

MAN AS COLOUR SPECTRUM

Erik Wysocan: I first became aware of your work last year at *This Is Not My Color / The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, the show with the artist Nikolas Gambaroff at the Swiss Institute in New York. If I'm not mistaken, this was a partial restaging of your earlier show in Venice titled *Our Sun*. That exhibition was framed by the rather apocalyptic state of the drowning city – a sinking condition that has become a prophetic vision of what's to come for Manhattan in the next century (according to the climate models). Did you have the sense, being in New York, that the financial capital of the US is on a slow decline into the sea?

Pamela Rosenkranz: 'When I was living in New York some years ago, I was actually quite drawn to comparing the two cities because of that literal fact. For the project *Our Sun*, I wanted to take a direct and realistic approach to the romanticized image of light playing on the floodwaters of a drowning city. I looked at the phenomena of sunlight and water from the perspective of a human 'domestication' of these elements – adored equally in religion, art, and holiday culture – distilling them down to the colours of blue, gold and silver and the monochrome versions of so-called 'skin colours'.

'This is not my Color in New York featured the topic of water, taking the colour chart of Evian as the basis for working with the commercial brand identities of water. I had also worked with this theme in my earlier project *The Most Important Body of Water is Yours* – a reference to one of Evian's famous slogans. This examination of natural water as merchandise, which has been advertised as a product for health and beauty, revolves around my concerns with the representation of the contemporary body. The idea that water can clean the body from the inside and purify it with its 'virgin' quality is brought to a boil... including the misguided assumptions about detoxification.

'Capitalism has become such a power of nature itself that in 2008 a formal proposal was presented to the Geological Society of London to make the 'Anthropocene' – the term used to indicate the period in which industrialization began to have an effect on Earth's evolution – an official unit of geological time. My ideas extended from the obvious implications like the greenhouse effect and the looming shortage of drinkable water to the nightmarish conspiracy theories of pole-caps melting that tip the planet out of its balance and eventually even out of its orbit.

'Venice is a typical short-stay destination – it is impossible to tell if those PET bottles that seesaw in the dirty canals were carried in from distant places or if they were bought from the wide selection of international brands sold by the city's shops. The local characteristics used to distinguish the many global water brands, like their geologically determined mineral balances, reach out to the privileged travellers as tiny little bodies of 'nature'. That inspired the work *Firm Bodies*: bottles filled with skin-coloured silicone, functioning like a short-circuit that reduces the idea of water into an absurd mantra where one is drinking a skin-toned milky liquid, something like a homogenized solution of one's own body.

'These ideas about colours and commodities are informed by a recent development by scientists of the so-called "brainbow", a specialized colour system created to visualize the sanctum of our subjectivity: thinking itself. Neurons of mice are dyed in the RGB colour spectrum – the same that composes a television

screen – and when new synapses are created, different thoughts are labelled by different colours. Since every mental state of the subject can be increasingly treated in mere biological terms and now visualized in its according tints, life and death, which may define the subject’s consciousness, are now linked to a set of colour labels for existential feelings, put into place by science.’

EW: In the catalogue for *Our Sun* there was a text by Reza Negarestani, the prominent (and somewhat mysterious) Iranian philosopher. How did you come to work together?

PR: ‘I noticed Reza’s work in the magazine *Collapse* and then, while reading his book *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008), I realized how much my ideas about Venice and its connection with the Middle East correspond with his writing about nature and culture and, especially, with his concept of “anonymous materials”. I think that it is more interesting to talk about art in terms of the material that determines the work, rather than the artist’s identity, and *Cyclonopedia* is doing that as meta-fiction.’

EW: You said earlier that there is a ‘conflict between the perspectives from our self-experience and science’s increasingly advanced understanding of neurobiological or physical processes’. Perhaps this is a contemporary rendering of the classical mind/body problem? In the emerging field of quantum biology there have been efforts to resolve the impasse with a theory of the Quantum Mind. In a funny move, the mind/body distinction is reconciled through their unification under quantum information theory, while at the same time indicating that the answer may be fundamentally unknowable – not only from a philosophical point of view, but also from the perspective of physics. Could this be where Negarestani’s ‘weird universe’ comes into play?

PR: ‘The “Quantum Mind” seems to be a quite disputed approach, and as far as I know it is a speculative theory that cannot be supported by experimental evidence so far. (This might be why physics touches on philosophy so much here.) I am of course not at all speaking against theoretical speculations in this regard, but I think that this concept infuses the mystery of quantum mechanics into the unsolved questions of how a physical brain can generate conscious experience. In general, people tend to like analogy more than the clear and neurobiological approach to the problem of consciousness, in the sense that analogy nurtures those emotional needs for comfort, which include our preference for imagining the larger universe as something dark, deep, and obscure. And I think that Reza would not give in to such romantic turns.

‘I am more taken by the act of thinking on a material basis. Every thought epigenetically – and therefore materially – changes the brain, and it needs fuel to do so. Thomas Metzinger speaks about this in the sense of a metabolic currency. He says that “If a biological brain wants to develop a new cognitive capacity, it must pay a price. The currency in which the price is paid is sugar. And additional energy must be made available and more glucose must be burned to develop and stabilize this new capacity. As in nature in general, there is no such thing as a free lunch. If an animal is to evolve, say, colour vision, this new trait must pay by making new sources of food and sugar available to it. If a biological organism wants to develop a conscious self or think in concepts or master a language, then this step into a new level of mental complexity must be sustainable. It requires additional neural hardware, and that hardware requires fuel. That fuel is sugar, and the new trait must enable our animal to find this extra amount of energy in its environment.”¹

EW: Is art implicated in this sort of metabolic economy?

I think very much so. This might even be where we can locate the questions of art's *prima materia*. Carbohydrates and time to think might have substantially more in common with the beginning of art than the occurrence of clay and pigments. But that is pure speculation from my side now.

To me, modern art can be to some extent described as using a psychology that centres the particular subject as the ultimate "experiencer" – infusing meaning into the world – as a form of a mystical idea of the self's continuity with nature. But if we take the findings of contemporary neurobiology into account, there seems to be no such thing as a self *per se*. The world is meaningless but the inventive self construes meaning in order to shape itself up for the evolutionary arms race of our brains – and the self is no fixed entity but an ever-changing process. Without saying that it is possible to destroy or necessary to eliminate our self, I am interested in the attempt to empty such given meaning; and to consider that even if it appears differently, it is generated by "meaningless" natural and material mechanisms.

In other words, if we take seriously the "truth" that science generates, and if we consider the political and social implications that a selfless subject might have, subjectivity becomes itself mere material. This was the reason why I started to work with Yves Klein as a model for the mythologization of the artist's subjectivity, to examine that figure – which so closely resembles the features of the contemporary individualist; and to look into the void of a meaningless universe where Yves Klein, or the artist, must be reduced to the physical interactions of neuro-chemical processes. I think the economy and culture that evolved into individualism and the inflation of the self that went along with it were very much mirrored in Klein's understanding of art and I think it is important to contrast this with our contemporary point of view.

Harried by negative critics and most probably already suffering from physical weakness, he wrote in 1961 in the famous Chelsea Hotel Manifesto: "That day, as I lay stretched upon the beach of Nice, I began to feel hatred for birds which flew back and forth across my blue, cloudless sky, because they tried to bore holes in my greatest and most beautiful work. Birds have to be eliminated."² Appropriating immaterial commodities like the sky and blurred by Christian hopes for absolution, Klein here seems to have regarded the birds that cross 'his' skies as a mere stand-in for evolution theory. A direct descendent of dinosaurs, the bird as species might have unconsciously reminded him too much of the natural origins of history and the meaninglessness of natural selection.'

1. Thomas Metzinger, *Ego Tunnel* (Basic Books, New York 2009) p. 43.

2. 'The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto' (New York, 1961), in: www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/chelsea_us.html

