Hungarian University of Fine Arts Doctoral School

The **RAL CLASSIC spectrum**
Colour in the context of industrial standardisation

Theses of the DLA dissertation

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This dissertation outlines a specific history of modern colour standardisation in the light of developments over the last 100 years. In 1925, the RAL Institute (Reichs-Ausschuss für Lieferbedingungen) was founded in the Weimar Republic, with the task of increasing the efficiency of the German economy after the First World War. As part of a comprehensive harmonisation programme, one of the first measures taken by RAL was to standardise the colour shades used in industry.

In 1927, 40 colours were standardised under the name RAL 840, which formed the basis of the colour collection known today as RAL Classic and currently defining 216 shades.

The aim of this research is to explore and contextualise the history of RAL Classic as accurately as possible along the following lines:

- How was the RAL institute's work on colour innovative compared to previous colour standardisation initiatives? What criteria were used to develop RAL Classic and what are the criteria that are still valid today?
- To what extent did the development of RAL's colour collection depend on World War II, the needs of the war industry and the strategies of visual branding and propaganda of the NSDAP?
- Was there any connection between RAL and the Bauhaus school, either in practice or in the theoretical approach of the initiative?
- What is the relationship between the idea of modernism and the rationality of technical modernisation?
- What exactly does the standard mean, what previous attempts have been made to standardise the spectrum, and how does RAL's work compare to the work of major international standards bodies such as ISO, and what distinguishes it from other government colour standards such as the American Federal Standard or the British Colour Standard?
- How does RAL Classic solve the problem of *colour and language* by using codes to denote colours, and what is the reason for the change introduced in the 1970s that reassigned denominator names to codes?
- What are the aspects that are the keys to the long-term survival of the RAL Classic and its position of global importance?

By clarifying the above questions, I conclude that standardisation brings a level of change to the previous discourse of inter- and multidisciplinary disciplines of colour that I consider to be a paradigm shift. This completely recalibrated concept of colour is of course not only represented by RAL Classic, and by extension I will refer to this phenomena as *colour 2.0*, and interpret it in the following terms:

- Standardised colour is an abstract phenomenon that can be defined by measurements (using standardised procedures)

- As a consequence, the colour standard is a concept that distances itself from the physical reality of colour (i.e. primarily pigments), becomes referential and overrides the previous (cultural and symbolic) role of colour.
- In this sense, *colour 2.0* does not exist in and for itself, but always serves an interest, represents a company, a product or a message, and can be appropriated, 'corrupted', manipulated, but also utopian.
- How can a colour be a trademark?
- The main driver of *colour 2.0* has been the liberal market logic of global capitalism, and the RAL as a global surveillance institution has become a visual authority of epistemological importance.
- While the European RAL dominates the heavy industry, the American *Pantone* is primarily important in the world of light industry and printing. There are many parallels between the two companies' missions.
- A specific field of *colour 2.0* is trend scouting or colour forecasting, i.e. the analysis and prediction of trends that investigate and influence the global presence of colour. The *Pantone Colour of the Year, RAL Colour Feelings+*, the *Colour Marketing Group*, or *Intercolor* (in the work of which a hungarian representation is also involved) are just a few examples of these practices, which aim to forecast colour in various professional circles, weather in open or strictly closed settings, but ultimately in a colour futurology context. These practices are generally characterised by an attempt to reattach a kind of cultural narrative to colour, which has been alienated by standardisation, and to return the virtualised concept of colour to the level of physical textures and materials.
- Standardised colour greatly aids the everyday navigation of global urban existence, but how much does a fixed colour palette constrain the human imagination?

My thesis seeks to highlight the dialectics of the capitalocene through contemporary examples of standardised colour, some of which are:

- the legal controversy over the EU classification of *titanium dioxide*, which has been going on for almost 10 years
- the phenomena of the "stone" called *Fordite*
- the moral and ecological debates surrounding the *2019 Pantone colour of the year*
- *Pantone 448C* - the "most anti-capitalist" colour

Finally I illustrate the artistic aspects of this theme with the following case studies:

- Presentation of the exhibition *Farbe ist program, Teil 1*
- Subjective analysis by Liam Gillick, Navid Nuur and Charlotte Posenenske

The thesis concludes with a summary of an interview I conducted in 2022 with Timo Rieke, head of the Colour Design Department at HAWK - University of Applied Arts and Sciences in

Hildesheim, Germany. Rieke is an external collaborator of RAL, co-creator of the *RAL Colour Feelings+* and a member of the *International Institute Trendscouting*. The discussion sums up well the context for understanding the contemporary role of colour.

In my opinion, a rather conservative and practical paradigm still prevails in the teaching of colour studies and colour theory in most art universities today. The aim of my dissertation is to open up, as far as possible, the closed frameworks along which we think about colour.

This thesis is an attempt to to talk about colour in the same context as, say, the concept of *pictorial turn* initiated in regards to contemporary visuality and representation.