

# Paying More Than Lip Service: Artists, Curators Restage An Andrea Fraser And Helmut Draxler Deep Cut In Los Angeles

*Frances Stark, A. L. Steiner, Martine Syms, and others convene to consider the many jobs that artists are asked to do*

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During the performance of 'Services: The Conditions and Relations of Service Provision in Contemporary Project Orientated Artistic Practice,' organized by Helmut Draxler and Andrea Fraser, January 22– 23, 1994, at the Kunstraum of Lüneburg University, Lüneburg, Germany.

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On the last Sunday of March, some noteworthy members of Los Angeles's art world arrived at the nonprofit Laxart and sought their places at a long white conference table positioned in the center of a gallery. Among them were artists A. L. Steiner, Lincoln Tobier, Martine Syms, and Frances Stark; the Museum of Contemporary Art's assistant curator, Lanka Tattersall; and writer and CalArts professor Michael Ned Holte. In front of them on the table were thick transcripts: they'd come at the behest of the nonprofit space's interestingly titled "Curator of Discursive Programming," Eric Stone, to re-create "Services: The Conditions and Relations of Service Provision in Contemporary Project Orientated Artistic Practice," a two-day-long event that artist Andrea Fraser co-organized 22 years ago at the Kunstraum Lüneburg, a small university gallery in Germany.

Earlier that day, Stone had turned on a set of projectors that played video footage of the original "Services" sessions. Fraser wore glasses and had her hair in a neat braided bun on the day in January 1994 when "Services" commenced. Her look is worth mentioning because it contributes to the sense of studious, optimistic intensity that pervades the video. Near her at the table is curator Helmut Draxler, with whom she organized these sessions and an exhibition, also called "Services," that opened after the two days of discussion. The two of them were concerned about a trend they'd observed: artists were increasingly being asked to render services for museums and galleries—to make work for particular exhibitions, or help design the brochures for their own shows. Certain artists had begun demanding fees for such services, but institutions didn't always pay on time, or at all. Fraser and Draxler invited 16 artists and curators to discuss this and other matters, among them Fred Wilson and Judith Barry. In the video footage everyone looks bright-eyed and engaged. Barry always seems on the verge of breaking into a grin; there is a lot of leaning forward and animated gesturing.

Stone has long been interested in the event's lasting resonance, and wrote about it recently for *Afterall* magazine, considering it as a way to better understand artists' working conditions in "today's global field." For his re-creation, Steiner played Fraser—this made sense, given Steiner's role in founding W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) and since Fraser serves on W.A.G.E.'s board. Tobier took the

role of Draxler. Tattersall played Wilson. Holte was Barry. Syms was artist Renee Green, and Stark curator Susan Cahan. The audience, seated in white folding chairs, formed a ring around the table.

There had been no rehearsal, so the reading got off to a rocky start. Stark-as-Cahan fumbled with the microphone before asking Steiner, playing Fraser, about “what’s going on now.”

Steiner, softer-spoken than the real Fraser, explained that she was interested in discussing “emerging forms of collaboration and conflict between artists and curators, and artists and institutions.”

Tattersall, as Wilson, had a lot to say about this, and spoke of rearranging museum collections. He’d become intimately aware of various institutions’ dysfunctions—at one, he said, the maintenance staff could discuss the installation he’d done about African-American history more fluently than the curatorial staff. “I couldn’t go around saying everything that I learned about the institution,” said Tattersall-as-Wilson,

“because the next institution would probably not allow me to do what I want to do. [...] I just don’t blab.”

Conversation about artist-curator relationships continued for some time. Artist Adria Julia, playing artist Martin Guttman, asked, “Would you work with any curator?”

Holte, as Barry, replied, “If the issues are interesting then I’m interested.”

Julia-as-Guttman: “But do you care about their politics?”

Holte-as-Barry: “I do, but it’s very difficult to know what anybody’s politics are really[...]. I’ve never been asked to work with the KKK.”

Holte-as-Barry described working with Coca-Cola as a young exhibition designer, and how different the corporate world had been from the art world. “The art world is a benign racist homophobic cultural institution in which you can act as a kind of bad conscience in a way that corporations would not tolerate.” Artist Basma Alsharif, playing curator Beatrice von Bismarck, turned to Holte-as-Barry: “From what you’re saying it sounds as if curators have a tendency to be particularly stupid” because it takes them so long to “understand exactly what you’re doing.”

Tattersall-as-Wilson had a pertinent anecdote to add about working with a white American curator in a museum’s Native American department. Wilson’s freeform installation design competed with this curator’s vision. “At that point he wanted the whole show to close,” Tattersall-as-Wilson said. “His tact was not to say that he didn’t like it. He said [his] Native American advisors wouldn’t like this—advisors he never told me he had.”

Holte-as-Barry: “It’s not that curators are stupid, it’s just that we have a different way of organizing the material and restating it.”

Discussion had turned to the reactionary new right and how cultural critique filters down to the popular press when Steiner-as-Fraser interrupted: “I have to make a very important point, which is if we don’t stop in the next five minutes, we won’t eat.” They didn’t stop.

In introducing the program, Stone told the audience it was an “endurance” project, and that they were free to come and go as they pleased. Very few left.

The real Fraser slipped in late, taking a seat near the gallery entrance. So did Barbara Kruger, another L.A. artist who was party to these kinds of discussion in the early 1990s. But most of the audience members, like most of the readers, were younger curators, writers, or artists whose careers began in the early-to-mid 2000s. The “Services” transcripts have never been published in full—readers and listeners were part of a

collective research project, absorbing as much as they could as the day went on, even if the talk got tedious or repetitive.

For this writer, and surely for others present, staying felt worthwhile because of how rapidly the L.A. art scene's institutional landscape has been shifting lately. Galleries that opened this spring, like Sprüth Magers and Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, have star-studded artist rosters and purport to offer museum-quality programming. They likely will not be adding many young or mid-career artists to their rosters, but such artists could very well invite to do performances or give talks—ambassadors to an exclusive institution from a wider-ranging community. The same goes for a new museum like the Broad, where Martine Syms recently participated in a feminist performance series. She was providing a service, collaborating with a curator to produce the event. Artists frequently “serve” the ever-expanding biennial circuit, too.

In the lead-up to the third Hammer Biennial, design duo Ekhaus Latta created a video campaign, advertising their own work but also, indirectly, plugging the approaching biennial. The K-Hole collective took on a more overt role last year, designing an advertising campaign for the New Museum Triennial. If all this feels new, it's just because we've forgotten we've been here before.

“I would like to examine the idea of how communities are formed based on something that's initiated [...] not necessarily by a fixed institution,” said Syms, as Green.

Steiner-as-Fraser wondered how artistic skill could serve “democratically organized groups.” Holte-as-Barry wanted to talk about activist artists involved in the AIDS crisis. But Eric Stone interrupted. It was nearly 6 p.m.; the readers had been at it for hours.

The real Fraser stood up. “Thank you so much for taking the time to engage,” she said. The readers were done for the day, but some would reconvene at the Hammer Museum two days later to hear Fraser debrief “Services” and other collaborative work. They'd been fidgeting, and seemed eager to leave the table. Still, hardly anyone headed toward the door. A few people wandered over to the bench instead, where the headphones for the looping video sat, opting to engage further.

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