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Imagined Australia

Reflections around the reciprocal construction
of identity between Australia and Europe

IMAGINED
AUSTRALIA

Peter Lang

Some of the papers in this volume indicate how over the last decades multiculturalism and even more importantly Australian cultural liveliness were in a problematic and at times dramatic crisis. This was due not only to the upheaval caused by One Nation and the arguably ineffective and ambiguous response to it by the Howard government, or the Tampa incident, the harsh treatment of refugees in detention camps or the 'history wars' but rather to the absence of *significant* debates around these issues in Australia. At the same time a profound distance between the European and the Australian societies and cultures emerges consistently and in unexpected ways.

Departing from that awareness, I wonder if both these situations are due to lack of courage in accepting the challenge to explore in time, in its "nicks, disruptions and upheavals", the events that disrupt our continuity – that induce transformation. In doing so I accept Elizabeth Grosz' critique that we, in social sciences, have probably forgotten where we come from, namely *body* and *time*:

Feminists and all theorists interested in the relations between subjectivity, politics and culture, need to have a more nuanced, intricate account of the body's immersion and participation in the world if they are to develop political strategies to transform the existing social regulation of bodies, that is to change existing forms of biopower, of domination, of exploitation.

Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* in particular, in her discussion of social transformation and change, presents and discusses theory as a transformative force, but at the same time, as not effective, alone, in producing social and political transformations. For Butler social and political change will only happen if intervention, action and practices are in place. It would be reasonable to regard theory as well as art, and especially some forms of Australian art and community arts, as playing a "transformative role". Notions of interstitiality – so thoroughly explored in Joseph Pugliese's work – and notions of the vernacular character of social phenomena- again corroborate my desire to and intuition of how important it is to investigate this complex micro scenario, which, despite its apparently limited dimension, has resonances that affect a much wider context. If you bear with me for the moment and safely play the game of dispensing with what Braidotti calls *linear and binary thinking style*, one can contemplate that theory and art are at the same time, but in different ways, agencies and expressions of culture, as well as creative forces instigating changes in society. In the writing present in this volume it emerges quite clearly how writers, architects, painters, how artists in other words, have been witnesses as well as agents of transformation in their societies. To postulate that art is transformative, just as theory is it is an option certainly not undisputable but worth entertaining. But I should explain what I mean by

transformative which is here a notion far from the power of a militant, resistant or converting force. There is no judgment of value in this distinction but simply transformation here is rather “transposition” also in Braidotti’s sense but not only. *Transformative* here is encompassing for example a “*translative*” role, meaning by this that theory and art are capable with language to open up unitary subjective positions and, in that sense, to intervene powerfully in society. They do so by *translating*-in the sense of multiplying possible understandings – in artistic expression, multiple identities, in the sense of Anzaldúa’s. I remember once Michael Clyne proposing to call “*artlect*” the discourse that is prerogative of the artist.

This type of power is a notion related to fantasy. If fantasy plays a role in theory and art, and by fantasy here I don’t mean only Butler’s concept of fantasy but also the imaginative dimension that theory and art produce (referring to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the *uncanny strangeness* that art is so capable of re-playing and exposing us to), and if we accept that fantasy structures relationality, then theory and art are profoundly political and socially performative practices. If one accepts that theory and art have a role in change then it is important to capture how they move people to change.

To return to the first statement in this section where the state of crisis in Australian debates on one hand and the distance Europe seems to stand at from Australia are indicated as problematic, here it is proposed to move away from moralizing or judgmental thinking but rather to generate what Braidotti calls ‘extra-textual experiences’. If one concedes that life is always politics, that life is indeed about the “perseverance of one or many groups at the cost of others”, as Grosz puts it, to be victorious does not produce an erasure of the past and in fact the victorious has to deal with even the extinct or thought extinct past. Nothing is lost or obliterated, not even by the violence or the deliberate will to define the colonized, gendered, and racialised as such: the past has “the capacity to disrupt the present with forces the present has not actualized”. Resistance in Australian society, that over many years has seen dominant affirmation of discourses of racism and discrimination, has emerged in various forms and certainly also in theoretical and artistic expression. Resistance is indeed always latent in society and has been acted out also by using the past for overcoming the present.

I hope readers of this collection will draw, from the multiple modes of theory present in this book, the pleasure and inspiration that the rich complexity echoed here, in the reflections offered to them, has provided to us involved in the Imagined Australia research project.