

Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes

‘My interest is in the various and fundamental ways we have of understanding and moving through the world, of coordinating our acts or operations, for example: joining, separating, corresponding, or transposing. I am not ‘making art’. In the sense that my work is intransitive (it has no object). I prefer to say that I am ‘doing’ art.’

Mel Bochner, Lecture at the ICA, London (1971)

This first British survey of US artist **Mel Bochner** traces 45 years of his multifaceted career. Encompassing a range of media from painting and photography to sculpture and installation, Bochner’s fascination with colour and perception act as the focus of this exhibition.

Bochner came of age during the second half of the 1960s, a moment of radical change, both in society at large as well as in art. While painting slowly lost its preeminent position in modern art, language moved from talking about art to becoming part of art itself. Bochner has consistently probed the conventions of both painting and of language, the way we construct and understand them, and the way they relate to one another to make us more attentive to the unspoken codes that underpin our engagement with the world.

In his large-scale painting *Blah Blah Blah* (2011), made especially for this exhibition, this meaningless bubble of everyday speech provides the compositional framework for a painting that literally oozes colour onto its velvet ground. In contrast, the much earlier *Theory of Painting* (1969–70), with its monochrome blue fields sprayed onto scattered newspapers, demonstrates the remaining four maneuvers that were left to abstract painters at the time: coherent figure on coherent ground, coherent figure on dispersed ground, dispersed figure on coherent ground, and dispersed figure on dispersed ground.

Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes is organised by the Whitechapel Gallery, in collaboration with Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany and Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal.

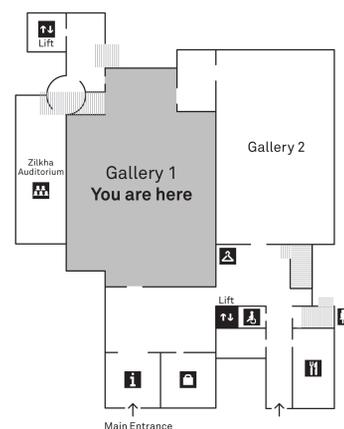
Supported by Suzanne F. Cohen, Jill & Peter Kraus.

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To find out more about events, film screenings, talks and a study afternoon on 16 November on Mel Bochner pick up a leaflet or visit whitechapelgallery.org.

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‘What I wanted to understand was the nature of the conventions. Conventions give us boundaries of experience. If you examine the conventions you may find where the holes are, where a leakage exists between ‘is’ and ‘is not’.’

Mel Bochner in conversation with James Meyer, *How Can You Defend Making Paintings Now?* (1993)

Baffled by how different his own works looked when photographed, Bochner soon began to analyse photography in an equally systematic way to painting. Examining the medium’s constituent elements one by one, he raised questions about photographic truthfulness, the contribution of colour and the relationship between positive and negative.

36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams (1966/2003) shows a series of ephemeral wooden sculptures, each photographed from above, at an angle and sideways on. Viewed together the photographs allow us to reconstruct the sculptures – all of which were built from the same set of cubes – while each vantage point seen by itself would not deliver sufficient information to do so. For *Transparent and Opaque* (1968/2008) Bochner covered glass slides with smears of clear vaseline and white shaving foam. Strong, tinted, raking light introduced an element of colour into the photographs which was entirely absent from the photographed objects themselves. The *Color Crumples* (1967/2011) were generated without a camera altogether, tying enlarged photocopies of a drawing illustrating linear perspective subsequently translated into large-scale prints.

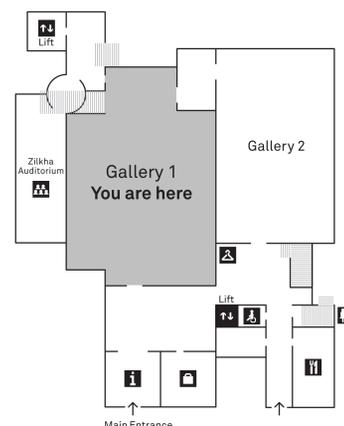
Rather than as a truthful reproduction of reality, Bochner shows photography to be reliant on the viewer compensating for missing or false visual information. Similarly, his ‘Measurement’ works such as *48” Descending a Staircase* (2012) expose the exaggerated faith placed in information which, while factual, ultimately does little to help explain the world.

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‘Whether in the public or the private domain, my recent work attempts to confront the ideologies and hidden agendas of language. Because, as recent history has painfully taught us, all abuses of power begin with the abuse of language.’

Mel Bochner, Lecture at NYU Institute of Fine Arts (2006)

In the late 1960s, Bochner made a series of drawings in which chains of adjectives, verbs and nouns mimic the formal characteristics of the work of artist friends such as Dan Flavin, Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson. These word chains were generated with the help of a *Thesaurus* listing words with similar meanings.

Some ten years ago, Bochner returned to this strategy, albeit not to create portraits but to expose the manifold conventions which govern the use of language. Incorporating colloquialisms, slang and expletives, the ‘Thesaurus paintings’ vividly capture contemporary life and its verbal manifestations. These range from everyday complaints and enthusiastic exclamations to the absurdities of political rhetoric such as the neologism ‘Decider’, invented by US President George W. Bush to describe himself.

Event Horizon and *If/And/Either/Both (Or)* (1998) are both rooted in Bochner’s earlier ‘Measurement’ works. While still interacting with the architectural space, they now also play with the conventions of painting: what is representation? What is abstraction? On whose eye level are paintings being hung? Is composition part of the painting or vice versa?

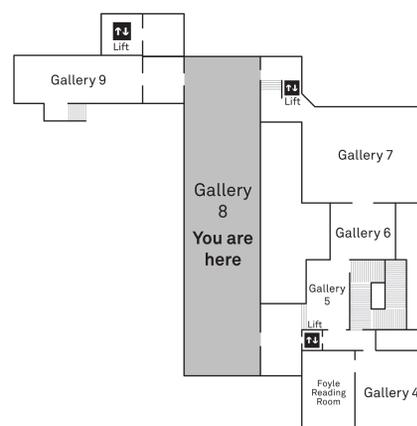
In all of these works colour plays a crucial role. Colour addresses itself not to linguistic thought but to sensory perception. Bochner’s paintings cut right to the heart of the age-old question how the mind relates to the body, thought to emotion, and the difficulty of expressing either one adequately.

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‘Rather than think about my work categorically as painting or sculpture, I think of them as more like ‘gerunds’, verbs that act as nouns. So that the work is an active thing, both the doing and the thing done. (...) I feel that the basic question in my work is how do you experience yourself in the world, which is to say, how do you inhabit an idea of the world?’

Mel Bochner interviewed by Elayne Varian (1969)

Often hailed as one of the founding figures of Conceptual art, a form of art which foregrounds the idea, Bochner has always maintained that the material used to express the idea – or the ‘delivery system’ as he likes to refer to it – inevitably affects its meaning. He has often done so by mobilising paradoxes that contradict pure logic.

Meditation on the Theorem of Pythagoras (1972/2010) references the well-known equation $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. However, if three squares of 3×3 , 4×4 , and 5×5 are physically arranged around a right-angled triangle, the sum total paradoxically is 47, not 50 as the equation would logically suggest. Interested in numerical order as a structuring principle, Bochner first created this sculpture from pebbles found in southern Italy before making later versions in coloured glass. The colour adds another element to the riddle that escapes rational explanation.

The spatial arrangement of the sculpture is echoed in *Two Planar Arcs* (1977). Fused with the wall, the work signals a first return to painting. *If the Colour Changes* (1998) is one of Bochner’s earliest paintings to make the intersection between language and colour its central theme. Quoting from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Colour* (1950–1), the perception of colour continually rivals and undermines our attempts at reading the words, thereby enacting the very essence of his treatise on colour and language.

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