

PRESSBOOK

Iván ARGOTE

Art Agenda

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Ivan Argote's "Reddish Blue"

The archive is dated; we now live in the age of footnoted fictions, as artists, writers, politicians, and technocrats each try to shape political reality through semi-plausible myths... each "based on a true story." As such, it might be time to start weighing the techniques of Hito Steyerl, or Ben Lerner's speculative political fictions that change the world "depending on its arrangement into one narrative or another"¹ against the not dissimilar disinformation tactics of political theater found in say, Putin's *éminence grise*, Vladislav Surkov, and his use of multiple false flag operators to confuse any cogent narrative of so-called "reality." For this review, let's take Ivan Argote's "Reddish Blue" as the opening salvo for this discussion.

As the title suggests, the exhibition is based on the color purple, and several of the gallery walls are painted appropriately. To learn why, visitors are presented with a slideshow that apes PowerPoint and silent movies by projecting 80 expository intertitles. It begins, "I think it's true..." and from there, a series of narratives that may or may not be true follow. These accounts more or less intertwine as the artist uses anecdotes to tell personal and familial histories, but the crux of it all is a particular 1970s snapshot captured on Kodak's Kodachrome film.

The image in question is a heavily faded color photograph of the artist's father orchestrating a protest with a group of primary school students. While the image is never really made present in the exhibition—save for illustrations in the press materials—the slides explain how the damaged photo now resembles a hazy purple duotone. The artist then ponders why the photo faded in this fashion as we read an interesting tale of what basically amounts to hearsay: Argote had a discussion with a guy who had a discussion with a Kodak employee that revolved around color and ideology.

According to the work, the "red scare and stuff" led Kodak to question how its Kodachrome stock tended to fade to red. Fearing that this hue might "color" political affect, the company transitioned to the new Ektachrome process, which faded to an ideologically neutral blue instead. As a conjecture, Argote suggests that his purple image must have been developed in the midst of this change and as such, the color shifted neither to red nor blue, but somewhere in between. This middle ground is then used as a kind of metonym for the dialectical clash between the so-called first-world "blues" and second-world "reds"; however, this is secondary to the artist's ultimate point: that memory can be mediated by black-box mechanics that govern how a device can represent, and moreover, that we should watch out for such snares. It's a nice story, and a prescient warning considering the hermeneutics and growing hegemony of digital and other technologies today; however, the artist discloses that he cannot find any evidence of Kodak's kowtowing to the American Cold War propaganda machine. The reason? Well, it's most likely false. The quirky thing about this exhibition is that Argote obfuscates an actual history that has just as much to do with capitalism, technology, and identity politics, in favor of his own fantasy.

Ektachrome did not succeed Kodachrome; they are two different Kodak products, which coexisted for decades before Argote's photo was taken, and likewise existed for decades after. While Argote is correct that Kodak changed its processing methods in the 1970s, he gets the motivation wrong... or does he?

¹ For more, see this interview with Ben Lerner in *The Believer*: http://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_lerner_2

After being tried and found guilty of violating antitrust acts in a 1954 court ruling, Kodak was forced to let independent labs process its film. For quality control, the company developed a printer and gave each of these labs a test card for color correction. On it was an image modeled by one of their employees, Shirley Page². These “Kodak Shirleys” set the standard for “normal” skin tones; however, since Shirley was a Caucasian woman, subjects with darker skin would become totally distorted in the process. Many artists, such as Jean Luc-Goddard, refused to use the film stock, which he noted was inherently “racist.”³ While I’d love to sell you a redemption story about how Kodak came to their senses, in reality, the company only changed their color balances after their two biggest markets, confectioners and furniture makers, complained that the narrow range of the film stock made dark chocolate and dark furniture look bad.

Adjacent to the screening room in which the slide show is projected, the gallery’s other chambers host a series of shelf-like assemblages that combine vanity mirrors and color “tests” culled from books—including images of other white women—into which Argote has laser-cut various epigrams such as “is this tomorrow?” Do these quasi-furniture pieces allude to in the “real” history mentioned above? Are the laser-cut words another pun on the etymology of the word “photography”—from the Greek, “writing with light”—and as such ask us to consider just how we define technology? Spiraling out from there, the visitor finds a set of broken concrete fragments that might also allude to street furniture or monuments, which are each covered in similar graffiti... one has the word “chocolate” written on it. Is this a hidden reference as well? But if so: to what, really?

In any case, my head is spinning, and I’m not sure why I had to take this huge tangent other than to look at an exercise in the rhetorical formulas of alternative fiction—“is this tomorrow” could be a malapropism leading us down another rabbit hole toward the title of the 1956 exhibition that launched the British Pop movement, “This is Tomorrow.” Maybe the show’s twists and turns schooled me on how look at spin with fresh eyes, and how narrative tricks can reshape realities. Considering that “Reddish Blue” sits in Brussels, I might also reflect on the Euro Zone headquartered there and the “trickle down” narratives preceding the January 22 European Central Bank vote on whether to flood half a trillion Euros of public funds into the hands of the privately rich, at a time in which the general public is struggling to make ends meet. While that hard sell trades on misdirection and mystification, I’d prefer to skip all of the games mentioned above in favor of the one Syriza is running on in the Greek National vote three days later: let’s just talk about the euro debit problem without pulling a whole bunch of other invented and confusing paradoxes into the mix. Only then can we all start talking clearly about a better tomorrow.

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² For more about the “Kodak Shirleys”, read here: <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/13/363517842/for-decades-kodak-s-shirley-cards-set-photography-s-skin-tone-standard>

³ As quoted by David Smith in the Guardian, “‘Racism’ of early colour photography explored in art exhibition,” January 2013: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/25/racism-colour-photography-exhibition>