

## WHAT'S IN A BLUE?

by

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IKB 79 (1959)

Staring into IKB 79 you may initially see ultramarine blue pigment suspended in fixative. But, looking deeper, you might find the evening sky on a clear summer night or the tropical ocean where you took your last vacation. The experience of color is not confined to visual system's response to wavelengths of light. It is also informed by the associations that come to mind while looking at the color, and the emotional responses to those associations. Accordingly, if you loved spending summer evenings gazing into the sky with your friends as a child, and you enjoyed your last vacation by the ocean, you might have a positive response to International Klein Blue (IKB). However, if IKB reminded you of a miserable childhood and how you nearly drowned in the ocean during your vacation, your response to the color would be far more negative. It is possible that an observer's response to color in art is formed by an interaction between the stimulation produced by the art object and the observer's personal history of color-related experiences, which filter the interpretation of the work.

Without distraction from representational form or other colors in the composition, IKB 79 invites observers to introspect on their experience of pure

color. For Yves Klein, monochromatic fields of color capture ineffable experiences of space and energy (Restany, 1982, p.11-12). He chose blue, at least in part, to translate the serenity and freedom he experienced under the sky by the sea during his childhood vacations in Nice (*Ibid.* p. 24). Illustrating the significance of the sky for Klein, biographer Pierre Restany describes a fantasy Klein envisioned with two friends, lying on the beach in 1949. The three young visionaries divided the whole world among themselves and Klein's portion was the sky. Klein imagined himself traveling to a vault behind the cloudless blue expanse to sign his name on one of his first monochromatic pieces. Restany quotes Klein, "That day I started hating birds that flew here and there, because they were trying to make holes in the biggest and most beautiful of my works" (*Ibid.* p. 13). It is clear from these anecdotes that the sky held deep, spiritual value for Klein, which he sought to imbue in his work. Here, it appears the artist's personal color-related experiences and associations contributed to the production of the art object.

The notion that people's responses to monochromatic colored fields are determined by previous color-based experiences was formulated in Palmer and Schloss's (2010) Ecological Valence Theory (EVT). The EVT posits that preference for a given color is influenced by the combined preference for all objects associated with that color. People have positive reactions to colors that remind them of positive things and negative reactions to colors that remind them of negative things. Although it is possible people are actively aware of some associations while looking at colors, it may not be necessary for the associations to rise to conscious awareness for them to influence color preferences.

To test the EVT, Palmer and Schloss (2010) asked whether average color preferences could be predicted by preferences for objects associated with the colors. They studied four groups of participants. The first group rated how much they liked each of 32 colors. The second group saw each of the same colors and wrote down all of the objects the colors reminded them of. The third group was given a condensed set of those object descriptions and rated how positive vs. negative those objects were (the "valence"). Finally, the fourth group saw each

object description along with the color for which it was described and rated how well the color on the screen matched the color of the object in the world (the “match” ). From these ratings they calculated the Weighted Affective Valence Estimate (WAVE) for each color, which is a single number that represents the average positivity/negativity of all the objects that were associated with the color (weighed by how well the objects match that color). These WAVE values were highly accurate at predicting color preferences, suggesting that color preferences can be explained, at least in part, by preferences for correspondingly colored objects.

Further research suggests that responses to colors are flexible and dynamic, depending on which associations are especially active in people’s minds. A laboratory study indicated that preferences for specific colors could be increased by priming people to think about particular positive objects associated with those colors (Strauss, Schloss, & Palmer, 2013). For example, showing people pictures of ripe strawberries, blossoming roses, and other positive red objects increased their preference for red. These changes occur without participants realizing that any attempt has been made to influence their color preferences. Additional evidence for the dynamics of color preferences comes from a study on political affiliation and color preferences of American voters (Schloss & Palmer, 2014). Surprisingly, U.S. Republicans liked Democratic-blue more than Democrats did on non-Election Days with no difference in preference for Republican-red. But, color preferences became more party-aligned on Election Day when political affiliation and party colors were particularly salient. The relation between object associations and color preferences appears to be selective for specific colors. For example, Stanford University students were found to like the particular shade of Stanford-red more than their rival UC Berkeley students did, but there was no difference for other types of reds (Schloss, Poggesi, & Palmer, 2011).

It has been long established that blue is generally the most preferred hue (e.g., Eysenck, 1941; Guilford & Smith, 1959; McManus, Jones, & Cottrell, 1981) and the EVT can explain why. In Palmer and Schloss’ s (2010) WAVE study, most

of the objects that were associated with blues were positive (e.g., evening sky, ocean/sea, and blue jeans). This is in stark contrast with generally disliked colors, such as dark yellow (a greenish brown color) and brown, which are largely associated with less positive objects such as feces, vomit, and rotting foods. Of course, people do love some brownish things, such as coffee and chocolate, but the average ratings of objects associated with those colors are far less positive.

By choosing blue as the main subject for his monochrome work, Klein selected the hue that was most likely to elicit the most positive and least negative responses in his observers. Had his transcendent experiences come from the sand and earth rather than the sky and sea, inspiring him to create his monochromes in "International Klein *Brown*," his work might not have been so well received.

Klein's monochromatic work turns color into a conceptual medium (Restany, 1982, p. 39), which inspires observers to contemplate the meaning that a single, isolated color holds for them. Decades later, his prescient question concerning the role of color in communicating information is a ripe topic of inquiry in the science of color cognition.

## References

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