

Funny Lady
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Andrea Fraser is funny.

Over her 25-year career, Andrea Fraser has created performances that veer from the satirical (*Museum Highlights*, 1989) and parodic (*Art Must Hang*, 2001) to the notoriously absurd (*Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001) and absurdly notorious (*Untitled*, 2003). In an interview from 2012, Fraser rejected the mantle of the entertainer and yet clearly embraced the strategy of comedy.¹ Entertainment is a mere diversion—a looking *at* that means looking *away* from some other important things—while comedy demands audience commitment and attention to its form and content. Furthermore, comedy, she explained, could be used to subvert norms and critique the status quo, and she cited her own low-turned-high influences—Berlin Dada and Warner Brother cartoons and Marx Brothers movies—and the generation of performance artists that crossed boundaries in the 1980s, including Eric Bogosian, Ann Magnuson, Spalding Gray, and the NEA Four.² Without Fraser’s permission or benediction, I would add these names and Fraser’s to a longer lineage of modernist and post-modernist agitators reliably noted in Western art histories: the roster starts with Marcel Duchamp and extends to include Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, the Situationists, Yayoi Kusama, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Adrian Piper, Howardena Pindell, David Hammons, the Guerrilla Girls, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and William Pope.L. The common thread among all these comic practices is the *épater le bourgeois* spirit and the poke in the eye intent toward institutions, attitudes ardently communicated through wisecracking bodies.

Funny is always peculiarly funny with Fraser. She is not a stand-up. Appropriate to her own claim about the institutionalization of institutional critique, the jokes in her work are grounded in shared knowledge among the insiders that are “us.”³ Even when she’s on a stage and in front of larger than exhibition-opening reception crowds, Fraser closes the distance between herself and those who are present. In much of the photo and video documentation of her performances, the camera provides looks at audiences, which seem to be following along and enjoying Fraser’s shtick. Well prepared to be ribbed, the gathered still chuckle and chortle (at least a little bit). *Agent-provocateur* is a role below Fraser’s pay grade: mostly, she does expect us to sit there and take it, it being a heavy dose of inveighing. Now, in 2015, we are aware (as Fraser is) that her bits won’t turn us resolutely against the museum, the art star system, and the spectacle of contemporary art markets and their inequities. So, what does Andrea Fraser really want?

Andrea Fraser is serious.

Some of Fraser’s recent projects (and some of her earliest) indicate that her institutional critique is not singularly “about” art.⁴ Fraser would be hard-pressed to deny the charge of her detractors that she is presenting information.⁵ To what end? In character

and outside of it, Fraser comes across as a know-it-all, a persona who often draws an especially pointed ire when located in a self-possessed female body. So her portrayal of men in *Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism*, KPFK, 1972 (2012), a work that she reprised at the Brava Theater in San Francisco on October 30, 2015, is a clever move that does not shift our attention away from her sex and gender. Instead, it underscores our predictable fixation upon those axes of identity. Because Fraser does not, mockingly, don a full drag king-like costume (à la Eleanor Antin) for *Men on the Line*, the performance has a better chance of indexically revealing its inspiration: a public radio station’s broadcast from 1972 made for listeners, made to be heard. Fraser’s research into and transcription of the show’s audio track are important aspects of her creative labor; another is the representation of a self-conscious, on-air rap session among four men discussing their feminist politics.



Andrea Fraser, *Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism*, KPFK, 1972, 2012. Performance at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy, January 23, 2012, as part of Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival, sponsored by the Getty Museum and LA<ART. Courtesy: Andrea Fraser and Galerie Nagel Draxler

What daylight is there between *Men on the Line* and Anna Deavere Smith’s signature productions, say, the interactive project of *Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education—The California Chapter* (2015) on the American school-to-prison pipeline? Both are scripted texts taken from “life.” Neither is improv, nor would either artist see the works as social practice. The distinction is drawn because of the different discursive frames of entertainment in which *Men on the Line* and *Notes from the Field* resides. Smith’s work is acting and Fraser’s is avowedly not. In *Men on the Line*, Fraser gives us speakers who are trying to work something out and who are not held up for ridicule. While it would be easy to present the conversation in *Men on the Line* as a laughable relic of a bygone time and space—self-consciously liberal, white Los Angeles of the 1970s—Fraser strains to avoid that outcome. Instead, her intent in *Men on the Line* is to offer their process as a desirable model for investigation and analysis—individual and collective.⁶

In *Men on the Line*, as in *Not Just a Few of Us* (2014), Fraser steps away from identifiably funny business. The mined dialogue in these projects retains its authentic charge, and it can make us wince. After a reading about societally constructed gender roles, Fraser, in the character of Bob Kruger in *Men on the Line*, confesses: “I felt very guilty about my penis. . . . I want to rebel. I could be one of those radical female feminists that I spoke about, that I couldn’t—about earlier, that I couldn’t relate

to.”⁷ Fraser is interested in the uncomfortable and unresolved emotions evident in such statements, and in the generative potential of bringing narrative that is searching and anxious into art practice grounded in struggle and conflict. *Men on the Line* asks many implicit questions, among them: “What’s the right thing to do?” Fraser lets us know that there are no simple answers; there is only more work to do.

¹ Andrea Fraser in conversation with Judy Batalion, “High Time for Humor, in *The Laughing Stock*,” *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, ed. Judy Batalion (Anderson, South Carolina: Parlor Press, 2012), 271–78.

² On the artists called the NEA Four—Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller—see C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1993).

³ Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Institutional Critique and After*, volume 2 of the SoCCAS [Southern California Consortium of Art Schools] symposia, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP/Ringier), 131.

⁴ Fraser says as much in “What Is Institutional Critique,” in *Institutional*

Critique and After, 306.

⁵ James Meyer reports this charge in “The Strong and the Weak: Andrea Fraser and the Conceptual Legacy,” *Grey Room 17* (Fall 2004), 90.

⁶ In an interview from 2010, Fraser disavows critique: “fundamentally what’s productive in the practice of art and the art field is something I don’t want to call critique so much anymore. It’s a space of an ongoing investigation and reflexive analysis.” Patricia Maloney and Dena Beard, “Bad at Sports and Women in Performance Interview with Andrea Fraser, Part 2,” *Art Practical*, October 22, 2012: http://www.artpractical.com/column/interview_with_andrea_fraser_part_ii/

⁷ Fraser, *Men on the Line: Men Committed to Feminism*, KPFK, 1972, PDF typescript, n.p.

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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.