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N. Cullinan, 'Mel Bochner: Whitechapel Gallery'
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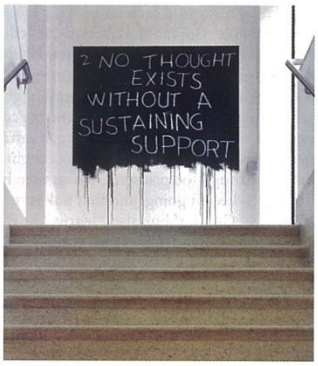

From left: **Mel Bochner**, ***No Thought Exists Without a Sustaining Support*, 1970**, acrylic and chalk on wall. Installation view. Photo: Stephen White. **View of "Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes," 2012.** From left: *Master of the Universe*, 2010; *Oh Well*, 2010; *Amazing!*, 2011; *No*, 2009; *Nonsense*, 2009; *Contempt*, 2005; *Obsolete*, 2007; *Event Horizon*, 1998. Photo: Stephen White. **Mel Bochner, *Silence*, 2012**, oil on velvet, 63 x 47".

Mel Bochner

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON

Nicholas Cullinan

MEL BOCHNER, heir to Henri Matisse? This seemed to be the surprising thesis put forward by curator Achim Borchardt-Hume in the delightfully revisionist exhibition of more than four decades of the renowned Conceptualist's work at the Whitechapel Gallery (remarkably, the artist's first survey to be staged in the UK). Not only were Bochner's appreciative nods to the master colorist of modernism highlighted in the accompanying catalogue, and Bochner's paintings privileged over his earlier sculptures, drawings, photographs, and measurement pieces that make democratic use of the gallery space, but the exhibition also emphatically sought to reframe Bochner's work via his interest in color as much as in language, and to explore how the two intertwine in his art through a shared tension between abstraction and representation.

Emblematic of this curatorial focus was the wall of words the visitor first encountered in the gallery's space. Occupying the entire visual field of the entrance, Bochner's vast painting *Blah, Blah, Blah*, 2011, consists of clotted and smeared multicolored letters rendered in the standardized font of a sign painter, spelling out the titular phrase forty times over in oil paint on a support of ten black velvet panels. The cumulative effect of the repeated word and the tension between the hues intermixing in Bochner's rainbow palette (resembling Pop silk screens) is undeniably mesmeric and eye-catching. Yet surely the choice of such a banal and cipherlike phrase complicated the exhibition's "exploration of communication and meaning in language" (as the accompanying wall label indicated somewhat nebulously), which was supposedly encapsulated by this opening gambit. Rather, as this painting announced, a quick sense of humor was palpably present on every wall of the exhibition, in Bochner's various engagements with the anxiety of art-historical influence—and by extension criticism—through his deliberate provocations and misprisions. This is made manifest not only in his maundering "Blah, Blah, Blah" paintings, 2000–, but also in the mischievously falsified quotes contained in *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)*, 1967–70, in which aphorisms on the photographic medium by such figures as Marcel Duchamp and Émile Zola are undermined by the insertion of a few feigned statements (Bochner has steadfastly refused to reveal which these are).

Most vitally, this focused show lets the works parse the two broad categories of color and language in order to consider their constituent parts, including medium specificity, texture, and tautology. Throughout Bochner's career, he has intrinsically wedded concept to facture, and the resulting physical objects are more than mere carriers of ideas. This is evident in the twelve color photographs of *Transparent and Opaque*, 1968/2008, with Vaseline, and, separately, shaving foam transmitting varying degrees of light and luster to the camera's lens; in the ninety-eight-foot stretch of *Event Horizon*, 1998, in which the artist's wall measurements are transferred onto eighty-three monochrome panels of various standard sizes and colors; and in more recent pieces, such as the smeared-white-paint-on-off-white-velvet *Silence*, 2012. Material concerns also trump historical reference when it comes to color: Bochner is less interested in the equation of silence with blankness (as put forward in discourses around Robert Rauschenberg's fabled *White Paintings* from 1951, which famously served as inspiration for John Cage's "silent" performance *4'33"*), or even the elevation of language, than in language's often jolting degradation. Thus, in *Silence*, as in many of Bochner's latest "thesaurus paintings," 2002–, we witness a deteriorating (or increasingly crude) use of language ranging from the opening eponymous imperative to ZIP IT!, to finally, and most coarsely, JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP! The tonal proximity of the creamy oil paint and the off-white velvet ground only serves to highlight the range of linguistic registers deployed and the resulting elision of word and image, viewing and reading.

Another crucial aspect foregrounded by the exhibition, befitting perhaps the central preoccupation of Bochner's career, is the seeming impossibility of thought existing outside language, or without being encoded and conveyed within it. This was made clear by a 1970 wall drawing that greeted the viewer at the top of the stairs to the second floor, *No Thought Exists Without a Sustaining Support*, where the fictive blackboard on which this phrase is scrawled in chalk appears to dissolve and drip down the wall. While this work might initially seem to have little to do with the show's curatorial focus, the chromatic range utilized in the art on display was matched only by the different mediums in which Bochner has deployed these colors, and subsequently our way of viewing the artist's investigations was recalibrated.

"If the Colour Changes" was densely hung (one might say overhung), which had the effect, despite Bochner's rigorous philosophical grounding, of making his works and the ideas contained within them appear curiously breathless and fidgety. This false impression was immediately rectified by the inclusion of four of Bochner's lucid texts in the very good accompanying catalogue. However,

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although all interesting, the five thematic and occasionally overlapping essays (by Borchardt-Hume and his exhibition collaborators Ulrich Wilmes and João Fernandes, as well as Briony Fer and Mark Godfrey) didn't particularly help to illuminate the works included at Whitechapel, or, by extension, the specific rereading of Bochner's career underpinning the entire enterprise. Individual entries, or at least expanded captions accompanying the catalogue's reproductions, would have aided the show's thesis concerning the parallel development of form and content in Bochner's oeuvre, which was otherwise so handsomely laid out. The Wittgenstein quotation that served as the exhibition's title (and the title of a painting in it) flags the adroit way in which Bochner has always balanced the pragmatic with the phenomenological in his materials—treating hue not as a unified concept but as mutable, contingent on naming, seeing, texture—and helps position him among the most compelling colorists of our age. □

Travels to the Haus der Kunst, Munich, Mar. 7–June 23; Fundação de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, July 12–Oct. 13.

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