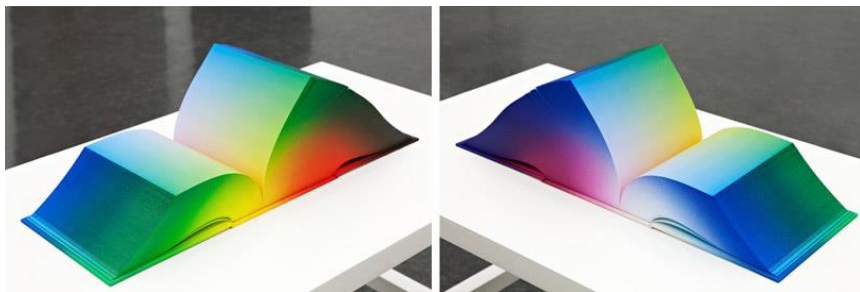


Introduction

Color and language

Artist Tauba Auerbach's cubic book of every RGB color in existence points out the gap between language and color. Flipping through the gradient pages, one cannot come up with names for every shade perceived. The artist has built a complete dictionary of RGB color and it is wordless.



Tauba Auerbach *RGB Colorspace Atlas*, 2011. Digital offset print on paper, case bound book, airbrushed cloth cover and page edges. 8 x 8 x 8 inches each.

The book format brings to the foreground the lack of color-language we have. Color reveals itself not to be the truth accessed by our eyes but mutable imprecise flavors that we don't have the words to completely standardize. So, whenever we use language to conjure colors, a generous amount of translating, extrapolating, and abridging occurs. Does this measure of translation which language imposes expand or deplete the rich experience of seeing color? Or do they work hand in hand? Pasolini the poet, film director, and translator wrote of the power of translation to regenerate.

Auerbach has also voiced interest in the translating role of language in a collaborative essay linked in the appendix. The poet Paul Legault considers text to be "a kind of cultural translation, in which the circulation (and recirculation) of text both activates and is newly activated by a diverse public." And yet artist Joel Isaacson writes that the act of painting "... requires going beyond convention, beyond training, beyond culture, back beyond language, to a state of naive yet sustained scrutiny and inquiry..." positing language as a falsehood for painting to overcome. Either way, the intersection of color and language have a range of impacts on working methods and artworks.

1) Tauba Auerbach's RGB colorspace atlas

<http://www.designboom.com/art/tauba-auerbach-rgb-colorspace-atlas/>

- 2) Pasolini – *Introduction: Translating Pasolini Translating Paul* by Elizabeth A. Castelli
 - 3) Essay *Tauba Auerbach on Science*
<http://www.taubaauerbach.com/pdf/PAPERSCIENCE.pdf>
 - 4) Paul Legaut, *Art in America*, October 2014
 - 5) Joel Isaacson, 1994
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Part I

When Color Trumps Words – Nameless colors



Christopher Chippendale, *Sleigh*, oil on canvas.

Joseph Albers collaborated long-distance with a printmaker, Tyler, to create color lithographs that related to his paintings and shared their luminosity. For this, Albers would paint an oil sketch of a specific color he wanted printed, cut it in half, send one half to Tyler and keep the other half to compare against proofs.

There is an obvious, practical reason for this practice between collaborators, but I can't help but also see an idealization and romantic impracticality to it as well. This color was too precise for

words, too precise for even making two consecutive paintings of it: a potion calling for that exact hue in order for the spell to work. This was so urgent and deep a need that only a piece torn from the original would do: a couple's photo ripped in half to remember a single moment by.

Christopher Chippendale paints without naming his colors. The translation is direct from vision to palette. The colors he arrives at are nuanced and subtle. When the need to communicate about colors arises, Chippendale describes colors with their comparative temperature and value, instead of grounding the colors in names like "blue" or "brown". This frees him from the default associations color-names gather, and the generic mixtures that usually follow on the palette.

Van Gogh sketched in dark ink or pencil and wrote in the color-names of different areas of his composition to paint from later. The color names, as simple and generic as "pink" or "blue" added another level of translation to the activity of painting: from sight to language to paint. "Pink" is an unexpressive umbrella term for a wide array of hues. The tag of "pink" could give Van Gogh the freedom to put in any of the colors that fall under that name. This could create color relationships beyond what the observed world had to offer. Language was both emancipatory and also limiting.

Van Gogh's struggle to articulate colors that were more specific than the words available is apparent in a letter he wrote to his brother on August 13, 1888:

"There is a sun, a light that for want of a better word I can only call yellow, pale sulphur yellow, pale golden citron. How lovely yellow is! And how much better I shall see the North!"



Vincent van Gogh, letter to Émile Bernard, Arles, 18 March 1888

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1. Van Gogh – letter 522 to Theo , Arles, 13 August, 1888
http://www.vggallery.com/letters/639_V-T_522.pdf
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John Walker, "Brake" (2014), oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches

Hyperallergenic's review *Paintings Like Sand in Your Teeth: John Walker at Seal Point*, by Thomas Micchelli, uses a similar strategy for describing the visual power of the work. The review is full of

visceral associations from "scab-colored" to acidity. Micchelli writes, "...the color is acetic, the paint handling is pugnacious, and the surface is so gritty you can almost taste it."

However art reviews, coffee description, and wine appraisals are not exactly the most approachable or accessible language concerning empirical experiences that are worth relishing. Although wine may, by nature, have an upper-class stigma, Robert Parker's work definitely builds the pedestal higher. The pioneers of Modernism spoke of the intuitive reaction to color that exceeds language, to an almost spiritual degree. In truth, Modernism was hard for a lot of "common" people to connect with if they didn't read plenty of theory, making the "purely visual" art language dependent and invariably classed by its cocoon of texts.

Several children's books offer explanations of color that are descriptive and abstract like wine or coffee reviews but not elite or alienating. "Knots on a Counting Rope," while inadvertently offensive and naïve about Native American cultures, offers another way of describing colors. In this excerpt of a dialogue, a grandfather explains the color blue to a blind grandson by likening it to other concepts:

“What is *blue*?

You know *morning*, Boy.

Yes, I can feel *morning*.

Morning throws off
the blanket of night.

And you know *sunrise*.

Yes, I hear *sunrise*,
in the song of the birds.

And you know *sky*, Boy.

Yes, *sky* touches my face . . .
Soft, like lamb’s wool . . .
and I breathe its softness.

Blue is all of these.
Blue is the feeling
of a spring day beginning.”

- 3) Ramey Wine Cellar, *Robert M. Parker Jr.'s The Wine Advocate*
<http://www.rameywine.com/robert-m-parker-jrs-the-wine-advocate-february-1-2010-1-2-3-4>
 - 4) Hyperallergic, *Paintings Like Sand in Your Teeth: John Walker at Seal Point*, by Thomas Micchelli , October 11, 2014
<http://hyperallergic.com/154513/paintings-like-sand-in-your-teeth-john-walker-at-seal-point/>
 - 5) *Knots on a Counting Rope* (1966) by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault
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- 1) Coffee description chart
http://thecoffeehead.com/?page_id=134
 - 2) Starbucks Tribute Blend <http://store.starbucks.com/starbucks-tribute-blend/011008768,default,pd.html>

Part III

Poetic Color – Named and Renamed

Paint chip #1

Paint chip #2



Color is generally considered “Real” and color-names hold a less-than place as signifiers or short hand of the “Real.” But in the case of paint chips, the signifier gains importance, arguably more than the visual impact of the color. How Post Modern, Benjamin Moore.

“Treat yourself” and “spa day” are not words that bring to mind the specific colors on paint chip #1, but rather romantic associations set to trigger memories, wishes, and meaning. The color on the chip becomes the generic shade to a specific emotion or sentiment. The perceived color of “I’ve got the blues” in chip #2 is very close to “treat yourself” in chip #1, but they offer different ditties.

Just as a precisely-mixed color becomes the talisman for tropical faraway lands, royal pasts, or luxurious free time, so are stars named and renamed in commercial “Star Registries” for money and romance and conjuring ideal mini-poems of perfect sentiment. The stars - distant, subtle, and glowing - become just flat markers for emotions. Consumers are buying into an idea, an idea most easily communicated and triggered by the signifier.

Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler used paint chip names in a social critique they launched in 1991. Language and color supported each other in their project “Camouflaged History,” for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C. The artists got the official list of colors that were permitted for house paint in the ritzy historic district.



They designed a military grade camo pattern based on Charleston's flora and fauna, with the help of professionals in the field. With permission from a resident just over the border of the historic district, a poor area where segregation is still very much felt, the duo painted

their camo pattern on the exterior of the house in the colors officially sanctioned for the historic district.

Cleverly crafted color names were written on the delineated blotches of paint on the house and also on a 13 foot color chart accompanying the site specific work. The bland, conservative hues fall back on the inventive and socially attuned language to describe them. Among the color-names Ericson and Ziegler came up with were "Rich Stucco Pink" and "Confederate Uniform Gray."

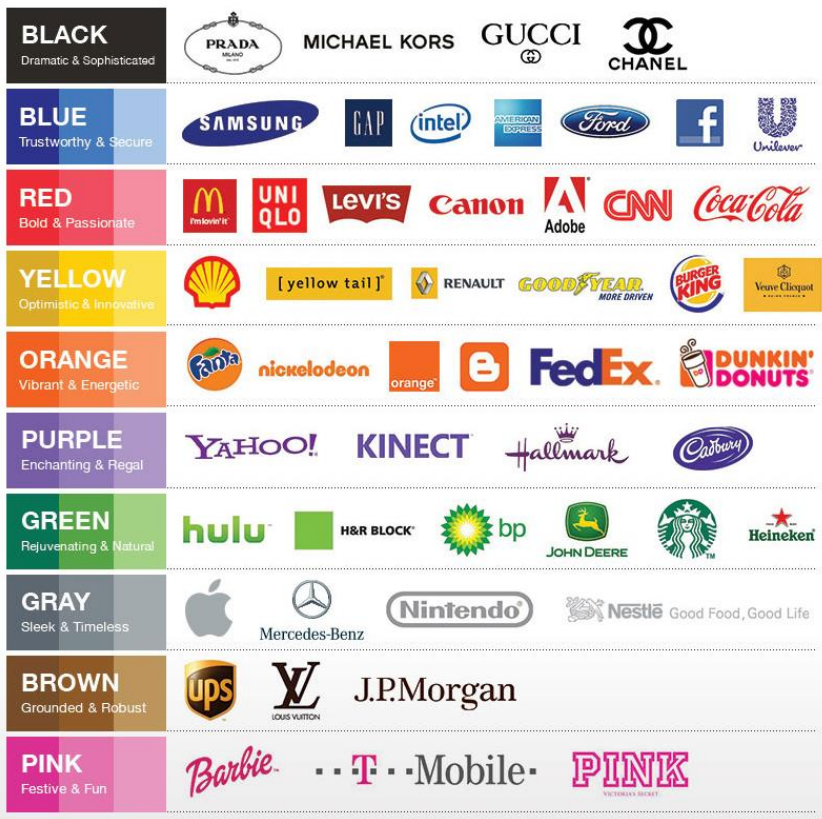


Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, "Camouflaged History," 1991

1. Star registry <http://www.starregistry.com/>
2. Camouflaged History http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/03/arts/design/kate-ericson-and-mel-ziegler-collaborated-in-color.html?_r=0

Part IV

The Most Nameable Palette - Corporate Color



Pantone Universe Art, Color Chart of brands published in *PANTONE CELEBRATES COLOUR*, 2013.

When we are little, some of the first descriptors we learn are color-names. All our toys are in bright, “namable” colors. It seems no coincidence corporations have latched on to the most namable palette of colors so ingrained in us for their branding purposes. The logos of these businesses form a garish rainbow – all primary and secondary colors, no subtle in-between-tones. These brand-colors are the closest to, or may have replaced the default colors in one’s mind. Coca-Cola red is THE RED one thinks of when the generic color-name is used. It is the red we learn to call red when we are little. Artist, Claude Briand-Picard wrote in 2008 of this growing phenomenon of living immersed in the commercial color palette:

“High fidelity colors. Thirst for color. Colorful life. A storm of colors, etc.

All these advertising phrases describe perfectly our modern world submerged as it is in a commercial culture which more and more often makes use of color in order to seduce consumers.

For many decades now, materials, object and commercial spaces have become more and more intensely colored. Artificial colors coming from chemistry labs, such as florescent colors (the ‘phtalocyanines’) have an undeniable influence on our perception. With the arrival of plastic materials, it is no longer a question of a color covering an object. It is the object or matter

itself which is the color. We are no longer looking at a colored object, but at a color-object. Thus throughout the twentieth century, matter materials and objects have invaded our field of vision, bringing with them not only new colors, but also a different physical presence of color.”



Claude Briand-Picard, *Rencontres n° 31*, Ensemblage. La Vigie. Nîmes. 2008.

Claude Briand-Picard uses what he calls “ready-made color,” for his installations and sculptures, taking the brightly colored production and refuse of corporations as his pigments.



John O'Connor, *Butterfly*, 2013. Colored pencil and graphite on paper, 75.75 x 60 inches.

John O'Connor takes his bright colors from the corporations in a more direct and language based manner. The corporate logos have no remove from their colors for O'Connor. In his painting "Butterfly," sarcastic product placement form bursts of color on his humorous and critical tale of consumer excess. The protagonist of the story jumps from product to product, consuming. As readers of this painting, we are pulled through the text by skimming from one burst of color to the next. We turn into color-consumers, and all the colors are brands.

1. *All colors permitted as long as they don't interfere / WSZYSTKIE KOLORY SĄ DOZWOLONE, pod warunkiem, że nie przeszkadzają w handle*, Essay by Claude Briand-Picard (pp. 26-27)
 2. John O'Connor
<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/john-orquonnor/>
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Conclusion

Color Experiment

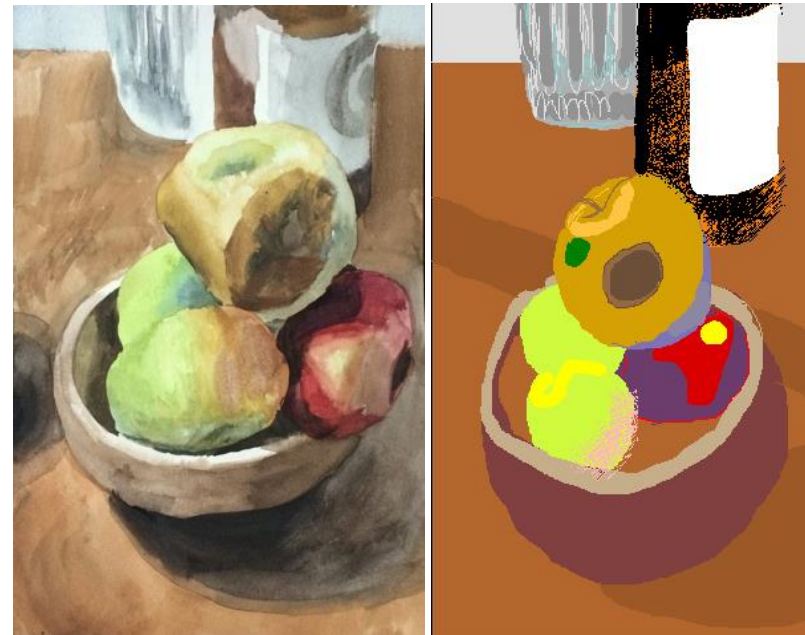


Christina Mackie, *Colour Drop* (detail), 2014 Installation View.

To come at color from a purely language-based perspective, I devised a collaborative experiment with friend and painter Vanessa Varjian. The intention of the experiment was to see what type of language the translation would take and how it would impact artworks of the same composition. One was to be made with visual data and the other only linguistic data. Vanessa Varjian painted a still life and then transcribed her color observations about the composition into words, which she sent to me to paint from.

glaze over the color of the apple.” Umber is a type of clay that contains iron and manganese oxides and is burnt to bring out a richer color. The color term hinges on the physical makeup of the pigment, comfortably concrete. I was reminded of Christina Mackie’s show *Color Drop* in which Mackie remade a mortar and pestle and crude palettes with precious stones that seem to be leaving residue in the pitted surface, recalling the ones used at the beginning of painting to grind down raw elements into pigments. Crystal-like glass chunks strewn on the gallery floor seemed like pure color sources, the object and hue condensed into one. In the most straightforward sections of Varjian’s description language, hue, and material crystalize into a single word. “Sienna.” “Cadmium red.”

Overall, I was surprised by the variety of strategies the description used, not just relying on pigment mixtures. This brought to mind a Turkish roommate I had who was almost fluent in English. Communication became an improvisation of pointing, drawing, miming, adopting her sentence structures, and extrapolating from her terms. We used everything that was available to us. Vanessa Varjian’s color description shows the same indiscriminating vocabulary to arrive at an approximation of the visual – translation indeed.



(Left) Vanessa Varjian , *Still life*, watercolor, 2014.

(Right) Mariah Siegmann, Microsoft Paint, 2014.

Vanessa Varjian’s Color Description (unabridged)

Still life - Vertical composition. Light source - Coming from northwest, a cool “daylight” bulb. Centered is a small, ordinary brown bowl holding 4 apples. Three are showing more prominently and there is a 4th that you can only see about 1/3 of. The largest apple is on top and has a big brown, rounded bruise. on the front of it. This apple is a russet/golden color with green dimple on top. The bruise is dark brown in the center with a lighter brown ring around it (think> two values of a burnt umber, with the lighter ring looking like a burnt umber glaze over the color of the apple. Shadow on the apple contains ultramarine blue and strays a little towards grey.

Another apple is light green and lemon yellow, with a very light blush of red on the right side. Another apple is mostly red (think cad red and alizarin mixed) with shadows from the other apples that look kind of burnt umber/purple. This apple has a spot of yellow on it though. The apple in the back/bottom that you can only see 1/3 of is the same light green, lemon yellow as the apple in front of it that I described earlier. The still life is set up on a wooden table that's color is like burnt sienna with a burnt umber glaze over it. The shadow from the bowl is a version of this color darkened with more burnt umber. There's also a shadow on the table left by some object, that appears on the left side of the composition and goes off the paper. Horizon line of the table is about 1/14 down from the top of the paper, so you can imagine that you looking at but also a little bit downward at the still life. Behind the bowl of apples (pretty close by, maybe only 3 inches away), is a bottle of pretty dark apple cider vinegar. It's placed a little to the right of the center axis of the page. You can only see the bottom 2/3 of the bottle, and the slim neck is cut off by the top of the paper so it looks like it could be a jar. The color of it is a deep orangish/brown, but with a little blue thrown in there. I used ultramarine, but it could be cobalt. The vinegar is cloudy as it's unfiltered so you cannot see objects through it/the glass. And that's why the color is so deep as well, there were a lot of tannins in the cider apples that were used. There's a white label that's covering most of the bottle, but you can see the vinegar on the left side where that label ends. Behind the vinegar, maybe an inch and half away is a drinking glass with vertical ridges that start a little bit up from the base of the glass. You can only see a small part of the glass which is located near the "horizon line" made from the table as most of the glass is cut off by the top of the paper/composition, and also by the vinegar bottle. The drinking glass though is lined up with the center axis of the paper, so it appears to be a little bit to the left of the vinegar as well as behind it. The color that depicts the farthest area of space is a pretty light, neutral/cool grey (top of composition above table horizon line). This color peaks through the drinking glass which has highlights that are close to white, but a little bit grey, and shadows in the ridges, a darker grey. Maybe a touch of turquoise thrown into the midtone greys depicted on the drinking glass.