MICHAEL THOMAS TAYLOR

Color—*Farbe*—Photography

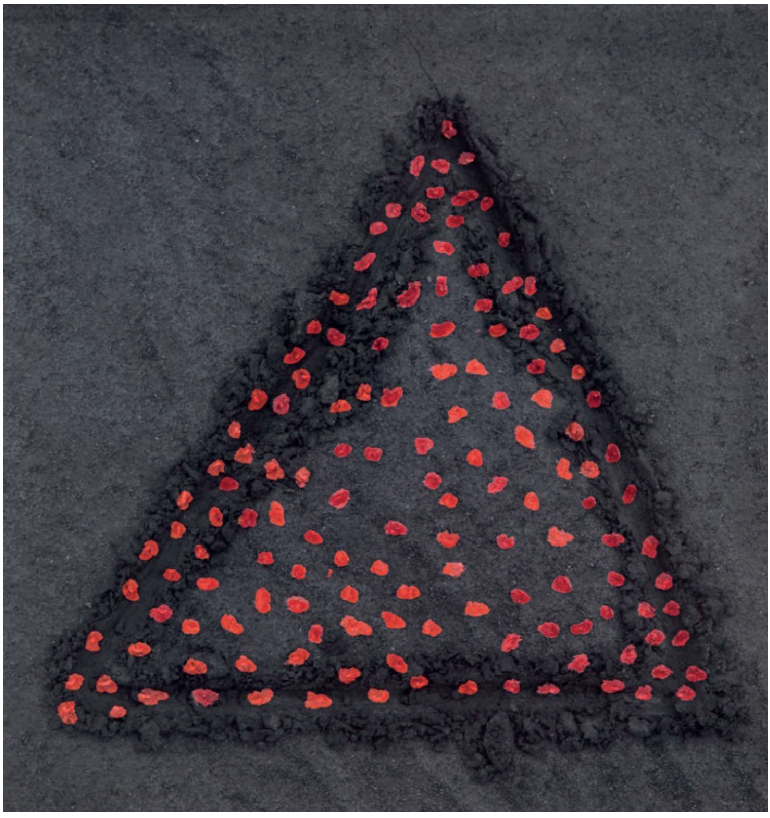
ZU GAST

ARS TRANSLATIONIS

https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1744.c26165

IT was through color, or rather in speaking of color, that I first encountered Bettina's thought—through an essay she had written on photographs by the Swiss photographer Hans Danuser.[1] His Volcano cycle (1996–2018) shows abstract triangles drawn in eroding shale, with material eruptions of color produced on the physical and chemical level of the print (the inks or pigments used remain unclear).[2] Bettina focuses on how these works foreground photography's physical medium, arguing that Danuser's use of color pushes back against the stubborn conception that photography serves to depict the world as it is. Instead, she sees the color in these images as a field of creativity—a basic material "reality" *before* the creation of the image—that Danuser employs to assert art against photography, by making photographs that refuse to act as evidence of the world. This analysis shifts attention, in the spirit of Sontag's argument "against interpretation," toward a work's form, presence, and material qualities rather than symbolic or referential readings. And it is in this tension that Bettina traces how Danuser's images engage with place on a local and global level: globally, in reworking the iconic emblem of Mt. Fuji as both a sacred symbol of Japan and a universally recognized token of art; and locally, in the way that Danuser uses the literal rock substance—the materials and motifs—of his native canton of Grisons. Against the tendency of photographs to become iconic—to appear factual while circulating as myths told, through interpretation, about the world—Bettina emphasizes Danuser's use of color as a means to decompose photography to the ground of its signification: ultimately, it is the grey of the slate in Grisons in which she locates the source and sum of Danuser's colors.

My part in this encounter was to translate Bettina's essay, and in the brief text that follows I reflect in a personal way on the work of translation and the dialogue with Bettina's thought it entailed. In this work, too, color was a kind of material friction—a piece of grit that refused to be sanded down or transparently carried over into a new surface. Because Bettina was not speaking of *color*, but of *Farbe*: *Farbe* as hue,



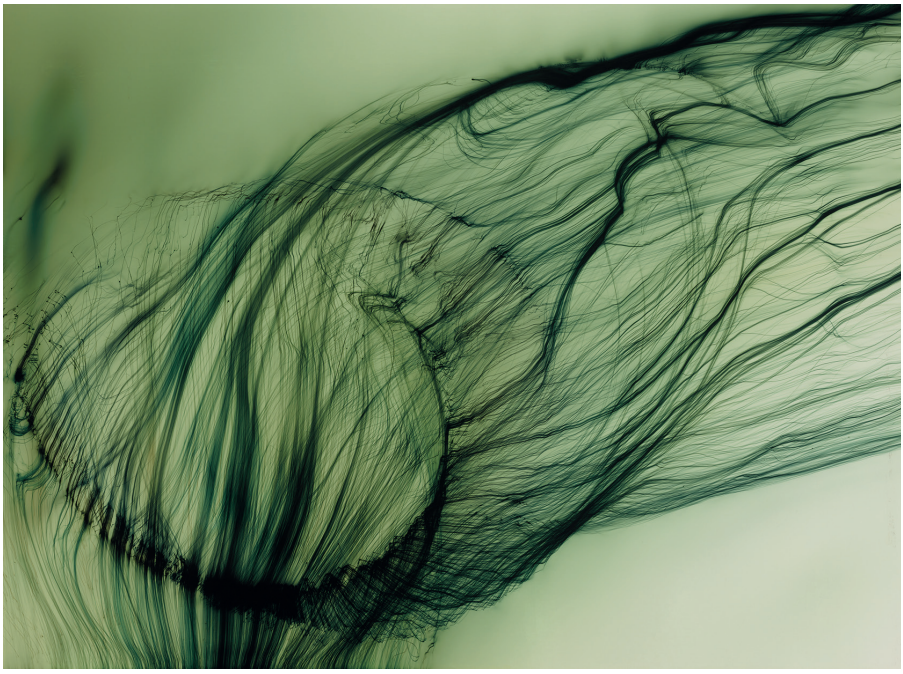
(1) Hans Danuser, *Mount Fuji VI*, matograph, 20.5 × 20 cm, from the series "Matographs and Volcanoes," 1996–2018, and part of the "One Million Pound Project," 1993–2018. (© Hans Danuser / Fotostiftung Schweiz)

(2) Wolfgang Tillmans, *Shaker rainbow*, 1998.

Farbe as pigment, and *Farbe* as paint. All three dimensions came together in the German word, and translating *Farbe* meant fragmenting its multiple senses—even when I did render it as *color*—into particles of meaning. Translated into English, *Farbe* in Bettina's essay thus broke down into its material components, giving a new significance to basic dynamics of translation. If translation never carries meaning across with indifference to the vessel of its operation, here the material weight of *Farbe* pointed to the construction and materiality of the substance with which Danuser works. In translation, meaning becomes dispersed among multiple signs and systems, never fully settling down into any one form. Here, that plurality underscored how *Farbe* becomes dislocated from the grey ground of Danuser's pictograms, to be suspended in the tension of abstraction between local origin and global circulation.

Conversely, my work on Bettina's essay offered a more material take on the usual challenges of translating color, such as the fact that colors and their significance are culturally specific; or more fundamentally, that colors are examples of qualia: the subjective, phenomenal character of experience rather than intentional references to objects themselves. References to color are different from references to pleasure or pain, because we do use color words to refer to things in the world, even as no reference to an object can vouchsafe for what it feels like when I see—or say—"blue." There is a genuine ambiguity here, triangulated among object, experience, and communication. Put into words, the experience of color points in several different directions at once: toward something in the world; toward the subject of that experience; and toward the material of that signification itself. The materiality of *Farbe* in Bettina's essay crystallized this complexity, while its translation left behind a residue: an experience, in language, of the way in which color resists being reduced to subjective experience or artistic expression, to a quality of objects, or to an empty signifier waiting to be inscribed with meaning.

A very different photograph—*Shaker rainbow* by Wolfgang Tillmans—offers a countermodel of color that can help clarify this perspective on translation. Tillmans's image shows a rainbow (and its faint echo) intersecting two simple white houses, buildings belonging to the Shaker community in Maine where he had a residency in 1998. The rainbow meets the second house at the precise place where a chimney rises from the first, and two power lines cross the frame, running almost geometrically, as if drawn by straightedge and compass. In this image, color is light made visible in its own right: a halo refracted from the energy illuminating the scene into the precise spectrum of the rainbow. This



(3) Wolfgang Tillmans, *Freischwimmer 16*, 2003.

spectrum seems to emanate from the house itself, while also hovering in the background to encompass the empty white field of the buildings' exterior surfaces, dappled with the shadows of trees, which here appears as a unity of color in light. Literally, the structures we see are sites to be filled with spirit in and through worship. Touched and surrounded by the rainbow, however, their surface figures on a more formal level as a vessel of revelation itself: as a field reflecting the pure light that can reveal the world, and of the power of vision (or photography) to receive that illumination. That the world appears on this field primarily as shadow nevertheless casts this power into doubt, just as the rainbow shows the purest clarity of light to be its own refraction: light appears most clear when it reveals not objects, but itself.

Color acquires a unique presence in this "materialized moment," as Tillmans has called his photographs,[3] alongside line and surface as basic elements of visual representation. More than the power to make an image, it captures the power to make an image *visible* in the world. To see pure colors in this scene, as refractions of light, is to see the medium that makes sight possible. Tillmans, too, is coming here to the medium of

photography, albeit from a different side of things. His registering of the world in light can be opposed to the eruption of Danuser's volcanoes out of the earth. But both work toward producing a new "reality" in photography, created out of the photographic medium. It is worth noting that at the same time he took *Shaker rainbow*, Tillmans also began to play with the surface of photography—but by writing with light. His Freischwimmer works, for instance, consist of large color images he produced without a camera—in a completely dry process—by hand-guiding light across photosensitive paper, creating fluid forms that foreground gesture, materiality, and the photographic surface itself. *Shaker rainbow* is not yet so abstract, nor so material. It registers the world with light, rather than creates it directly. But moves in that direction, and it does so through color.

At one radical limit, this is signification before images become signs, with the burden of interpretation that entails; it is language before the tower of Babel, as Walter Benjamin and others have read this myth—that is, before the fall from the immediacy of the pure language of God, in which words are called into being as names, with the linguistic confusion that followed.[4] Color in this sense needs no translation, because it speaks for itself: it is what it says. But rather than signifying any intentional content, it poses the question of what remains immediate in signification as a means of manifesting the world to experience. *Shaker rainbow* can be read as one answer to this question. To speak of light in this photograph is to speak of the rainbow: to see an immaterial quality in the medium that makes creation appear in all its particularity, and to see that medium in the refraction of light. By "creation," I mean both the creative activity of the artist who has taken this photograph and a way of seeing attentive to a sense of wonder that the world is *so given to us* at all, as something we can see. For to see color as such is to see what *we imagine* in seeing the world;[5] it is to see something our minds themselves *give* to the world as the mode and form of our vision. One might call this a transcendental take on Tillmans's photograph: to see it gesturing toward the subjective conditions of possibility of perception—toward qualities that subjects originally contribute to perception, making it possible at all.

The image, though, is firmly situated in time and place—which is to say, in history. And the world it captures suggests other interpretations, drawing from the signifiers at play. We can read the building as a white cube—the paradigmatic exhibition space for art—coinciding with a house of worship, or its rectangular volume topped by a triangle as a kind of temple. Its geometric shapes can be read as gestures toward truth, spanning—via the powerlines and the rainbow—the mundane and the divine. The rainbow itself has Biblical and art historical significance,

signaling the benevolence of God and the harmony of creation. And the striking absence of the Shaker community captures a tension between the finitude of a circle that eschews sexuality and is dying out, and the timelessness of truth.

To read the photograph like this is to translate what we see into claims about what the image says and how it generates meaning. But the discourse provoked by an image can also be more subjective, grounded in our own experience and what it prompts in the beholder. When I first saw this photograph, I thought about my own family history, which traces to Mormon immigrants to the United States, and to that exceptional moment known today as the Second Great Awakening, which took shape most intensely in New England and the "burned-over district" of upstate New York, before spreading farther west along the US frontier. This fervent landscape gave birth to so many radically revivalist, often millenarian visions of faith and community: modern outpourings of the spirit that included not only the Shakers and the Mormons, but Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Oneida community, and Baptist and Methodist expansions. As their name suggests, Shaker worship was originally expressed in ecstatic physicality; this may have shifted today into other forms of service, tied to communal living, but the intention remains to transcend the material world through practices that invest it with spiritual meaning. In the context of Tillmans's œuvre, and of my own move to Berlin as a student in the early 2000s, this photograph also conveyed the pull between these religious currents and the secular celebrations of communal transcendence that erupted in the city's club culture. Seeing Tillmans's image, in other words, caused me to reflect on my own place in the world and its cultural genealogy.

In their subjectivity, these responses are akin to the colors of Tillmans's rainbow, but as contents rather than qualities of the disposition I bring to what I see and the personal inspiration his image provokes. Danuser's photographs also touch me on a personal level, in a connection that begins with the mountains in which I was raised yet came to include a visit to Davos and a later conversation with him in Zurich. But a translator is not an artist or an author; the translator's task is to step aside as the work is done and recede into (near) invisibility. What remains could be called the color of an encounter, in the sense of *Farbe* in Bettina's essay: not as a kind of transparency in light, as a shade or a hue, but as something more substantial, more physical. This kind of color might better capture how translation works, because whether a translation succeeds or not is in fact a matter of feeling. In English, colorful

language is eminently subjective: cursing, cussing, and swearing that convey emotion. We likewise speak of local color as a colloquial quality of language, reflecting a shared linguistic world tied to a specific community, place, and time. To translate *Farbe* one last time, which also means to speak of color: seeing, too, is dialogical and intersubjective. It, too, is an act that signifies.

NOTES

1 Bettina Gockel, "Uncalibrated: From the Standpoint of Color—Hans Danuser," in *The Colors of Photography*, ed. Bettina Gockel in collaboration with Nadine Jirka and Stella Jungmann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 173–200.

2 See Thorsten Sadowsky, Kirchner Museum Davos, eds., and Hans Danuser, *The Mount Fuji of Davos/Der Fujiyama von Davos* (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2018), as well as the documentation of the exhibition at the Kirchner Museum in Davos on Danuser's website at https://hansdanuser.ch/en/the-mount-fuji-of-davos, accessed December 9, 2025.

3 See, for instance, Tillmans's discussion with Martin Hägglund in an issue of *Aperture* on spirituality that Tillmans guest edited: "Spirituality Is Solidarity," *Aperture* 237 (Winter 2019), available online at https://aperture.org/editorial/wolfgang-tillmans-spirituality-solidarity/, accessed December 9, 2025.

4 See Walter Benjmain, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62–74.

5 On this point, too, I am in dialogue with Benjamin. See "The Rainbow: A Conversation about Imagination," in *Early Writings: 1910–1917*, trans. Howard Eiland and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 214–223.