

TEXT Vol 5 No 1 (April 2001)

Reviews contents

- Susan Broadhurst *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*
review by Jondi Keane page 2
- Nick Mansfield *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*
reviewed by Patrick West page 4

Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory

review by Jondi Keane

Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory

Susan Broadhurst

Cassell, London and New York: 1999

ISBN 0 304 70585 3 (hardback)

0 304 70585 1 (paperback)

197 pages, \$49.95

Many practitioners have reached a level of awareness where liminality may be used to deliberately organise their understanding and interaction with the world. Susan Broadhurst's book takes advantage of the rising tide of interest in liminal studies to emphasise the importance of taking the body seriously in contemporary practice and the spaces which have been a direct result of this seriousness. Her insight addresses the current situation where, she suggests, theory is unable to sufficiently deal with the corporeal and consequently neglects a rich source of research, discovery and meaning. She positions her inquiry such that the liminal becomes a form of resistance as well as an approach to both art and theory.

The objectives of the book are to articulate the context in which liminality operates and the advantages that noticing liminal concerns may produce. Specific discussions include

- the relation of the liminal to the unrepresentable
- the adjustment that theory, influenced by the linguistic turn, must make to include 'intersemiotic' activities as an important part of current discourse
- that liminal acts and interests resist thematic closure
- the evocation of terms with other values such as 'excitement' or 'delight' to replace the 'beautiful'.

The structure and scope of her overview is ambitious and goes a long way towards forging a discursive practice that might function outside or across the domain of the arts and extend to social, cultural and political domains as well.

Much to Broadhurst's credit, she does not attempt to create a new genre for the practice of the liminal but establishes a way of looking at the vast quantities of interactions between bodies and information. She finds the liminal among already existing re-combinations of information and she unpacks quite adeptly the overlapping edges of contemporary creative work in the second half of the book. The practice of liminality consists of taking notice of the conditions of emergence due to the complexity of cultural sites.

The scope of the overview overburdens the investigation to produce a lineage and pedigree and in doing so the liminal begins to appear as a thematic version of postmodern aesthetics - something Broadhurst explicitly tries to avoid. Broadhurst is, however, after a more subtle and more far-reaching critique that would influence the practice of theory and art. And although the tone of this more precise investigation is present in the work, she does not critically engage contemporary theory in search of the liminal, as she does when dealing so

successfully with creative works. In addition she chooses an already accepted group of canonised theorists whose texts are dealt with as discursive rather than liminal acts. The theory serves to rationalise and frame the emergence of the liminal and in doing so seems like an exercise in legitimization.

As a result the book teeters perilously on being an example of her own criticism. In an early discussion Broadhurst laments the number of 'practitioners who become impossibly complicit with the very ideas and structures they seek to deconstruct'. As a result her choice of only well-established older male theorists and her use of their work as foundational rather than liminal becomes suspect.

An oversight of Broadhurst's book is examining only the well-worn edges and leaving the outer emergent edges of culture and practice unrecognised. All of the artists she uses as examples are prominent players. It seems a shame not to articulate how fringe, alternative and younger liminal scenes work into the fray. Another important issue that is not addressed in the book but which the book raises is: How do we, collectively as a culture and singularly as practitioners, make the transition from the practice of resistance - that challenges the 'authorial forms of authority' and opens up liminal spaces - to a practice that merges aesthetic concerns with the ethics of everyday life? 'Liminal works confront, offend and unsettle', yet they must also reconnect and reconfigure. Perhaps this is beyond the scope of a critical overview.

In conclusion the book seems to suffer from an atmospheric perspective. The weather plays with the overview rendering the more current and closer creative works clearly and fully while the theory appears at a farther remove, withdrawn from detailed scrutiny like the horizon behind the haze. Although Broadhurst certainly does not need to install one uniform perspective, the critical intensity and terms of engagement should fray the edges of all practices towards their thresholds and not further alienate the subject of theory and practice. The current interest in liminality points to culture that is increasingly aware of its own abstract nature and has begun to recognise the real effects that these abstractions have upon practical applications and embodied existence.

Jondi Keane teaches cultural studies and cross-artform practice at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus.

TEXT

Vol 5 No 1 April 2001

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au

Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway

review by Patrick West

Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway

Nick Mansfield

Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000

ISBN 1-86448-939-1

207 pages, \$32.95

Perhaps the best place to begin reading this book is at the end. Excellent writing might be defined as writing able to communicate a meaningful summary of complex and anti-intuitive concepts in very few words. Nick Mansfield's Glossary to *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* achieves this level of competence without any difficulty. Signifiers weighed down by the history and multiplicity of their signifieds rest very lightly on these pages. This section is a sort of micro Keywords. Small essays as they are, the various entries can almost be taken in and understood at a glance.

I had already read this publication once, when I unexpectedly encountered it again in a pile on the bottom shelf of an inner-city Melbourne bookshop. A tower of copies rose just high enough to threaten to sway a little in the summer air. There are no doubt hopes for this paperback edition. As I write this review, the academic calendar is just beginning a new cycle. I am reminded of all of those hundreds of books that grow out of the crowded floors of university bookshops every year about now, gradually to be reduced in size as the semester grows old. Where does Mansfield's text fit into this picture of sudden emergence and subsequent diminishment?

This is a 'learning and teaching' book par excellence, particularly suitable for all of those students who might otherwise graduate out of humanities departments without the sort of basic understandings that should really be inculcated, as they certainly can be, right from the beginning. *Subjectivity* is a resource for teachers who think about the 'how' of teaching as much as about the 'why'. It made me cast my thoughts back to my own experiences as a student. 'God made you a boy but he didn't make you cut your hair short!' That explanation of the sex/gender distinction - concise and sardonic as it is - has remained etched into my mind for many years now. It was an important learning moment: a teacher's clever use of words to generate perception and retention. Mansfield's explanation of this axiomatic proposition loses nothing by comparison. Contained in the glossary, it is, like the rest of the book, admirably clear and rigorous: easy to understand.

I suspect that *Subjectivity* will very quickly become a compulsory acquisition for undergraduate subjects all over the place. The voice of a thoughtful and lively academic/lecturer/thesis supervisor speaks through all of these pages. Evidence for past subjects successfully taught can easily be found. Distilled knowledges are reiterated in user-friendly prose. Sometimes, it is almost as if private thoughts (silent attempts at comprehension) are being revised and read back to you. It's that good. Things are said differently: usefully. There are suggestive echoes and resonances contained in almost every paragraph. Phrases tend to linger in the mind. The items in the Further Reading sections at the end of each chapter are an opportunity for providing more answers, and for asking more questions. Mansfield is a superior sort of guide.

There are at least two ways of reading this book. First and foremost as a basic introduction to the work of theorists 'from Freud to Haraway' (note that provocative combination and

expanse of thought), *Subjectivity* is also a set of notes towards an enquiry into the historical, social and cultural circumstances that are responsible for our veritable obsession with subjectivity. Adding spice to the writing are the many allusions and references to current affairs and the productions of popular culture. These are not just heuristic. Accompanied by rhetorical questions that now and again become something more than rhetorical, inviting us to reflect upon what is actually happening around us in our daily lives, these allusions and references are the iceberg tips of another project. The questioning of the question 'Who am I?', might ensure that the shelf-life of this book is somewhat extended. Inevitably, however, in that same bookshop in inner-city Melbourne, Mansfield's text will eventually find itself wedged upright on the top shelves, secure and immobile. It will gradually disappear from university reading lists.

The progressive redundancy of this book would seem destined to proceed from the inside out, microwave fashion. Of the thirteen chapters, chapter six is about the work of Julia Kristeva. Sandwiched between 'Femininity' and 'Masculinity', it already has just the slightest whiff of epitaph about it. Those sections that come before Freud and after Deleuze will on this basis be the ones that lose their importance last. More expansive, and contained on plateaus that extend further into both the past and the present, they are the indices of a general interest in the problem of subjectivity that, expressed like that, shows no signs of disappearing anytime soon.

I encourage you to buy this book and to make use of it in your teaching.

Patrick West is a lecturer in writing and literature at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus. He is currently at work on his first novel.

TEXT

Vol 5 No 1 April 2001

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady

Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au