MEMORY AND PLACE FROM THE RED CENTER
OF AUSTRALIA TO THE PERIPHERY OF PARIS:
TO SEE THE FRAME THAT BLINDS US

CLAIRE FARAGO

The epigram by the peripatetic Lutheran-turned-Catholic physician, priest,
and poet Johann Scheffler, better known by his literary pseudonym Angelus
Silesius, that appeared in the call for papers to the conference Imagining
Places/Spaces, which later became the volume you are reading now, is highly
appropriate to the discussion of indigenous Australian artists’ entanglement
with the global art industry that follows here. Silesius’s one-liner, “[y]ou
are not in a place, the place is in you,” is fitting in the first instance because
Aboriginal identity is construed in terms of a fluid combination of space and
time that is always moving, in which personal identity is tied to a series of
places understood as events linking the past with the present. In the desert
region at the center of the continent (see plate 1–1), the native Australian
cosmology is in keeping with a lifestyle that may entail navigating 4000
square kilometres in a single year in search of food and water. Yet the
travelling is not undertaken solely for sustenance, because the journey is
the source of the indigenous Australian lifeworld (“Lebenswelt”) where
all consciousness and meaning, all sense of place and belonging, as well
as all individual historicity, are generated, in the never-ceasing movement
through space. In the second instance, Silesius is pertinent to the manner
in which Aboriginal representations of the places inside/outside become
packaged, commodified, and moved around the world.

To begin, given the precarious nature of living off the land especially
during the present era of desertification pressed by climate change, there
is the question of who controls that space. In the late 1960s, the Australian

1 This paper is an outgrowth of a collaborative book co-authored with Donald
Preziosi (2012). Portions of the text here have been adapted from this jointly
authored study; I thank my co-author for permission to excerpt my contributions
in their present form, which, like the original, benefit substantially from our joint
discussion and his critical interventions.
government removed several groups of indigenous peoples living on cattle lands in the Western Desert region of the Northern Territory to Papunya, a government relocation center established 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. In 1971, Geoffrey Bardon, a school teacher newly arrived to the centre, encouraged his young students to paint using only indigenous patterns and motifs. Bardon was soon approached by a small group of initiated Aboriginal men who proposed creating their own designs based on traditional graphic schemes. This initial exchange resulted in the Honey Ant Dreaming mural (figure 1–2) Tjukurrpa, a Walpiri word that is usually translated as dreamings—and there are many others in the 250 or so native languages of Australia. It designates the creative principle that saturates the world with meaning, as manifested in the topography of the land, its life forms, its law—codes of social behaviour. Tjukurrpa take the form of inherited narratives about the creation of sacred places, land, people, vegetation, and animals, and they comprise a complex network of knowledge informing all aspects of an individual’s life by tying his or her existence to prior events. Upon birth, the child is considered a special custodian of that part of his country where the mother stood when the child first moved in the womb, the place from which his or her spirit came as his or her dreaming. The named landscape features of this geography are said to be created “as the result of the activity of a Dreamtime hero in the distant past” (Langton 2000, 16). The ancient beings are present all around, in this world, and their stories are the Western Desert peoples’ geography.

The invention, production, and reception of “Aboriginal Art”—itself a problematic term given its links with notions of cultural “primitivism”—nonetheless raises fundamental epistemological and ethical concerns about ways of construing both place and space, and negotiating different cultural understandings across both physical and figurative boundaries. Such negotiations are the subject of this essay, which weaves together indigenous Australian beliefs with the expectations of a globalized art system in which abstract paintings are simultaneously imagined as personal evocations of a specific geography and as manifestations of the timeless, universal, and enduring presence of pure artistic form. How these apparent contradictions maintain one another in juxtaposition is the focus of my thinking about imagined places/spaces.

To approach the problem of imagining places and spaces in such a complex intercultural framework requires considering the entire arc of cultural production, from the paintings’ point of origin in indigenous beliefs (to which I have only partial access), to the paintings’ various points of reception outside the communities in which they are produced. The intersection of cultures now stretches across the entire globe, and reverberates in every direction almost instantaneously. At an art centre located in an impoverished desert community half a day’s journey from the next outpost, the staff work at computers negotiating with high-end galleries in London, Amsterdam, Dubai, and elsewhere to which they will ship unstretched canvases painted by Aboriginal artists instructed by their art teachers on the model established at Papunya in 1971.

The Honey Ant Dreaming story belongs to the place of Papunya, not the relocation centre but the place where the dreamsings of the Pintupi, Luritja, Walpiri, Arrente, and Anmatyerre peoples who were sent there by the Australian government converge. Painted on the walls of a disused building (and later painted over by government administrators), the Honey Ant Dreaming mural utilised indigenous drawing and painting patterns. According to Bardon’s own recollections, at a time when the first individual interpretations were materializing, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa won the lucrative “Caltex Prize” in 1971 and returned to Papunya with the prize money, there was a clamour for art materials from a number of men. Yet we could equally say that the story began decades before Bardon arrived, with Albert Namatjira (1902–1959), the first Aboriginal person to achieve mainstream recognition as an artist, who spent his last two years at Papunya.²

² Namatjira’s first exhibition was held in Melbourne in 1938; he was awarded the Queen’s coronation medal in 1953. His career ended tragically when he was
In other words, the Western Painting movement was not the outcome of naïve indigenous artists meeting a gifted white art teacher. The formal artmaking skills of the Aboriginal men preexisted Bardon's arrival and were connected both to their traditional responsibilities as initiated adult males and to an existing cottage industry of making “art” for tourists and the mainstream art market in which Namatjira participated by painting in a western representational style that he himself valued highly. For his part, Bardon promoted a non-representational style that translated what he seems to have understood as his students’ tactile engagement with the world into a fully “visual” form of painting (Carter 2007, xvii–xviii). In one sense, his pedagogy reproduced problematic, essentializing distinctions between the mentalities of different people still rooted in nineteenth-century racial ideas. On the other hand, he tried to develop an understanding of art free from racial theories of cultural evolution. He practiced a hands-on approach with his adult students, encouraging them to paint visually coherent images that were individual, personal interpretations of the sacred, communally sanctioned designs traditionally appearing on sacred boards (chirrungas), as body ornamentation and ground paintings associated with secret-sacred ceremonies, as well as the designs that were drawn in the sand to accompany the narration of unrestricted stories.  

arrested and convicted for illegally supplying alcohol to Aboriginals, a victim of the neo-colonial paternalistic government despite his success as an artist. (Johnson 2008, 7–19.) On Albert Namatjira, see Kleinert.  

3 As Paul Carter has already emphasized. See Carter (2007, xvii–xviii), which also mentions Bardon's source in the writings of early twentieth-century Viennese art educator Viktor Lowenfeld. See further discussion in Farago (2009).  

4 See further, Farago (1995).  

5 See Munn (1973), for a groundbreaking contribution to non-native understanding of these representational systems. An extensive body of scholarship now exists, but for a recent contribution with further bibliography, see Ryan and Batty (2011). Their exhibition features approximately 200 of the first paintings produced at Papunya in 1971–72 by the founding artists of the Western Desert art movement. It establishes connections between these paintings and their sources in designs made for use in ceremony. The exhibition will begin with a sprawling of shields, spear throwers, stone knives, headbands and body ornaments, early drawings collected by anthropologists, historical photographs, and a ground painting. My thanks to Philip Batty for this information in advance of the publication.  

Figure 1–3. Men’s painting room, 1972, with Shorty Tjungurray working on Water Dreaming. Benjamin & Weilagel, 2009.

Composition board, acoustic tiles, tin cans, car bonnets, as well as canvas served as the support for these early paintings. The first paintings were not made for sale. But soon powerful, abstract designs on a much larger scale, still rooted in the land-based belief systems of the first peoples of Australia, were achieving international recognition and commercial success as the most important contribution to High Modernist art in decades. By the late 1980s, the art movement that had begun in 1971 as an educational programme brought new respect for Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia and the world. The creation of Aboriginal art for an international market is also poignantly paradigmatic of the modernist commodification of (fine) art in a very specific sense: as the abstraction and extraction—the reification—of particular visual or optical properties of actual multimodal,  

6 The historical emergence of Aboriginal painting as a respected art form is far more complex than this brief narrative can suggest: Morphy (1998) and (2007). By the 1960s, in the Northern Territory, bark painting was a well established genre within the art industry; see “A Short History of Yolnu Art,” 27–86, with further references, in Morphy (2007). Personal communication with Philip Batty, 5 February 2009.
multidimensional, and multifunctional indigenous practices, with the effect of making such abstractions consonant with late Modernist (Western) artistic formalism in its contemporary “globalized” manifestations. The trajectory from an indigenous understanding of identity as performative, immersed in the land, connected to a geography peopled by ancestral spirits, transmitted from generation to generation in communally prescribed ways that not only discourage but ostensibly forbid innovation, to personal interpretations of inherited stories produced as paintings for sale to an audience of outsiders, challenge us to think about place in uncommonly complex ways. The conundrum that Western Desert painting presents at first sight is the possibility of artists unfamiliar with Modernist abstract painting to succeed at making such relevant examples of it.

From a position in the middle of the Australian continent, began a fieldwork project that paused many months later in Paris. My ex-centric route from what was historically a periphery to a center of the contemporary art world intentionally plays with, upon, and against center-periphery models of artistic and cultural development. Center-periphery explanations of cultural interaction have inevitably placed Europe in relation to artistic peripheries elsewhere and generally replicate a colonialist, ethnocentric worldview. While the scale of explanation varies—the center could be Rome, the periphery Florence, or England, the Americas, Australia, and so on—the systemic or structural principle would remain the same if the center were Botswana, Bogota, or Beijing.

Inverting the center/periphery model, that is, utilizing it in order to recognize the dynamically active conditions of reception, is an important corrective but does not alter the structural principle. Alternatively, a network of distributed knowledge practices offers a less Eurocentric (or Sinocentric or Afro-centric) way to write a “global” history of art. Even in this case, however, even if no centre is more important than another in the network of modules, first there would still have to be general agreement that the problematic notion “art” is a universal, pan-human phenomenon and activity. Yet that raises other troubling questions—such as, who is at the table to draw up the agreement? Many First World and indigenous peoples in numerous locations around the globe refuse the label “art” for their cultural productions and object to public cultural institutions such as museums collecting, preserving, or displaying their esoteric cultural artifacts because they are not meant to be viewed in this manner or seen by the uninitiated or even preserved. I am more than willing to jettison the category of “art” conceived as universal and timeless in favor of articulating how the Western ideal of (fine) art came to be applied to cultural productions of any origin whatsoever—and, specifically, how that now contested but no less globally-disseminated product of European thought operates in the world today. My metamorphic itinerary moving backwards through the center-periphery hierarchy questions and complicates the assumption that the West is central. Can this realignment of hierarchies expose the theoretical underpinnings of an art system that ties identity to place and then circulates the fabrication globally for consumption as an exotic, virtual reality?

The first question. The Aboriginal art movement that began in the early 1970s, rapidly assumed international artistic and commercial prestige. How did indigenous Australians without formal artistic training in any conventional sense or even knowledge of art-making practices and their histories elsewhere come to be inserted into the canon of High Modernism? Disjunctions between communities of collecting and communities of production—an effect of this recent “art historicization” of Aboriginal cultural praxis—foreground aspects of what was forgotten, erased or occluded in European modernity’s own invention of what subsequently became the “idea” of (fine) art as itself an abstraction of certain (visual or optical) properties out of cultural behaviour: the abstraction of visuality as such in the service of that modernity.

A first observation. Although their visual appeal is primary to their aesthetic and commercial success, the Western Desert acrylic paintings are also widely valued by collectors for the cosmological significance of designs that are very rarely understood at all by those outside the secret and sacred traditions from which the designs are partly derived. Over time, marketing strategies for these acrylic paintings—the issues of origin and nomenclature are complex and fraught, as I will discuss more fully—have come to incorporate reference to their content in ways that simulate copyright. By including the artist’s “dreaming”—told in simple terms that do not violate the community’s integrity to control the dissemination of knowledge—the numenial content of the work is verified, its enigma authenticated along with more prosaic signs of authorship, such as the artist’s “skin name,” place of origin, the work’s exhibition history, and so on.

A second observation. At the art centres I visited in the desert regions of the central parts of the Northern Territory and the eastern edges of Western Australia, art production potentially offers economic relief for impoverished and in many respects severely dysfunctional communities. The mostly government-run operations function in settings without adequate health care, educational opportunities, and with little or no economic infrastructure such as retail businesses. Yet for all the hope that
the production and sale of "Aboriginal art" in an international market may represent for these art centers—it is the reason for their existence, even when they are unprofitable—the artworks themselves have no other intrinsic functions in their own communities. They might be a point of pride, but they are also a mark of indentured servitude to a global market; in any case, "Aboriginal paintings" do not fulfill indigenous houses with objects of individual contemplation or family décor and acrylic paintings as such serve no function in indigenous ceremonies or other tradition-based collective practices. On the other hand, other objects initially made for sale, such as dancing boards and clapsticks traditionally used in ceremonies, are sometimes taken out of the commercial art centre setting and used in those ceremonies today. There is, in other words, nothing that intrinsically prevents objects made as art from having a functional value in their indigenous context. But the acrylic paintings of dreams have no such use value. Aboriginal art-making communities use their livelihood to negotiate their divided identities between two worlds. Subtle and profound ways of worldmaking and negotiating difference are involved, homologous to traditional ways of negotiating space and time in a harsh desert environment. A brilliant way of coping with catastrophic change that is neither assimilation to nor a rejection of the dominant culture, but a strategic form of survival in a subaltern position. Resistance under the wire—"managing the interstices with a measure of creativity," as Nestor Garcia Canclini once put it regarding the intersections of tradition and modernity in Latin America (Garcia Canclini 1995, 204).

To appreciate the conundrums that contemporary Aboriginal art presents for consideration of the art system, it is important to bear in mind how sudden the transition has been from the traditional itinerant camping lifestyle of hunting and gathering to a sedentary way of life. As recently as 1984, a group of nine Pintupi people who had never seen white outsiders emerged from the Western Desert. Within three years of first contact, some of them produced museum-quality acrylic paintings for the commercial market. Acrylic paintings mark the arrival of the "genius artist" model of individual artistic production and its attendant manifestation, the celebrity artist.

---

7 As observed in both West and East Arnhem Land, by art historian Susan Lowish and anthropologist Howard Murphy. Personal communication with Susan Lowish, 10 February 2011.

8 For example, Warrimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, Two Boys Dreaming at Marnggu, 1987, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; see Kimber (2006, 28) for a reproduction of this painting.
by the way), there were no obvious labels of any kind. So this was not meant as Art with a capital A, but as stagecraft, a literally moving entrance.

Figure 1–5. Installation view, first gallery, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, July 2010. Photograph Claire Farago.

And what a mystifying space I found at the top of the ramp! An even darker space, with high ceilings hung with bright spotlights trained on amazing, even unimaginable objects, suspended in enormous glass cases without frames so that everything appeared to be floating in a liquid glittering darkness above the glowing, seamless red vinyl floor that wound through the long, deep space. The combination of darkness and reflected light on so much glass facing in many directions absorbed the spectator. We—spectators and displayed artifacts—all became ghostly. Instantly (see plate 1–6).

The objects on display, looming material presences from a museological spirit world, were raffia and wood masks, long snaky totems, a spectacular gigantic wooden drum with animated details, abstract figures intricately carved or dramatically painted with geometric patterns, grinning and grimacing faces assembled in groups for no apparent reason other than theatrical effect. Enormous creatures in lively poses gestured in some

universal but not quite comprehensible sign language, palpable and mute. Truly stunning. Deeply moving. Absolutely gorgeous. Yet the initial giddiness gave way to museological sobriety, soon dampening delight. What does “Oceania” mean? Or “funeral mask?” There was little to learn (where were the extended labels? the informative text panels?). Virtually nothing to read; only beautifully staged things to see. Here was the most lavish, most unapologetically formalistic display of ethnographic objects as art I had ever witnessed.

Well into the display space were two sections of Australian Indigenous art. After studying hundreds of historical objects from a wide variety of Oceanic and African cultures, without a blink came contemporary bark paintings from Arnhem Land and contemporary acrylic paintings from the Western Desert. Another day, to another place, they would have been displayed as “contemporary art” in a canonical white cubed gallery, but here they were being offered in direct juxtaposition and thus comparison to funerary masks and sacrificial offerings. Enveloped by the darkness, they glowed with the same eerie warm light as everything else on display: the old familiar commensurability of modernist museology and marketing.

Figure 1–7. Installation view, Western Desert paintings from Australia, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, July 2010. Photograph Claire Farago.
One of the only educational panels in the display focused on the Swiss surrealist artist/ethnographer Karel Kupka, highlighting his prescient interest in the indigenous material beginning in the late 1950s, thus confirming that the objects on display might be considered Art of an unorthodox modernist variety. Kupka went on a series of expeditions to Arnhem Land in northern Australia in 1950s and 1960s collecting for the Ethnographic Museum in Basel and the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris, the predecessor to the Quai Branly along with the Musée du l’Homme. There was nothing in the museum wall text about the Romantic labeling in Kupka’s book Dawn of Art (1965), and certainly no discussion of the way that his late-blooming evolutionist paradigm had deeply offended and antagonized Australian anthropologists. Nor was there discussion of the continuous contact of Australians with Europeans, documented since 1803 in the case of the Yolngu of Arnhem Land whose recent and historical objects were installed nearby without distinguishing labels.9

The uncanny assemblages of contemporary paintings and sculpted objects—some of which had been made purely for the art market, others of which were more traditional objects such as hollow log coffins that had had actual funerary functions—were set next to a bank of windows painted to look like a rainforest, serving as the setting for functionally fake ethnographic objects that had been made within the last two decades for the commercial art market by contemporary artists, many of whom were well known names to collectors of Aboriginal art.10

When the museum first opened in 2006, at least one Australian curator had called the display a stunning example of “regressive museology.”11

Yet what I experienced was much more complex than mere museological regression, though it certainly was that too. These contemporary Australian paintings and other objects were made to be regarded as art, whereas the rest of the museum’s exhibited collection was filled with more or less historical objects that were not made as art in the Western sense.12 Yet everything was on display for its formal qualities, therefore treated as artful—valued for its timeless artistry. The theatrical display—the spectacle that had captured me in the entrance hall—was quite unlike any art museum display of contemporary art. That is, unless it was an installation by an artist, or by a curator working in conjunction with an artist, to interrogate conventional museum practices. The exhibition at the MQB was neither what I had been witnessing was the presentation of objects as if they were imbued with embodied spiritual presence according to a Western taxonomy that had traditionally classified such objects as artifacts. The contemporary process of exotizing consisted in manipulating the dichotomy between art and ethnographic object in a mode of presentation that oscillated between art and artifact, the central term of which was “the spiritual.” By including contemporary “Aboriginal art,” the Museum not only framed its holdings in this area as if still imbued with “spiritual presence,” it also gave voice to what I had observed about the framing of contemporary Indigenous Aboriginal art in art gallery settings—namely, the claim that these abstract designs have an enigmatic but indisputably “spiritual” dimension.

In fact, many of the objects participating in the hyper-drama were once considered as idols or fetishes. The Musée du Quai Branly’s reinvention of these objects as art perpetuates an essentially western, Christian distinction between matter and spirit and the “link” purported to be between them, namely made things that stand in for or re-present the beliefs of the people who made them. The indigenous Australian sense of place implies a very different ontology in which the Tjukurrpa is an omnipotent force that permeates everything (Hetti Perkins, Icons). The art system imposes a very limited perspective and a reductive ideology on how things mean. Place in the form of geographic distance was an important vehicle for instantiating this discourse at the MQB; there were no cultural displays of anything comparably European. In fact, a comparison was made to European art of a certain different kind, part of an explicit program to justify the reduction of the world to one-part national, producing naturalistic art, versus three-parts

9 On the documentation of Yolngu contact with Europeans, see Morphy (2007, 56). Swiss artist Kupka presented his research for a doctorate in anthropology at the University of Paris—essentially a documented catalogue and ethnographic contextualization of Yolngu works. Anthropologists who objected to his book positioning Aboriginal art at the dawn of human history include Ronald Bredt, W. E. H. Stanner, and A. P. Elkin. Morphy writes that all of these believed in the visual power of Aboriginal art, all were interested in the role of the individual artist and concerned to attribute works to particular artists. This was (and still is) the revisionist antithesis to treating ethnographic objects as the (timeless) production of collectivities.

10 The building, designed by internationally celebrated architect Jean Nouvel, had included a “living wall” on the other side of those windows, but an inadequate support system for the plant roots, irrigation, and drainage problems compromised some of the vegetation. This is presumably the reason why what remained for everyone to see on the inside was a fake painted forest.

11 Bernice Murphy, co-founder of the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art and currently National Director of the Museums of Australia, cited by Eccles (2007).

12 With the notable exception of a display of European art, and slippages between traditional cultural practices and those made for the market in the displays of Native American art.
irrational, producing symbolic, abstract, and/or fetishistic art.\textsuperscript{13}

This purportedly scientific, anthropological model was no doubt intended to avoid direct connections between the mentality of a people and their cultural productions based on inherited identity and geographical location. The underlying assumptions of an earlier racial model remained entirely intact, however: the viewer was instructed to read intentionality directly out of visible form as if the formal elements of a made object (its stylistic vocabulary and its syntax, or system of relationships) had a certain indexical value. Missing from the equation was any historical or cultural understanding of the forms themselves—such as the conventional meanings attributed to them by their cultures of origin, their context of production and use. The scheme itself was essentially unchanged from Enlightenment claims about the origins of culture: early peoples lacked the power of reasoning (ratiocination) but possessed a robust and vigorous imagination. On these grounds, “primitive” humans, in contrast to Europeans, were deeply immersed in their immediate sensory experiences without the mediation of abstract reasoning. Their immersion in the world they inhabited was understood as an inability to abstract from experience and this was thought to explain the “absence” of European artistic styles of representation based on techniques of chiaroscuro and linear perspective such as those associated with academic artistic instruction.\textsuperscript{14}

**Staging the spiritual**

By focusing on the formal qualities of its vast collection, did the Musée du Quai Branly overcome the oppressive weight of historical taxonomies that divided the world’s cultural productions into discrete categories of art and artifact? Hardly. The MQB is an exceptional place, but it is the exception that proves a rule. Allowing the primitive with modern abstraction has been a ubiquitous modern trope, one that is also replayed from the other side of the equation, in exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art. Recounting his first encounter with Western Desert painting in the early days before it became a commercial success, Philip Batty, a former teacher at Papunya

and now Senior Curator of Central Australian Collections at the Museum Victoria in Melbourne, poses one-half of the question I want to pursue:

Certainly, the detached kind of art I had studied at the National Art School stood in stark contrast to the work of the painters. In depicting their dreaming, they were depicting their personal ancestors and therefore, supernatural beings to whom they owed their physical existence and identity. This was made particularly apparent when I attended the men’s secret-sacred rituals in which the recreation of the dreaming—encompassing similar iconicographic symbolism seen in their paintings—was, for the Aboriginal participants, a serious and potentially dangerous business. How then was this serious religious business converted into a saleable commodity called “art”? (Batty 2007)\textsuperscript{15}

The other half of the question is equally important: How is it still possible in 2011 for this saleable commodity called “art,” to be reinserted into a context of “spiritual” expression? The questions are actually just two sides of the same coin. The link between “the primitive” and “high modern abstraction” continued as a positive value in the way in which the cultural construction of the Indigenous Australian artist as a High Modernist genius takes place. To understand the theoretical underpinnings of the system requires paying attention to the performative aspects of meaning-making. Framing Aboriginal art as the product of individual genius is only superficially different from suppressing the individual intentionality of the artist in a collective display when it comes to staging “spiritual presence.”

For the museum is a place, too, of course—an uncanny, heterotopic space partitioned off from the rest of the world, creating second, third, and fourth worlds. Creating particular inflections of the inherently opened relationship that exists between people and places is never a straightforward matter. What makes the museum especially dangerous is its presentation of a fabricated world as though it were real. The museological presentation generates the desired effect of “spiritual presence” by erasing itself as a framing effect in the very act of mediation (cf. Eisenlohr; cited in Birgit Meyer 2011). At the Musée du Quai Branly, object and environment merge. The apparent understatement of the white cube art gallery is another

\textsuperscript{13} Anthropologist Philippe Descola, Chair of Anthropology at the Collège de France, was responsible for the pedagogical framing and is cited frequently within the exhibition, for example, in a sign that reads: “PAINTING IS MENTAL.”

\textsuperscript{14} Giambattista Vico, in his widely read La Scienza nuova (1725), set the terms of discussion; see further, Connolly (1985).

\textsuperscript{15} Batty (2007). For one American writer, looking at Central Desert Aboriginal painting is like watching American basketball: “...an inmemorial vocabulary of forms, all highly ambiguous in significance, that can be pursued in an infinite variety of modulations and innovations—sometimes subtle, sometimes startling and dramatic.” Mitchell, “Abstraction and Intimacy,” written originally in the 1990s and published in Mitchell (2003, citing 241-42).
staging platform that shapes and manipulates its captive audience. In 2008, when the National Museum in Canberra opened its retrospective exhibition of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, indisputably the most famous Australian woman of any ethnicity who ever painted, the show extolled her originality as on a par with Kandinsky, Klee, and de Kooning, despite her humble origins and subsequent life at a remote cattle station named “Utopia” in the Australian outback. Kngwarreye had neither formal artistic training as a painter nor any familiarity with European Modernism. Yet her brief and unbelievably prolific career (she is estimated to have painted an average of one canvas per day amounting to some 3,000 works in an eight-year span) was described in the catalogue and on the exhibition walls as unfolding in developmental stages comparable to the careers of equally long-living European artists such as Rembrandt, Titian, and Michelangelo (Neale 2008, 33–47). “Emily,” as the catalogue explained and the installation performed, worked through the issues of Modernism entirely on her own.

Despite the claim that Emily is a unique phenomenon—and who would doubt that she is a force of nature?—isn’t she enacting the normative ideals of modern creative agency? Are we not witnessing what Foucault called the reasserting of prior representations in new forms? In yoking material things to another domain, museology creates the bonds that it claims merely to document: a virtual sense of meaning, direction, time, and place. In the present context, it is important to remember that “Aboriginal art” succeeded commercially in the 1990s, when High Modernism was critically waning. From the standpoint of art as a high-end commodity form, Kngwarreye’s paintings became a new product on an old shelf as her career skyrocketed—her work offered a novel variant of an existing genre that invigorated a tired market.

Moreover, the same move that elevated the Aboriginal artist to the status of European modernists of an earlier generation re-inserted the hegemonic Eurocentric discourse in which the Aboriginal artist still occupies the lower rung of the traditional hierarchy between civilized/primitive, European/Other. By the time Western Desert acrylic painting became an artistic sensation and economic goldmine in the Australian and international art industry, the symbolic markings characteristic of the “style” were viewed reductively within the framework of high modernist abstraction, and indeed bore little resemblance to the first wave of Western Desert painting. Kngwarreye and many other Aboriginal artists whose styles developed on the model of Western Desert painting and whose careers were shaped and steered by government art advisors and powerful institutions found themselves promoted in a self-deceiving position. From an institutional standpoint, Kngwarreye was held hostage by an art system colonized by the interests of the elite collectors who craved her work for its unadulterated, uncanny recapitulation of formal modernism—and painted seemingly straight from the desert inhabited by Aboriginal people still in touch with their ancestral way of life.16 As the catalogue emphasized, Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s traditional concern was with the pencil yam (amwelarr) (see plate 1–9). Her name “kame” is given to seeds of the pencil yam plant and she repeatedly painted the underground network of its roots and tubers (Green 2005). Her paintings, however, were the product of an unacknowledged collaboration with the curators and collectors who packaged her as a modernist—and not only rhetorically but to the extent of providing her with preformatted, stretched canvases.

16 And indeed apart from Aboriginal curator Margo Neale’s apparent passion for Kngwarreye’s art.
like the ones lined up to create the serial paintings known as the Utopia panels, originally commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery in 1996. The artist’s agency is certainly not negligible, but distinctions between anthropological or curatorial agency and the artist’s intentionality are enduringly indeterminate.

One has to ask how the references to Kngwarreye’s native country function in the reception of her work. It is the dynamic structure of the matrix of the art system that needs explicating: what creates the celebrity artist, who occupies a certain cultural place, a heterotopic identity in a twilight zone, apart from the rest? What keeps seemingly outmoded notions of the “individual genius”—which in Kngwarreye’s case, as in the case of Western Desert painting in general, are cast in a dual role as genius loci—in play? The underlying problem is that single authorship and high art media determine the values of the art industry. So the simple answer is profitability. This is also the reason that artists working within the system can be made into celebrity artists overnight. Two years after she was “discovered,” Kngwarreye had her first solo exhibitions in the state capitals of Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. In 1997, she posthumously represented Australia in the 47th Venice Biennale. Not bad for an artist (and a woman) without formal artistic training who started painting at the age of eighty. In the final analysis, when indigenous Australian artists making “art” for the market adapt their work to suit the expectations and tastes of their buyers, what goes by the label of “Aboriginal art” is quite literally a mirror image of European desires (Batty 2007). Specific cultural memory is evacuated and recast as abstract design (its indexical relationship to an actual place no longer based on inherited iconography, but on the artist’s original invention). The gestural painting is a visual signifier of noumenal presence in the viewer’s phenomenal experience.

**Imagined Places in the Twenty-First Century**

The compromised agency of Aboriginal artists is thus itself emblematic of the complexities that “place” entails as a signifier in the contemporary Lebenswelt of the art system. Once they enter the art system, objects in which the artists adapt imagery from actual ceremonial practices of their own culture may signify no differently from art that imitates the ceremonial objects of other places—or abstract art in general for that matter. The alleged “spiritual value” attributed to the object depends greatly on the collector or other spectator who, in the paradigmatic case of “Aboriginal art,” does not have easy access to much of that meaning. The enigmatic nature of the abstraction enhances its noumenal value in the marketplace, where its actual economic value is determined and maintained according to a system far removed from the artist’s intentions. And even farther removed from the conditions in which Kngwarreye, her many needy relatives, and the majority of artists dependent upon and feeding the thriving art market in “Aboriginal art” live out their lives.

Let’s examine another sense in which “place” and space operate in the art system. Kngwarreye was never in a position to mount a sophisticated, self-aware resistance to the cultural status quo. Instead, she ran the risk of being perceived in the position of the “primitive” in an evolutionary trajectory of cultural progress because her appearance as an “abstract expressionist” at the cutting edge of the avant-garde is a belated modernism. The cutting edge is always moving on. The systemic challenge, then, is to make art that is perceived to be at the front line of this movement. This is a questionable requirement, however, because what constitutes originality and for whom is neither stable nor independent of social context—a conundrum that “liberation artist” Richard Bell in fact clearly articulates:

I am an Aboriginal man living and working in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. I make a living from painting pictures. Because I am from the closely settled east coast of Australia I am not allowed to paint what is popularly called “Aboriginal art.” Nor can I use the symbols and styles of Aboriginal people from the remote, sparsely settled areas of northern Australia. Apparently, this would make my work derivative and hence diminished in importance, relevance and quality. However, in western art, which appears to be almost entirely and increasingly derivative, no such restrictions apply. Quoting, citing, sampling or appropriating pre-existing works even has its own movement: appropriationism. There is even a belief that “everything has been done before.” (Which makes it cool to appropriate).

Consequently, I have chosen to quote, cite and sample the works of many artists from around the world…” (Bell 2007, 59)

---

17 Emily Kngwarreye-Althukere: Paintings from Utopia (1998). The retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra was based partly on research conducted for this earlier exhibition, organized immediately after the artist’s death (much to the consternation of many who hold to traditional views for respecting the spirit of the deceased).

18 Citing Richard Bell in Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial (2007,
Bell’s ironic appropriation of Roy Lichtenstein’s art (see plate 1-10) makes its strongest point within another system of reference than that of 1960s Pop Art: the dots are no longer just references to the reproduction process of cheap newspaper print (Ben-day dots), hence to discourses on the originality of the artist; they are now, primarily, considered in the social context of Australian art marketing, references to the so-called “dot style” distinctive of Western Desert acrylic painting, where dots were purportedly used at first to mask secret-sacred imagery, a bone of fierce contention within the indigenous communities. The ricochets playing out in Richard Bell’s incisive text are deeply and almost deliciously ironic. With this irony, he situates himself along the moving front line of conceptual art, at least that is the strategy. In gaming the system, Bell demonstrates that there is no stationary ground zero—rather, “ground zero” is a moving target, a constantly renegotiated set of relations.

Contemporary Aboriginal art in its diverse manifestations of space, place, situatedness, location, ground, foundation, and so on, is in many ways paradigmatic of the position of art and of artists in contemporary Euro-American society, and this is not due to the demands of the marketplace alone. The opportunity seized by Emily and by the Aboriginal men of Papunya definitely raised their sense of self-worth and created an important new painting movement, among other things, but the retrospective narrative of these events is still subject to the biographical framework and the privileging of white agency associated with the most conventional garden variety of (implicitly or explicitly racist) art history. In reframing “Emily” as a (belated) Abstract Expressionist, institutional authority denied her both the possibility of participating in the deconstructive discourse about the Western idea of art and the possibility of acknowledging her communal working methods even where they continued to exist. Complex agencies were involved in Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s success as a painter. She practiced collaborative working methods during her entire career, as did many of the Western Desert artists, but conventional accounts suppress these aspects of their personal histories. And the young art teacher Geoff Bardon remains the hero of the Western Desert Painting movement in the current telling, portrayed as dating from the moment of his arrival to Papunya, even though there would be many other ways to narrate the story. I am not suggesting that either she or he deserves to be deposed so that someone else can be inserted into the same hagiographical template.

Rather, there is an obvious need to examine how what we commonly refer to as art has served as the site par excellence for the production of the phantasmatic fabric of our modernities and postmodernities—the chimeras of identity, ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, geography, sexuality, culture, indigeneity, and others. The key metaphorical conundrum of post-Enlightenment modernity has been that the form of your work should be legible as the figure or physiognomy of your personal truth, nailing down your place in the world, establishing your permanent address: the emblem, symbol, echo, reflection, expression, or re-presentation of who and what you essentially “are” or claim to be.

We still search for ways to tell the stories with the nuance and force that prolonged contact between the various agents in a field split since the colonial era along ethnic lines demands. The pressing issue is how history is told: what sources are used, who tells it, who benefits, and who doesn’t? Framing strategies invisibly organize our perception and thinking about what is presented as evidence. Discussing the widely circulated photographs of prisoners being tortured by American serviceman and women at Abu Graib, Judith Butler examined the framing effects of camera angle, posed subjects, points of view, suggesting that those who took the photographs were actively involved in the stagecraft of war. As the case of translating Western Desert painting from its point of production to its many points of reception further suggests, framing effects are not limited to the visible register or the manipulation of the medium. Furthermore, interpretation is never simply a subjective act at the level of the individual viewer because the structuring constraints also have agency: they have the power to elicit empathy or antipathy, action or inaction—depending not just on the representation, but on what is representable: what is included is constituted by what is occluded. As Butler aptly put it: “To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter.”

Butler described the relentless logic of indexicality at work in contemporary life, determining which of us are capable of being seen as fully human subjects, and which of us are subjectified, dehumanized others. Along with many other public intellectuals, she calls for a different ontology, one that stresses our global interdependency and recognizes the interlocking networks of power that maintain differential positions in everyday life for what they are. The future ontology, she writes, needs to
recognize that my life “refers to some indexical you without whom I cannot be.” (Butler 2009, 44.)

The fundamental issues at stake in imagining [abstract] spaces as [inhabited] places hinge on the recognition that connecting “this with that” is inevitably an active, ongoing process of seeing similarities in dissimilarities. Metaphors are instruments for reckoning with the world, dynamic tools for constructing dynamic worlds. Thinking about “art” as the medium that binds together persons and places beyond identity politics, beyond the commodity form, Australian cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis has called attention to the body of work produced by Western Desert painters as “raising” questions of authorship, community involvement, historical retrieval, and political affirmation... (by) allowing for a horizontal model of storytelling to emerge through the collaborative practice of a community” (Papastergiadis 2008). As another Australian, Paul Carter, once put it, describing the unprecedented events at Papunya, “another space was opened in and round the painting room, another ground of exchange. To look at the paintings made there... is also to ponder the terms of a non-assimilationist political future” (Carter 2007, 356).

That is to say, the intercultural and communal art-making situation that Geoffrey Bardon, Kaapa Tjampijinpa, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, and many others utilized—a mode of practice that was and often still is marginalized in accounts of Aboriginal artmaking because it does not conform to the “genius-artist” model of the art industry—also generated other, incommensurable perspectives. In these circumstances, Aboriginal artists and their white teacher/advisors set out together to create a different place from what had existed before, a “third space” in which some level of exchange could flow, a dynamic place of enunciation, identification, and negotiation that neither assumed nor aimed to create a homogeneous community. A question I would leave with the reader, then, is whether communal artmaking on this order of exchange, in a “third space” that no one owns, might serve as an effective model for re-imagining social space in a heterogeneous world? While there is no doubt that the turn towards collaborative and community-based art practices is now a global movement that is still gaining momentum, what I want to stress are the paradoxical tensions operating between location, on the one hand, and mobility and displacement, on the other.

---


References


MULTISENSORY MEMORIES AND THE SPACES OF SUBURBAN CHILDHOOD IN THE GREATER HELSINKI REGION IN THE 1950S AND 1960S

KIRSI SAARIKANGAS

The summer suburb was printed on my memory in certain scenes, atmospheres, and scents. Heat and dust! Dirty, sweating boys playing football. The urban scent of wet asphalt after the rain, when we got back from the countryside. Cellars, doorways, flat roofs, staircases, parking places, concrete. But also parks, lawns and thick forest, which was not yet turned into park, and which we at the age of seven called rainforest. Every now and then we slipped out of the woods directly in the middle of the scaffolding, stacks of timber and the dust raised by concrete mixers. Incomplete buildings and a fascinating amount of building materials occupy a central place in my childhood imagery... The smell of timber and cement told of thrilling abundance. There was always something new to discover.¹ (LS 79)

A man who moved to the Kontula suburb in eastern Helsinki at the age of six in the mid-1960s gives a multisensory and vivid picture of his childhood suburban milieu. He wrote down his reminiscences thirty years later, in 1995–1996, for an essay competition arranged by the major Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat.