



A previously-remembered version of the account in this bulletin was published in *Idea*, no. 316, 2010. It was originally written to Mark Aerial Waller. With thanks to Tom Benson

Cover image: Tom Benson, *Frame*, 2012

Dear Mark,

Here's a response to your inviting me to curate a show that comprises a single piece of work—a mechanic that simultaneously mocks and affirms the idea of an establishment like the Louvre, with its line of people queuing up to witness the *Mona Lisa*. It would seem to conflate highbrow and lowbrow, and possibly overcome that communal exhaustion and disinterest everyone seems to accept as the regular ambience of gallery openings these days. To paraphrase Wyndham Lewis's *Diabolical Principle*—a collection of incendiary pamphlets, similarly low-key—these things might appear insignificant or profoundly marginal in terms of scale or location, but ultimately they represent IDEAS that might then be contemplated or applied at any scale. At the very least your idea pushes for a third way, however modest or short-lived.

My idea is to combine two elements. The first is a painting by Tom Benson, a friend of mine in London. His recent work—at least, that he showed me a year or so ago—might be described as an attempt to *prove color.* I mean prove in the sense of allowing it “to prove itself”; perhaps “beyond all reasonable doubt.”

I'll try again. Tom's flat (not flat) color paintings work towards the optimal demonstration of a specific color's coloriness. In 1968, the British author B.S. Johnson christened the character of his first novel *Travelling People* Henry Henry in order “to emphasize his Henryness,” and of course Russian exile Vladimir Nabokov had already done the same thing for similar reasons with *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert 13 years earlier—a pseudonym invented by the character himself, so to speak, from a shortlist including Otto Otto, Mesmer Mesmer, and Lambert Lambert, that he thought best expressed his “monstrously twofold” character.

Tom's paintings are some kind of visual equivalent: Red Red or Blue Blue. Tom's Red is a Reds' Red in the same way a certain artist might be considered an Artists' Artist, i.e., with some degree of inner circle respect, other Reds genuflecting as Tom's enters the same space. It also occurs to me that he's simply (and complexly) painting portraits of colors—a red picture that attempts to capture Red's likeness. Only that's not quite right either, because he's equally after assimilating its abstraction. And because

both representation and abstraction are fundamentally tied up in the whole riddle, and because the material, the pigment, used to depict the subject IS the subject, we arrive at some sort of broken zen: a visualization of the sound of one hand clapping.

The piece of Tom's that stuck in my eye's mind the first time I visited his studio was a relatively small painting, between A3 and A4, on aluminium and perspex of a deep deep indigo (deep deep as in Henry Henry) with what seemed the precise visual depth of a glass of Guinness; more precisely, the proverbial pint in those old Rutger Hauer ads on TV, where the camera zooms into the top of the glass, down through black black and on into the cosmos. Tom's indigo had approximately the same consistency —thicker than water but not quite blood—and this was only one of a number of qualities that made it quite *other.* According to Tom, such depth was won by his laboriously applying 165 layers of the same pigment day after day, and the result resists description just as it resists reproduction, resigned to remain a live sensation, an impression. I'm failing here too, of course, but then (I reason) I'm already writing at least one step removed.

One more attempt. This indigo was the sort of color that seems intrinsic to a specific object or situation, like the red of Heinz Ketchup or the purple of a sheet of carbon typing paper. Only this particular instance bespoke a double-reference, two parents: first, that classic bottle of fountain pen ink, Quink; second, that optional greaseproof packet of salt found in old bags of Smiths crisps. Both might sound trivial, or flippant, and described here they seem to give off an unpleasant retro stink. But I'll let it pass and follow the idea that these mundane artifacts remain lodged in my mind precisely because the indigo so curiously ingrained in both exists outside the normal scheme of things, the regular spectrum ... or at least that which the brain is readily primed to calibrate. It seems to *pierce* perception instead.

The second aspect of my proposal is to introduce some psychedelic drug or other. Initially this just came out of my asking you whether you could imagine organizing some kind of art salon without alcohol or any other drug. You didn't really answer (I'd still like one) but instead suggested I ought to organize a drug event "in the Spring when the sun is hard and

low.” I think it was that description of the light that excited me enough to take you seriously.

Exactly a year to the day before you asked I found myself at the back end of a Saturday afternoon in early December stood in the middle of the King’s Road gazing up at Chelsea Fire Station, framed in my mind as a perfectly flat (not flat) painting that again walked the edge between representation and abstraction. The scene seemed to manifest some obscure modernist paradox—the function of that pure red red, winking at me elsewhere on the street from what seemed to be last of London’s classic telephone and post office boxes, offset against the romance of an expansive, luminous blue blue Christmas sky.

As it happened, I’d eaten some peyote earlier that afternoon, and now in fast-forward retrospect the whole day seemed weirdly pre-planned. That morning, on the first day I’d had off with nothing much to do for months, I’d decided to drift for no particular reason across the city towards Notting Hill Gate. I’d bought a newspaper for the tube that had a picture of some peyote on the front and a story on page three about a loophole in the law that had resulted in dried varieties of the psychoactive cactus being legally sold on Portobello Road market. As I appeared to have been unconsciously propelled in that direction already, easy peyote suddenly seemed like a good idea, hence a few hours later at the lowest point of the afternoon I found myself staring up at the outsize backwards-moving clock above the Vivienne Westwood shop at the bottom of the King’s Road, then entering to discover someone had decided to fit it out as one of those inverted-perspective rooms, an Ames Room, where the far wall seems wider than (or is it the same length as) the one behind you. To make matters worse, every door in the place was at least twice as small as the assistants inside, who were all suddenly knee-high anyway. Trying to leave, my suddenly-telescopic right arm went for a pinhead of a doorknob now shrunk in direct proportion, and I ended up having to sort of prize myself out of the space, one newly gangly leg first, then the other, and back out on the street with no little relief.

At the highest point of the afternoon, on the other hand, after a rubber bus ride through Sloane Square, Knightsbridge, and Piccadilly, I came to rest speed-drinking hot chocolate in a café just off High Holborn with the

vague idea I seemed to recall from somewhere that I might come down off the sugar. I found myself sat opposite a girl with long dark hair and icy calm clad in a bright pink patent leather miniskirt and matching jacket, cyan Converse and black fishnets, reading a massive cartoon *ACME Deleuze & Guattari Reader* perched what must have been uncomfortably on her lap. I remember the apparition literally hurt my eyes, though evidently not enough to look away. After about ten minutes of this, grinning wildly into and apparently completely absorbed by the book, her left hand slowly began to tear apart the holes in the tights with mounting vigor. This went on for perhaps another five minutes until they were completely destroyed, at which point she shut the book decisively, walked out and didn't look back.

For a recent exhibition in Tallin, Estonia, I made a 3D version of something called *Equation for a Composite Design: Two Ideologies* that I'd originally published in the 2D pages of a magazine. Both instances comprise a pair of buses: on the left, the one rainbow-painted and driven around the mid-1960s by Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters with the destination FURTHUR over the windscreen; and on the right, a reversed, negative image of the one on the back of the Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant" single bound for NOWHERE and xeroxed in Jamie Reid's signature black and white. Scavenger-hunting the original material carriers of these two ideas, the Pistols' bus was an easy enough find—a suitably fucked copy of one of tens of thousands of the original 7-inch single from 1977 that arrived in the mail covered in coffee stains. The Pranksters' bus was less obvious until I happened upon some LSD blotter art on a hippie souvenir site—vanity blotter, it's called—with a multicolored cartoon of the bus repeated in miniature on each perforated tab. I got in touch with Ken Kesey's son Zane, who sold me what was supposedly the last of a hundred copies. It arrived from San Francisco a couple of weeks later, signed by ex-Pranksters in an array of colored felt pens, like kids practising autographs; some kind of mirror to punk's caffeinated trace.

At some point in advance of the trip to Estonia I'd convinced myself it would be antithetical, or unethical, to show the blotter if it wasn't properly loaded. I began to ask around but was told I'd chosen "the wrong season"—whatever that meant—and so unfortunately the piece was shown below full strength. The morning after the exhibition opened,

though, I discovered that a corner of the sheet, some ten tabs or so, had disappeared along with a bunch of itinerant Russian artists who'd been hanging out in a corner of the space the previous week. It occurred to me for the first time (for some reason) that the street value of such a sheet of around 200 tabs would be pretty high, not to mention the fact that shipping it elsewhere would involve considerable risk. The Tallin show was due to travel indefinitely around Eastern Europe, and an obscure crate being shunted from one more or less underground space to another containing a well-wrapped sheet of acid recently soaked in a bathtub somewhere in the Estonian countryside was perhaps not such a great idea. I was reminded of Daniel Buren's title *The Unspeakable Compromise of the Portable Work of Art*, and it struck me that this particular piece of portable art was, legally speaking, unspeakable, and further, destined to show nowhere, locked in a state of permanent compromise charged by neither acid nor law. A framed version of the two artefacts has since been lost or apprehended somewhere between Schipol and Gatwick airports on the way to a different venue altogether. No-one at the airports, the airline, or the baggage handlers ever responded to my calls, and in the end I reckon limbo is probably the best place for it.

I'd been talking with Tom about the difficulty of showing his work in print, because any translation (scanned, photographed, printed, described) of work so obviously reliant on physical apperception was always going to be fundamentally flawed. We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the various standard and non-standard methods of color calibration and reproduction, perhaps the most common and efficient (but still woefully inadequate in this case) being the Pantone system. Then I began to think that soaking a sample indigo chip in LSD would perhaps come closest to approximating the spirit in which it was conceived—or at the very least posit a closer translation of the affect intended. And so I finally meant to propose that the two of us hang Tom's indigo painting, go out early to score some market peyote for an evening audience, then spend the bulk of the day collectively alone with the work before they show up. Doing this on, say, a Tuesday during regular office hours would make the event even more abject, nicely charged with work-ethic guilt.

But I've since changed my mind: I don't think we need an audience at all. I immediately counter-propose, then, that we just frame the chip, hang

out in the gallery for a day, and title the whole thing “*Acid Pantone 274U* (after Tom Benson: *Plus, 2000 (Indigo)*, pigment and cellulose binder on aluminium and perspex panel, 45 x 30 x 0.8 cm).”

Regards,

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