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Reflecting on Learning Processes

The Museumsakademie at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg and the work of Andrea Fraser

In this article we present and discuss the working process and the works-in-progress that resulted from a learning experiment as part of our seminar on “Cultural production in the context of contemporary art” (summer semester 2015). This seminar took place as part of the Museumsakademie, an initiative of the Museum der Moderne (MdM) in Salzburg.

Sabine Breitwieser, director of the museum, invited various art academies and universities in Austria and Germany to engage in the exhibition of Andrea Fraser’s work (March 21–July 5, 2015). The website states, “The Museum der Moderne Salzburg is the first institution in Austria to present a comprehensive survey of the work of the American artist Andrea Fraser (1965 Billings, Montana, lives in Los Angeles, USA). Her groundbreaking work has sparked several controversial debates and has made Fraser one of the most influential artists of her generation.” (Museum der Moderne website). Our article is based on a talk we gave at the Museumsakademie’s final symposium on June 13, 2015 at the Museum der Moderne where all nine participating groups, most from fine art academies, presented the projects they had developed.

We held a series of seven events within the MuseumsAkademie. Twenty-two students from the University of Salzburg and two from the Mozarteum University along with a few non-university visitors participated. The students came from various disciplines, most from communication studies but also from theology, European Union studies, art history, music and performance studies, history, art education, and voice studies. In contrast to an art academy, we work with students from various fields, which made it a so-called “wild mix” of sorts. For most students it was the first time that they reflected on the contemporary art field and on art practices. Consequently, we began by laying some groundwork and providing a theoretical base on the development of artistic practices since the 1960s. The general aim was to explore the issues of artistic practice and cultural production within Andrea Fraser’s exhibition by linking theory and practice. Our main aim as lecturers was to initiate processes of learning and reflection on issues of contemporary art, and also, through engaging with the work of Andrea Fraser, introducing the students to critical perspectives on the relationship between art, cultural production, institutions, and society.

The Museumsakademie

We therefore focused on the discussion and reflection of core themes connected to Andrea Fraser’s work, which we identified as:

- Artistic practice and cultural production
- Institutional critique
- Feminist performance art
- Art as a social field, as elaborated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu

For these core themes we researched and pulled together a pool of texts concerning important terms, such as context art and artistic institutional critique, but also texts

written by Andrea Fraser (e.g., “It’s Art when I say its art...”) and interviews with her. In the course of our sessions, the students worked in four groups and developed small experimental projects by starting from one of Andrea Fraser’s works and a corresponding core theme.

Structurally, we began with the artist Andrea Fraser and her work by visiting the exhibition opening and the artist talk the following day. In addition, we participated in an exhibition tour with the art mediation program. On April 30, we organized a symposium on “Artistic practice and institutional critique” with two invited speakers.

Our first guest was Carola Dertnig, a performance artist and professor for performance art at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna. She gave a lecture/performance on “Staging Archive / Staging History.” She spoke about her view of the history of performance art and presented the project *Let’s twist again: Performance in Wien from 1960 until today*, an anthology she published with Stephanie Seibold (2006). In this they undertook a non-linear cartography of historical and contemporary performance artists in Vienna. Finally, Carola Dertnig provided us with a few examples of feminist performances and concluded with a performance project of her own.

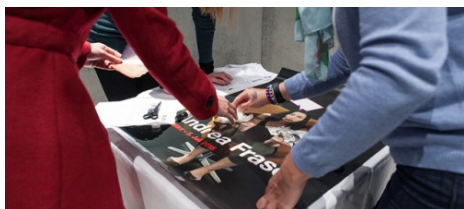
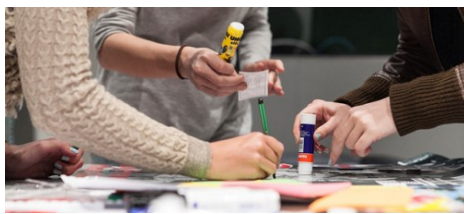
Our second guest was Luisa Ziaja. She is a curator at the 21er Haus / Museum of Contemporary Art in Vienna and co-director of the postgraduate course educating/curating/managing at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She talked about artistic institutional critique and the museum, and focused on potentials and contradictions of the difficult relationship between them. For example, she pointed out that the field is subjected to neoliberal tendencies that reinforce economic challenges and nowadays, institutional critique is part of the art historical canon. Luisa Ziaja showed examples of various artists in the field of institutional critique and how they use it as a method of self-reflection and transformation. Important questions she raised were: What role can the museum play in social processes? How can the museum be a space and a kind of laboratory, in which one can be active? Finally, she gave an overview of the exhibition she curated with C. Martinz-Turek *Have The Cake And Eat It, Too. Institutional critique as instituent practice* (2008, Kunsthalle Exnergasse Vienna).

In the afternoon we offered two parallel workshops, one by Luisa Ziaja: *Institutionskritik im Museum (Institutional critique in the museum)* and one by Elke Zobl: *Ein Experiment zur Institutionskritik (An experiment on institutional critique)*. In the workshop with Luisa Ziaja, participants visited and engaged with the exhibition of the Generali Foundation at the Museum der Moderne and asked if artistic institutional critique has left traces in the Museum.






Elke Zobl conducted the second workshop. Here, we started out with Andrea Fraser's work *Four Posters: Lake George* (1984), in which she takes posters that she bought at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art's museum shop and makes an artistic intervention, thereby dismantling the implicit assumptions of the collection. We paralleled her *Four Posters* work by buying posters from the Museum der Moderne's museum shop. We worked with them by reflecting on issues we had discussed that day. In the example you see here, the group wanted to explore the split personality of Andrea Fraser; torn between a critique of the museum or the art field and her concurrent attempt to be a recognized part of it.



In the next session our topic was the art field and distinction. Elisabeth Klaus introduced the students to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. We talked about the concepts of habitus, taste, and distinction; of the different forms of capital and of the social field and its illusion. In Bourdieu's theory, structure and individual are co-constituted. Social structure is not an outside force, but is within us, engrained in our opinions, values, and actions. We constitute the social field; we are the field. Bourdieu's writings, especially his *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (1984) deeply influenced Andrea Fraser. His work became a kind of "second language" for her. Pierre Bourdieu, for his part, spoke highly of the feminist artist. As Alexander Alberro, the editor of a collection of her writings has noted:

Andrea Fraser's work, writes Pierre Bourdieu in his foreword to *Museum Highlights*, is able to 'trigger a social mechanism, a sort of machine infernale whose operation causes the hidden truth of social reality to reveal itself.' It often does this by incorporating and inhabiting the social role it sets out to critique—as in a performance piece in which she leads a tour as a museum

docent and describes the men’s room in the same elevated language that she uses to describe seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Influenced by the interdisciplinarity of postmodernism, Fraser’s interventionist art draws on four primary artistic and intellectual frameworks—institutional critique, with its site-specific examination of cultural context; performance; feminism, with its investigation of identity formation; and Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology. (Alberro 2015, n.p.)  (*1)

Bourdieu also explored the artistic field in a number of his publications (for a summary, see Kastner 2009). It therefore seems that his work is ideally suited not only to shed a critical light on positions, roles, and judgments in the artistic field and the inequalities it is built upon and generates, but also to bridge the difficult divide between art and science.

In the afternoon and following the talk we held a workshop on “Institutionskritik im Bildungssystem und am Beispiel der Universität.” (Institutional critique in the educational system, based on the example of the university). In the workshop we focused on the field in which we work: the educational and academic realm. Linking the university to the analysis of Bourdieu, we asked: How is education linked to academic institutions and who defines it? Who is a part of it and who is excluded? Who are the players and contestants in the field, what are the rules by which the hierarchies are determined and power is established? Inspired by a vivid discussion, the participants created three posters.



Developing experimental projects by students

Throughout the course we linked Andrea Fraser’s writings and the work shown in the exhibition to the students’ experiences and reflections. The students chose one of Andrea Fraser’s works for closer analysis, reflected on it within the context of a core theme and developed a project from their investigations. Our aim was to initiate a learning process and motivate students to pose their own questions and reflect on the boundaries of naturalized knowledge production and the possibilities of dismantling them.

Group “4 Posters” - Institutional critique: Stephanie Müllers, Stefanie Kern, Lisa Sommer, Elena Schuhmacher, Nina Druckenthaner, Marie-Therese Huemer

Zum Text: Nina Druckenthaner: Four Posters

This group reflected on the work 4 posters in the context of institutional critique. They focused on the university and a selection of posters and PR material from the university. Through interventions, they attempted to reveal the underlying assumptions made about the fields exemplified in the posters. For example, a poster for the career fair was contrasted with data on unemployment among academics. Also, the same poster showed a figure making a series of jumps, presumably on his or her career path. The group concealed the last jump by mounting a whirlwind above it, which would inevitably swallow the jumping figure.

Group “Untitled” - Feminism and performance art: Anne-Fleur Werner, Anna Feiler, Daniela Fella, Nina Herzog, Maria Zehner

Zum Text: Daniela Fella: Untitled

This group discussed the video Untitled. Quite complicated issues arose in their discussion, which made their work difficult. The group began by reflecting on the artwork's lack of a title or soundtrack. They asked museum visitors who had watched the video if they could give the artwork a name. Most people made associations with “sex.” By reflecting on this experiment, the group came to the conclusion that their method might have been counterproductive: Prompting visitors to answer spontaneously brought social stereotypes to the forefront and revealed a misogynist social order with regard to sexual encounters. This reveals once again that our class was more concerned with initiating processes of reflection than producing final results. The group later used the voices of the museum visitors as background noise for a controversial dialogue between an art critique explaining Fraser's work and a visitor doubting its critical potential and artistic value.

Group “Therapy” - Art as social field: Isabella Stief, Maria Birnbaum, Astrid Rizner, Daniel Kranawetter, Lilia Ubert, Maja Beyreuther

Zum Text: Lilia Ubert: Projections

The third group chose the work therapy and reflected on the notion of art as a social field. They developed a performance on the theme of writing a master's thesis. The group performed an inner dialogue of a student who feels overwhelmed by the task of writing a thesis and the multiple and contradictory demands that this entails. Each member of the group represented one of the internalized voices addressing the student, thus revealing the different norms, values, and interests of parents, teachers, peers, etc. After specifying the roles, a script was created, showing that some voices were more powerful than others, some positions more valuable than others.

Video „Masterarbeit“



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Group “Recherche” - Art as social field: Anja Schönau, Susanne Zauner, Johanna Jung, Verena Leitner

Zum Text: Susanne Zauner: Museum für alle

Andrea Fraser elaborates in one of her articles that the museum has a public obligation. If the museum indeed wants to serve the public it needs to appeal to all classes of people and not only to those that legitimate taste (Fraser 1997).  (*5) This appeal was the focus of the fourth project. “Imagine people who might go to the Museum der Moderne. How would you describe them?” The group posed this question to about 300 people in the city of Salzburg. They also asked them to write their answer together with their occupation on a sheet of white paper. The idea behind the project was to reveal the projections people in different social positions have about the so-called typical visitor to the MdM. Forty percent of those asked said that the typical visitor was “different,” “not like everybody else.” That is, the typical visitor was characterized as hip, creative, alternative, or special. At the same time, they also said that the museum wasn’t for them, because they were “just normal.” In this case normality seems to be in line with what Pierre Bourdieu calls popular taste. All in all, the students’ experiment shows once again that indeed, museums are primarily for those who legitimate taste; the educated, rich, distinguished, and less so for everyone else. Of course, it would be highly interesting to compare the results with the demographic statistics of the actual visitors to the MdM, but the museum did not provide them.

Reflection on our learning processes

Fraser's work provided a very stimulating red thread through our class and inspired students' own experimental projects. Fraser's work is ideal for bridging the difficult gap that often looms between theory and practice, science and art. But we also found the experience quite challenging: First of all, a three-hour class did not provide enough time for a full-fledged creative process. Furthermore, it was very difficult for our students to bring together theory, artistic work, and practical experiments. Finally, the concept of critique proved difficult. For the students, what is meant by cultural and social critique was not at all self-evident.

All in all, we found the class a very rewarding but at times also unsettling experience; focusing on Fraser's work allowed us to raise various issues that are extremely relevant to our field, contemporary arts and cultural production. For example, we discussed "What exactly is the relationship between contemporary art and cultural production?" "How can we distinguish between them without recreating exclusivity?" and, "Isn't the insistence on a critical stance per se, and by definition, an elitist endeavor?"

It has become clear to us how precise Fraser's work points to ruptures in the social and cultural fabric. Her art often prompts a feeling of discomfort and it seems that precisely this dis-ease is what allows us to think not only about the difficult relationship between the museum and institutional critique, but also about stores of self-evident knowledge and art's interventionist potential.

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//Zur Person

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Nach Studien der Bildnerischen Erziehung, Germanistik, Gender Studies und Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften (Salzburg, Wien und North Carolina), erhielt sie 2004 ihr Doktorat an der Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Wien. Von 2000-2006 forschte sie an der Universität of California San Diego, 2007-2011 war sie Inhaberin eines Herta-Firnbergs Postdoc-Stipendiums am Fachbereich Kommunikationswissenschaft (Universität Salzburg). Seit Mai 2011 ist sie Assistenzprofessorin am Fachbereich Kommunikationswissenschaft und am Schwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst.

Mehr Info

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She is a professor and the Chair of the Communication Department at the University of Salzburg. Her research mainly focuses on communication, journalism and feminist media studies, popular culture, and theories of the public sphere. Her numerous publications include *Identitätsräume* (2004, with Brigitte Hipfl and Uta Scheer), *Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Geschlechterforschung. Zur Bedeutung der Frauen in den Massenmedien und im Journalismus* (2005), and *Media Industry, Journalism Culture and Communication Policies in Europe* (2007, with Hans Bohrmann and Marcel Machill).

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