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Abstract: In Black and White.

This article is intended as a critical companion to the exhibition *Blanco* (White), which was held from xx xx to xx xx 2015 in Santiago de Chile. The colour white is an important field of aesthetic and theoretical investigation for Modern and contemporary western artists and art theorists. After an initial presentation of the formal characteristics of whiteness as related to artistic materials (most notably paint and canvas), and spatial configurations, such as the White Cube; the article then explores the ideological significance of whiteness. Post-Colonial Studies and the nascent field of Whiteness Studies provide methodological tools for considering some of the more transgressive works exhibited on the *Blanco* exhibition. Ruth Krauskopf and Benjamin Lira's terracotta sculptures defy a literal interpretation of *Blanco*. It is argued that these forms may be associated with new expressions of *Interculturalidad* within Latin America. In association with this post-colonialist reading, a critical Materialist reading was developed, that advances the agency of the artists. It was concluded that these works may suggest an infinite latent possibility for the reconstitution of alternative tropes and norms, within contemporary art in Chile, and perhaps beyond.

In Black and White.

This article seeks to engage with the exhibition *Blanco*. It is a parallel body of creative reflection that aims to accompany, augment and enrich the work presented. From the outset it is important to note that the reading of any specific colour is mediated by both social and cultural contexts and affiliations, and that by logical extension, the author is also implicated in this phenomenon! White has at least four distinctive dimensions, including psychological,ⁱ symbolic,ⁱⁱ formal and ideological. However, this article will focus on the latter two dimensions of 'whiteness'. It will focus on formalist reading of the colour white that may be related to a material, a surface or extend to a spatial configuration within Western material culture;ⁱⁱⁱ and finally it explores whiteness as an ideological concept within the exhibition *Blanco*.

The colour white may be associated with the visual identity of a material or a space. A Janus-faced entity, it may also be considered a non-colour, for example diluted white is often characterized by an immaterial quality. The passage between opacity and transparency or invisibility, and the material / immaterial aspect of the colour is an important point for reflection for many Western artists, philosophers and theorists through the ages, including Plato, Aristotle, Vasari, Goethe, Newton, Gombrich, Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Wittgenstein, Monet, James McNeill Whistler, Pissarro, Malevich, Lucio Fontana, George Segal, and more recently by Robert Ryman, James Turrell and Hiroshi Sugimoto,^{iv} among many others (Brusatin 1986, Davis ed. 2000, Gombrich, E.H., et al. 1977, Itten c2002.)

The materiality of the white colour may be activated via the process of looking at a profoundly white surface or environment, and is often accompanied with retinal reverberations. This 'humming' of the eye may, in certain instances, be accompanied by a retinal afterimage. These formal quality of white has excited artists – who have explored the colour and its

rich optical potential in diverse materials, including paper, Carrera marble and other white stone,^v porcelain (from the euphemistic 'Blanc de Chine' to industrial sanitary ware^{vi}), painted wood,^{vii} textiles,^{viii} bone, plaster, plastic and other synthetic compounds, neon,^{ix} natural^x and projected light.^{xi} Ephemeral materials (such as fog,^{xii} steam and condensation,^{xiii} ice,^{xiv} ash, flour, salt,^{xv} and milk^{xvi}) also offer interesting possibilities for artists to explore whiteness.

One of the most prevalent mediums for exploring whiteness is paint on canvas or paper. Artists have used white paint – as thick impasto,^{xvii} or near transparent layers,^{xviii} to explore the formal qualities of the color, the surface and capture the artist's gesture. This observation of the abundance of white paintings or paintings that explore white surfaces merits a brief, eclectic and partial review.

Kasimir Malevitch was among the first to explore the plastic qualities of white in his famous *White Manifesto* (1918). The artist argued for an abstract and conceptual vision of whiteness, associated with purity of concept, spiritual revolution and infinity (De Mèredieu 1994:62). His celebrated work *Carré blanc sur fond blanc* initiated a conversation that generations of artists have responded to. For example, Sherrie Levine's *After Kasimir Malevitch* (1984) consists of a white painted square, positioned off-centre on a monochrome beige background. Similarly Aurélie Nemours's *Quatuor blanc* (1990) also references Malevich's work.

From the late 1940s various international *avant garde* artists including including Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, who were associated with *Arte Povera*, made significant contributions to the discourse on the significance of white surfaces. Lucio Fontana's monochrome *Tagli* ('cuts') series from the late 1940s through to the late 1960s, includes the stunning *Concetto Spaziale, Attese* (1968) - a silken white canvas bearing eight vertical black slashes. The act of piercing the canvas is widely understood as an

important moment in the history of western painting and according to Fontana, proposed a new dimension of the cosmos and infinity (the artist cited in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum 2006:19). In a similar vein, Manzoni's *Achrome* series of white paintings from the late 1950s and early 1960s, consisting of canvas and kaolin augmented with drapes, folds and incisions, explored the material and chromatic values of white surfaces and simultaneously advanced the sculptural possibilities of canvas.

Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) that consists of traces of drawing media on paper with a label and gilded frame; reconsiders the gesture in terms of its absence. A slightly blemished white surface is the aggregate of a deliberate, negotiated act of aesthetic defacement.

In the 1960s numerous prominent American and European artists explored whiteness through the lens of Abstraction and Minimalism. Jo Baer's paintings of the 1960s and 1970s which responded to the supposed 'death' of painting argued by Robert Morris and Donald Judd, consisted of large white canvasses with a black frame that incorporated a fine band of another colour (mauve, salmon, beige, pistachio etc) directly next to the frame, thus establishing subtle chromatic friction. Baer aimed to create 'a vital painting that did not depend in any way on illusion, content, or even quality of the mark, that was about its own architecture... yet did not cross the line of sculpture (Diehl 2003:101). Her work does not speak of emptiness or of negation, but rather of an infinite latent possibility. This notion of latent possibility (or impossibility) is significant, and I will return to it at a later stage of this essay.

Other artists who have explored the chromatic, painterly and atmospheric value of whiteness include Cy Twombly and Roman Opalka. Olivier Mosset explores whiteness in many of his works, including *Cimaise* (2010) (Screen) that is composed of five large white sculptural screens that have

the frontality of a painting, but in their volume, evoke sculptural forms.^{xix} Robert Ryman may be considered to be among the most significant contemporary artists to explore the materiality of whiteness. The artist notes that he never intended to make monochromatic paintings, rather he aimed to use white as a means to expose other elements. White, Ryman claimed, permitted the texture of the surface (cotton, linen, paper) and the nuances of the pigment to become visible (De Mèredieu 1994:62).

Whiteness is also associated with a particular spatial configuration that is at the center of exhibition protocols for much modern and western contemporary art and design. The 'White Space' or the 'White Cube' has various European roots which coalesced in the 1930s in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Among the most important precursors were the 1920s discussions among Constructivist artists and architects in which white was associated with infinite space. In parallel, temporary exhibitions gained importance within the museum, and were accompanied by moveable wall partitions and flexible ground-plans (Maak, N., C. Klonk & T. Demand 2011, Manovich 2005, O'Doherty 1976).

Pure whiteness is also a central quest within the domain of ceramics, particularly within the history of porcelain in Western Europe. Thus, it is no surprise that many European art critics were infatuated with the whiteness of porcelain (Bagdade and Bagdade 1998, Haggar 1968, Penkala 1968 and Wynter 1972). Among the most creative in their articulations were the Goncourt brothers, Jules (1822-1896) and Edmond (1830-1870). Using a gastronomical lexicon, they described '*Blanc de Chine*' porcelain as an 'unctuous' and 'beautiful, creamy material, that recalled a non-solidified *blanc-manger*^{xx} under an icy white glaze'. Similarly, they described the '*Blanc de Riz*' porcelain as being composed of a 'greasy,' rich paste (Own trans. cited in De Mèredieu 1994:62). The quest for ultra-white porcelain continues today, and within certain industrial sectors, specialist manufacturers of porcelain have removed the

kaolin from porcelain and replaced it with alternatives, such as zirconium.^{xxi}

The second, and for me, the most important manifestation of whiteness is that of an ideological construct, which has traversed colonial and post-colonial history. In recent years, the privileged status of fair skin and whiteness has been problematized as an academic domain in the form of 'Whiteness Studies'.^{xxii} While academia claims agency for the subaltern, and the possibility of the colonial and post-colonial subject to 'speak back,' in contemporary Latin America in many milieu of within 'everyday' life, resistance is far from the norm. The desirability of pale skin is at the heart of the global fashion industry (Bordages 2013). This is manifested in a multitude of ways, including via the chemical bleaching of skin and hair. Indeed, the initial phenomenon is now major considered a major global public health concern (Anekwe 2014).

It is in this context that I consider the works of Benjamin Lira and Ruth Krauskopf on the *Blanco* exhibition. Lira's terracotta head, with its uneven, cracked and disfigured, superficial white patina, may be considered to evoke the dilemma of this epidermal 'white-washing' of the contemporary Latin American subject. The pathos of the disfigurement of Lira's head is heightened by the solemn stature, the upright engaged pose and high forehead. Yet, poignantly, Lira's head lacks a mouth, which renders the figure mute. The paradoxical qualities of dignity and disfigurement, eloquence and absence, and the transgressive presence of this mottled brown head in a white gathering, compels viewers to ask questions about the aim and intention of this work, as a deliberate gesture of resistance.^{xxiii}

Ruth Krauskopf's earthenware sculpture recalls a fetishistic idol. Like Lira, the artist has chosen to transgress the exhibition theme, *Blanco*. Her terracotta sculpture appears to evoke a period, and an aesthetic universe

that either predate or exclude colonial history. Like the work of many other socially engaged contemporary Latin American and Diaspora artists and designers,^{xxiv} Ruth Krauskopf and Benjamin Lira are searching for modes of expression that may challenge, deny or subvert aspects of the normative force of western aesthetic and cultural tropes, especially those associated with whiteness. Perhaps the notion of *Interculturalidad*^{xxv} may be appropriated to describe the works cited above. Like this contemporary popular socio-political phenomenon, the works of Lira and Krauskopf attempt to engage in another form of thinking and being, where white is no longer perceived as an essentialist category, that may be loaded with disempowering symbolic, historical, cultural and formal associations.

In parallel to this ideological deconstruction, a materialist analysis may be developed of the plastic qualities proposed by unglazed earthenware clay. Indeed, it is argued that Krauskopf and Lira's sculptures in that they draw attention to a certain formal materialism. They are not the Goncourt brothers' unctuous icy glazed *blanc-manger*. Krauskopf and Lira's deliberate choice of a textured earthenware clay engages with historical hierarchies concerning different clay bodies (in particular, earthenware, stoneware and porcelain) in Western art and craft history. Like Baur's work, where the white canvas is manipulated to explore the boundaries of a literal and figurative field, Krauskopf and Lira highlight the problematic historical values of connoisseurship that often delimits the boundaries of a ceramics as a studio practice, by distinguishing (predominantly grey, brown or terracotta) earthenware clay as common and (predominantly white) porcelain as infinitely superior. In the case of Latin America, the problematic superiority of porcelain is compounded by an ecological reading. As white porcelain clay is most certainly imported, the use of this material compounds the carbon footprint of contemporary consumer culture. The corollary is that local earthenware clays are less harmful to the planet.

These materialist questions may further be linked to socially engaged practices. While Baur's work questions, for example, 'what is an *avant garde* painting in the USA in the 1960s?' Krauskopf and Lira's sculptures demand 'what is a contemporary art in present-day Chile?' These latter works may be seen to challenge the supposed margins of creative expression in terms of a project that reframes the normative center of art practices and relocates a multitude of parallel centers outside of the 'West'. Indeed, both Lira and Krauskopf are senior artists, who are recognized as pioneers within Chile, and have trained and variously influenced successive generations of local artists. They are at the center of the Chilean art scene and are powerful agents for change.

In conclusion, the colour white as an important field of aesthetic and theoretical investigation for Modern and contemporary western artists and art theorists. In an attempt to critically collaborate with the exhibition *Blanco*, this article has eclectically explored whiteness in both the fields of art history and the social sciences. It initially explored the formal characteristics of whiteness as related to artistic materials, surfaces and spatial configurations. However, this politically charged colour also demands an ideological analysis. Post-Colonial Studies and the nascent field of Whiteness Studies provided methodological tools for considering some of the more transgressive works exhibited on the *Blanco* exhibition. Ruth Krauskopf and Benjamin Lira's terracotta sculptures defy a literal interpretation of *Blanco*. It is argued that their earthy, expressive semi-archetypal forms (Lira's head and Krauskopf's 'fetish'), allude to *Interculturalidad*. The agency of these artists was examined via a materialist reading of their works. Lira and Krauskopf's sculptures may suggest an infinite latent possibility for the reconstitution of alternative tropes and norms, within contemporary art in Chile, and perhaps beyond.

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ⁱ Colour is known to have tangible effects on the viewer, and has calming or stimulating properties. The psychological effects of colour have been studied in a variety of contexts. For further information consult Itten c2002, Goethe 1970. Gombrich et al. 1977, among others.

ⁱⁱ In terms of its symbolic dimension, the colour white has been associated with innocence, purity and divine light in Western art history (Brusatin 1986, Gage 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ I note that this article would most certainly be enriched by Asian and multiple 'other' non-western perspectives.

^{iv} The Japanese photographer, Hiroshi Sugimoto has explored the white light emanating from screens. These screens dissolve into ethereal whiteness as a result of a voluntary decision to open the camera shutter for a prolonged period.

^v Richard Long's *Norfolk Flint Circle* (1990) was created specifically for Tate's Duveen Galleries, as part of an exhibition for Long after he won the Turner Prize (1989). Composed of tightly assembled layer of mottled white flint stones, it was displayed adjacent to another iconic white work by the artist, *White Water Line*. In a slightly more urbane vein, Jean-Pierre Raynaud's 1993 installation, *La Maison* consisted of dozens of metal basins containing building rubble featuring white tiled surfaces.

^{vi} Let us not forget, Duchamp's signed urinal, *Fountain* (1917) or the similarly iconic installation by Jean-Pierre Raynaud, *Container Zéro* (1988), which was commissioned for the 10th anniversary of the Centre Pompidou, and consists of a large white 'container' that is entirely covered with brilliantly sanitary white industrial tiles.

^{vii} Robert Wilson's *Bessie Smith Breakfast Chair*, 1988 is a *chef d'oeuvre* of Post-Modern design.

viii For example, an early American feminist artist, who has largely been forgotten, Anne Healy explored notions of purity and flux in her monumental illuminated draped fabric installation, *White Goddess*, 1972.

ix Dan Flavin; François Morellet; Claude Lévêque, and a host of other artists have worked with neon tubes from the 1970s.

x For example, DeWain Valentine's *Curved Wall Spectrum* (1971-74), and Tadao Ando's sublime *Church of the Light* (1987-1989), Japan, features a large cruciform opening for natural light that pierces the entire width and height of the church's nave.

xi James Turrell is the leading pioneer of light projections since the late 1960s. Other prominent artists working with light include Michel Verjux, Bertrand Lavier, Douglas Wheeler, Robert Irwin, Hap Tivey, Eric Orr, Susan Kaiser Vogel, Bruce Nauman and Maria Nordman (Butterfield 1993). Rosa Barba's installation, *Stating the Real Sublime* (2009), consisting of a suspended projector that played a 30 second loop of 16mm of white light in homage to early pioneers of light and cinema.

xii Larry Bell and Eric Orr's pioneering *Solar Fountain* (1983) incorporated a large fog making device in an illuminated open-air installation. Ann Veronica Janssen's work for the Belgian pavilion of the 1999 Venice Biennale consisted of a space that was saturated with fog.

xiii Robert Morris poetic work *Steam* (1967) was installed in the CACP, Bordeaux in 1995. The intervention consisted of filling a stone building (a former church) with large river pebbles that appeared to produce steam (Lebovici 1995). Morris's *Steam* was perhaps inspired by Hans Haacke's glass *Cube of Condensation*, (1963-65), New York.

xiv For example, Olivier Mosset's 2010 exhibition at MAC Lyon, *A Step Backwards*, included a series entitled *Toblerone* that consists of giant triangular ice blocks. These melting sculptures recall both the chocolate and anti-tank barriers. Other examples include the Land Artist, Andy Goldsworthy's *Touching North* series (1989), which includes photos of poetic meandering paths in an infinite snowy landscape, and a monumental sculpture of 4 circles made of ice blocks. Similarly, Thomas Flechtner's photographic series *Frozen* consist of 'abstract' images of icy tundra in Greenland and Iceland, and was published in his book, *Snow* (2001).

xv A key work by the pioneer earthwork, body art and conceptual artist, Dennis Oppenheim, *Salt Flat* (1989) involved spreading 1000 pounds of salt over a 50 x 100 foot rectangle in a parking lot in New York city.

xvi The German artist, Wolfgang Laib is known for his iconic piece, *Pierre de Lait* (1993-94), which consists of a large slab of white marble, covered with milk

xvii Cy Twombly's *Untitled* paintings from the mid-1950s, and more recently Sturtevant's *Johns White Numbers*, 1991, are some of many works in this genre.

xviii Bertrand Lavier's *Rue Réaumur n°2*, 200, explores the repetitive painted doodles on a shop window.

xix Mosset's *Cimaise* (302 x 50 x 200 cm, 200m²) was displayed on his 2010 exhibition at MAC Lyon, *A Step Backwards*.

xx *Blanc-manger* is a gelatinous desert made of milk or cream.

xxi This was explained to me on a recent visit to 3DCeram, Limoges, 5 December 2014.

xxii The field of critical whiteness studies recognizes the need to identify "white" as a racialized category. Those studying whiteness recognize the need to challenge whiteness as a powerful symbol of racially conferred privileges.

xxiii For many years Lira has produced brown heads. The author notes that this is the first head she has encountered with a partial white patina. The deliberate uneven white patina, it is argued, serves as to augment the irony of participating in the exhibition, *Blanco*.

xxiv Among others, Teresa Margolles (Mexico), Pedro Reyes (Mexico), Kukuli Verlade (Peru / USA), David Elia (Brazil / Monaco), Liliana Angulo Cortés (Columbia), Adriana Varejão (Brazil), DFC (Digital Federal Capital, a Mexican design collaborative with Tony Moxham and Mauricio Paniagua), gt2P (a Chilean design studio), Chiachio and Giannone (Argentina), Liliana Ovalle (Mexico / UK), and the collective Dias & Riedweg (consisting of

the Brazilian, Mauricio Dias and the Swiss, Walter Riedweg) are significant contemporary socially engaged artists and designers from Latin America.

^{xxv} The term *Interculturalidad* refers to a movement among many indigenous movements from the 1990s in Latin America. It seeks an 'equal but different' status, and the reconstruction of sustainable and emancipated lifeways. The movement demands the recognition of the assimilation and subjugation of the peoples of the Americas throughout the course of globalization. It is characterized by interculturalism, and not multiculturalism; and is argued to be a transition to something new (Wickstrom & Young 2014:12).