Claire Farago

Redemptive acts of seeing: Riegls Australian legacy

For Martin

Contemporary inquiries into the structural intuitions shared by artists and scientists, a subject of enduring interest to Martin Kemp, are directly implicated in the movement of ideas that is the subject of the present essay. It is offered as a thought experiment, a mental exercise somewhat in the manner of Leonardo da Vinci's Scholastic mode of investigating a problem by imagining an experiment. Occasionally, it is difficult to tell from Leonardo's notebooks whether we are dealing with the documentation of a thought experiment or an actual laboratory procedure. There is a similar indeterminacy in what follows here between the entirely hypothetical and the merely analogous. I ask the reader to imagine whether and how European structures of seeing and theories of perception, in particular those explored by art historian Alois Riegls (1858-1915) around the turn of the twentieth century, found their way into the institutional perception of contemporary Australian Aboriginal painting. 

By the end of the sixteenth century, an international discourse of European origin had been established for representing indigenous peoples as examples of parochial humanism, with Aboriginals as the most primitive of all. 

Then towards the end of the nineteenth century, E. B. Tylor's (1832-1917) Primitive Culture (1871) set the stage for new definitions of art as a universal phenomenon. He suggested that all areas of culture can be comprehended as one natural process rooted in primitive agriculture. With this move, cultural differences came to be explained in terms of degrees of cultural progress through which every society passes. In 1885, Tylor recruited his student Baldwin Spencer (1860-1925) to relocate the Pit Rivers collection of ethnographic artifacts to Oxford, where this account of shared cultural evolution was famously displayed in a museum setting. 

Two years later, Bachelor's degree in hand, Spencer emigrated to Australia to take up a position...
in biology at the University of Melbourne, where he was appointed honorary director of the Museum of Victoria in 1899. Over his long productive career, Spencer assembled an unprecedented collection of artifacts, photographs, and the earliest films on Aboriginal peoples based on his own fieldwork. Baldwin Spencer's first book, Native Tribes of Central Australia (1889), and two subsequent volumes, widely considered groundbreaking studies, had an important influence on European theories of societal development. On the one hand, as David Tacey writes, Spencer's writings documented the errant spiritual longing of Europeans looking at indigenous cosmology of place and spiritual mythology. On the other hand, following ideas popular at the time, Spencer's widely disseminated publications problematically cast contemporary indigenous Australians as primitive playing the role of Europe's past. 

Emile Durkheim's (1858–1917) Elementary Forms of Religion (1912) relied heavily on the published works of Spencer and his collaborator Frank Gillen (1855–1912), as did Sigmund Freud's Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics (1913). Yet there is a third component of Spencer's legacy to consider: the high cultural value that he and a few of his contemporaries attributed to Aboriginal cultural artifacts. The field notes and specimens of Spencer's collecting activities include an irreplaceable archive of ethnographic photographs and films recording indigenous Australian ceremonies and daily activities. The organization of the material collected (his descriptions, classificatory schemes, and so on) encapsulates in its structure the system of his beliefs about Aboriginal society, which merited study in its own right. At the same time, this material record is available today, archived at Melbourne's foremost educational and museumological institutions, to construct new ways of looking at the past. The following story of Riegl's hypothetical Australian legacy is haunted by these broader historical circumstances. I would like to begin by suggesting that a previously unrecognized translation of Riegl's ideas to Australia can be traced through the activities of a lone art teacher named Geoffrey Bardon (1940–2003) working with indigenous artists of the central Western Desert in 1971–72 (fig. 1). Bardon introduced acrylic paint and canvas to a group of senior Aboriginal men living in the government settlement of Papunya, located 250 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs in the central Western desert region of the Northern Territory. In the late 1960s, the art movement that had begun as an educational project at Papunya achieved world-wide recognition that brought new respect for Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia and the world. Of course, a complete account of the historical, political, and social factors that enabled the emergence of contemporary Aboriginal painting is far more complex, as Philip Barty, Senior Curator of Indigenous Cultures at the Museum Victoria, writes: Aboriginal men such as Kanta Tjungurrayi and others had been depicting ceremonial iconography in acrylic and watercolor paintings long before Bardon arrived in Papunya. At Bardon himself indicated, the 'big break' that sparked the new practice of Papunya's Bards' in 1971–72 occurred when Kanta won the lucrative 'Coles Prize' in 1971. The winning painting was not created by Bardon, but by a local government officer, Jack Cook – the kind of person that Bardon presumably despised. Bardon reported that when Kanta returned to Papunya with the prize money, there was a cluster of art materials from a number of men (I know Kanta well – a very mercurial character who would have delighted in boasting about his wins!). Moreover, the so-called Renaissance of Aboriginal art at Papunya was in actuality the product of a long engagement/exchange between Aboriginal and Whites in Central Australia stretching back to at least the 1960s. This is not to say that Bardon did not play a significant role – he did. Most importantly, he established a precedent and model for 'white art editors' who have been indispensable in the development of the Aboriginal art industry (and I don't mean that in a negative sense).
forms of knowledge should be stressed. The same applies to the present case. Specifically, I am trying to understand what role was played by European accounts of structures of seeing in the emergence and later success of contemporary Aboriginal painting. It is unlikely that Barlow knew Riegl's work directly and, in fact, he may never have even heard of the Viennese art historian. Yet Barlow knew and utilized Riegl's famous distinction between two different modes of perception modeled on the senses of sight and touch. Their likely intermediary was the Austrian-born American art educator Viktor Lowenfeld (1903–1958), author of arguably the most influential textbook in art education during the latter half of the twentieth century. Lowenfeld initially studied art at the University of Vienna about twenty years after Riegl himself was a student at the same institution and he was active in the same intellectual milieu. These Viennese connections make it possible, and perhaps even likely, that Lowenfeld knew Riegl's published work and drew his terminology directly from it. It is also possible, on the other hand, that Lowenfeld's terminology is not indebted directly to Riegl at all but to the sources that he and his Viennese predecessor both read—namely, the works of Johann Friedrich Herbart, Robert Vielder, Adolf von Hildebrand, and other late nineteenth-century German language writers whose neo-Kantian physiological accounts of aesthetic experience investigated the role that subjective feeling plays in conditioning the perception of form. The pressing philosophical problem in Kant's day had been whether human reason was able to grasp an idealized truth behind the veil of sensory experience. The problem that these writers inherited was to account for the duality of reason and nature in the Kantian subject. In his analysis of the sublime, Kant posited the Ding an sich as that which lies beyond the limits of reason. In designating a certain transcendental object as something that we cannot know—the mountain in an ostensibly phenomenal world, as Kant put it—Kant departed from existing claims that nature could be entirely known and classified. To sketch a complex sequence of events quickly for the sake of the following argument, the inaugural moment for late nineteenth-century empathy theory can be located in Herbart's attempt to mediate between empiricism and rationalism. Taking issue with Kant's notion of space as an a priori form of intuition, Herbart argued that the experience of space was an abstraction based on the synthesis of tactile sensations. In this process, a key role was taken up by the movement of the body, for it is only when one moves that the eye that sees and the hand that touches builds up a representation of three-dimensional space. Herbart's reduction of Kant's transcendental subject to a physiological interpretation of aesthetics, which, while highly problematic from a philosophical perspective, was widely influential, culminating in texts like Adolf Hildebrand's Problem of Form in the Fine Arts (1853) and terminology like Adolf Riegl's use of the haptic/optic distinction. Herbart's argument that experience of the three-dimensional world depends on supplementing visual perception with an active bodily engagement with the world made a substantial impact on the application of physiology to general theories of perception. Within the sphere of Aesthetics, writes Matthew Kempler, the conflation of the cognitive and the physiological formed the basis of empathy theory, whereby the aesthetic interest in the purely formal aspects of the object was accompanied by an emotional engagement with it. In the experience of the sublime, according to Kant, the subject discovers its interiority over and above nature. For Vielder on the other hand, following Herbart and striving for from Kant's understanding of the subject as transcendental, the functions of hand and eye together were considered necessary to the experience of space and the visual perception of depth. Treating analogies between the sense of sight and touch that ultimately originate in Aristotle's Physica naturalis and were developed in late Antique and Arabic writings on the inner senses before they turn up in medieval Latin treatises on formal optics that continued to be read well into the seventeenth and even the eighteenth century, Vielder wrote of touch as the haptic sense and described seeing as 'a more subtle touching at a distance.' To understand what is at stake in positing a history of art as a progression from the haptic to the optic engagement with space, as Riegl did, it is useful to bear in mind not only the physiological accounts of aesthetic experience that were new in the late nineteenth century, but also the longer history of Western illusionism. The fundamental problem, recognized by artists and philosophers, lay in accounting for the unbridgeable
gap between the representational field and the viewing subject. In Descartes' legal work, as Yale Massey has argued, there is increased attention to what might be called the semantic elements of perception and the idea that sensation is inextricably bound to bodies in a material sense. In the mid-twentieth century, Mieke Bal formulated the problem of the following clear way of understanding how perceptual activity works, we have to understand how the body works as an intertwining of vision and movement within the field of the visible. Vision is not the interior mind's eye but corporeal habitation within the sphere of contact with the world. As European visual artists had long understood, there is a distinction between how we occupy space and how we represent it. Perhaps the distinction between subject and object inherent in optical naturalism—the system of illusionistic representation based on perspective—helps to explain why Riegl was interested in Vischer's Herbartian insights about feeling into (Einschwingen) forms and space. In Riegl's psychology of perception, depth perception and knowledge of surfaces require a synthetic process of subjective thinking. Riegl's accompanying account of the history of artistic progress positioned a new, positive role for every period of art, as exemplified in late Roman art, formerly considered a period of artistic decline. Riegl described the vast interior space of the Pantheon as more purely optical and dependent on distant vision (Einschwingen), therefore less haptic than its Greek and Egyptian predecessors. The fact that Riegl's terminology turned up in Australia three-quarters of a century later is remarkable. No matter how tentative the contact between Bardos and Riegl may have been in actual fact, attention to the intellectual heritage that encompasses them provides new insight into the effects that European theories of art history have historically produced in the world beyond Europe. The thought experiment I want to perform explores whether Riegl, still considered one of the most important theorists in the field of art history a century after his lifetime, in any way shaped the present understanding of Indigenous Australian art. Geoff Bardey's encounter with the term haptic and optic for visual began when he was an art student at the University of Sydney in the late 1950s, where he read Victor Lowenfeld's Creative and Mental Growth, initially published in 1947. Lowenfeld's text was widely adopted in courses for prospective elementary school teachers in the United States and in Australia following World War II. Like the Swiss Jean Piaget (1896–1980), whose first book on children's conceptions of the world (1929) preceded Lowenfeld's earliest publication on creativity in children by a decade, Lowenfeld adopted the pre-existing schemes of optic and haptic to his account of childhood development. For Lowenfeld, the 'optic' and the 'visual' correspond to two types of art expression occupying opposite ends of a continuum in the mode of perceptual organization and the conceptual categorization of the external environment. The visually minded person engages with the environment primarily through the eyes and feels like a spectator, while a person with 'haptic tendencies' is 'concerned primarily with his own body sensations and subjective experiences.' Bardon appears to have understood Lowenfeld's use of 'haptic' and 'visual' in this sense, but he did not have to account for his ideas as a systematic thinker—he was an art teacher invested in the progress of his students. Lowenfeld's description of the ideal art teacher fits Bardon exactly, judging from everything that has been reported about his encounters at Papunya, including his own autobiographical reminiscences. The new sense of self worth that emerged in the heterogeneous Indigenous community of Papunya in 1971–72 was the realization of Bardos' highest aspirations as an educator. Let me emphasize that my interest is not in whether Bardon accurately understood Lowenfeld, or whether Lowenfeld's appropriation of Riegl's appropriation of Kant makes any sense to us now. How is one person's experience more subjective than another's? I am instead interested in the underlying discourse, specifically the recasting of prior representations in new form, like Bardon's recasting of Lowenfeld's recasting of Herbart. In this process of semiosis, at one set of communications slides over another, what happens to manifestations of racism preserved in language?
all 'cultural influences' in favor of painting 'their own indigenous patterns and motifs'. Within months, the artists formed Papunya Tula, a professional organization, and sold their first paintings. The art education literature that underpinned Bardon's unconventional teaching practice included not only Lowenberg, but texts by other art educators who argued that realism in western representational art was abstract because it detached seeing from a kinaesthetic engagement with one's surroundings. I have already indicated the longer roots of these modernist trends and the philosophical problem that underlies them. Bardon adapted his available sources, art education texts of the 1960s, to the circumstances at Papunya. He promoted a non-representational style that translated what he seemed to have understood as his students' kinaesthetic engagement with the world to a fully 'visual' form of painting. In one sense, he reproduced problematic, essentializing distinctions between the mentalities of different people (still rooted in nineteenth-century racial ideas, though neither Riegl nor Bardon recognized this). On the other hand, Bardon, like Riegl, tried to develop an understanding of art free from the racial theories of cultural evolution that they had both inherited.

There are also other contributing factors to consider, such as the extent and importance of ritual life in the western desert. Many of the early examples of Papunya paintings are not fully realized in the manner of natural pigments that were used. Aboriginal peoples of the western desert possess a highly elaborate and well-defined system of representation, developed in paintings and body ornament, a range of natural pigments, and other materials. Eurocentric distinctions between the senses of sight and touch are irrelevant when one considers the highly complex interaction among the senses in any artistic process. Developing the implications of the research, linguist Jenny Green is currently documenting and analyzing how deeply integrated touch, sight, sound, and movement (auditory and kinaesthetic/visual modalities) are in Anangu activities. It is in this context that we must consider further what Riegl's historical schema was meant to achieve in the broader

Indigenous Australian storytelling provides researchers with an excellent case study of how visual and kinaesthetic activity works by integrating the senses within the field of movement. For this reason, the investigations of Mann and Green are also part of the legacy of nineteenth-century philosophers who sought to understand the experiences of space by studying art. Unlike the anthropologists and ethnographers who studied Aboriginal systems of mark-making and visual representation before, during, and after Bardon's tenure at Papunya – who likewise collaborated with their subjects by providing them with art materials and even instructions on what to depict – Bardon's humanist sensibilities and the belief in the potential of art to foster social cohesion and personal development are reflected in the work of the artists at Papunya to reveal the subjective significance of their paintings. Nonetheless, the traditional use of cultural designs led to serious problems within the Aboriginal community, as Batty explains:

Indeed the designs themselves are secret and subject to complex protocols of ownership and display. Further, the rituals which in which these designs are ceremonially revealed were ascetic – strictly off limits to women and children.

Yet the question remains, did Riegl's structures of seeing, that is, his conceptions of subjectivity and objective engagement with the world at both the individual and collective level, have anything to do with this Australian legacy? I have already mentioned the multiple sources of the terminology that Riegl adopted. Let us now consider further what Riegl's historical schema was meant to achieve in the broader...
context of nineteenth-century European debates about human cultural development. Riegl envisioned the history of art as a continuous process of development that minimized the rise and decline schemes he inherited. His objective was to eliminate Social Darwinism from the writing of art history, a subject to which he devoted some fifty pages at the beginning of his first major theoretical publication, _Stilfragen_ (Problems of Style) (1893), refuting the idea of evolutionary cultural progress proposed by some of his contemporaries. In the introduction and opening chapter, where Riegl set out his theory of geometric style to refute the materialist theories of his contemporaries, he rejected theories of cultural history that postulate a parallel between the physical evolution of the human race and the progress of civilization. He blamed this trend on theories of racial difference that had steadily crept into the writing of art history. Riegl’s objections were explicitly addressed to controversies over cultural development that extended far beyond disciplinary concerns with methodology. The fundamental issue at stake was whether racial differences in mental ability existed. Anthropological discussions in late nineteenth-century Europe and Australia, which also extended beyond scientific debates to the popular press, emphasized that aesthetic capability manifested in artistic productions helped to define the degree of cultural progress, and hence the degree of humanism. The concept of art as a universal and simultaneously ‘spiritual’ phenomenon encompassing crafts was widely disseminated by Tytler’s publications and by writings associated with the British arts and crafts movement. In this newly expanded vertical scale of cultural development, where Australian Aboriginal peoples occupied the lowest rung, most writings on Aboriginal art and culture avoided crediting Indigenous Australians with any degree of creative ability. Tytler and Spencer proposed basically the same arguments as Riegl, namely that all forms of human artistic production are ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘mechanical’ by nature. This conception of art as a universally human phenomenon is at the core of Riegl’s revisions to Kantian concepts of Kunstwollen and constitutes his fundamental objection to materialist theories of artistic development. Yet Riegl, like Tytler and Spencer, explicitly did not reject Darwin’s theory of evolution. Indeed, who would have taken their theories of art seriously if they had objected to the dominant scientific paradigm of the day? Many did. Riegl completely reject the humanist model that granted pre-eminence to ancient Greek civilization. Again, who would have taken Riegl’s theory of art seriously if, instead of explaining cultural development, he had rejected the cultural values of his day in their entirety? Lingering epistemological assumptions of cultural progress still present in Lowenthal’s text, despite his explicit acceptance of all art as equally valid, colored Bardon’s practice as an art teacher when he proposed to change the ‘hectic’ engagement of his students to a ‘visual’ engagement with the world. His aim was to bring dignity and prosperity to the Aboriginal community. What Bardon failed to recognize was that his understanding was ultimately grounded in a racialized view of cultural production. Furthermore, Bardon’s unconditional belief in his students not withstanding, by the time Western Desert painting became an economic goldmine in the national and international art industry in the 1980s, the symbolic markings were viewed reductively within the frameworks of high modernist abstraction, as they still are. In the process of becoming fully ‘visual art in a thoroughly western sense for their overwhelmingly white audiences, acrylic paintings from the central Western Desert negated or at least marginalized the cultural meanings that the work had for its makers and communities of origin. And this was partially by design, because the artists wanted to protect the aesthetic references in their work from uninstructed viewers. More sinister are the circumstances that enable wealthy buyers and sellers to participate in the re-sale auction market, where paintings bring tens of times the amount ever paid to an artist directly. At the present, some of this money benefits the artists, their descendents, or communities who produce such valuable cultural products. The mythos that represent indigenous Australians as hapless victims rather than active agents provide an over-simplistic account of the relocation and assimilation process practiced by the Commonwealth government. Nonetheless, one unresolved question is why alcoholism and violence should be commonplace when so many highly original and successful artists emerged from Papunya and elsewhere beginning in the 1980s. The entanglement of issues of social justice and the West-
ern Desert art movement deserves attention, demands comment and action. The romanticizing, exotifying, and whitewashing of native artistic traditions, practices, and beliefs does not provide insight into cultural differences. Australian artists who identify with their indigenous roots who are able to critique the western art industry do exist, but what goes by the label of Aboriginal art is all too often only a mirror image of European desires. Native knowledge is also increasingly lost as it is successively formatted in conformity with western values. As anthropologist Fred Myers described the situation in 2002, the circulation of acrylic paintings is not easily contained within a single regime of value— they are neither simply commodities, nor fully sacred objects. As long as the question of single authorship and high art media that are still so important to the selling of art prevails, European values will provide the standard against which everyone else is judged. Aboriginal artists were configured as Australia's leading internationally known abstract artists in an astonishingly short period of time. They filled the pre-existing role of the archetypal artist, appropriating the longstanding narrative of the male genius who recapitulates the great moments of avant-garde art without any formal education or even knowledge of the art to which the work is commonly compared. Significantly, this career-making took shape in the 1980s and 1990s, when formal High Modernism was passe, though of course still a profitable model in the art industry that quickly made artists like Clifford Possum and Emily Kngwarreye into international stars. While it would be callous to label them as new products on an old shelf, from the standpoint of art as a high and commodity form, that is exactly what they were—a novel twist that enfranched a tired market. Assessing Riegl's 'Australian legacy,' it should now be clear, is a complicated matter. The recursive movement of ideas shifting between Europe and Australia over the last century that I have sketched here suggests both how individual agency can intersect and even subvert the trans-generational reproduction of unchangeable racist constructs and, concurrently, how individual agency is continually pressured by institutionally sanctioned forms of power delivered in a variety of ways. Barren could hardly have foreseen that the force of the art market would eventually work against the best interests of indigenous communities that he and his immediate successors tried to rehabilitate psychologically and make self-sufficient through the production and sale of art. Assumptions played out in nineteenth-century European and Australian scholarly texts were enacted by the colonial Australian government in its treatment of indigenous populations. Rivalry between the popular press and entertainment industry echoed these policies far and wide. For the same reasons, however, the continuing negotiations of place and memory between different subgroups are especially clearly articulated in Australia, and worth international attention for this reason. In recent years Australia has officially begun to come to terms with its racist colonial past; when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd assumed office in January 2008, he opened Parliament with an apology to all Aboriginal people only, the second such apology offered by any government. Yet, as more recent protests attest, the impoverished conditions of indigenous Australians and their unequal access to education, health services, and other rights of citizenship continue today, and racist attitudes have by no means vanished completely in Australia or elsewhere. The wider significance of the foregoing thought experiment has been to establish a long trajectory for investigating structures of seeing through the study of art. The structural intimations of Aboriginal artists have been studied by scientists and scholars for over a century. During this time period, the cognitive and creative abilities of indigenous Australians may have been a constant factor; but appreciation has changed from considering them to be the most primitive of humans to understanding their artmaking as an exemplary manifestation of multimodal sensory integration of the body and the environment.
My deepest thanks to Philip Batty and Susan Lawler whose incisive comments on an earlier draft of this essay prove we miss the entire argument. To Rob and David Farquhar for their very helpful comments on an subsequent draft, and to Paul (Paul) for offering Originally and encouragement the earliest the writing process.


3. Although Spencer was an evolutionary, his partner John Gillies had a much greater respect for the correct way of Aboriginal peoples. A large number of professional anthropologists were not on board of Aboriginal assumption for Aboriginal organizations such as the Central Land Council.


5. The idea of the 19th century social evolutionism, to which Spencer and Gillies are both indebted, originating in classical antiquity and elaborated during the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. According to the thesis known as "Antiquitiy", Aboriginals were variants of Neolithic and therefore the equivalent of prehistoric Europeans. McFadden and Ruse, Appropriated Past, p.5;


7. The historical emergence of Aboriginal painting as a respected art form is a much more complex than this brief account can suggest. See H. Murphy, Aboriginal Art, Phaidon, London, 1998, and ibid., "Aboriginal Art: A History". Melbourne, 2000, pp.83-100, with further references.

8. Personal communication with Philip Batty, February 1, 2009.


35. Watts, personal communication with the author, November 3, 2002. Green is currently completing her dissertation on this subject at the University of Melbourne, entitled "The North, the South, the Multicultural in AROUND the World." (see note 35).

36. Watts, "Whiteness Pedagogy."