

'Subterranean influence': Debating the Life of Ursula Hoff, Art Historian

Review of:

Sheridan Palmer. *Centre of the Periphery. Three European Art Historians in Melbourne*. Australian Scholarly Publishing. 2009.

Colin Holden. *The Outsider: A Portrait of Ursula Hoff*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing. 2009.

I was taking coffee with a senior member of the Canberra arts fraternity. 'Just bought the new Ursula Hoff book as they were putting it out on the bookstand across the road', I gestured, pointing at the elegant citadel of the National Gallery of Australia. 'Couldn't put it down last night', I said, referring to a smartly designed tome by Colin Holden. 'Oh, Hoff', came the reply, 'well she was really like a god when I was young. Her word was like the Law'. 'Well', I replied, 'you had better read this book'.

Two books have been published in the past year on the topic of Ursula Hoff. Both provide different versions of the life story and 'soft power' (my term) or 'subterranean influence' (Palmer 198) exerted by Hoff in the Melbourne art community, a long-lasting influence that has been noted by many working in the cultural sphere.¹ One is a deeply personal and occasionally prurient account by Colin Holden of the German (but British born) art historian who emigrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1939, where she first took up a post at Women's College. The historian author had access to the private diaries and notes that were kept for a part of Hoff's life, and his background in the history of the print and connoisseurship creates a vivid and lively account that supports Hoff's own predilections. The other, by Sheridan Palmer, an art historian, is based on her PhD dissertation undertaken jointly in the departments of Art History and History at the University of Melbourne. The latter study is therefore more dry, but it provides a tempered and broader cultural history. It is also a more expansive and comparative account, examining the backgrounds and impacts of two other war-time émigrés to Melbourne, the Viennese Franz Philipp and the Irishman Joseph Burke (appointed inaugural Herald Chair of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne in 1946). Hoff was appointed as Keeper of Prints by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1943, but the impact of her scientific training, publications, collecting and connoisseurship meant that her lecturing and judgments had much wider repercussions than simply within a gallery setting. Later she was the Felton Bequest adviser based in London,

¹ It provides the focus of a positive and brief one page review of Holden's book by Professor Sasha Grishin: 'The outsider: A portrait of Ursula Hoff', *Imprint. Print Council of Australia. Annual Report*, 2009.

and it is this London period that provides the novelty of Holden's well written book, full of word images, lyrical prose and colourful vignettes.

Philipp and Burke, together with the Australian-born Bernard Smith, created the first department of Fine Arts in Australia at the University of Melbourne in the 1940s. Hoff was an occasional lecturer there and is remembered fondly by senior scholars including Professor Sasha Grishin (Australian National University).² Hoff looks out forcefully, centre stage, on the cover of Palmer's book cover. Although the author paints fine sketches of Philipp and Burke, one senses that it is Hoff who really interests her. Hoff is credited on that dustjacket in being 'instrumental in bringing European art to the Australian public'. Herein lies much of Palmer's passion in writing the book; a palpable love of art and a deep interest in provenance, collecting, dealing, and the back stage of museology, including the politics, achievements and disappointments of professional careers. Palmer is intrigued by the interlinked 'importance of human and cultural traffic to the Antipodes and its impact on the development of our culture' (ix). Equally important to her account is the intersection of 'the alliance of culture, education and politics' in shaping the practices of art history in Australia (177). This emphasis is also apparent from the small but very fine black and white and colour images that illustrate the argument; about half of them are about people, the other about paintings and sculptures, little 'object biographies' in themselves. Palmer is interested very broadly in the diaspora of people and things, from small medieval sculpture, some of which ended up in Melbourne, to the whole Warburg library, 600 crates of it, shipped to London. She writes nearly fifty pages regarding the passage of art historian émigrés generally to London and the United States. This focus on the broad picture is useful, as it shows how interlinked the war-time intellectual diaspora was, but it distracts a little from the focus on Melbourne.

Both books are firmly set within the cultural landscape of Australia, dominated by coastal and suburban living. Australia has long exhibited a high level of home ownership; by 1890 almost half of the population were home-owners. Palmer creates a wonderful expression - 'dionysian consumerism' - to describe post-war life in Australia. Her book is really about views of 'cultural progress' (229) after the war and how émigré culture contributing to the remaking of social and cultural horizons. Joseph Burke wrote of Australia that it was the 'Cinderella of the Dominions' (78). Although Palmer does not take sides herself, she makes good use of contemporary sources to indicate the depth of feeling at the time regarding the impact of quotidian life and suburban culture. She quotes journalist Brian Penton, who believed that Australia was a country of 'fair average' people who stood 'at the crossroads' of mediocrity' (79). The place of women and the matter of amateurism is relevant here. Hoff as a curator and an historian would have run up and against this at all times; her frustrations at petty bureaucracy that had little or no understanding of the work of a professional curator appear in both texts. The historian Beverly

² Communication with Professor Grishin, October 2009.

Kingston has noted in a more general context: 'As consumers of culture, women may have been disproportionately influential. Indeed, it is possible that the middle-brow tastes and values of Australian society, then and since, are related to a tendency to assign culture as women's work, while denying them the resources and experience to do it well'.³ Hoff had the experience and frequently demanded the resources to overturn this conjuncture.

Neither books are studies in the detailed methods and techniques of art history. There is much in Palmer's on the notion of *Weltgeist*, 'the unity of culture and the universal spirit' and the humanist notion of interlinked ethical, artistic and intellectual abilities that characterised Art History in the inter-war period (3).

Palmer is clearer on the details of the new Viennese School than regarding Panofskian iconography. To Palmer, the latter method is mainly about 'contextual historiography' (18) or 'the Panofskian perspective' (139), contextualising lives of artists historically – but this might have been sharpened and the particular devices and impacts of these figures set out. What is clear from the primary sources that Palmer cites is that Hoff was equally a connoisseur who linked a finely grained understanding of form and history with her engagement with materiality – for example, in Hoff's own words, a Liotard she acquired for the National Gallery of Victoria indicated 'exquisite taste allied to meticulous craftsmanship' (141). Most interesting is Palmer's illumination of the impact of historical methods interacting with personal memories and also regional cultural histories, when particular art works triggered sets of associations. For example, the Rembrandt and William Blake drawings and water-colours in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria 'sparked Hoff's memories of her past, fragments of the Old World'. The art works became a type of 'prop' to 're-assert 'the self within an alien environment' (96).

Elsewhere Palmer reveals how Hoff also deployed an atemporality that was humanist in its emphasis – of John Brack's painting *Tailorshop*, she wrote that it 'has no before or after. Form reveals the whole story... [it] is not concerned with narrative action but with a state of consciousness' (184). It has become fashionable to denounce such musings as insufficiently theorised and not socially located, but Hoff is working with her own humanist ethos and prevailing cultural milieu. It is hardly surprising that Hoff's favourite Australian writer was Patrick White (1912-1990), whose sometimes difficult prose matches the complexity of the psychological and social conflict he describes. One of her favourite novels was White's *The Aunt's Story* (1948), the narrative of an Australian spinster who wanders off into decaying vestiges of the Old World. Other images are presented in Palmer's book of the highly aestheticised attitudes developed by émigrés around images of the Australian countryside – Burke compared Australia to 'a landscape designed by Henry Moore and coloured at sunset by Graham Sutherland. The Surrealists merely painted the landscapes of a dream world; Australia realised them' (154). Such asides are

³ Beverley Kingston, 'Women in Nineteenth Century Australian History', *Labour History*, no. 67, November 1994, 91.

valuable in helping build the picture of how Australia was imagined, and how the language of art itself helped form cultural preconceptions and understandings, which clearly have flown over into post-war and also more recent theatre, film and television.

Palmer brings alive very effectively the confluence of disciplines and practices that animated post war Australian cultural life; the Australian poet A. D. Hope lecturing on William Blake, for example. Franz Philipp she characterises as practicing an art history more concerned with the relationship between beholder and image (165). Her text is quite persuasive concerning the real barriers that faced women art historians; Panofsky wrote to Hoff from the USA to tell her not to bother competing in applications against the men who were queuing for posts. Lengthy and disturbing narratives of Nazi persecution are used effectively to underline a range of Jewish scholars' subject positions once they reached Australia. Hoff was half Jewish and able to leave Hamburg relatively easily. Philipp was interned in Dachau before gaining papers for England. We learn that Australia turned away the composer Schönberg, and that we might also have gained Pevsner, who came close to arriving in the country (37). There are many interesting asides presented on the creation of the new National Gallery of Victoria, a place which Joseph Burke hoped would make 'the man in the street and his family ... feel at home' (149), with restaurants and children's spaces – very much like the newly built Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Queensland, today. There are fascinating comments on the matter of amateurism in the arts; the issue of the public service mentality, clocking on and off for work, having to apply to public servants for leave.

Both books raise important issues of the function and challenge of writing cultural history, as well as biography. Holden and Palmer make extensive use of diaries, letters and other private correspondence to create their history of Hoff and others, to reveal the 'true' figures, as it were. Palmer writes of Hoff: 'it is debatable whether she ever fully emerged from an introspective silence usually associated with an outsider' (75); Holden makes outsider status the very title of his book. Palmer's text is less about Hoff's way of researching, writing and operating – although fine accounts are presented of her rigorous cataloguing and other curatorial methods - than her subject position, raising an interesting point – to what degree do subject positions propel theoretical and methodological positions, before a notion of identity politics and the 'ficto-critical' voice transformed ways of presenting oneself in the world? Of another period of migration to Australia, the early nineteenth century, David McCooey has written of the function of the psychic effects of migration, 'pre-existing autobiographical forms of the journal and the letter as modes of self-representation to respond to the psychic effects of displacement'.⁴ Such modes become, to the biographers Palmer and Holden, central to their investigation.

⁴ David McCooey, 'Autobiography' in Peter Pierce (ed), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne et al, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 324

In the case of Ursula Hoff and Franz Philipp, the tension of synchronic and diachronic time emerges in Palmer's analysis. Australian cultural history in the 1940s did not yet sense the 'deep time' of Aboriginal culture but instead authors such as Eleanor Dark (*The Timeless Land*, 1941) presented the country as 'timeless'.⁵ Both Hoff and Philipp were intensely interested in the question of indigenous injustice, the representation of Aboriginal figures in contemporary Australian art, and Hoff in later life was concerned that the cult of indigenous paintings might become a hollow fad with no real benefit for indigenous Australians. There is much here that runs parallel to the thinking and writing of Nobel Laureate Patrick White. His *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) included the 'Alf Dubbo' figure, in fact a 'stolen generations' child who is sexually abused by a priest. White imagines an Australia in which Christian, Jewish and indigenous religious systems interact – all of this in the early 1960s.

Holden is particularly fine on bringing out the frustration involved in dealing with a complacent and snobbish Australian cultural establishment after the war, a source of great annoyance to Hoff, who detested the marriage of wealth, power and philistinism that pervaded the art world, including elements of unthinking anti-semitism (40). There are a great many parallels with Hoff the part-Jewish outsider and Patrick White the homosexual returned émigré. Like Hoff, White was simultaneously excited by Australia's rawness and possibility, but also railed against its conservatism, snobberies and hatred of difference. He despised 'industrialist Philistines' and property developers, rich but stupid society figures, the un-thinking press barons, and the jingoistic nature of the Bicentennial in 1988. Much of White's writing identifies the menace that lies at the heart of Australian niceties and conservatism, and the assumption that Australian egalitarianism and sameness is necessarily generous. Hoff, too, in her private communication picked up on certain utilitarian threads amongst everyday Australia – 'no imagination' (Holden 21) she wrote; 'in her eyes one of the characteristics of Australia was a certain hardness' (21). Hoff described the François Boucher painting and its companion that she herself suggested that the National Gallery of Victoria purchase as 'real Rich Men's pictures' (57).

The French critic and historian Jacques Barzun (b. 1907) gave a paper in 1954 which expressly addressed the challenge of writing cultural history. In 'Cultural History: a Synthesis' Barzun outlined the shift from 'state-ridden' histories to those privileging underlying economic theory during the course of the nineteenth century.⁶ He rather brilliantly argued that the devastation of World War I, which was in effect an 'industrial effort', led to the growing understanding of struggle, interests and ideology. As intellectuals sought refuge in Paris bars or Capri beaches,

⁵ Philip Mead, 'Nation, literature, location', in Pierce, 554

⁶ J. Barzun 'Cultural history as a synthesis' [Paper delivered before the European History Section of the American Historical Association, 1954], in F. Stern (ed), *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*, Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1956, 387-402.

they reflected on cultural differences, Freud's unconscious mind and the intangible but very real 'influence of habits, assumptions, and beliefs'.⁷ Within this framework, 'cultural history' replaced the old-fashioned idea of 'manners and morals' with specialist graduate studies being created in which 'culture' came to mean something different to an historian than an anthropologist. Barzun provided us in 1954 with a warning that a cultural historian must have an ability to see the whole field in order to produce meaningful comparisons: 'cultural life is both intricate and emotionally complex. One must be steeped in the trivia of a period, one must be a virtual intimate of its principal figures, to pass judgment on who knew what, who influenced whom, how far an idea was strange or commonplace, or so fundamental and obvious as to pass unnoticed ... The cultural historian lives imaginatively in his own culture and also in that he has made his own by study... Just as in biography we take for granted the subject's daily routine of hair-combing and tooth-brushing, so in history we take for granted the great dull uniformities of vegetative behavior'.⁸ As with Patrick White, food culture was an essential part of every day life for Hoff and clearly a type of connoisseurship in itself. Holden's detailed account of her dining habits and judgements of other's tastes in wine are entertaining and appropriate, but do we really need to know what varieties of African violets she liked to propagate (73)? Here perhaps Holden is describing the quiet pleasures of the domestic sphere as a necessity that Hoff had to embrace for personal and psychological reasons, and he links it nicely with her academic study of Dutch art and the representation of the interior, in which she tested its didactic or allegorical dimensions (77). As with White, the domestic sphere was not unproblematic for Hoff – it frequently contained a demented mother – and she always saw above and beyond it; it was not an end in itself.

Holden's book, although a fascinating account, is written for a general audience, not necessarily other art historians. It is difficult to describe *Country Life* even in its early years when scholars frequently wrote for it, as a 'scholarly magazine' (99) and post modern historians do not claim 'previously neglected artists as revolutionaries' (103), rather they question the ground on which such claims are made. Palmer's work, whilst providing a compelling account of the practice of Art History in post-war Melbourne, has a tendency to drift into the cognate areas of collecting and intra-personal networks about which she has a wide-ranging knowledge; she is a scholar with a keen sense of the history of institutional politics and personal friendship networks. That two completely different texts have been published on the topic of post-war Australian-based art historians indicates how wide-ranging their cultural influence in spheres from scholarship to collecting has been. Further work might now be undertaken on exactly what approaches to art historical method, from iconography to spectator positions, shaped the way in which

⁷ Barzun, 389.

⁸ Barzun, 394-97.

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Review of Palmer, *Centre ...* and Holden, *The Outsider*

local scholars were trained and works of art interpreted, and how this approach was modulated by new voices in the 1970s and 1980s.

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