

Interview by Ann Cesteleyn
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AC: Let's start from the beginning, your name. Can you say where it comes from? It's not a typical Belgian name.

AV: Danes usually take the surnames of both their mother and their father. I eventually decided to use mainly my mother's name, Vester. The name comes from her family in West-Jutland, so this provides a bit of geographical orientation.

AC: Did you study in Denmark?

AV: Yes, the first two years I studied textile design in Copenhagen, where I became fascinated by printing techniques, flatness and colour. My mother was a weaver. That probably had an influence on me. The design school was where I learned about colour theory, which left a deep impression on me, too. I became fascinated by the flatness that arose from the materials we used, as well as by the way colours could be juxtaposed. It was really like stacking colour planes.

AC: Would you say that that's typically Danish, or is that going too far?

AV: No, that's taking it too far, but it was perhaps typical for that time period. The work of Marimekko was a strong presence at home. I got a lot out of seeing those designs: the way the colours were contrasted and the relatively simple patterns they used. After two years at the design school I made the transition into fine art. I did my first two foundation years at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. Then I chose to go into the sculpture department, mainly because of the professor, Mogens Møller, who taught there at the time.

AC: The majority of your work is painting. Where did this interest in sculpture come from?

AV: I actually never felt truly at home in any of those disciplines. My work is somewhere in between them all. I was always most interested in painting, but studied sculpture instead, first in Copenhagen and later in London at the Royal College of Art. In 1986 there was an exhibition entitled *New Sculpture* at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, with work by Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons and Robert Gober. The impact of that catalogue was immense. All the students were completely blown away by this new movement with its everyday objects like readymades, presented in a pop kind of way. I saw something in the likes of Robert Gober, specifically the way he modelled impersonal objects like sinks. What they lacked in charm, he made up by giving them a sort of personal history, presented in a minimal way. That was a twist I found fascinating, that you could wrap up a personal or intimate story in that repetitive and readymade ideology.

AC: Your earliest known work dates from your student days in Copenhagen. In the work *Untitled* from 1989 we also see the repetitive, serial motif.

AV: The work consists of five elements that appear like windows, held together by an iron rail with grooves worn out at the extremities, as if it had been used often and the frequent friction had left its mark. In this way I connect an everyday object with the aspects of the human or the subjective.

AC: Does this signal the start of your interest in the physical relationship between the human body and the artwork?

AV: Absolutely. When you stand before the work, it is like there is another figure standing before you, so you have a sort of one-on-one relationship with it. The physical aspect of standing in front of

something is very important. The relationship with regard to the whole space would later become more important to me. In this work it was not so much about how the work functioned in the space, but about the structure of the work itself.

AC: I also see a link with architecture in your early work.

AV: It's not really about architecture but rather the structures and the circulation of the city. I used that language because I was overwhelmed when I arrived in London. I grew up in Viborg, a small city, and later in Copenhagen. Both cities are accessible and well-ordered. Then there was London with its constant buzz, fast pace, the Tube ... all movement and total disarray. I lived there for two years but still couldn't get a real grip on the place. That inspired me to do something with this as a visual language. I still try to take the form from my surroundings and at that time it was the city. I wanted to internalise and tranquillise the structure of the city. I love architecture. My father was an architect and he often dragged me through the city. I was always made aware that things weren't here by chance: it was all created.

AC: Did making those works give you the bearings you needed to feel more 'in control' of the city?

AV: Rather than seeking to control the city, I was inspired by its indomitable nature. Sometimes, when seeking to say something about silence, an efficient approach is to do so with the language of speed. The viewer is familiar with images of the city in movement, so if you internalise and tranquillise the image of the city it is strengthened because you have a different pattern of expectation. That was the 'taken by surprise' element in my work.

AC: One can see clear elements of this that remained consistent in your practice, like the prominent position of colour.

AV: Yes, that's true. Such as the fluorescent orange colour placed behind a milky glass in *Untitled* (1989). What this colour says is what I wanted the work to say. It couldn't have been a blue or a green; it had to be a colour that, for me, was linked to the loudness of consumer society. My idea was to tranquillise that loud colour and create a sort of stillness with the aid of the colour and with the railing.

AC: How should we interpret colour in your work?

AV: In my work the experience of colour is layered. On the one hand, there is the experience of how two or more colours work together and how we perceive that, the interaction between colours, but, on the other hand, there is also the story that every colour carries with it. For me, every colour is charged with a certain narrative. We can think of colour as having two tracks. The British abstract painter Bridget Riley describes this with great clarity in her essay *Colour for the Painter* (1995). One track is what Riley calls 'perceptual colour', which refers to how we perceive colour from day to day. The other is 'pictorial colour', referring to the colours chosen by the painter for their intervention on the canvas, and how the colours work together. So you have these two kinds of colour systems that I seek to combine.

AC: Would you then describe your practice as the attempt to bring these two together?

AV: In some works, yes. But in my works that use word and colour I work from a decidedly more conceptual perspective. In these cases I rather try to isolate the experience of a specific colour and to give space to the process of abstraction that arises from the confrontation with the colour. A bit like the American writer Gertrude Stein, who describes every word as an event in itself.

AC: In the 90s you started making colour pairings by putting two colours alongside each other in an object that you would sometimes call a 'sign' or 'post'. In this context, can you discuss, for example, your work from 1994 for the gallery Bruges La Morte?

AV: Yes, that was the first series of *Wooden Posts*, four wood works that use different colour combinations. The combinations are reasonably straight-forward, such as red and blue, red and white and black and yellow. I believe the last one was a bit less obvious, orange and green. These were the colours of street markings that I had observed.

AC: Some works are horizontal, some vertical.

AV: Yes, the vertical ones are made up of four wooden slats that were first painted separately and then put together such that the colour runs through the object, so to speak. There is a movement that circulates through the work, from which arises a certain autonomy. For the horizontal works it was important that they were not too wide, that they had a width relative to the body. The works were painted with vinyl paint, very matt. To give them a sheen I polish them with beeswax, an old way of treating and protecting furniture. Treating the wooden works with beeswax serves to protect the colour. Once the wax is applied, the colour penetrates completely and the carrier and the paint become one.

AC: And the leaning constructions?

AV: That was in Copenhagen, in an exhibition space belonging to the Ministry of Culture. I called them *Resting Leaning*. Again, these were with familiar colour combinations: white, black and red, white, black and yellow; sometimes the darker colour above and the white below. These colour combinations are based on the same idea as those in the *Wooden Posts*: the colours are, in some logical way or another, linked with what we know, especially in relation to graphical applications with white and black and white and red. There's a sort of dependent relationship between two parts of an object that make a whole. The surface was finished in the same way as the other wooden works: first painted and then polished with beeswax.

AC: How did this installation work, spatially?

AV: It is a gigantic space and I had only seven of these works. That worked to great effect in the space. There was really a lot of space between the works but it worked because of the verticality of the pieces. This verticality is like a slice in the time-space-experience. All the wooden works are a bit the same as these *Resting Leaning* works: two or more separate objects that enter into a functional relationship with each other. One does the carrying while the other rests. And then you have the aspect of colour on top of that. So it's not only the objects or the wooden planks themselves that relate to each other: the colours also have a predetermined relationship with regard to each other.

AC: In your oeuvre you also have a photo series. Can we talk about that?

AV: You are referring to the series *Colour Slides*, a series of slides showing all manner of coloured objects I came across. In the context of a talk I was invited to give, I made a series of slides. In this way I provided those in attendance with an insight into my way of working. I made a habit of going to places just to photograph colours. I would go to Dunkirk or Paris, or simply for a stroll in Beersel, the municipality where I live. After that talk I felt that it worked nicely as a whole. I continued to do it. I photograph everything with a colour and afterwards I select the slides. For some time now I have had the idea to compile them and present them in book format. I think that would work well.

AC: How are they ordered? By colour? Or by location?

AV: No, they are all mixed up. I order them intuitively. The way I presented them, there were multiple slide projections in the same space, at the same time. All the colours are jumbled together. First you look at an object, such as a purple bag, for example, or a boy with a green sweater. But after a while you start to only see colour after colour; the subject itself dissolves. It is an intensive but also liberating way of looking at the world.

AC: Are you still working on that series?

AV: Yes, I'm still working on this series. I paint with the images. I let the slides play and then decide spontaneously: next to that yellow there should be a purple, etc. It has nothing to do with a story or with objects. It's only about the interaction of colours. That is the 'relational colour' spoken of by the German Bauhaus artist and teacher Josef Albers, the idea that the observation of a colour is influenced by the adjoining colours, in this case those that are shown before, after or simultaneously.

AC: Can you tell me more about the exhibition *Recollection* at Strombeek Cultural Centre in 2001?

AV: That was the first big presentation of my archive. I began by painting colours side by side on large panels. With these I made a tall painting of 13 metres and leaned it against the wall, effectively creating a double wall. The idea was that it shouldn't be a painting on the wall but something that stood on its own. It is a matter of constantly questioning the traditions of painting.

AC: A word is cut out at the bottom of each panel. Was this the first time that words appeared in your works?

AV: Yes. The words refer to objects such as a bathing suit, a pair of shoes, a bicycle, a bag or a bar of soap. All things that I had seen, most of which had featured in my life. You live with certain colours that are stored in your memory. When you then see a certain colour somewhere else, it invokes certain memories. This mechanism functions as a form of displacement. A whole story unfolds out of something very small like seeing a colour. I think it's beautiful to initiate something like that. About ten years later, in the book *The Architectonic Colour* by Jan de Heer, I came across Le Corbusier's use of colour in his palette for *Salubra Wallpaper* (1959). I was surprised: those 24 colours were all colours that were in my archive, too. I immediately made up my own version of his colour palette with my words instead of the colour codes.

AC: Your starting point is the archive, which forms the foundation for your work?

AV: Yes, the archive consists of self-made colour swatches based on colour memories of objects, spaces or structures I have seen, particularly in my youth. For a long time my work revolved around that archive, but recently I feel more like working with colours in and of themselves, separate from the personal memories.

AC: Can it be said that your personal archive, your own memory, converges with a sort of collective memory?

AV: Yes, but actually I wonder if it doesn't all begin with the collective memory, at least insofar as visual memory is concerned. Our collective memory is actually a reflection of the culture that surrounds us – our way of communicating, such as with colour, for example. Our personal visual memory is formed when we are growing up and, as such, is largely determined by the collective memory.

AC: Sometimes I get the feeling that this personal story used to be important but is not so important anymore.

AV: No, the personal story was never very important. I started out with it because I was becoming increasingly aware that I was using colour in a certain way. I started to ask myself where this came from, this certainty that, for example, these orange textile artworks had to be exactly that particular orange. The colours had a sort of origin and I found this fascinating, but it's not that I am attempting to tell my life's story.

What is important to me, though, is that when you look at a certain colour, it might take you somewhere other than where it takes me. Just the awareness that we don't see the world with an unbiased gaze, because we all have a relationship to things – that's what I find interesting.

AC: In your oeuvre you also have a series of paintings with stripes painted on glass or Plexiglas. Is it by painting on flat, smooth surfaces that you find that absolute flatness you mentioned?

AV: Yes, this planarity and detachedness is interesting to me because I seek to show the colour in itself and not to let my hand come in between the colour and the viewer. We feel little intimacy with flat, reflective surfaces. With the paintings on glass or Plexiglas the challenge is to let an intimacy arise in these anonymous, flat and shining surfaces.

AC: You have never painted on canvas?

AV: Well, yes, when I was very young. Now I paint on wooden panels, wooden blocks, glass, Plexiglas, aluminium or dibond, but never on canvas. That's part of the work. They are not paintings, they are objects with colour.

AC: The works with stripes on Plexiglas appear mechanically made but this is not the case?

AV: These are hand-painted because there's no other way to do it. I mix every colour myself. So far the colours in the *Colour Stripe Paintings* have all come from my archive of personal colours. The mixing process is a mental process where I try to get as close as possible to a certain colour and it is therefore an important part of the work in itself. I don't want to work with a computer where you pick the colour on a screen.

The vertical stripes are again a way of applying a vertical form in a space and in this way slicing a piece of time out of it. The colours in *Colour Stripe Paintings* are juxtaposed in just as intuitive and non-hierarchical a way as those of the slides or the archive. A unique dynamic arises in each work due to the colours. At the moment I am working on a new series of stripe paintings on Plexiglas that are more 'composed' and where the focus is more on the mutual interaction of the colours.

AC: You made your first murals in 2005 for the White Out Studio in Knokke. These were two planes of colour with a single word cut out of each. Is there a relationship between the two words in these works?

AV: Yes, there was one with the words 'chair' and 'dress', so that is a sort of image of a chair on which someone in a dress is sitting. The meeting between the colour of the chair and the colour of the dress is like an imaginary situation. You could see it as a film still. The other words were 'car' and 'hotel'. The murals are in this way snapshots of something that might have happened. You can use either the two words or the two colours to invoke some image or other. Usually the combination of word and colour will only be right for me, and someone else will find another meaning in them, but that doesn't matter.

AC: Here the works are still neatly contained in an imaginary frame that alludes to the format of a painting.

AV: Yes, this was the first time that I worked on the wall. I realised only then that I could do a lot more with the aspect of space.

AC: In these works one again sees a strong example of the relationship of the works with respect to the body of the viewer.

AV: Yes, true. The planes of colour are always placed next to each other horizontally, such that a verticality is created where the two colours meet. There is a sort of temporal momentum, a point in space, where the two colours meet. As with the *Colour Stripe Paintings* and the *Wooden Posts*, a specific moment in time and space is created by accentuating a certain verticality.

AC: After making the relatively small murals for the Westrand in Dilbeek and the Halles de Schaarbeek, you began to take up an increasing amount of space with your planes of colour.

AV: The first time I really took on the whole space was for a project in the Centre de Couleur Contemporaine in Brussels. I had already gone and sat in the space several times before that; I was looking to see which colours were already present there. It was a 'white cube' but there was still a power outlet, a heating element, etc. These things had nuances of beige and grey with a touch of purple. I used the colours already present as a point of departure for the work.

AC: So, you feel the work's relationship with reality is very important?

AV: Yes, it's difficult if the space is too white. The interesting thing is to enter into a dialogue with things that are not art. That's fascinating to me because you suddenly feel your eye wandering and your attention fixing on things that you would not otherwise observe. Currently I'm working on a project for the exhibition *Wals05* in an old rectory in Ressegem. Here the point of departure is a grey-purple shade that is used for all the skirting boards and doors in the rectory. By using these same colours in my colour intervention I am involving the various floors and spaces of the building in a story about spatiality and abstraction.

AC: For your exhibition at M in 2015 you also had a white cube to contend with. How do you approach this?

AV: Because there were no elements to work with there, I reverted to colours from the archive. In addition to the mural I also had a book and a painting at the exhibition. In this way a dialogue arose between the different works. I presented a small panel there that resonated enormously with the mural.

AC: How do you think about a work's autonomy? Should the work not be able to stand on its own?

AV: Certainly every work can stand on its own. It is just that when you make an exhibition you get the chance to use the space. Here in the studio I make the works and I sometimes think of the presentation, particularly with regard to murals. But apart from that, I always consider the autonomy of the work itself. It's fantastic when you get an empty space to work with and you can facilitate a dialogue between the different works. You notice it right away. It adds an extra dimension to the work. When a work is sold, it begins a new dialogue with the objects around it in the collector's home. This interests me.

AC: In 2012 you presented a marvellous series, the *Celadon Paintings*. In 2019 the M HKA presented a new version of this series. Can you expand on this?

AV: The *Celadon* series is about the relativity of personal memory. My entire archive is made up of colour memories and yet it all remains relative. And I have never sought to pin them all down. If I was very sure of myself, I would be able to give a colour code for each memory and thus know exactly how to arrive at a given colour, but I have never done so. I have never systematised or defined the archive because I know that the memory is volatile. Celadon is a colour from a type of Asian pottery I saw on a trip in Malaysia. We ate from plates in celadon, a very beautiful but unusual colour somewhere between grey, brown and green. When I arrived home I decided to mix the colour at various times and on various days. At the end of the series I turned the panels over and saw that they were all subtly different. I felt this was a beautiful image of the relativity of memory. For my presentation at M HKA in 2019 I showed the series together with two versions of another colour memory – Arabia.

AC: Which artists have influenced your practice?

AV: The texts of Bridget Riley are remarkably clear. She knows precisely what she's doing. Furthermore, she knows how to position herself in art history. She has a great knowledge of painting and how colour has been used throughout history. Her essay *Colour for the Painter* (1995) is about the emancipation of colour in painting. In it Riley describes how, since Titian, colour has slowly detached itself from the narrative aspect and become an element unto itself. Bridget Riley begins with Titian but I would begin with Giotto. When you look at Giotto's use of colour in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, you notice that same scrutinising gaze. In the complementary colours and in the way light is created using the most amazing colours. He was far ahead of his time. Agnes Martin is a great inspiration. The slowness, the stubbornness and the sensitivity in her work is very strong. And Josef Albers. His way of teaching as well as his work. One of his paintings, *Homage to the Square*, is hanging in Louisiana's Museum of Modern Art, just outside of Copenhagen. My parents took me there as a child and I remember it very well. That analytical approach, the repetitive quality, the working in series, the exploratory attitude ... all things that still interest me today.

AC: The painter Matisse must surely be an important figure for you, given that colour is so deeply important to your work?

AV: Definitely. One work that speaks to me in particular is *l'Atelier Rouge*. There you can see that he's concerned with pictorial colour. He takes on the challenge to create a feeling of space with the colour red. Which is almost impossible since red is a colour that is so immediate. It has the longest wavelengths on the spectrum. It is nice to see that he has chosen to challenge himself. He raised the stakes.

AC: You mentioned that you would like to make an artist's book with the colour photos. Do you have other projects you'd like to realise?

AV: I would like to have the opportunity to make more colour integrations within specific spatial contexts. I previously spoke about 'perceptual' and 'pictorial' colour and my drive to unite these two colour principles. I feel the potential of this in the murals where I take the colours present in the space as my point of departure. I would also like to take the time to conduct further research into the geometric forms that have been used throughout history to visualise various different colour theories. A small series of paintings that I made in 2019 for the exhibition at Geukens & De Vil in Antwerp was based on this. The series consists of four small paintings, each with a six-cornered shape coloured with different versions of the primary colours. I see this small series as a light relativisation of the scientific approach to colour.