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SYMPHONY IN GREY

Kjetil Ansgar Jakobsen is a historian, professor and writer based in Oslo and Bodø. In this essay he writes about Gaylen Gerber's *Support* series based on the cultural history of colours.

The cultural history of the grey shade is colourful. Let us begin in earliest modernity with the English philosopher-scientist Francis Bacon, who lived around the year 1600. In his utopian novel *The New Atlantis* he describes an involuntary journey to the imaginary ideal society Bensalem, which is led by scientists who devote all their efforts to the creation of new technology and progress in the natural sciences, starting from controlled experiments. Much is as one would expect in a book written by a philosopher who is often called "the father of modernity." But something is also quite different, and that has to do with colours. The first scientist the narrator meets arrives in a chariot without wheels, draped in blue velvet with gold embroideries "and two footmen on each side in the like attire." "The chariot was all of cedar, gilt, and adorned with crystal; save that the fore-end had panels of sapphires, set in borders of gold; and the hinder-end the like of emeralds of the Peru colour....The chariot was covered with cloth of gold tissued upon blue. He had before him fifty attendants, young men all, in white satin loose coats to the mid leg."

The scientist, we are told, is dressed in a robe of fine black cloth, with wide sleeves and a cape. His trousers are of white linen, he wears remarkable gloves studded with jewels, and shoes in peach-coloured velvet, while his hat is as round as a Spanish montera.

As a philosopher of science, Bacon was well ahead of his time but the aesthetics and the human relations in the New Atlantis were those of his own time. When Bacon wanted to enhance the power and legitimacy of science, he dressed the scientists up in colourful and costly robes of the type that princes and nobles used in the Renaissance.

Now we move three hundred years forward in time, to the USA during the Great Depression at the beginning of the 1930s. For a short period, while tens of millions were unemployed, Howard Scott and his mass movement Technocracy Inc. stole the biggest headlines. The movement's analysis and programme predicted that the market economy was facing collapse and that engineers and researchers should control the economy using a system of "objective" prices, based on how much energy was required to produce a commodity. Like Bacon, Scott too was preoccupied with colours. But now it was no longer the diversity and intensity of colours that were to express the power of science. Scott's technocrats instead wore grey uniforms and arranged motorized demonstrations where all the vehicles, including the iconic yellow school buses, were painted over in grey.

The visions of Francis Bacon and Howard Scott have much in common. Both imagine a society where scientific expertise directs development and where technology liberates people from need and worry. In the course of the three hundred years that separate them, however, something drastic has happened to the semiotics of colour, and especially the ability of the grey shades to express rank and power.

In pre-modern and early modern European society it was often determined by law who was allowed to wear strong colours such as red, purple, blue, black and yellow. These were colours that were difficult to obtain in nature, which had to be manufactured in costly processes, and which were therefore reserved for the most powerful people in society. Peasants and paupers dressed in grey, which was the colour of undyed wool. The Franciscans, who reacted against the wealth and luxury of the Church, and wanted to live modestly like the first Christians, were called Greyfriars.

Oil paint on mirror with gilt frame from the Kennedy Winter White House, Palm Beach, Florida, mid-20th century, installation view

Besides being a philosopher and natural scientist, Bacon was Lord Chancellor of England with the title Viscount St. Alban. He lived in a society where communication mainly took place face to face, not at a distance through communication media. To be effective, power had to be made present in the situation. This created a mode of being that we would today call theatrical. The nobleman's attributes stood for power. This applied to the sword, the armour and the coat of arms, but also to cosmetics and wigs, the colourful coats and cloaks, the breeches, the thin hose and the high heels, along with the balletic way of moving learned in the fencing hall and on the dance floor. The peasants wore clogs, noblemen strutted around in high-heeled slippers and were called "the high and mighty." Modern societies like ours, as well as the one Howard Scott lived in, have reacted against this kind of rhetoric of power. Power relations are determined by money, legal codices, academic degrees and job titles, not by who wears the most showy robes. Power is something one has by virtue of belonging to a larger, invisible apparatus. Titles and positions remain constant regardless of the situation. The risk that the doctor may be degraded to a nurse or the professor to an assistant is not at stake.

Gaylen Gerber, Edvard Munch Studio, Ekely, Oslo, 2019 installation view

In modern societies the culture of colour is therefore quite different from what it was in the Renaissance. Power must still be expressed and symbolized, but it is not done by way of the rare and bombastic, rather by way of the monochrome and neutral. The power of capital is expressed through the businessman's grey clothing, that of science through the doctor's white coat. This reversal happened in the wake of the great French Revolution towards the end of the 1700s. A symbolic change occurred in the 1830s, when Louis Philippe, the last king of France, appeared in a grey suit and with shoes that were suitable for walking.

The power attributes of the aristocracy had not gone, but had emigrated to the feminine domain and to art. The power rhetoric of the Baroque became the gender rhetoric of bourgeois society. The attributes of the nobility lived on as symbols of femininity: colourful robes, wigs, make-up and high-heeled shoes. Even the musical instruments of the court, the harp and piano, which had been forbidden in the time of Robespierre, were passed on in the 1800s as part of the practice of femininity. Ironically, bourgeois feminine culture drew on the traditions of the nobility's masculine warrior ethos. In visual art, the colours and the pre-scientific myths lived on: with the Impressionists, the Symbolists and the Fauvists.

Since then, this too has changed. Neither the modern woman nor art is content to be purely decorative or to feed daydreams. Women seek power and this leads them too to the monochrome.

We see them in the white coats of the health institutions and in the grey or beige costumes of the world of business and politics. The cultural elite for its part trusts in black, a colour which for centuries has been associated with the spiritual, with priests and professors, magicians and judges. The relationship between system and individual is subtle in the monochrome cultures of modernity. Howard Scott's Technocracy Inc. never became much more than a curiosity. Technocratic power is in fact invisible. The idea of bringing it out into the light of day with grey uniforms and grey-painted vehicles and objects was a great misunderstanding, politically speaking. Technocracy Inc used grey in an ostentatious manner, which meant that it lost its ability to symbolize the anonymous apparatus. Above all, Scott and his followers lacked an understanding of the interplay between individuality and system in modernity. The businessman's grey and the cultural elite's black are only uniforms in an ironic sense, they leave scope for individual expression, while at the same time the 'uniform' signals a connection with the structures of power. The use of uniforms by Technocracy Inc in the 1930s followed the pattern of the fascist movements in Italy and Germany, but without the fascist cult of the Führer and sense of personal charisma.

In the twentieth century, the monochrome became the new power rhetoric. And thus it also became a theme in art, which has always been interested in the rhetoric of power. The monochrome as gesture in painting was invented around 1920 by the Russians Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko. In the heyday of modernist painting around the middle of the twentieth century Robert Rauschenberg worked with black or white surfaces and Yves Klein with blue. Early in the 1960s Jasper Johns painted a long series of monochromes in grey, exploring the melancholia of the grey shades.

Gaylen Gerber, Edvard Munch Studio, Ekely, Oslo, 2019, installation view

For Oslobiennalen, Gaylen Gerber has contributed new works in his series Supports. Objects that carry with them strong, deep meanings from their original cultural and historical contexts are painted over in grey or white and exhibited together. In the Oslo Myntgata neighbourhood he has covered the large old German barracks with grey. This is the last example of this kind of wartime architecture remaining in the centre of Oslo. The authorities have said no to protecting the building, pointing to the fact that similar buildings will be preserved at nearby Ormsund and Hovedøya. The artist is free to do what he wants with the barracks, since it is to be excised from history anyway. But what will happen to the building now that Gerber has marked it out as art? Will it still be demolished?

The elegant Art Deco studio that Edvard Munch had built at Ekely remains in use on a daily basis as a studio for artists. Here Gerber is exhibiting Supports. These may be works by other contemporary artists, cult objects or popular-culture icons, which the artist picks out and paints over in institutional white or grey. And thus the artist combines two of the most important gestures in contemporary art since Malevich and Duchamp: monochrome and ready-made or 'found art.' Duchamp incorporated objects from everyday life – a urinal or a bottle rack – into art by putting them on pedestals. In a way Gerber does the opposite. He ejects art objects from art by letting them borrow the grey and white authority of power. But the paradoxes pile up here, for this is done as art and within the art system.

Gaylen Gerber, Edvard Munch Studio, Ekely, Oslo, 2019, installation view

The word 'support' comes from the Latin verb supportare, which means to transfer or transport. It is a compound of sub (under) and portare (to carry) and thus strictly speaking means not to carry over, but to carry under! What is it that is carried under Gerber's grey? What do these Supports carry with them from their mythical and often non-western contexts, when they now stand in the studio of the great western modernist Edvard Munch? Do they lose authenticity and meaning? A Chinese statuette from the Ming dynasty, a fetish head from the Brazilian interior, a bench designed by Alfred Loos, a film box from Walt Disney, pottery made by indigenous North Americans in the 1800s, a 1500-year-old Indian woman's bust and a similar work from Nigeria in the twentieth century, a 3-4,000-year-old plaque from Mesopotamia and a work by Darren Bader from 2014 stand side by side, all enveloped in the same 'neutral' colours. What happens to these artworks from many cultures when Gerber paints them over with his responsive, sensitive strokes? Do they share in modernity's anonymous rational power, in the grey of capital and the white of science? In that case, though, it is ironic that the objects remain art to an even greater extent after Gerber's colour treatment. History and magic retreat into the background, but form is foregrounded. We see the formal similarities – and differences – among objects that otherwise lack a common defining character.

But then there is something more. Gerber is a Chicago artist, and there is something about the grey shade with which he covers the objects that makes me think of the dirty big city snow in which people in the winter cities of Chicago and Oslo trample around for large parts of the year. The association goes to snow, not ice. Ice and snow are both frozen water; the chemical formula is identical. People who live in regions with mild winters often hardly distinguish between ice and snow. It is different for those who come from snowy cities like Chicago and Oslo; for them ice and snow have a different phenomenology. Ice is cold and sharp, snow is balmy and protective. If you get lost in the mountains you can dig down into the snow and keep warm. Ice cancels out time. Snow, on the other hand, stands for oblivion, sometimes also for reconciliation and hope. It covers tracks and creates a new, virginal terrain.

The art institution has traditionally taken the side of ice against snow. Art is lifted out of time, one 'freezes' it by covering the painting with glass and putting the object in a display case. Gerber does not freeze the object; rather, he lets it disappear into the city's dirty snow. At Myntgata this is done with a site-specific object, an anonymous piece of architecture erected by Adolf Hitler's army during the Second World War. The history of the building is associated with pain and conflict. German barracks were often set up with slave labour. After World War II and during the Cold War, the building was used by the Norwegian military intelligence service, which probably carried out top secret operations from there. The ghosts of the past echo through this provisional facility, which has stood for so long. Packed in city snow in the middle of summer, it is as if the building at last finds a kind of peace.