

CONCEPTUAL SEX

MODERNISM ACKNOWLEDGES COLOUR

Colour has become the central focus for a young generation of artists. Not for its expressive value, but particularly as an artistic and social idea. The discourse on colour has a long history.

by Maxine Kopsa

We used to call them 'colourists', these artists who spent more time on colour than on line. These artists who, according to Baudelaire, induce reverie while arousing thought. Both, he claimed, were pleasures; albeit of a different kind, yet no less equal. The French art critic Charles Blanc (no pun intended) was less forgiving in his view of colour as *opposed* to form: 'Colour is a mobile, vague, intangible element, while form, on the contrary, is precise, limited, palpable and constant.'¹

Colour, it was generally held (probably up until the mid 20th century), is a sentiment, a snake charmer, a multifarious escape from thought and purity. Purity – which stems from the mind – is not manifold like sentiment; it is a single-lane highway, a straight and narrow to enlightenment. Man strove for 'line', divorced from distraction and rid of adornment, a line that champions an intellectual, conceptual method above an emotional approach.²

RIPOLIN

What Blanc wrote in the mid 19th century (these quotes are from 1867, but of course echo the classic Poussin vs. Rubens debate on line vs. colour and stretch back to the 17th century) is not much different than Le Corbusier's ideas on white, or rather, 'whitewash', condensed in a manifesto he wrote in 1925 titled *A Coat of Whitewash: The Law of Ripolin*. In it, he exclaims that every citizen should

be required to replace their hangings, their damasks, their wallpapers, their stencils, with a plain coat of white ripolin, so that one can reflect as an improved individual, and be able to judge clearly.³

The Austrian architect Adolf Loos's ideas on ornament and the plain offense of it – ideas that predate Le Corbusier's manifesto by only a decade – are a perfect echo of the Ripolin effect, if one agrees to follow the logic of whitewash down to the crime of ornament.⁴ To Loos, the will to perform an aesthetic gesture, to adorn (to decorate) is akin to the juvenile tendencies of a 4-year-old, or so he was convinced: 'I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects. I believe that with this discovery I was bringing joy to the world; it has not thanked me.'⁵

But we have since, haven't we? Modernism thanked Loos; the Conceptual Art of the 60s and 70s thanked Loos. And, I dare say, we continue to thank him, whether or not we realize it, through much (all?) of contemporary artistic practice up until today.

READYMADE COLOUR

While I was skyping with the artist Amalia Pica in April this year, she answered my question 'Are you scared of using colour?' by saying that she didn't always know what to do with it, but this was precisely part of her motivation for working with it.

Amalia Pica: Colour always escapes coding, because it always appears so subjective – unlike conceptual art that was historically so black-and-white. My thought is rather, how to look for conventions (social conventions) as they are manifested in colour. So the point is: I want to think, but not in black-and-white.

Maxine Kopsa: Do you have no-go colours?

AP: No, just colour 'for the sake of it' is no-go.

MK: Too aesthetic.

AP: The easiest colour is found colour.

MK: ...like a found object. Couleur trouvée...

AP: I use things that have colour to think about colour, but would rarely paint something in a colour just

because I like it.

MK: Why not, actually?

AP: Because colour as arbitrary as that does scare me. But so does arbitrary form.

So colour is tricky. And yet it's all over the place. Not just obviously, as in all things, but aesthetically, culturally, in terms of current artistic practice. The rebirth of colour – colour experimentation, colour as a subject, colour as a question, colour as an aim, colour as a problem – seems to have re-entered the arena of the visual arts. The question is, why? And what kind of colour are we *allowed* to use now?

ETHICS

Rem Koolhaas explained that for him, colour went out of colour in the late eighties: 'After an initial outburst of the use of paint at the beginning of the century – was it the easiest way to transform, to get rid of history? – we are at the end of the twentieth century, committed to the authenticity of materials.'⁶ More plainly said, if you use colour, you must quote colour.

A recent series of works by Sara van der Heide does just this. *Claim to Universality. Colour Theory Exercise 1-20* (2011-2012) takes as its starting point a drawing by Bauhaus student Lena Bergner from 1927, made for a class given by Paul Klee. Van der Heide analyses the basic workings of watercolours in twenty variations on the 'original'. In turn, Bergner was responding to an assignment dealing with the establishment of focal points, but ultimately, in her final piece, the chromatic and compositional characteristics took centre stage. By quoting Bergner, Van der Heide manages to use colour, unabashedly, again and again, experimenting in formal composition, in 'illumination' and 'shading' without falling prey to the arbitrary. In essence, she remains committed to the authenticity of materials.

As such, *Colour Theory Exercise 1-20* introduces the problematics of form, of purity and the consequences of pure and impure composition, while remaining a conceptual endeavour. Van der Heide's series thus begs the question of enjoyment, the enjoyment of colour and formal experimentation. Can it exist today? Or is the only way colour is invited in through a concep-

tual back door, masked as the concrete front door?

TRUTH

Could we have all become Poussinists? And when exactly did this happen? After or before 1908? Around 1925? Or finally with the Age of Information and the ensuing Post-Fordist conceptual pull of the 60s and 70s? Was there a break in between, when 'colour hadn't left yet colour'?

In her recent paintings, Melissa Gordon has been looking at the representational history of De Stijl – specifically, Mondrian – and what is revealed by close analysis (a blow-up) of the object (in this case a painting) via its reproduction (a photograph in a book). Her silk-screened canvases depict close-ups that she re-photographed in her studio from cheap Taschen books and pair them with coloured rectangular blocks. Gordon wrote to me in April: 'I wanted to put the colours back in the front of the screen prints to try to underline what colour in a Mondrian painting does – in a literal manner. It's about the 'spatiality' of painting (painting as something which exists to duplicate things on a surface in perspective/scale, in layers, to give the imitation of space).'

These works not only bring the spatial (*back, sic!*) into Mondrian's composition, they also underline the fallibility and temporality of a reproduction. Gordon: 'For me, what is so interesting about De Stijl and colour is influenced by Yve-Alain Bois' notion of colour within the idea of the model. At one point in *Painting as Model* there's a great description of how Naum Gabo visits Mondrian in his studio and he is painting the white thicker and thicker (to erase spatiality), and Gabo tells him that it's an impossible pursuit. What's so wonderful about their exchange is that, to me, the point of what Mondrian was doing was "impossible": it's "impossible" to erase space on a pictorial plane (it's impossible to duplicate space on a pictorial surface too) – but it's also impossible to avoid colour.'

Would Mondrian have turned in his grave to see his cracks revealed, his colours turned into sculptural elements? After all, he was very clear in his intent: 'Abstract-real painting can

create in an aesthetic-mathematic way because it possesses an exact mathematical means of expression: colour brought to determination.'⁷ Gordon gives a brave twist to his notion of 'determination' and raises the point of 'expression'. This new Mondrian operates, according to Gordon, 'on an edge between function (meaning) and ornament (feeling)'.

Which makes me think of the social implications – even the political implications – of the use of colour. *Multicultural Crayon Displacements* (2007-8), may look like a Joseph Albers experiment in abstract colour planes, but in actual fact it is much more.⁸ In this series of works (3 versions of each original colour), Lisa Oppenheim represents Crayola crayon's dated flesh colours through photographs that each represent one of the colours in Crayola's Multicultural Crayon Set. The story goes, in order to answer to political correct demands, Crayola extended their assortment of flesh-colours in the early 80s and launched the new and improved 'Multicultural Crayon Set'.⁹ The new box set apparently created such a ruckus that it prompted other companies (like Band-Aid) to reconsider their chromatic definition of flesh.

Oppenheim's *Multicultural Crayon Displacements* relates to problems of representation and discrepancy in historical depiction, as do Gordon's paintings. Here, however, the reference to the use of a Modernist language is apparent, and explicitly invoked in order to underline the visually 'scientific' solution to socio-political questions.

CITATION

Conceptual art was dictated by the *burden* or the *release*, depending on how you want to see it, of black-and-white: like wearing a uniform during grade school, it's just a whole lot easier not to have to make decisions about adorning. So, following through with the idea that today we continue the conceptual journey (indeed we cannot but do otherwise), colour must be seen in terms of, as Blanc would say, *reason*. Colour has become 'reasonable'. And has hopefully finally rid itself of its overly simple categorization of 'determined by the irrational', where colour is seen as a means of

appealing to the spiritual, reduced to the emotional, the indeterminate or the mystical, a denotation but one small step away from 'ornament', once removed from 'degenerate'.

Thankfully, the use of colour today is more complicated than this. Colour today is cited. It is sourced from and revealed by, and by no means becomes an easy matter. What it does do is take the modernist language it so often refers to and squeeze it and caress it into a bastardized version of the present. Put differently, colour today is the result of conceptual, consenting sex. Finally, Modernism has come of age; we are, you could say, 'rainbow ripolined'.

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¹ Charles Blanc, *The Grammar of Painting and Engraving* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1874), as quoted in: *Colour*, David Batchelor, ed. (London: Whitechapel, 2008) p. 32-34

² *Ibid*, Blanc: 'A sentiment is multiple, while reason is one.'

³ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* (London: The Architectural Press, 1987), p.xxvi.

'If some Solon imposed these two laws on our enthusiasm:

THE LAW OF RIPOLIN
A COAT OF WHITEWASH

We would perform a moral act: to love purity!
An act which leads to the joy of life: the pursuit of perfection.

We would improve our condition: to have the power of judgment!

⁴ Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, Innsbruck, 1908, reprint Vienna, 1930, quoted here from <https://docs.google.com/>, p. 20: 'Every age has its style, is our age alone to be refused a style? By style, people meant ornament. Then I said: Weep not! See, therein lies the greatness of our age, that it is incapable of producing a new ornament. We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament. See, the time is nigh, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will glisten like white walls. Like Zion, the holy city, the capital of heaven. Then fulfillment will come.'

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁶ Rem Koolhaas, *The Future of Colours is Looking Bright*, 1999, in David Batchelor, *Colour* (see note 2), p. 220

⁷ From: 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst' (The New Plastic in Painting), published by Mondrian in twelve instalments in the journal *De Stijl* during 1917 and 1918 and quoted here from David Batchelor, *Colour* (see note 2), p. 69. The quote continues: 'To determine colour involves, first, the reduction of naturalistic colour to primary colour, second, the reduction of colour to plane; third, the delimitation of colour – so that it appears as a unity of rectangular planes.'

⁸ Oppenheim recreated each Crayola hair, eye, or skin tone via a replication of the earliest known process for colour photography, photographing each crayon colour with red, green, and blue filters, and then projecting the resulting red, green, and blue slides onto photo reactive paper. Source: Press release for *Reduced Visibility at The Glassell School*, Houston, 2009

⁹ In 1963 Crayola re-named their 'Flesh' colour 'Peach' and in 1999 'Indian Red' was changed to 'Chestnut'.