

457 words on colour

When I shine my lamp onto a white wall and then increase the brightness of the lamp we would doubtlessly describe the effect as a change in the level of brightness – not as a change in the color of the wall. This since we, without thinking about it, attribute the effect of its change to its cause. Like a kind of representational perception we experience through filters that organize or even control our ability to sense.

In my work called "Room for one color" we actually only see one color. The wavelength of the lamps in a space are in the yellow area of the visible spectrum resulting in the fact that all colors in this room submit to the yellow domain and organize themselves in the duotone scale from yellow to black. Like a black and white image with shades of gray in-between, this yellow space organizes the green sweater and the purple shoes into the monochrome field of endless shades from yellow to black. The experience of being in the monochrome space of course varies with the people, but the most obvious impact of the yellow light is that the perception is obviously acquired: The representational filter is brought to our awareness and with that our ability to see ourselves in different light.

The experience of color is a matter of cultivation. As much as the senses and perception are linked with memory and recognition, our relation to color is closely derived from our cultural habitat. The Eskimos have one word for red but thirty for various whites.

Lime has a disinfectant effect and was thrown into mass graves to prevent diseases to spread. For health reasons hospitals used the lime to whitewash and disinfect the walls and soon the color white was equal to clean. The modernists believed that an open and clean space was the best platform for execution of artistic self-realisation. Imagine if lime by nature had been yellow, maybe the now well-known white cube gallery would be all yellow. The Yellow Cube.

Even though one of the largest intercultural common constructions is the agreement about what color is what color (time being the all time largest !), there is still a very large portion of individual opinion about color (unlike time). Color has in its abstraction an enormous psychological and associative potential, and even though color has been cultivated to the extreme the amount of individuality in experiencing colors is equally extreme.

This points to that color doesn't exist in itself, but only when looked at. The unique fact that color so to speak only materializes when light bounces off it into our retinal circus shows us that analyzing colors is in fact about the ability to analyze ourselves.

Olafur Eliasson