

Relativism & Its Discontents: Radical Revisionism (Book Review)

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Susan Best (2006) "Relativism and its Discontents: Review of Rex Butler's *Radical Revisionism*," *Art Monthly* 196 (December): 11-12.

Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art is intended to be a sequel to *What is Appropriation?* The latter collection of essays, also edited by Rex Butler, is a highly successful anthology which examined a key artistic practice of the heyday of postmodernism—that is, appropriation in the 1980s. That collection has proved to be of enduring value: it is an excellent introduction to this trend in Australian art and hence an essential teaching tool. It has even been reprinted, which unfortunately is an all too rare achievement for a scholarly book of essays on Australian art. One can imagine, then, the publisher's enthusiasm about a sequel.

Radical Revisionism follows on from *What is Appropriation* in an intriguing manner: it addresses what most critics would characterise as the demise of postmodernism in the 1990s, and the new trend that supposedly superseded it, what is sometimes referred to as the 'return of the subject.' This shift was best diagnosed by Hal Foster in 1996 in an article appropriately titled "Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?" He argued there that a concern with subjectivity was what distinguished the art of the 1990s from high postmodernism, as he put it: "the death of the subject is dead in turn: the subject has returned in the cultural politics of different subjectivities, sexualities, and ethnicities, sometimes in old humanist guise, often in contrary forms--fundamentalist, hybrid, or . . . 'traumatic'".¹ This pervasive concern with the politics of identity, or identity politics as it was often termed, is widely interpreted as a key shift in art practice. Other terms used to describe this philosophical and artistic shift include: a new cultural politics of difference (Cornel West), and the age of multicultural translation (Homi Bhabha).

In *Radical Revisionism*, Butler's approach to this shift is very, very different. He characterises the theoretical concerns of the 1990s much more narrowly as "postcolonial revisionism." Similarly, rather than attending to shifts in art practice, Butler is concerned with how modes of interpretation shift in this period, or rather how they stay the same. Butler's key premise is that appropriation makes postcolonial revisionism possible, or rather that it is continuous with it. As Butler

puts it: “That is, for all of the opposition made between them, we can absolutely see the connection between post-modern appropriation (with its ‘death of the subject’) and post-colonial revisionism (with its ‘return of the subject’).” (12) To simplify, the connection is that the work of art is open to numerous interpretations: that is, a postmodernist appropriation of a work of art demonstrates that the original can be recontextualised or reworked and given new meaning and this also describes the process of art historical revisionism. I am leaving to one side here the more complicated theoretical armature Butler typically uses to buttress this kind of argument—Derrida’s questioning of origins, his intertwining of opposed terms, Baudrillard’s celebration of the simulacrum. While the current argument clearly follows the same track--the copy proceeds or influences the original, there is no secure underlying reality to guarantee the truth of interpretation--these ideas don’t provide much support for the inventive link between appropriation and revisionism.

While the link itself is novel, some might say eccentric, it could be argued that the basis for the link does not introduce a substantially new point. Certainly, this particular account of the work of art and the open-endedness of its interpretation is hardly an insight of the 1980s, or our own time for that matter. That the work of art is open to numerous interpretations is after all a defining feature of the aesthetic domain dating back to the very beginning of the modern system of the arts in the late eighteenth century. Curiously, Butler wants to claim this defining feature of the work of art for appropriation. Indeed, while he is prepared to sacrifice the specificity of postcolonialism—it is, by his account, an extension of postmodernist appropriation—he wants to attribute highly generalisable, non-specific features to postmodernism, presumably in order to bolster its continued relevance or significance. Although quite why this term is subject to this peculiar inflation is not explained. Under such strange circumstances, in fact, almost anything and everything can be called postmodern. Hence, Butler wants Bernard Smith to be regarded as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, and his seminal work, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, presumably infected or inflected by the parodic keynote of much postmodernism, should be viewed as a satire, Butler suggests (13).

The idea that *European Vision* could, or should, be thought of as a satire will no doubt enrage some readers. As indeed it should. There is an extraordinarily cavalier

attitude to the work of others displayed quite consistently in this collection. This attitude is most evident in the introduction, where rather than any attempt to explain or understand the work of others, or to articulate key differences and nuances of argument, all positions are blended together as an illustration of Butler's grand view about appropriation and revisionism. Excerpts from articles are then cut, often quite drastically, in order to illustrate this grand view. The first section of the book, *History Backwards*, is particularly unfortunate on this score. The debate around Bernard Smith's work is not well served by the extremely short extracts from *European Vision*, *The Necessity of Australian Art* and Peter Beilharz's book on Smith. The cavalier attitude also extends to the illustrations, or rather, the lack thereof. Many chapters in the book refer closely to works of art that are not reproduced; only one colour image illustrates each chapter (other than Butler's introduction).

Sometimes, however, there is a funny side to this attempt to conjure the grand view. For example, in an interview in the book, Butler tries to get Bernard Smith to support his somewhat errant reading of him—Smith as the first Australian postmodernist, Smith as postcolonial, postcolonial as postmodern and so forth. Rather like Ali G, or closer to home our own Norman Gunston, Butler deliberately presses along with a line of questioning that he (surely) knows will, at the very least, be rebuffed and which potentially could offend, given the ignorance displayed (feigned?) about the interviewee's position and work. For example, Butler tries to insist that Smith is propagating Butler's argument. Butler: "Romanticism arises in response to the encounter with the Antipodes," to which Smith responds: "Well that can be forced. Romanticism had most of its sources in Europe; it didn't have them in the Pacific" (75). Smith is in very good form, parrying each attempt to bend his work towards illustrating Butler's premise.

If much humour depends on deflation, then in this robust, good humoured refutation of Butler's argument, we can glimpse not only the funny side to his grandiosity, but also the rich debate about Australian art and its interpretation which at times the anthology allows to come to the fore. Certainly, in the second section of the anthology, there are some excellent essays by Tim Bonyhady, Ian Burn, Ian McLean, Nicholas Thomas, Toni Ross, Chris McAuliffe and Mary Eagle, to name just some of the standouts. Unfortunately, the one picture policy seems to be extended to epochs,

so that one essay, often on one artist, stands for a certain period of time in Australia's settler history. As the anthology gets closer to the present, the selection of artists becomes increasingly arbitrary. Why, for example, have two essays on Gordon Bennett and none on Tracey Moffatt?

Many of the essays in this section deal with Aboriginality; this is most evident in the essays on colonial artists, where the depiction of Aboriginals is a consistent theme. Surprisingly, however, in the modern period the only Aboriginal artists discussed are Bennett and Namatjira. This extraordinarily restricted representation of Aboriginal art isn't justified or mentioned. Given that the collection sets out to explore postcolonial revisionism, narrowing the set of concerns to just examining the complex debates about Aboriginality and representation would have given more depth, focus and purpose. As it stands, the key criterion for the selection of topics seems to be that the article was written in the 1990s; that it is, according to Butler, offering a 'revisionist' interpretation of Australian art; and that it contributes to the quick sprint through the history of roughly two centuries of Australian art.

Ironically perhaps, the worst flaw of the anthology is actually presented as a feature of the articles. Butler argues: "Whoever reads it [the work of art], in whatever circumstances, inevitably ends up producing a version that appears to speak to them, offer a reflection of them and their current concerns, exactly insofar as they think they are speaking for some 'original' meaning of the work." (7) This is an apt and succinct description of the way in which the different authors are treated by the editor. It is curious, and very sad, that the failure to attend to difference is presented as inevitable, rather than a failure of ethics and care.

ⁱ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1996) 209.