

The Anti-Aesthetic Essays on Postmodern Culture

Edited and Introduced by
Hal Foster.
Bay Press, Port Townsend,
Washington, 1983.

*I*t is now common knowledge to say that in these eclectic post-modern times it is getting increasingly difficult to tell a radical from a conservative. For better or worse the illusion of a single unifying vision of progressive culture has been shattered and in the wake of this cultural fragmentation the nature of authority (and audience) becomes an issue.

Not only is the reality of the modern presently under attack from all sides but also the reductive and 'correct' view of history which has led up to it. These days it is hard to decide whether a 'traditional' form is being brought back from the grave, radically, to cause doubts about a merely functional world or simply as a wilful denial of contemporary history and a conservative assumption of continuity.

Many artists today have rediscovered the single most important lesson of modernism (and the driving force behind it) - that meaning is not inherent in an object and that 'meaningfulness of meaningfulness' is the result. This and the fact that they are exploiting the ambiguity of the artwork in such a complex cultural mo-

ment, has caused critics to make an attempt to re-define the role of criticism.

With culture fragmenting and the art market booming, criticism finds itself somehow out-smarted and in disarray, and this collection of essays edited by Hal Foster, with contributions by Jürgen Habermas, Kenneth Frampton, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Gregory L Ulmer, Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Edward W Said, seems symptomatic of this confusion.

'Though diverse, these essays share many concerns: a critique of western representation(s) and modern "supreme fictions"; a desire to think in terms sensitive to difference (of others without opposition, of heterogeneity without hierarchy); a scepticism regarding autonomous "spheres" of culture or separate "fields" of experts; an imperative to go beyond formal affiliations to trace social affiliations (the institutional "density" of the text in the world); in short, a will to grasp the present nexus of culture and politics and to affirm a practice resistant both to academic modernism and political reaction.' (Hal Foster).

Needless to say, the 'will to grasp and to affirm a resistant practice' is another way of saying that most of the critics writing here seem to be nostalgic for the centrality of criticism as an activity of judging and ordering cultural production fit for consump-

tion, within the terms defined by criticism. Thus, a sense of the pessimism of marginalised intellectuals pervades these writings, exemplified here (as elsewhere) by those of Jean Baudrillard.

The opposite extreme is represented by the (much quoted) contribution by Edward W Said who sees the only possible role for art, literature and criticism as one of interference and intervention. With a keen (contextual) awareness of his audience and an appropriately irreverent attitude, Said uses his knowledge to undermine this position, that of his authority and that of the rest of the book (it is no surprise his is the last essay before being returned into the world or back to the beginning of the text).

Whilst awaiting the book which starts from the writing of Said, it would appear that what we (post-modern artists) have to be most grateful for is that with the publication of *this* book, the terms of the post-modern debate (even the term 'post-modern' itself) are rendered intellectually acceptable. Thus having read it, and it is essential to, it leaves us free to work out new ways of 'breaking the law'.

Art in Ruins

Also published by the Pluto Press in the UK under the title *Post-modern Culture* 1984, £4.95.

The Anti-Aesthetic is truly an impressive anthology. The essays by Baudrillard and Frampton alone are enough to merit the purchase. Read more. 2 people found this helpful. These essays express the sense that definitions and distinctions are blurring and fluid in postmodern society, which is a common theme throughout the book. The writing also frequently addresses discourses outside of the art world, which is another element of the expanded roles of art and theory. The writing can be a little dry at times, but overall I think it's worth the read, and a great reference for postmodern philosophy. Read more. 7 people found this helpful. Preview "The Anti-Aesthetic by Hal Foster. The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. by. Hal Foster (Editor) The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism Craig Owens A Remarkable Oversight A La Recherche du R cit Perdu The Visible and the Invisible Discusses the intersection of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodern critique of representation. Owens is interested in a Lacanian context of feminism, specifically in terms of Saussurian structuralist linguistics.