

**ZERO**

The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

Originally published in Germany in 1958 and 1961 by Otto Piene and Heinz Mack  
English translations by Howard Beckman added in 1970

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Printed by Halliday Lithograph Corp. Bound by The Colonial Press Inc. in the United States of America.

ISBN 0 262 16 041 2 (hardcover)

Library of Congress catalog card number: 78-130276

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## MY POSITION IN THE BATTLE BETWEEN LINE AND COLOR

Paris, April 16, 1958

The art of painting consists, in my opinion, of restoring matter to its primordial state. An ordinary picture, as it is generally conceived, seems to me like the window of a prison, where the lines, contours, forms, and composition are determined by the bars. The way I see it, lines embody our mortal state, our emotional life, our power of reasoning and even our spirituality. They are our psychological boundaries, our history, our education and skeleton, our flaws and wishes, our powers and our stratagems.

Color, on the other hand is more natural and human, it bathes in cosmic sensitivity. Pictorial sensitivity, unlike what line would tend to make us believe, is not filled with hidden nooks and crannies. It is like the moisture in the air; color is nothing but sensitivity turned into matter, matter in its primordial state.

I can no longer approve of a "legible" picture, my eyes are not made to read a picture, but rather to see it. Painting is COLOR, and van Gogh exclaimed: "I want to be liberated from I don't know what prison." I think he subconsciously suffered from seeing color cut up by line and its consequences.

(Colors are the real dwellers of space, whereas lines merely travel through space and streak it. They streak the infinite, while color is. Through color I feel a total identification with space; I am truly free!

During my second Parisian exhibit at Colette Allendy's in 1956, I displayed a selection of PROPOSITIONS in varied colors and sizes. What I expected from the public was this "moment of truth" of which Pierre Restany spoke in his text for my exhibit. In feeling free to remove this impure external encumbrance and to achieve that degree of contemplation where art becomes full and pure sensibility. Unfortunately, it became obvious from reactions to this display that many observers, caught in their habitual way of seeing, were far more receptive to the relationship of the PROPOSITIONS to each other and re-created the elements of a decorative and architectural multicolored design.

After this, I was moved to continue my research one step further and to show, this time in Milan in the Gallery Apollinaire, an exhibit dedicated to what I dared to call my "blue period" (in fact, I had been concentrating on the search for the most perfect expression of blue for more than a year). This exhibit consisted of ten blue pictures, dark ultramarine, all of them exactly alike in tone, value, proportion, and size. The impassioned controversy following this exhibit and the deep emotion among open-minded persons who were ready to escape the stifling effects of well-known representations and deep-rooted rules showed me the importance of the phenomenon.

Although I live in the midst of errors, naïvetés, and utopias, I am happy to be dealing with a problem that is so much of our time. One must — and this is not an exaggeration — keep in mind that we are living in the atomic age, where everything material and physical could disappear from one day to another, to be replaced by nothing but the ultimate abstraction imaginable. For me there exists a sensitive artistic color material that is intangible. Thus I have pondered whether even color, in its physical aspect, has become finally for me also a limit and a hindrance to my effort to create perceptible pictorial states.

In order to reach Delacroix's "indéfinissable," the very essence of painting, I have embarked on the "specialization" of space, which is my ultimate way of treating color. It is no longer a matter of seeing color but of perceiving it.

My recent work with color has led me progressively and unwillingly to search for the realization of matter with some assistance (of the observer, of the translator), and I have decided to end the battle. My paintings are now invisible and these I would like to show in my next Parisian exhibit at Iris Clert's, in a clear and positive manner.

Yves Klein

## ON THE PURITY OF LIGHT

Light is the primary condition for all visibility. Light is the sphere of color. Light is the life-substance both of men and of painting. Every color derives its quality from its allotment of light. Light creates the power and magic of a painting, its richness, eloquence, sensuality, and beauty.

Although painting, like a living organism, relies on light for its existence, painters have seldom given light the attention it deserves. We find an inkling of its realization in Etruscan and Pompeian frescoes, in gold grounds and stained-glass windows. Leonardo is the real discoverer. He clothed the raw Renaissance urge to question with a restrained yet markedly articulate play of light and nonlight; in this Masaccio preceded him. Rembrandt breathed shimmers of reality into the established symbolism of medieval gold grounds. Yet at the same time that he used lights and darks to affirm reality, he used radiance to transcend it. Rembrandt's contemporaries, the Sensualists, confused painting for centuries; they restricted the light of color to the limited role of rendering the illumination of objects. The course of painting seems to have led away from this aberration. It led to Goya, who explored the light of color for its own sake, and on to Turner and to the Impressionists, who at least managed to produce, in their finest and loftiest period, paintings that transformed the ordinary materiality of light, i.e., the rendition of illumination, into light that permitted a more genuine realization of color as a manifestation of the spirit. Van Gogh mastered its force and thereby "ignited" his work, while Seurat made the clarity of light the medium of the restrained motion in his painting.

Like the revolutions of the Egyptian, Greek, medieval, and modern periods, the revolution of contemporary art seems forced to renounce the wealth of choices. Freedom has been corrupted by fear of the multiplicity of relationships of the sensual and, hence, of the experience of light. Consequently, Delaunay and many works by Severini and Balla have no direct successors. The world of art is so fascinated by the brittleness of signs and planes that it is felt that the proper concern of painting is the flat plane and its inhabitant, form.

Pollock's action painting and the obvious mysticism of Wols's work have their origin in the revolution against the Revolution. The Informel movement inspired by them has given painting back its *élan vital*. The price of this victory was extraordinarily high: it was the renunciation of the concept of purity of color, a concept that, although it was advocated more than fifty years ago, was never completely realized. Color could not become pure because one indispensable condition had been overlooked: purity of light.

The light of color flows between the work and the spectator and fills the space between them. This space cannot be quantified because the spatial properties of the work are irrational — the work "as space" is irrational. The legitimate fear among modern artists of the occurrence of spatial illusion as it had appeared in art between 1500 and 1900 caused them to reduce pictorial space to near-nothingness, because given the intentions of classically-tempered modern art, the continuity of space in paintings could not be maintained otherwise. The static character of forms available to modern art paralyzed both light and color.

In order to achieve its dynamic, Informel painting does not hesitate to readopt or merely place matter in front of the old, perspectival space that appears to open up behind the picture plane. Consequently, no dynamic continuum can be formed; an Informel work is only frozen movement, a report on movement that has occurred in the past. Just as fatal is the kind of subtle shading of color in various greys which leads to an old-style valeur painting. The seamlessness of the resulting pictorial blendings is an imitation of nature. The aficionados of richly associative painting are delighted by this creation that represents nature in a seemingly established, final stage; after all, a static interpretation of nature is a pessimistic interpretation, and, to the fans, to be pessimistic is to be contemporary.

Although no one today seriously doubts that even the most restrained paintings are an expression of human thought and feeling, it appears as if language and painting have gone their separate ways. Actually, their relationship is more intimate than ever before, because they have to rely upon one another. For instance, language serves to interpret painting. If one takes this relationship seriously, paintings created out of an initial dependence on tachism are an expression of a pessimism that with a melancholy matter-of-factness takes human misery for granted. The believers seek to derive an aesthetic stimulus from their pessimism.

The common idea that a painter should express his own times is naïve insofar as it reduces the painter to a kind of journalist. The artist does respond to his environment, but his response is creative in that it refers more to the future than to the present. Today, as always, every art has its moral side. The platonic ideal, that the beautiful is both good and true, has not been forgotten. A painting that achieves its potential simultaneously fosters a conviction. The art that is created most of all as art and that renounces the directness of actual report will have the greatest meaning; that is, man will find his aesthetic sensibility to be the doorway to his spiritual self.

Drabness of color is an expression of man's own drabness, of drabness of consciousness in the broadest sense, and it suggests this drabness to the spectator, too. To deny this would mean for art to give up its exemplary capacity. Purity of light, which creates pure color, which in turn is an expression of the purity of light, takes hold of all men with its continuous flow of rhythmic current between painting and observer; this current, under certain formal conditions, becomes a forceful pulsebeat, total vibration. The vitality of color is in its persuasive power. The energy of light emanating from the field of the painting is converted mysteriously into the spectator's vital energy.

The means have been found to give painting so much sensuality (while still retaining its discipline) by virtue of light that it will depart from the rational explicability of signs and symbols and enter the realm of painterly beauty, in which the course of spirit is guided by the senses. Painting will achieve a beaming intensity, it will radiate to man. The purity of light will enable painting to arouse pure feeling.

Otto Piene