

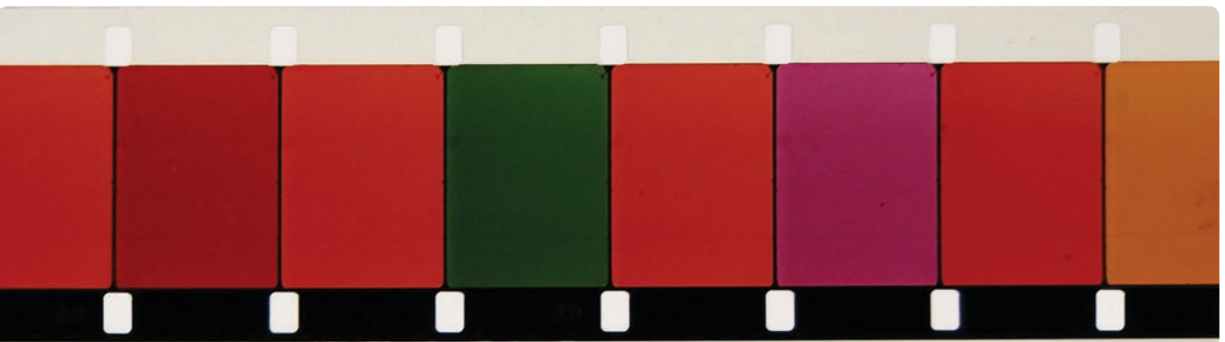
Tina Frank *Chronotops* 2005 © Tina Frank

COLOUR FIELD FILM AND VIDEO

Friday 21 November –
Saturday 22 November 2008
Tate Modern

The two programmes in this series look at the myriad ways in which 'colour fields' have been explored in artists' films and videos. The work included spans the history of experimental film and video, from some of the earliest avant-garde films of the 1920s to contemporary digital abstraction. Links are explored between these films and videos and certain trends in abstract painting, from constructivist aesthetics through to colour field painters, including Mark Rothko. The use of colour in the works that comprise these programmes is sometimes celebratory or playful, but always critical and direct.

Curated by Simon Payne
Simon Payne is a video artist. Most recently his work has shown in a programme entitled *Material Colour: Perception / Memory / Material* curated by Peter Gidal, for the Serpentine Gallery. He has a PhD from the Royal College of Art and is a Senior Lecturer in Communication, Film and Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge.



Paul Sharits *Ray Gun Virus* 1966 Courtesy Estate of Paul J Sharits

TATE FILM



Vincent Grenier *Color Study* 2000 © courtesy of the artist

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COLOUR FIELD FILM AND VIDEO

Programme One: Kinetic Colour

Friday 21 November 2008 19.00

In the catalogue that accompanies the current Rothko exhibition at Tate Modern several of the contributors attest to the cinematic qualities of his paintings. Correspondingly, there are a number of links between the films and videos that are showing here and the aesthetics of modernist painting, from constructivist principles through to the approach of the colour field painters including Rothko; some of the films, notably Walther Ruttmann's *Opus* films and Oskar Fischinger's *Motion Painting no.1*, involve painted surfaces and painterly marks. But what's key about these and each of the other films and videos, in these two programmes, is that they deal with colour and surface in a way that is specifically time-based.

The work that's screening in the first programme, *Kinetic Colour*, spans the history of experimental film and video, from avant-garde films of the twenties through to contemporary digital abstraction. It focuses on works in which fields of colour have been manipulated by animation, printing techniques and flicker, and generated by electronic processing or digital synthesis. The films and videos suggest various sensibilities and were made using a range of technologies. At the same time there are several connections that cut across the decades in which they were produced: there are aspects in the form-language of the early abstract films that seem to prefigure the aesthetics of the contemporary digital video work for example.

In Ruttmann's *Opus II–IV* (1923–5) the screen is animated by the dynamic interaction of organic and geometric forms and their relation to the edge of the frame. The film's motifs, of shapes resembling waves and pistons, are pared down over the series. Likewise there are passages in *Opus II* and *III* that were originally tinted, while *Opus IV*, which is the most energetic of the series, was always only black and white. The stark contrast of the imagery makes for a film that reveals the rhythm of cinema's intervals: the undulations in the crest of a flowing waveform and the speed of horizontal rolling black bars are evidently propelled by the projector's flicker and frame-rate.

Oskar Fischinger's *Motion Painting no.1* (1947) presents the act of painting thought through as a film. In the opening section of the film there are elements that are almost biomorphic, in others spiralling lines or dashes build up a complex and purely abstract design. The film is at its most abstract in those sequences where Fischinger has added one brushstroke per frame. Working towards the edge of the screen, the final section is comprised of wingtips that penetrate from the top,

bottom and sides of the frame, and then in counterpoint circles of primary colours radiate from the centre.

Len Lye is known for his technique of painting directly on film. *Color Cry* (1953) utilises a different method involving coloured gels (predominantly red, orange, yellow and pink) together with stencils and objects such as fabrics, string and saw blades, which were placed on strips of film that were then exposed. The resultant colourful shadow patterns dance across the screen: horizontal stripes roll through the image; layered grids bounce between the sides of the frame; and thick vertical bands sway – all to the music of Sonny Terry's energetic Blues harmonica. For Lye, this combination of music and imagery made for a political film.

The central dynamic of Rose Lowder's film *Parcelle* (1979) revolves around the relationship between a point of focused colour (a circle or square) on a black background in the middle of the screen, which alternates with frames of flat colour. The structure of the film creates perceptual ambiguities: the distinction between circle and square becomes difficult to discern, for example, and so do the relative colour values of figure and ground.

In this programme the film with the purest 'all-over' colour fields is Paul Sharits' *Ray Gun Virus* (1966) though at some points it is possible to see surface textures represented in the image. The first section of the film comprises black and white frames, and then frames of varying tone; yellows, pinks and light blues follow and subsequently give way to more saturated colours. In its exploration of additive colour mixing, the film's structure is extremely intricate and subtle. In some passages it explores the interaction of similar colours, in others it deals with complementaries. In the most complex passages dissolves from one colour to another are interspersed within the pattern of otherwise separate frames.

The exploding patterns, swathes of colour and pulsating sound in Peter Donebauer's *Entering* (1974) are the result of the live manipulation of video and audio feedback. The ethereal nature of the imagery reflects the fact that *Entering* was the first video art work to be broadcast on national television in the UK, but it is also a video that evokes the possibility of a form of electronic painting that concerns the spiritual.

Stephen Beck's *Video Weavings* (1976), made using his own video synthesiser, is a piece that connects the art of weaving (also there in the structure of *Parcelle* and *Ray Gun Virus*) with the warp and weft of the horizontal and vertical scanning lines of the video raster, and correspondingly the columns and rows of red, green and blue pixels in the image display. The use of colour in this video and the analogy to weaving, also brings to mind Chevreul's account, in the 1830s, of the appearance of juxtaposed colours in woven

textiles.

In contrast to the composure of Beck's very early experiments with digital video, the structure of *uta zet* (2001) by the duo reMI (Renate Oblak and Michael Pinter) involves distortion and glitches. Both *uta zet* and Bas van Koolwijk's *Five* (2005) represent an assault on the surface composition of digital imagery, which is becoming increasingly seamless with the rise of 'high-definition' technology and more efficient compression codecs that go unnoticed by the viewer. These videos unravel the weave of the video image, but in doing so they also produce an extraordinary range of colour combinations that cluster and separate.

In contrast to the soundtrack of *Five*, Tina Frank's *Chronomops* (2005) begins with a poppy musical refrain. Like many of the films and videos in this programme, it relates to a tradition in which colour has been conceived as an element in the composition of 'visual music'. In *Chronomops* the rising pitch of the soundtrack corresponds with the layering of flat striated colour fields and drives them to spin wildly in an illusory three-dimensional space.

In my own video *New Ratio* (2007) there is a strict correspondence between the area of the colour fields and the dimensions of the screen: the ratio of their sides is either 4:3 or 16:9. The hue of each colour field derives from the seven colour bars that constitute the standard test signal image. The video itself comprises two simple repeating sequences that are almost the same duration (one has an additional frame of black). This throws them out of synch, which causes a phasing that effects different mixtures of colour and a range of tone combinations, testing the containing edges of the image.

Walther Ruttmann *Opus II-IV*
Germany 1923–5 (35mm, 10 mins, b&w, silent)

Oskar Fischinger *Motion Painting no.1* USA 1947 (35mm, 11 mins, colour)

Len Lye *Color Cry* USA 1953 (16mm, 3 mins, colour)

Rose Lowder *Parcelle* France 1979 (16mm, 3 mins, colour, silent)

Paul Sharits *Ray Gun Virus* USA 1966 (16mm, 14 mins, colour, sprocket-hole soundtrack)

Peter Donebauer *Entering* UK 1974 (Video, 8 mins, colour)

Stephen Beck *Video Weavings* USA 1976 (Video, 9 mins, colour)

reMI *uta zet* Austria 2001 (Video, 5 mins, colour)

Bas van Koolwijk *Five* Netherlands 2002 (Video, 3 mins, colour)

Tina Frank *Chronomops* Austria 2005 (Video, 3 mins, colour)

Simon Payne *New Ratio* UK 2007 (Video, 2 mins, colour)

Programme duration approx 71 min

Programme Two: Contrasting Surfaces

Saturday 22 November 2008 19.00

Karen Wilkin has suggested that Mark Rothko's paintings 'seem to possess colour but not substance, to assert a literal surface and simultaneously establish a kind of ambiguous space'. This description also evokes the qualities of the projected image; and there's something in this that the *Contrasting Surfaces* programme addresses. Most of the work in the first Colour Field programme affirms the flatness of the screen. In contrast, all of the films and videos in this programme explore, in different ways, the ambiguous relationship between the surface of the projected image and the instance of recorded imagery. In these works the coloured surface of the screen is often accentuated by filters or mattes and in some the subject matter refers to a flat coloured surface, but the prominence of grain or pixels, and the effect of printing processes or compositing, often sets up a tension between the perceived layers in the projected image.

The 'flicker' films of Rose Lowder, Paul Sharits and my own video *New Ratio*, shown in the first programme, make it apparent that the generation of colour is a matter of perception. The colour in these pieces originates from within the system and structure of the work, which encompasses the discrete colour fields (whether on the filmstrip or digitally synthesised) and the reproduction of those fields by the eye and brain. The first film in this programme, Jennifer Nightingale's *Knitting Pattern* (2006), involves a related investigation, but in this work the emanating colour is also attached to filmed objects (balls of wool). The structure of the piece, which follows the knitting pattern for a Fair Isle sweater, with one frame exposed per stitch, also picks up on theme of patterns in textiles and colour perception.

Chick Strand's *Anselmo* (1967) is a jubilant and wonderfully colourful film, which begins and ends with a collage of scenes that includes an airplane crossing in front of a rainbow, flocks of birds superimposed, galloping horses and carnival fireworks. The subject at the centre of the film is Anselmo Aguascalientes, a lone figure in the desert with his tuba, and whose celebratory oompah music plays on the soundtrack. The colour footage, often in negative, renders the imagery of the film in vibrant patches of purple, peach, pink, acid green, orange and blue; the screen is simply awash with colour in the swaying dance sequences.

Gregory Markopoulos' *Ming Green* (1966) is what Kristin Jones has called a 'chromatic chamber piece', which he was prompted to make by Stan Brakhage. The film continually sets up contrasts between the deep green walls of Markopoulos' apartment and the colours of personal

effects that share the space with the filmmaker. The woven structure of the film, comprising sequences of fleeting images and a masterful combination of dissolves and superimpositions that were all composed in-camera, presents a cumulative perspective. It's weaving brings together images shot in daylight and at night, and relates the intimate interior with views shot from the window. It suggests past, present and future events and personal associative memories, offering a sensuous experience of colour and space.

Stan Brakhage's *III, IV* and *V* are three short films out of the nine that comprise the Roman Numeral Series (1979–80). In contrast to *Ming Green* the imagery in these films appears as if it is all shot in extreme close-up. The defocused quality of the footage doesn't obviously depict proximity, but the films are very grainy – they were shot on Super-8 and then blown up to 16mm – and as a consequence one's eye is drawn to the surface of the film image as much as the textures of represented surfaces. Certain colours predominate in each of the films: white, red and orange are primary in *III, IV* features a golden yellow and black; green and blue prevail in *V*; but the forms which contain these colours are difficult to grasp, and the relationship between form and colour is impossible to separate out. At a fundamental level this is symptomatic of the way in which film reproduces colour. Unlike the video image in which colours are derived from an additive mixture (of red, green and blue pixels) film colour is also produced as a subtractive mixture of the light from the projector as it passes through the composite coloured layers of grain on the filmstrip.

Color Aid (1970/71) by Richard Serra is the longest and most demanding film in this programme. Serra acted as a teaching assistant to Josef Albers while he was a student at Yale University in the early 60s; this film uses the 220 sheets of coloured paper in the standard Color-Aid set that Albers recommended to his students. However, in contrast to the poised harmonic interaction of colour that Albers sought to produce, Serra's film goes through each of the colour samples one by one. In this respect it is more reminiscent of Gerhard Richter's colour-chart paintings perhaps, but the interaction of colours from one instance to the next, as Serra's finger swipes another colour into view, has a certain drama to it, and an element of suspense that is necessarily time-based. Nor does the serial logic of the film curtail the effect of the framed colour fields as perceptual phenomena; the memory of one colour distinctly affects one's experience of subsequent colours.

The subtle interplay between layers of colour in George Barber's *Tilt* (1983) is surprising given the brash imagery culled from American and British television. Partly this is due to the degeneration of the footage,

which makes for bleeding edges. Throughout the video there are also inset/offset geometric divisions of the screen. The colour is saturated for the most part, and in places the imagery is chromakeyed, emboldening the pastel colours associated with video. Animated blobs are superimposed in some passages, and elsewhere trapezoid blocks of colour or swirling stripes run through the image. Relating the critique of scratch video, in time with the cutting, is the line: Do not be misled. You have had it!

Nicky Hamlyn is mostly known for his films. *Telly* (1995) is one of the few videos that he has made, which documents a familiar space, focusing on surface textures, the changing effect of reflected light and the planes in space that depth of field constructs. The location here is a living room, and at its centre a television. Hamlyn scrutinises the edges of the screen, the reflective glass surface and its array of pixels. In several sequences it's Brookside that's on television, and this offers up a further set of familiar locations. Square apertures and black mattes repeat the shape and edges of the television set, and dissolves to flat primary colours emphasise the surface of the screen that *Telly* is seen on.

The opening image of Vincent Grenier's *Color Study* (2000) shows a hillside of trees in autumn, covered in green, red, auburn and brown leaves. Changes in colour values slowly occur as patches of pixels begin to shimmer, replicating the seasonal transformation of the trees' leaves. The modulation in hue, which is almost imperceptible at first, becomes more dramatic as the piece develops. Washes of colour from the video spectrum sit over the hillside and dissolve into each other, taking the landscape image into abstract territories. Towards the end of the piece the original colours of the trees return, but one is left with a very different perception of 'natural' colour.

Jennifer Nightingale *Knitting Pattern*
UK 2006 (16mm, 3', colour, silent)

Chick Strand *Anselmo* USA 1967 (16mm, 4', colour)

Gregory Markopoulos *Ming Green* USA 1966 (16mm, 7', colour)

Stan Brakhage *III, IV and V from the Roman Numeral Series*, USA 1979/80 (16mm, 9', colour, silent)

Richard Serra *Color Aid* USA 1970/71 (16mm, 36', colour)

George Barber *Tilt* UK 1983 (Video, 4', colour)

Nicky Hamlyn *Telly* UK 1995 (Video, 4', colour, silent)

Vincent Grenier *Color Study* Canada 2000 (Video, 4', colour)

Programme duration approx 71 min