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COLOUR AS A *READY-MADE*: NOTES ON THE MARGINS OF THE WORKS OF ADAM MARCZYŃSKI

Kolor jako *ready-made*: notatki na marginesie prac Adama Marczyńskiego **Abstrakt**

Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie koloru i jego percepcji w wybranych dziełach Adama Marczyńskiego (1908-1985) z cyklu *Refleksy zmienne* z lat 60 i 70. XX wieku. Punktem wyjścia do rozważań jest kolor traktowany jako *ready-made*, karta kolorów zaanektowana w przestrzeń malarską przez artystów świadomych faktu, że kolor może być komercyjnym produktem. Przedmiotem analizy są prace Marczyńskiego wypełnione kwadratowymi lub prostokątnymi kasetonami zamykanymi ruchomymi na osi, uchylnymi klapkami. Wnętrza kasetonów artysta pokrywał intensywnym kolorem, najczęściej z użyciem farb fluorescencyjnych, a ich soczysta barwa miała być transmitowana w formie odbić, refleksów powstających na srebrzystych klapkach, zmieniających się w zależności od kąta nachylenia.

Słowa kluczowe: Adam Marczyński, *Refleksy zmienne*, kolor w sztuce współczesnej, farby fluorescencyjne, sztuka lat 60. i 70. XX wieku

Abstract

The article deals with the issue of colour and its perception in selected works by Adam Marczyński (1908-1985), which are part of the *Variable Reflections* series from the 1960s and 1970s. The starting point for our considerations is colour treated as a *ready-made*, a colour swatch annexed to the painting space by artists aware of the fact that colour can be a commercial product. The subject of the analysis are Marczyński's works filled with square or rectangular coffers covered with movable flaps hinged on an axis. The artist covered the interior of the coffers with intense colour, usually achieved through the use of fluorescent paints. Their vivid colour was to be transmitted through reflections of light bouncing off of the silvery surface of flaps, and changing depending on the angle of inclination.

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Keywords: Adam Marczyński, *Variable Reflections*, colour in contemporary art, fluorescent paints, the art of the 1960s and 1970s.

Colour charts first appeared in the 1880s. Sets of mass-produced, ready-made paints for home use dethroned hand-made pigments. From the very beginning, they were presented in the form of plainly-painted rectangles, machine-filled with a uniform, flat spot of colour, devoid of any traces of human intervention, arranged next to one other in even rows and columns against a neutral background. Unlike the colour wheel, first proposed by Isaac Newton in the early eighteenth century, the colour arrangement in the swatches is irrelevant. It is a system devoid of hierarchy, and its only purpose is to present the set available in a commercial offer. According to Ann Temkin, the curator of the *Color Chart: Reinventing Color* exhibition,² by looking closer at the colour swatches, as if through a lens, one can trace the significant changes that took place in Western art in the twentieth century, when established beliefs about spiritual aspects as well as scientific properties of colours had to acknowledge the fact that colour is also a commercial product.³ This was mainly due to the attitudes of the artists themselves. Andy Warhol's statement "I want to be a machine,"⁴ or Frank Stella's declaration to "keep the paint as good as if it was in the can,"⁵ have devalued the traditional drive to showcase the painter's personal expression, largely achieved through colour.

The use of colour cards, or even the instrumental transfer of geometric colour templates into the work of the painter, who thus distances himself from exposing his individuality, can be compared to the permanent annexation of the grid motif by visual artists, seen by Rosalind Krauss as an emblematic structure of modernist art.⁶ Krauss observes two dimensions in which the grid reveals its modernity: spatial and temporal. In the former, it establishes the autonomy of art from reality (flat, geometric, and therefore antimimetic), in the latter (which I would also dub historical), the grid in and of itself constitutes a modern form, belonging to the art of the twentieth century and absent from the works of the previous century.⁷ Due to its deindividualised arrangement, the colour card has become analogical to the modernist grid, filled with colour. By complementing each other, both the card and the grid elevate their impersonal and neutral status towards the artist's actions. A good *exemplum* of such perception comes from the paintings by Gerhard Richter (born 1932), from his *Colour Cards* series (Ger. *Farbtafeln*), which has been under composition intermittently since 1966. By combining random rectangles of varying shades, obtained from a mixture of primary colours, the German artist paraphrased the paint swatch – or its enlarged replica – deliberately

² *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 2 – May 12, 2008, curator: Ann Temkin.

³ A. Temkin, *Color Shift*, in: eadem, *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today*, [exhibition cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 2 – May 12, 2008], New York 2008, p. 16.

⁴ After: G.R. Swenson, *What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters. Part I*, "ARTnews," 62/1963, No. 7 (November), p. 24.

⁵ *Questions to Stella and Judd. Interview by Bruce Glaser*, ed. L.R. Lippard, "ARTnews," 65/1966, No. 5 (September), p. 58.

⁶ R.E. Krauss, *Grids*, in: eadem, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London 1986, p. 9 (Pol. ed. R.E. Krauss, *Statki*, in: eadem, *Oryginalność awangardy i inne mity modernistyczne*, transl. M. Szuba, Gdańsk 2011, p. 17).

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

relinquishing aesthetic control over his work. After 1973, he began to exponentially increase the amount of elements used in his paintings, based on the number four. André Rottmann calls these works “*a diagrammatic abstraction*,”⁸ pointing out that contemporary research into the developmental path of this cycle of images presents two interrelated propositions of their interpretation. According to the first one, Richter defines abstraction as a product of modernity, not a means to cross it, and, at the same time, he transforms the grid – the template for modernist self-reflection – into a model pattern of exercising power through discipline and control.⁹ The other interpretation points to the introduction of chance as a means of suspending the painting medium in the dialectical tension between the increasingly technologically conditioned methods of control and the aesthetic form of rebellion or even resistance.¹⁰

Does the widespread use of *ready-made* colours mean that, as Ann Temkin points out, this modernist myth of originality “has lost much of its remaining allure, and the connection between the artist’s hand, and the product known as the work of art is often nonexistent?”¹¹ The solution to this issue appears in the works of Richter’s contemporaries – if we were to abide by the nomenclature of colour – in various shades and gradations, and does not allow for the formulation of clear-cut, “black and white” answers. An interesting contribution to this artistic discussion are the compositions by Adam Marczyński (1908-1985) of his *Variable Reflections* series from the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, the aim of the article will be to indicate the most interesting aspects of the ambiguous use of “ready-made” colours on semi-pliable wooden coffers filling these works, arranged in geometric sets.

Adam Marczyński, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków (1936) and, after World War II, its longtime professor, was a member of both the pre-war Kraków Group as well as the so-called second Kraków Group.¹² His diverse oeuvre situates his work in relation to deliberations on nature, although it transcends the framework of traditionally understood realism. This path led from combining the seemingly impossible reconciliation of the poetics of colourism and cubism in the 1930s, through lyrical-abstract compositions of the latter part of the 1950s, to the pieces built “from matter,”¹³ created towards the end of the decade and

⁸ A. Rottmann, *Randomizing Paintings: Notes on Richter’s Abstractions*, in: S. Wagstaff, B. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter. Painting after all*, [exhibition cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 4.03.2020–5.07.2020], New York 2020, p. 87. Rottmann cites the definition of *diagrammatic abstraction* after Benjamin Buchloh, who in the text devoted to Frank Stella’s paintings from the 1950s states that it is “the one variety of abstraction that recognizes externally existing and pre-given systems of spatio-temporal quantification and schemata for statistical collection of data as necessarily and primarily determining a pictorial order;” B. Buchloh, *Painting as Diagram: Five Notes on Frank Stella’s Early Paintings, 1958-1959*, “October,” 143/2013 (Winter), p. 129.

⁹ A. Rottmann, op. cit., p. 84. Rottmann uses the term “*cultural technique*,” borrowed from Bernhard Siegert; cf. B. Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, transl. G. Winthrop-Young, New York 2015, “Meaning Systems.”

¹⁰ A. Rottmann, op. cit.

¹¹ A. Temkin, *Color Shift*, p. 25.

¹² Cf. J. Chrobak, *Kalendarium*, in: *Adam Marczyński 1908-1985. Wystawa monograficzna*, [exhibition cat.], ed. idem, March – April 1985, BWA Kraków, September – October 1985, Ośrodek Propagandy Kultury i Sztuki Łódź, Kraków 1985, n.p.

¹³ Maria Jankowska-Andrzejewska described these works as “the painting of matter,” emphasising their distinctiveness from *purely* painterly works – whose structure was enriched by authors with admixtures of other substances – accentuated by replacing paint with other materials; M. Jankowska-Andrzejewska, *O „obrazach z materii” w polskiej sztuce II połowy lat 50. oraz lat 60. XX wieku*, doctoral dissertation, thesis advisors: prof. P. Juszkiewicz, prof. M. Haake, Institute of Art History, Faculty of History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2019.

gradually organised into increasingly more geometric systems. At the beginning of the 1960s, Marczyński transgressed the boundaries of an image perceived as a two-dimensional plane. He moved towards the image-object and introduced movable elements into his compositions in the form of rectangular flaps on metal hinges, which the viewer could open or close. He called this series *Variable Systems*. Soon, he replaced the fully openable flaps with wooden coffers, whose coloured fillings were covered with tiles, fixed on axes, which the viewer could decide to tilt, at an angle, to one side or the other. This resulted in the appearance of colours in part only, or in the form of reflections cast by the flaps.¹⁴

A complete colour analysis of these works without taking into account their technological aspects is impossible.¹⁵ What makes many of Marczyński's works in the *Variable Reflections* series uniquely original is the use of acrylic fluorescent paints. Without going into the complexities of physicochemical phenomena, suffice to say that the special ability of fluorescent pigments to remit light – giving the viewer the impression of the colours glowing in the painting – is visible only when the object covered in those colours is illuminated and ceases to be once the lights disappear.¹⁶ Thus, by introducing fluorescent paints into his repertoire of colours, the artist can enhance the visual effect of either the entire work, or its fragments, thanks to their distinctive brightness and luminous impression compared to “traditional” paints.

The viewer's knowledge of the presence of such paints in the works they view is a key aspect that allows for a better understanding of the idea Marczyński had in mind while working on *Reflections*, all the more so since it turns out that nowadays, half a century after their creation, the proper colour perception of these compositions is often impossible or even distorted. This is due to the photodegradability of fluorescent paints.¹⁷ In addition to daylight, what also contributes to the loss of fluorescence is humidity and elevated temperature.¹⁸ Exposed to UV rays, the colours darken or fade. This is why, due to exhibition and storage conditions, many of Marczyński's works painted with fluorescent paints¹⁹ have lost their

¹⁴ The issue of Marczyński's extremely original artistic concept of including the viewer actively in the act of co-creation of the work by manipulating the flaps of the coffers, which allowed for an almost infinite number of combinations of layouts, is a completely separate problem, one that extends beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁵ At this point, I would like to thank the conservator Anna Kusz, who kindly shared with me her knowledge of the painting technologies used by Marczyński and the experience gained during the conservation of his 1971 painting *Variable reflections 50* (owner: Galeria Studio in Warsaw), made as part of the conservation part of her artistic thesis, defended in 2019 under the supervision of prof. Dariusz Markowski at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

¹⁶ Detailed information on the phenomenon of fluorescence and its types was provided by Anna Kusz in the theoretical and research part of her diploma thesis, *Uzupełnianie fluorescencyjnych, akrylowych warstw malarzkich przeznaczonych do oglądu w świetle VIS w procesie konserwacji. Problematyka oraz badania komparatystyczne potencjału dostępnych na rynku materiałów* [Eng. *Replenishment of fluorescent acrylic paint layers to be viewed in the light of the VIS during the conservation process. Issues and comparative studies of the potential of materials available on the market*], MA thesis (theoretical and research part), supervisor: prof. D. Markowski, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń 2019, pp. 12-18.

¹⁷ It was one of the main conservation problems that Anna Kusz struggled with while working on Adam Marczyński's *Variable reflections 50*.

¹⁸ A. Kusz, *Uzupełnianie fluorescencyjnych...*, p. 52.

¹⁹ The works of Adam Marczyński are held in all major museum collections featuring contemporary art in Poland. Compositions from the *Variable reflections* series can be found at the National Museums in Kielce, Kraków, Poznań, Warsaw and Wrocław, the regional museums in Bydgoszcz, Koszalin, Radom and Toruń, the Museum of Art in Łódź, and the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław.

former splendour and juiciness. Such impressions of colour were described suggestively by critics contemporary to Marczyński. Descriptions of the reflection effects on silvery tiles covered with “structural colour” as similar to “chitinous insect shells,” may arouse surprise, suspicion, or at least disbelief in the contemporary viewer of Marczyński’s works, whose condition has deteriorated.²⁰ However, the definitive feeling that remains with us is that of dissatisfaction and a form of envy caused by our inability to soak in the experience of this power.

Compositions from the *Reflections* series are worth being examined from the perspective of their morphology. Helpful in carrying out this task are the photographs taken by Jacek Maria Stokłosa in Marczyński’s studio in Kraków in 1968.²¹ The presented photograph [fig. 1] shows the artist working on one of his *Reflections* at his workshop. The use of the craft-related word “workshop,” coming from the German “workplace” (*Werkstatt*), is by no means coincidental. A number of activities that Marczyński undertook during the construction of his works required him to not only have a previously thought out concept of the arrangement of individual coffers – as evidenced by the abundantly preserved sketches of these compositions [fig. 2] including the one visible in the lower right corner of the photograph – but also display a high degree of workshop proficiency. In addition to the typical painterly endeavours, such as coating the work with colour, the artist’s job also included a rather tedious process of assembling the wooden coffers and, as a final step, adding the movable flaps.²² These peculiar lids – and we know that for sure thanks to the work of Anna Kusz – were point-glued to wooden axes, which were attached to the wooden coffers with two nails [fig. 3]. It is worth noting that not all lids were movable. Selected single plates were immobilised in one fixed position by a wooden, triangular wedge to which they were glued [fig. 4]. In order to ensure the most precise finish of the work, which is extremely important from the perspective of the final colour effect, the artist first painted its individual elements, which he then attached to the support. The painting support most often consisted of a fibreboard mounted on a painting loom, pre-primed by the artist with 3-4 layers of emulsion paint on the face side, and subsequently covered with 15-20 layers of acrylic paints, creating a smooth, uniform surface.²³

The coffer-frames, made of wooden slats, were painted by the artist on the outside, inside, and on their front edges. To paint the inside walls of the coffers, first primed in white, the artist used the aforementioned fluorescent paint,²⁴ applied by spraying (“dotting” effect) or

²⁰ B. Kowalska, [n.t.], in: *Adam Marczyński 1908-1985*, [n.p.].

²¹ Photographer Jacek Maria Stokłosa (born 1944) spent several dozen years accompanying the Krzysztofory Gallery in Kraków and the artists associated with Tadeusz Kantor’s Cricot 2 Theater and the 2nd Kraków Group, documenting vernissages, exhibitions, and less formal scenes from the local café life; *Jacek Maria Stokłosa. Galeria Krzysztofory*, [exhibition cat.], photographs by J.M. Stokłosa, texts by A. Baranowa et al., ed. R. Domżański, Kraków 2018.

²² Adam Marczyński would order wooden coffers-frames from a carpenter’s.

²³ Such detailed information is provided in Leonarda Wiczyńska’s article *Technika i technologia współczesnych malarzy krakowskich*, “Ochrona Zabytków,” 33/1980, No. 4 (131), p. 313. The author – undoubtedly upon gaining first-hand knowledge while the painter was still alive – reports in detail that Marczyński used the Polinit TA emulsion paint for priming, sanding each layer with sandpaper, and using the Gesso primer from Talens in the final stage. On the other hand, in the painting layer, he mainly used acrylics, which allowed him to obtain colour variants other than in the oil technique; *ibidem*. Anna Kusz agrees with these technological descriptions as the most probable in most of the works from the *Variable reflections* series; A. Kusz, *Uzupełnianie fluorescencyjnych...*, p. 17, fn. 13.

²⁴ The palette of fluorescent colours most often used by Marczyński included: yellow, green, and orange.



Fig. 1. Adam Marczyński in his studio in Kraków, 1968, photo by Jacek Maria Stokłosa

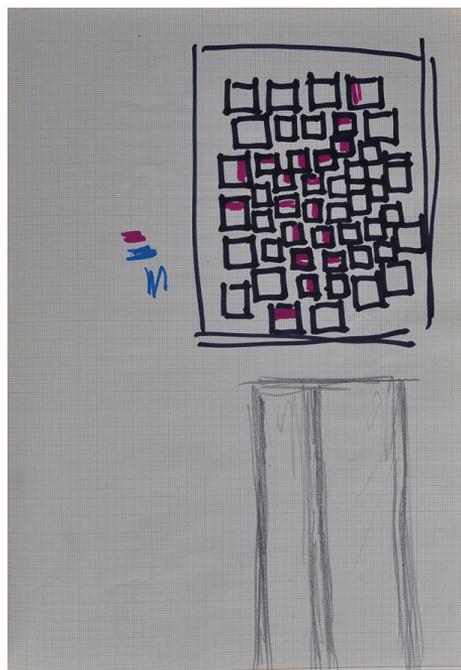


Fig. 2. Adam Marczyński, a sketch for a composition from the *Variable Reflections* series, mid-1960s, marker on graph paper, A-3 sketchbook, private collection, photo by Elżbieta Błotnicka-Mazur, courtesy of Piotr Marczyński

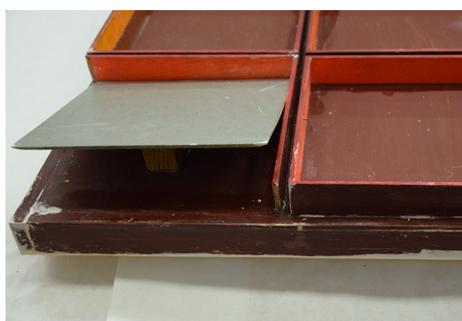


Fig. 3. Adam Marczyński, *Variable Reflections 50*, 1971, mixed technique, 153 × 78 cm, Galeria Studio in Warsaw. A fragment of the work under maintenance: a nail fixing the flap's axis is visible in the cassette on the right, photo by Anna Kusz



Fig. 4. Adam Marczyński, *Variable Reflections 50*, 1971, mixed technique, 153 × 78 cm, Galeria Studio in Warsaw. A fragment of the work under maintenance: a wooden wedge visible in the coffer, photo by Anna Kusz

with a brush, which is indicated by the characteristic “sweeping” trace, deliberately left by the artist.²⁵ The inside of the coffers, or the *de facto* painting supports under the frames, were to remain hidden from the viewer thanks to the thin fibreboard flaps, which Marczyński sprayed on with nitrocellulose varnish with an admixture of metallic silver powder.²⁶ And it was those flaps that – as the artist intended – played a key role in transmitting the reflections after which his work was named. The semi-matte, silvery surface of the coffers movable lids was supposed to reflect the colour in its immediate vicinity. The surface covered with intense pigment was small: it contained only the inner, narrow stripes of the coffers’ walls, only fragmentarily accessible to the viewer’s perception. It is the colour that was being “captured” by the limited range of motion of the rotatable flaps. Depending on the method and intensity of lighting, as well as the angle of the lids in relation to the surface of the image, the reflected colour seemed either more or less intense to the viewer [fig. 5]. Therefore, light and shadow play an important role. Could Marczyński’s *Reflections* offer a possible answer to the question of whether a shadow has a colour? Impressionists addressed this problem in their painterly approach: in their artistic practice, they refrained from painting shadows black. From the holistic perspective, the shadow used in the exhibition of the Kraków artist’s objects, projected by the flaps set at various angles, affects the perception and visibility of the colour. Unexpectedly, the importance of shadows is emphasised further in black and white photographs of Marczyński’s works [fig. 6a and b].

Such a concept implies both similarities and differences between looking at the work from up-close and from a distance. Here I propose to recall the observations of Adolf von Hildebrand, a nineteenth-century classicist sculptor, focused on a very specific understanding of sculpture regarding the duality of its perception: stationary, frontal, from a certain distance as a whole, but also dynamic, up-close, “groping” individual details through the means of gaze. Such a view is inherently fluid: the first approach is about keeping a distance from the perceived reality, while the second requires time and movement.²⁷ The sense of touch also plays a significant role in the perception of *Variable Reflections*: it is desirable, even indispensable, to the realisation of the author’s intentions. It is the direct haptic contact of the viewer with the work that guarantees the visual variability of the composition, and it is the viewer who, through touch, completes the creative work.²⁸ Therefore, it is not any single flap that is important, but rather its arrangement in relation to the entire set, which determines its fluid nature due to changes occurring in the course of each new viewer interaction [fig. 7].

In order to strengthen the conviction about just how well thought out the concept was, it is worth referring to the results of Anna Kusz’s restoration work on Adam Marczyński’s *Reflections 50*, whose detailed documentation allows to look into the artist’s “kitchen.” Thanks to the conservation of the object, the artistic effect of the fluorescent pigments is clearly

²⁵ Information from A. Kusz, April 14, 2021.

²⁶ In the article, I refer to the compositions from the *Reflections* series, in which the movable flaps of the composition were painted silver. But the artist also used white, e.g. in the work *Variable blue reflections 5* from 1967 (42 × 60 cm, Museum of Architecture in Wrocław).

²⁷ A. von Hildebrand, *Problem formy w sztukach plastycznych*, trans. T. Zatorski, introduction and editing W. Bałus, Warszawa 2012, pp. 27-29. An active sculptor, Hildebrand was primarily interested in the observation of spatial forms, which seems to be helpful in the perception of Marczyński’s semi-plastic compositions.

²⁸ On the issue of optic and haptic perception of Marczyński’s works, see E. Błotnicka-Mazur, *Na granicy optyczności i haptyczności widzenia. Dynamika w czasie i przestrzeni dzieł Adama Marczyńskiego*, in: *Sztuka pograniczy. Studia z historii sztuki*, ed. L. Lameński, E. Błotnicka-Mazur, M. Pastwa, Lublin-Warszawa 2018, pp. 499-513.



Fig. 5. Adam Marczyński, *Variable Reflections 53* (fragment), 1972, mixed technique, 135 × 75 cm, National Museum in Warsaw, photo by Elżbieta Błotnicka-Mazur, courtesy of Piotr Marczyński

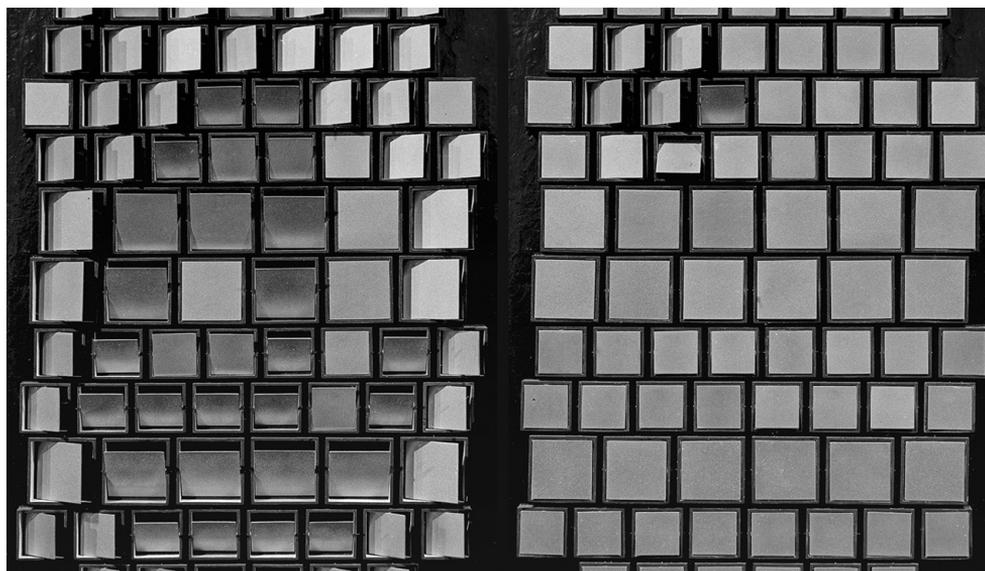


Fig. 6 a.b. Adam Marczyński, *Red Variable Reflections*, 1968, mixed technique, 84 × 60 cm, photo by Jacek Maria Stokłosa

visible again in all its glory, as revealed by a photo of the painting's face, taken in UV light just before the installation of the movable lids on the coffers [fig. 8]. The photograph shows distinctly that the colours of the coffers' interior are arranged in stripes following a diagonal composition, making the perception of the painting more dynamic.

The semi-malleable coffer arrangements in Marczyński's *Reflections* visually evoke colour swatches – which are the starting point for these contemplations – in Marczyński's case,



Fig. 7. Adam Marczyński, *Red Variable Reflections*, 1968, mixed technique, 84 × 60 cm, photo from the opening of the 9th Kraków Group Exhibition in Krzysztofory, 30 October 1968, photo by Jacek Maria Stokłosa



Fig. 8. Adam Marczyński, *Variable Reflections 50*, 1971, mixed technique, 153 × 78 cm, Galeria Studio in Warsaw. The face of the painting under UV light before the assembly of the movable plates after dotting it with paint, photo by Anna Kusz

they are transferred from a flat-printed sheet of paper into the three-dimensional space of boxes. They can also evoke associations with rectangular paint containers, found primarily in watercolour paint sets. However, Marczyński's "boxes" were emptied of their physical contents. What remains in them is only a trace of colour: intense yet accessible to the viewer's perception only through the limited mobility of the silver lids, which prevent unobstructed access. Instead, the artist encourages the viewer to make a visual effort, enhanced by his own extraction of the impression of colour reflected and scattered through free manipulation of the coffers' lids. His use of ready-made pigments, including the pioneering and consistent use of fluorescent²⁹ paints, reveals their presence only fragmentarily but at the same time magnetically attracts the viewer's attention. Today, efforts are underway to obtain pigments with the properties of never-fading structural colours, which can be observed in nature owing to the characteristic nano-structured construction of their material³⁰. It is a pity that Adam Marczyński could not have accessed them 50 years ago.

²⁹ They were probably not very popular in Poland at that time and were treated as more of a novelty and a painting experiment. Cf. e.g. M. Łukawski, *Między sztuką a projektowaniem graficznym. Wspomnienie o Bogusławie Balickim*, "Powidoki," 2/2019, p. 211; J. Filipczyk, *Sztuka na peryferiach. Opolskie środowisko plastyczne 1945-1983*, Opole 2015, p. 108.

³⁰ L. Burrows, *Color that goes beyond nature. Research opens the door to predicting and designing structural colors*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.seas.harvard.edu/news/2021/03/color-goes-beyond-nature> (accessed 4.15.2021).

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