

457 Words on Colour

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When I shine my lamp onto a white wall and then increase the brightness of the lamp, we would doubtlessly describe the effect as a change in the level of brightness – not as a change in the colour of the wall. Without thinking about it, we attribute the effect of this change to its cause through a kind of representational perception that filters and controls our ability to sense colour.

In my work *Room for one colour* (1997), we actually see only one colour. The wavelengths of light from the lamps in the space are in the yellow area of the visible spectrum, resulting in all colours in this room being subsumed to the yellow domain. Like a black-and-white image with shades of grey in between, this yellow space organises a green sweater and purple shoes into the monochrome field of endless shades between yellow and black. The experience of being in a monochrome space of course varies for each visitor, but the most obvious impact of the yellow light is the realisation that perception is acquired: the representational filter, or the sudden feeling that our vision simply is not objective, is brought to our awareness and with that our ability to see ourselves in a different light.

The experience of colour, closely related to the experience of light, is also a matter of cultivation. As much as perception is linked with memory and recognition, our relation to colour derives from our cultural habitat. The Inuit, for instance, have one word for red but various words for white.

One could make a small thought experiment based on the whiteness of lime, a disinfectant that was once thrown into mass graves to prevent diseases from spreading. Hospitals used lime on their walls, and soon the colour white became the equivalent of clean. Christianity adopted the purifying status of white light, in the architecture of Northern European churches, for instance, and by the time of industrialisation, when modernity also introduced its dogmas for a healthy, good life, white was already deeply rooted in our culture as a purifying colour. The modernists also believed that an open and clean space was the best platform for the execution of artistic self-realisation. Imagine if lime had been yellow by nature; maybe the now well-known white cube would have been the yellow cube.

Colour has an enormous psychological and associative potential: even though it has been cultivated to the extreme, the amount of individuality in experiencing colours is equally extreme. Colour does not exist in itself but only when looked at. The unique fact that colour only materialises when light bounces off a surface onto our retinas shows us that the analysis of colours is, in fact, about the ability to analyse ourselves.