

FrameWork 5/21

Craig Rodmore on Shirley Wiitasalo

Goodbye to Language (Fragments)

When I tell someone I am not blind, is that an observation?
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*

(1)

“My own earliest recollections,” William Clement Ley told the audience of an 1878 lecture on nephology, “are those of looking at the clouds, and forming infantine speculations as to the causes of their forms and movements, and of being reprehended for exposing myself to all states of weather for this purpose. The tendency was inveterate, and to this day I have spent nearly a twelfth part of my waking existence in that occupation. I can now, when only the summit of a cloud, 40 miles away, is visible above the distant horizon, state with unfailing certainty whether or not rain is falling from the under surface of that cloud.” He also told them: “Cloud observation is, in a very large measure, an incommunicable art.” Perhaps more than anything it is that incommunicability that his lecture communicates: there is what can be described and explained, and there is something else beyond it.

In an essay on the “melancholy” science of nephology, Marcel Beyer points to an example of just how far the meteorologist’s art strayed from language; the same event is recounted without variation in innumerable sources: in September 1862, on a balloon ascent to take readings of water vapour in the clouds and beyond them, the meteorologist, astronomer, photographer, and balloonist James Glaisher and his co-pilot Henry Tracey Coxwell proposed to reach the highest altitude yet achieved. It is assumed that they did so, likely rising more than 31,000 feet above sea level and perhaps as far as 37,000 feet—that is, altitudes at which passenger jets fly today—but no measurement was taken: Glaisher’s profuse notetaking stopped abruptly at 26,000 feet when, suffering the combined effects of rapid ascent and dwindling oxygen, he found himself blind and unable to move his arms. He lost consciousness altogether somewhere around 29,000 feet, while Coxwell, an experienced pilot and dentist whose hands likewise betrayed him, climbed out of the basket and into the rigging and eventually opened the gas-valve by pulling the line with his teeth, and the two men, one unconscious and the other semiconscious, descended to thicker air—the sky a “deep Prussian blue,” the balloon’s shadow on the clouds below “surrounded by a kind of corona tinted with prismatic colours,” and their record-setting altitude a white space in the pages of Glaisher’s logbook.

Photography, otherwise so profoundly capable, produced similar results: Beyer notes that as the nephologists of the late nineteenth century “set about documenting the subject of their research in photographs, the greatest challenge proved to be the clouds’ reflective behaviour.” Like the lacuna in Glaisher’s logbook, “sometimes there is nothing but a shapeless blob, dissolving in the landscape, largely absorbed by the bright light; sometimes, due to the strong sunlight, the photograph shows not the textbook cumulus form standing out against a clear sky, but a uniform dark-grey surface taking up the entire space over the horizon.”

(2)

If objectively such undifferentiated fields of silver offered no improvement over the work of “the artist who reflects the mind or paints for the eye of the general public, to whom a cloud is a camel, weasel, or whale shaped mist, and nothing more,” the facticity of the photograph nevertheless gave such images an aura of proof, illustrating the observations they accompanied despite the near total absence of visual incident.

It was not so long before Glaisher and Coxwell’s flight, over the course of a decade or so in the first half of the nineteenth century, that photography had rapidly ascended from being a fantasy tantamount to alchemy through Niepce’s crude 1826 heliograph in bitumen to the perfection of the process and the announcement in 1839 of the inventions of Daguerre (positive) and Fox Talbot (negative). Around the same time, the electrical telegraph emerged, followed by wireless telegraph transmissions via radio waves and then radio technology proper; these innovations gave rise to the theory of telepathy (“mental radio,” in Upton Sinclair’s phrase) and lent credence to accounts of contact with spirits—that is, of thought transmitted along a “sympathetic cord” like “electric fluid on the telegraphic wire”; in turn, the English electrician and spiritualist Desmond Gerald Fitzgerald, editor of the *Electrician*, called telegraphy itself an “occult art” in the pages of that magazine. In 1895, both the first X-ray image and the Lumière brothers’ cinematographs appeared. In the intervening years the germ theory had finally gained acceptance in the west, gradually superseding the long-held belief in miasma, though the latter still held some currency in the early twentieth century.

Amidst these revelations is it any wonder that when the Polish inventor Julian Ochorowicz—whose other work included improvements to the telephone and, in 1877, a design for a television—observed an unexpected result in the course of his experiments with the spirit medium Stanislaw Tomczyk, he attributed it to some sort of “photographic ideoplasty”? Judging the developed image to show “a full moon on a background of white cloud” such as the medium had observed the day before, Ochorowicz theorized a “hallucination of a photographic plate, in accord with human hallucination.” (The French cavalry officer and “photographer of fluids” Luis Darget explained his own method of thought photography in plainer terms: “It seems that the bottle-shape I was deliberately maintaining in my brain was projected onto the plate, that, luminous, it left the brain, passing through the cranium in the manner of X-rays.” As proof of his method of producing “photographs of an object thought of, on a dry plate placed at a distance from the forehead, without contact,” by which he had extracted images both from his own mind and that of his wife, Darget “sent the Academy photographs of mental forms that I had produced with thought, such as: a bottle, a second bottle, a walking stick, an eagle.”)

Even now, do the explanations of the isochromatics of photoelasticity by the celebrated engineer Gengo Matsui—who endorsed the method of analyzing structures by the multicoloured “fringes” and moiré patterns that occur as a given material’s refractive index is altered by stress—really sound so different to me than the accounts of coloured auras surrounding human beings given by the clairvoyant and Edgar Cayce, who could “not remember a time when the human beings I encountered did not register on my retina with blues and greens and reds gently pouring from their heads and shoulders”? His supposition about these colour-fields seems plausible enough: “color seems to be a characteristic of the vibration of matter, and our souls seem to reflect it in this three-dimensional world through atomic patterns. We are patterns, and we project colors, which are there for those who can see them.” And after all, Cayce, like me, had “been told that with proper equipment it is possible for almost anyone to see an aura. Equipment has been built for this purpose, and I once met a professor who said that he not only had seen auras but in his laboratory had measured and weighed them.”

Cayce, who worked as a photographer—his studios twice burnt down in separate fires—and who would fall into a sleep during which he prescribed cures that, on waking, he knew nothing about, was sensitive to the limits of our perception and the great possibilities those limits implied: “We can only see the few colors between red and violet. Beyond red on one side and violet on the other are unguessed numbers

of colors, some of them so bright and wonderful, no doubt, we would be stricken blind if by some chance we could see them. But in the fact of these colors we cannot see, these sounds we cannot hear, these thoughts we cannot apprehend, lies the hope of evolution and the promise of eternity. This is a small and narrow world, and beyond it are the glories which await our souls. But if we labor to expand our understanding and our consciousness, we can push back the limits a little bit even while here, and thus see a little more, understand a little more.”

(3)

It was of course above all the facticity of photography—its absolute believability, its status as index, as trace—that famously brought about the first stages of a crisis of painting, whose function of representing the world had suddenly become redundant. By 1915 Malevich had brought abstraction to the point of the black square, the first indication of the monochrome painting as a category, and in 1921 Rodchenko, following experiments in “linearism,” decisively inaugurated it with the three monochromes *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Yellow Colour*, and *Pure Blue Colour*. Following this absolute break with figuration, all the other categories and subcategories of painting could only continue, as Jeff Wall put it, “through the act of putting something on top of a monochrome—by effacing, supplementing, or disfiguring a monochrome.” As for the monochrome itself, it “remains the boundary-marker of a point we have not been able to reach, a reminder of the culture we have not been able to create.”

Yet the indexicality that distinguishes photography inheres in painting as well, and after the medium’s representational function had been supplanted it was the index that soon rose to the surface and spread across it, from the brushstrokes of nineteenth-century plein air easel paintings to the expansive “arenas of action” that Harold Rosenberg identified in the work of the New York School. We could almost say that it was precisely the indexical character of painting—the spell of the trace—that continued to hold our interest. Ostentatious vigour is not compulsory: the index is also there, for example, in the infinitely more sober work of On Kawara—where the time-bound act of painting is certified by the date meticulously lettered on the monochromatic ground—or in the monochrome paintings of Yves Klein, who spoke of his work as the *réalisme d’aujourd’hui*.

Completing a process that began with Rodchenko’s three primary-coloured rectangles, Klein’s countless specimens of International Klein Blue constitute the monochrome painting as *swatch*—a word that originally meant “the counterfoil of a tally”—that is, the part of a document (receipt, cheque, ticket, etc.) retained by the issuer—and came to denote a colour or material sample by way of its specific use in sixteenth-century Yorkshire, where it referred to a tally “affixed to a piece of cloth before it is put with others into the dye-kettle.” As such the swatch is connected to record keeping, to the document, to ephemera, and thus ultimately to the trace. (*Tally*, incidentally, once also had the meaning of a duplicate or a counterpart, often the corresponding negative form that would engage with a positive, a sense still recalled in the phrase “tally with.”)

(4)

In our encounters with indeterminate visual matter, from convolutions of coloured pigment to radiant emptiness, the slightest incident occasions what seems like recognition—when we don’t know what we’re looking at, the mind makes what connections it can. Thus we see camels, weasels, or whales in clouds and expressive human faces in arbitrary arrangements of inanimate objects. The term for this perceptual tendency is *pareidolia*, and in this way the figurative—like the index—persists in the most unexpected places.

Form and movement give rise to facile associations. Against the blue ground of a monochrome painting, a white form like that of a sailing vessel or the white surf against the dark swelling of the ocean or the reflection of the sun on its vast surface or a great white cloud in sharp relief against the sky—no, that’s not right: the white is the ground, but you see it first and mistake it for the figure, and the more you look at the boundaries between them the more you see how difficult it is to differentiate on-top from underneath. Then there are forms like the layered folds of some diaphanous textile, the figure you had taken for the ground, and wide vertical bands alternating between darker and lighter—cloth in the dye-kettle or the effluvium of a spirit medium’s materialization against a whirlwind of auratic energy, substantiated in a nineteenth-century cyanotype whose imperfections only seem to enhance the impression of authenticity. In red it’s different: the contrast between bands is greater, perhaps as red pigment descends more rapidly into darkness, and there are small markings like incisions or scars, and the surrounding texture has a more ominous character, seems more violently crumpled, as if by a clenched fist—but that’s not right either: looking back at the blue, are they really so different? In green it really does seem different—layers of long, thin leaves extend from dark origins gentle curves, and also the sole instance of the organic boundary of the painted surface disrupting the rigid line of the tape edge—but again, is the behaviour of the pigment so different? Are these just simplistic colour associations? Here the white areas are like roller marks, whether that means the marks of faulty application—paint roller—or the absence of ink, as in a defect of offset printing—“the greater the success, the closer it verges upon failure (as a masterpiece of painting approaches the color repro).” In yellow, there is a liquid character that is not present in the others: not only does the whole surface seem to flow down over the support, but also nowhere else are there drops like these—but that’s not true either; in fact, the same thing appears, if less prominently, in all the others.

Blue is the sea or the sky; red is the body, the viscera, the blood; green is “nature,” as distinct from both animal life and technology; yellow is fire or molten matter or the sun or the fiery apparition of the forest and the lake at sunrise: these banal associations are inevitable because what we regard as banal is actually the most common, the most fundamental experience—what could almost be called universal—what is most ordinary and therefore most consequential. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, “nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between weather and boredom.”

Going from a small number of large monochrome paintings to a larger number of small multichromatic ones, groupings of swatches in various colours seem like a catalogue of effects, each type gathered on a different field, like-with-like, variations or instances of different phenomena gathered and organized by a great collector, like pages from the logbook of some obscure science: in blue, gradients or shadows raking across fine meshes, two of which have been reduced to a pale wash, as though erased; in various near-primaries, resonance, moiré patterns, windswept dunes, waves, ocean currents or currents of air forced through white clouds of smoke; in primaries and secondaries that shift to olive and brown, I know there is a fold and a sort of diamond or harlequin pattern but when I look I can only see what I’m predisposed to recognize—the triangular peaks of pyramids in photographs from nineteenth-century expeditions; in greens and oranges, instances of glare like that of headlights on tarmac or floodlights on a wall or the flare of light leaks on film—the effect of light on surfaces; in turquoise, teal, bright red, caramel, and eggplant, subtle textures like those of a charcoal drawing or photogravure print; in black, grids, fields, and oscillations; and in bright, synthetic colours a set of largely empty frames as though defining the boundaries of an image that came out all white.

(5)

Sol Lewitt, whose own work gave rational form to the most unreasonable pursuits, made the important point that “conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.” That does not mean those conclusions are false; on the contrary, in a recorded lecture with the scientific title “Origin and Theory of the Tape Cut-Ups,” William S. Burroughs describes the discovery that “when you experiment with cut-ups over a period of time you find that some of the cut-ups and rearranged texts seem to refer to future events . . . when you cut into the present, the future leaks out.” Perhaps because there is a kind of boundlessness inherent in them, technologies of reproduction or registration in particular have always mingled with the mystical and paranormal. Robert Bresson spoke of them in terms of “divination”: “how can one not associate that name with the two sublime machines I use for my work? Camera and tape recorder carry me far away from the intelligence which complicates everything.”

The boundary between the mystical and the rational is not as well defined as is often supposed. We are forever glancing, almost seeing and almost not seeing—“moments of awareness are not complete awareness, just as moments of blindness are not completely blind,” as Agnes Martin said. Trying to “see a little more, understand a little more,” we squint towards the glare of a boundless vista opening before us whose details we are still unable to discern. Take the example of Halcyon, California: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a group of kooks associated with Theosophy moved to the sand dunes south of San Luis Obispo and just east of Oceano and the beaches of Pismo, where their temple and the plan of their rudimentary town were designed so as to correctly distribute energy and “raise human ‘vibrations’ to a more spiritual level.” If the early settlers’ fascination with magnetism, electricity, X-rays, auras, vibrations, “vivifying currents,” and the “radiant forces resident in the sand dunes” manifested mainly in what seemed like mystification and medical quackery, the second generation of “dunites” included Russell and Sigurd Varian, whose many inventions included the klystron microwave oscillating tube—the first microwave tube and the basis for particle acceleration, radar technology (first put into service in the detection of German submarines during the Second World War), and ultra-high-frequency television—and George Russell Harrison, a pioneering contributor to atomic research and inventor of the echelle spectrograph. The three boys grew up together in Halcyon, conducting experiments in the “piecemeal laboratory” of their childhood. Thus this strange settlement between the dunes and the waves really did represent, as Paul Eli Ivey writes, “a coming of higher vibrations, as both microwave technology and ‘atom smashing’ spectroscopy found their most important inventors and practitioners in the sons of the first settlers of Halcyon. The esoteric forces spoken of by their fathers, although based in occult ideas, were increasingly realized as usable though intangible material forces, arrived at through a stunning mix of intuitive creativity and scientific precision.”

One of the various artists and cultural figures who spent time in Halcyon was Edward Weston, who made photographs of the windswept dunes—“straight” photographs that might be taken for the moiré patterns recorded in material under stress, or for the oscillations of a seismograph measuring the vibration of the earth, or for the waves of electromagnetic radiation; he contributed one of these photographs to an issue of Halcyon’s short-lived *Dune Forum*.

Among the endless perseverations in Weston’s letters and in his famous daybooks and other notes there is a reflection on a photograph of a tree he had made. The successful print was consolation for the tremendous difficulties he was having with a photograph of a cloud—an impossible white cut-out in the sky that slipped too readily into nothingness, an image so slight that the white paper it was printed on was enough to disrupt it.

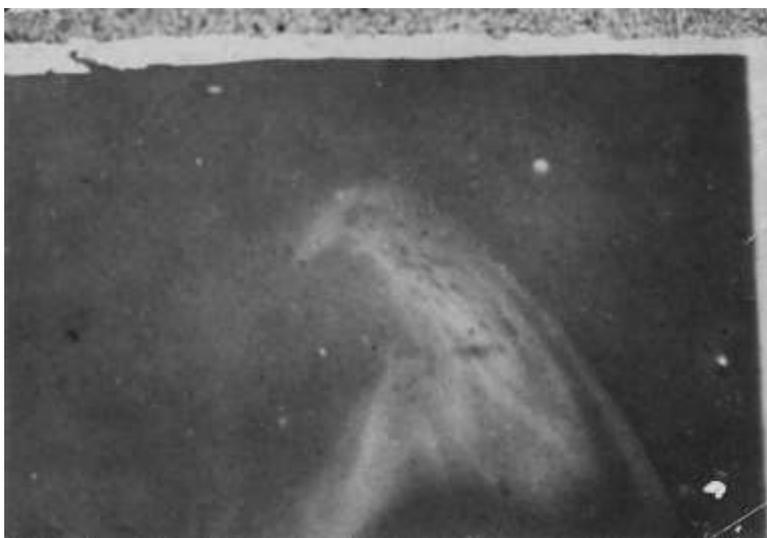
Desperate, rife with dashes, his reflection on the tree photograph summarizes to some degree what it is like to encounter and attempt to think through the mystery and facticity of these monochromes and multichromes, these pictures that are both painting and impression, original and replica, error and

FrameWork 5/21

discovery—first in the closed gallery, afterwards in the blinding glare of the midday sun, and now in the burnt-out building that is disappearing around me, unable to see well, hands failing, fatigue taking over, alone with this task. The perplexed Weston writes: “The trunk of a palm towering up into the sky—and not even a real one—a palm on a piece of paper—a reproduction of nature—I wonder why it should affect others so emotionally—and I wonder what prompted me to record it—many photographs might have been done of this palm—yet this picture is but a photograph of a palm—plus something—something—and I cannot quite say what that something is—and who is there to tell me?”



Edward Weston. *Landscape with Clouds, Prescott, Arizona*. 1938



Louis Darget. *L'Aigle*. 29 June 1896



Fig. 25 -Close Marks and Low Spots caused by Dirtiness during Casting

25



Fig. 26 -Streaks caused by Marks left by Grinding Operations after Casting

26

Jack Deller. Figures 25 and 26 in *Printers Rollers: Their Manufacture, Use, and Care* (London: Charles Skilton). 1959

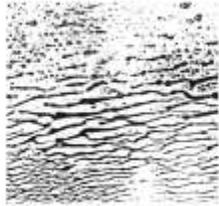


Fig. 29 -Clusters of Ink building up on Steel Distributing Roller

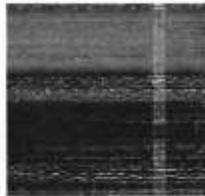
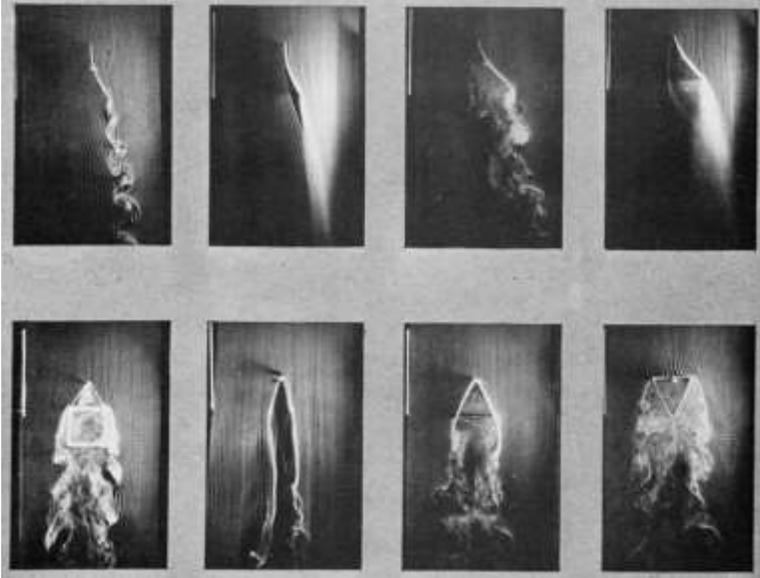


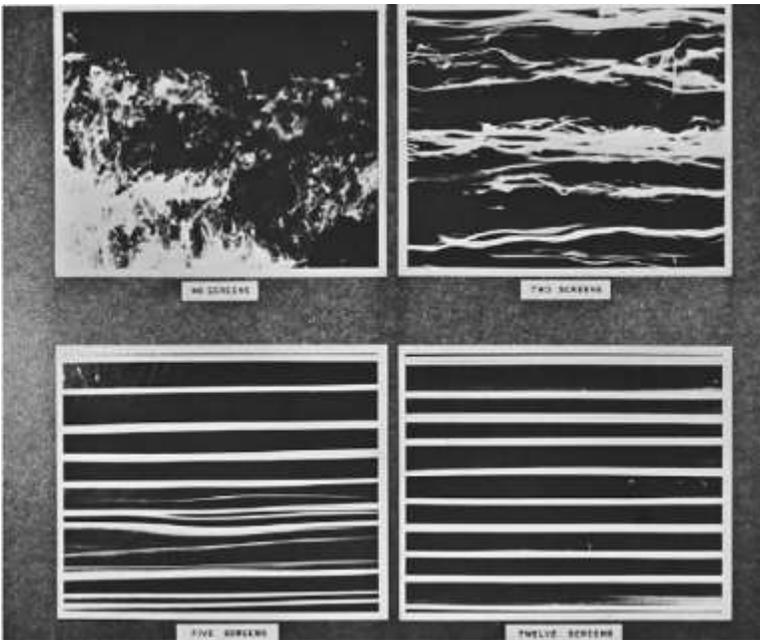
Fig. 30 -Corrugations on Roller Surface caused by Ink piling up in Ridges. (White Line caused by high spot in form)

31

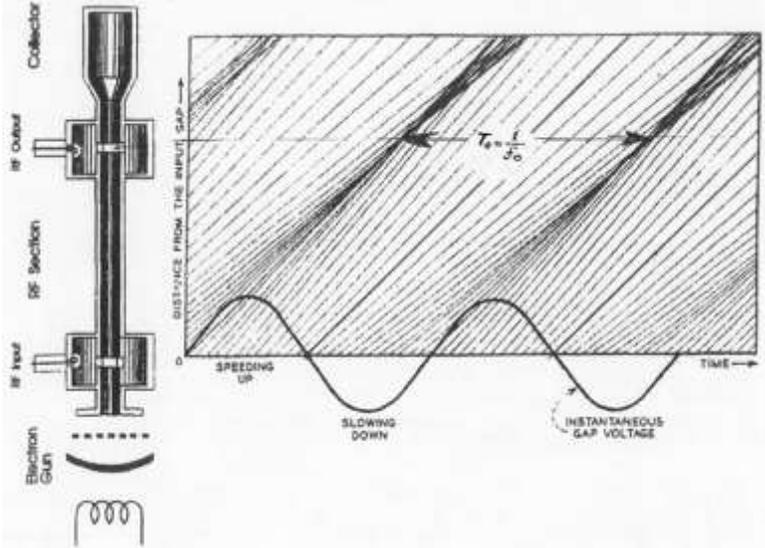
Jack Deller. Figures 29 and 30 in *Printers Rollers: Their Manufacture, Use, and Care* (London: Charles Skilton). 1959



Étienne-Jules Marey. *Air Movement in Collision with Objects of Different Shapes*. 1901



F. N. M. Brown. *Plate with Results of Different Alignments (0-, 2-, 5-, and 12-grid screens) in Wind Channel, without Obstacle*. 1971



Russell Varian and Sigurd Varian. Klystron. 1937



Edward Weston. *Dunes, Oceano*. 1936