Interview by Erwin van't Hart with filmmaker/video artist Simon Payne (UK) related to the presentation of his two most recent pieces in Rotterdam in January 2015: *NOT AND OR* in the cinema at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and *Cut Out* at the online space of the Suburban PS Parallel Screen. Originally published online.


You've been at the IFFR regularly with your work both in an installation setup as well as in cinema screenings. Your work has been described as 'Colour field video' investigating depth and orientation and constantly questioning the perception of the viewer. How would you describe your work and how it developed over the years?

From 2004 until very recently I have been making works solely with computer-generated graphic imagery – not imagery as such actually, but simple graphic planes or shapes using a limited colour palette. *Colour Bars* was the first piece that I made in that mode, and it was shown in Rotterdam on screens of various sizes including a massive screen on the side of a truck that was parked outside the Witte de With gallery.

I began making work with this kind of material because I didn't know what to point the camera at anymore, having pared my subject matter down quite substantially, to blank surfaces of one kind or another in pieces such as *Black and White* and *Monitor*. In all of the work that I've made I've been interested in making pieces which are on the one hand simple, or to some degree explicit regarding their construction, but also difficult to fathom in terms of their effect, and how one might understand or experience them. *Colour Bars* and subsequent colour field works, such as *Iris Out*, took those questions into the realm of time-based structures concerning 'pure' graphic screen space as opposed to camera-recorded imagery and representation. There are a number of works up to *Vice Versa Et Cetera* in which what I found interesting was the fact that the one's eye tracks movement in depth as well as laterally across the screen, despite the extreme discontinuity in the sequencing of forms. Colour is a constituent in that too: despite the limited palette of six colours that I recurrently used, to my mind (and eye) there was no limit to the number of colours that one might see when watching the work. *Colour Bars* is silent, but most of the other pieces that I've made since then have had a soundtrack. One's experience of the soundtrack in these pieces isn't analogous to their affect on vision though; I've ascribed colours specific tones, and the pattern of tones corresponds to the colour/forms that one sees, but the tones in sequences, at 25 frames per second, remain much more discrete, and in this respect the soundtrack works in counterpoint to the image.

In the most recent pieces, *Cut Out* and *NOT AND OR* which are showing during the Rotterdam Film Festival, I've used a camera again because I've been interested to see how I

could introduce another time index, using either a handheld camera or a introducing a simple action in front of the camera.
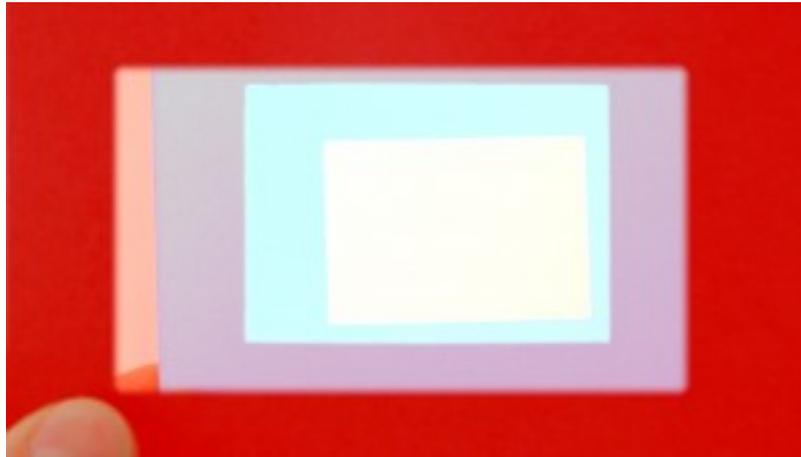
Cut Out by Simon Payne

If I may throw in two artists working with colour that are on display at the moment. There's quite a debate recently on the use of colour in the emotionally saturated works of painter Mark Rothko, now on view in The Hague with a large exhibition. The IFFR will present a documentary on the work of a festival favorite: Avant-garde filmmaker Paul Sharits. Do you feel any connection with those two influential artists, both working with a different medium than your own?

I visited the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, quite a long time ago, and I remember reading the visitor's book in which lots of people had expressed their deep identification with the emotional resonance of the paintings (and the setting I guess). But I think one has to read a lot into the paintings for that. Either that, or one takes the paintings as a reflection of what one wants to see in them or feel from them. I'm not very interested in emotional associations or references with regards Rothko's paintings, but I do certainly enjoy looking at them. One's sense of their colour changes as you move closer to or further away from them, though the experience of colour per se is inseparable from the quality of their tonality and darkness; the kind of reflection that they prompt on that level is what's most impressive. There are plenty of other painters whom I'm interested in: Ellsworth Kelly would be one, to name another American. Closer to home I'd cite Mondrian and van Doesburg, and closer still the British painter Noel Forster.

In Paul Sharits's films I admire his ability to have crafted very complicated sequences of colour combinations which include, for example, alternating dissolves or fades. And there is one of his essays that describes his thinking about film as both modular and vector-based, which I've found useful and applicable to digital video making. Though his films are characterised by single-frame structures and 'flicker' they often involve an interplay between the unrelenting metre of the projector and something quite subtle played out over time. Something else in Sharits' films, particularly *Ray Gun Virus*, that I think is interesting is that it looks as if he shot through coloured gels; one can see a surface behind the colour its seems to me. And in that respect there's something else going on in addition to the sequencing of colour – something to do with representation of sorts. One aspect that I don't particularly care for in Sharits's films is the coded psychodrama and anxiety that features in films that include *Touching* and to a lesser extent in *Piece Mandala*. The iconographic elements in these films – the scissors, the genitalia, the fucking – make a lot of sense if one sees them in a cultural or even biographical context, but the subtle aesthetics that are central to *Nothing* or *Shutter Interface*, say, are missing from these films.

I think that transparency is key with respect to the difference between film colour and digital colour. Even if one considers hand-painted films, there's still a sense, with colour in (or on) film, that it's the product of light shining through a transparent medium and that there's a tangible reference point for it. The reference point for digital colour is far more abstract – a more-or-less artificial, mathematical colour space – that's synthesised at the moment of projection or display. One of the other differences between Sharits's film and my own videos has to do with the point about iconographic imagery. Sharits's all-over colour fields are often punctuated by provocative images. I've incorporated shapes, as a way of producing boundaries and containing between colours, but I haven't been inclined to incorporate images as such.

For *Cut Out* it seems you have used a different, more 'hands on' technique of superimposing images. What made you decide to work in this manner instead of completely digitally like with most of your latest works?

The method of superimposing the two layers of imagery isn't 'hands on' particularly – it's what is sometimes called a 'picture in picture' effect, which seems apt. But you're right, the piece has a hand-made quality to it, because of the coloured card that I've cut apertures in, and the hand that's holding the card, taking it further away from the camera or bringing it nearer. *Cut Out* has a different tempo to most of my latest works; scale is a different matter too, and both of these factors are related to the action that I've recorded: the tempo is set by the movement of the hand and the size of the hand is an index of scale, which is something I haven't necessarily been concerned with in the other colour field, or abstract digital pieces.

Could you explain a bit your investigative process, for example in the work *NOT AND OR*?

A clever student in Cambridge asked me after a screening of this piece, why the title wasn't instead 'neither and or'. That option hadn't dawned on me because I had been thinking about Boolean logic and simple electronic gates, but either way 'not' is more emphatic. These words NOT AND OR, or their constituent letters, appear in black on white, or vice versa, in a changing order, in between sequences that involve black rectangles on white, or vice versa. In the first half of the piece the rectangles are direct, unmediated computer graphics that rotate in virtual space, or they are static graphics that have been shot off a screen with a handheld moving camera. There are two forms of movement and depth implied in the footage therefore: one artificial; the other a product of footage having been recorded in real space. But I hope that before too long, one's almost completely lost regarding the origin and orientation of what one sees. The second half of the piece started as an inversion of the first half, but it was shot off the screen in sections again and again, so that the surface of the image is increasingly dispersed; at the same time the process also generated additional colours at the fringes between black and white. I'm describing the piece here, rather than explaining the investigative process I guess, but as with all of the pieces I've made I'm not really sure what I'm investigating until after the fact. Having said that, this piece and *Cut Out* both derive from an attempt to consider ways in which I might use different, idiosyncratic camera-recorded footage in tandem with purely graphic images without simply designating one or the other as this and/or/not that. Of course that's what the movies do now all the time – computer-generated images are seamlessly integrated with live-action footage to produce convincing pictorial space – but I'm working in a mode that's anti-imagistic.

NOT AND OR by Simon Payne

And for the last question: do you have any preferred places for presenting your works, in either a cinema, festival, gallery or an online setting. You have a certain setting in mind when creating a work? Also for example when it is made silent or with sound?

I've made a few versions of a piece called *Primary Phases*, which involves multiple projectors, and is made specifically to be shown in a gallery-type setting, because amongst other things it involves the reflected colour from one projector affecting the colour of an adjacent projection surface. The single-screen works are meant to be seen from beginning to end, and are usually best seen projected. The duration of these pieces is key. I don't at all mind that people have access to my work at home on DVD, or online, but on the occasions where I have a responsibility to present my work publicly to an audience then I like it to be presented to a seated audience who at least know when the piece is going to begin and end. Aside from the issue of duration, I'm very aware that the experience of any one of the single screen videos is quite different depending on the scale of the projection. The digital video image is inherently scalable, so that's part and parcel of the medium, but I also think that the experience of watching specific pieces, such as *Iris Out*, is inherently different every time, because of the way that it's made; one can't help but see new or different things in it. *Cut Out* is the first piece that I have made in quite a while where, as I have said before, there is an index of size in the image. And because it's my hand, I can see how it might be quite fitting to show it on a smaller more-or-less human scale.

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