

Blacking out on Black Holes

What is black? Where An Ongena focuses on printing techniques, paper and ink, Hanne Van Dyck searches the realm of language to answer this question. Both work from a fascination for the elusive. Out of the urge to answer difficult questions.

Is black something or nothing? This can start infinite discussions. Black is a utopia, to be searching for one truth, something absolute. Many artists try to create and claim the blackest black, like Anish Kapoor and Frederik De Wilde who both claim to have found it. In general we accept that black is the darkest color there is. Nevertheless there are many nuances and visions about 'the darkest'. We say it is both a color and not a color, it lies outside the color spectrum because of the absence of light. So what is black? In daily life we do experience black as a color, for example in our clothing or in a piece of furniture. Still we also experience that no single object or thing is really black. We can only observe an object when a (little) bit of light is reflected. That's why black never seems to be completely black. When something is really black, it absorbs all the light and we can not see it.

The universe also seems black. What An Ongena is fascinated by is this infinite blackness, this infinite unattainable mass. What is this black that we observe? Where does it stop? What comes after this black? Is it really black? Scientists have proven that if you mix the whole universe in one pot, you get a sort of beige. This average color is called Cosmic Latte. We can ask the same questions with black holes. According to certain theories a black hole is something from where nothing, not even light, can escape. This should be the blackest existing black. But we can not comprehend this. What is black? What does it comprise? What if you fall in a black hole? What comes after?

To represent this questions and thoughts, An Ongena started a research on all the blacks she could find. With the single condition that it can be printed. This way she will start to determine a system of specific parameters for black. Herefor she will use the three most important aspects necessary to print: paper, ink and printing techniques. It is not a quest for the blackest or best black. It is a research in kinds of black, in interesting blacks and the meanings and compositions of black. It is a work that will probably never be finished.

By using a few parameters, An printed drawings of acoustic vibrations. These vibrations don't exist in space because out there, sound functions completely different. In outer space we have to forget everything we are familiar with and adjust to new territory. They are printed with RISO printing technique in four different ways. All the works are self-printed at the Charles Nypels Lab, Jan Van Eyck Academy. In every publication you will find:

- one work with CMYK printed on 100g EOS 2.0 paper
- one work with CMYK printed on 120g Munken Lynx Rough paper
- one work with 100% black printed on 100g EOS 2.0 paper
- one work with 100% black printed on 120g Munken Lynx Rough paper

The prints resulted in four different blacks. The work can be interpreted as a series of prints or as independent works. When kept inside the catalogue they will be transformed by the blackness of the opposite page, when taken out they will be transformed by daylight and the contrast of their new environment. They function as a starting point for an infinite research into blackness. An Ongena's aim is to let this work evolve into a major study of a huge spectrum of blacks. Practically this work is tightly framed but actually it breaths a whole discussion and mystery. With this work An Ongena doesn't only want to conduct a research in black but also into the composition of it, cmyk, the golden combination, different rasters, and this can go on and on.

Hanne Van Dyck's main interest is our relationship to nature. In her work she studies how we reproduce our experiences and impressions through language and images. Her contribution focuses on the cultural relativity of color, on language and color as means to convert an absence into a presence, on the etymology of black and on ways to comprehend and put into words the elusiveness of the universe. When Isaac Newton discovered the spectrum, he presented a new order of colors in which there would no longer be a place for black. But if not a color, what is black?

Every representation gives a specific interpretation of reality. This interpretation is determined by the society we live in. Society gives a color its meanings, codes and values. And these meanings change just like societies change. Today for example we see everything in different lighting conditions than societies in the Middle Ages. A torch, an oil lamp and a candle produce different light than electricity. If an old book tells me that the dress of the princess was black, it is not because that dress was actually black, although it could have been black. The difference between the actual color and the named color can already be big. The difference between a princess' definition of black and my definition of black can be big. The danger of anachronism is big when calling a representation of a color by my word for it. For centuries black and white were considered colors, the distinction between primary and complementary colors emerged slowly over time and the opposition between warm and cool colors is only a matter of convention. It all changes over time, just like the color of my new black pants. So, as color vanishes over time, how to best describe a Blackberry to a black witch?

The word black comes from ink as well as from burn, gleam, shine, flash, dark and from the black fur of the sable. The Ancient Greek sometimes used the same word to name different colors, if they had the same intensity, like dark blue and black. Other cultures had two words for black, one for dull and one for brilliant black. How does one word become another? And from what moment on did we have the need to formulate this color? Because color only exists as it is perceived by an individual, it becomes hard to definitively say what our ancestors did or did not see. Perception doesn't exist before there is a word to describe it. Did our ancestors merely lack the vocabulary to articulate what it was they were seeing? Or did their brain not bother to view black as a color?

Black, noir, zwart, svart, schwarz, hitam, nigrum, preto, nwa, all different words with different origins. Do they all describe the same thing? Black is often used to represent darkness, mourning, death, evil, witches, magic, the end, secrets, magic, force, violence, evil and elegance. And powerfully opposed ideas: authority and humility, sin and holiness, rebellion and conformity, wealth and poverty, good and bad. In nature black means the absence of light. Was the black sky just as black when we were born?

The universe is mostly black because there are not enough stars to produce light and most of them died out before they reach us. When the stars reach us they are already dead, how much more black would the universe be where it comes from? A black dwarf is a theoretical stellar remnant, it is a white dwarf that has cooled sufficiently so it no longer emits significant heat or light. Because of the time required for a white dwarf to reach this state it is calculated to be longer than the current age of the universe. Therefore no black dwarfs are expected to exist in the universe yet.

To be able to understand the unattainability of the universe, scientists make analysis. But scientific research as well is culturally determined, it has its history, ideology and motives. We can describe black with words, such as absence. If we convert this absence in an image we go back to black. We depend on a medium to catch black: ink, paint, language. If we use all kinds of paper, all kinds of ink, all kinds of words like holes, magic, panther, and we take all kinds of forms and we paint them black, would we be able to create an independency that makes black the constant factor that explains itself? Since any description, any notation of black is also cultural and ideological, we want to emphasize the relativity of black in this little inventory and the relativity of this inventory itself.