

# Of Words and Colours

— CHRISTOPHE VAN GERREWEY

1. There is a description in the historian Michel Pastoureau's *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps* of the oil paint department at the largest seller of artist's supplies in Paris. Customers are shown a sample book containing unlabelled colour swatches, from which they have to point out the shade they want to buy. The assistant then names the colour, together with the adjacent tones in the chart. It is not unusual for customers to change their mind at this point – the name pronounced by the assistant is so evocative that it alters the would-be buyer's perception of the colour samples. 'Is that what it's called? Actually, I think I like this one more'. The reason for this odd behaviour is simple: colours do not exist; they do not have any fixed properties; no one can define the colour 'green' precisely without referring to objects or things, or without a debate as to which green it is. 'When it comes to colours', Pastoureau writes, 'we are prisoners of language and of lexical data. The named colour often appears to play a more important role in the social context than the perceived colour'.

2. It comes as little surprise to discover that Ludwig Wittgenstein was obsessed by colours: his philosophical exploration of the relationship between language and reality can almost be summed up through his often amusing thoughts on this subject. 'How do I know that this colour is red?' he wondered, to which he answers: 'Because I learned German'. Wittgenstein's almost indignant conclusion was that the way we perceive the world of colours is extremely elusive: 'When we're asked "What do the words 'red', 'blue', 'black', 'white' mean?" we can, of course, immediately point to things which have these colours – but our ability to explain the meaning of these words goes no further!' He wrote in his *Remarks on Colour*, as if he had discovered a commandment or law of life: 'We must always bear in mind the question: how do people learn the meaning of colour names?'

3. [...] *STAIN* [...] by Ana Torfs uses images, words, sounds and objects to explore the same question: how do people learn the meaning of colour names? The problem is located in the observer (like the customer in the oil paint store who chooses the colour with the nicest-sounding name), but also in the colours themselves and the cultural, social or political history of which they are the product. 'In everyday life we are virtually surrounded by impure colours', Wittgenstein wrote. 'All the more remarkable that we have formed a concept of pure colours'. There is no question of such purity in the universe evoked by [...] *STAIN* [...]. The twenty displayed colours are not primary, natural or ideal ones (like the cyan, magenta,

yellow and black of the colour system for printer's ink), from which all other colours are composed. The colours in [...] *STAIN* [...] – such as Prussian blue, mauve, Indian yellow, tartrazine and malachite green – are *inventions*. Wittgenstein may have struggled with people's absurd attempts to use language to get a handle on *real* colours, but Torfs shows these to be artificial too. Not only are the words unreliable (as is everything that comes from human beings), so too are things and the colours they possess.

4. [...] *STAIN* [...] presents this unreliability by having the viewer walk around an installation comprising four long lecterns on which twenty black frames are laid, each displaying a synthetic pigment. The name of the colour is printed beneath the coloured glass, along with ten numbered images. Goose feathers are mounted below the colour name. A woman's voice reads out the captions to the images in a seemingly random sequence and in a playful, brisk and slightly ironic tone. The explanations are brief; they link picture and colour with reference to a particular use, application or anecdote: how Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, that you should never trust a woman who wears mauve; how Olafur Eliasson turned rivers fluorescent green by pouring in uranine dye; how the yellow food-colouring tartrazine can cause indigestion or depression; how chemistry students spiked cola with methylene blue as a practical joke, turning the victim's urine a scary colour; or how jeans manufacturers in Mexico and China dump waste water contaminated with synthetic indigo.

5. The spoken explanations mean the viewer barely gets a chance to stand still: the guide keeps him or her moving from one frame and picture to another. This constant movement is symbolic of how synthetic colours also cannot be assigned a clear-cut place or interpretation: a colour might be produced artificially, but that does not mean its use and value are rationally fixed. On the contrary. Colours evolve with history; sometimes they are used, sometimes misused; sometimes they escape a particular use or counteract it; and sometimes they fall into disuse, or are unfairly forgotten. 'It is not nature that makes colour', Pastoureaux writes, 'and still less science or technology: it is society'.

6. Coloured glass is strange to look through. Wittgenstein thought so too: 'We would say, perhaps, of a green pane: it colours the things behind it green, above all the white behind it'. So too with the twenty panes making up [...] *STAIN* [...]: if we want to see 'Congo red', we could look at the glass, were it not for the fact that it is transparent and so offers a view of what lies behind it (unless it is white glass because, as Wittgenstein says, we cannot imagine that it is truly transparent). If we really want to see Congo red, we need a colour sample: 'It is not immediately clear what transparent glass we should say has the *same colour* as an opaque colour sample'. What about the goose quills, the earliest writing implement?

Surely these are straightforwardly coloured Congo red? Certainly – and yet, they are located behind glass that is also Congo red, which means that when we look at the feathers, we are seeing an intensified version of the colour. Our view of the frame’s contents cannot therefore help but be literally coloured.

7. There is one other property of the pigments in [...] *STAIN* [...] that shows how deep the influence of colours is, both literally and metaphorically. ‘Look around you carefully and you will see that everything is coloured’, writes the Dutch poet K. Schippers. The twenty colours in this work are used for precisely that purpose: to look carefully. Staining is a technique used in biology and microscopy to heighten the contrast of an image in order to reveal details and different elements. A few drops are added to a specimen to make cell tissue ‘legible’ under the microscope. The colours in this artwork likewise help us to look more carefully at the use of colour and to appreciate how colours influence human life down to the smallest cell.

8. Goethe already recognized that colours really were both emblematic and complex. He wrote, with a touch of frustration, in the ‘Confessions of the Author’, which he appended to his *Theory of Colours* (1810): ‘I could only conclude that living artists worked impulsively and solely on the grounds of vacillating traditions; that light and shade, and the use and harmony of colours invariably revolved in wondrous circles cutting across one another. None of these things developed from nor acted upon the other’. It was precisely this state of affairs that he sought to address by providing artists with a clear theory of colours. It is no coincidence that very few synthetic colours existed in Goethe’s time, since he died just as the industrial revolution was getting going. The human intellect allowed natural phenomena to be considered autonomously and laws and rules to be derived from them (or so it was firmly believed). Wittgenstein was not so sure: ‘Is there such a thing as a “natural history of colours”’, he mused, ‘and to what extent is it analogous to a natural history of plants?’ [...] *STAIN* [...] clearly shows that there is only a *cultural* history of colours, precisely because they (along with everything they colour) barely qualify as ‘natural’ any more.

9. In so doing, [...] *STAIN* [...] demonstrates the obsolescence of certain humanist pretensions (à la Goethe) with regard to solving the mystery of colour. At the same time, the work may be viewed as a fragment of an immense, even infinite display of all the colours in the world – there is a reason for the ellipses in square brackets that precede and follow the title. It testifies in this way both to the desire for encyclopaedic completeness and its tragicomic impossibility. How many different colours are there supposed to be? And is there any point in continuing to distinguish between natural colours and colours produced (since the industrial revolution) by people? The digital revolution has further shaken up the world of colours.

I just checked and the computer screen I am looking at right now has at its disposal a palette of over sixteen million colours. It is inconceivable that they will ever all be named. Who is going to christen them? Most digital colours are *numbers* – a single word will never be wasted on them, nor will a story, an anecdote or a cultural meaning ever be devoted or assigned to them. Does that mean (another question that [...] *STAIN* [...] raises) that these colours do not exist?

10. The more colours we try to discover and name, the less we know the world. This is not a bad thing: ‘In every serious philosophical question’, Wittgenstein wrote, ‘uncertainty extends to the very roots of the problem’. Looking at, listening to and walking around inside [...] *STAIN* [...] shows how important, amusing and mysterious the relationships between words and colours have been for centuries, and will continue to be.

(Translated from the Dutch by Ted Alkins)

#### LITERATURE

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).  
The author sourced the quotes from Michel Pastoureau and J.W. Goethe from the richly packed ‘Colour’ issue of the literary magazine *Raster*, nos. 111–112 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2005).