

MEL BOCHNER: IF THE COLOR CHANGES... (2003)

ALFREDO FRANCO

This text is an edited version of the audio commentary recorded by Alfredo Franco as part of the Zimmerli Art Museum's audio guide for the exhibition *Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists* (September 4, 2012 – January 6, 2013). No passage of this text may be reprinted or quoted without permission from the author. To obtain permission, please contact Marilyn Symmes at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey: msymmes@zimmerli.rutgers.edu.

In Mel Bochner's monoprint from 2003, *If the Color Changes...*, the text of section III-326 from Ludwig Wittgenstein's last known philosophical work, *Remarks on Colour*, is presented in both the original German and English translation. The two texts are superimposed and difficult to read.

The German text is as follows:

Beobachten ist nicht das gleiche wie betrachten, oder anblicken. "Betrachte diese Farbe und sag, woran sie dich erinnert." Ändert sich die Farbe, so betrachtest du nicht mehr die, welche ich meinte. Man beobachtet, um zu sehen, was man nicht sähe, wenn man nicht beobachtet.

The English translation is:

To observe is not the same thing as to look at or to view. "Look at this color and say what it reminds you of." If the color changes you are no longer looking at the one I meant. One observes in order to see what one would not see if one did not observe.

Wittgenstein lived from 1889 to 1951. He was born in Vienna to a fabulously wealthy family, whose home was visited regularly by legendary artists and musicians, including Johannes Brahms, Gustav Mahler, and Gustav Klimt. His older brother Paul was a gifted concert pianist who lost his right arm in World War I, and it was for him that Maurice Ravel composed his famous *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*. Upon his father's death, Wittgenstein became

one of the wealthiest men in Europe, yet he gave away his vast inheritance so as to devote himself fully to philosophical problems. His first book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, was published in 1921 and is considered one of the most important works of twentieth-century thought. In it Wittgenstein sought to clarify what language can and cannot do. The limits of our world, he said, are the limits of our language, and what cannot be described in language cannot be known and must remain silent. The role of philosophy itself is the critique of language; most philosophical problems are merely misunderstandings of the logic and meaning of words.

Wittgenstein spent a large part of his life in England, where he taught philosophy at the University of Cambridge. *Remarks on Colour*, which was incomplete at the time of his death, consists of Wittgenstein's notes on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colours*) of 1810, a text that exerted considerable influence on artists such as J.M.W. Turner and Wassily Kandinsky. Wittgenstein is less interested in the natural science aspects of Goethe's text than he is in exploring whether language can describe colors with any accuracy.

The very definition of individual colors through language seems impossible. The elusive nature of color might in some ways be reflected in the difficulty that we experience when attempting to tease out the German and English words that Bochner superimposes in this print.

Alfredo Franco is the Curator of Education for the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.