**Jean Spencer: The Ideological Dimensions of Colour**

Charley Peters

Jean Spencer’s early work was articulated by an acute numerical or geometric logic. Her sequential white reliefs explored the fall of light and shadow across shifting rhythms of shapes and forms, and were defined by strict mathematical principles. Although her work became no less rigorous or precise, in the late 1970s Spencer started to move away from her previous observance of mathematical systems, which she had explored through three-dimensional constructions, towards a practice of painting; her research into colour becoming a major preoccupation of her work for the rest of her life. Material from her archive, given to Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, by her sister after Spencer’s death in 1998 illustrates the depth of her relationship with colour and the shift from her early monochromatic reliefs to painting. Containing many previously unpublished examples of personal correspondence, exhibition proposals and Spencer’s own notes and documentation of her work, information contained in the Jean Spencer Archive demonstrates her meticulous processes of research and experimentation in painting and colour theory in the last two decades of her life, and in addition reveals an expanded discourse of feminist consciousness through her sustained practice of constructive abstraction and her working relationships with other artists.

Reflecting on her transition from reliefs to painting in the catalogue to the 1996 exhibition at Kettle’s Yard, *Testing the System*, Spencer wrote that, ‘there’s a limit with how much you can do with a relief, because there aren’t that many dimensions to it. Because of the dimensionality of colour, and because of its geometry, you can say all these things…’ She saw colour as having three dimensions: a dimension of *hue*, for example, its redness, its greenness, its yellowness or its blueness; a *value* such as its lightness or darkness; and a *chroma*, referring to its intensity or saturation. For Spencer these elements made a spatial map of colour that she would refer to as an ‘array’, in which any colour could be related visually and conceptually to any other colour. In these colour systems, Spencer was striving to find an equilibrium, where no colour was more dominant than another. Adjacent colours were placed to encourage visual harmony, rather than divergence, by her use of systematised variations of hue, tone, brightness and saturation. She combined areas of colour from a distinctive palette, whose tonal values and luminosity were carefully arranged to create a visual dialogue. The deceivingly simple colour arrangements were based on Spencer’s thorough research, and her notebooks contain meticulous analysis of theories of colour, and diagrams documenting the results of her mixing different pigments in varying quantities over many years of focused research.

In 1986 Spencer participated in the project *Kunstsommer Kleinsassen* in central Germany, which was to prove significant in the development of both her painting and the dialogues she instigated around her practice. She was invited to join Arbeitskreis in 1977, a pan-European constructivist group. Arbeitskreis organised workshops and symposia as well as exhibitions, and *Kunstsommer Kleinsassen*, organised in association with the municipal authorities in Fulda, proposed for artwork to be placed on public view in each of 16 villages strung out along a rural road, which was named the Kunststrasse for this purpose. All the artists except Spencer produced outdoor sculptures, one for each village. Spencer, however, produced 16 paintings. The works in *16 Part Painting* were identical in size, but differed in colour through a systematised series of chromatic variations. All 16 were first exhibited in the principal village, Kunststation, after which the body of paintings were separated and one was shown in each of the 16 villages in the Hofbieber District. The paintings explored the geometric and chromatic characteristics of ‘16’: quarternity, complementarity, opposition, orthogonality and diagonality. The development of the series is documented in a collection of small colour studies in oil on card, 9.5cm x 9.5cm, which now form part of her archive, alongside Spencer’s original written proposal for the project. The paintings are relational, the palette generated to complement, contrast or complete the system of colour in each other painting. Her proposal text suggests that the work is underpinned by principles of equality, not only in the colour relationships in each painting but also through the manifestation of the series as a whole, ‘The presentation promotes collaborative rather than competitive response to the work; the paintings do not compete with other works for space or attention (as in gallery or museum presentations); the respondents to not compete with each other for ownership. The work of ‘reading’ the paintings is collectivised’.

The *Kleinsassen* paintings formed the largest single group of colour works Spencer produced. Despite presenting a harmonious grouping of colour arrays Spencer saw the series as a signifying moment in the further development of her thinking about relational colour and how it is perceived. In her lecture notes for a talk presented at *Konkret 10*, Nuremberg in 1990, she wrote, ‘from 1987 – after the Kleinsassen painting – the colour system and my conception of the array appeared less and less satisfactory; too many inconsistencies, too many fudges, patchworks, ‘almosts the sames’…’ Spencer was concerned about ‘radical inequalities’ between different segments of the spectrum in pigment, or perhaps moreover, in human vision. She wrote that colour arrays are seen in nature in what she described as an ideal state, but that what we each understand of colour and their relationships is as informed by what we have learned to perceive about colour as it is by a natural, or ‘pure’ vision: ‘The way we have learned to think…is dominated by language, both the structure of language (syntax) and its power to name, or classify.’ Spencer’s notes describe these questions about the universality of colour, perception and language after *Kleinsassen* as her developing ‘doubts’ about the ‘ways we have learned to think’ about colour. She describes a colour language in the structural sense of a ‘system of signification’ in which our understanding of one term is possible only in the context of all others, by learning to understand all the terms it is not, the terms it is in opposition to, or in a sequence with.

Spencer’s doubts about our understanding of a learned perception of colour coincided with her starting to work with a group of women artists who were engaged in discussion about gender and sexual politics in constructive art. This collaboration seems significant in Spencer’s developing practice of painting, her articulation of colour and, increasingly, a wider political context for it. Spencer’s concerns with equality were not limited to her pursuit of producing an egalitarian array of colour; she was a committed feminist in her values, with a deep interest in sociology. This led to her meeting the sociologist Elizabeth Chaplin in 1982, who was studying the role of artists and artists’ groups in society and looking closely at gender bias in different types of art. At Spencer’s suggestion, the women artists involved in Chaplin’s research – all working in what they described as a ‘Systematic Constructive Art Practice’ – formed a collective which she named *Countervail*, drawing the word from the writings of Julia Kristeva. They held regular meetings to discuss Chaplin’s ideas and their own approaches to constructive abstraction, Spencer providing much of the conceptual and administrative drive. She also worked closely with Chaplin to organise several exhibitions of their work between 1992 and 1994. The members of *Countervail* resisted the belief that a constructive art practice based on systems or mathematical principals was an intrinsically male form of expression, rejecting the widely held feminist belief that all forms of rationality were contrary to the female position. For women practitioners of constructive work in the late 1980s/early 1990s the situation was all the more negative: constructivism was seen on the right as socialist, and on the left as a face of elitist Modernist abstraction. In addition, mainstream feminist art critique prioritised (and arguably, still does prioritise) gender-related issues, and women artists working outside of these subject matters were considered to lack a feminist consciousness. The idea of abstract painting having a feminist origin and therefore being political is still not widely written about, and it is difficult to determine abstract painting’s relationship to feminist ideology if abstraction is viewed as a form of individual expression free from political subject matter; it is hard to analyse by an audience, and therefore irrelevant to feminist political goals. However, can the content of an artist’s work be completely separated from her/his political beliefs? Jean Spencer’s commitment to painting an equality of colour and understanding our learned perception of colour surely cannot be wholly disconnected from her *Countervail* discussions of equality in a social context and our learned perception of gender. In 1990 Spencer wrote *Three “Essays”: Classification, History, Politics*, a set of discussion notes for the participants of *Countervail*. In this text she returns again to the learned language of perception as something opposite to what we understand as ‘natural’, but this time Spencer is writing about our understanding of gender, using similar terms to those she previously used to discuss colour, ‘the fundamental difference instituted in human societies is that between male and female; so fundamental, so deeply institutionalised that it overdetermines all social relations, all politics, all h/Histories; it appears as if natural (and is largely maintained through appeal to Nature) and, because there is no mobility, no “betweeness”, this difference is reduced to opposition.’

For the 1992 *Countervail* exhibition at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, Spencer made a set of four paintings and contributed text to the catalogue introduction to contextualise the project, ‘Tocountervailis not simply to counter what prevails….It is to intervene actively in prevailing value systems, to insist on others measured in and for themselves, to be a power/force equal and active…’ In her *Four Part Double Square Paintings* she employed a colour system of ‘differences: opposite to this, adjacent to that, equal to the other’ and questions if colour can by and of itself‘countervail the norm?’ For Spencer, painted colour was made twice; once organised into a pictorial form, and then secondly re-configured in the conscious/unconsciousness of the viewer, or in her words, ‘a (social) subject’. Spencer therefore, saw the pictorial practice of colour as a process of conflict and debate, a cerebral space of ‘countervailing energies, of power sharing and struggle.’ The *Countervail* project – the discussion texts, conversations, exhibitions and symposia – was informed by feminist ideology but as a group the individual members did not reach an agreement on whether a Systematic Constructive Art Practice is a feminist ideology in itself. Archival notes and letters exchanged between Spencer and other *Countervail* members reveal parallels between a developing understanding of colour in her work and more ideological concerns about her position as a woman artist, perhaps therefore enabling Spencer to articulate a closer connection between her work and her beliefs, both conceptually and linguistically. Abstract painting has offered illusions of objectivity and idealism, which limits its potential to be seen as political. However, if we continue to respond to abstract painting as being apolitical then this sustains the myth-making that categorises it as an embodiment of Modernist elitism or objective expression. The *Countervail* discussions initiated by Spencer, through which women artists shared experiences and different viewpoints of their work and their individual perception of constructive abstraction as a feminist practice, has some parallels to consciousness raising techniques. Talking about abstract painting allowed a new language for its interpretation to evolve and for it to be shared with others. Reflecting on their working relationship in the catalogue to Spencer’s posthumous retrospective at the Yarrow Gallery in 2006, Elizabeth Chaplin wrote, ‘…In short, what Jean did for me was to blur the distinction between artist and social scientist. She did this by bringing feminist theory and practice to bear on that distinction. Quite simply, in her working relationship with me and my sociological project, she demonstrated what feminism was all about.’

--

*This text is based on a collection of Jean Spencer's own notes, correspondence, exhibition proposals and colour studies, which are held at Chelsea College of Arts Library, University of the Arts London. I had originally accessed the archive to learn more about Spencer's individual methodology of colour and its relationship to her painting. When I started to read through the archive of material relating to the Countervail Collective - comprising Jean Spencer, Judith Dean, Susan Tebby, Nicole Charlett, Tam Giles, Elizabeth Chaplin, Natalie Dower and Jane Wilbraham - another story about Spencer’s practice emerged that continued to run in parallel to her investigation of colour, and that suggested a wider discussion about abstract painting and ideology. This text can’t present a definitive word on the relationship between political principles and painting - the Countervail Collective came to no conclusions about this either - but I hope that it at least suggests the potential to see the work of Jean Spencer and others as moving beyond the formal concerns of abstraction and into a more subjective dimension.*