



Sit, Talk, Silence

Andrea Fraser's «This meeting is being recorded» at Luma Foundation

Barbara Preisig

The wooden chair sits hard under my bones, my neck is tense. My view is partly obstructed by the heads of students. The projection field is small compared to the size of the art space in Zurich West, where the public event takes place. On view is Andrea Fraser's 2022 video performance *This meeting is being recorded*. The artist reenacts parts of Group Relations meetings she had held with other white- and female-identifying people about manifestations of internal racism in the U.S. I am following this well-tempered conversation. And while I analyze the group dynamics in the film from a certain distance, my chair suddenly begins to tremble.

This piece is a field report on the collapsing boundaries between art work, audience and classroom, on confused speakers-positions, shared silences and monophonic discussions.

Desks in rows



Pairs in rows



The 'horseshoe'



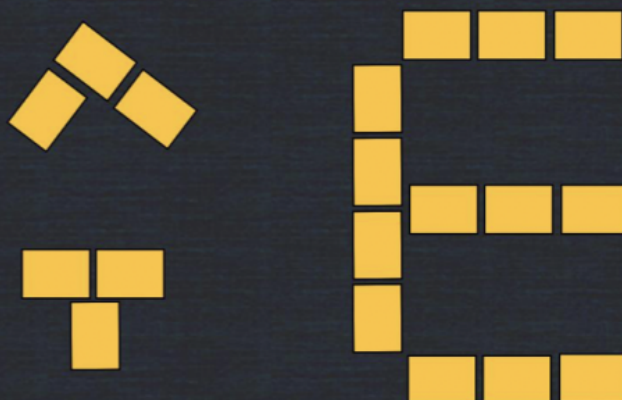
The 'double horseshoe'

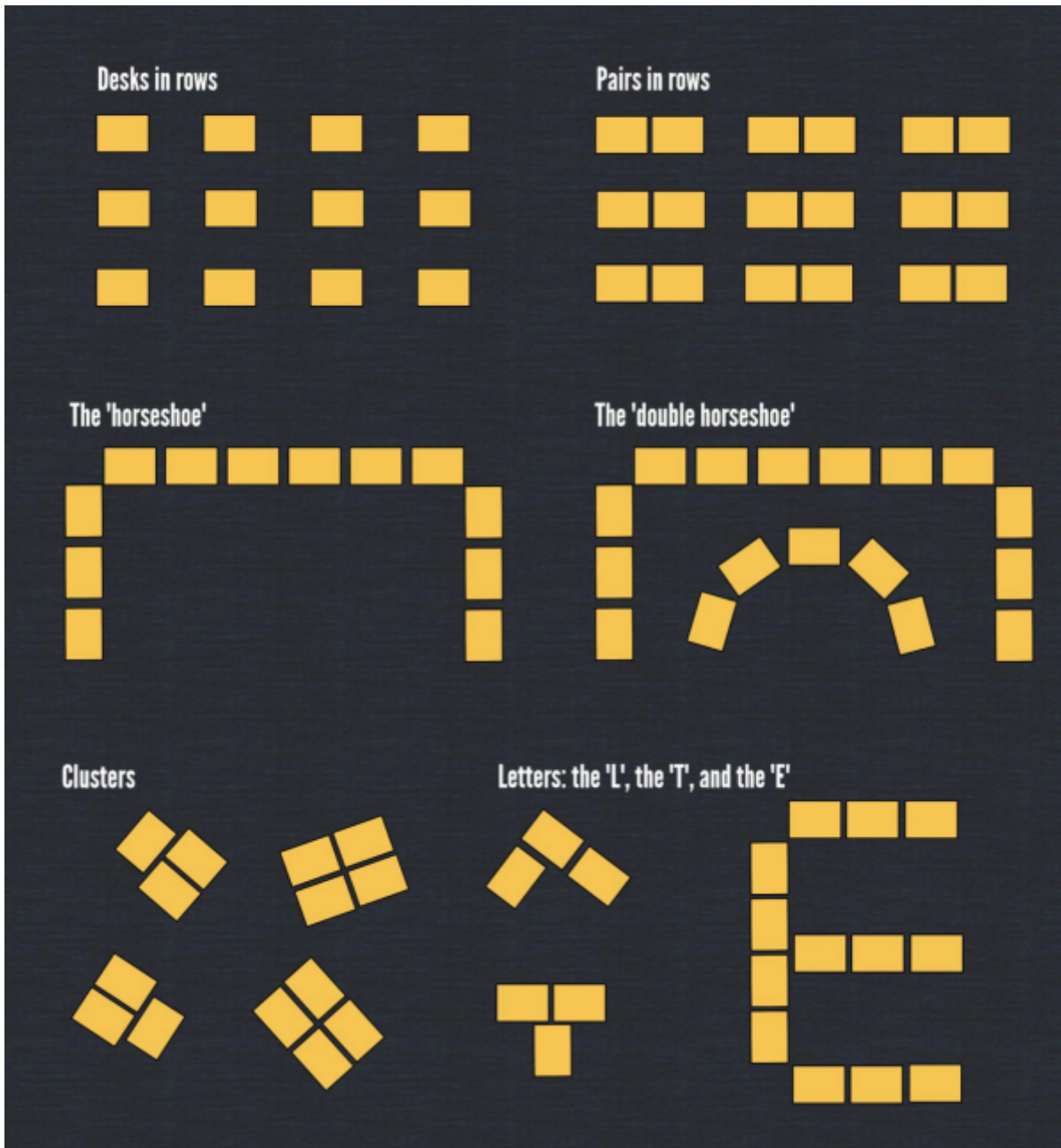


Clusters



Letters: the 'L', the 'T', and the 'E'





Classroom Seating Arrangements,
Source: https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/infographic-classroom-seating-arrangements

1 p.m. Becoming Grid

I did not want to miss the day-long screening of her new film, *This meeting is being recorded* (2022), at the Luma Foundation in Zurich, nor the subsequent discussion between Andrea Fraser and curator and psychotherapist Jamie Stevens. And I decided to attend the event together with students of my BA Fine Arts class.

I always liked Fraser's work for its use of everyday gestures and role play to interrogate the institutional conditions in which art comes into existence. And because the artist never limits herself to pointing fingers, but willingly gets herself into trouble as well. In Fraser's work, the social conditions being criticized are never just out there, but always part of ourselves and the institutions that we ourselves constitute. Fraser has radicalized this relational self-questioning in recent years by increasingly applying her experiences from Group Relations conferences to her artistic practice. Group Relations is an experiential learning and research method that developed in the 1950s out of the work of British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion. Group Relations is usually practiced in the format of a multiday gathering, with individuals engaging

the experience of what group dynamics unleash—studying how one’s own unconscious thoughts and feelings unfold within the group and how they bounce back both individually and collectively.

This story begins in our classroom with an unplanned group relations experiment. It is Wednesday, the day of the screening, and we gather after lunch for a short introduction. Before the class starts, my teaching colleague, Louise, suggests changing the seminar room’s seating plan by breaking up the theater-style seating and scattering the forty chairs throughout the room. She wants to see how the students organize their seats, as the seating order of a group is considered an indicator of a group’s relation to an institution, its hierarchies, authorities etc. Half an hour later, the students slowly drop in while Louise and I are leaning against a wall on the side of the room. We are observing a more or less silent performance, an unchoreographed choreography of moving chairs. Each student takes a chair, and, after a moment of disorientation, finds a new, suitable spot and sits down. The more students there are in the classroom, the more manifest the new order becomes: lines, rows, straight and parallel, facing us, the teachers. Order returns to the scattered landscape of chairs, and the division between lecturer and student, speaker and listener is rebuilt.

2 p.m. The Comforting Half Moon

Only a few chairs, maybe six, are awaiting us in the large space. A regular semicircle around the screen. We are changing scenes and are now entering the Löwenbräu arts complex to see the film. Fortunately, we find a stack of extra chairs in the back corner. This time, the chairs are arranged without hesitation, with the existing semicircle of chairs being extended into a ragged half moon. I put my chair at the moon’s outer edge, where I can also observe the students, though I am a bit concerned that my view may be partly obstructed by their heads. The 100-minute film is shot from a single camera set-up with very few cuts (maybe three). The artist is sitting in front of us in a life-size projection, facing us at eye level. Her chair is just as plain as mine but has a gray cushioned seat. In a one-woman stage play, Fraser reenacts parts of conversations between seven white- and female-identifying people of different ages. They are members of the Group Relations community in the U.S., the artist herself being one of them. The original six ninety-minute Zoom meetings were held in 2020. In her introductory remarks Fraser said the meetings were intended to apply «Group Relations perspectives to the study of manifestations of internal racism in ourselves and our role in structural racism and white supremacy.»

The conversations in *This meeting is being recorded* revolve around the power relations of the individual group members to people of color in their immediate environment, as well as the self-reflective question of what unconscious attitudes and projections cement power differences. Repeatedly stressed are the group members’ own privileges and their sense of vulnerability as white women. The conversation keeps returning to the white women’s own race and origin. «I was always very vanilla»; «I am a white woman, but I am also a little Puerto Rican.» There’s a certain Anglo-American inflection to the discussion about racism here. The topic remains inseparably linked to the question of skin color but doesn’t take into account origin and language as targets for racist discrimination.

I am impressed by Fraser’s acting skills. And I am asking myself: How might the hours of rehearsing a conversation about racism have changed her relation to the meetings and the topic discussed? What happens when seven speakers collapse into one—when the artist is speaking in tongues? Is Fraser representing the group members’ multi-voicedness, or does her performance transform them into stereotypical characters? Does the artist make it apparent that there was never a polyphony, but rather a single shared situatedness? Into what are Fraser’s interlocutors transfigured? More questions come to my mind: should Fraser’s choice to discuss the subject of racism with white people be seen as a strength of her work or rather as a weakness? As I understand it, the video is about the situatedness of the artist, that is a

white privileged person, identifying as woman, living in California. Is the artist justified to critically reflect on her own hidden racist feelings in trying to overcome them? Taking her own situatedness into account, how else could she personally contribute to this issue? Or does she merely confirm her privileged speaker's position by doing so?

While I am watching the film, these questions are being interrupted by another self of mine—a less scholarly one, a participant, perhaps even a client in a therapy session?—who has no sense of distance and feels addressed by the way the group members express themselves and speak with a high degree of self-awareness, each utterance coming with a reflexive twist. I-statements only, so any form of attack is avoided as much as possible. The well-temperedness of the conversation cannot hide the tension among the protagonists that spills over to me. I realize how stiff my neck is. My mind turns away from the immediate scene on screen, busy trying to understand the dynamics of group relations at play—dynamics of splitting and projections. Other issues now pop up in my head, like the blind spots in my relationship with my children. Questions like, do I unconsciously attribute my split-off feelings to them, when they actually are mine? It is not my internal racism I am reflecting on, although this is the real issue here. I imagine the women, channeled by Fraser, in nice two-story Californian homes with pretty gardens and an SUV and a farmers' market nearby. I feel involuntarily complicit with them, trapped in my white privileged bubble, disconnected from those who are affected by the violent urgency of racism. And it seems that this conversation lacks a subject. There's consensus among the members of the group that racism exists and that it is a structural problem. And there's consensus that most people, the women shown on screen included, do not admit individual complicity with racism. The group is grappling with an issue that somehow resists to be addressed individually. A smell of shame and displacement clouds over to my chair I desire to leave soon.

8 p.m. Confused Scatterings

When I enter the same space a few hours later to attend the artist talk, the students have already taken their seats in the very first row. (I read this as a reflection of their motivation, but later learn that those were the only chairs left: the students were late, too.) The space is crowded. Again rows of chairs, but this time they are already occupied. More people are standing in the back of the room. A small bistro table with two chairs in front and center, placed in the exact same spot where the film had been projected in the afternoon, awaits Andrea Fraser and her interlocutor, the curator and psychotherapist Jamie Stevens. The bright spotlight directed at the table leaves no doubt as to where the center of attention is located. I feel too close to that center. The light hits parts of my body, it burns on my shoes, my knees.

The evening event begins as expected: there is an introduction by the organizer who extols Andrea's work and provides brief biographical information about the artist and her interlocutor. The latter, Jamie Stevens, then starts the conversation. «I have to admit,» he says, «that the huge number of people in the room makes me very nervous. My knees are shaking, and I will thus shorten my prepared introduction down to a few words.» Andrea takes over, explaining in a slightly detached tone how she came to make the film, how she created the one-person performance out of several Zoom meetings and how she sees her work connected to Group Relations. Then she addresses the audience, saying, «Instead of having this conversation between the two of us, we would be much more interested in hearing how the film resonated with you.» I read this as a rather common rhetorical gesture towards the audience. Participation is considered a positive feature in public events of all kinds. After a moment of discreet silence, one person raises a hand, praises Fraser's film, and asks the artist a question I can't recall. Silence. No response. What if the artist and Jamie refuse to participate in this conversation? How would this evening develop? Who would be directing this evening? Would people leave? Now, other members of the audience start commenting on the film and addressing more questions to Andrea. The silence that follows comes with a

whiff of frustration and displeasure and gradually settles between the rows and chairs like thick fog.

The next action from the audience is somehow different in tone. «Hi, I am an artist from Israel,» a young person says. «I think racism is such an important issue, and maybe in Europe racism is not linked to skin color as much as to being a foreigner. I've been living in Zurich for four years now and I also experience racism here.» Her statement breaks the ice for a discussion about racism in Switzerland that now follows. Several people share their experiences, stating that they have been confronted with subtly racist sentiments. It seems as if the audience has collectively decided to stick together and no longer accepts being turned away by the artist. The scattered crowd behind my row of chairs now gently hugs my back like an airbag. I suddenly feel connected—not because of the discussions' subject matter but because we, somehow having been transformed from recipients into producers, are filling this large space with meaning ourselves.

Now, an elderly person, responding to the previous statements by members of the audience in a lengthy monologue, claims that there is no racism in Switzerland, and that racism is exclusively a US-American problem. Some more or less hostile counterstatements follow. The group comes out in solidarity against the speaker (no longer against the artist, who seems momentarily forgotten), referring to him not as a member of the audience sharing an individual experience, but rather as a typical old white man.

Then the conversation takes a selfreflexive and analytical twist, as the collective silence itself becomes the subject of further statements. Some members of the audience experience the silence as deeply unsettling, while others, including myself, feel a vague sense of cohesion. «Normally I never raise my voice in such a public situation,» a female person explains. «But I felt encouraged by the statements of so many others in the room. And the collective silence made me think of who speaks, who feels entitled to speak, and I thought I would actually like to have a voice here, too.» While people reflect about their roles in the group, I start realizing that I have never witnessed an art talk with so many members of the audience taking the floor. What is more, I realize that the evening has quickly turned from an artist's talk into a Group Relations meeting.

And then Andrea starts crying, quietly, but emphatically. The attention returns to the actual center of the room. Minutes later, after regaining her composure, Andrea grabs the microphone. «I feel I should say something before this evening ends. This is not an easy situation for me. I could have done a conventional conversation with Jamie about my work. I know very well how to do this. But I wanted to question my role here. How far can I distance myself from the expectation that is given to me as an artist who presents her own film in public? What is my responsibility here? What I came to realize now is that I can get invisible, becoming obsolete. This is hurtful».

The audience doesn't get an opportunity to discuss Andrea's questions. Instead, Jamie and Andrea end the evening, explaining that it was intended to have the exact same duration as the film: 100 minutes. Applause (directed at whom?), and it is only now that I discover the camera in the back of the space that creates another parallel between this evening and *This meeting is being recorded*: not only did Fraser record the initial Group Relations, she also recorded this very evening, talk, event, meeting. Are we involuntarily becoming actors in her next work? Is this a social experiment? What does the artist plan to do with the recording? To my own surprise, I don't care that much about the artist's play or plans. What fascinates me is how radically my position of encounter was destabilized, how I felt helplessly thrown into shifting roles of recipient and producer, how often I went from identifying to feeling alienated and from being affected and cornered to feeling detached, how the artistic work that we looked at in the afternoon suddenly no longer has a clear beginning or end, how it nestled in the midst of our rows of chairs and slowly swallowed up the audience

9 a.m. the next day. Implosion

Back in class, somehow hung-over. I don't like the seating plan I find in the classroom. The tables are arranged in a large U-shaped formation with the teachers' table facing the opening of the «U». In the Swiss school system this is probably the most popular seating arrangement, commonly referred to as a horseshoe, though it has nothing to do with horses but, if anything, with being neither fish nor fowl—not entirely frontal and longing in vain to be a circle. Since the students have already taken their seats, we decide to go with the «U» and ask the class how they feel about yesterday's events.

«She played us,» one student said. «The artist forced us to become part of her performance. She really is a gifted actress. I felt cheated of my safe spectator position. There is something violent about the artist's intervention,» the student continued. «Never in my life I have felt so completely unaddressed as by the screening yesterday,» another student, person of color, adds. She goes on, «I am irritated by the level of whiteness. This film is made by a privileged artist and addressed to a privileged art audience.»

My attempt to defend Fraser convinces no one in the room and I realize that the story of the day with Andrea Fraser can be told in a completely different way. The given seating order turns out to be acoustically unfavorable. It's impossible to understand what the students in the other corner of the room are saying. We ask them to move closer together and bring their chairs to the middle of the «U». Most of them follow our instructions, some students stay outside and we, Louise and I, are finding ourselves in the middle of the greatest seating chaos, where my chair is now just one of many. Unlike yesterday, there is no disciplined turn-taking today, no divide between students and lecturers. The seating order now only separates those in the belly of the horseshoe who participate in the discussion from those on the outside, who refuse to do so. And I wonder what goes through the minds of those who do not follow our instructions. Aren't they in a chatty mood? Or is the refusal directed against our order?

«Why did Fraser not include people of color in the Group Relations meetings in the first place?» a student says. And someone adds: «It is just pathetic how these women pity themselves in the video and how they navel-gaze themselves about the fact that they are white but also a little Puerto Rican. By speaking publicly about racism, the artist does not question hegemonic speaker positions. It has always been the privileged who were authorized to speak. If we want to learn something about poverty, should we really listen to a millionaire or rather to a homeless person?»

What is taking place inside the horseshoe belly cannot be described as a discussion. The students are not contradicting or questioning but rather mutually reassuring one another in their critique of Fraser's work. I wonder why we have such a monophonic conversation and why there seems to be no room for questions, indecisive statements, ambivalent encounters. Is it the loaded topic of racism that provokes normative political statements, rather than revealing our own subjectivities and insecurities? Or is there something about the way racism is represented in Andrea Fraser's film that reduces us to members of a class, a race, a skin color, unable to speak beyond these attributes? Or perhaps the discussion is not so much about racism as it is about power relations that are present in this very moment, for which a lack of multi-voicedness seems to be a precondition. The group unites against the authorities in the room. Not against the artist this time, but against us lecturers. The audience empowerment from the artist's talk has carried over into the classroom. If yesterday it was Fraser who became obsolete as an authority in the room, now it is us, the lecturers. And there it is again, the impression that social dynamics are being repeated. Group Relations in an endless loop. A mirror cabinet. I no longer have any desire to lecture, to be a speaker of any kind—a feeling that will last for the rest of my teaching week, accompanied by ongoing seating rearrangements.

BARBARA PREISIG

Barbara Preisig is an art historian and art critic whose research focuses on contemporary artistic practices and their social and political contexts. In exploring translocal, transdisciplinary, and nonacademic ways of writing and thinking, she addresses a range of subjects including artistic research, feminism, institutional studies, and the politics of authorship. Barbara Preisig is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.

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