The author notes: "I was in a color theory reading group from 2011–2015, and we tried to read everything written about color. Then in 2014, the topic of color was assigned to me by the organizers of a symposium on painting held at Harvard. That was the occasion for which I wrote this talk. Then I gave it again at the Whitney Biennial 2014, as part of the talk series that accompanied the exhibition. At the Whitney, I also invited a guest, Eric Wilson, a fashion writer, to have a public Q&A with me about how the fashion industry decides what the 'color of the season' is every year. And following that, my friend Cameron Martin and I ran a closed seminar upstairs at the Whitney also about color in general."

The talk has also recently been published with the less colorful title "On Color," in a book that grew out of the same Harvard symposium: Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, eds., *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

Cover: Photograph of Lynda Benglis with *Fling, Dribble, and Drip*, February 27, 1970. Originally published in *Life*, February 1970. Photo: Henry Groskinsky, *Life* Inc. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. © Lynda Benglis. Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Recently an art historian and I surprised each other: I told him that even if I were blindfolded I would know whether I was holding a tube of cadmium red or a tube of cobalt violet because of their difference in weight. He didn't know this. He had never held pigment in his hands, and didn't know that cadmium red is heavy and cobalt violet is light. This surprised me because the weights of these pigments are fundamental to a painter, and not knowing their differences seemed absurd to me, like not knowing the difference between a coat and a T-shirt. But my job and that of the art historian are different — mine is to hold color and his to behold it, and this split is as old as the hills. Even Josef Albers assumes this in *Interaction of Color*, stating in the intro that his book will reverse the "normal academic order" by putting practice before theory. So I guess I'll begin there too, taking up the subject of color as a manual thing.

I learned about color in art school in the 1970s, and through the usual post-Bauhaus, post-Ab-Ex, post-hippie art school education of that period. The corporeality of color was simply primary; something to handle, pour, slosh around, feel, drip, smudge, tape off, and experience. We read Albers's color book more like notes from a test kitchen than like a bible of optical pedagogy, and in fact *Interaction of Color* is both of these. To learn color from Albers, to do his exercises, you first have to gather color swatches like ingredients, splice and dice them, layer them and shift them around to test them out on your eyeballs. Albers's empirical tradition came down to us via the idea of push-pull, Hans Hofmann's wrestler-like term for the muscular dynamics of color in paintings. At art school, we talked about color like baseball players would discuss the feel of different pitches, or like butchers would talk about how to cut up slabs of beef. So I can only begin any discussion of color with this kind of practical shoptalk.

Color as object is earthly material stuff. Color as subject arches over everything like a rainbow, from cosmic rays to the minerals in the earth to what happens inside your eyes, from religious symbology to philosophical problems, from phenomena to noumena. But aside from all that, color is just the tool that a painter wields in making a painting. To deal with color as a painter is to render these overarching problems as

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physical propositions, as sensuous experiences synaesthetically merged under the sign of the hand. That's why even a freshman at art school knows the weight of pigments. Each hue adds a nearly anthropomorphic character to the operations in a painting: a painter will know that Naples yellow will make things turgid, chromium oxide green is overbearing, flake white has a dry indifference, phthalo blue seems filmy but always ends up domineering, king's blue appears classy at first, but is really kind of vulgar. By using oil paint, you quickly learn to distinguish and predict your materials by feel, all the way down to the brand: Williamsburg paint is grainy, Rembrandt is slimy, Old Holland is creamy, Gamblin is dull, Utrecht doesn't weigh enough, Lefranc & Bourgeois weighs too much. Managing all these characteristics is part of what you learn to do in the act of painting.

Color is also a luxury item sold like controlled substances by the ounce or gram. The Greeks don't call color *pharmakon* for nothing. The word means color, drug, poison, remedy, talisman, cosmetic, and intoxicant. Art stores supply all of these at once; the ultimate bohemian experience. As the poet Lisa Robertson wrote: "Color, like a hormone, acts across, embarrasses, seduces. It stimulates the juicy interval in which emotion and sentiment twist." And indeed, the purchase of color is an entirely capricious experience—an art store is a kind of fetish shop offering chromatic luxury in aisles, like a supermarket but with an air of esoteric connoisseurship. A good metropolitan art store is usually an intimidating multistory affair staffed by sullen but knowing art school clerks, with staircases to mysterious and all-encompassing storage rooms. It is set up like a bazaar where shoppers can touch and feel everything before buying, although at Madison Avenue prices. The more you touch it, the more you want it. That new gold lacquer, that little jar of iridescent lilac, that special kind of creamy modeling paste. When was the last time I got past the checkout with a big basket of oil paint for less than a thousand? But I shell it out because I need this equipment and am seduced by the ritual of purchasing it.

Even the nomenclature of paint is insider-ish, like code words for drug packets: it's not pink, it's dianthus; not purple but hematite or Egyptian violet or cobalt violet light; turkey umber; Hooker's green or cinnabar

green. Glue isn't glue, it's methyl cellulose or jade; the insider knows that modeling paste is actually called molding paste. All day long on the Golden Paint company telephone helpline, a person on duty answers your questions about which of the dozens of Golden products to use and why. When that person tells you to get something called GAC200, the art supply clerk reassuringly knows what this is.

And who can resist the mythic narratives of origin of pigments? The color called carmine is made from acids extracted from the body and eggs of female cochineal insects that live on prickly pears. Tyrian purple, a status symbol in ancient Rome, is a dye made from secretions drained from the glands of predatory sea snails. Indian yellow is a color said to come from the piss of cows fed on mango leaves, and now the cognoscenti wink that that story is an urban legend. To dilute these pigments, one needs solvents and lubricants made from oils, elixirs, seeds, flowers, and beeswax.

As if to seal the deal, these bewitching substances are also exotic poisons — the eros of paint is mixed with an equal dose of *thanatos*. A painting studio is a kind of haphazard chemistry lab where non-scientists work like medieval alchemists with scant protection from treacherous materials like lead, copper, aluminum, oxide, arsenic, cobalt, naphtha, or benzene. These precious poisons are carefully applied by hand to the finest textiles, which have been stretched, rubbed, and scraped as if for an illustrated manuscript or an ancient papyrus. Most painters devise their own special recipes and techniques to prepare their own surfaces just right, sizing them with glues that may be made from pulverized rabbit skins, warmed twice to exacting degrees in double boilers, and then layering, sanding, and layering again with milk proteins, marble dust, chalk powder, or polyvinyl. And all this stuff I'm describing is just the run-of-the-mill practice that the average painter knows how to do. These surfaces are buffed using special sponges, sticks, and brushes made of goat or mink or mongoose hair, with handles of hardwood or bamboo. (The best brush is called Kolinsky sable. I always thought Kolinsky was a Jewish brush manufacturer, but it turns out that Kolinsky is a kind of snow weasel that lives in Siberia.) One should really be wearing protective masks and latex gloves, saving

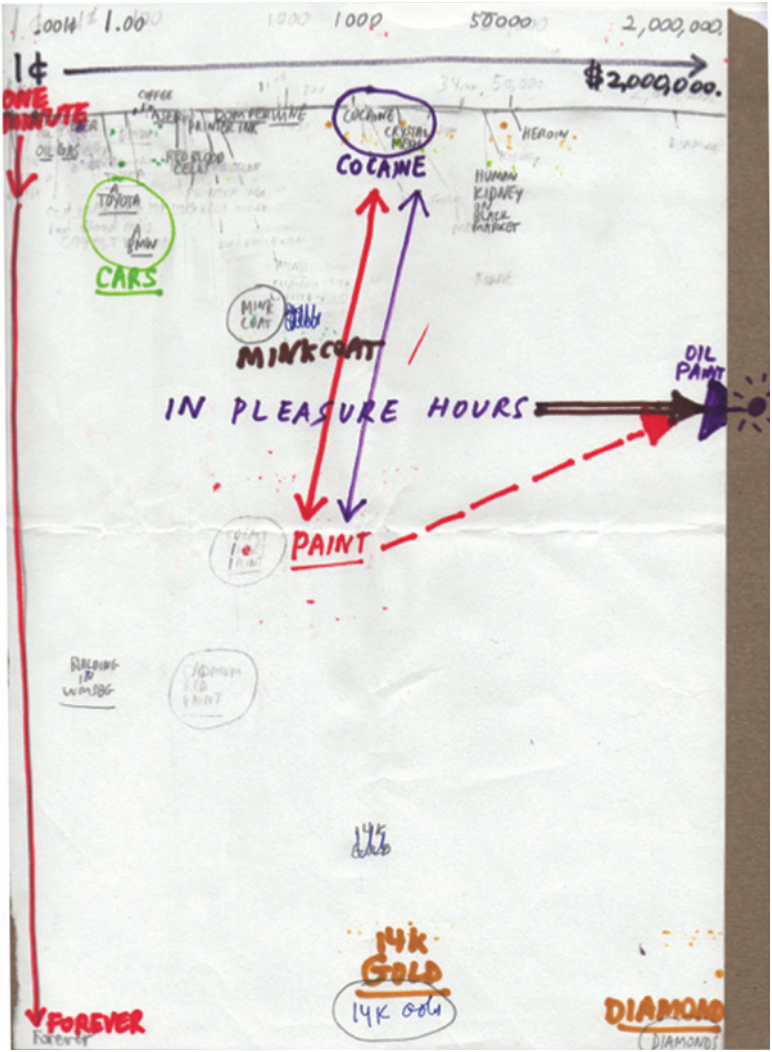
up the dregs in sealed metal containers, using complex ventilation systems, metal storage cabinets, and industrial waste removal — but usually we don't.

So let's take a look at the weird economy of all this esoterica: the cost of color in the form of oil paint. With what I spent in the last tax year on color I could have bought a BMW or a mink coat. On the next page is a graph comparing the properties of an ounce of cadmium red light paint to a variety of other luxury items in both cost and longevity, such as water, oil, cars, drugs, gold, diamonds, a mink coat, an apartment building in Williamsburg, all figured according to their weight by ounce and how long they last. Cadmium red falls somewhere passed the mink coat and before the apartment building on the spectrum of both value and longevity.

One ounce of cadmium red light costs the same as an ounce of the best caviar. The same red costs as much as an ounce of cold-packed human red blood cells. A small tube of cobalt violet costs the same as a bottle of Dom Pérignon. A large bag of the same pigment will cost you as much as a very large bag of cocaine. (A quarter ounce of cadmium red will cover a meter of canvas but if Barnett Newman painted it red, it would cost the same as a bar of gold.)

But note: if you figure oil paint by the time vector, in longevity rather than dollars per ounce, paint is way better than drugs. An ounce of cocaine costs about 60 times more than an ounce of oil paint, but it only lasts for an hour, while cadmium red lasts for hundreds of years. So if you figure it backward, in *pleasure hours,* a tube of oil paint is equivalent to a hundred million dollars of cocaine. And like a drug addict, I often find myself up late at night with a razor blade, desperately scraping the last miserable speck out of an exhausted tube of a color because I just need more of that substance. If you run out after hours, you're stuck until the next day when the art store opens — the only dealer for your substance of choice.

Making a painting is so hard it makes you crazy. You have to negotiate surface, tone, silhouette, line, space, zone, layer, scale, speed, and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mass, while interacting with a meta-surface of meaning, text, sign, language, intention, concept, and history. You have to simultaneously diagnose the present, predict the future, and ignore the past—to both remember and forget. You have to love and hate your objects and subjects, to believe every shred of romantic and passionate mythos about painting, and at the same time cast your gimlet eye on it.

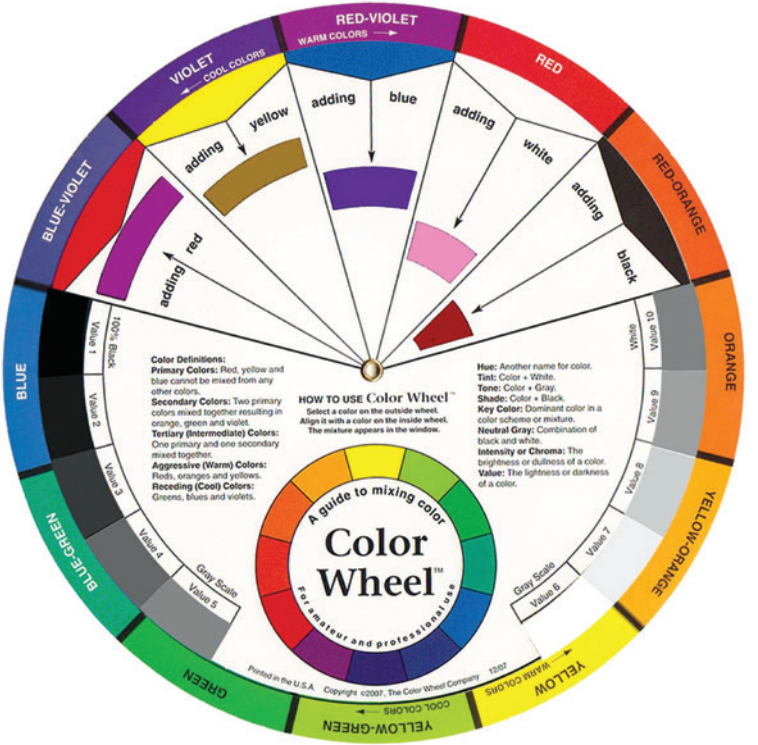
Then comes color—even harder to negotiate. You have to keep these toxic, expensive, and unpredictable substances fresh looking, like a model wearing a no-make-up look to maintain an illusion of effortlessness. When people talk about color as decorative I just don't know what they're talking about. Try mixing oil paint: it's hideous 95 percent of the time. Those shimmering powders from the paint store quickly turn into slop buckets of sickening green or hemorrhage-y brown, and all the preparatory optimism goes horribly wrong. All painters speak regularly of their colors becoming "mud." The pigment itself is reverse alchemy, a gold that becomes shit in our studios, and our task is to try to turn that shit back into gold. Often, surrounded in my studio by buckets and paper towels, I wonder what kind of Freudian mistake has been made to turn me into a painter.

This brings me to one of color's primary paradoxes: the schizophrenic nature of its own rhetoric. Color represents all good things on Earth: beauty, awe, surprise, romance, freedom, innocence, gay politics, civil rights. Who forbids color? Men in control, men with homosexual panic, Stalinists, prison guards. (A woman who grew up in a Communist country recently told me an anecdote about the ultimate color buzzkill. When she went to art school, only one color was issued to all the artist comrades: chromium oxide green. All the paintings in the school were painted by chromatic fiat in tones of this one dull pigment, and she talked about how the art students longingly gazed at flowers and imported German candy wrappers colored in rich purples and pinks.) Against such forces of joy-killing, color is a wild card, a powerful force, a feminine or anarchistic other who is resistant to the language of law. Walter Benjamin writes that color is the very essence of childhood imagination, a powerful form of innocence that can subvert the logic of capitalism.

But on the other hand there is the production of color, the way it arrives from its material substance to your hand in a polychromatic spree of corporate desire sold to us by capitalists or the Walt Disney Company. Color production has involved some of the most spectacularly horrible things on Earth, such as mining, colonialism, slave labor, Nazis, the chemical industry, the IG Farben company, Zyklon B, and now Foxconn where iPhones (with their astonishing color settings of "billions") are made by children working in conditions of Orwellian horror.

Strangely, above this earthly fray, the representation of color theory in the form of the color wheel has rolled on steady as the sun for many centuries, with a kind of supreme indifference to what ideological system toils below. Since Isaac Newton first arranged colors on a disk around 1706, the same basic wheel and its orderly progression of geometric slices has served as the visual theorem for color. In the 1920s and '30s the three major color teachers in the West were Gustav Klutsis at the Vkhutemas, Johannes Itten at the Bauhaus, and Albers at Black Mountain College and Yale. Though their politics and methods diverged entirely, all three utilized the same basic color wheel and principles. The only fundamental attempt to reinvent the color wheel was done by Albert Munsell, a Boston-based art professor in the turn of the twentieth century, who updated the flat old wheel with a new pole-shaped, three-dimensional model with triadic gradations of hue, value, and chroma, as well as a new decimalized naming system. In the end, paradoxically, the Munsell system detoured to the service of capitalism. It didn't catch on with artists, but was taken up as a kind of index for governing color operations in business and technology. Nowadays, you can find Munsell-based guidebooks in thrift stores, which recommend color schemes for the offices of male vs. female executives, or Munsell color standards in the U.S. Department of Agriculture guide outlining, for instance, the golden brownness required in the preparation of frozen French fries.

So by the 1970s, to paraphrase a Rihanna song, we at art school found color pedagogy in a hopeless place. The pedagogic trajectory was schizophrenic. In Painting 1, a freshman was instructed in an antiquated method of laying out a brownish palette on a piece of heavy glass,



really only useful for someone rendering nudes in a wooden academy in Philadelphia. Sophomores who continued into Painting 2 met Kandinsky (i.e. modernism as a kind of occultism). From Wassily, we picked up crypto-informational tips that boiled down to a kind of color astrology, an optimistic speculation system in which blue is cold, that red is a square, and that green is a feeling, the same way that Geminis are fun and Pisces are moody. The stalwart juniors and seniors who made it to Painting 3 were finally brought to the insider's painterly summit: the French, from whom we learned that color = space, and space = light. But what good did this do us when the conditions of illumination itself had fundamentally changed? Could the School of Paris account for Edison, General Electric, and Sony? Impressionism was said to have sprung partly because of the invention of oil paint tubes, but what about cathode tubes? Far from Aix-en-Provence where it was last theorized in time and space, color was then in an overt relationship with bulbs and television, and would eventually be between a rock and a (digital) hard place in which illumination exists in some infra-thin space between pixel and monitor. In mechanical reproduction, all color is essentially a compromise formation between your rods and cones and the viewing platforms where they hit RGB and CMYK. And while it could still be said that there is a realness to pigment and eyeballs and in-the-flesh viewing, at the end of the day, who is the standard viewer anyway? The unassailable final fact of color is that you can't really know what another eye is seeing, ever. Albers said this on the first page of his book on color written 50 years ago that even if the same standardized red Coca-Cola sign is proposed to a thousand people, they will all be thinking of a thousand different reds.

So what is color theory now, really? The words of the painter Peter Saul ring in my ears—he once warned that modern art was the triumph of art supplies over art. We all put our colors in buckets and cups any which way we want to, and then go back to the art store for more ingredients. Modern color education is heavy on theory and light on practice, suffused with a wide array of material to choose from, and yet finally rendered in colors that contradict with the mechanical reproduction where it will most often be viewed. This is what I think partly accounts for the way we can look at color's appearance in

the work of many contemporary painters. Much of it is synthetic, humorous, ironic, aggressive, fast and furious, denatured, neither specifically theoretical nor precisely symbolic. Color now expresses a combination of the art supply store, the vicissitudes of reproduction, and an understandable modern impatience with the slow experience of determining paint and color in a lonely art studio.

As for me, I am more interested in color as an engine of ongoing change and metamorphosis than as a static theory. I'm a slow worker, a constant adjuster and editor of paintings — every one of my paintings is a kind of animated movie, a series of adjustments and overhauls with scraped-off colors, until a kind of weight or visual surprise tells me something I didn't already know and I stop. Color is a primary tool for negation in my work — colors that block each other out or contradict each other, and are mixed in an archeologico-dialectic of continual destruction and reconstruction. My palette begins with everything I look at in the world: paintings, iPhone apps, cartoons, magazines, flowers, fashion, buildings, landscapes, books, movies. But then using oil paint affords one the chance to rework colors until they're wrecked, to then rescue them with solvents, in pots and buckets, eventually scraping all the disasters off the canvases and mixing the sludgy browns, greys, and intermediates together with the saturated ready-mades that can be bought new.

I realized recently that I am somewhat doomed to the palette provided to me by the manufacturers of oil colors. My base materials are paints chosen in part by the tastes of the people who run the R&F pigment factory in Kingston, New York, where I buy many of my paint supplies. At one point a friend observed that my palette can be garish, almost kitsch, with 1980s pink and bright orange mixed together with shades of grey and brown. But what I think of as "my" palette is in fact a ready-made, informed by the manufacturing choices made by a paint company. Maybe the person who makes the colors wears a nylon windbreaker in shades of purple and green, for example, or lives in a room painted ochre and beige. My palette is also infected by Apple, by my work with animation on iPads and iPhones, and the polychromatic effortlessness of weightless color options one can change in an instant across a screen

by the mere drag of a finger, a phone designed for a generation of people who, like the art historian at the beginning of this essay, may never have never felt the weight of color in their hands. This means that color usage is in part arbitrary; it is as much about welcoming the wrong colors as the right ones. Maybe my way of mixing color also courts wrong feelings, such as gaudiness, irritation, queasiness, bitchiness, like the off-kilter feeling of an ugly acrid yellow-green shine I always liked, which could simply not be represented in photography. This way of working with color — anthropomorphic, relational, emotional, psychological, and corporeal — has nothing to do with color theory, only the theory of ignoring a theory. In other words, let us welcome the collision of mistakes, accidents, desires, contradictions, destruction, and possible disasters that color embodies.

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Amy Sillman, *Finger × 2*, 2015, oil on canvas, 75 × 66 in.

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