

Color Specificity: the perception of difference through exhausting repetition

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Abstract

This article seeks to address the perception of color and its relativity from the approach to creative and artistic processes based on a repetitive and systematic structure through the implementation of a group of formal rules. Paul Cézanne and Claude Monet through their artistic processes show us how their involvement with colors can be a reflex of a long period experience of repetition and observation of a specific formal context. That, we associate to Patricia Stokes and her notions of *ill-structured problems* and *well-structured problems*. Color and its volatility leads us to say that its relativity is associated to *ill-structured problems*, which will allow its author to perceive, based on repetition and creation of several analogous units, the ambivalent instability that identify a chromatic universe. Therefore, we come close to the artists Anoka Faruqee and Ângelo de Sousa to approach repetitive processes, that can lead its author to a creative singular path, where each unit that appears in the space of doing potentiates a confrontation between repetition, difference and singularity.

Keywords: *Color Perception, Repetition, Context, Constraints and Difference*

INTRODUCTION

As the most relative medium in art, color can boost unpredictable states of perception. Take into consideration that the perception of a group of shapes is a reflex of the chromatic pallet, perceived and captured in a certain moment by someone, we start this article approaching how the experimental creative intentions of Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Claude Monet (1840-1926) seem to lead them to an involvement with repetition as a means to embraces different perspectives of a same motif. Color and its relativity provided the artists a confrontation with multiple perspectives of the same regular shapes. Consequently, we associate the aim of these two artists of capturing the essence of an environment by repetition, to the notions of task and goal constraints of Patricia Stokes, related to creative and unexpected results. By that, after an approach to the chromatic structured problems of Josef Albers (1888-1976), given to his students, about the multiple faces of colors, we come closer to the contemporary artists Anoka Faruqee (b.1972) and Ângelo de Sousa (1938-2011) to analyze how a group of self-constraints can contain and promote simultaneously their artistic processes related with colors and its contaminations in the space of perception. At last, a personal relationship with the implementation of color constraints to promote an authorial chromatic search in an artistic creation, led us to conclude that, when related with the creative ambitions of an artist, a set of self-constraints implanted regularly can externalize small and singular differences that improves an understanding of the artist about the ambiguities that his/her repetitive task can embrace.

1. Repetition in Painting as a constraint methodology to perceive formal differences

In the history of painting, or even in the history of art, the connection between looking, perceiving and representation feature the main concerns of art creation. Aspects related with shapes, volumes, perspective, but also with color – its relativity, perception or representation – were taken, more or less, into account by the artists during a creative process of a visual masterpiece. The color as medium

and resource started to occupy, around the nineteenth century, some of the biggest concerns of artists, such as Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Claude Monet (1840-1926), Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Georges Seurat (1859-1891) or Henri Matisse (1869-1954). A bigger awareness about color contrast and its relativity began to model the way that the artists represented the observed reality. The Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings from Cézanne or the Rouen Cathedral painted twenty-seven times by Claude Monet (Stokes, 2006: 47) exemplify this awareness. Cézanne and Monet had sought to capture the essence of a visual scene through an exhausting repetition, characterized by a persistent rearrangement of the shapes and colors. Cézanne did it through his several approaches to the Mont Sainte-Victoire, creating several compositions from the mountain and its environment, and also through his several still lifes, where he explored different formal hierarchies and chromatic balances by means of “multiple arrangements of the same objects” (Stoke 2006: 48). Monet explored color light relationships through an attempt to register a time specific impression of things, like in his painting series from Rouen Cathedral, but also, in his paintings from the same row of poplars that he also carried out in various times of day (Stokes, 2006). Consequently, it seems that repetition, as a creative methodology, was sustained by the possibility of each unit highlighting singular differences, turning them into a true moment of uniqueness. That is because repetition allowed each one of the artists to explore their own intentions inside a restricted subject of work, without precluding an individual confrontation with different understandings and formal relationships. In “Creativity from Constraints”, Patricia Stokes specify the approaching intentions of Monet (his goal constraint) through the identification of his task constraints, such as limitation on motif (Stokes 2006). In her perspective, the goal of Monet was to perceive “how does light break up (a) on things, (b) between things, (c) alone” (Stokes 2006: 41). His *goal constraint* or artistic intention connected to a task constraint leading him to an involvement with repetition as a process of perceiving the circumstantial differences. Therefore, this can be one of the possibilities that leads some artists to an involvement with systematic processes, sustained in a restricted group of rules.

2. Constraints and Color Relativity

After the closure of Bauhaus in 1933, Josef Albers (1888-1976) migrated to the United States, where he taught until 1950 at the Black Mountain College and, until 1958, at the Yale University. Albers was a paradigmatic teacher that, in the words of his former students Sheila Hicks and Richard Lytle, expressed his main goal as a professor with the expression “opening eyes” (Search Versus Re-Search, 2015, 25:28). By this simple phrase, Albers wanted to alert his students to the relationship, that we appoint early, between looking, perceiving and representing. To explore the intersections between these movements, Albers established some challenges and exercises with procedure constraints as a means to introduce his students to the chromatic ambiguity of hues and tones in different contexts. Considering color as “the most relative medium in art” (1976: 1), Albers presents some *ill-structured* problems (Stokes, 2006), allowing his students to create, test and analyze dozens of similar results promoting a search for balances between hues and shapes. One of the exercises was called “Four World Project” (Lytle in Search Versus Re-Search, 2015). The exercise consists in the selection of four hues that, when combined in four different studies, must enable a confrontation with completely different worlds. Despite Richard Lytle referring to the colors blue, green, red and black as the best ones to embrace this problem, the exercise doesn’t imply a single right answer. On the other hand, its form allows each student to confront a lot of different combinations of four hues in lots of diverse shapes. Consequently, each student has a singular confrontation and experience with forms, perspectives and color manipulation that redirect his/her expectations and understandings towards a

given creative path. However, in the words of Patricia Stokes, an exercise to be related with the possibility of creative results must present an *ill-structured* opposed to a *well-structured* problem (2006). The difference of both is in the specification of its task constraints. In a *well-structured* problem all the steps are known previously, likewise its right answer. Instead, in an *ill-structured* problem something is left to chance, being determined, posteriorly, by the circumstantial conditions of the moment. Nevertheless, in our perspective, when an exercise has in consideration that the perception of colors is dependent on a host of variables, the task constraints are always related with *ill-structured* problems, not being dependent of their specification or openness. The color itself can lead to unpredictable results (Pinheiro, 2019).

2.1 Repetition and Color-constraints in Contemporary Artistic Creation

Between 2004 and 2007, the artist Anoka Faruqee (b.1972) created five diptychs, through a definition and execution of a group of task self-constraints, whose principle and final result were connected with the sense of copy. The first step of the task was to paint a small canvas with one of the three colors: cyan, magenta or yellow. After that, she should brush the entire surface with one of the two other colors, leaving a trail of paint. To finish this painting, she should make another layer, like the second one, with the color left behind. The second step of her task consisted in copying exactly, in a bigger canvas, what she could see in the smallest one (Faruqee 2008). The goal was not to copy the way of doing, but to copy the visible image, including the multiple lines of hues observed. In the first diptych (Figure 1 [CMY]), Anoka Faruqee registered fifteen different hues, while in the last one (Figure 1 [MCY]) she reported ninety-three colors. In the words of the artist, she saw more colors just because she increased her expectation to see them (2008). However, her expectation led her to add some regular variations between diptychs, as the size difference between canvas ended up changing not only her color perception, but also her gesture register. By that, her diptychs started inscribing little variations, resulted from the making circumstances and her predisposition to look at each small painting as a distinguished universe that inscribed different movements and color trails. Consequently, her task constraints revealed a certain openness, enhanced by the procedural differences, that led her to amplifying her own perceptual experiences.

Another artist that also amplified his own color perception restricting his pictorial action to the use of only three colors, creating a monochromatic painting series, is Ângelo de Sousa (1938-2011)¹ (Dias, 2016). Starting each painting with a subtle drawing and with a very thin and transparent paint layer, Ângelo de Sousa was defining the shapes and each chromatic environment through a successive and occasional process of primary colors overlaying: blue, red and yellow. Sousa created a huge number of paintings with large areas of a manipulated hue that inscribed multiple shades and subtle chromatic crossings (Figure 2). Along this repetitive and restricted process, his task included self-constraints as the linear drawing previously determined, the restricted used of the three primary colors and, possibly, his goal of each canvas giving the illusion of a monochromatic surface. However, his chromatic expectations, and consequently the course of each painting, were determined by each overlap that took place in the course of his task. Despite each layer, being carried out, taking into account a possible effect, each overlap determined consequently the expectations of Ângelo de Sousa, redirecting or

¹ Natural from Maputo, Ângelo de Sousa moved to the city of Oporto in 1955, where he started and developed his extraordinary artistic career. Very experimental and multifaceted, Ângelo de Sousa is a Portuguese artist that became known by his attempt of trying to get “a maximum effect with a minimum of resources; a maximum of efficiency with a minimum of effort; a maximum of presence with a minimum of screams” (own translation from Nazaré et al. 2005: 18). By that, Ângelo de Sousa created lots of works of art inside a repetitive methodology where he explored multiple formal variations inside diverse constraints of materials. | *citation in pt: “um máximo de efeito com um mínimo de esforço, um máximo de eficácia com um mínimo de esforço, um máximo de presença com um mínimo de gritos” (Nazaré et al. 2005: 18)

Color Specificity: the perception of difference through exhausting repetition attesting his chromatic options on a given route (Sousa, 2007). Therefore, his pictorial path was a result of a dialogical movement between what he could hope to get and what really happened during the process.

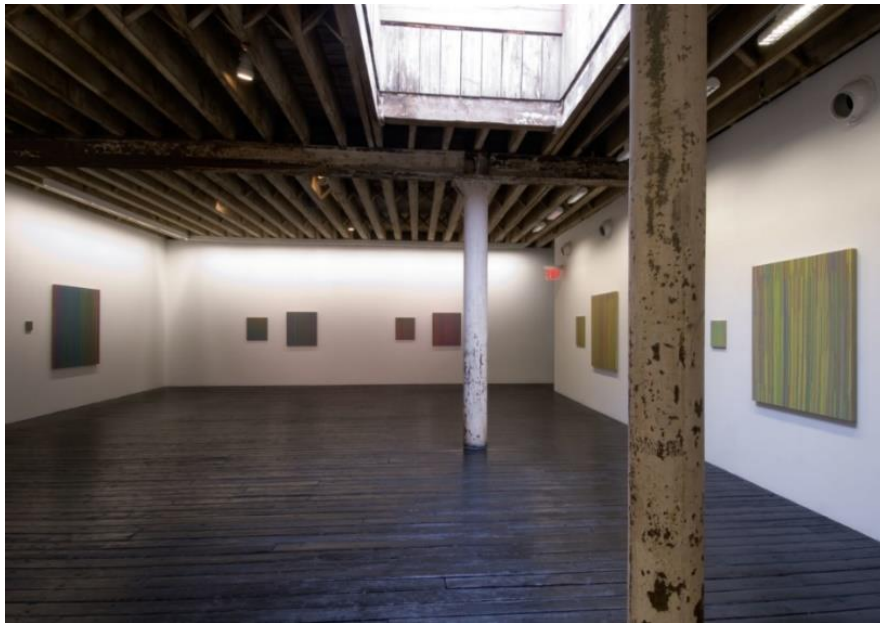


Figure 1: Diptychs “Colors Observed and Magnified” – from left to right – (MCY), (CMY), (MYC), (YCM) and (YMC) in the Exhibition CMY RGB XYZ from Anoka Faruqee at the Hosfelt Gallery, New York, 2008. Source: <http://anokafaruqee.com/installation-images/>



Figure 2: Ângelo de Sousa, (both paintings) Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 169.5 x 199.5 cm (left), 199.5x170 cm (right), 1973-74. Source: Foundation of Serralves Collection, Oporto.

These consequently rapprochements of the artists to the universe of color across the implementation of a group of self-constraints, lead us to reinforce the position of Josef Albers, about color and its relativity, saying that color and context are intimately connected. In other words, the perception and the use of a color are hosted in unstable conditions determined by the circumstantial characteristics of a context. By that, the repetition and the execution of a task settled in a group of self-constraints guaranty the artist a particular and specific environment, allowing him/her attesting

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the variations that his/her task embrace. In that sense, the repetition can lead the artist to get results that escape the reductive condition of his/her initial restrictions.

2.2 Color-Constraints: from School Exercises to an Authorial Artistic Practice

In my personal experience, only after five years of artistic practice, I started to recognize that my increased involvement with color and art creation was a reflection of all my experiences and pictorial works created inside a specific group of self-constraints. Since the beginning, my paintings embraced, as principle of construction, a specific group of constraints directed to: i) the shapes' representation, with three specific rules; ii) the choice of three colors, for each painting; iii) and colors application through an overlaying process. That self-awareness, lead me to embrace my artistic practice as an opportunity to test and create other task constraints as a principle to explore the proximities between formal perception, color, repetition, *ill-structured* problems based on school exercises and art creation. My installation "In the beginning the difference of the end" (Figure3) was the first result in the art field of these personal intentions. In this work, my memory as a primary school student was rescued and the simple exercise of reproduce a chromatic circle through geometry and a use of the gouache's three primary colors was repeated and executed successively until the one hundred units. The only formal variation inscribed in my self-constraints was the three secondary colors obtain through the mixing of the primaries. This minimal change allowed to create and perceive a strong and static form, that independent of its opacity and rigidity, embraces a whole lot of perceptive illusions, turning the repetitive solid in a static image in motion. An exponential color mixing accuracy and sensitivity led to a subsequent register of the endless middle hues that hypothetical separate two primary colors: as greenish blues, blueish greens, yellowish greens or greenish yellows. By that, repetition as a methodological process led me to a formal approach that escaped to the reductive condition of my initial restrictions, promoting the discovery of unexpected color results and singular affinities between hues that improved my self-awareness about the potentialities of three colors manipulated.

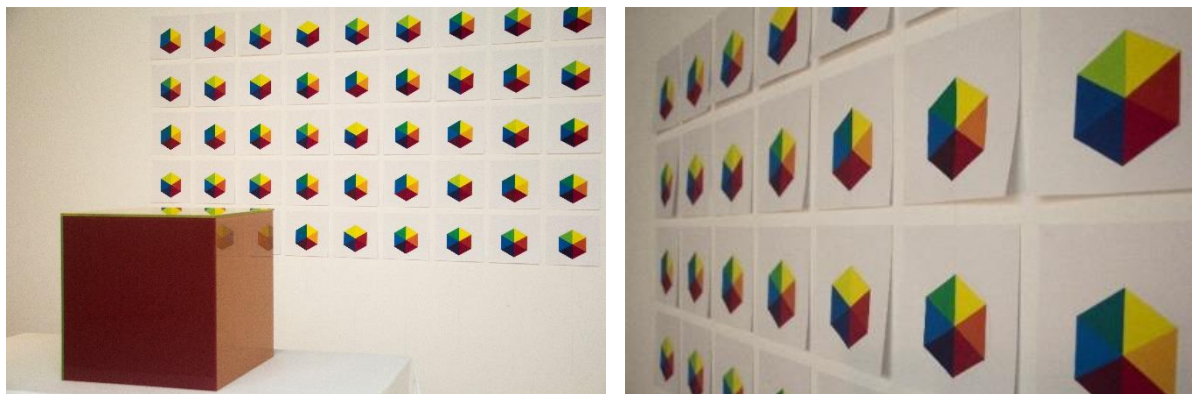


Figure 3: Daniela Pinheiro, "In the beginning the difference of the end", graphite and gouache on paper and enamel on float glass, 50 drawings of 100, 20 x 20 cm (each) and one glass object, 40 x 40 x 40 cm. 2020.

CONCLUSION

The first approach to the artistic involvement of Paul Cézanne and Claude Monet, enabled an approach to repetition as a strategy that can be related with a group of self-constraints, defined by the artists as a means to specify their artistic challenges. Having in consideration that the perception of a color is dependent on a host of circumstantial conditions, an artist can choose to enlase his/her own artistic creation at a group of self-constraints, allowing him/her a confrontation with the multiple perceptual variations that his/her task can reach. The contemporary artists Anoka Faruqee and Ângelo de Sousa

revealed how a permanence and constant implementation of their tasks can highlight unpredictable results and surprising affinities between color, perception and its manipulation. A repetitive implementation of a group of formal strategies can reveal singular differences, that with time, extrapolate its first restricted condition, leading the artist to an open dialogue with his/her own intentions.

On the other hand, the connection that we protrude between the structure of task constraint and the structure of educational chromatic exercises (ex.: Josef Albers) leads us to question how closer can task constraints created by the artists be from teaching art school exercises? Maybe the cross line of both sides is thinner than we can imagine. In any case, these rapprochements to the universe of color across constraints and *ill-structured problems*, allow us to reinforce Albers's perspective, about color and its relativity, asserting that a certain ambiguous perception of a color application can be reached through a repetitive patient process. That is, because the little singularities that distinguish each analogous unit in the space of doing are a consequence of a time-extended execution and from the predisposition of the artist to embrace them as parts of a distinct whole. At last, a repetition process can lead to the perception of singular differences, that in dialogue with the creative intentions of the artist, will lead his/her artistic search in a given singular course.

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