

Chromophobia: Ancient and Modern, and a Few Notable Exceptions

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To address the question of colour in art is, sooner or later, to encounter a strange and deep kind of loathing. For example:

The union of design and colour is necessary to beget painting just as is the union of man and woman to beget mankind, but design must maintain its preponderance over colour. Otherwise painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through colour just as mankind fell through Eve.¹

The passage was written by the influential nineteenth-century critic and colour theorist, Charles Blanc, it is interesting on a number of counts. First he identifies colour with the 'feminine' in art; second he asserts the need to subordinate colour to the 'masculine' discipline of design, or drawing; third he exhibits a reaction typical of phobics: a massive overvaluation of the power of that which he fears; and fourth he says nothing at all original. In aesthetics and art theory colour is very often ascribed either a minor, a subordinate, or a threatening role. The devaluation of colour expressed in the phrase *disegno versus colore* has a very long history. The idea that adequate representation through line alone is both possible and preferable was revived during the Italian Renaissance from ancient Greek and Roman sources, and continued to inform academic training until the nineteenth century.² When colour was admitted to the equation of art it was, as Blanc indicated, usually within a strongly disciplinarian regime marshalled by the more 'profound' art of drawing. Even Kant, writing in 1790, maintained that while colours may give 'brilliancy' and 'charm' to painting and sculpture, 'make it really worth looking at and beautiful they cannot'. Again, only drawing was 'essential'.³

Chromophobia, the fear of corruption through colour, is not inherent in all devaluations of colour in aesthetics, but it is visible in many instances. Associated with decadence, exoticism, confusion, lack of clarity, superficiality and decoration, colour has been conscripted into other more well-documented racial and sexual phobias. Taken as a marker of the feminine by Blanc, others as far back as Pliny have placed colour on the 'wrong' end of the rhetorical opposition between the Occidental and the Oriental, the Attic and the Asian, the rational and the irrational. For Aristotle, colour was a drug ('pharmakon'); in rhetoric itself 'colores' came to mean embellishment of the essential structure of an argument. If colour is not a contaminant, then it is more often than not treated as an addition, embellishment or supplement, relating to 'mere' appearances rather than to the essential structure of things.

A suspicion of colour persists in certain types of art, particularly the kind which aligns itself with the more cerebral, intellectual and moral aspects of experience. A commitment to one or another variety of Realism has almost always been marked by a

¹ Charles Blanc, cited in Charles A Riley II, *Colour Codes*, Hanover and London, University of New England Press, 1995, p.6.

² See John Gage, *Colour and Culture*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, esp. chapters 1 and 7.

³ Cited in Riley, *Colour Codes*, *op cit*, p.17.

fondness for brown; Conceptual Art made a fetish of black and white. To this day, 'seriousness' in art is usually available only in shades of grey. The idea that strong colour is the preserve of primitives and children may not be stated much these days, but it appears still to have a strong silent presence.

One of the reasons for the continued devaluation of colour in much art and theory is perhaps that both conceptually and practically it is extraordinarily hard to *contain*. Conceptually colour has proved irresistibly slippery, constantly evading our attempts to organise it in language or in a variety of linear, circular, spherical, or triangular geometries. For Plotinus colour was simply 'devoid of parts' and therefore (literally) beyond analysis. When the twenty-two-year-old Newton revolutionised the scientific understanding of light and colour, the subordination of colour to a system of laws also became an imperative. But the rationale for Newton's division of the spectrum or rainbow into seven primary colours was based less on any inherent divisions within the colour continuum than on the desire to make it match the seven distinct notes in the musical scale.⁴ Evidence of the sheer contingency of colour-systems and colour-concepts has been produced by a number of ethnographers, linguists and cultural historians in recent decades. But only a relatively few philosophers and theorists have found the awkwardness of colour at all suggestive. Kierkegaard identified intense colour with childhood, as others had before him, but lamented its loss: 'The hues that life once had gradually became too strong, too harsh for our dim eyes'.⁵ The problems of matching the experience of colour with available colour-concepts became the basis of Wittgenstein's last main preoccupation.⁶ For Barthes, colour, like other sensory experiences, could only be addressed in language in terms of metaphor: his answer to the question 'what is colour?' was: 'a kind of bliss'. Barthes' sensualising, or rather his eroticising, of colour is a very striking inversion of Blanc's Old Testament foreboding. In a way there is no disagreement between them: colour has a potency which will overwhelm the subject and obliterate all around it, even if, for Barthes, this was only momentary, 'like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell'.⁷ The potency of colour presents some real problems for artists: colour saturation tends to knock out other kinds of detail in a work; it is difficult to make it conform to the spatial needs of bodies, be they abstract or figurative; it tends to find its own level, independent of what is around it; colour is, in short, uncooperative. The advent of monochrome painting during the 1950s and '60s might seem like a logical, if extreme, solution to this difficulty: here, for once, colour would not have to cooperate with drawing. And yet, with some important exceptions (such as Klein and Fontana), monochrome painting has often proved oddly shy of chromatic intensity, preferring instead of the quieter waters of tonal value and variation (Ryman, Richter, Charlton, for example). The reasons for this are various and complex; but they may have something to do with painting's unavoidable relationship with the (usually white) wall-plane and the need to tune painting to this given of the gallery environment. And this, in turn, may explain, in part, why in many instances during the post-war period a preoccupation with colour has found its form in sculpture and three-dimensional work. But there are also other, stronger, reasons for this change of direction and dimension.

⁴ Malcolm Longair, 'Light and Colour', in *Colour: Art & Science*, ed. Trevor Lamb and Janine Bourriau, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp.65-102.

⁵ Cited in Riley, *Colour Codes*, *op cit*, p.17.

⁶ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1977.

⁷ Cited in Riley, *Colour Codes*, *op cit*, pp.59-60.

In his final, posthumously published, essay 'Some Aspects of Colour in General and Red and Black in Particular' (1994), Donald Judd remarked that, after Abstract Expressionism, 'colour to continue, had to occur in space'.⁸ He also indicated that, in a series of multi-coloured works he began in the early '80s, he wanted 'all of the colours to be present at once'. In painting, even in 'flat' abstract painting, colour will tend to function pictorially, to advance or recede relative to other colours, and to detach itself from the picture plane. In sculpture such as Judd's, colours are stabilised by being present as literal surfaces of three-dimensional elements. The edge of each colour coincides with the edges of the object, and being visibly assembled from discrete units, this leaves less room for optical jockeying, and thus more space for a very wide variety of colours 'to be present at once'. These works – a large number were made during the second half of the 1980s, and many more unassembled works remained in Judd's studio after his death – are perhaps the 'purest' colour-experiments in recent sculpture. The aim, I think, was no more and no less than an open-ended investigation into the possibilities of colour combination. Derived from the industrial colour-chart, rather than the traditional colour-circle, Judd's work freed itself from the baggage of traditional colour-theory, with its prescriptions, its grammar of opposites and its hierarchies of primaries, secondaries and tertiaries. It also made colour a kind of Readymade, something to be selected from a stockist, like the range of light-industrial materials which are typical of all Judd's work.

For a number of other sculptors, particularly during the 1960s, the materials and processes of industry offered a world to work with. While this is well documented, what is often overlooked is how the colours of industrial materials and commercial finishes focused the artists' attention. John Chamberlain has used the applied spray-painted colour of cellulose car-paints since the early 1960s; Carl Andre's wide range of metal sculptures are marked by strong intrinsic differences in colour which he sometimes explores within a single work; and Dan Flavin worked with the palette of commercially available colours in fluorescent light, again either singly or in combination. There are obvious and important differences between these types of work: in some cases colour is applied, in others it is intrinsic to the material; in the case of Flavin, and in some works by Judd in which he employs transparent acrylic sheet, colour is a quality of light emitted from, and reflected in, the surfaces of the work. But what all this work has in common is a fascination with the colours and surfaces of modernity; and it is from these sources – from the slick and brash and vulgar world of industry and commerce, rather than the more refined and repressed taste of high culture – that these artists, like their contemporary Warhol, find the most vivid material.

This work is alike also in that it is usually assembled or arranged from pre-existing parts. Except in the case of Chamberlain, the materials are not manipulated in the studio so much as ordered-up from the stockists or fabricators. In most cases the materials are also flat unmodulated planes rather than solids (Andre being the partial exception here); and this has consequences for the experience of colour in the work. Built rather than crafted, joined together rather than whole, literal rather than pictorial, planar rather than solid, synthetic rather than organic, regular rather than irregular: the

⁸ Donald Judd, 'Some Aspects of Colour in General and Red and Black in Particular', *Artforum*, Vol. XXXII, no. 10, Summer 1994, pp. 70-79, 110 and 113.

characteristics of this art are also characteristics of our modernity. And the colours of modernity are inseparable from these other aspects: its surfaces, its shapes, its structures and its arrangements.

It may be the case that the most important and experimental use of colour occurs outside the world of high art. This offers the interested artist a vast resource of readymades and references, from the developments of the automobile industry and commercial paint manufacturers, to the patterns on toys, ornaments, packaging and departure-lounge kitsch. If the New York artists of the 1960s tended to draw on a range of *industrial* commodities for their work, several American and European artists over the last decade have exploited the ubiquitous world of *consumer* commodities. Mike Kelley and Sylvie Fleury have both made direct use of such material, and even if their work is not ostensibly about colour, the point is that once this commodity-world is invoked, colour invariably comes with it and makes itself present. Some of the early work of Tony Cragg may have been made in recognition of this. *Plastic Palette II* (1989), is, like all his work of the time, made from the detritus of commerce and industry, the found shards of brightly coloured plastic which insert themselves into the corners of our cities. In this instance the shards' colours become the organising point for the work's imagery – a silhouette of the traditional painter's palette – and this, in turn, becomes an acknowledgement of the ambiguous position – *between* painting and sculpture – which is characteristic of much recent colour-based work, and Judd's and Flavin's in particular.

Colour as a market of mass-culture or of kitsch is also represented in the work of artists such as Jenny Holzer and Jeff Koons. In Holzer's case the use of light-emitting materials is transformed from the simple and static geometry of a Flavin to a hyperactive spectacle of sound-bites and *non-sequiturs*. Koons' carved and painted flower arrangements (and his animals and figures) make a positive, if ironic, value of much which aesthetics has suppressed: the ornamental, the decorative, the domestic, the trivial, the childlike. Note, however, that it is not only through intense colour that Koons invokes the kitsch: he has also succeeded in hijacking white, the last colour in the fortresses of refinement, in works which invoke nothing more elevated than domestic cleanliness or neo-classical sentimentality.

None of the above constitutes anything like a school or a movement. If there is a preoccupation in the work mentioned so far with some or other aspect of mass-culture, the particular reasons for this preoccupation will be quite different for each artist. And not all sculptors who thematise colour have done so by this route. Anish Kapoor and Georg Baselitz both make work in a relatively traditional way (as does Koons, sometimes), by carving or otherwise cutting into lumps of wood or stone; and this immediately distinguishes their work from the work discussed so far. In Kapoor's and Baselitz's case, the worked material is then either partially or entirely covered with pigment. And in each case the relationship of the colour to the material is crucial, seeming to dissolve it into a perceptual vapour (Kapoor) or organise it into a loosely conceived figure (Baselitz). In neither case is there anything in the finished work which readily links it with the world of commerce and industry. Rather the opposite: both sculptors seem to be involved in a turn away from modernity; but in making this turn, coincidentally, they arrive at a point not that remote from some of the other work mentioned so far. In the rhetoric of chromophobia, the vulgar and the

kitsch are in the same domain as the primitive and the exotic – the critical and self-conscious reference-points of Baselitz and Kapoor respectively.

The problems for an artist working with colour are not only the chromophobic prejudices, whereby colour is positioned, in one way or another, as Other to the higher values of Culture; but also the handed-down baggage of traditional colour-theory, within which colour is marshalled, disciplined, subordinated, and subject to entirely arbitrary divisions and codes of conduct. In some respects, chromophobia is preferable to the systemisation of colour: at least chromophobes recognise and value, in a perverse back-to-front way, colour's potency and indiscipline. Only relatively few artists actively thematise colour these days; and those who do (a fuller list would include painters, photographers and installation artists of various types), do so in an informal and highly idiosyncratic way. To talk of colour in recent art is to speak of instances and highly localised interests; not of systems, models and movements. This is the point: colour is infinitely more complex than the means we have to describe it; and in that space between seeing and knowing there may be occasional moments of freedom.

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