

Contemporary artists and colour: meaning, organisation and understanding

Professor Judith Mottram

Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU

Tel: +44 (0) 115 84 2312

Fax: +44 (0) 115 848 4876

Email: judith.mottram@ntu.ac.uk

Abstract

What implications do the ranges of traditional and non-traditional media used by contemporary artists have for understanding the selection and specification of coloured materials? Interviews with prominent artists explore their use of colour and their views on the role of colour in their work. The paper establishes that the interview respondents operate successfully within a professional and permeable frame of reference, with different approaches to determination of colour meaning. The colour propositions of neuroscience, psychophysics and anthropological linguistics appear to have little impact on the respondents' practice, and the paper concludes by suggesting the need to explore boundaries between disciplines.

Keywords: Contemporary Art, Colour, Meaning

Introduction

The physical evidence of contemporary art, seen in exhibitions in venues such as the Tate galleries in London, the Venice Biennale, or the Museum of Modern Art in New York, demonstrates that a wide range of materials are used in its making. The materials traditionally associated with the fine arts, such as pigment-bearing oil and water-based paints, and materials like stone, wood and metal, are still much in evidence. But over the course of the last century, these materials have been joined by laminates, thermoplastic sheet, chemicals, synthetic emulsions, resins, diverse vegetable and animal matter, electrical, mechanical and electronic components,

and other stuffs¹. Some of these materials are vehicles for coloured pigmentation, but others are not. In order to reach a position from which it is possible to ask how contemporary artists are using colour, whatever materials they are using, it is useful to think further about some of the implications of material choice.

The expanded field of materials for the making of art is generally accepted although sometimes it has attracted comment or controversy. There are indications that such debate is focussing on the combined associations, of the meaning of the image together with the meaning of the material/s used, not solely on the image itself or the materials alone². It could be said that the focus on the associative is a core aspect in understanding the representative function of art in the post-modern period. The decision to use this material over that is as important to the meaning of art as is what is or is not be depicted³. But given the involvement of the audience in the construction of meaning, through interpretation drawing on both shared and dissimilar world views and core knowledge, art works today could be seen to be presenting allusions or questions that are driven by the spectator rather than by the intentions of the artist. This perspective may not be familiar to all audiences, as the

¹ The following artists are among those who have used non-traditional materials within their work: Damien Hirst - animal carcasses and formaldehyde; Chris Ofili - elephant dung and decorative glitter; Anselm Kiefer – straw; Hamad Butt - chlorine gas; Joseph Beuys – lard; Rebecca Horn - mechanical elements; Tania Kovats - acrylic composites.

² For example: the presence of elephant dung in Ofili's 'The Holy Virgin Mary' in the Sensation exhibition stimulated Mayor Giuliani's comment that the work was 'sick stuff'. A similar response was made to Kovat's Madonna sheathed in a condom when shown in Melbourne. The inherent danger of Butt's work in the Tate's 'Rites of Passage' exhibition in 1995 generated some concern, offsetting the emphasis on religious connotations that characterise the first two examples.

³ This is maybe an aspect of modernist formalism that has been carried forward in a slightly different iteration. It is no longer 'truth to materials' that is the driving force, but maybe a consideration of whether or not the meaning of the material is active within the construction of the meaning of the work.

Enlightenment idea that the agency, or intention, of the artist is of prime importance continues to be widely held. Within this context, where decisions on colour, material and form might be presumed to have been taken by the artist, but the construction of meaning might reside in a more distributed coalition of the audience, how can we see or understand the role of colour?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the thinking and choices made by contemporary artists, looking at their motivations and intentions in relation to the use of colour. We have to proceed with the assumption that the role of colour in contemporary art, and the expansion of materials used in the production of art, is linked to the discourses of culture. Whilst the inherent qualities of colour and material were profoundly important issues for modernist⁴ thinking about art-making, this no longer appears to be the case. A cursory look at contemporary writing around art practice and its reception would suggest that associations, metaphors and parallels are the current focus of interest. There has been little evidence that visual perception per se is a topic of concern, possibly reflecting the implicit understanding of vision as being immensely variable from person to person⁵.

The approach taken here to address the question of how artists are currently using colour considers individual accounts from case studies in relation to literature in the

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, 'Modernist' accords roughly with the dominant trends of western art from 1880 to 1980. The term 'Post-modern' is used to refer to work that is considered to be operating within a distinctly different paradigm in the period from the late 1900s onwards

⁵ Charles Riley, in 'Colour Codes' [2: 2], notes that 'with research pointing to complete individuality in perception, what theoretical models have a chance?'

field. In practice, this entails the analysis of transcripts from interviews conducted with two artists in August and September 2003, alongside consideration of exhibition catalogue essays by and about the artists, and other relevant publications. Within the professional arena of contemporary arts practice, the 'artist interview', published in art journals or in exhibition catalogues, is a standard mechanism by which artists' thinking is made accessible. The role of the interviewer and editor in the ultimate construction of the meaning communicated by such interviews has attracted some criticism by authors such as Julian Stallabrass [1], but it should be noted that the resulting texts are normally not subject to the additional analysis or evaluation attempted by this current project.

Context

To contextualise the case studies it is considered relevant to assess how colour figures as a topic of interest within the general discourses surrounding art practice. Two texts could be seen as indicative of current attitudes to colour within the arts: Charles Riley's 'Colour Codes' [2] and David Batchelors 'Chromophobia' [3]. 'Colour Codes', by its very title, signals the emphasis on the 'codes' by which colour is understood. He notes a 'profound uneasiness' about the use of colour by artists, but states that: 'Precisely because it is largely an unknown force, colour remains one of the most vital sources of new styles and ideas' ([2]: ix). He suggests that it was the mystery of colour that accounts for the engagement with it by the (primarily modernist) artists that he considered⁶. The emphasis of the book is on an explication of the codes, or models of thinking, that have been developed

⁶ The distinction between the modernist framework and that of the current context of the artists considered in this paper needs to be kept in focus.

within philosophy and the arts to underpin the continued use of or thinking about colour in a context where all attempts to codify it systematically have been evaded. Whilst arguing that a return to 'colorism' is immanent, his approach through codes of thought might undermine his proposition. On the one hand he uses the mechanism of association and reference to other models of thinking or to other outcomes of practice, but on the other he suggests that disciplines such as the visual arts are about to return to the 'sensory material of their media' after a period of 'conceptual bias'. However, there is little evidence presented by him to indicate that such a period of bias is coming to an end. His own engagement in writing about colour is manifest in the following passage [2: 204], on Jaime Franco's paintings of the rivers in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

The warm umber tone is dense and submerged, threatening to swallow up the medial axis that you will find in the river works. The intersecting curves of *Flegeonte* are more pronounced, perhaps drawing on Franco's training in physics and the study of the patterns of wave action. The ellipses create more of a three-dimensional spiralling effect, leading downward through a redder, hotter medium. By contrast, *Leteo*, the river in Purgatory at which souls drink and forget their previous incarnations, is cooler and more delicate, pulsing with a more balanced relationship to the underlying grid.

I would suggest that Riley's delight in writing about colour mirrors the dominance of the dance of ideas and associations that is central to the post-modern project. It is questionable whether this dance can accommodate the purely expressive or the scientifically rationalist. It appears as if the combination of the uncertainty about the basis of colour vision, as exemplified by Saunders' critique of the psychophysical,

neurophysical and linguistic understandings of colour [4], with the seductive power of post-rationalist critical tropes, leaves colour in an uneasy position. In relation to art practice, we can see that colour carries meaning, in its capacity to allude, but do we know what colour actually does?

Writing in the 1990's, Riley notes that 'color is in exile', with 'the exuberance of chromaticism ...replaced by a new sobriety [2: 70-71]. David Batchelor's 'Chromophobia' continues with this theme in a text that is even more clearly situated within a contemporary idiom than Riley's mix of modernist artists and post-modernist anti-rationalism. Batchelor argues that it is the 'unknowable' nature of colour that makes Western culture fear that engagement with it, in practice or through theory, will contaminate or corrupt thought or action. He comments that 'one would think there is a lot to say about art in a book about colour. It just hasn't turned out that way. The more I have written, the more the art has got pushed further and further back'. [3: 97]

Literature, philosophy, science; films, architecture and advertisements – the focus of his writing ranges far beyond his own core discipline. He describes colour as 'antidisciplinary', and wants to 'preserve the strangeness of colour; its otherness is what counts, not the commodification of otherness'[3: 97].

Even more emphatically than Riley's book, 'Chromophobia' is an example of discourse around art practice that becomes in itself an artistic moment. The language used, particularly in sentence construction, alliteration and repetition, is in itself a dance. For example:

It is not that digital colour is more true than analogical colour. But it may be true that digitised colours have a stronger relationship with works of art that refer, directly or indirectly, to the experience of modernity. These colours are more the colours of things than atmospheres. More urban colours than the colours of nature. Artificial colours, city colours, industrial colours. Colours that are consistent with the images, materials and forms of an urban, industrial art.' [3:106]

The ideas; of retreat from colour, of seduction by colour, of the superficiality of colour, are entwined with allusion and reference. There is a delight in connection and cross-referral, in a scholarly familiarity with content and meaning across a broad cultural framework. This writing about art (by an artist), is also emphatically of art.

It is clear from this brief summary that these contemporary examples of writing about colour in relation to art have distinctly different characteristics to those found in the writing about colour and vision or colour and linguistics in the 'scientific' literature. No attempt has been made here to define or explore the 'modernist' proposition that colour might have 'inherent qualities', but consideration of the texts by Riley and Batchelor indicates that the alternative proposition - that associated meanings and references are important mechanism for understanding current arts' practice - appears to be founded.

The case studies

The two case studies for this paper draw upon interviews with the artists Liam Gillick and Catherine Yass. Both of these artists were shortlisted for the 2002 Turner Prize and are of the generation of mid-career British artists whose careers have become established within the international art world over the past ten to fifteen years. These artists were selected for this study because they have achieved the level of recognition signalled by the shortlisting for the Turner, and because they both use materials or processes in their work that means that colour attributes are carried by a medium other than paint. Neither artists employ palette-based colour mixing procedures in the generation of their art-works. The work of Yass consists of either still photographs that are presented as back-lit light boxes (figure 1), or moving images captured via film or video. In each medium, Yass employs a method that engineers a 'gap', either between a positive and a negative transparency printed together, or between the tonal or colour layers of digital video. Gillick's work is manifested through a variety of media. These include screen, platform or suspended ceiling units constructed of aluminium section with clear or tinted Plexiglass panes (figure 2), through letterforms or simple pattern elements applied directly to walls, and through the combination of these with other media such as decorative glitter, such as used in Christmas decorations, and planed timber (figure 3).

The briefing given to the artists prior to the interviews outlined the focus of the enquiry and the intention to present the findings to an audience including experts from disciplines beyond the arts. Beyond the framing of the enquiry as upon contemporary artists' use of colour, reference was made to interest in colour

organisation, management and meaning. At the start of each interview, the researcher re-capped on the purpose of the interview, and re-iterated her position with a university art school, thus confirming a common background with the respondents, who both regularly or occasionally teach within that context.

The topics covered during the interview ranged from clarification of the media used by the artist, their specification of media, their familiarity with theoretical understandings of colour and their attitudes towards descriptions made of their work by critics and writers on art. Four main themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts. The discussions on colour specification established the extent to which standard notations were used, changes in specification methods resulting from geographic location and from the impact of computer use, and approaches to colour matching. Discipline knowledge, from within and beyond the arts, and as communicated through education, was seen to operate with varying degrees of connection to the conceptual and practical concerns of the artists. The final two themes, labelled as 'background ideas' and 'colour impact' in the coding process, may be seen as particularly useful in locating the role of colour in the contemporary art practice of the respondents.

Colour specification

It is noticeable that RAL codes or pantone references are included with details of title, date and medium in exhibition catalogues of Liam Gillick's work. This level of specificity is not common in exhibition catalogues, although it could have long-term usefulness for museum conservators. His initial reaction to my question about his approach to colour specification was that framing the enquiry in those terms was a

strange way of talking about it. He clarified this by saying that he had 'very little interest in colour as such but quite a lot of interest in the ranges of available colours' that were publicly available. He described his interest to date in working within the limitations of available ranges of coloured thermoplastics such as Perspex or Acrylite, as opposed to the 'limiting excess' implicit in the pantone system with its implication of customised specifications. However, due to increasing time spent living in New York, he reported that he was being confronted with an arena in which colour systems such as RAL or the Natural Colour System (NCS) were 'barely even heard of' by his US suppliers. His perception was that there was a lack of systematisation, related to a general sense of suspicion in regard to unifying systems. In contrast, his experience of working with European suppliers was that there was a useful degree of inter-changeability between RAL codes and the various mediums he worked with. In the US, he noted some use of brand ranges as standards, such as the tendency of architects to specify according to the Benjamin Moore paint range but that, as this was not cross-transferable to metal finishes, 'its all done by eye'. As a result, he was now in a 'transition state' between his 'use of a limited range of things' and an expansion into 'any colour you want, which is much more confusing in a way'.

The impact of the virtual collapse of the use of coding systems as a specification mechanism within his current context led to a reflection by Gillick on his disinterest in the 'fetishisation of matching' as 'not something that I find very exciting'. In his work, this is seen as the 'least crucial part, somehow it's the predictability I'm interested in'. As an aside however, he did note that the notion of the artist making visual discrimination between samples by eye accorded with general perceptions

of 'what art is supposed to be'. This perception of what it is that is expected of the artist also links to observations Gillick made about work undertaken with industrial sponsors who manufactured sheet material. While Gillick's interest was in using pure, flat colour at high saturation, essentially working within the parameters of standard ranges, the sponsor was hoping that he would bring 'artistic signification' to the product. Probably of most pertinence here is the identification of the mismatch between the perceptions of the non-art audience and the artist's understanding of their own agenda. He also noted a related issue when specifying standard anodised aluminium: suppliers can assume an odd custom version is required and make some 'added value art-type gesture' on his behalf without consultation.

Paralleling the New York 'deli style custom-made sandwich' approach to colour procurement of materials and finishes, the software 'colour picker' also has an impact on Gillick's use of colour. In addition to his custom built swatches of, for instance, known Plexiglass colours, he does make use of the full-spectrum colour picker for rapid explorations of possible combinations. The potential to interchange sets of colours between different projects with ease on the computer appeared to be viewed as a positive benefit. He described how colours that were going to be used on one project, such as a large scale wall painting, might end up as the colours used for another project in a very different format, e.g. a magazine layout, and vice versa. Although 'these are things that sound like not very profound', they are the 'kind of little meandering territories that are the true reasons why something ends up the colour it ends up'. This emphasis almost on a sense of arbitrariness in the way colour decisions are made is, according to Gillick, 'not random', but also

'not even systemised...like laying the table'. The key to this apparent contradiction is the use of codes: 'The code becomes a cipher for a kind of visual precision that is frankly absent'. It is only when working with spaces that are not the 'usual' spaces for art that this is seen to raise a problem. Gillick refers to the 'actual mute art moment' when accurate visualisations are required in order for the project to be understood by the architects and others involved in the realisation of work outside of the gallery or museum context.

In summary, Gillick's colour specification could be described as predominantly procedural, allying random process to industry conventions. The changing context of a more open smörgasbord of options, provided by the industrial context in the US and mirrored by the software he has been using for some time, has to date been accommodated within a robust conceptual framework that asserts a set of parameters for operation that are not necessarily in accord with generalised, and romantic, perceptions of art practice.

For Catherine Yass, the issue of colour specification occurs primarily at the point of printing. Her photographic works come into being when she successfully combines a positive transparency with a negative overlay. The task then, in collaboration with the printer, is to match the transparency. The actual process of manually aligning the two transparencies spans several hours, during which time 'something's going in' so she knows 'what I think is right when...the tests are done'. But Yass notes variation in the way that different printers understand her requirements. She used one printer for several years and told me that 'we always just thought the same thing, it was fine, and then I changed printer, and he always wanted it [to make the

colour] much colder'. The ensuing issue of getting the colour to match her perception of the colours of the overlaid transparency necessitates a shared understanding of appropriate nomenclature. Starting off by saying something like 'that looks too green', then 'do you think we should add red, or blue?', the exchange would hone down to her wondering whether actually it was too cyan, in effect using the vocabulary of photography. The impact of 'paint bias'⁷ was evident during the interview, specifically in Yass's comment on the difference between the opposites of colours in photography from those of painting.

In relation to the specification of the materials used for the presentation of her works, Yass has developed her familiarity with the nomenclature used to describe different sorts of lighting tube and acrylic sheet within industry. As she notes, 'if you phone a company that you're not working with... you have to make it clear very quickly that you know the language'. But in relation to the decisions made on presentation issues, or with the printing, there is evidence of that visual discrimination by eye that accords with generally held assumptions of 'artistic' decision-making. In talking about whether she tests out different combinations of the materials used for presentation, she notes that 'in general I would probably know, I probably wouldn't do that'. She holds the knowledge that for her work, flat

⁷ Paint bias: in the identification of elemental hues ('those which cannot be perceptually analysed into more basic hue components' p151, Miller, David L, *Beyond the elements: investigations of hue*. In Hardin C.L. & Maafi, Luisa, *Colour Categories in Thought and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3 of 8 respondents 'used a combination of "blue" and "yellow" responses for a "green" stimulus. This pattern was interpreted as a "paint bias". It was presumed that observers responded to green as a mixture of blue and yellow because of training in, or experience with, subtractive colour mixing.' However, they did proceed to establish an experimental method that they considered eliminated the paint bias problem for all by one observer in a 10.

images need opaque Perspex, and that the colour sensation of the final work is affected by tube types as well as the choice of lightbox interior.

The advent of the need to engage with digital photography is setting up new challenges for Yass. As opposed to only having to colour match at the printing stage, an additional level of colour-matching the separate transparencies at an initial scanning stage has entered the equation. The vagaries of the different colour calibration of different monitors as well as Yass's sense that the fine incremental changes she can make manually when positioning the overlays on her desk are not achievable on-screen is causing some frustration. And again, when considering the use of computers, the 'different story of colours' came up. Yass noted that it could be 'quite hard to ...move your head into a different sort of space' but she supposed that 'people bought up on computers not painting think in terms of red, green and blue'.

Colour specification for Yass would appear to demonstrate a much closer fit with the idea of the artist as intentionally presenting visual images of particular and specific colours than was evident in the interview with Gillick. In that case, the sense of some other driver to the work was more apparent. However, there was evidence in both transcripts that suggested that knowledge from both within and beyond arts practice was connected to the conceptual and practical concerns of the artists in relation to their use and thinking about colour.

Discipline Knowledge

In Yass's case, the references made to what we could describe as 'art knowledge', that is other artists, their work and the theoretical discourses around their work, were closely related to visual experience. She talked of her use of striped filters for a body of work made while resident at the William Dunn School at Oxford University (figure 4) as 'like little abstract expressionist paintings...like little Bridget Riley's or something. She liked the metaphor implicit in this, of 'photographing through the eyes of an artist', or through her own history of art. And in talking about her experience of travelling to different countries, she remembered really clearly the difference sense of colour experienced from Northern Renaissance art and that from Italian artists. Whilst generally resistant to the idea of early experience influencing a predisposition to use particular colours, she did note that she had found the blue in the Giotto paintings at Padua 'really amazing, so that must have had an effect on me'. The blue areas in a significant proportion of Yass's work, which result from the transparency overlay process, has led to comment on this 'signature' element and its association with religious art or the spiritual (figure 5). She particularly dislikes such references that she sees as used by art-world 'insiders' when being critical, or by non-arts people when responding positively to the work.

What is of interest to Yass is not the symbolic associations, but potential for conflict between the 'geometric depth of the image and... the depth that the colour gives'. She sees the colour depth as giving a different kind of space, 'its like a different paradigm'...'disrupting the language of geometry and perspective'. This idea of colour space could also relate to comments by Yass on the blue used by Yves

Klein. She recalled seeing an exhibition of his where the 'the blue just had this weird thing where you couldn't understand where the surface was'. This reference to Klein followed a comment on whether colours impact differently on different people, and whether there were neurological or psychological reasons for this. A really strong sense of interest was manifest by Yass when the focus of the interview turned to advances in vision science and linguistic studies of colour naming. Whilst concern was expressed about the need to balance time making work and time undertaking related research, it was apparent that direction from which Yass had been approaching discourses on colour was rooted in philosophy. She talked about Julia Kristeva's work on blue in 'Desire and Language', and returned to this later in the interview when referring to her objective of 'allowing a semiotic non-linguistic space to erupt' through her work.

The combination of references to colour in the work of other artists and to relatively recent philosophical discourse would be unsurprising to any academic associated with the education of artists during the last twenty years. However what could be slightly surprising was the recollection by Yass that colour as a subject had not been covered during her experience of higher education. She stated that 'I never had any training on colour theory. I mean, is that something which is standard at an art school? Because I don't think it is'. She went on to say that if lectures on, for instance, colour naming from an anthropological perspective had been offered when she was an undergraduate, she and her colleagues would have attended. 'If there had been anything that linked back to our practice, we would all have gone, you know we were desperate for that kind of thing but there wasn't anything'. The postgraduate level theory component with its sessions on contemporary philosophy

would appear to be the main element of formal teaching that have provided the basis for her subsequent acquisition of relevant professional knowledge.

The place of 'art knowledge' in Gillick's practice differs from that of Yass, reflecting the perspective reached from consideration of his comments relating to colour specification that he was not operating within the framework of 'artist as aesthete'. In response to a prompt about the knowledge formerly held by artists on pigments, Gillick referred to telling another artist that he:

'had about as much interest in pre-modernist art as most D.J's have in Brahms, which is a passing interest and I recognise it as an art-kind of activity in the same way they would recognise that as music-like activity, but I have no real interest in it or knowledge of it'.

What he cites as interests were 'structure and context and systems and projection and social space'. In particular, he professed much more interest in the built and constructed world. When queried about work undertaken within the framework of psychology on the impact of colour within the work environment, he reported his perception that one of the reasons he, as an artist, gets invited to get involved in those sort of environments is to bypass the 'excess of analysis around those kind of spaces'. He reflected on his role in this context as 'adding yet another layer of intuitive and not analysed behaviour to the situation', and asserted that he would not take the findings of a consultant on colour in the environment seriously, viewing it as 'some sort of conspiracy of excess management that's got nothing to do with well-being or anything like it'. In contrast to the tone of this response to the question of work environments, Gillick spoke with perception and sensitivity about

the role of corporate imagery and the differences between the US and the European context.

When considering the associations his palette could be seen as having with post-war consumer products, or the echoes of corporate modernism in Donald Judd's work of the 1970', he noted the need to check back to the original sources to verify and then maybe to disrupt the linkage. His objective would seem to be to deal with something 'a bit more contradictory and a bit more paradoxical and a bit more extreme than focusing on a moment of style or something'. But pinning this down more is elusive. The discussion shifted to the paradox, or the joke, inherent to a reference made to his interest in signs in catalogue of his recent exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London⁸ (figure 6). He had stated there that he remained 'interested in the skill and technical issues faced by those who make real signs' [5: 85]. This referred both to the consideration of art works as signs in relation to semiotic theory in the context of the art schools in the 1980's, as well as to the actual production of signs related to commercial enterprise. As such, it is really an amalgam of these roles that is his focus in terms of how the built environment and public spaces speak.

It would appear to be almost more knowledge of action or intention, in a cultural and conceptual sense, rather than apparent and acknowledged visual models, that are active within Gillick's practice. In this context, it is very interesting to consider what he said in response to my query about the way his colours are described. He noted that there has 'been very little attempt to actually describe the colours at all',

⁸ The Wood Way. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 3 May-23 June 2002.

ascribing this to the nature of art criticism now to avoid such particulars in favour of a 'softened critical theory kind of analysis of the ideas'. Although not advocating 'the actual description of what things look like' he did comment that 'there's a lot more to talk about than people generally do'. The only exception to this tendency was seen to be when there was a greater level of coverage in the more popular or mainstream press, such as occurred at the time of his shortlisting for the Turner Prize. Gillick noted that whilst reference might be made to a coloured plastic ceiling, there was no attempt made in the descriptions to 'go beyond the source of the colour' to consider how it would 'completely change the colour inside the room, or the shadows with different colours' or how 'the cast of light on peoples faces were different'. A similar evasion is seen when people approach his work through Gillick's writing. He notes a tendency to wilfully ignore some aspects of the work, such as the colour, structure or visual referents, but indicates that he gets 'a lot of ideas from people who have almost no interest whatsoever in the aesthetic qualities of the work'.

As with Yass, Gillick recalled very little consideration of colour while he was a student. Whilst he could not 'remember it coming up' he did recall that he was 'really interested in what [he'd]... call design colours'. Specifically, he was interested in the colours of car paints, that enabled him to deal with 'what already exists....your reference point is a finished completed commodity...that you would come across in the world'. He noted that the choice of coloured medium, whether his use of car paint, or the selection by painters of 'the oldest and most expensive [oil] paints', 'were clear moments where people did things that really were to do with signifying their intent to continue or to take themselves seriously'. The

reflection that certain areas of practice were presented as 'geared towards a particular set of ideas around what art should be', rather than as an exploration of what picturing or depiction might be, could be seen as pinpointing some reluctance to assume an analytic position at that period. His perspective on what going to art school was about seemed to centre on the opportunity for discovery, of 'wanting to find out for yourself', although he did note that the students he encountered through his work at Columbia University were 'more and more demanding' of concrete information and ideas.

The comments of both artists indicate that a relatively low level of discipline knowledge was communicated during their formal education. They appear to have developed distinct modes of operation that draw upon knowledge from within and beyond their core discipline in different ways. Gillick's use of a broad range of stimuli, with colour operating as just one of a number of devices that have both practical and conceptual roles within his practice, results in an output that is somewhat resistant to interrogation of colour meaning through 'conventional' mechanisms. In contrast, Yass appears to be more embedded within visual experience; the role of colour is more central to the meanings and space that she wishes to explore through her work. This enables the work to be approached from the perspective of visual perception and cognitive association.

Background Ideas and Colour Impact

The nature of the data collection method of this project accommodated digression by the respondents to talk about topics other than the primary focus of the sessions. The two additional themes evident in both interviews are described as

'background ideas' and 'colour impact'. In relation to colour impact, Yass was more focused on considering individual perception, whilst Gillick's interest centred on its contribution to the understanding of complex social spaces.

Whether it was personal memory and individual chemistry that determined which colours 'moved' a viewer, the opportunity for colour to open up 'some kind of psychological space' was considered important by Yass. Although she queried whether colour impact was neurologically or psychologically determined, wondering whether she was working in the dark, Yass asserted that she felt she should do what her senses were telling her. As a slight rider on this, later in the interview she qualified this position by acknowledging the importance of knowing about colour within different cultural spheres, but through an alertness to 'picking things up when they come up' rather than through methodical research, which could cause a loss of 'any sense of your own reaction'. Yass's concern with the different spatial qualities of colour, and their potential to open up a psychological space in her works, is central to her interest in the conflict between the geometric depth of the image and the different space given by colour. She likens this to setting up a different paradigm, to allow for the eruption of a 'semiotic non-linguistic space'.

Gillick also saw visual attributes such as colour as a 'kind of lure', as another entry point into 'another set of ideas', and there was also some sense of him questioning whether that, the visual lure, was where the 'art moment' was. But whilst he did not see colour as being able to 'be separated from the structure or context within which the structure is being shown', he did comment that he has 'ended up relying on

other people caring more than I do about getting something rights in terms of colour'. This implies that the actual colour carried by his pieces is contingent, outside of his exact determination. The apparent contradiction here, of Gillick both ascribing an 'art moment' to colour and denying his agency in its determination, would seem to reinforce the central conceptualisation of art practice as contingent. But then again, the meaningfulness of form, or colour, is noted with reference to the shape, or colour, of the table for the Vietnam peace talks. He did admit to being 'interested in the apparently circulating questions', with specific reference to 'the visual identity of social spaces'. He queried how decisions get made now that 'planning as a kind of political exercise has lost to speculation' and asked 'if they're not discussed in art then when are they discussed?' Colour is emphatically not a central issue in Gillick's concern with the built environment, but is rather more clearly one of a number of circulating tropes that takes part in a play between assertion and question that is itself the central engine of his practice. Colour here is a differentiator on a relatively superficial level, although its power to carry its own associations and influences is recognised, respected, and allowed to function.

The literature in the field

From the catalogue texts, reviews and other texts available, a complex and rich set of ideas and perspectives is evident in the writing about the artists surveyed for this paper, and in the writing published by one of them. Gillick's practice to date has encompassed not only making art but also writing alongside it and writing about the work of others, including a text on the work of Yass and another artist for the 1992 Serpentine Gallery exhibition 'Exhibit A'.

Before commenting on that 1992 text, more recent literature will be considered, to assess the extent to which the outcomes of this enquiry confirm or otherwise the understanding of these artists' work. The catalogue for Gillick's 2002 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and the book produced by Yass's gallery in 2000, contain both texts about the artist and a transcription of an interview with the artist.

Consideration of these catalogues supports the proposition that texts about these artists do focus on association, metaphor and parallels. The 'reading' of images and the associated implications of process appear to form the basis of Greg Hilty's overview of Yass's work in his recent essay [6]. The predominant focus of his text is upon the description and exploration of her images. He notes the 'cumulative threat and allure' of the hospital corridor images 'as being one of absorption into an institutional body, at once nurturing and devouring'. He describes her intense regard for 'where humankind reveals itself most openly', as 'physically manifested in the double image – at once positive and negative'. The process of using the double negative, with the concomitant shift in the image allowing a gap for the temporal distance to be perceived, is seen as 'a mobilisation of matter and memory as present phenomena'. The works thus become 'the products of a momentary and partial focus rather than the synthesising visions of a particular time and place'. Hilty notes that 'Colour is one of Yass's most powerful and least remarked upon tools' and considers that, in her work, 'The chemical properties of colour recover some of the representational power – though without the iconographic or symbolic specificity – they had in the art of pre-Renaissance Europe'. The chemistry of photographic printing and the light thrown by the structurally powerful visual

elements being recorded is seen to produce 'potent emotional statements', with the 'often melodramatic colouration' having a 'corporeal intensity'. 'Her yellow is the yellow of jaundice, her green the green of bruised flesh, her purple the purple of exposed veins'.

Hilty's text indicates that colour is an active component in the construction of meaning in response to Yass's work. Colour is definitely not seen as 'in exile' here. In the interview with Yass in the same publication, the focus of the exchange with Parveen Adams [7] is largely upon technical aspects of the process of constructing the image, and their potential to create a gap, or space, for meaning: 'The photographs allow you to see differently because habitual space and time are put out of joint'; 'there's something latent in the nature of a photograph in the sense that it always implies its own opposite...so there's always the potential for a shift'. There is not so much here about readings of the images, but about the potential for reading. Even when discussing the installation of her photographic images as light boxes, Yass refers to their occupancy in three-dimensional physical space as producing 'another doubling or turning as the viewer switches between the space of the image and the space they're in. There is a disorientation as they are caught in the gap between them'. Adams notes the particular role of the dense blue ('Catherine's Blue') that is so characteristic of Yass's work, in obstructing the passage of light through the light boxes 'so one is constantly shifting from seeing the picture to seeing different intensities of light and colour' (figure 5). The interview does suggest a more technical discussion, where process and effect - of colour, light and image - are evidently managed with intentionality, but space is left for the ultimate construction of meaning. That arena, of suggesting readings for the work,

almost as a copywriter gives us clues as to why we might want a product, is occupied by Hilty's text.

In 'The Wood Way' [5], the book published to complement Gillick's 2002 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, an introductory text by the Director of the gallery, Iwona Blaswick, occupies similar territory to Hilty. She describes the naming of his work, the characteristics of the structures, their colouration, systematisation and phenomenological impact, and the possibilities the work provides 'for us to meet, to reclaim the idea of discussion, consultation, renovation or delay – for us to become protagonists in modelling possible futures'. Her comments on Gillick's use of colour bear comparison with Riley's delight in writing about colour in the work of other artists:

By turns transparent and opaque his monochromatic bands are dazzling; they bounce reflections, or throw chromatic light on their surroundings with all the transformative hue of a rose coloured 'Poussin glass'. Like stained glass windows they carry intimations of transcendence; and like Modernist housing developments they speak of an abstract and therefore putatively universal language of optimism.

In some ways, other parts of Blaswick's text are more straightforwardly descriptive than Hilty's text on Yass. She is describing an 'œuvre' rather than individual works and, within this body of works, one could say that the absence of depiction and the presence of systematic structures leads to a focus on constants. Her identification of the 'managerial signifier', the 'off the peg' colour, inherent contradiction, and the vagaries of chance, reflect the topics discussed in the interview with the artist. In

addition, the way in which these are embedded within the text with interpretive 'clues' for the reader locates the site for meaning through association in a similar way to Hilty's text.

'The Wood Way' includes a text of an exchange between Gillick and Anthony Spira. In this text, Gillick expands upon the thinking related to his work, covering both issues of material and construction as well as a complex web of history, ideology and association. The actual physical manifestation of work as presented in the gallery appears to act as a moment in his thinking, as a mechanism for realising an opportunity to see and consider ideas. He notes that his work 'doesn't share the same implication [as Minimalism or late modern formalism] that art might be able to demonstrate an autonomy from other things in the world', but rather it 'gently pokes at certain ideas about materiality because these physical objects are only a small part of a whole matrix of things that play with the way ideas are placed into hierarchies'. The making of the art work here appears as a part of the process of doing art – the process that the artist is involved in is much wider than that of artisan. Interestingly, Gillick does note that there is 'a whole new set of audiences who were primarily retinal or visually literate in a different way and who were creating the conditions which would make it possible to evolve a whole new set of possibilities'. Whether these new audiences are the same ones that might respond to a 'sensory engagement' with the material of art is uncertain, but anecdotal evidence from within the art schools suggests that this might be so.

The other texts in 'The Wood Way' operate much more like Batchelor's 'Chromophobia', as literary documents in their own right. They sit alongside the

exhibition more like gentle musings, the ruminations of parallel universes. A parallel can be seen with the way that Gillick's physically-manifest works sit alongside his rather more penetrable texts, but he asserts that the work does have an important functional aspect as an actualisation of ideas. He denies proposing metaphorical relationships, and doesn't quite go along with the 'the game of suppressing aesthetics'. 'Visual kleptomania and visual pleasure' are involved in his creation of 'thought spaces which highlight both the concepts themselves and propose[s] an alternative view'.

The extended means by which Gillick operates, through writing and curating exhibitions as well as through making art, suggests a different sense of what it is to be an artist than is evident in the Yass's practice. A very clear indication of the pervasive nature of his agenda can be seen in a catalogue text he wrote to accompany the exhibition 'Exhibit A', shown at the Serpentine Gallery in 1992. In this text [8], when considering the ideas that permeated the work of the artists included in the show, Gillick suggests Yass had 'a desire to forefront an examination of images or situations that are already invested with status even before the artist has got her hands on them'. With reference to Yass's portraits of the people involved in exhibiting her work, Gillick asserts that taking the photographs 'could be interpreted as something of a cathartic act, reclaiming the power in a situation where artists could be perceived as increasingly embroiled in a web of shows, power structures and subject to all the effective feelings of dislocation that go with that.' He describes the 'apparently extraneous application of solarised colour bursts and overlaid printing in Yass's work' as 'overriding constants, alluding to a more elemental state of things': a 'notional aura of the

subject is exposed resulting in images where each person is somehow equally lost within a hallucinogenic place; a metaphorical revelation is put forward, yet the final decision as to where we all stand in relation to each other is still in question.' The underlying concerns here maybe are more central to Gillick's agenda than to that of Yass, leaving the question hanging in the air that is suggested implicitly by all the texts considered here: who is writing for whom? And how is the literature of the field of contemporary art contributing to the spread of ideas and the development of understanding in the discipline?

Summary

The case studies have established two distinct approaches to the use of colour, as well as to contemporary practice in more general terms. In the case of Catherine Yass, the artist controls the exact specification of colour and her core agenda is an exploration of the potential of colour to contribute to the setting up of a 'signed' visual space within photography. Her understanding of colour is rooted within the discipline of art and the issue of 'paint bias' in relation to the need to become familiar with the nomenclature of other disciplines was noted. Whilst the meaning of space was also central to Liam Gillick, there was a sense in which he both took on and evaded responsibility for the role of colour in his work. Colour here was more like a component than a carrier in a far more extended system for consideration of the meaning of the work.

The breadth of materials or processes that could lead to the colouration of the art works produced did not appear to place onerous demands upon the artists. Both artists had acquired the relevant and specific knowledge to manage colour

specification to the required level during the course of their professional careers. However, both artists indicated that their formal education had not addressed the topic of colour in any depth. There was no sense in which this had any deleterious impact upon their subsequent development.

The interviews did not identify any significant issues arising from the use of non-traditional coloured media in relation to safe studio practice, maintenance, conservation and disposal. The initial framing of the paper had identified this topic as having potential interest for the audience. The subject of conservation was discussed with Yass but not with Gillick. It was noted that Yass had considered the life-expectancy of the materials and adhesives she used and appeared confident that she was operating within known industry standards. That the issue was not discussed with Gillick resulted from the researcher's instinct that the flow of the interview would be disrupted. In effect, this omission resulted from the nature of the dialogue operating within the framework of discourses around art rather than the absence of potential problems. This area may well require further exploration.

One difference between the case study artists was the level of interest expressed towards the understanding of colour within other disciplines. Gillick indicated a certain level of negativity towards the idea that the discipline of psychology could draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of different colours within the work environment, although he did contradict this by his comments on the possible impact of interior colours on delicate negotiations. Yass however, became quite animated when discussing development of colour perception and naming in relation to human development in relation to age and cultural perspective.

Conclusions

It would appear that contemporary art practice, having suspended the influence of early Twentieth Century iterations of colour theory, is operating effectively at a remove from consideration of the implications of opponent process theories for colour mixing, with little consideration of studies on the impact of colour in relation to well-being, or understanding of the semantics of colour naming. The concerns of the artists interviewed for this study are centred on issues more complex and interconnected with other aspects of the social, cultural and physical world than the fundamental visual attributes of the physical works they produce. It is difficult at this point to see how an extended understanding of colour from the perspectives of materials science, neuroscience, psychophysics or anthropological linguistics would necessarily have any benefits for this field in relation to the production of art works. However, there may be scope for a broader understanding of colour to contribute to understanding the perception and cognition of art works. In addition, as industrial processes become more widespread in the production of art, colour measurement and specification across diverse materials and finishes could become more of an issue.

The case studies demonstrated that when operating within the professional arena, familiarity with the nomenclature of the relevant industrial processes and procedures acquired during practice, rather than through formal education, enabled management of the potential issues that might arise in selecting, matching and specifying non-traditional coloured materials. Whilst it is evident that contemporary arts practice operates successfully within a frame of reference that is permeable,

on its own terms, to knowledge from other disciplines, it is important to ask whether the educational frameworks feeding the professional arena need to review curricula content. Even if actual practice may not require an in-depth understanding of colour vision, colour measurement or colour naming, the fundamental nature of their contribution to seeing and the seen suggests that these topics should be understood by students of the visual arts. The tenuous nature of the propositions of neuroscience, psychophysics and anthropological linguistics would be an interesting match for the contested, and hermetic, sites and models of artistic agency. When Arthur Danto spoke of philosophers 'doing anticipatory science badly' in their attempts to understand colour [9] he was referring to the resistance of philosophy to taking science into account. In a similar vein, it is high time for the visual arts, which sits half inside the academy and half within the arena of cultural exchange, to notice the 'simple cultural lag' between developments in other disciplines and fields of enquiry and those in art. In asking what science has to say to philosophy about colours, Hardin [10] used this reference to cultural lag to note that the science looked at by philosophy was 'twenty-five years out of date'. What of the science looked at by art, or the art looked at by science?

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the artists for giving me their time and permission to reproduce images of their work.

References

1. Stallabrass, J. *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990's*. London: Verso, 1999. p. 261.
2. Riley II, Charles A. *Colour Codes*. Hanover: University of New England Press, 1995.
3. Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000
4. B. A. C. Saunders and J. van Brakel. 'Are there nontrivial constraints on colour categorisation?'. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 20, 1997, pp 167-228.
5. *The Wood Way*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2002. p. 85
6. Hilty, Greg. *Near Dark*. Catherine Yass. London: Asprey Jaques, 2000. p14.
7. Adams, Parveen. *Light Pictures*. Catherine Yass. London: Asprey Jaques, 2000. pp81-7
8. Gillick, Liam. 'trading images: the work of cindy bernard and catherine yass', in Exhibit A, London: Serpentine Gallery, 1992
9. Danto, Arthur. *Forward*, in Hardin, C. L. *Colour for Philosophers: unweaving the rainbow*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988
10. Hardin, C. L. *Colour for Philosophers: unweaving the rainbow*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988

List of illustrations

Figure 1: Catherine Yass, *Star: Shah Rukh Kahn*, 2001. Ilfochrome transparency, lightbox. 88 x 131 x 12.5 cms. Courtesy of the Artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Figure 2: Liam Gillick, *Coats of Asbestos Spangled with Mica*, 2002. Anodised aluminium, Plexiglas. Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London

Figure 3: Liam Gillick, *Ein Ruckbluck aus dem Jahre 2000 auf 1887*, 2002. Anodized aluminium, Plexiglas, 240 x 360cm. *The Wood Way*, 2002, The Whitechapel Galley, Installation View

Figure 4: Catherine Yass, *Double Agent: Mildred*, 2001. Ilfochrome transparency, lightbox. 101 x 217.5 x 12.5 cms. Courtesy of the Artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Figure 5: Catherine Yass, *Corridor: Jubilee*, 1994. Ilfochrome transparency, lightbox. 89 x 72.5 x 14 cms. Courtesy of the Artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Figure 6: Liam Gillick, *The Wood Way*, 2002. Anodised aluminium, Plexiglass, vinyl wall text. The Whitechapel Galley, Installation View

Figure 1: Catherine Yass, *Star: Shah Rukh Kahn*, 2001. Ilfochrome transparency, lightbox. 88 x 131 x 12.5 cms. Courtesy of the Artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London



Pre-Publication

Figure 2: Liam Gillick, *Coats of Asbestos Spangled with Mica*, 2002. Anodised aluminium, Plexiglas. Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London



Pre-Publication

Figure 3: Liam Gillick, *Ein Rückblick aus dem Jahre 2000 auf 1887*, 2002. Anodized aluminium, Plexiglas, 240 x 360cm. *The Wood Way*, 2002, The Whitechapel Galley, Installation View



Figure 4: Catherine Yass, *Double Agent: Mildred*, 2001. Ilfochrome transparency, lightbox. 101 x 217.5 x 12.5 cms. Courtesy of the Artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London



Pre-Publication

Figure 5: Catherine Yass, *Corridor: Jubilee*, 1994. Ilfochrome transparency, lightbox. 89 x 72.5 x 14 cms.
Courtesy of the Artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London



Pre-Publication

Figure 6: Liam Gillick, *The Wood Way*, 2002. Anodised aluminium, Plexiglass, vinyl wall text. The Whitechapel Galley, Installation View

