44

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

From the Museum to Artistic Research and Back – Mapping the Field of Contemporary Art

authors:

Andrea Fraser, Krzysztof Pijarski, Katarzyna Bojarska

source:

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 44 (2026)

URL:

https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/44-witches-wisdom/from-the-museum-to-artistic-research-and-back

doi:

https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2026.44.3247

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

Andrea Fraser; institutional critique; Pierre Bourdieu; artistic autonomy; artistic research; field theory; art pedagogy.

abstract:

This is an in-depth dialogue with artist and theorist Andrea Fraser, centered on the evolution of her influential diagrammatic mapping of the contemporary art field. Moving away from the overtly polemical stance of her earlier work, such as L'1%, c'est moi, Fraser discusses her shift toward a relational sociology—deeply rooted in Bourdieusian field theory—to describe the intersections of market, academic, exhibition, activist, and community subfields. The discussion interrogates the "fantasy of autonomy" within artistic and academic institutions, arguing that these spaces are not external to power but are internal sites of entanglement and struggle between cultural and economic capital. Fraser addresses the rise of artistic research, expressing caution regarding the dilution of "research" as a term when subsumed by corporate-academic structures, while simultaneously defending the necessity of rigor in artistic practice. The interview concludes by reflecting on the material realities of artistic labor and the shifting role of public universities in a globalized, corporatized landscape.

Andrea Fraser - Professor of Art at the University of California Los Angeles. Her research focuses on many aspects of the art world, including art museums, the contemporary art market and cultural philanthropy, as well as institutional governance and labor issues in the nonprofit arts sector. She has worked internationally in conceptual art, institutional critique, feminist performance art, exhibition-making and the psychology of art practice. She is also a certified group-relations consultant and an authority on the psychodynamics of groups and organizations, particularly those in cultural fields. Her books include "Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser" (2005), "2016 in Museums, Money and Politics" (2018), and "Andrea Fraser

Collected Interviews 1990–2018" (2019). Fraser is the former board president of WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) and of Grex, the West Coast affiliate of the A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems. A survey exhibition of her work, "Art Must Hang" was on view at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw 14.03 – 08.06.2025.

Krzysztof Pijarski - Visual artist, researcher, educator, curator, and producer. Associate professor at the Faculty of Design / SWPS University, where he is chair of artistic and design research; member of the Visual Narratives Laboratory (which co-founded and co-directed in 2019-2024) at the Film School in Lodz (https://vnLab.org), where he taught in 2009-2025. The vnLab is a media lab focused on the evolution of visual storytelling into such areas as XR, stereoscopic 3D, interactive web-based pieces, or the film essay. A big part of his work at the vnLab was focused on the Interactive Narratives Studio, where he worked on developing webdocs and other narrative and archival interactive pieces, especially in the transmedial space. His interests lie above all in exploring convincing visual forms of thinking by way of visual essays, atlases, analogies. He likes working between fact and fiction, with visual intelligence, distance, and the ability of going beyond the established uses and conventions of photography. Out of his engagement with bound content, he initiated the PubLab Collective around his vision for web publications as an evolution of the printed book. Recipient of a Fulbright Junior Research Grant at Hohns Hopkins University (2009-2010), and grants, among others, from the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and the Shpilman Institute of Photography. Headed and partcipated in grants from the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, the National Science Centre, and the National Programme for the Development of Humanities. Authored a monograph on modernism as seen through the the dual prism of the figure of Michael Fried and photography as a technology that changed our understanding of art (Archeologia modernizmu. Michael Fried i nowoczesne doświadczenie sztuki [An Archeology of Modernism. Michael Fried, Photography, and the Modern Experience of Art], 2017), as well as (Post)Modern Fate of Images: Allan Sekula / Thomas Struth (2013). Edited the volumes Ludzie i rzeczy: „Zapis socjologiczny" Zofii Rydet (2022), Object Lessons: Zofia Rydet's „Sociological

Record" (2017), and The Archive as Project (2011). A collection of his translations of essays by Allan Sekula was published by the Warsaw University Press in 2010.

Katarzyna Bojarska - Assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the SWPS University. From 2008 to 2019, she worked in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Co-founder of Widok. Since 2024 head of Center for Comparative Research on Memory Cultures (CCRM). Author of articles and translations interested in the relations of art, literature, history and psychoanalysis. She translated among others Michael Rothberg's "Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization" (Warsaw 2016). Author of a book "Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman" [Events after the Event: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman] (Warsaw 2012). Editor and one of translators of Ernst van Alphen's book "Criticism as Intervention: Art, Memory, Affect" (Krakow 2019). Receipient of numerous research grants and awards, including Fulbright, National Centre for Science, Horizon2020.

From the Museum to Artistic Research and Back – Mapping the Field of Contemporary Art

Framing the diagram and the question of autonomy

Krzysztof Pijarski: We've just translated a selection of your works, as well as essays, into Polish as part of your retrospective exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. One of your essays, "The Field of Contemporary Art: A Diagram," struck us as immensely useful in thinking about the art field and its dynamic. Could you tell us a bit more about where it came from?

Andrea Fraser: I'm trying to be as objective as I can. And that's part of what I hope the value of that essay is, actually: that even while I have not actively and eagerly and fully participated in the market for the most part, I still have access to that arena. I talk to people; I kind of know how it works. I'm also a professor and I also work in museums, so I do think I have a perspective across the field that perhaps not everyone does.



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

Wanting to step back and take it on as a whole rather than just writing from my particular position was part of my agenda. In "The Field of Contemporary Art: A Diagram," I also refer back to "L'1%, c'est moi." At the time I wrote that essay, when I was starting to think about the fragmentation of the field into these increasingly autonomous subfields, that fragmentation was my most optimistic scenario for holding on to some aspects of the autonomy that Bourdieu, for example, attributes to the historic

art field, or cultural fields in general – an autonomy I felt was being lost to the market, among other forces.

By the time I wrote "The Field of Contemporary Art," I no longer wanted to write a polemic – and I'm not sure I had a polemic to write. (But I do think about expanding on that essay.) As I started to present it and have discussions around it, responses were very specific to where in the field people were reading it. For example, I'm on the board of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and the board president, who I'm friendly with – she's not a collector but a supporter – sent me a screenshot of a Zoom with a group of Mexican art patrons discussing the essay. It is being read from there to an artistic research program in Holland – so it's really gratifying that it circulates across different contexts, and that was really my intention. I doubt that would have happened in the same way if I had written it as a polemic.

Within other portions of the art world, like the Whitney Independent Study Program, which is on the opposite end of the spectrum than that group of patrons – the questions were all about autonomy: what happens to autonomy? I did feel I neglected that question to some extent. The essay poses it, but it doesn't really address the consequences of the phenomena I describe for artistic autonomy. I kind of throw it under the bus.

Descriptive, not prescriptive: Reading the diagram



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

KP: It is important you say that, because I wondered, as I read the essay, both from the perspective of my own practice and of teaching art: how to think of autonomy today? Isn't it more of a regulative idea – a horizon – rather than a literal condition? If it means the freedom to do whatever

you want, then that's illogical. So maybe it's about choosing your entanglements.

What I found convincing in your diagram is that it's descriptive: it delineates a field in which one can take various positions, and positions can change over time. The boundaries are porous. You might be an artist at one point, then start a gallery as a group of artists, and also write about your colleagues as a critic.

AF: I'm happy you see it that way. Others read it as prescriptive, which I wanted to resist. I'm glad the diagram feels dynamic rather than static and prescriptive to you – capturing movement and change over time is very hard in any visualization.

KP: It was a process to get there, wasn't it?

AF: Older versions of the diagram emphasized fragmentation. I'd been thinking about this for ten–fifteen years, since "L'1%, c'est moi." I prepared the first versions during COVID for graduate students, as we were reading online together: I asked everyone to diagram their practice, inspired by a student who was on a course studying W. E. B. Du Bois's graphic representations of demographics and statistics regarding African Americans – they are amazing diagrams. And then I thought that I didn't want to diagram my own practice as a part of this. So I generated the first version of the diagram. It was blue and black, and done in a very cumbersome way, in Excel. It is for this very reason that it was static and fragmented.

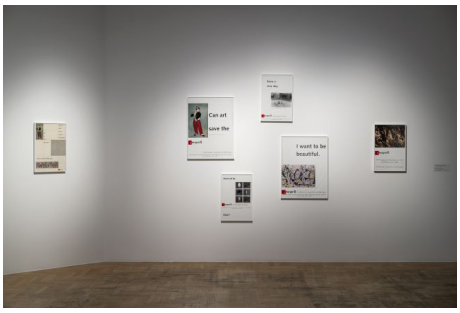
Toward the end of writing that essay, I redid the diagram completely to the published version with overlapping colors – a spectrum from blue to yellow – so overlaps create new hues. That representation shifts the emphasis from fragmentation to intersections and interrelations, and it gives a stronger sense of dynamics and potential movement.

KP: What I find so interesting about it is that it produces a language to describe positions within the field without being value-laden. In "1%" the values are already assigned – e.g., the artist in the commercial field is politically or ethically inferior to

the one trying to resist. Your gesture of mapping that produced the diagram is more neutral.

Power, positions, and the absence of an outside

AF: Right. Even so, retrospectively, it's clear my earlier critique of the market field was articulated from somewhere in the vicinity of the academic field as it intersects with an activist field. That's where the polemic came from. The diagram, by contrast, tries to make explicit what comes from Bourdieu: relations and dynamics of power. What Bourdieu tries to force us – especially intellectuals – to do with his analysis of cultural fields and of the field of power as a space of struggle between cultural and economic capital, is to see that one cannot simply take a position against domination as such. Rather, positions are struggles for different kinds of power, not a simple moral high ground outside of "relations of domination." Values must be understood as positions within these dynamics, not as transcendental liberatory projects. Otherwise, we risk a kind of intellectual self-mystification.



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

KP: Absolutely. It's always been easy for intellectuals to claim an external standpoint from which to judge. But there is no outside to this field. I've often returned to Clement Greenberg's statement that the avant-garde has "always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold" to the ruling class. That's the market, Trotskyite as he was.

AF: Because the ruling class defines what counts as art. Of course, that excludes vernacular culture, popular art, folk art…

KP: As does your diagram – folk art appears within its bounds only when institutions acknowledge it.

AF: Exactly. I recently went to the Outsider Art Fair in New York with a collector – it was interesting to enter that segment. The key issue isn't inside/outside the art field, but inside/outside the field of power. If one wanted to contest my model (or Bourdieu's), a pointed objection would be: is all of the art field inside the field of power, or is some part outside of it?

KP: And there's this widespread feeling that academically legitimated art practice stands outside power. Your diagram shows the academic context is also a site of entanglement, power struggles, and relations of domination.

AF: That was central to my agenda. There's a fantasy that "going academic" preserves autonomy. But autonomy is never a given. Also, within academia itself, many are acutely aware they're not autonomous; they're in increasingly privatized, corporatized, hierarchical, managerial institutions. What happens when academic discourse enters the art field, though, is a denial of those conditions. Suddenly it becomes: "We're autonomous compared to the market," as if academia weren't itself inside other institutional fields. That drives me crazy.

Katarzyna Bojarska: We can see this beyond art as well, globally – vis-à-vis the war in Gaza. Scholars in Holocaust studies, previously oriented to an ethical stance and knowledge production, woke up to see that their knowledge production has served particular political purposes they otherwise criticize. Recent writing turns to implicatedness – Michael Rothberg's "implicated subject," Bruce Robbins's idea of the "beneficiary" – reminding us that you can take a leftist epistemic stance yet still be implicated, and thus must see yourself within a broader field of power. Meanwhile, in the U.S., humanities and arts funding faces pressure.

AF: That's been ongoing for a long time. Under Trump's executive orders and the withdrawal of federal funding, the

bigger immediate impact is actually on the sciences. The American system is not bureaucratic, it's allocative: federal funds largely go to non-profits and universities via grants. Universities – UCLA's South Campus, for example – are heavily dependent on federal grants for sciences and medicine, and they recoup overheads on those grants. Some of that gets redistributed to the humanities, which usually don't have access to such grants. So the cuts indirectly affect the arts and humanities, but the direct hit is bigger for the sciences – which is ironic, given the technocratic, research-fueled economic rhetoric.

Teaching and the diagram: Orienting practice

KP: You start your essay with the statement that you find yourself pulling up the diagram every time you meet with art students for the first time. Why is that? What kind of educational work does it do for you?



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

AF: I use it as a kind way to address two issues. First, many young artists have little idea how the art world works. Each subfield has its own legitimizing discourse – often emanating from the academic field as the center of discourse production – yet that discourse tends to conceal the field's basic conditions, because of mutual dependencies among subfields. This manifests in specific ways that shape student perceptions, or misperceptions, of the art field, and their resulting understanding of it.

For example, students doing video and installation see galleries showing those media and assume those galleries sell them. But video/installation is a tiny slice, less than 1%, of the market by value. Galleries show it to compete in an experience/attention economy; they rely on academic/exhibitions fields for value beyond luxury goods, so that they are not devoured by the

market. Likewise, the academic field's claims to radical, transformative, activist practice rarely hold up; much remains constrained to the campus.

This yields student projects that try to be research-based, effect social change, function as an installation for exhibition, and remain semi-marketable via sculptural components. Well, that's not going to work. Such a strategy won't achieve the stated goals. You won't truly produce knowledge (it's often "content," to legitimate a production for a market that won't care). In exhibition contexts, it might function as experiential learning – but then you must rigorously define the experience, the learning, as well as what kind of knowledge you're producing, and for what community.

So I keep asking students, and this goes back a long way: what do you want your work to do? That pivot moves away from the old semiotic, post-structural, discourse analysis decoding frame – "What does it mean?" – toward performance and affect. This practice of encoding and decoding, in more and more complex theoretical frameworks, has become a sort of basic form of engagement with art, both on the level of making and receiving, as I already mentioned, emanating from the academic field. And it has become elaborated into a certain sector of the art world, of the various forms of research-based practice. My primary thinking about art is much more rooted in what I describe as the exhibition field. I'm Deweyan: art is experienced. The encounter activates structures, relations, responses. It may trigger an intellectual process, but meaning is not primary; the activation is.

The diagram's five subfields map loosely to five emphases: value, experience, knowledge, community, social change. They're not neat "criteria," more like what each field emphasizes art as doing or producing. Even that is a bit vague, but it's a workable teaching tool.

KB: That's a challenging perspective for students – locating oneself in such a multidimensional zone of interests, expectations, tastes, ideas – rather than "producing a message."

AF: Yes. Compared to "message production," it's more complicated, and it's never stable.

Public and private: Institutions, funding, and dynamics

KB: So, when you talk about public funding, about institutions that are publicly funded, how do they relate to the private sector? We've seen what has been happening in Germany; in Poland under Law and Justice we saw the impact on public institutions. That's why it is important to continuously scrutinize the dynamics that mobilize these subfields.



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

AF: Yes, and that's why I think Bourdieu is so valuable: his relational sociology prioritizes dynamics over substantive categories. He critiques a nominalist approach to "objects of study" and insists we analyze how categories are produced – e.g., not "unwed mothers" as a static group, but the sociohistorical production of that category. I think I say this in the essay, but that might be one of the reasons why the field of art was interesting to him, because in art, the definition of "artist" and the field's boundaries are themselves continually at stake, and the struggles over those boundaries constitute the field. And even if you get that, I think it's still very hard for people to look at these things and not assume that it's describing some kind of static situation. What is remarkable is that I'm using the coordinates that he developed to describe the 19th-century literary field in France, and they still help us understand today.

The question isn't whether the model is "true," but whether it helps us understand current conditions – and I think it does.

Artistic research: Autonomy, specificity, and institutional logics



Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989. Live performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, courtesy of the artist, photo by Kelly & Massa Photography.

KP: I must confess that I have an agenda here as regards the direction my questions are taking, and that is the emerging field of practice-based or artistic research.

AF: Now you're speaking from a particular point in the field!

KP: Indeed. In Europe, for quite some time, there has been a discussion around acknowledging artists as knowledge producers, recognizing art as a mode of inquiry, parallel to, but not identical with science and other modalities of scholarship. In this frame, the epistemological is as important as the aesthetic. Of course, this means taking part in the struggle for domination in the field of power, because this discussion has institutional implications: acknowledgement by funding bodies, emerging – and contested – criteria of excellence, as well as the resistance of these transdisciplinary, so-called advanced practices against institutionalization.

AF: It's a big field. My experience of artistic research was frustrating. I was involved with an art PhD program in The Hague at the time. (In the States, there are very few PhD programs in art, and there are economic reasons for that.) For me, artistic research is a specific artistic methodology, a particular approach to art making – distinct from formalist, intuitive, or procedural approaches. But once universities embed artists into research structures, especially in PhD programs, everything artists do becomes "research" – painting is research, ceramics is research

– so the term loses specificity. It becomes synonymous with art. That blurring creates conflicts between artistic autonomy and academic autonomy.

One of the ways Bourdieu frames autonomy is as a field's capacity to determine and impose its own norms, sanctions, and criteria of value on what circulates within it. The art field's "aesthetic disposition" (that would be Greenberg's or Adorno's definition of autonomy) is different from field autonomy as Bourdieu uses the term. And in that sense, the art field is not at all specific when it comes to autonomy. So when artists balk at dissertations or academic standards as an attack on artistic autonomy, they're often attacking academic autonomy in turn. If you don't want those standards, why be there?



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

As for research-based artistic practice – research-based methodologies of artistic practice that produce knowledge – yes, that's what I do. I do believe there's value to it, but it's hard to specify a distinct "epistemic value" apart from the disciplines from which we borrow methods (sociology, psychoanalysis, ethnography, history, political science). I adopt those methods as interventions in the field of artistic practice because it's defined in the field, not in those disciplines – I lack the credentials and legitimacy there. At the same time, I had a funny experience with *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*, where I did my impersonation of a political scientist. I did an event with this political scientist and philosopher named Rob Reich, who teaches at Stanford, and he writes a lot about philanthropy and democracy in the U.S. People were not sure what to make of it. It's ideal when art people ask if my work is political science and political scientists ask how it's art – it tests both sides. I had a similar experience with my Generali Foundation project from the mid-90s, where I went in as

a consultant and interviewed the executives and the staff, and wrote a report. While the executives for the most part hated the art that was being collected by the foundation, and the employees hated it too, because they felt it was imposed on them, my corporate-style report made sense to them. For them, it wasn't a problem whether they would consider it art or not. They didn't consider it art, but that didn't matter, because it was challenging as art only in the art world anyway. So, the project challenged the art world as art, and critiqued the corporation in its own language. This goes to intersections: is the academic field a subfield of the art field or the reverse? Flip that and you'll discover different conditions and power relations. Intersections might be the sites where criteria can be shaken, but shaking things up isn't automatically transformative of relations of domination, is it? Impact must be specified.

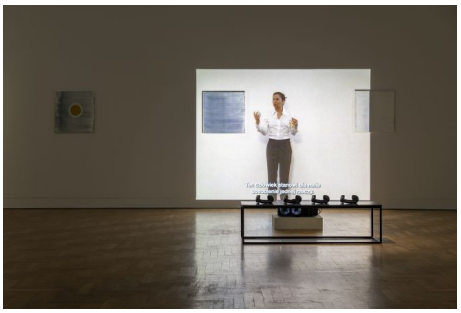
KP: I would try to define two kinds of impact: one, intervening in power relations within the field to change the field itself, to find less exploitative, more equitable positions; and two, finding a position from which you can say something about the world and be heard. Art's experiential mediation can carry ideas beyond specialized readerships. Bourdieu may be underread in the U.S., yet your work mediates those ideas, similarly to how Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*, after being acknowledged in the art world, became a mandatory source in many courses on globalization, communicating critically and rigorously while remaining accessible. For me, Allan was a formative figure in this regard. When I first saw *Fish Story* at *documenta 11*, it just

blew me away – that you could do art in such a mode. He became a sort of father figure for me later on.

AF: When I think about research-based artistic methodologies, my father and mother figures of research, I think of Allan Sekula as well, but also Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler – rigor is the value I hold dear, though it's not foregrounded in my diagram and it's not often valued in market or exhibition fields. Rigor is slow; it takes time. Also, it has a bad connotation in the art field, because art is supposed to be about ease, about gesture, about immediacy, and rigor seems so stiff, you know? In most contexts in Europe and the United States, art institutions are traditionally defined as educational and scientific institutions, but these institutions have, under populist and corporate pressures, shifted toward attention economies and spectacle, which displace rigor and learning. To go back to your first points in this conversation, this is what changed for me since 2010, when I wrote "L'1%, c'est moi." One, I got a job in academia, and two, the exhibition field consolidated further toward spectacle, moving away from the historic (yes, often elitist) bases of its autonomy – introducing a different heteronomy.

KP: Why academia?

AF: I was in debt and exhausted. I talk about rejecting the market and staying out of galleries, but in truth my work has little market; it's partly self-representation. I don't sell much. The real question is: how do you make a living as an artist? Each subfield implies different economies. There is a way to support yourself within the exhibition field now, but it requires a kind of production and practice I didn't want to pursue (I tried throughout the 90s, and it exhausted me, it exhausted itself). I started looking around for alternatives and was incredibly



View of the exhibition *Andrea Fraser. Art Must Hang*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, March 14–June 8, 2025, photo: Maciej Landsberg / Zachęta archives, CC BY-SA

fortunate to get a job at UCLA. I'm relatively "patriotic" about UC – though less so after crackdowns on encampments and criticism of Israel. There are a couple of state university systems that I think have become pretty corporatized and sort of privatized, and less than 50% of the budget of the University of California comes from public sources at this point, but it still has strong shared governance, transparency, and diversity within R1 universities, including the greatest number of low-income students. I've also had many undocumented students, and that hopefully will be able to continue.

KB: This would be the moment to talk about pedagogy and the frameworks you work from in this context, especially psychoanalysis and your investment in Anglo-American object relations, Group Relations in particular.

AF: I only managed to write a couple of things that reflected my interest in group relations, but it really had a big impact on my approach to pedagogy and my approach to teaching. And teaching had an impact on my shift from an economic, sociological perspective to a more psychological perspective. Because suddenly my primary encounter with art was not in the context of museums or galleries, but in the interpersonal framework of a studio visit or a classroom, where intersubjective dynamics and their embedded social structures are palpable, while market structures are remote, but that is material for another long conversation.

KB: Indeed – we already look forward to it!

The above conversation took place on the occasion of Andrea Fraser's visit to Warsaw for the opening of her show *Art Must Hang* **curated by Maria Brewińska at the Zachęta National Art Gallery. We are grateful to Maria and Andrea for making our meeting possible. Polish translation of Andrea's "The Field of Contemporary Art: A Diagram" available here.**