

March 2011

Letter from BERLIN

by David Rhodes

DAG

INCLUSION

LAURA MARS GRP., BERLIN | FEBRUARY 5 – MARCH 5, 2011

Alois Riegl (1858 – 1905), an Austrian art historian, was a major figure in establishing the study of art history as an independent discipline. He was also highly influential in the development of late 19th century formalism. It is well documented that Greenbergian formalism, with its blinkered appreciation of mid-20th century painting and sculpture, has brought this way of looking into serious disrepute. While notions of formalism have been debated as far back as Plato and his argument for *eidos* (shape) being as much a product of our ideas as our perception, it seems clear that form is in a non-passive relationship with any beholder.



DAG. "Inclusion." Exhibition view. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Laura Mars Grp. Berlin. Photo by Stephanie Kloss.

Riegl's reputation as an innovative and radical art historian was firmly established with the publication of his second book, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (*Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, 1893). In this extraordinary text, Riegl described a continuous "history of ornament" that followed particular motifs from the Ancient Near East through Classical, early Medieval, and Islamic decorative art. In doing this he proposed the idea of *Kunstwollen*, which translates very approximately as "the desire for art," or perhaps more accurately as the desire for what we have come to name as art. Riegl believed that the stylistic directions of any given age were driven not by mimetic or technological expediencies but by a visual and formal dialectic. This would apply equally to belt buckles, textiles, or paintings. Claiming a history for ornamentation was unexpected and resisted, since it was thought that only serious painting or sculpture was worthy of an analytical history.

Riegl moved from one innovation to another in his art historical thinking. Combining his concept of *Kunstwollen* with a growing interest in the so-called transitional periods of art production, he considered these eras of equal interest to classical periods, making this the central issue of his third book, *Spätromische Kunst-Industrie (Late Roman Art Industry, 1901)*. One of the clearest expressions of his concept of *Kunstwollen* comes in the final passage of this book: "The plastic *Kunstwollen* regulates man's relationship to the sensibly perceptible appearance of things. Art expresses the way man wants to see things shaped and colored, just as the poetic *Kunstwollen* expresses how men want to imagine them. Man is not only the passive, sensory recipient, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way (varying from one people, region, or epoch to another)...in religion, philosophy, science, even statecraft and law."

Shortly before his death from cancer at the age of 47, Riegl had been working on another concept: that of "attentiveness," exploring the relationship between viewer and work of art. All these ideas are revisited, of course, in contemporary aesthetics: the preoccupation with context; reassessing what has been categorized as minor art; and the relationship between viewer and object.

For DAG, an artist who is equally at ease with the motifs of Modernism and the products of design stores, corner shops, and DIY centers, Riegl's ideas of "attentiveness" find renewed relevance. Included in the Laura Mars Grp. exhibition are geometrical paintings using store-bought, triangular templates. At first glance, the small-scale triangle, carefully filled-in and repeated with fine felt-tip pens across a square meter or more of canvas (or, in past cases, an old T-shirt) evoke both the patterning typical of mass-produced fabrics and the weavings of Anni Albers. The idea of shape being determined intuitively while remaining formally rigorous and inclusive of materials outside of the art supply store makes for visually rich and surprising work. As with Albers, the craft of making, in her case weaving, combined with the work's appearance, synthesizes modernist abstraction and the continuing history of ornament: For Albers, it was the visual texts of Peruvian and Mexican textiles; for DAG, somewhat closer to home, it is the patterns and designs of industrial production.

Across a doorway, party streamers form a curtain of bright angular patterning that separates as it reaches the floor, the streamers curling randomly, invoking the social spaces where DAG made a reputation for himself in the 1990s as a DJ in Berlin's numerous unregulated clubs. The sight of the doorway is like hearing a folk melody from Stravinsky, but here it's in a dance hall and not concert hall. Strangely, after the beginning of a new century, and significantly after 9/11, the Berlin club and art scenes moved abruptly toward a more regulated and professionalized context. The old open, improvised way of life seemed threatening and not so easily controlled. A more conservative attitude developed in reaction to events.

Throughout DAG's work, the feeling is of found beauty, discovered composition, and finely tuned repetition. A pale blue sheet of cloth, its weave open in parts, is stretched like canvas on a frame, resembling a Blinky Palermo with imperfections but totally removed in impact from that currently celebrated artist's work. The worn threads make tiny geometric shapes that evoke the tiny triangles repeated across DAG's paintings as well as the crossing, diagonal bands on the party streamers. The range of perceived time is extreme, from the quickly stretched pale blue sheet to the pen-drawn paintings and their many hours of labour. The works are long in the looking, with details revealing themselves slowly—things found, things manipulated, and things worked over for extended periods. The making is not fetishized, nor is it to be looked at through an idealistic lens about labor or high and low art. The connectedness between ornament and shape, craft, and fine art is complete. Where would Riegl place these works? He would recognize that after Modernism, we are in a transitional period of assessment that takes into consideration recent as well as distant achievements. And I think he would appreciate the attitude and means evident here in DAG's Berlin exhibition.