

RABINOW, PAUL & GEORGE E. MARCUS WITH  
 JAMES D. FAUBION & TOBIAS REES.  
*Designs for an anthropology of the  
 contemporary*. 140 pp., bibliogr. London,  
 Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2009.  
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Read in conventional academic fashion, *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary* is a very good book, four prominent anthropologists' often sparkling exploration of important currents in, predicaments of, and possibilities for cultural anthropology today. Paul Rabinow and George Marcus have played leading roles in some of the currents under discussion, in the process progressing from (stellar) rebels to (rebellious) senior figures. Jim Faubion, once a student of Rabinow and long a colleague of Marcus, has substantial engagements with both academic philosophy and poetry. Tobias Rees, a student of Rabinow's and of the medical sciences, frames the book and facilitates the exchange. At issue is whether and how cultural anthropology can engage the contemporary; what resources might the discipline muster to interrogate the way life is lived here and now?

Owing in no small part to the efforts of Rabinow and Marcus over the years, the issue has become familiar, and may appear domesticated. But if anthropology is an essential mode of understanding, as anthropologists must believe, and if our contemporary is on the table, then the question is not merely professional (whither the discipline?) or broadly speaking social/political (how are we to think about life in the metropolis?), but existential (how are we to be thinkers?). The great virtue and real drama of *Designs* is that it confronts the threat entailed in the question.

Which is to say that reading *Designs* in conventional academic fashion misses something important. The book is a collection of dialogues, and as such begs to be read dramatically. As intellectual theatre, this book is not just good; it teeters on the edge of greatness. Especially for anybody at all familiar with the cut and thrust of cultural anthropology in the United States over the last long generation, the dialogues make it sometimes uncomfortably clear that intellectual history is always also the history of intellectuals, that this 'abstract' academic discourse not only asks existential questions, but raises existential stakes for actual individuals. The authors struggle to think together amidst their needs to earn places *vis-à-vis* the tradition, peers, and teachers; anxieties about and joy in creativity; loneliness and friendship; loyalty and paternal

pride. This is a drama of serious and more than ordinarily successful academics – but success, like love, is rarely if ever enough – trying to work among friends. *Designs* is all too human, intellectually undressed if not completely naked, and therefore impolite and sometimes achingly true in ways that cannot have been entirely intentional and are therefore more forceful.

I say all this with some trepidation. Post-structuralism notwithstanding, good manners often require the pretense that living authors, friends and colleagues, are in charge of their plainly representational texts. Accusing people of committing art, and then having one's way with their work, is rather rude. Moreover, the terrain from which this review is written is uneven. I do not (yet) know Tobias Rees, but Marcus is a good friend and a very important interlocutor. I am quite fond of Faubion, and I have met and been impressed by Rabinow. My conversations with Marcus and Douglas Holmes have recently been issued as a (competing?) book about the significance of ethnography at the present time, a book highly praised by Faubion. And, professionally speaking, I am a guest in anthropology, because I am a professor of law. So even in this little review, the personal, the academic, and the intellectual are entangled in almost Parisian fashion – a small doubling that no doubt pleases the editors of the *JRAI*.

There is more poetic justice here: Rabinow and especially Marcus are identified with the *Writing culture* critiques of the 1980s, when it was argued that anthropology's forms of production configured what it meant to be an anthropologist in deeply problematic ways, a tradition of critique and an attitude towards anthropology carried on in important respects by both Rees and Faubion. In short, a more self-conscious crew of anthropologists is hard to imagine. And so it seems highly appropriate that the four of them are none the less swept along by their own forms of production and dialogues, and the play thus produced is worth serious consideration.

Thematically, the play can be understood in terms of three cross-cutting ways to engage anthropology's present situation: historically, philosophically, or aesthetically. Necessarily somewhat inchoately, the future of anthropology is imagined in much the same terms: the anthropology that the authors hope to see emerge in order to cope with the contemporary might produce a kind of history of the present, or a conceptual work or new ontology, or should perhaps be imagined as some kind of collective aesthetic practice.

Various designs, in the sense of both blueprints and schemes, are imaginable. Indeed, our characters shift and switch designs in the course of the book.

Each of these approaches, however, has substantial weaknesses, of which the authors are well aware. Intellectual history, which is a natural way for academics to start (so, what did *Writing culture* mean, then and now?), comes unravelling. History is always a tale of significance to an audience. The epistemological critiques that Rabinow and Marcus have been carrying on these many years, however, place in question both the forms of anthropological discussion and especially the audience(s) for anthropology. Moreover, while intellectual history (usually in the voice of Rees) attempts to nail ideas down, in a sequence that can be studied, judged, and taught, the ideas do not stay nailed down for any of the authors, who are after all proponents and adversaries. The significance of an argument, made at this or that juncture, invariably gets caught up with the meaning of the argument, as still contested here and now. To quip, Marcus is the last person to ask what *Writing culture* meant – George cannot help but talk about what anthropology might mean.

Philosophy, in several senses of the word, similarly seems to offer ways forward, but in the course of the book, each of the paths comes to seem impassable. There is talk drawn from the usual theorists, but the authors share a belief that while theory is a tool and a mode of expression, anthropology as such must do fieldwork, must concern itself with the concrete and particular and ordinary. Moreover, the authors have drunk deeply at the post-structuralist well, and so efforts to generalize, schematize, and abstract the problems of anthropology that would permit of philosophical ‘solution’ are met with the (now traditional) scepticism of meta-narratives – and then, winsomely and sometimes comically, highly philosophical discussion begins anew. The authors cannot help but be philosophical, and are nowhere more so than in their intermittent recognitions that philosophy cannot provide what they seek.

What the authors seek is, in the nature of emergent developments, not entirely clear. This reaching for something that is not yet there is what artists do, and ‘aesthetics’ is the most pervasive, and the least well-developed, approach the authors use to think about what anthropology might be becoming. But ‘aesthetics’ also presents difficulties. It seems too romantic, and maybe too hard and lonely as

well. Institutionally, to ask that anthropological production be brilliant is problematic for the academy, where a high degree of competence, good ordinary work, should suffice. So the book ends somewhat inconclusively (but what conclusion would be possible?) with suggestive if vague images of design studios and collaborative laboratories, institutionalized places where brilliance is possible but not required on a regular basis, where teachers and students discuss work in process, feeling their way forward. Rees notes in an afterword that both Rabinow and Marcus have developed their ideas for collaboratories and studios further in the years since 2004, when these conversations were (first) held.

Intentionally or not, however, the book exemplifies another ‘aesthetic’ approach, a noble response if hardly a solution, to the problem of how to think today. Very serious scholars might simply speak candidly, on the record, with one another about matters they have considered for years. It is such a simple genre, one we should all try. Right. *Designs* is a bravura performance.

DAVID A. WESTBROOK *State University of New York*