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"The Look of Looks, or, Ryan McGinness's Ontology of Color"
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Those attending to the arc of Ryan McGinness's career will no doubt note that something striking happened in 2003 with an installation the artist titled *Worlds Within Worlds*. There, at Deitch Project's Grand Street gallery, McGinness transformed the back room into a rudimentary maze of mirrored walls. The mirrors added several layers of visual complexity to the audience's otherwise easily navigable path through the maze, whose literally self-reflective infinite regress was punctuated by white vinyl discs punched with designs familiar from McGinness's graphic vocabulary. Once inside the maze, the audience, quite simply, got a load of itself, and the experience could be quite disorienting. At the gallery's perimeter, large black wall drawings rose above the maze's roughly eight-foot-high dimension and so offered the tease of orientation, but only a tease. As the photographic documentation of the show demonstrates, even these putative landmarks began to fragment and dissolve in the upper regions of the maze's mise-en-abîme.

What was striking about *Worlds Within Worlds*, however, was not this profusion of reflectance and the audience's immersion within its proliferating environment of graphic patternings. What was striking was what wasn't there, what was, in one sense, wholly absent from the scene, and that was color.

This is striking because *Worlds Within Worlds* is perhaps the first moment that McGinness evacuates color from the audience's experience of one of his installations, and does so in a purposeful manner. (There remains a series of signature color works as part of *Worlds Within Worlds*, but these serve more as appetizers to the main course of the maze.) It should be all the more striking to the historically attentive viewer, because in the year 2000, arguably the moment of McGinness's advancement to his current artistic idiom,[1] the artist practically announced his unique interest in color with his *Supreme Color Formula Guide* (2000), a series of skateboard decks arranged and painted to mimic a fan book of color print swatches like those that litter the desks of graphic and interior designers.

Prior to 2000, though obviously in a thrall to the visual lexicon of pattern and design, McGinness worked with two conventions that he quickly dropped from his visual vocabulary after that year: the photograph and the outline. Pieces such as *Interior View* (1999) and *Tug of War* (1999) exhibit McGinness's adherence to the use of drawing as a means to describe the contours of figures within an otherwise undifferentiated field of color (this is particularly the case with the "figures" of furniture against the undifferentiated yellow of *Interior View*), or to the appropriation of photographic imagery, especially when human bodies and visages were involved, as a way to achieve similar effects when compositions grew more complex. But in 2000, photographic imagery all but disappears from the finished work, and the drawing convention of outlining—actually more like modeling through contour—undergoes a transformation, whereby the outline grows into the object or figure itself by hypostatizing contour while eschewing any kind of modeling. It is from this point forward that, as McGinness so aptly puts it in the title of his earliest catalogue (not coincidentally dating from 1999), "flatness is god."[2]

If it is important that this sacrifice of photographic imagery and the negation of any kind of modeling is roughly coincident with McGinness's production of the *Supreme Color Formula Guide*, then it would seem logical to ask, what role might the Guide play in this transition from the "modeled" work (which I take to

include both the photographic and drawing conventions) to the "flat" work? Pushing further we could ask, what is it about *color* in general that changed—or changed in—McGinness's enterprise? In conversation, McGinness admits that he does not necessarily think too hard about color, or at least he does not think about it in any systematic way, as if working with a *theory* of color in hand. From a practical standpoint, McGinness's approach to color is intuitive, in the sense that working over a long period of time with Golden-brand acrylic paints and Pantone color books, he has come to internalize something of this readymade color system. Nevertheless, this intuitive way of working does not preclude his usage of color from being theoretical. For one of the things that the *Supreme Color Formula Guide* points to is McGinness's readiness to let color stand or fall on its own, which is to say that here color is freed from mimesis or locality, from the necessity of "coloring" objects or imagery as they would appear in the world at large.

Let's take a moment with the *Guide*. The decks, an edition of 500, were commissioned by James Jebbia of Supreme, a skateboard shop with stores in New York, Los Angeles, and across Japan. Of the five decks, the top one shows the standard CMYK or process colors: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. Within a standard color printing process, nearly any other color can be produced out of a proportioned combination of these four and their derivatives, as the remaining decks demonstrate with their respective color "families." Regarding each deck's design, McGinness explains that "[I] originally thought to make them Benjamin Moore paint chip samples like you get at Janovic [a local New York paint store], but I thought that Pantone was closer to my heart,"[3] which is to say, closer to McGinness's training as a graphic designer, and further away from the language of classical painting or, more generally, conventional artistic practice.

The ease with which McGinness moves back and forth across the increasingly thin boundary between fine art and graphic or commercial design is a commonplace observation in writing on his work, with the standard take being that McGinness adopts the language of graphic design, which is consistently in service to advertising and branding of one sort or another, and elevates, translates, or transposes it into the field or locale of fine art and aesthetics.[4] Whereas McGinness's work easily stands to the fine- art side of the art/design divide, McGinness's *Supreme Color Formula Guide* seems to straddle that boundary as something of a curious hybrid. McGinness's "design" for the Supreme decks is essentially an appropriation, an adoption of a design matrix that is the Pantone "look"—the formula breakdowns, reference keys, and even font and graphic layouts that the Pantone corporation uses for its own formula guides. Thus the *Guide* layers together fine art (a limited-editioned work produced by a recognized artist); a consumer product (a skateboard deck sold under the auspices of a respected skate shop); and a design matrix (a proprietary color matching system targeted for the printing and graphic design industries).

We have seen this strategy before, most saliently in the work of Jasper Johns, whose flags, targets, and number series slowed the conceptual trajectory of the readymade paradigm and turned it into an option by which to appropriate pictorial structures of a more resolutely graphic character. But, of course, none of this activity would be conceivable without Marcel Duchamp, who, we should note, had something very interesting to say about "art making" and color just around the time that Johns's work began to reverberate throughout the art world:

> *Now what is making? Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red, putting some of it on the palette, and always choosing the quality of the blue, the quality of the red, and always choosing the place to put it on the canvas, it's always choosing. So in order to choose, you can use tubes of paint, you can use brushes, but you can also use a ready-made thing, made either mechanically or by the hand of another man, even, if you want, and appropriate it, since it's you who chose it.*[5]

Duchamp is right of course, but contemporaneous developments within the history of what we might as well call the production of industrialized color would render his comment a bit reductive.

Nineteen sixty-two, after all, marked the incorporation of Pantone Inc., and the following year saw the introduction of the first printer's edition of the Pantone matching system, with subsequent editions, formulas, and systems following rapidly thereafter.[6] It is tempting to claim that Duchamp's identification of the tube

of paint with the readymade (and thus, by extension, all painting as a simple act of nomination) takes into account something like the emergence of the Pantone system. What is the latter if not an entire industry designed to distill color down to a simple act of choosing? But the appearance of the "palette" in Duchamp's statement, and his recognition that every painter must choose the "quality of the blue" or the "quality of the red," opens a space in which one may make some distinctions as to color's total subsumption under the weight of the readymade. For example, in noting how the color palette is inherently tied to color mixture, and that mixture to color theory's articulation and manifestation in the color circle, David Batchelor explains how such an understanding of color is "based on a geometry of triangulation and a grammar of complementarity" that underwrites color's traditional subservience to the world of representation and mimesis.[7] But, Batchelor continues, the color *system* that is Pantone, "divorces color from conventional color theory and turns *every* color into a readymade. It promises autonomy for color… that of each color from every other color, that of color from the dictates of color theory, and that of color from the register of representation."[8] This difference between a color *theory* and a color *system*, then, would seem to accord members of the latter the status of *things* out in the world, whereas the former is more concerned with how we see those things to begin with. If color theory is a theory of *vision*, then a color system, by rights, is a system of *objects*.

This is an important distinction, one which I want to turn in two directions: the first turn takes us back to the role the *Guide* plays in McGinness's drop of both modeling and the photographic image from his visual vocabulary; the second turn takes us forward to the question of color's *ontology*—that is, to what color actually is—and how one way of posing this question bears upon McGinness's evacuation of color from the installation of *Worlds Within Worlds*.

As with most intersections of autonomy and aesthetics, the autonomy of color remains a high modernist idea. Ever since Kandinsky likened seeing colors oozing from their tubes to an encounter with "strange beings" who could teach him the new language of pure painting, color—freed from imitation and, in Kandinsky's case, in the service of a "spiritual" abstraction—has seemingly had a life all its own.[9] But the way to that high modernist liberation of color had been prepared by the divisionism of Georges Seurat, itself at once a positivist renovation of how a painting may be "seen" and a mechanization of the very act of painting, a kind of surrender of the artist to the logic of the assembly line, where all that is required is the application of "dots" of color, straight from the tube as it were. Furthermore, the possibility of divisionism itself was secured by a different moment of mechanization, that of oil paint manufacture and its distribution through the vehicle of tin tubes, which began earlier, in the 1830s, at roughly the same moment that Talbot, Daguerre, and Niépce were finding ways to "fix" images of the world using only chemistry and light.[10]

Though the early industrialization of artists' oil paints and the invention of photography may be entirely coincidental, their effect upon artistic practice, and modernist artistic strategies, in particular, were not. "What is called modernism in painting," writes Thierry de Duve, "is perhaps nothing but the history of the obstinate… resistance that painters opposed to the division of labor with which industrialization was threatening them. Competition with photography was the most obvious threat; competition with the pigment industry was a more insidious but no less crucial one and, by the way, linked to the first."[11] We can see this linkage in the way that early photography made a quick claim to the documentation of landscapes, to which the practitioners of *plein-air* painting and impressionism also directed their eyes, but only once premixed and easily portable tubes of paint freed them from the confines of the studio and the alchemy of pigments that took place therein.

On the impressionists' canvases, color came to displace the mimesis enacted by photography. Like photography, painting would become a means of recording light, but it would lay bare the process of that recording. Vision itself, rather than what vision held in its sights, became painting's charge. With divisionism, that process became equally mechanized. The brushstroke itself, the means of making lines, of establishing limits and contour, was similarly displaced, now by the single daub of color transferred directly to the canvas from the tube. And at the root of these two displacements lay the industrialization of color manufacture—the sole

hue in a single tube of paint.

Though Pantone's entrance into this history of color manufacture comes 40 years prior to McGinness's own displacement of photography and modeling, we can now see how the *Supreme Color Formula Guide* serves as something of a symbolic marker that announces the replay of these historical shifts within the trajectory of McGinness's own artistic development. I am not claiming here that the *Guide* is responsible for such displacements, that there is some sort of cause and effect relationship between the Guide's appearance and the concomitant disappearance of photographic imagery and modeling from McGinness's subsequent work. But I do think that the *Guide*, and what it has to show about color, offers a way of thinking through, or conceiving, McGinness's breakthrough to the "flat" work of the last eight years.

What do the *Supreme Color Formula Guide* and, by extension, the Pantone system have to say about the ontology of color? This is a philosophical problem and one with a history too long to detail here.[12] Nevertheless, we can trace its basic contours by asking a series of albeit overly simplified questions: Are colors properties of objects in the world, or do they arise from our perception? In other words, are colors objective or subjective, real or illusory? If there were no human beings around, would the world still "have" color? Or do the colors we see—the reds and the blues, the vermilions and the ultramarines—belong only to us?

From a certain perspective, the color "Supreme 190C," for example, just is that color for everyone because it is the color that is constituted by certain percentages of "Warm Red," "Rubine Red," and "Trans. White," which themselves must be constituted by certain percentages of the original CMYK pigments. In other words, these colors are reducible to the formula used to produce them. This is different than discussing how any particular color appears, or how we might experience color, or attempting to describe color in any other set of color terms. What that particular Supreme Color *is*, is just the formula that produced it.[13]

The "Caution" note included at the bottom of the *Guide*'s top deck is informative in this respect as well. It reads, "Due to uncontrollable fading of printed materials, the colors on these decks may change.… The decks should be replaced periodically to maintain accurate color communication." Due to the decks' exposure to light, the physical makeup of the pigments will change, thereby changing the colors' appearances. Just how the color pigments will change, how much they will fade, "yellow," or what have you, is a different question altogether. But when considering the place of color with respect to the *Guide*, the fact of the change itself is a good defense for its presentation of a *realist* ontology of color, partly because it is the effect or outcome of a physical process, but also because the change occurs within and as part of the *Guide*'s, and thus our own, external environment.

This may sound paradoxical at first. If color is dependent upon its environment, doesn't this effect how it appears to us? Are not environmental conditions exactly the things that we invoke when we talk about having certain experiences of color—i.e. this red in this light, or that yellow under those specific conditions of illumination? The way out of this paradox is to conceive of color as the philosopher Alva Noë does, as *enactive*, which is to say, as something that is affected by and at the same time affects its environment: "To perceive something as red is to perceive it as thus acting on and capable of acting on its visible environment. In this way, the enactive view is an account of what it is to be red in terms of the *phenomenally salient ways* in which the object *interacts with* its environment."[14] None other than Josef Albers offers an example of such a "phenomenally salient" way in which a colored object interacts with its environment when he describes how "the white ceilings of houses surrounded by lawns or the white-painted eaves of a roof on a sunny day appear in bright green, which is reflected from the grass on the ground."[15] More generally, Noë explains that "the color a thing appears to have, like its apparent shape and size, varies as our relation to the thing varies, and as its relation to its environment changes. Colors, like all appearances, are genuine features of the environment."[16]

At the core of Noë's enactive approach to perception is the notion that our sensorimotor skills and awareness

inform the way things look to us and enable us to reconcile the myriad appearances a thing may have with what that thing actually is. Those appearances, as opposed to simply qualifying as subjective experiences, Noë holds out as *real*, as "things" themselves, which belong to, and are conditioned by, their environment. For example, just as a dinner plate, which I know is circular and of a specific, measurable size, *appears* elliptical, and smaller, from certain perspectives, those appearances are not reducible to some subjective interior experience of my own, but are rather a function of my (and my body's) position with respect to the plate, the table upon which it lies, the room in which we are situated, the lighting within that room, etc. These are real, physical conditions of the environment, of which all the attending "appearances" are a part, even the appearance of color.

The mirror maze of McGinness's *Worlds Within Worlds* would seem to offer us a demonstration of just this kind of "reality of appearances" through an amplification of those appearances' number and kind. It is an unorthodox environment to be sure, but what we see inside the maze is a profusion of spaces punctuated, or interrupted, by the white vinyl discs, which, combined with the mirrors, produce a kind of instantaneous juxtaposition of multiple different "looks." Standing in one place and looking straight forward at a single disc offers a standard, verifiable view: this disc is circular, of such and such a size, with this particular figure punched through it serving as a device by which to distinguish it from the "look" of other discs. Looking just past this disc to one side or another, then, we see an infinite profusion of other discs, and as we move about the space, these "looks" are multiplied again and again.

All of this is captured in a short video that McGinness shot as a means of documenting the installation. In it we see a sequence when McGinness zooms in just to the right of his own reflection and finds ever more discs "in the distance." The infinite regress forges an artificial extension of space into which the discs recede, and though this recession is illusory, the various "appearances" of the discs (the slivers, the ellipses, the circles; in other words, the "looks") are not—they are real features of this specific environment.

Now, according to the enactive approach to perception, color does not occupy a position analogous to shape and size. "If colors, in contrast with shapes, are ways things look, then it is not possible to explain our experience of the actual color of a thing in terms of looks, in the way that we are able to explain the experience of the actual shape of a thing in terms of our experience of how it looks," which is to say, "colors, unlike shapes, it would seem, are themselves looks. This would seem to make apparent colors the *looks of looks*."[17] Noë admits that understanding colors as the "looks of looks" is probably "incoherent," but it is not all that far off from his conclusion that "we experience [colors] as imbued with possibilities of variation, as possessing degrees of freedom in a space of phenomenal possibilities."[18] Though, for example, the specific red that I see in my glass of wine will change as the conditions of its environment change, which includes my position with respect to it and a number of other variables, I understand all of these "reds" to belong to a single regime of color possibilities. From my experience, which is to say, from my sensorimotor confrontations with glasses of red wine in the past, I understand how the red of the wine should look in innumerable numbers of configurations, including those which I have yet to actually experience. Thus within my understanding of the red of the wine there exists a horizon of expectations and discernments that form a tacit field in which I am able to navigate all the possibilities of this particular red.

From a certain perspective, is this not the experience we are offered in the mirrored maze of *Worlds Within Worlds*? For while the maze evacuates any and all color from the viewer's experience, its infinite regress would seem to produce that particular structure of color experience we can now conceive of as the "look of looks," as an experience "imbued with the possibilities of variation," and one which secures those looks as members of a reality quite independent of our own subjective impressions. Of course, within McGinness's installation these variations are played out upon the size and shape of the white vinyl discs, but the proliferation of those "looks" within the maze's fun-house environment offers the viewer that necessary multiplication of looks, the "looks of looks," which simulates the realist ontology of color, even when color of any kind is nowhere to be seen.

Notes

1. One hesitates to apply the more familiar and pedantic "mature style" here given that it is inevitable that McGinness will advance through many more and different stages before he is through, none of which may be any more or less "mature" than the next.
2. See Ryan McGinness, *Flatnessisgod* (New York: RSUB, 1999).
3. Ryan McGinness, interview with Takashi Murakami on Japanese radio, 2001, (http://ryanmcginness.com/mp3/murakami&mcginness.mp3).
4. Most recently see A. A. Bronson's "From Low to High and Back Again: Zen and the Art of Being in Consumer Culture," in Ryan McGinness, *Installationview* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005). But the basis for this argument has been given its most articulate and robust form by Arthur Danto; see his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
5. Marcel Duchamp, interview by Georges Charbonnier, radio interviews, RTF, 1961, quoted in Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge and New York: The MIT Press, 1996), 162.
6. *International Directory of Company Histories* (New York: St. James Press, 2003), vol. 53.
7. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 105.
8. Ibid. Italics added.
9. See Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," in *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 1:371–2, and *On the Spiritual in Art* in the same volume.
10. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce is widely regarded as having made the first photograph in 1826 and so may be named as its first true "inventor," but William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre turned the taking of photographs into photography by developing the process and the market for the new invention. See *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991). There is however new research that claims the earliest photographic processes—photogenic drawing, a type of photogram—date to the 1790s. See Randy Kennedy, "An Image Is a Mystery for Photo Detectives," New York Times, April 17, 2008.
11. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 176.
12. See *Readings on Color, Vol. 1: The Philosophy of Color*, ed. Alex Byrne and David Hilbert (Cambridge and New York: The MIT Press, 1997).
13. This is an albeit very specific and perhaps idiosyncratic application of the modal-realist approach developed by Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke, an approach that is meant to "fix" references for certain "natural-kind" terms, such as "water" or "gold." Christopher Norris describes the situation thus: the modal-realist approach "aims to re-establish fixity of reference for natural-kind terms like 'water' and 'gold' by supposing that those items were first picked out by a designative act of naming… despite various—sometimes radical—shifts in our range of scientifically informed identifying criteria. Thus *water* went from something like 'transparent, odourless, (normally) liquid substance that freezes or boils at certain temperatures, falls as rain, fills up lakes, possesses certain cleansing properties', etc. to substance 'with the distinctive molecular structure $H_2$0'." See Christopher Norris, *Philosophy of Language and the Challenge to Scientific Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 20. See also Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), and Hilary Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
14. Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge and New York: The MIT Press, 2004), 143.
15. Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 45.
16. Noë, *Action in Perception*, 144.
17. Ibid, 133. Italics added.
18. Ibid, 137.