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Between artifice and nature: colour since the 1960s

'One sits more comfortably on a colour that one likes.'
Verner Panton

'Colour is stronger than language. It's a subliminal communication.' Louise Bourgeois

In 1909, Henry Ford made his famous declaration of standardisation: 'Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black.' Almost exactly a century later, Apple was challenged in court over its use of the slogan 'Millions of Colors' to promote its computer equivalent of the *Model T*. These two examples illustrate – almost too neatly – how from the late nineteenth century to today there has been an almost unimaginable shift in the availability and possibilities of colour, colour technologies and our experience and expectations of colour, all of which have snowballed exponentially, from the limited and gradually changing palette of the pre-Victorian era and the first chemically manufactured paints, via the invention of scientific colour systems such as the Pantone chart, to the potential for a seemingly infinite virtual palette of digital colours projected magically on our computer screens and phones for our use and play.

The Danish textile company Kvadrat emerged almost exactly at the mid point in what might be described as the century of colour, and has since played a significant role in colouring furniture and modern interiors. In the history of the evolution of colour and design in the last half century, a handful of episodes and collaborations stand out as particularly significant in shaping the interior landscape of colour and its influence on the design world. And Kvadrat's role in the story is pivotal.

While modern industry has tended to promote colour in terms of quantity and choice and has given us hugely expanded palettes that can be accurately reproduced at relatively low cost, that is only part of the story. Arguably, artists' and designers' more experimental approach to colour and their pioneering interpretations of new colour technologies have been equally – if not more – influential in shaping colour aesthetics and how we use and relate to colour.

From the outset, Kvadrat operated in a progressive design world and responded to directions set by the designers, architects and artists around it. It is this experimental cultural milieu and a series of significant collaborations that have been instrumental in pushing the boundaries of colour and textiles in interiors and in propelling Kvadrat to the centre of design developments.

The palette of pop

In a world already thrown open to change, 1968 was a cataclysmic year across Europe – from explosive politics and student revolutions to pop art and its brilliant candy-colours that reflected the new social order. It was also the year that Kvadrat was founded in the small town of Ebeltoft on the Danish coast. Scandinavia was a good place to be at the time, as the influence of visionary Nordic designers – Eero Saarinen, Arne Jacobsen, Verner Panton, Gunnar Aagaard Andersen, Nanna Ditzel, Eero Aarnio and Marimekko among others – reverberated way beyond that region's borders. From the outset, it could be argued that Kvadrat's unofficial mission was to provide the palette to colour this brave new futuristic organic interior landscape and the pop aesthetic that was in the process of emerging.

As much as anything else, what pop revolutionised was colour. In contrast to the traditional artists' painterly palette, rooted in the natural world and its flora and fauna, pop treated colour as ready-made, and borrowed bold hues from the garage forecourt, supermarket shelves, commercial paint charts and the mass media. Roland Barthes's observation that the colour of pop was 'chemical' referred to the bold contrast of saturated primaries as well as the fact that it no longer made use of oil paints or artists' colours but borrowed colour directly from industry. The artificial flavourings of Warhol's many *Marilyns* came from commercial screen-printing inks applied on canvas; Frank Stella used a standard range of alkyd wall paints – a form of polyester with an even matt surface – manufactured by the Brooklyn paint company Benjamin Moore; Donald

Frank Stella, *Single Concentric Squares (violet to red violet half-step)*, 1974

Above: Verner Panton, *Restaurant Varna*, 1971 (Aarhus, Denmark)
Facing Page: Verner Panton, *Astoria Retaurant*, 1960 (Trondheim, Norway)

Judd – following Richard Hamilton and John Chamberlain – adopted high-gloss lacquers such as motorcycle paints (Harley Davidson's Hi-Fi red and Hi-Fi purple). The chemical effect turned colour from the natural, with all nature's variegations, into a single smooth industrially manufactured entity, a lipstick-like surface appeal, celebrated in the mesmerising title of Tom Wolfe's book *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. As artist and writer David Batchelor notes in *Chromophobia*, 'The colours of the modern city are almost all entirely new and completely unnatural. Most of the colours we now see are chemical or electrical; they are plastic or metallic; they are flat, shiny, glowing or flashing.'

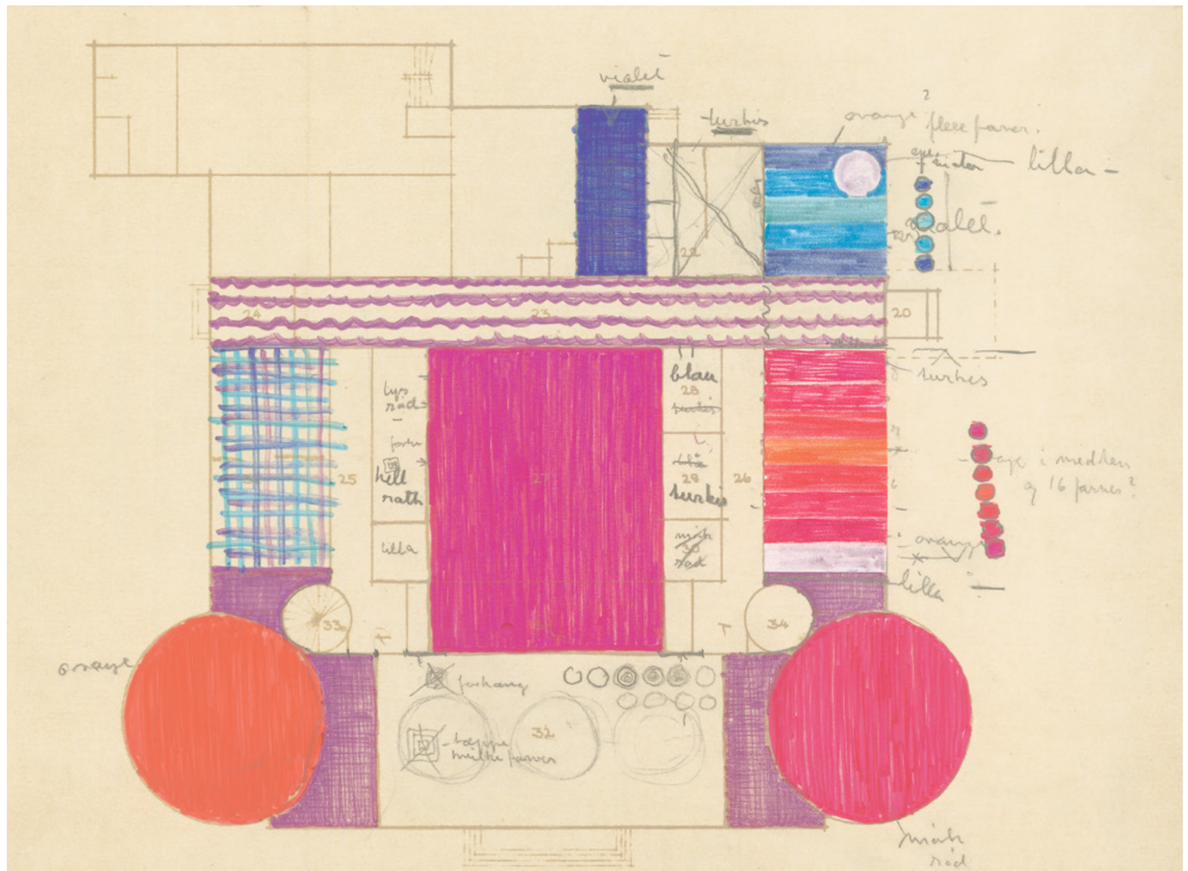
This brave new colour explosion came right up to Kvadrat's doorstep: Verner Panton and Nanna Ditzel were key figures in overthrowing the colourlessness of the muted, wood-toned monochromes of Danish design in the 1950s and early 1960s and translating pop's abstract and graphic approach to colour through to the material world. Although Panton worked with other textile companies – first the Danish Unika Væv and then the Swiss company Mira-X – his world was closely connected to Kvadrat. Kvadrat's founders Poul Byriel and Erling Rasmussen worked together at Unika Væv under the directorship of the flamboyant Percy von Halling-Koch (known affectionately as 'Bum'), at a time when the pioneering textile company was championing the new Danish design being disseminated via Gunnar Bratvold's influential design magazine *Mobilia*.

Panton has been described as a 'creator of atmospheres for living spaces', and essentially these atmospheres were founded on colour. 'One sits more comfortably on a colour that one likes', Panton wrote in *Notes on Colour*, the book which collected his personal comments on the perception of colour alongside his reflections on both ancient and modern colour theories as well as the more technical colour systems employed by modern industry.

Panton followed Goethe and Kandinsky in their belief in the psychic and spiritual meaning of colours and their psychological and sensual effect on the environment and hence people. 'Colour planning is of utmost importance when creating a milieu. It is not enough to say that red is red and blue is blue. I myself normally work with parallel colours whose tones follow consecutively according to the order of the spectrum. In this way, I can control the character of the room in terms of warmth and coolness and thereby create the desired atmosphere.' Working with the six prismatic colours – the three primary colours and three secondary colours – he distinguished between warm and cool palettes to create moods that corresponded to the purpose of a room: 'Green for example is given priority in rooms in which a calm atmosphere is required'. He frequently used interior landscapes of greens and blues in schemes for offices, whereas the clubs and restaurants he designed pulsate in over-heated, retina-warping contrasts of purple, red and orange.

Colour as a psychological and sensual element reached full expression in Panton's trippy spatial installations, which wove together architecture, furniture and light to create total coloured environments such as the *Astoria* (1960) in Trondheim, Norway, and *Restaurant Varna* (1971) in Aarhus, where Panton allowed the floor, ceiling and walls, furniture, lamps, mirrors and textiles to merge, melt and blend into one single close-knit entity where individual objects seem almost to 'grow' out of the room. Colour gives definition to this open spatial flow, using pulsating hues to create an unreal, mood-altering ambience. In *Notes on Colour* he wrote, 'There is an incredible number of people who fight against the use of colours. But there are also many people who fight against common sense.'

The most influential fabric in terms of bringing colour to this bold new graphic-design language was undoubtedly Nanna Ditzel's *Hallingdal*, designed originally for the Halling-Koch Design Center in 1965 and



Verner Panton, colour plan for *Restaurant Varna*, 1971 (Aarhus, Denmark)

Verner Panton, *Restaurant Varna*, 1971 (Aarhus, Denmark)

Nanna Ditzel, *Stairscape*, 1966 (created for Unika Væv showroom)
Facing page: Nanna Ditzel, *Hallingdal*, 1965

associated from the start with such revolutionary designs as Arne Jacobsen's *Egg* and *Swan* chairs. Within a few years the marketing was taken over by Kvadrat, and the textile has been the company's bestseller ever since. From the beginning *Hallingdal* was available in 42 colours, and it is revealing that the colour range is not based on an industrial colour system but on Ditzel's own highly refined and idiosyncratic colour sense. While still using bright colours, she moved from pop's primaries to a more harmonious palette that has been described as bright pastels. The range eventually grew from 42 to 105 colours and was updated by Ditzel every five to ten years until her death in 2005. In the 2012 update, part of her original harmonic colour scheme was restored. Among the constants have been Ditzel's favourite colours – a hot pink and a vivid turquoise. Photos of Ditzel's house in 1966 show platform seating in soft lipstick pink and reds set off against a mauve blue. Ditzel's striking sense of colour infiltrated the Kvadrat universe in other ways: she coloured the interior of their second office, the schoolhouse, painting the balustrade in a luminous palette of blues and pinks.

Hallingdal and the collaboration with Ditzel established a working pattern that Kvadrat has followed ever since, by inviting artists or designers to develop colour ranges for a specific fabric – ranges that are deliberately large enough to provide architects and designers with a diverse palette but that are also governed by a strong individual aesthetic. In the early 1980s Kvadrat began a long collaboration with poetic colourist Finn Sködt, best known for the textile *Divina*. Sködt first worked for the company as a graphic designer, but his influence soon extended to textile colour and also to the way fabrics were presented in sample books and in the company's showrooms. Sködt sees textiles as a means of bringing softness and colour into the interior, and works from an instinctive understanding of colour and its effect on material that's informed by memory, recognition and the emotional effects of colour rather than fashion or scientifically formulated systems. According to Sködt, 'Colours have an autonomy about them, an ability to elude any system. They should be perceived in the pigment and in the fabric and not in any system.'

Divina's success – like *Hallingdal*'s – can be attributed largely to its extraordinary colour range, which is periodically refreshed by Sködt. One of the boldest recent uses of *Divina* is artist Liam Gillick's seating installation *Prototype Conference Room* for the auditorium at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, where contrasting colours hum and zing, sweetie-wrapper pink riffing against canary yellow, Belisha orange against Yves Klein blue. The effect is a strange, even slightly uneasy, hybrid of institutional and groovy; a bit Bauhaus, a bit Donald Judd; a bit psychedelic; strikingly unfamiliar.

And Kvadrat's colour evolution is ongoing. An important current collaboration is with the Italian fashion textile and colour adviser Giulio Ridolfo. Ridolfo brings a fashion sensibility to furnishing textiles, and what he describes as an 'Italian eye' to balance the cooler aesthetic associated with the watery Scandinavian light and landscape and Modernist terrain from which Kvadrat sprang. Ridolfo's first collaborations in the furniture industry were with Italian manufacturer Moroso and designer Patricia Urquiola. Here he was instrumental in shaping a material patchwork of pattern and colour characterised by 'off' colours and a delicacy and vivaciousness – even femininity – that are very different from the graphic boldness and saturated colours generally associated with Modernist design. Ridolfo describes fabric as the 'robe' that dresses furniture; 'the surface that has to appeal both visually and tactilely as well as looking good under any lighting conditions'. He experiments with materials, patterns and colours until the product is 'dressed' correctly and he has given it an identity. For Urquiola's urbane *Fjord chair*, for example, the

Nanna Ditzel, Kvadrat showroom, 1970 (Ebeltoft)

Below: Finn Skōdt, *Divina* colour palette from 1989
Facing page: Liam Gillick, *Prototype Conference Room*, 2009 (Zilkha Auditorium of the Whitechapel Gallery, London)

Above: detail of Feuilles de Choux tapestry panel (Flemish, 16th century, Langeais Castle, France)
Facing page: Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, *North Tiles*, 2009 (Kvadrat's Stockholm showroom)

Above and facing page: Patricia Urquiola and Giulio Ridolfo, *The Dwelling Lab*, 2010, (in collaboration with BMW, Kvadrat showroom, Milan)

prominent seams give it a tailored appearance that's softened by the subtle play of surface pattern and colour.

Ridolfo's starting point is the character of the fabric that is to be coloured – whether cotton, wool or plastic – and its weave. His first colour scale for a Kvadrat fabric was for *Steelcut* (designed by the Dutch weaving master Frans Dijkmeijer), a strong weave to which Ridolfo's colouring brings a more organic feel. *Steelcut Trio* is composed of three different colours which he describes as 'complex mixes with something missing, something irregular, an imperfection that permits a different kind of harmony.' Ridolfo builds these purposefully idiosyncratic and skewed colour palettes by assembling objects to create families of colours and textures. But while composing the colour palette might, on the surface, seem like the colourist's main task, in reality this is only the beginning. Each new colour then takes six to eight months to evolve from proposal to final fabric range, in a process that involves mixing a dye formula that can be guaranteed to produce the same results time after time.

Like Panton, Ridolfo sees a psychological dimension in the way textiles and colour interact in an interior, conditioning mood and influencing social interaction. 'How will we read a textile? Is it destined for the beach or the seventh floor of a skyscraper? What do people need? There's no longer a need to surprise in a public space. Instead we need to create a setting where people can interact. In a restaurant we need to make people feel comfortable, make them talk and feel good together. It is more about inner values and textiles can help create the setting for this.'

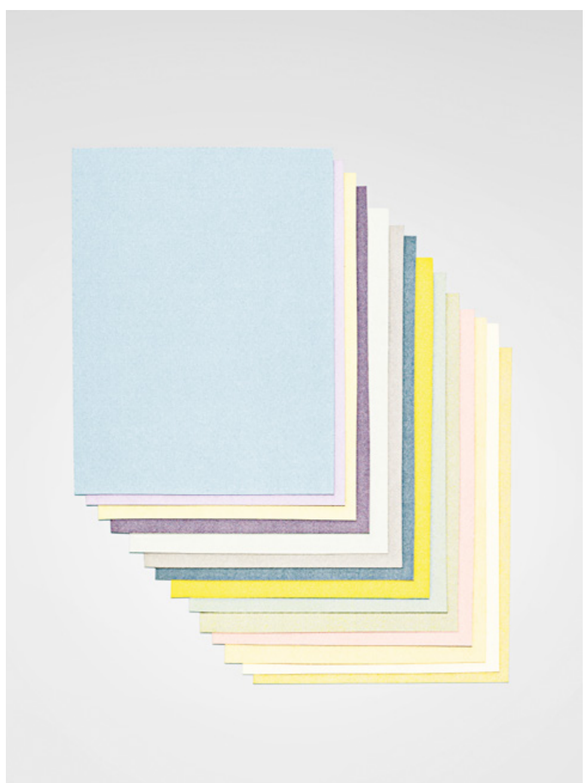
In collaboration with BMW, Kvadrat invited Ridolfo and Urquiola to revisit the car interior. 'They asked us to reconsider the big bourgeois car, the *Gran Turismo*, and of course executive tastes. Leather, beige, shiny wood: it is the same for all executive cars and planes, but I don't believe anyone really likes it. What is needed is to reconsider the boundaries of luxe and good taste.' Ridolfo and Urquiola produced a tactile padded textile interior in a warm beige spiked with fluorescent flashes. According to Ridolfo, 'It was about a provocation – it used *Remix* and *Divina* to tone down the car interior. There is always a lot of visual pollution in the car. You are seated for a long time but you don't enjoy your sofa.' Although this project has yet to have much perceptible influence on car interiors, it is underpinned by an imaginative approach to colour and textiles that has the potential to make industrial objects more nuanced and subtly meaningful.

Virtual colour

From the birth of egg tempera to the invention of synthetic paints, new technologies have influenced and even transformed artists' and designers' approaches to colour, and without doubt the biggest step since pop's celebration of chemical colour is the emergence of digital colour. Instead of natural plant roots, leaves and petals, or laboratory test tubes, virtual colour is brought to us in immaterial byte-sized pixels and every computer, tablet or phone offers a practically infinite menu of ready-made colours. The glowing screen has created an aesthetic even more alluring and evanescent than the glossy world of pop; a virtualisation of colour that paradoxically appears both intangible and more mesmerizingly hyper-real than anything the analogue colours of the material world can match. In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor draws a distinction between analogical and digital colour. 'The colour circle', he writes, 'is analogical; the colour chart is digital. Analogical colour is a continuum, a seamless spectrum, an undivided whole, a merging of one colour into another. Digital colour is individuated; it comes in discrete units; there is not mergence or modulation; there are only boundaries, steps and edges. Analogical colour is colour; digital colour is colours.'

Below: Giulio Ridolfo and Frans Dijkmeijer, *Steelcut* colour palette, 2006
Facing page: Giulio Ridolfo, *Remix*, 2012

Below: Aggebo and Henriksen, *Waterborn*, 2010
Facing page: Aggebo and Henriksen, details of urban snapshots used as a colour source for *Waterborn*



Above: Peter Saville Studio, sleeve design for *Blue Monday*, New Order, 1983
Facing page: David Adjaye and Peter Saville, Kvadrat showroom, London, 2009

The immersive allure of colour is both subject and object of the collaboration between art director Peter Saville and architect David Adjaye in Kvadrat's London showroom. The Victorian warehouse has been hollowed out and coated in matt black to act as a vacuum-like foil to the dominant element: a stairway lined with a spectrum-coloured glass balustrade. Emphasizing the synergy between a place and its purpose, this rainbow bath of coloured light is an obvious reference to the importance of colour to Kvadrat, but also to Saville's 1983 design for the record sleeve for New Order's *Blue Monday*, which famously did not print the title or the band's name, but used blocks of colour as a code with which to transmit them, rather like a coloured barcode.

We have seen from the beginning how Kvadrat has responded to the artists and designers circling around the company and looked to them for influence and the impetus for new directions. In the last decade CEO Anders Byriel has been instrumental (as his father Poul Byriel and Erling Rasmussen were before him) in gathering a network of collaborators whose work does not necessarily relate directly to textile design, but whose influence becomes apparent from time to time. At the entrance to the company's Ebeltoft headquarters is a chandelier by Olafur Eliasson, a relative of his immense kaleidoscopic chandeliers hanging in Copenhagen's opera house. Last summer Günther Vogt and Eliasson completed the landscape work *Your glacial expectations*, surrounding Kvadrat's offices. It will be interesting to see how this collaboration evolves, although early attempts to translate Eliasson's aesthetic to textiles have proved challenging for contemporary colour technologies.

While op art and pop art rejected nature as the root of colour in favour of a chemically induced palette, Eliasson's work returns to nature, but nature as refracted through technology; it is an investigation into our perception of light and colour. Natural phenomena form a basis for his art, but they're catapulted into an extra-terrestrial dimension. In Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, his *Weather project* becomes a sunset beyond natural human experience. In Aarhus, the installation *Your rainbow panorama* immerses visitors in the colours of the rainbow but with the brightness dial turned to max. While these works dematerialise colour, they also make it the medium of existence. Colour is no longer fixed, but fleeting and evanescent, like the effect of light on the dichromatic and reflective glass surfaces of Eliasson and Henning Larsen Architects' façade for the *Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre*. If colour is a continuously evolving narrative, in parallel with developments in other fields like genetics or environmental science, there is a sense that it has entered a new discourse between nature and artifice, analogue and digital, virtual and material, where these are no longer segregated or in opposition, but breeding new hybrids, engaged in a constantly evolving relationship.

Above and facing page: Olafur Eliasson, *Your rainbow panorama*, 2011 (Aarhus, Denmark)

Olafur Eliasson with Henning Larsen Architects, façade of the *Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre*