

# ***The Materiality and Thingness of Colour in Art***

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## Abstract

This essay will discuss 3 keywords relating to my practice: colour, materiality, and things. I will investigate how research of the materiality and thingness of colour, specifically using Jane Bennett's idea of 'thing power', both levels colour with humanity and raises it above us to a divine place. I will discuss theorists Philip Ball, Phyllida Barlow, Jane Bennett, John Gage, Kelly Grovier, Derek Jarmin, and Mark Miodownik. I will also discuss Phyllida Barlow's work as an artist alongside that of Duccio di Buoninsegna, Vincent Van Gogh, Anish Kapoor, and Yves Klein.

## Illustrations

**Fig 1.** Barlow, P (2012) *untitled: upturnedhouse2* [sculpture]. ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland

**Fig 2.** Barlow, P (2013) *untitled: brokenupturnedhouse* [sculpture]. Norton Museum of Art, Florida, US

**Fig 3.** Di Buoninsegna, D (1312-15) *The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Aurea, and The Patriarchs and Prophets* [painting]. The National Gallery, London

**Fig 4.** Klein, Y (1959) *IKB 79* [painting]. Tate Modern, London

**Fig 5.** Kapoor, A (1985) *Mother as a Mountain* [sculpture]. Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, US

**Fig 6.** Van Gogh, V. (1888) *Bedroom at Arles* [painting]. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

**Fig 7.** Van Gogh, V. (1888) *The Night Café* [painting]. Yale University Art Gallery, Connecticut

Materiality, colour, and things relate to us far beyond being concepts we interact with intimately on a day-to-day basis; they are us. They influence everything we do and don't do, everything we think and don't think. Jane Bennett discusses the theory of 'thing-power', of how everything including human beings possess it;

“Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (2010, pg.xvi)

Phyllida Barlow's series of upturned houses is based on a radio program she heard following Hurricane Katrina, one of a man who had “walked and walked and walked in the direction” of his house; “I saw my home because I recognised the colour of the walls on the inside.” Barlow expressed that this statement intensely moved her, along with the man's “incredible, vivid description” of his home without “[naming] it as a house”, allowing an “incredibly powerful object that was resonant with all the memories, and incredibly tragic” to emerge. (Barlow, P. 2019)



Fig 1



Fig 2

These objects “constructed out of brightly coloured panels” mirror this “abstracting” of the home (Barlow, P. 2019). Domestic materials and colour construct the thing we build our lives around - what holds our pasts, presents, and futures – destroyed beyond recognition. These objects are constructed with a range of materials including steel armatures and paper mâché; Miodownik writes of both, referring to steel as being the metal with we are most closely acquainted as we put a version “in our mouths almost every day” (2014, pg. 19) while paper can become “a simulacrum of [...] skin” (pg. 49). These ideas push Barlow’s houses to become us; they are not only representative of our memories but of our bodies. Our existences are levelled, the houses are flesh, and we are object.

“Vital materiality better captures an “alien” quality of our own flesh, and in so doing reminds humans of the very radical character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman. My “own” body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human. My flesh is populated and constituted by different forms of foreigners” (Bennett, J. 2010, pg. 112).

Both of our fleshs populated, both of our bodies material, we hold the same ‘thing-power’. However, Barlow’s upturned houses emphasize the “kinship” not only between the material of people and of object but between the material of people and of colour. The story of the man highlights colour as the identifying factor of his home; it creates an object where there is none. In conversation with artists Fiona Bradely and Briony Fir, Barlow speaks that no matter the characteristics of an object, colour holds hierarchy (Hauser & Wirth, 2014); the materiality, the incredible humanness of the thing, cannot triumph. This idea is underscored in Barlow’s speaking of her *upturnedhouse* series

where she pushes the hierarchical place of colour further; applying the paint onto the object encrusts the shape with colour, using it as a modelling material “even in its most simple form.” (Green, T. 2015). Colour here is more than an add-on, it has taken on the form of the object and becomes the object itself. It has devoured all other materials while rising to be more than human; “the colours of the painter could surpass their own materiality and take on an almost divine significance” (Ball, P. 2002, pg. 84). While colour is used under the guise of its submissiveness, manipulated by person and material, we are the ones submissive to it.

This divinity of colour is further seen in Duccio di Buoninsegna’s *The Virgin and Child with Saint Dominic and Saint Aurea*, a work’s which “transcendence is all the more astonishing when we reflect on the materiality of its making.” (Grovier, K. 2023, pg. 11).



*Fig 3*

This portable altarpiece, commissioned by a Bishop, depicts the image of The Virgin Mary draped in blue, a colour synonymous with her in Christian symbolism; for this, the colour is raised above humanity. It is the colour of Jesus' mother and would have been almost exclusively seen as such in the largely Christian West of the past. The pigments at play in this work result in a piece infused with life, though life that returns the piece to earthly being. The lapis lazuli behind the blue pigment was mined from cave despite the name of the colour it would become when "laboriously pulverised", ultramarine, meaning a colour "beyond the sea"; it strikes the image as an "uncanny interior space, a cave of the soul" as opposed to what it once was, a "timeless, gold-hammered heaven" which depicted nothing but the love of Mary and Christ (Grovier, K. 2023, pg. 13). An incredible humanness of the piece comes through as the flesh tones start to reflect the underlayer of green pigment, a "death-in-lifeness" that intensifies with age, a "natural

force interwoven in the world we occupy” infecting what is supposedly higher than us. Death and age affecting the Virgin in blue shows that perhaps the pigment is not divine at all. However, it can be argued that the underpainting of green overwhelming the whites and pinks that originally dominated the canvas “reveals the irrepressible power of pigment.” Colour has free will, is “unshackled to the will of the painter” (Grovier, K. 2023, pg. 14). It once again is seen to transcend us, the pigment in the work alone bringing the piece to a divine status, even when the imagery it sculpts is discarded.

From the 1950s, Yves Klein “began unveiling works consisting solely of a field of pure, undifferentiated blue, unsullied by shape or shade”. The artists *IKB* series, each work highlighting the pure International Klein Blue colour, “demonstrated [...] that colour could transcend form or function” and that colour itself “could be elevated to the status of iconic, unforgettable art” (Grovier, K. 2023, pg. 133). The eponymous shade came from Klein’s years of experimentation, the artist wanting to achieve a blue not seen in artist material before; his method of combining an ultramarine pigment with a matte resin came out on top as it allowed the pigment to retain its intensity unlike all other ‘ultramarines’ on the market. Klein said that blue, “is the invisible becoming visible” that “it ‘is’ beyond the dimensions of which other colours partake” (Ball, P. 2002, pg. 260); if colour is above people and material, then blue is the highest of all.

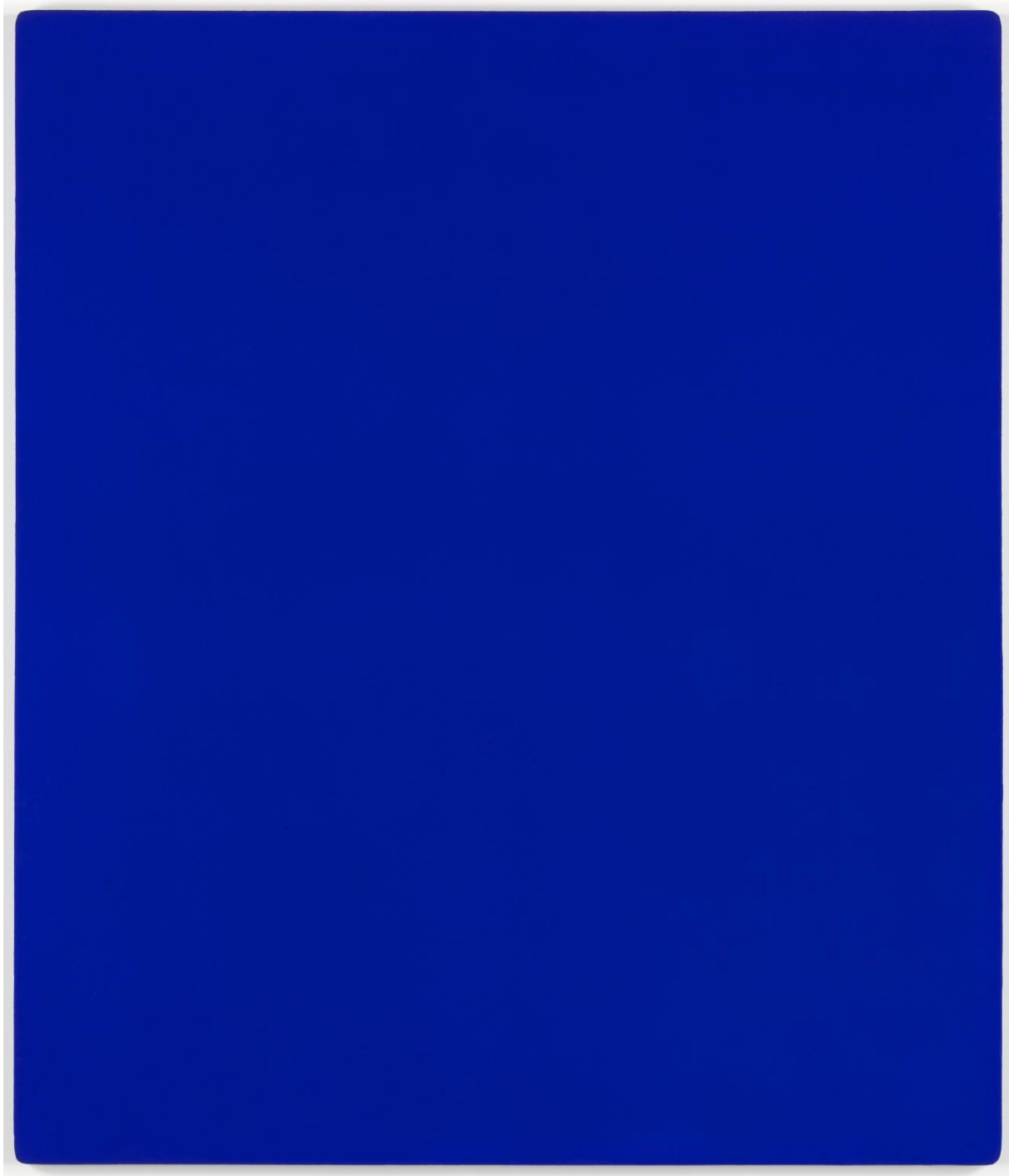


*Fig 4*

“Klein did not just want to show us pure colour; he wanted to display the glory of *new* colour, to revel in its materiality” (Ball, P. 2002, pg. 2). Klein had opened a new “dimension”, something “divine” created by the hands of man; to “revel” such a thing should have been human nature. However, it may be argued that it is impossible to

“revel it its materiality”. Phyllida Barlow speaks of the “vitrined object”, an object trapped behind glass (Evans, S et al. 1997):

“like a wild animal in captivity, the object is emasculated, the potential of its physicality reduced to a mere virtual identity. Vitrines are an invitation to remove the potency of an object, its repulsiveness, its seductiveness, its beauty, or its ugliness – all hugely powerful characteristics in their emotional effect. These characteristics potentially invoke hatred because they perhaps remind us of the uncontrollable sides of ourselves [...] Therefore the vehicle of these emotions, that is the object, must, quite literally, be removed, put away, to be scrutinised from a safe distance and to function only as a reminder of possible threat.”

When exhibited, Klein’s *IKB* series become these “vitrinated objects”, they are stripped of this materiality that Klein wanted to celebrate to please a hypothetical audience.

Without the glass barrier we are subservient to the painting, our minds open to the manipulation the artifice evokes; but with the glass, we are above the painting, above the colour. There is no opportunity of equal ‘thing-power’ between human and Klein’s work and so, we strip all power it has as to not let our own be surrendered. Miodownik writes of glass being the material that “allows us to transcend our scale”, it is what makes human civilisation “special”, and is this perhaps why? It allows us to be separated from ‘thing’ that mirrors us, objects that would attack and overpower us if set free (2014, pg. 156).

While Klein’s embracing of colours materiality could be called into question, the same could not be said for sculptor Anish Kapoor. The 1980’s saw him produce a series of

“bizarrely shaped coloured works”; Kapoor believes that “shapes have a close affinity with colours” (Gage, J. 2006, pg. 85).



*Fig 5*

The relationship between colour and shape is not an idea unique to Kapoor however, theories of an intrinsic relationship between the two dating back to the Greeks, though it could be argued that Kapoor saw the true complexity in colour as shape. Theorists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Ivan Kliun used everyday shapes when forming colour, assigning the primary yellow, red, and blue a different rotation of triangle, square, and circle. Kapoor's sculptures were things unseen before, they are the artist's unique view of colour. However, despite the fascinating appearance of these sculptures, what is really capturing is Kapoor's use of raw pigment as opposed to paint or pastel. Kapoor is

not only celebrating colour at its most complex, but also at its most simple. Though, is it truly that simple? John Gage proposes that the raw medium contrasts the incredibly complexity of the shape (2006, pg. 85) while Grovier argues that “[p]igments are the syllables art speaks in” (2023, pg. 10);

“an artymological reading recognizes that paintings and sculptures, drawings and installations, are not merely ideas. They are things. The pigments that comprise them are not abstract concepts, but profoundly physical substances that possess the power simultaneously to command the surface of an artwork and to evaporate into nothing.” (2023, pg. 11)

The skin of pigment in this work is striking. Red is the colour of birth, the colour of war, religion; “If you look the light of the world in the eyes, creation turns scarlet” (Jarman, D. 1994, pg 25). Artspace editorial relates the shape of the sculpture to fertility and “a woman’s genitals”, even if Kapoor has not said the same for the work (2017). This presents that there is an implicit relation between person and colour, even where no such context is given to a work by an artist; could it have been unknowingly dictated by the colour? Colour is as alive as the artist when it comes to expressing a meaning, as human; chromophobia has invaded Western cultures for centuries with artists such as Reinhardt stating, “there is something wrong, irresponsible, and mindless about color, something impossible to control. Control and rationality are part of any morality” (Rose, B. 1975, pg. 153). Perhaps colour is so difficult because it truly has a mind of its own, artists paying no attention to Reinhardt’s idea of immorality as colour is the one really in control. Colour’s ‘thing-power’ exceeds us all, pigment a man-made object spiked with life.

Vincent van Gogh was absorbed in colour, using it to change the world around him; no object, no person, was safe from its manipulation at the end of his brush.



Fig 6

Van Gogh wrote to Gauguin of *Bedroom at Arles*, proclaiming that he had turned the white deal furniture chrome yellow as to create a “kindred colour” with the bedding and added a spark of white in the black-framed mirror to “get a fourth pair of complementaires” (1888). He betrayed realism in the favour of colour law; he used pigment as the material to build his own world. Colour manipulated the real world beyond what was on canvas; van Gogh wrote to his brother that his choices in this work were to encourage a restfulness, allowing the colour to pull, stretch, change the audiences mind as if it were the art material. This is something seen again in *The Night*

*Café*, “a pure nightmare of red and green complimentaries bathed in an acidic yellow light” (Ball, P.2002).



Fig 7

In further letters to his brother, van Gogh stated that *The Night Café* is “a place where one can ruin one’s self, go mad, or commit a crime” (1888). The striking red wall fights with the green hues of the work, instantly instilling a sense of unease. The feeling is heightened when faced with a figure staring back at you, both pulling you in and pushing you away; the simulation of a person made of nothing but pigment, feeling as real as flesh and blood. The “acidic yellow” makes this aversion yet captivation stronger giving both a sense of disgust and familiarity. Van Gogh stated that he had “tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green” (1888), through piling clashes

and contrast thickly; this building of paint using “wild, frantic, unfettered stokes of the brush and palette knife” (Ball, P. 2002) engulfs the audience in the artist’s imagined world, successfully capturing the audience and all their “terrible passions” in it.

In art, materiality, thing and colour are equally vital to each other, though the use of colour encapsulates them all; more than anything, colour holds the ultimate ‘thing-power’. The colour of and around an object influence us more than the object itself, the colour that encrusts a material becoming the dominant material. The words of Barlow, Grovier, Bell, Jarmin and Gage interwinds with Bennett’s idea of ‘thing-power’ to unlock this whole new world of colour. The “strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness” can be seen in colour more than anything else, some theorists suggesting that they exceed their status as alive with Ball implying their divineness. Colour more than “[constitutes] the outside of our own experience”, more so than materiality and thing also, it influences all we experience and don’t. These ideas of colour encapsulating all, being divine above all while being all is something to explore in a further essay, the question being:

**“People in art are not people, [...] Things in art are not things” they are simply colour constructed**

**Discuss this quotation by Ad Reinhardt and how it embodies something he deemed against morality. (Reinhardt, A. 1965).**

Utilising Reinhardt's ideas against himself, exploring a history of colour in art including his own before turning to monochrome black, will further expose the world of colour.

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