

Looking at (not seeing)

Reconsidering the work of Emily Kame Kngwarreye

ROBERT HOLLINGWORTH

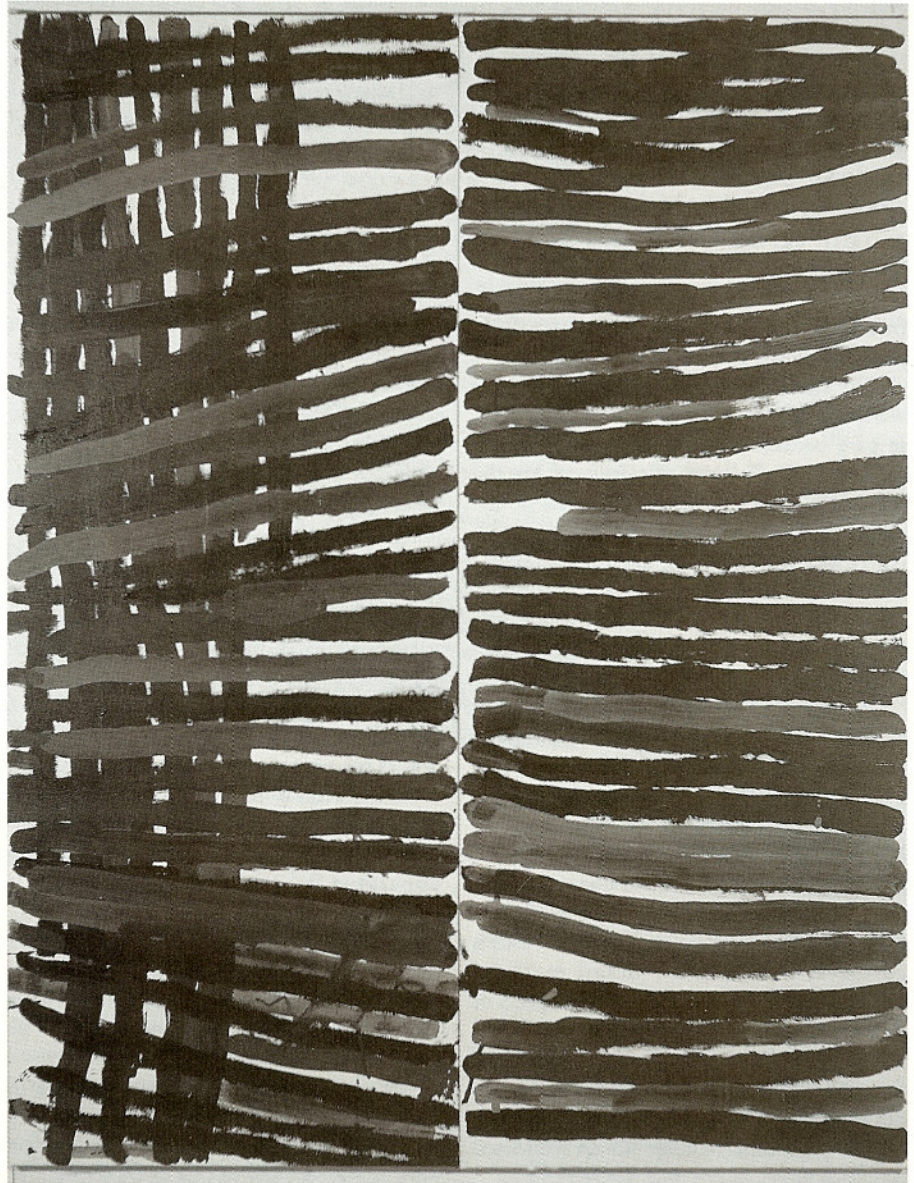
Emily Kame Kngwarreye told us very little about her work - but then she told us everything. Her enduring comment is emphasised in the catalogue accompanying the current touring retrospective, 'Whole lot, that's whole lot... That's what I paint: whole lot...' This reconsideration of her work examines the factual weight of this comment and relates it to the ideas of others, most notably Nishitani and Bataille. These writers may help us locate operations within the work which extend further than its widespread appeal and in so doing mobilise the viewer beyond Eurocentric conventions.

Kngwarreye has already been the subject of many informative discussions relating to many aspects of her life, her culture and her work. The current catalogue extends this with thoughtful contributions from those who were, in different ways, close to this extraordinary Anmatyerre elder. Yet any clear reception of her work still eludes us and none of our critical discourses seem appropriate to discuss the work. Perhaps it is not so much the terminology that is the problem (although it contributes) but that to see Art (big A) we assume an aesthetic posture. We position ourselves as contextual decipherers and attempt to locate a homogenous strategic framework, but this adopted posture looks nothing less than foolish in the company of Kngwarreye's work.

To examine another approach, we will need to revive the subject of perception. Already a problem has arisen. Perception, or the way we intercept the material environment and our own created imagery, has been fairly much off the critical agenda for at least a couple of decades. In art today, critical attention is directed to locating theoretical contexts associated with the work rather than actually engaging with the work itself.

This was the position Ian Burn faced when addressing ideas about perceiving works of art from the 60s in his curated exhibition of 1993, *Looking at seeing & reading*. Burn suggested that our current way of seeing is to read theory onto the image rather than to look at the work itself; to treat the art object as 'a rhetorical surface' - a site to locate an objectified theoretical voice - rather than to engage with it in a perceptual way.

So highly was Burn critically regarded



Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled (Awelye) dark horizontal stripe partly webbed*, 1994, acrylic on polyester. Private collection, photo courtesy Utopia Art Sydney

that had he not tragically died at the time of his exhibition it would have been interesting to see where his discourses on perception would have taken us. In Burn's words, 'only the recovery of perception in its critical capacity realises the visual density of art-making.' This essay argues for a revision of

perception, because, if there is one thing we can say about Kngwarreye's works, we cannot read them as theoretical (rhetorical) surfaces. But it is a critique which goes beyond a mere philosophical discussion.

We can say that we learn to 'see'; seeing is socialised vision. It can be compared to the

way we recognise the written word. Words are abstract, they stand in for something and for us 'being literate' means we have learned to decipher them - we have mastered the ability to think abstractly - otherwise written language is just a confusion of marks. Similarly, we read pictures, we observe signified form and match our knowledge to it.

Since Sartre, a great deal of intelligent discourse has been directed to the way we encounter and interpret the visible world. The predominant view now is that 'being aware' is not simply the receiving of a play of light off surfaces but involves intercepting an intelligible system of signified form held in place by the defining elements of language. Norman Bryson in *Vision and Painting* offers a very lucid explanation of this. 'For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world. Vision is socialised ...'¹

'Seeing' then, is a matter of absolute fidelity to strict definitions which were set in place before we were ever there. If we feel we are an agent independently assessing the world around us, we may be sadly mistaken, in part, because we read the view through a pre-established 'screen' of signifiers. But the relevant point is that for most readers of this essay, our method is entirely Eurocentric - the viewer, the signifiers, the interpretation - are responses to a strict Western methodology, one that considers everything as static entities in a system of interposing relationships.

We think of the material environment around us as an object-world. Over many centuries we have systematically categorised everything using intelligent, analytical methods that constantly undergo addition and revision. A flower then, is different from a stick. But a flower is also characterised, classified, rated, ranked, analytically divided and so on. This process is pivotal to Western cultures, it is how we detail material conditions and restructure certain aspects of it. But in perceptual terms this analytical method insists that our flower is recognised as a static, isolated, schematised entity that is not only distinct from everything else but is also in opposition to other things with fixed classifications.

Subject-object duality

This represents the old Cartesian model of subject-object dualism which strangely we still seem to adhere to. As Bryson explains 'Both subject and object exist in a state of mutual confirmation and fixity. The subject, from its position of centre amidst the world of things, looks out on objects and perceives them as separate entities.' Despite intense post-structuralist debate which questions these positions, in the real world, few are yet

to see beyond them. Similarly, most people (who also view art) still follow the Marxist view that everything operates according to rigid systems that can be objectively tested, ratified by science and explained with language. These 'metanarratives' were overturned by science itself decades ago.² The problem is that they are considered givens - absolute truths rather than socially arranged structures - and they stand between ourselves and another possibility implied by the pre-eminent Japanese writer, Keiji Nishitani.

Nishitani extends the discussion of perception further and directs the contemporary subject-object duality to a solution based on a kind of emphatic inclusiveness. To summarise the conventional position he states that 'The self is set up in opposition to the object.'³ We as central subjects stand apart and direct our attention towards objects. We see them this way by binding them hypothetically with an outline, cutting them out from the surrounding field. Importantly, seeing things as static objects is only possible if we first eliminate everything else that is not them, while at the same moment deferring time as well. But if we can reverse this, if we can remove this immobilising outline and withdraw from the notion of an isolated entity stalled in space, the 'object' resumes its place and mobility as part of an indivisible continuum which includes us.

If we now reconsider the empirically defined flower in this context, as Bryson puts it 'its existence is only a phase of incremental transformations between seed and dust... the entity comes apart. It cannot be said to occupy a single location, since its locus is always the universal field of transformations: it cannot achieve separation from that field or acquire any kind of bounded outline.' Object ceases to exist when the framing apparatus is removed. In its place is a continuous 'field of transformations' - an uninterrupted state of 'becomings'. This means there can be no such thing as a 'normal' state, the material world involves a continual shift of overlapping states or phases.

Of course to contemplate this kind of inclusiveness has been a part of Nishitani's Buddhist background for millennia. But we need not accept any of this as transcendental. In this discussion, the recognition of indivisibility is not even a philosophical consideration. Instead it has its origins in physics. It recognises the body (and everything else) as a transitional site of interactive energies. It can be as unremarkable as the scientific certainty that one day a tree will become a rock (or a brick) and I will become a tree. We easily accept the Western maxim 'dust to dust'. It is only a tiny step further from dust to tree, it just takes a little longer.

Dissolving solids

Perhaps now we are going some way towards recognising another 'whole lot' possibility for Kngwarreye and her relationship to her work. We can see that her works are not analogues of the 'exterior' world and they are not simply 'compositions' even if it is impossible not to respond to their formal beauty. However, without subtracting anything from the essential nature of Kngwarreye's tribal knowledge, we can begin to understand the works as the enactment of experience associated with being inextricably included in an indivisible world.

Two key elements in Kngwarreye's work are the line and the dot. Both operate in an emphatic way throughout the entire body of her work and as noted in the catalogue she sees no distinction between these processes. Where line is used, it is not 'outline'. It is not employed to delineate an 'object' or something 'seen'. Rather, it cuts through and across in consecutive tracings that in sum-total demonstrate a graphic recording which may be equivalent to body/world experience itself. This is far away from autographic, self-motivated 'project'.

The dot works similarly. Without 'Westernising' the process, we may note in passing, the way the dot is employed in office drafting. A dotted line in a drafted plan is used to indicate something in the diagram that cannot be literally observed. The repetitive dot or broken line is arguably one of the very few graphic means to effectively do this.

The 'dot style' originated in other Aboriginal communities to the west of Alice Springs and derives from body and ground designs. But in Kngwarreye's paintings, she seems to utilise it as a very ingenious means to speak of 'being' as an indivisible system of inclusiveness. The dot seems to operate as a remarkable system of human ingenuity to mobilise the visual; it causes a continuum of visual shifts that annihilates ideas such as opposition, separation, objectification and discriminating fixture. And both dot and line can decentre the viewing subject, offering no fixed base from which to theoretically 'read' the work.

The informe

Perhaps it is timely now to introduce Georges Bataille. For an introduction to his writings in relation to art, the text *Formless - A User's Guide* by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois is very useful. This book offers a new and surprising inroad into how Bataille's notion of the *informe* 'the formless' can be used to reassess a hitherto unexplored operation in modern art both past and present.

The discussion here however is much more particular, we are specifically

addressing the idea that something can be created in art - a phase-form - that can be 'acknowledged' but not differentiated. It is a kind of transitional form that is not representational - but then neither is it abstract; instead it is a viable third possibility. Transitional form is epitomised in Kngwarreye's work as the residual outcome of the direct engagement of 'body' with the tangible world. It materialises as a recognisable structure, but one which operates outside language and the enclosures of rule-regulated empirical knowledge.

How can some 'thing' exist visually yet avoid being recuperated into the known? Bataille can help us here. His term *informe* 'formless' negates the idea of definition; it denies the possibility that things have 'definition'. Bataille recognises an escape route from the homogenising ambitions of the empirical sciences through the non-linear and the non-systematic. He says conventional thinking tries to appropriate the unknown into the known by developing theories to explain it, by taking action. Bataille's term for this is project. Project starts with a kind of premise, therefore it cannot include the unknowability of the unknown. Bataille says that what is unknowable can only be acknowledged by avoiding this kind of action upon it.

Two recent essays by Rex Butler on Kngwarreye map out arguments against attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable.⁴ But let us not surmise from this that Kngwarreye's work is beyond approach, that it is some sort of unaccountable exotic 'other' that everyone else must forever accept as separate and unreachable. The work (like all work) is a culturally arranged structure which perhaps speaks of a world picture which may be unrecognisable to Western perceptions. But perceptions too are socially orchestrated, so our position is not impervious to change as contemporary scientific inquiry is quick to point out. We can be perpetually alert to the potential for new comprehensions of the world picture and we can learn from other cultures.

Perhaps it is time to forget about assimilating Kngwarreye's work to a Western way of thinking (as everyone acknowledges) but to try it the other way round. Can we

imagine a change to our own art paradigms using the sensibilities of another culture? To do so would not be an aesthetic consideration - it is not a position to be adopted. Instead it requires a sustained paradigmatic shift in the way we think about art and what its operations can be.



Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled Alhalkere*, 1990, acrylic on polyester. Private collection, photo courtesy Utopia Art Sydney

The opposite of action

Kngwarreye's work was made horizontally and on the ground. In a real sense, perhaps the work should remain this way, and in the same location. This is where it may be said to truly operate. To take it up and prop it against a tree (let alone place it in an art gallery) irredeemably changes its operation. It alters the work's essential relation to the earth/ground, to inherent conditions relative to the maker and to the bodily operations within the work. We position the work according to Western vantage points that we regard appropriate for viewing 'works of art'.

This means that before we even sight the work we have defined it. This will never be avoided but acknowledging it may help us recognise other inherent operations which are in Bataille's terms 'beyond project' and 'beyond knowability'. Perhaps, as Rex Butler says, '...the failure to comprehend the work is

not to be overcome or solved but is what the work is.' But inertia need not be the outcome, we may consider the work's indeterminacy as productive and still approach the work - if we can subvert our propensity to aestheticise the process of looking.

Bataille's solution is 'inner experience' by which he means experience that is not preconditioned by a desire for moral, spiritual or fact-seeking ideals. 'Inner experience is the opposite of action. Nothing more.'⁵ Bataille simply wants to undo the form and concept of the world that our totalising systems try to construct. He negates the possibility of this kind of homogeneity and suggests that the receptive subject can locate something else which empirical knowledge cannot frame.

At the heart of Kngwarreye's work perhaps this 'something else' is being traced. She seems to reach into the texture of 'consciousness' and present for our consideration another potential for what this can actually be. It is irrelevant that we cannot connect the substance of the work to our object world - or to other art. To attempt this is to return it to the paralysing dialectic that underscores so much of our 'information age'. Kngwarreye takes us onto a new field of the immeasurable, away from enclosure to the outside, to a kind of experience that 'at a certain point, must not be translated into representation or fantasies... but must be seen

as a dynamic flux that carries us away even further outside'.⁶

- 1 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, Yale University Press, 1986 pp 87-94
- 2 See K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1959. *His considerable reputation rests on his philosophy of science. In contrast to the Logical Positivists he never held that non-scientific activities were intellectually irrelevant.*
- 3 Keiji Nishitani, *Religion & Nothingness*, University of California Press, 1983
- 4 *Eyeline 36*, 1998 & Australian Art Collector, December 1997
- 5 L. A. Bolt-Irons, ed. *On Bataille - Critical Essays*, 1995
- 6 Gilles Deleuze in *The New Nietzsche*, ed D. Allison, MIT Press, 1985