

A Journey into Colour

On a voyage of discovery in the world of colour the artist-traveller moves through a multi-faceted world where colours are constantly being put into a different light. The very number of colours seems immeasurably large but is that really so? Do we see the colours that are there or are there only the colours that we see? In other words, do we make the colours or do the colours make us? Is the world for the Melanesian people so much more colourless than ours since they have but three words, in their language to denote colour, roughly corresponding to white, red and black. These colours also appear in the weapons of the Asmat people in former Dutch New Guinea, where they signify semen, (menstruation) blood and the dark skin of the Asmat themselves. Do the Asmat not see green, yellow, or the beautiful colours of the bird of paradise whose exuberantly coloured feathers are used in their ceremonial costumes? Do the relatively small number of words make the colours of the world of less importance to them than to the fashion designer who makes a limitless number of distinctions between series of reds, yellows and blues and their complementary counterparts? The designer even makes up new colours (brick-red, taupe, mauve) – a sophisticated extension to the almost countless additions to the colour palette. We see here the materialisation of colours, in the way in which they are bound to objects, phenomena, plants, parts of the human body.

Anke Kuypers demonstrates this clearly with the collection of prefixes to names of colours, although we can hardly imagine them without the presence of the colour itself. Only the black-on-white indication of those prefixes is clearly insufficient.

Does colour exist without being visibly present? Wittgenstein would have us believe that the explanation of the question ‘What is blue?’ implies the answer ‘*That* is blue’ as we point to something in that colour. Is this always the case? That is the question. The colour we are ostensibly pointing to will have to fit into the framework of the culture in question. In former New Guinea, as we saw before, you would say that light blue was *white* and dark blue was *black*. To say something was blue would mean nothing there. To the physicist blue is nothing more than reflected light within the visible spectrum with a wave length of about 400nm. Even an object has no colour of its own, it merely reflects sunlight or artificial light in some way. Colour would thus seem to be colour in name only, and not in substance; not an intrinsic part of the object we see. Yet we see object and colour to be irretrievably connected; a green sun is just as unthinkable as a blue moon, or a lilac traffic light. Whereas the two first relationships belong to the Quine’s category of the ‘natural kinds’, the last one is of course one we have agreed upon. We have given traffic lights three colours: red, orange/yellow and green. Red is for ‘stop’ as that is what we have agreed. In the same way, green

means 'go'. The relationship is symbolical just as the sound of the letter 'o' stands for the sound 'o'. In our language 'sun' is the word that denotes the flaming star that has lit and warmed our planet for millions of years.

The relationship between word and object is an arbitrary one but not in the Platonic sense. His point of view was that there was an inextricable connection between the word 'sun' and the heavenly body, making language not a symbolic system but an iconic-indexical constellation of sounds, objects and phenomena. It is a relationship based on similarity and tradition. The symbolism of colours is as multiple and arbitrary as there are cultures and subcultures. Where red has always been the colour of love in the western world, in China it is yellow.

We distinguish warm and cool colours; the reds as opposed to the blues, for example, but this is mainly determined by our culture. This seemingly unsolvable dilemma has prompted Anke Kuypers to undertake an investigation into colour, to try to get to grips with the essence of colour. And she came upon the central question: "If everything were red, would red exist?". She comes to the conclusion that this is not the case, and that colours only exist by the grace of other colours. To work out the dynamic interrelationship among colours, she weaves numerous patterns of colours with each other so that together they evoke yet other colours and so display the influence they have on each other.

Anke Kuypers has undertaken a voyage of discovery into colour, and, as this exhibition shows, she has discovered many unknown territories.

Introduction to the exhibition 'In Colour' in the Museum Smallingerland, Drachten, 2001

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2001

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