

# Any Queeries?

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‘The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to be caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.’<sup>1</sup>

Paul Taylor, possibly the most influential commentator and theorist writing about Australian art in the 1980’s, founding editor of the journal *Art & Text* and no stranger to trouble, observed:

A search for a regional Australian culture, ultimately a worthless pastime, reveals a directed impulse wherein our art is the flak of an explosion not of our making<sup>2</sup>

Elaborating, Taylor proceeds to advocate a paradigm out of which a national personality might be meaningfully extrapolated: “a carnivalesque array of copies, inversions and negatives”<sup>3</sup>, which sounds like the basis for a reasonable definition of Drag to me! It is not needlessly looking for trouble to say, a plausible reading of contemporary Australian culture is that it displays many of the attributes of a self-loathing closet queen/king, living in denial and fear of exposure. To **out** Australia is simply yielding to what theorist Judith Butler argues is trouble’s inevitability when contesting the veracity of reigning discourses. *Any Queeries* is a subjective enquiry into New World mimesis requiring only prior acknowledgement by its reader that feminist and more recently queer theorists have initiated frameworks for cultural visibility and inclusion, which have been useful to other minority groups. Within the West generally and more specifically and thus importantly in the regions adjacent to its second settlement Australia is a marginal entity, largely unseen in the exchange of ideas that make up the world of contemporary ideas. This text proposes therefore that tactics perfected by formerly invisible, disparaged urban subcultures such as that of Gays and Lesbians may be helpful in clarifying aspects of Australia’s relationship to the Asia-Pacific region as well as the culturally influential metropolitan centres of Europe and North America. The overdue outing of Australia begins then, in this instance with David van Leer’s visioning of “the closet’ and ‘coming out’ not as problem and solution, but more neutrally as two different strategies for dealing with the dominant culture”.<sup>4</sup>

That we speak and write so regularly about spectacle lends an ideological perspective to the use of the term Drag in an analysis of contemporary art and culture from the New World. The disquieting aspect of mimicry, identified by Homi Bhabha as a

tool for undermining colonial authority, may have as a precondition the presence of perceptible differentials: language, or more usually a visible indicator such as skin or body type; something in any event capable of distinguishing at a glance, the colonised from the colonising. The ‘ambivalence’ and ‘menace’ Bhabha outlines in *The Location of Culture* is in all probability an apposite tactic for peoples emerging from physical oppression: those whose country was taken from them or them from their country – Indians or Afro-Americans for example. As a feint it does not seem to work effectively for diasporic entities like Australia, Singapore or Canada. For that reason the reconceptualisation, as a *drag act*, of white Australia’s predilection for imitation and derivation seeks firstly to sketch in a *similar but different* species of copycat on existing illustrated maps of postcolonial theory.

Published explication over the past twenty years has failed to generate credible models for the localization of *double voiced* processes such as mimicry or appropriation within the Australian context as it is viewed from outside. To make meaningful the re-enactments that are pervasive forms of expression in New World societies (particularly this one), we are now obliged to look elsewhere – subcultures that have evolved successful strategies for mitigating marginality – the queers for example. **Queerness, unlike ethnicity or gender, need not a discernable otherness be.** To consider the *similar but different* predicament of spotting an Australian among a crowd of British and Americans and picking the *fruit in a suit* on the floor of the stock exchange, is to concede the equivalent invisibility and overlapping constructed-ness of the entities *White Australian* and *Queer*. As the basis for developing a discourse sympathetic to the difficulties faced by contemporary Australian artists – international recognition and topicality for their work among others, the analogy of **White Australian = Queer** draws on the authority of scholars who have recognised in camp certain attributes of post-modernism: irony and bricolage most obviously. As an authorial category Drag or the wearing of the signifiers of one body by another, begins for the modern epoch in the molly houses of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, making it prescient within the context of post-modernity. Dragging, from the point of view of many spectators *resembles* the appropriationist strategies much in vogue among New World artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and episodically since.

As cultural historian David Van Leer observes:

Only after we examine critically why things do or do not seem similar or for what reasons and to whose benefit – will we be able precisely to locate, read and

activate the potential for opposition that lies throughout the margin.<sup>5</sup>

If nothing else, the comparison of *camp* with white Australian sets up a framework of analysis that allows us to determine the relative efficacy of different strategies for being seen and heard. It is a contentious but acceptable assertion: gay and lesbian Australia has been reasonably successful at acquiring international visibility and relevance for its self-expression and heterosexual white Australia, to an equivalent degree has not. Consequently in part, the purpose of this text must be the scrutiny of models for cultural production that are apparently alike: drag and appropriation, and to locate in the successes of one potential palliates for the failure of the other.

To acculturate second settlement Australia as queer/camp is to retrieve it from irrelevant provincialism by providing Australia with a discursive model located in its own globally acknowledged subcultural performance genres. A claim, as likely to be true or false as any other currently in circulation purporting to make sense of "the way in which imitation and derivation is privileged by the pre-existing social and symbolic order which all peripheral cultural production occurs."<sup>6</sup> The billing of second settlement Australia as a *drag act* works to highlight points of difference between it and other Western-identifying societies and helps to establish the framework for a purposeful relationship to and with the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. If cultural norms are policed in exactly the same way as gender ones – as a means of buttressing existing hegemonies, than it follows that the tactics for successfully contesting one may be gainfully applied to another. Empirically we know that the voice with which *out* marginal groups speak to power can contest the authority of that control over them, while that of those *in the closet* works only towards its consolidation. On the basis of Queer Australia's modest success at obtaining visibility and respect for its culture abroad, we may deduce that drag has counter-hegemonic potential while appropriation evidently does not. Judith Butler, in her response to *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's 1991 film about drag balls in New York City pinpoints aspects of Drag that are convergent with attributes of the corrosive mimicry contemporaneously asserted by Homi Bhabha: notably the critical distinction between repetition and re-representation. Butler writes:

This is not appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake – and sometimes succeeds.<sup>7</sup>

By comparison, the cocktail of borrowings and quotations characterising supposedly advanced art from second settlement Australia rarely if ever exceeds the sum total of its borrowed parts – its logic, self-defeating because hegemonies are known, as Antonio Gramsci tells us, to propagate themselves through *rearticulation*. Peggy Phelan, also writing about *Paris is Burning*, likewise acknowledges drag and dressing up in general as a "means of investigating the politics of culture, knowledge and power"<sup>8</sup> Drag accordingly has the capacity to reconstitute copying as 'liberation aesthetics' while the hostage discourse of appropriation runs the risk, as Terry Smith surmises of "subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values."<sup>9</sup>

Highlighting a further distinction between queer and unqueer'd tactics Van Leer calls attention "to the extent that much camp humor is not appropriation but re-appropriation – a recapturing of something that was already part of gay cultural heritage."<sup>10</sup> Van Leer's insight enables new possibilities for artists engaging with influential models of cultural production as the source for their own and perhaps more importantly linking it to other contentious issues, such as the growing debate around copyright enforcement and peer to peer file sharing. Furthermore, Van Leer's description of queer re-appropriation allows for guilt free unconditional access to core material of the Western tradition, particularly for those without sustained access to the artifacts that transmit it. Drag, not only clearly insinuates performance in the versioning of master narratives; it also generates opportunities for the creative mistranslations of those narratives.

The embodiment of one's country as masculine or feminine, illustrated by the terms fatherland and motherland clearly genders the state, suggesting that both its performance and constructedness are comparable to that of gender. This extends the work of scholars who have transcribed Judith Butler's *Theory of Performativity* onto other kinds of group identity.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, gender hierarchies share many of the characteristics of other pecking orders further expanding upon the areas where the concerns of New World artists overlap with those of other historically marginalized groups.

Many may find that the paradigm of Drag as capitalised by this text counterproductive. Contaminated by the misogyny of some gay men, particularly when filtered through the performance of woman by a man hostile to her, Drag is as problematic a metaphor as it is vivid. The enterprise of *Any Queeries*, however, does not on this occasion concern itself with either the depoliticisation of Drag when excised from the social conditions that produced it, nor does it have space to accommodate the debate about Drag's potential to degrade its subject. This inquiry seeks only to trace the possibility for creative expression that occurs when moving from the act of Dragging to the concepts that are suggested by it. Before addressing its celebrated status as an adversary of fixed, exclusivist gender definitions, it is important to touch upon the way in which contemporary usage has expanded upon the conventional definition of Drag.

Drag, normally a noun is derived from the Dutch word *dragen*, a verb meaning to wear or carry: a connotation that goes a long way to explaining its traditional association, at least in English, with clothing. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Drag and the adoption by one gender of the garments of another were synonymous, finding expression in popular working class entertainments and a species of usually, but not always – queer performer. In the here and now dragging (vb) has emerged as a class of open source imaging freeware based on one of several characterising attributes of the romantic artist identified by T.S. Elliot – the temporary extinction of personality. It allows the Drag'eur to overwrite established codes for representing ethnicity, gender and the orthodoxies of received history. Dragging facilitates the generation of a multiplicity of fictionalised selves – authored in part by media representations and proliferated by the diversity of personal taste in multicultural and multiracial societies.<sup>12</sup>

It is a given that cultural taboos against ambiguous genders promotes the authority of sanctioned ones. So it should come as no surprise that the withholding of institutional legitimacy is a tool used against both unconventional gender representations and most forms of creative expression beyond those without explicit relationships to sanctioned models of cultural production. In respect to gender, Drag over time has helped reframe important aspects of the discourse between what is understood by the terms "imitation" and "original". Moreover, it provides a promising model for recasting others where these terms are also in wide circulation. In *Bodies that Matter – On the discursive limits of sex* Judith Butler argues that cross-dressing,

when it is men in drag as women, what we have is the destabilization of gender itself, a destabilization that is denaturalising and that calls into question the claims of normativity and originality by which gender and sexual oppression sometimes operate.<sup>13</sup>

Minority groups have a lot to learn from each other and the unacknowledged whiteness of much Australian culture blinds Australians to their own minority status in the larger scheme of things. As a way of amending the framework for its expression author and feminist theorist Monique Wittig has frequently proposed altering the grammar by which cultural expression is discussed.<sup>14</sup> Ergo Drag. For those who scrutinise art for its motifs and motives, this could be an important first step in ameliorating the marginality of much of that generated by second settlement Australians, particularly since the 1960s. Queer cultural production with an honest relationship to its own constituency - a magazine like *THEY SHOOT HOMOS DON'T THEY?*, or an artist like Leigh Bowery have an integrity exceeding that of their heterosexual equivalents, from which much can be extrapolated. The quest for concomitance with influences emanating from New York or Berlin is futile as Smith accurately determines:

Their character is distorted because acquaintance with them is late, usually with the mature form of the style. The early innovative struggles are simply not available outside the limited cultural situations in which they arise.<sup>15</sup>

Smith continues "Like its political history the development of Australian art is typified by variations on the theme of dependence."<sup>16</sup> To contemporise for an audience unfamiliar with it, Smith's call more than thirty years ago for a questioning of the terminology by which the hegemony of the centre reiterates itself, I refer the reader to another enforced dependency - that of women upon men. The contentiousness of both this example and its broad generalization is meant to expand upon the discourse of commonalities between unempowered groups and their overlapping historical experiences. From which I may productively conclude that the requirement for critical visibility placed upon Australian artists is to *quote* from processes originating elsewhere can be purposefully allegorised by reference to *the demand that women reflect the autonomous power of the masculine subject.*<sup>17</sup> Giving us some idea of the redundant orthodoxy of much second settlement Australian art and the source of its innate conservatism and subsequent lack of interest to others. The attribution of universality by Australian artists to what are in fact values particular to powerful transnational interests both complicates this citation while at the same time more closely aligning it with the fiction of male autonomy.

Butler in writing about the masculine subject says "it only appears to originate meanings and therefore to signify."<sup>18</sup> Or as another Butler - the Australian critic Rex - was to write: "Indeed, such is the 'strawman' nature of most post-colonial revisions that it is possible that the centre did not have the power attributed to it until its critique"<sup>19</sup>

"Recent criticism has begun to read dialogues between disenfranchised peoples as a form of transgressive discourse, one not determined by dominant cultural norms."<sup>20</sup>

In returning to my initial characterisation of white Australia as an in denial closet queen/king, I wish to highlight the remedial effect that a queer acculturation of second settlement Australian culture might have on its international marketability, relevance and status. I now propose to offer a generalised account of how Australia's *closeting* might be received by others and speculate on interpretations that could as a consequence, be applied to it.

Generally, a closet queen is someone who will not admit that they are queer, taking extraordinary measures to avoid detection by their family and friends. It is a form of masquerade, and usually proceeds by exaggerating those aspects of heterosexuality that are presumed to be its signifiers. Typically, this sort of *passing* involves a hyperbolic mixture of physical cues reinforced by certain behavioral attributes that tend to be associated with the identity to which one aspires. Sounding familiar? 'Super sizing' and a self-consciousness amplification of fashionable positions from the white tribal homelands have long been identifying facets of second settlement Australian art. Revealingly, Terry Smith identifies overemphasis as a key indicator of provincialism:

that while the artist pays exaggerated homage to the conceptions of art history and the standards for "quality", "significance", "interest" etc., of the metropolitan centre, he has by definition of his situation, no way of (from his distance) affecting those conceptions and standards. He may satisfy his local audience, but to the international audience he is mostly invisible, sometimes amusingly exotic.<sup>21</sup>

It is not so much that appropriation is so heavily promoted a strategy for Australian artists it is more what these obsequious expressions of kinship with distant centres of global culture might tell us about *their* Australia. In nature mimicry and copying are expressions of crisis or camouflage. So paradoxically, what this might reveal about Australia is not sophistication and connectedness to advanced concepts, but rather disconnectedness, vulnerability, and an anxiety as old as the second settlement. Passing in this sense refers to Australia's *tragic* aspirations to be regarded as an extension of the European and North American cultural space, and reflects its craving for acceptance (and protection) by them as such. In the real world, these displays are usually defensive mechanisms intended to conceal vulnerable creatures from predation. In the context of Australia, a possible interpretation might be that the mimicry of European and American art is intended to signal cultural whiteness to the neighbours, and is construed by them as denial of our geography and an impediment to meaningful exchange.

Historically, Australia has been viewed as betwixt its 'great and powerful friends' Britain and America and in concluding, I wish to expand upon the metaphor of *neither one nor the other* by

again locating it in what I believe are rectifying queer parameters. A consensus has emerged that a transvestite cannot be adequately described by the terms *woman* or *man*, but must be evoked by reference to the *in-betweenness* that stands for the temporality of their new identity, and accordingly its potential for multiplicity and nuance. I am not making trouble, to return to the Butler quote with which I began, by picturing Australia as a Drag Queen or King; rather, I draw upon Marjorie Garber's claim that "*transvestism is a vestimentary code, in Barthes's sense, a rhetorical system of signification.*"<sup>22</sup> New critical structures need to be developed to make sense of the appropriationist predisposition of much art that Australia incubates as a reflection of itself. The inability to productively contextualise the hyper-reflexivity of contemporary Australian art making means that it remains to all but parochial stakeholders *lite white* at best; ersatz and unconvincing by default. Theorists, curators and cultural entrepreneurs, in their quest for expanded visibility and relevance for the local product, may find that Drag provides the exemplar where "*the queen will out-woman women.*"<sup>23</sup>

What clarity this text possesses owes a considerable debt to R.S. (bedankt liefje)

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Judith Butler *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York & London, 1999, pp., XXVII
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Taylor quoted by Rex Butler in *Imants Tillers – The Last Australian Painter*. Jan Manton Art, Brisbane, 2006. Unpaginated.
- <sup>3</sup> Taylor in *Imants Tillers – The Last Australian Painter*
- <sup>4</sup> David Van Leer, *The Queening of America – Gay Culture in a Straight Society*. Routledge, New York & London, 1995. p. 5
- <sup>5</sup> Van Leer, *The Queening of America – Gay Culture in a Straight Society*. p. 15
- <sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha 'The Third Space' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed) *Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1990.
- <sup>7</sup> Judith Butler *Bodies that Matter – On the discursive limits of Sex*. Routledge, New York & London, 1993. p. 137
- <sup>8</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 94
- <sup>9</sup> Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, Vol 13 September 1974, pp. 54 – 59.
- <sup>10</sup> Van Leer, *The Queening of America – Gay Culture in a Straight Society*
- <sup>11</sup> See Zillah Eisenstein 'Writing Bodies on the Nation for the Globe' in Sita Ranchod-Nilsson & Mary Anne Tetreault (eds), *Women, States and Nationalism* Routledge, New York & London, 2000.
- <sup>12</sup> Gary Carsley 'Drag/Mash', *Eyeline*, No. 62 Eyeline Publish Ltd, Brisbane, 2006 p. 48
- <sup>13</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter – On the discursive limits of Sex*, p., 128
- <sup>14</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston. 1992

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *The Provincialism Problem*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *The Provincialism Problem*, p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Paraphrasing several feminist scholars who have used this construction or similar expressions to connote equivalent forms of historical obligation.

<sup>18</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 57

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *The Provincialism Problem*, p. 55

<sup>20</sup> Van Leer, *The Queening of America – Gay Culture in a Straight Society*, p. 157

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *The Provincialism Problem*,

<sup>22</sup> Majorie Garber *Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, Routledge, New York & London, 1992, p. 157

<sup>23</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter – On the discursive limits of Sex*, p. 132