Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes, Whitechapel Gallery, London
Lucy Dawe-Lane

Entering the lower galleries at Whitechapel to view Mel Bochner’s show If the Colour Changes involves consciously moving through a red line taped across the glass of the double doors, at the artist’s eye level. Once inside, it becomes clear that this line links two of Bochner’s historic measurement works: a pair of black and white photographic prints, Actual Size (Hand and Face), 1968/2002, which flank the doorway. This format first dates from 1969, when the work was titled Actual Size at Eye Level, and so already doubt is thrown over exactly what piece is on exhibition here, or even which century it hails from. This exhibition will tour to Munich and Porto, and at each venue a slightly different list of works will be shown, already documented ahead of time as digital installation views in the catalogue. It becomes clear that an exhibition, like a work of art, has always been a proposition in Bochner’s hands, a temporary configuration of possible worlds.

At the time of the first measurement series, Bochner stated, ‘My intention is to change the work of art’s function for the viewer. Art would go from being a record of someone else’s perception to becoming the recognition of your own.’ (‘Interview with Elayne Varian’, 1969) As if on cue, the unguent stench of drying paint emanates from the massive painting which blocks progress into the gallery space beyond. ‘Blah Blah Blah,’ 2011, is installed full frontal as a blow to the senses. Its ten panels, mounted two high, each contain four repetitions of the four-letter word of the title. Garish, commercially produced colours, mechanically imprinted onto black velvet, ooze from the marbled block capitals. Wondering whether this is a painting or a print, a single work or a multiple, one’s whole field of vision is taken up with Bochner’s phatic words. While signifying nothing, they nevertheless exuberantly imply a great deal, perhaps about the current state of painting.

In a 2012 documentary film, Bochner describes the phrase Blah Blah Blah as ‘the black hole of language’, even as he paints and then cheerfully rubs out the eponymous words, in the process of making a white on grey painting in another series. Filmed by his wife, Lisbeth Marano, as freeform jazz plays in the studio, the artist explains how ‘Blah’ can be used as a shorthand in conversation, connecting people who understand each other; but on the other hand it might evoke ‘the endlessness, emptiness, and darkness of the discourse.’

The perverse nature of language, once it hits the world of bodies and things, is what connects all the work in this show, linking a selection of Bochner’s celebrated early conceptual pieces to the current large-scale Thesaurus Paintings. The curator, Achim Borchart-Hume, has taken the artist’s perennial interests in measurement, the conventions of media, and the position (both literal and cultural) of the viewer, and has nailed them to the mast of colour. Bochner often talks about his early investigations as ‘bracketing’ painting, a philosophical move which parks something in order to then proceed with a particular line of inquiry. In this show, it is the greyscale of the early conceptual works which is bracketed, but...
those chosen for inclusion in this exhibition do not all perform as colour’s chromophobic ‘other’, as might be expected of historical conceptualism. Colour was present all along, we realize, but always for a reason, and never taken for granted, any more than the other conventions of artistic media could be.

Other works in the lower galleries challenge the invisibility of conceptual art’s principle means, namely photography and text, but they do not perform a retrospective function, as all are recent iterations of earlier pieces. The Colour Crumples series, for example, originally created in 1967 using hand dyed photocopies of images of crumpled grids, were digitally printed into eight foot high C-prints in 2011. These hover just proud of the rear wall of the gallery, on aluminium mounts, cut to fit their silhouettes. They engage us on the same epic scale as much contemporary photography now does, but this also retrofits them to engage, for the first time, with minimalist discourses on medium specificity and the phenomenological encounter.

Such temporal re-orientation is one of many modes of displacement that characterize Bochner’s modus operandi, one which allows him to engage in a dialogue across the history of his own practice, now spanning almost half a century. Each artwork is re-made using a variety of means. Both media and materials form a circular ‘delivery system’ (Bochner’s phrase), within which none of the permutations is either permanent or prioritized. Mediation on the Theorem of Pythagoras, 1972/2010, for example, is installed in the upper galleries in a version which uses nuggets of coloured glass. This dates from an exhibition at Studio Casoli in Milan in 1991, formerly Fontana’s studio building, where, fortuitously, a box of Fontana’s glass remained. Sparking a new iteration of Bochner’s entire Theory of Sculpture series, this also reflected back on Bochner’s connections to Arte Povera artists and institutions forged in the 1970s. Bochner had then used hazelnuts and small stones to make this work, found in situ when he first tried out the idea at a temple dedicated to Pythagoras, in the heel of Italy. His use of such ‘parsimonious’ materials was the subject of great jokes with Robert Smithson, who was also using rocks, but on a different scale, at that time.

The title of this exhibition is part of a quotation used by Bochner in 1998, when he finally decided to work from within the conventions of the orthogonal stretched canvas. In If the Colour Changes (#4), 1998, the passage from Wittgenstein, ‘If the colour changes, you are no longer looking at the one I meant’, is overwritten in an indecipherable riot of colours in both German and English. Here, finally, Bochner’s art no longer brackets but rather embodies the problematics of painting. The Thesaurus Paintings in the final gallery constitute what followed in this century. Again, they are a return: to the methodology used in the tiny 1966 thesaurus portrait drawings, where Bochner began. Each painting starts with a word or phrase, followed by a carefully orchestrated list of substitutes which degenerate in tone using the street smart, bodily oriented slang that appears in the updated 21st century edition. From ‘silence’ to ‘shut the fuck up!’ and from ‘obsolete’ to ‘shit-canned’, we inhabit a shifting language world. It appears to operate on the level of the hive, providing a mirror of who and how we are, collectively. And yet colour is here too, contradicting, cutting in, insinuating. Colour is a silent language that speaks differently to each of us as embodied subjects. It can hit as hard as the verbs nonetheless, as Bochner’s collective palette is beyond taste, if not pleasure. He executes the lowercase words from top right to bottom left in meticulous freehand brushwork, choosing each colour change as he goes so that, just as in his early serial works, the overall result is only disclosed after completion. There are no colour studies. Instead, written lists of colour mixes are recorded on a ‘working drawing,’ executed while painting. The titles take us on a journey through the history of easel painting, from burnt sienna to dioxine purple, as evocative as a poem. The catalogue’s endpapers reproduce one of Bochner’s shopping lists, further sorted into lists of commercial colour brands: Williamsburg, Old Holland, Holbein, Winsor & Newton... The world of words and the world of colours collide in the mind, and any sense of origin, priority or hierarchy, as with Bochner’s works as a whole, has to be let go.

This returns us to the nature of the proposition of the whole exhibition. Any nostalgic whiff of the second-hand black and white Bochner of art history books is denied.

us by both curator and artist, as these works have been remade, reconfigured, revised and in some cases also transposed through new technologies. They are also re-contextualized here in relation to the 21st century work, confirming Bochner’s claim that painting had always been the missing signifier in his early work. Now that he engages with this problematic from within, we are confronted with serial methodology ‘live’ as it probes the limits of painting’s conventions extant today; and maybe he finds such a sensitive limit in our expectations of colour composition. The work is undeniably challenging and by no means does it sit tastefully alongside other contemporary serial artworks, which appear obeisant in comparison. Bochner inherited the question of how to proceed with painting and it seems his answer, to borrow the final words of Marano’s film, is ‘to be continued’…

Lucy Dawe-Lane is currently researching Mel Bochner’s work for a PhD in visual culture on the aesthetics of conceptual art at NCAD. Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes was on view 11 October – 30 December 2012.