not participate in their production remains much more problematic for me. They are the ones who will *only* be paying money for it and, with only that, take ownership of a very intimate part of me (and the participating collector as well). It will exist for them as a simple commodity, to be bought with no more than an economic risk and potentially sold at a profit in which I will have no share. For me, the "complete legal and unalterable possession" (as Barnett Newman once called it) that commodity ownership entails is much more alienating than any aspect of my encounter with the participating collector. The fact that the DVDs will increase in value immediately for buyers by virtue of their own purchase, and that this and all future appreciation is lost to me—along with the 50% taken by the dealer—is much more exploitative.

What makes it exploitative, however, is not the idea that there might be a "fairer" price for my labor or my artwork. What makes it exploitative is the fact that others have the potential to profit more from my labor than I do myself and that this potential derives from their capacity for capital investment. I don't believe that there is any such thing as a "fair" price. As soon as one begins to think about compensation in relative, comparative, competitive terms—"fair" or "unfair," "a lot" versus "not enough"—one accepts a market logic. In accepting a market logic, one also accepts the reduction of one's labor and its products to commodity status within that market. And one also accepts the legitimacy of

that market to determine their value. But markets are never "fair": someone always gains and someone always loses.

**GB:** The nature of the "calculations" you describe above regarding the amount paid for the work involves many more factors than a simple economic—or monetary—formula. To understand all that's at stake in these calculations we must consider other factors: the emotions, affects, feelings and sensations produced by the work and in the work. What's at stake in the exchange? What's placed at risk is the desire for recognition, a fundamental human need; as well as the pleasure in creativity. Your approach to these aspects in *Untitled* makes them nakedly apparent as the substance of the work. Why was it important for you to be in that hotel room with the collector? You could have hired someone else to perform your role demonstrating the same principles. You could have further complicated the work by situating yourself as an artist/contractor, farming out your labor to a "specialist," as so many other artists do in their work. It is significant that you chose to perform the role yourself—it ties the work to all your previous work.



*Andrea Fraser, video still from Soldadera (Scenes from Un Banquete en Tetlapayac, a Film by Olivier Debroise), 1998/2001, two-channel video installation, 5 minute loop. Courtesy American Fine Arts, Co.*

**AF:** You're absolutely right. What constitutes *Untitled* in my mind is the confrontation of these conditions of economic exchange—which are absolutely generalizable given the extension of a market logic into ever more realms of public and private life—with an interpersonal exchange that I do believe resists and transforms those economic conditions. When I first thought of *Untitled* I imagined the documentation as a kind of Douglas Huebler contract piece. But then I realized that as a conceptual work, *Untitled* would be more easily



*Andrea Fraser, production still from Exhibition, 2002, one- and two-channel video installation, 20 minute loop. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery.*

reduced to a yet another cynical extension of commodification—disguised, perhaps, as a "critical literalization" of an old metaphor. What did Carl Andre once write about "conceptualizing ink-pissers" who claimed to be antibourgeois by doing away with objects, only to replace them with even more extreme reifications of abstract relations of production, like stock shares and contracts? In the end I decided against any kind of contract at all. I didn't even ask the collector to sign a release. I see that as an ethical and political as well as an artistic decision. I do not want to be exploited, but I also don't simply want to turn the tables and make a work at the expense of someone who might be more powerful than myself. If we want to reject the reduction of freedom to economic and legal privilege, then we have to take the personal risk of leaving the protection of those privileges behind. The exchange in *Untitled* remained very much in the realm of trust. We were strangers to each other. He had to trust me, as an artist, with very intimate material. I had to trust him to provide consent to my use of it. But even more importantly, of course, as with any sexual encounter, we had to trust each other with our bodies and whatever feelings might emerge with intimacy. I think that dimension of the encounter is conveyed in the video—and that's another reason it's so important that *Untitled* is not represented as a contract in the



*Andrea Fraser, Official Welcome, stills from video documentation of performance at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, September 2003. Commissioned by and first performed at The MICA Foundation, New York, November 2001. Courtesy Andrea Fraser and American Fine Arts, Co.*

tradition of Conceptualism, or something "farmed out" in the tradition of Minimalism. Without that affective dimension, without that confrontation between economic and human exchange, *Untitled* could be just another extension of market rule.

You and I were together at a conference about performance in Vienna last September. You presented a paper about affect theory and I presented a video of my performance *Official Welcome*, in which I weep. Our presentations went together very well, especially perhaps because when I went back up to the podium after the screening I actually was weeping. It made for a very interesting discussion. *Official Welcome*, like *Untitled*, is partly about performing the structure of relationships within the art field. Someone in the audience asked me whether or not *Official Welcome* performed that structure as stable, and, if so, how would those relationships be transformed. At that moment—because of your paper, I think—it occurred to me that the destabilizing potential of *Official Welcome* might lay precisely in affect, in the excess of affect as well as in what may be excessive about affect itself. That is, that what we want and what we feel is not contained within the structures of economic exchange, or within institutionalized structures of recognition, or by the rewards and forms of satisfaction we are offered in our field. And those affects, those feelings, are destabilizing: like weeping at a podium, they disrupt our ability to simply perform our roles and fulfill our functions within those structures. I still think that the role of art is like that of psychoanalysis: it's about bringing us to the question of what we want. And one of the ways it does that is through the release of affect that's gotten displaced, misplaced, alienated, and bound up with things it doesn't really have anything to do with. I mean, what do we want from art anyway?

**GB:** Psychoanalytic theory gives us many ways to approach your work. *Official Welcome* builds toward a point of tension where it is necessary for you to remove your clothes. You strip in a way that seems completely unaware and incongruous with the speech you continue to recite. Why do you have to get naked? It seems to me that, as a woman artist, you continue to face the masculinist prejudices of the art world despite the gains of feminism. Patriarchy remains intact. All systems of differentiation and evaluation—market values, creative capital, social hierarchies etc.—are determined ultimately by gender difference and object choice. I see this realization enacted and embodied specifically in *Official Welcome*.

An unresolved tension animates your performances. Looking back at your work now, it seems that you have cycled through all the tactics available to creative practice in the 20th century: irony, mimesis, collage, scientific method, withdrawal from 19th century notions of "aesthetics" (that lingered long into the twentieth century). In your most recent works you inhabit the form of the revolutionary (*Soldadera*). You perform the role of entertainer (as a samba dancer in *Exhibition*); the role of the viewer (*Little Frank and His Carp*). You use your own body, emptied of unique substance, to showcase the affects and emotions of art world figures in general (*Official Welcome*). Finally in *Untitled*, you take on the role of prostitute.

In this accumulation of poses, affects and tactics you are trying to capture in a single practice all the feints and gestures of the historical avant-garde. Ultimately, through your work and its accumulations, we are led to contemplate the figure of the artist arrested in the face of seemingly irresolvable problems: the alienation and instrumentalization of artists instituted by structures that do not have our interests (our desires) in mind. So, it's interesting that your most recent work takes the form of a sexual encounter. Where else

does repetition, return, the constancy of pleasure and the desire for release play itself out more dramatically than during sex? Further, *Untitled* is silent. In this piece you chose to withdraw all speech.



*Andrea Fraser, Official Welcome, stills from video documentation of performance at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, September 2003. Commissioned by and first performed at The MICA Foundation, New York, November 2001. Courtesy Andrea Fraser and American Fine Arts, Co.*

These gestures and their possible motivations I've just described seem somewhat unconscious on your part. (Indeed my lengthy description above may reveal more about my own unconscious.) What is the role of the unconscious in institutional critique? Institutional critique is often predicated on the presentation of a rational and fully conscious analysis. Can one perform the analysis of institutional critique and include along side that analysis psychically risky acts that one can't fully control? Acts that exceed language? Can one approach the non-rational within institutional critique without undoing the critique? I think you can. You demonstrate this in your work.

**AF:** I actually think what I'm trying to do would more accurately be called institutional analysis than institutional critique. The latter emerged from and in many ways remained rooted in a Marxist tradition of ideology critique, whereas I have been more influenced by psychoanalysis in my approach, if not always in the content of my work, which has often been more sociological. There have been any number of attempts in the 20th century to integrate Marxist critique and Freudian analysis, and it may be that my approach is simply a repetition of one of these. I'm not competent to rehearse that history or try to distinguish myself within it. Artists reserve for themselves the right to rediscover the world, including the world of thought, and to see that world as their own creation. Sometimes we actually do manage to create something new. Very often we do just reproduce and repeat, in our own ways, and that may be one aspect of the kind of repetition you've been referring to.

In psychoanalytic terms, that artistic privilege of reinventing the world could be connected to the way children preserve an infantile sense of omnipotent control (how they imagine their relationship to an environment that seems to spontaneously satisfy all their needs) by "inventing" found objects as their own. We could be talking about the ready-made, but isn't that what the field of art as a whole also promises? The capacity to create and control the world according to our own desires? But it's a promise that can only be made good within the boundaries of the specific history and institutional structures of the field. So, the omnipotence (and freedom, or access to instinctual satisfaction, as well as "originality," but that's an old debate) that we perform and represent as artists is not really ours at all. Could it ever be? An undialectical approach might be to proclaim, Artists against institutions! Reintegrate art into everyday life! Total freedom or bust! Autonomy or death! Such demands are also part of the tradition of institutional critique and in them it can be recognized as a kind of last-gasp of the neo-avant-garde: an attempt to rationalize and systematize, via political and social theory, the defense of what could actually be considered a deeply irrational fantasy of artistic omnipotence.

Bourdieu's analysis of the artistic field convinced me of the fallacy of any attempt to think of art outside of or opposed to its institutions. The institution of art is not a kind of establishment or a fixed structure: it's a field made up of a dynamically structured and always changing set of individual and organizational agents, discourses, practices, values, interests, histories, myths, representations, dispositions, competencies, etc. etc., of which art and artists are a, if not *the*, constitutive part. Sure, we can exist outside of the field of art, but not as artists. The moment we are recognized as artists, the moment our products and practices are recognized as art, we are within the field. We may transform what it means to be art or artists, but in doing so we expand the field, increasing its reach and power. I take this as an absolutely immutable law. What we are left with is always only a relative autonomy, a relative freedom, and a relative creativity. (This doesn't mean that we shouldn't defend the autonomy and freedom we have, but that's another discussion.)

Where does all this leave institutional critique? For me, institutional critique is defined not by its object (art, art institutions) but by a procedure of critical and site-specific reflexivity. I often say that if I've made work about museums, it's not because I find museums particularly interesting—I don't—but because that's where I end up. By the time I came across Bourdieu's theory of reflexive sociology, my approach was already largely formed by structuralist and feminist readings of Freud, particularly the practice that one could say *is* psychoanalysis: the analysis of transference. "No one can be slain in effigy or in absentia," Freud wrote in one of his papers on transference, meaning: one can only

transform relationships in their enactment. The tricky part is that this always also means, *in one's own participation in their enactment*, their reproduction and their repetition. And this always also means taking into account how one's own interests and desires are invested in those relationships and their reproduction. This has an ethical dimension for me, but it's also quite practical: there is no other way to effect change.

But are those desire and interests "unconscious"? We could call all kinds of determining structures and forces "unconscious" to the extent that we can't consciously control them and are often unaware of them. This is one of the ways the notion of the unconscious has been taken up within Marxist thought—that is, in its adjectival form—and it would be fairly easy to square such usage with institutional critique. But it's a different story when it comes to a substantive notion of "the unconscious," the noun, Freud's radically unknowable repository of repressed memories, fantasies, and wishes that are fundamentally sexual in nature.



*Andrea Fraser, Official Welcome, stills from video documentation of performance at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, September 2003. Commissioned by and first performed at The MICA Foundation, New York, November 2001. Courtesy Andrea Fraser and American Fine Arts, Co.*

I don't know where to begin to think about the role of this unconscious in institutional critique. One might consider *Untitled* as a kind of return-of-the-repressed, as if the unconscious of the art world is dominated by a fantasy of sex between artists and collectors. That may very well be, but I would be embarrassed by the literalness of such an interpretation, since the sexual intercourse performed in *Untitled* would serve only as a very poor metaphor for range of sexual investments at stake in the field of art.

I would see the role of the unconscious for institutional critique more dynamically. I've believed in this unconscious for a long time, but only recently, since I started an analysis, do I feel that I've really has an experience of it. That experience has convinced me that believing in the unconscious, knowing something about it theoretically, rehearsing its mechanisms, doesn't help you one bit. You can only know about it from it's effects. It's like someone who sneaks up behind you shouts into your ear and makes you laugh suddenly, or brings you pain, and then disappears again. It's an eruption of completely unexpected understanding. I do think that's how a "critique" or "critical intervention" should work. That's the kind of laughter I've striven for in my work and it would also describe the effect I hope to produce with *Untitled*. But I can't project what kind of understanding it might be. That's how *Untitled* may differ most from all of my other work. I've always believed that artists have a responsibility to anticipate and try to control the meanings that get made from their work. With *Untitled*, I had to accept from the start that I wouldn't be able to control it's meaning, in part because when I started I wasn't sure what it would mean. I still can't say that I know. Is that the kind of risk you're referring to? A few years ago I would have considered that irresponsible. How can we take responsibility for desires and interests we can't control and aren't fully conscious of? That may be one of the greatest challenges posed by the existence of the unconscious.

**Gregg Bordowitz** is an artist and writer living in Chicago where he is an associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Film/Video/New Media Department. His forthcoming book, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003*, will be released by MIT Press in Fall 2004.

**Andrea Fraser** is an artist living in New York. *Andrea Fraser, Works: 1984-2003*, a retrospective organized by the Kunstverein in Hamburg in the fall of 2003, is currently on view at the Dunkers Kulturhus in Helsingborg, Sweden. An accompanying German/English catalog of the same name documenting her work to date is available from Dumont and DAP. *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, will be released by MIT Press in Winter 2004/5.