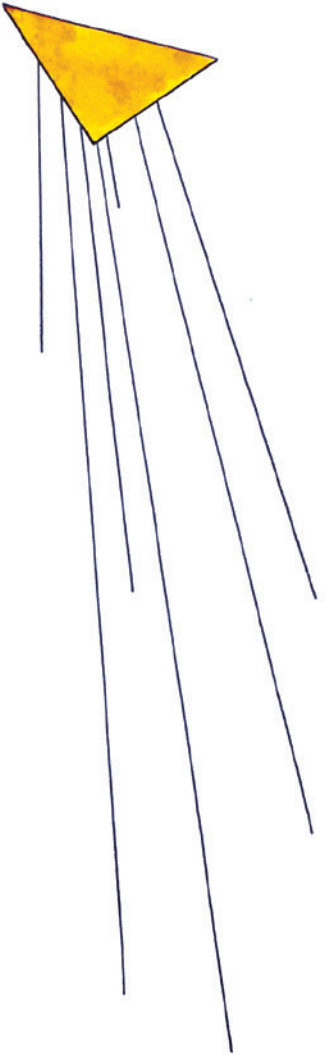

Cover: Arthur Davison Ficke, detail of "Spectra," no date,
ink and watercolor on paper.

Page 66: Cover of *Spectra* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1916).
Photo by the author.

Page 73: Arthur Davison Ficke, "Portrait of a Poet," no date,
ink and watercolor on paper.

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THE COLOR OF DECEPTION

As Joseph Albers wrote 50 years ago in his *Interaction of Color*, "In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually." Such innate deception is born of color's unstable ontological status — a color may seem manifestly real and resoundingly "true" in one's own mind, yet it is also eminently fraudulent if measured against the experiences of others, as anyone who has ever had an argument over paint chips can tell you. Color's insincerity makes the interaction of color and language especially tricky, as readily demonstrated by the "Stroop effect," in which printing a color term in an ink of a different hue significantly impedes beholders' abilities to name the hue. Try it and see:

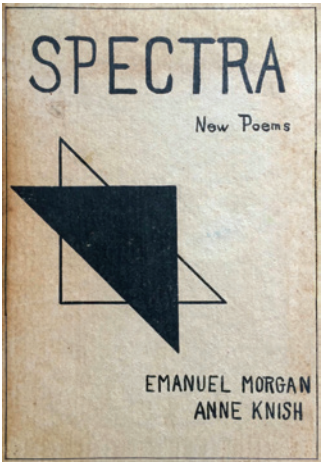
Red Green Blue

These internal discrepancies between color words and perceptual experience can be used to tease, confuse, and falsify. Color's ability to lie via the senses by conjoining truth and falsehood made it an appealing instrument to some early 20th-century artists and pranksters who delighted in playing provocative critical games. The Spectra Poetry Hoax of 1916 was one such deception.

According to record, Witter Bynner came up with the idea of satirizing modern poetry in the spring of that year and swiftly convinced his friend Arthur Davison Ficke to join him in a grand gag. He adopted the name "Spectra" to evoke blended reference to the deceptions lurking within the color spectrum, as well as ghostly "spectral" illusions. Reacting with scorn to what they perceived as the fatuous insincerity of many varieties of avant-garde modernism — Imagist poems, Cubist painting, and Futurist manifestos — Bynner and Ficke set out to lampoon the gullibility of audiences drawn by fashion to artistic novelty. For their purposes, color proved an eminently useful but equally slippery entity.

While sequestered for 10 days in a hotel room, imbibing copious amounts of scotch, Bynner and Ficke invented the "Spectrist School." They crafted a scientifically-supported theoretical framework for their

project, and adopted ethnically satirical alter-egos — Bynner became "Emanuel Morgan," while Ficke emerged in the cross-dressed guise of "Anne Knish" — under whose identities they composed inventive and intentionally absurd poems. Morgan's contributions specialized in eccentric rhyme and meter, while Knish experimented with free verse. In these roles, the two published their self-titled collection, *Spectra*, within the year.



It is amusing to imagine the delirious, tipsy word play in which Bynner and Ficke indulged, composing kaleidoscopic color-imagery: "Indigo birds and squirrels on a tree" cohabitate in Morgan's *Opus 41* alongside "maidens hung with vivid beads of green" bearing "an orange cat" as the "night bloomed blue." While many of their verses were meant to be deliberately loopy, others, like Morgan's *Opus 6*, also showed innovative, frolicsome rhythm and cadence:

If I were only dafter
I might be making hymns
To the liquor of your laughter
And the lacquer of your limbs.

Spared from the indignities of cohabitating with two inebriated men, Marjorie Allen Seiffert was invited to join the prank after its inception, contributing her own witty verse under the name "Elijah Hay" for a special 1917 issue of the "little magazine" *Others*, devoted to the new Spectrist school.

Spectrist poems conjured flights of creative fancy during a moment when prolific artistic invention, unconventional allusion, and unconscious association had become celebrated principles within developing modernist movements. Capitalizing on the appeal of such trendiness, *Spectra* became an immediate sensation: literary luminaries such as Harriet Monroe, Albert Kreymbourg, and William Carlos Williams praised it, although some of their colleagues were more cautious about its worthiness. The Spectrist school gained followers, as well as critics, until early 1918, when the full story came out. Yes, Bynner affirmed in response to a direct question: he was Emanuel Morgan, Ficke was Knish, and it had all been an elaborate prank.

But while the Spectrists skewered poetic fads and duped some of the period's leading aesthetic rebels, as well as shallow imitators of modernism's apparently transitory fashion, *Spectra* did much more than expose the excesses of an elitist yet credulous avant-garde: it shed light on the conflicted forces fueling the spread of modern art and iconoclastic poetry. Propelled by skeptical doubt, ambivalence, and duality — qualities relating closely to color's falsehood — *Spectra* was a paradoxical success. Rather than unveiling an underlying sham within modernism, the Spectra hoax proved the value of experimentation, the suppleness of imaginative metaphor, and the fickle ways in which color's instabilities could propel aesthetic insight. Running wild within the Spectra Poetry Hoax, the color of deception — in all its contradictions — produced unanticipated revelations.

THE SPECTRUM OF DOUBT

Spectrist poems thrived in a climate of uncertainty concerning the "truthfulness" of color, and the equally subjective verities of

radically novel forms of art. By 1916, American artists, scientists, and philosophers actively pondered the instability of individual color experiences, since throughout the 19th century, amid the dubious "improvements" wrought by modernization, color had gestured towards perfidious illusions, even as it delighted the senses and signaled the transformation of consumer society. Although inherently shifty, color was nonetheless a phenomenon by which all kinds of things were defined and objectively measured: species of bird, ripeness of fruit, quantities of matter. For contemporary scientists of perception, newly invented tools and methods held out the promise that a standardized, rationalized means of quantifiable measurement might ultimately ascertain color's underlying psychological veracity.

Yet, philosophers also regarded color's fungibility as a test case for coming to terms with proliferating modern subjectivities. Even in the midst of an early 20th-century drive to standardize the language of color alongside its measurement, to rein in its rampant allure and in the process calibrate perception, modern artists registered its resistant multiplicity: painters like Wassily Kandinsky laid claim to the spiritual properties of color that far exceeded its material limits, and championed its "transcendence."

Mistrustful of the abandonment of rigorous aesthetic discipline that accompanied such persuasive ideas, Bynner and Ficke released *Spectra* in the wake of both the controversies sparked by the 1913 Armory Show and the equally provocative publication of the first experiments in free verse and Imagist poems that had been published in the influential journal *Others* that same year. Just as Cubism and Fauvism had produced sensationally polarized responses among viewers — giving rise to some very clever visual parodies in newspapers and journal illustrations — Spectrist poems caused a commotion. Reviews filled the pages of national newspapers and journals. Recognizing its novelty while questioning its quality, on December 29, 1916, the *New York Herald* called it a "daughter of Futurist poetry, a granddaughter of *vers libre*, and no relation at all to real poetry."

When Bynner was asked by the editor of the *New Republic* to write up his own critical evaluation of the movement, which he reviewed with guarded favor, he cheerfully accepted, for a fee. Trained in traditional poetic meter, structure, and form, both he and Ficke had previously published volumes of their work, as well as individual poems in established magazines like *Scribner's*, *Forum*, and the *Smart Set*, and by the teens, Bynner was lecturing across the nation about the dubious virtues of modern poetry and the established values his own work represented. The Spectrists also lamented the trendy "Gisms and Cisms" which provoked adoring but superficial admiration and cliquish behavior.

Beyond ridiculing Imagism, Chorism, Vorticism, and a host of other movements shaking up the literary world, the Spectrists took aim at pictorial art. Ficke — writing as Knish — proclaimed in the preface to *Spectra*, "It is the aim of the Spectric group to push the possibilities of poetic expression into a new region, to attain a fresh brilliance of impression … not so wholly different from the methods of Futurist Painting." In light of what many perceived as the near-illegibility of modern artistic extremes, Bynner and Ficke indulged their skeptical bemusement by challenging elitist claims for art's transcendent "truth" and goading mistakenly sincere responses from some of modernism's staunchest defenders.

Evidently, they admired some modern poetic liberties as much as they objected to their shoddy implementation: Bynner, still writing as Morgan, affirmed in 1918 in the pages of *Poetry* magazine (even after the prank had been revealed) that, "Our intent in publishing the book was not to question the use of free verse and not to 'bait the public,' but to satirize fussy pretence." Thus, even while mounting their derisive critique, Bynner and Ficke tried their own hand at venturesome poetic expressivity, submitting poems under their own names to the "little magazines" in which literary innovations were promoted, such as Harriet Monroe's periodical *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Reedy's Mirror*, and *Others*. There was more than a scrap of esteem amid all their apparent disdain for unfettered modern experimentation: they earnestly desired to participate in the latest literary developments.

THE PRISM OF CONVICTION

The Spectrist school took hold in the imagination of readers with unexpected force thanks in large part to the theoretically insightful preface, primarily composed by Ficke/Knish, which reads like a manifesto. S/he grounded the movement in scientific knowledge about the psychology of color perception and elucidated three meanings for the term "Spectric":

It speaks, to the mind, of that process of diffraction by which are disarticulated the several colored and other rays of which light is composed. It indicates our feeling that the theme of a poem is to be regarded as a prism, upon which the colorless white light of infinite existence falls and is broken up into glowing, beautiful, and intelligible hues.

But in its second sense, it also "relates to the reflex vibrations of physical sight, and suggests the luminous appearance which is seen after exposure of the eye to intense light, and … the after colors of the poet's initial vision." Thus in its third sense, "spectres … haunt all objects of both the seen and the unseen world … the manifold spell and true essence of objects."

The science of color perception and illusory after-images that Ficke called upon was good enough to justify and prove their poetic experiment's value. In fact, the Spectrists shared a particular fondness for philosophy and psychology: meeting one another while students at Harvard, Bynner and Ficke had taken classes taught by William James as well as George Santayana. Indeed, they regarded their spoof as a kind of "prism" through which different modes of modern knowledge about perception and aesthetics were diffracted, an idea Ficke played with wittily in his design for *Spectra*'s cover. Below the apparently hand-written title, Ficke alluded to the aims of "Spectric theory" with two triangles: a black one superimposed atop a white, configured like a tangram puzzle to reveal proliferating triangular forms. But, in calling to mind a diagrammatic view of two overlapping and inverted prisms, the drawing was also a schematic conceptualization of the movement's theory, on which Morgan and Knish expanded in an essay published in

The Forum in the summer of 1916, in advance of their book's October release.

Color's perceptual instabilities, deceptions, and illusions were, as they affirmed in *The Forum*, essential to how Spectric poetry — indeed all poetry — worked in the mind. Their theory proposed a model of prismatic fragmentation in a poet's observations and composition alike: as the pure light of universal experience is "broken up, refracted and diffused into a variety of many-colored rays," by a poet's perception, these "will necessarily color his whole poem with its hues." But, a poet

must, if he is to create a fine work, have regard for the fragmentary nature of his perception, and allow his creative imagination to indicate some relation between his limited and single-colored vision and the great stream of pure light from which the vision originally was separated.

Thus, the Spectrists asserted, in creating striking analogies to sensory experience, the poet "involves some consideration of the psychological processes by which the mind forms images of the outside world," and the poet's "senses, and the mind behind them, act to a certain extent as a prism." Sensations, like color "impact upon the sensory nerves [and] are conveyed in the form of a totally different kind of vibration to the brain," where they take the form of purely imagined imagery, emotion, and memories of lived sensory experience. Since the poems in *Spectra* hewed closely to the rules of these self-articulated theories, readers believed in them wholeheartedly — even in the most absurdly ridiculous verses.

Some poems did tempt credulity with bizarrely capricious similes, such as Knish's *Opus 45*, which begins, "Her soul was freckled / Like a bald head." But others are rich with expressive potential. Color allusions burst forth in all of William James's "blooming, buzzing confusion" in Knish's *Opus 50*, confounding readers' expectations with riotous correspondences:

The piano lives in a dusk
Where rich amber lights

Quiver obscurely [...]
There is an indigo in this music ...

Calling upon the early psychological experiments that eventually led to the measurement of perceptual anomalies such as the Stroop effect, the Spectra poets luxuriated in the paradoxes of color and language.

In blending domains of knowledge proper to art and science, Bynner/Morgan and Ficke/Knish also played a game familiar to many avant-garde radicals. Tapping into the widespread appeal of synaesthetic analogy in modern art, their argument for the value of Spectrist theory was particularly persuasive because it accorded with concurrent scientific research. Psychologist June Downey dedicated a thorough investigation to the phenomenon of "Literary Synaesthesia" in her 1912 study of mental imagery produced by poetry and prose. Although she concluded that these were not "true" synaesthesias, Downey's analysis demonstrated that the transformative, imaginative power of words was strong, indeed, where sensory stimuli were concerned. And, because several contemporary artistic movements pursued similar models of imaginative perception and color-vision, such as the Synchromist painting that Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell first exhibited in the U.S. in 1914, the mockery within Spectra was widely misperceived. To many, it was invisible, concealed behind the ostensible color of the poets' evident and theoretically-supported sincerity.

THE SHADE OF SINCERITY

Indeed, Bynner and Ficke soon found themselves entangled in the proliferating questions their project raised, and the contradictory forces driving the rapid transformation of American art and culture. While some observers were wary of modern art's extremes, even if supported by science, contemporary defenders of aesthetic challenges queried on what terms any subjective, creative project could ever be considered a "deception," as long as some beholders considered it valid. Charles Caffin, critic and advocate of modern art, had asked this very question in

a 1913 column, "Can There Be Fakers in Art?," concluding that as long as the expression was truly felt, no art form could ever be fraudulent. If the Spectrist's intent to deceive undermined that affirmation, the initial skepticism driving their prank disguised their far greater ambivalence about the liberating spirit of free modern verse and creative play with language. Their genuine desire to expose fatuous insincerity snarled amid the widespread appeal of their poems, which caught on, far more than Bynner and Ficke first intended, because of the originality they were emboldened by parody to display.

The hoax had, in fact, struck its mark, dead center: *Spectra* was "so bizarre and violent in style that it seemed a perfectly natural sign of the times," wrote a critic in the *New York Times*. It was a hit especially among New York's literary radicals, the anarchists and free-thinkers of Greenwich Village, and with the artists, critics, and writers who frequented Alfred Stieglitz's gallery 291, although some, such as poet Amy Lowell — no stranger to literary sensationalism and publicity — expressed a degree of doubt. (Yet, she also reportedly recommended the book to many of her fellow writers.) The national press picked up its debut, and reviews — equally positive and negative — appeared in most major American cities. Devoted admirers sent letters to the Spectrists' Pittsburgh address from Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, as did those less enamored of *Spectra*'s loose structure and wildly unconventional imagery.

The Spectra poets' own confusion about the stakes of their success found curious outlets, spawning developing perplexity about the true identity of Morgan and Knish. In September 1917, Ficke contributed a page of Spectrist-sounding poems and accompanying illustrations under his own name to *Vanity Fair*, concerning "The Spread of Modernist Art." "It would seem that even the poets are beginning to feel the influence of Picasso, Picabia, and other extremists in art," Ficke observed, noting with some caustic snark that his own pictures, "more precious to me than rubies" and "dearer to me than life," are "nothing less than the explosion into painting of the Freudian self of a poet." Amid the sarcasm, Ficke's illustrations, just like his *Spectra* poems, reveal irresolution about the undeniable influence of "extremists

in art," the rising cultural currency of psychological selfhood, and the merit of radical aesthetic change. In his crystalline gems of visual parody, Ficke's illustrations (even lacking the color of his original ink-and-watercolor drawings) play freely with modern art's leading formal inventions.

In fact, in many of the novel art movements to which many Americans reacted with shock and fascination, color had taken on a preeminent role. The intense shades of Henri Matisse's *Blue Nude*, exhibited at the Armory Show, had confounded viewers just as much as the fleshy pigments of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, upon which critics and humorists focused their invective. And the Spectra hoax unfolded at precisely the same time that another prodigiously fruitful (and much better known) prank was being perpetrated in a different quadrant of the art world: the entry and removal of Duchamp/R. Mutt's infamous *Fountain* from the 1917 Independents' exhibition, swiftly followed by the justification for the piece published in yet another little modernist magazine, *The Blind Man*.

To some observers, all radical aesthetic novelties seemed like a grand hoax that artists were playing on the public, and as critics likened modern art to a gag, a joke, or a travesty, satirists found a rich seam of humor to mine for revelatory cultural commentary. But behind the animated spoofing of modern aesthetics and behavior, incisive mockery revealed perceptive observations about the value of avant-garde ventures in art and literature alike, and the color of deception fractured into a panoply of hues.

THE BRILLIANCE OF REVELATION

Spectra hoodwinked thousands of poetry lovers because it was so very close to the form of the modern experiments it sought to ridicule, eventually confounding the perpetrators of the poetic parody. They lost sight of some of their original objectives, and they discovered new ones within the colorful labyrinth they had created. Bynner's eventual confession of *Spectra*'s deceptions unfolds like that of a confidence man

getting caught in the midst of a trick. During a lecture Bynner was delivering on the relative merit and mendacity of modern poetry, a listener interrupted, demanding to know whether he and Emanuel Morgan were the same person. On the spur of the moment and in the face of his own doubt fueled by rising public suspicion, he affirmed his and Ficke's dual identities. The story was disclosed shortly thereafter in the *New York Times Magazine* in June of 1918, but, as the journalist remarked, the movement's nuances had produced unintended consequences: not only had readers become devoted followers, but so had the poets themselves. "Bynner is beginning to believe in dual personalities," the writer observed, "no wonder he puts whiskey in his tea."

Yet, since many of their peers were well able to distinguish a fraudulent desire to cheat from the pleasures of well-constructed illusions and the humor of a prank, Bynner and Ficke suffered few lasting ill-effects. While it had been conceived as a spoof, over time Spectra had taken on the complexion of an art form all its own, and had proven its real virtue in the process. Although a few journals refused to print any more examples of Spectrist poetry, publisher Jane Heap, writing in her magazine *The Little Review*, wondered in an editorial why poems formerly regarded as worthwhile had suddenly lost value. The well-played deception of the Spectrists was all the more revelatory because the light they shed on their own cultural moment was not the blazingly clear illumination of self-deluded earnestness, but the more subtly honed shades of diffracted criticality. As supporters of modernism like Caffin had stressed, "truth" in any art form lay not in the artist's ability to dissemble, but in the honesty of sentiment, emotion, and expressivity their work demonstrated.

Although Knish and Morgan didn't exist, their theoretical "manifesto" had the weight of conviction, and in their poems the Spectrists explored the limits of their invented movement as if it was something other than a phantom of Ficke and Bynner's imaginations: their "true colors" emerged in the identity that lay between equally "spectral" egos and alter-egos. As Bynner/Morgan explained it to readers of the journal *Poetry*: "Having given vent to Witter Bynner's irritation at smug and pedantic pretences, Emanuel Morgan soon found himself a liberated identity glad

to be agog with a sort of laughing or crying abandon." In the prank's aftermath, both writers continued to distinguish themselves, and their work showed the lasting benefit of their studied imitation of the best qualities of modern poetic radicalism. Ficke's later poems were embraced by many of the literati he had duped, and Bynner was still occasionally writing under the name Emanuel Morgan in 1927. "I can't get rid of Emanuel Morgan!" Bynner remarked in 1918, "I write like him without the slightest effort — I don't know where he leaves off and I begin."

The unintended success of the Spectra hoax called forth crucial philosophical connections to color's inherent deceptions. Like the dazzling but illusory color-imagery the Spectrists played with, their plan to illuminate the falsehoods of aesthetic change scattered through their own self-made theoretical prism into a rainbow of polyvalent effects. Casting diffracted light on the doubts, risks, and leaps of faith that accompany major shifts in art and culture, the Spectrists arrived at a deeper, more complex comprehension of the capacity of art: the colors of deception proved truer than any falsehood. They unwittingly tapped into what anthropologist Michael Taussig in his 2006 essay "What Color Is the Sacred?" celebrated as the "bodily unconscious" : their play with color and poetic metaphor addressed an activated sensory imagination, and instead of inspiring doubt about modern innovation, their art born of skepticism unleashed its genuine, gleeful power.

If the difference between sincerity and falseness itself is calibrated on a scale between the blazing purity of forthright modernist devotion and the scattered hues necessary to satire's subterfuge, at what point, then, does the Spectra hoax fall? Revolving around dynamic interchange between the contradictions inherent to a truthful deception, the "color" of Spectra's deception is not, perhaps, measurable according to any visible spectrum. Indeed, had their poetry truly been "false," its poetic metaphors would not have been discernible at all. Like a color that cannot be named because it cannot be envisioned by the mind, an utterly nonsensical poetic image could not be conceptualized: it simply wouldn't produce meaning. But because readers of poetry want to find significance even in infelicitous associations and

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off-kilter analogies, Spectra's brightly colored absurdities generated their own novel, whimsical meaning.

Thus, exceeding any retinal experience, the color of Spectra's aesthetic deception was proven unexpectedly authentic in the perceptual space of the imagination, where color terms shake off the cognitive dissonance of the Stroop effect, calling to mind shades that defy fixity and limitation. There, as "amber light" and "indigo music" burst forth from the black-and-white of the printed page, the Spectrists' intent to dissemble was belied by their brilliant chromatic revelation.

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