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COMMENTARIES

How to Look at Everything

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Nick Relph 'Thre Stryppis Quhite Upon ane Blak Field'

Ludwig Wittgenstein controversially suggested that there was one object in the world of which we could never say either that it was a metre long, or was not a metre long: the prototypical 'standard metre', a platinum alloy bar supposed to be the ur-measure of a metric metre, held by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sèvres just outside Paris. Wittgenstein went on:

Let us imagine samples of colour being preserved in Paris like the standard metre. We define: "sepia" means the colour of the standard sepia which is there kept hermetically sealed. Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not.

Wittgenstein saw this example of the sepia sample as a linguistic problem, a paradox of self-reference – something cannot be measured by a standard it is supposed to set – but we might equally regard it more pragmatically as a problem of 'colour management'. Confronted with this Platonic sepia sample we have to wonder, for example: has it faded? Real-world fabric swatches are inherently mutable, however hermetically preserved, especially when their colours come from natural dyes (sepia originally comes from the pigment of cuttlefish ink). And where exactly "in Paris" would our sepia sample be preserved? What international body or bureaucracy could be invested with the authority of preserving and enforcing its hue?

Nick Relph's video *Thre Stryppis Quhite Upon ane Blak Field* is a kind of collaged ode to 'colour management', those systems by which we seek to standardise colour and to take confidence in the idea that is something we have in common. The three pre-existing documentaries it takes as its sources – one about the painter Ellsworth Kelly (famous for his colour field paintings), one about Rei Kawakubo and her Comme des Garçons brand, and one about the tartan industry – are projected over one another by three separate projectors, each of which is projecting in only one of three primary colours (red, green or blue). The additive RGB colour system is thus decomposed: rather than its three elements combining, the three images ghost over one another as fragmentary moving monochromes (each film swapping between the colours, so the associations are never fixed). At the same time the

subjects of these films, whose soundtracks are also discontinuously superimposed, are all preoccupied with the precision of colours in their particular fields (in paintings or fabrics) – of colours we are shown but cannot see, because each image has been reduced, at any given moment, to one saturated primary.

Thre Stryppis... confronts these creative endeavours with sympathetic scepticism and an implicit question: do we ever see 'true' colour and, moreover, can we even conceive what that would mean? Or, as Wittgenstein asks elsewhere, is it the case that "the word 'red' means something known to everyone; and in addition, for each person, it means something known only to him?" Wittgenstein also imagined "a tribe of people who are all colour-blind", somewhere exotically unspecified, and wondered whether their words for colour would correspond to ours, or indeed how we could ever ascertain if they did, suggesting that somehow colour was at one limit of translatability – or perhaps even formed a kind of fissure into which all our hopes for mutual intelligibility risked vanishing. The scientists and anthropologists have not been deterred. Recent academic studies of the colour lexicon of Himba-speakers of northern Namibia – in which there is no clear distinction between what a Glaswegian might call 'green' and 'blue', for example, but other hues are differentiated which that same Scottish eye would see as a single colour – raise the possibility that language may in some ways really be the *condition* for colour perception, that seeing and saying are inextricably intertwined.

For Ellsworth Kelly, it is ultimately simply a question of patient looking: "In my paintings, I'm not inventing, my ideas come from constantly investigating how things look". Relph's work instead implies that, to a degree, looking is *itself* invented and that what we might want to call 'red' is not something we can say with confidence pre-existed Pantone or the Color Marketing Group – in fact, that colour is unthinkable without colour management, without all those mechanisms of language, technology, commerce and politics which supervene on the neurobiological event we call vision. Even: that colour is nothing more than the name for that undecidable point, seemingly right in front of our eyes, where these fields overlap.

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