

## On Spencer Finch

### A Rainbow in Brooklyn

The New York Subway's F line stretches from Coney Island to Queens, and but for an overpass a few stops into Brooklyn, is submerged below the city. When the tracks emerge from the subterranean drabness to reach above the red roofs of the Borough, most weary commuters keep their heads in their papers while tourists turn right to pick out the distant Statue of Liberty. One day, however, Spencer Finch, whose studio on the Gowanus Canal lies directly below, looked left and saw a rainbow. It must have been a fleeting sight—surely the train would have moved on, or the rainbow would have disappeared—but nonetheless Finch remembered exactly where he'd been at that moment and proceeded to measure where the rainbow's two legs would have touched the ground. He then travelled to both sites to take black and white, postcard-size photographs. One photo showed a garage door from across a street; another, a grocery store on a corner. These pictures were corralled into a single work in two parts. Each part includes one photograph plus a handwritten card placed just below it: "Approximate location of the right leg of a rainbow viewed from the F train at Smith/9 Street overpass, Brooklyn, October 24, 1999 3PM," says one. The other is the same, but for the words "left leg." The two parts of the work tend to be placed some distance apart—either side of a doorway in a gallery, or at the front and back of a book.

RAINBOW (BROOKLYN), 2001, displays many of the anomalies and contradictions that constitute Finch's practice. The artist is prompted to make a new work by the sight of a fleeting, natural phenomenon, but his process continues through extended research and rigorous measurement. (Most artists who would be moved to respond to a rainbow would not go, compass and map in hand, to locate the position of its legs.) The sight of the rainbow was colorful, and romantic, but the photographs are crude documents in black and white—nothing like Walker Evans's *Shop Fronts*, closer in fact to the shots of buildings in Hans Haacke's SHAPOLSKY ET AL. MANHATTAN REAL ESTATE HOLDINGS, A REAL TIME SOCIAL SYSTEM, AS OF MAY 1 (1971). The contrasts between the work and the experience that triggered its making are palpable to any viewer contemplating the work

and through such contrasts one is compelled to realize one's distance from the event that took place on the overpass: a distance both of time and of place.

## Light installations

Spencer Finch is now probably best known for light installations realized in galleries and museums in Europe and the United States. While RAINBOW (BROOKLYN) resulted from an unanticipated personal experience that preceded a period of research, these installations usually begin with research into a site where the light has already received some representation because of political history, or in literary, cinematic, and/or art historical sources. Made aware of these sites through background knowledge and research, Finch travels to the location armed with a digital light meter to take an accurate reading of the color and intensity of the light. He has visited the desert in Los Alamos, New Mexico where the first atomic bomb tests occurred. He has taken a light measurement of the dawn at Troy, which Homer famously described as "rose-fingered," and after reading Emily Dickinson's 1862 poem "Before I got my eye put out," he went to her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, to measure the sunlight in her garden, along with the effect of a passing cloud there. He stalked Ingmar Bergman outside his Stockholm residence and measured the light at dusk, a "magic hour" associated with the auteur's films. He journeyed to Monet's garden at Giverny to discern the intensity of a shadow on a bright snowy day similar to the one on which GRAINSTACKS (SNOW EFFECT; SUNLIGHT), 1890–91, was painted, and made the shorter trip to Times Square to record the electric glow at a place that inspired Mondrian to make one of his final paintings, BROADWAY BOOGIE WOOGIE (1942–43).

By this stage in Finch's process, light has already been filtered by historical-cultural associations and by the technological device he uses (the light meter). More mediation follows when back at his studio; there, Finch selects appropriate materials with which to re-create the light he has seen. 1) He has worked with stained glass, but most often he deploys real (+10) filters to create his installations. For EOS (DAWN, TROY, 10/27/02), 20002, he wrapped cellophane gels around thin fluorescent tubes and arranged them across a ceiling; for MOONLIGHT (LUNA COUNTY NEW MEXICO, JULY 13 2003),

2005, he fastened these gels over the windows of a gallery space. DUSK (HUDSON RIVER VALLEY) 10/30/2005 (2005) involved hanging gels in planes using clothes pegs and fishing lines, while SUNLIGHT IN AN EMPTY ROOM (PASSING CLOUD FOR EMILY DICKINSON, AMHERST MA, AUGUST 20 2004), 2004, comprises two distinct parts: gel-covered, wall-attached fluorescent tubes to provide a light equivalent to sunlight, and a hanging form made of theatre light filters bunched together with clothes pegs to replicate, when in front of it, the effect of a passing cloud.

When a viewer enters the gallery to behold an installation made of these materials, they are bathed in exactly the same light that Finch encountered on his travels. Reading the work's title, the viewer then understands that the surrounding light refers to the specified "other time and place" of Finch's visit, and that this visit was, in turn, motivated by a previous encounter with, or description of light at that site. Oddly, the viewer realizes that light, which so often appears in art just as a presentation, here serves also as a representation. Representation always infers a distance from, and difference to the referent, and difference and distance are what Finch's light installations slowly underline. Though their viewer might initially look at the glow hitting the walls around them and be impressed by the accuracy of Finch's representation of a faraway light, they will inevitably cast their eyes upon the dumb materials which emit or filter it—the fluorescent tubes, the individual bits of colored plastic, the tape and clothes pegs that hold everything together, and so on. Unlike James Turrell, or even Dan Flavin, who occasionally pointed some tubes towards the wall to conceal the exact colors he used, Finch will never hide his materials, and by making them so self-evident, he allows his illusions to fall apart even as they are created. Attending to the literal materials of Finch's installations, the viewer recalls that they are in the interior of a gallery in a nondescript building in a city far away from the initial location. This is not the fleeting violet of a Troy dawn, nor the shadow on a bright snowy day at Giverny, but a crude and static technological recreation, albeit an accurate one. But if there is some disappointment in the encounter with Finch's light installations, it is always tempered by the bemusement that derives from contemplating the artist's extraordinary efforts to achieve the luminescent replication, and of course by the pleasures of looking at colored light.

## Drawings

Finch's drawings function somewhat differently, but like the light installations they are often concerned with color. Another point of connection is that the drawings represent referents without ever resembling them in any conventional way. Finch's drawings are usually made in series or contain a series of comparable elements, and they tend to record a process involving some kind of measurement. TRYING TO REMEMBER THE COLOR OF JACKIE KENNEDY'S PILLBOX HAT from 1994 consists of 100 parts—each a sheet of paper with a pastel pink blob around its centre. While the viewer could judge whether any of these pinks corresponds to their own memories of the hat, the work convincingly shows how little use memory is in this kind of enterprise. No matter how many times Finch changed the tone of the pink, he could never be sure which best approximated the color of the hat in the assassination footage. Memories of color are notoriously unstable and more so, presumably, when you try to recall a pink forever associated with a blood stained occasion. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the memory of the color was that much more slippery than the object itself: in the Presidential limousine the hat appears darker towards the President's side, and lighter to the sunlit front of the car.

Other tasks that Finch has set himself have been even more complex. For instance, he challenged himself to record every color that was visible in his studio—a feat that resulted in the huge drawing ARTIST'S STUDIO (THEORY OF RELATIVITY), 2001. Hundreds of watercolor circles are scattered across the paper, each captioned in pencil to indicate the source of the color—for instance, "Rolling Rock beer bottle (empty), 2/6," under a particular dark green. Finch-the-draftsman here assumes the role of an archivist, but no matter how wide the drawing (and this is 2.75 meters wide) the archive can never be adequate. New items would have constantly been arriving in the studio during the course of the drawing, but even stationary objects would shift in appearance in changing light from day to day—something that Finch acknowledged by the inclusion of a date under every circle. If this work suggests the impossibility of an objective representation of colors, even those perceived in a confined indoor space, 102 COLORS FROM MY DREAMS (2000–2002) shatters any promise of objectivity from the beginning. Of course one wonders

whether Finch actually dreams in color, and next how it would be at all possible to recall colors if this were the case. The work is an entirely subjective set of records of dreams—those most totally subjective experiences. And Finch makes this especially clear by presenting each color in its separately framed sheet not as a circle (as in ARTIST'S STUDIO) but as a Rorschach ink blot—a form famously used to encourage a highly personalized response.

Other drawings suggest the incapacities of language. STUDY FOR A GROOVY UNNAMEABLE COLOUR (GREENISH-YELLOW), 1997, is a grid of no less than 228 swatches going from lemon yellow in the top left corner to bright green in the bottom right. It looks like the kind of preparatory exercise John Ruskin describes in *The Element of Drawing* (1857) yet this is a work in its own right, and one that suggests with some humor the poverty of a language capable only of supplying the prosaic designation “greenish-yellow” for all these myriad hues. Somewhat paradoxically, then, Finch visualizes through his drawings the inabilities of language, memory, and measurement to describe visual experience, but this is not to say that the artist regards vision as a privileged sense somehow able to provide us with a more authentic encounter with the world. As another group of his drawings suggest, vision can be deceptive, partial, and descriptive only of itself. Finch has made drawings of the colors seen through his eyelids at the Grand Canyon, and of afterimages caused by a blinding sun glimpsed at the OK Corral. Finch is equally interested in invisibility and the limits of the visible: in 2005, he travelled to Lascaux but asked that the caves not be illuminated. Afterwards, he produced a series of drawings showing his recollection of darkness. Though this was the very darkness that Lascaux's primitive artists “saw,” the series implies that its own account of the site fails to represent what really made the visit interesting—the damp, the feel, the echoes of the cave.

Doubt is perhaps at the core of Finch's drawings, and no more so than in the works devoted to Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, a theory of quantum physics dating from 1927 which proved that as one measures a property of a material to an increasing degree of accuracy, readings of another related property will become increasingly inaccurate. Finch dedicated an early drawing to Heisenberg consisting of two circles, both made by the same colored pencil, one formed by repeating the word “orange” over and

over again, the other by repeating the word “yellow”; more recently he completed the giant ABECEDARY (NABOKOV’S THEORY OF A COLORED ALPHABET APPLIED TO HEISENBERG’S UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE), 2004. In *Speak Memory*, Nabokov had claimed to associate each letter with a color, albeit not a conventional one—“there is steely x, thundercloud z, and huckleberry k,” he wrote. 2) Finch crossed Nabokov’s text with Heisenberg’s and the result is an indecipherable, utterly opaque translation. This fact is demonstrated in a very material way: where previously Finch’s drawings have been populated by discreet, colored elements— dots, or blots, or whatever, here each letter was represented with watercolor that had been dropped onto the paper from some height. Looking at the drawing one sees the results of hundreds of chance events—and because one drop splashed into the next, or merged with a neighbor, the references to Nabokov’s idiosyncratic colors—let alone Heisenberg’s text—become harder and harder to detect.

Finch has also produced photographic series, kinetic sculptures, and paintings made with glass mosaic and rhinestones; very soon he plans to work with fans to replicate the wind at Walden Pond, and with TV monitors which will be placed facing a wall to cast a glow replicating a sunset in Monument Valley. 3) But even with just the drawings and light installations in mind it is apparent why Finch’s practice is so compelling. Finch’s insistence on the inadequacies of representational techniques, of measurement, language, memory, and of vision amounts to an urgent description of a kind of subjectivity premised on doubt. Finch’s work proposes a subject who neither can name, nor recall, nor replicate what he or she sees. At a moment when certainty is valorized, this critique of mastery and insistence on uncertainty is crucial. Finch’s work confronts a mode of existence in contemporary (political) life, but also responds critically to a tendency in contemporary art identified by Hal Foster as the catastrophe of minimalism: for Foster, artists after Dan Flavin have taken up the spectacular qualities of minimalism to produce immersive and bedazzling work which seduces the viewer into forgetting just where they are. 4) By contrast, Finch’s installations expose their workings to remind viewers about their real circumstances. Finch’s ability to undercut spectacle is all the more surprising given his work’s often ravishing use of colored light. The third reason for Finch’s importance, however, is that for all these critical tendencies, the finished work remains as absurd as the ridiculous challenges and journeys that Finch undertakes to make it. Previous artists might have explored similar territory—

Mel Bochner in his *Measurement* series and John Baldessari in his early 1970s treatment of color—but Finch’s work is even more quirky. What’s more, no matter how much it deconstructs vision and emphasizes the distance between a source image or experience and its own material appearance, the work is always a visual pleasure, a joy to behold.

### The other side of the rainbow

With this I want to arch back around to RAINBOW (BROOKLYN), for as well as being a good starting point, the work can also serve to test out different approaches to Finch’s entire corpus. I can imagine producing a reading of the work which would show how Finch respects all the prohibitions around natural representation instituted by critical artists since Monet. All our encounters with light and with nature are now so highly predetermined that painting a rainbow *en plein air* would seem utterly naïve: Finch respects this contemporary condition by adding more layers of mediation in his representation of the rainbow, and indeed by removing the rainbow from the scene all together. Romance and myth are dead, and Finch testifies to this by showing that the “pot of gold” at the foot of the rainbow is actually a garage door, a grocery store. All in all, Finch demonstrates that Romanticism and Impressionism hold no purchase on the contemporary world. To respond authentically to the contemporary, one must produce a work deploying blunt black and white images and a text, a work which mimes the form of a document in a depressingly administered world.

This reading is partially adequate, but I’d prefer another interpretation, a reading that speaks to other works by Finch as well. In this version, Finch is pining after the world of Turner and Monet rather than deflating their ambitions. Somewhat reluctantly, he is recognizing that it is no longer possible to depict the rainbow, but he is doing everything to keep it in our minds. Just as the F train emerged on the overpass for a brief moment of escape from the tunnel, so RAINBOW (BROOKLYN) allows its viewer a brief moment of escape from the world of administered experience. Whenever I look at the work, I might see (+I0) black and white photos and text, but I think (+I0) of a rainbow above New York, and in my mind it’s more beautiful than any painting could have been.

MARK GODFREY is an art historian who teaches at The Slade School of Fine Art, University College London

Notes:

1) Sometimes, Finch adds another degree of mediation: instead of recreating the appearance of the light, he finds a pigment that replicates it, works out the chemical structure of this pigment, and finally arranges light bulbs into a three-dimensional diagram of this chemical structure. An example of this kind of work is BLUE (SKY OVER LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO, 5/5/00, MORNING EFFECT), 2000. This means the viewer is at one more remove from the color of the light Finch saw.

2) Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), p. 34.

3) The television monitors will play a selection of stills from John Ford's *The Searchers*, filmed in Monument Valley. The stills will not immediately be visible as they will face the wall; but they will create a darkening glow that replicates the falling light of a sunset.

4) Hal Foster, "Six Paragraphs on Dan Flavin," *Artforum*, February 2005, p. 161.