



Mustafa Sabbagh,
'XI Commandment:
You Shall
Not Forget',
anthological
exhibition, Forlì,
2017. Installation
project: Antonio
Ravalli, Mustafa
Sabbagh.

GENEROUS BLACK

Antonio Ravalli, Mustafa Sabbagh

GC Antonio, it was you who drew me into this idea of black architecture some years ago, so you are the right person to start this series of conversations. I asked you to involve Mustafa, not only because of his personal research around darkness: your paths have often crossed and I believe this common passion grew up in your collaboration.

AR Even the latest exhibition by Mustafa¹ we set up in Forlì is entirely black...

GC But how did it all start? Is there any particular episode or influence?

MS Those who work with photography, then with light, naturally have a preference for white, but I soon realized that it is misleading: white reverberates, dazzles. Black is much more generous because it has the strength to accommodate every other colour. It is the opposite of the myth of the cave of Plato (and the correspondence between light and truth on which it is based): I think darkness is revealing as it introduces a contrast and allows us to see.

One thing I learned by teaching photography (when we mostly talk about light) is that three-dimensionality depends on shadow, and this opens up a world of possibilities.

Black is a paradox: it subtracts light to emphasize the light. Any light, entering a completely dark environment, comes out amplified.

AR In the use of black, there are also practical reasons. What Mustafa says is true: black is very generous. An architect, who has to lean on others for the execution of his work, knows it provides a way to reduce the perception of errors. It hides, somehow, and therefore it carries something that has to do with elegance...

I do not remember any decision on black: I started using it and my reflections came from experimentation, from the observation of its results.

1. Mustafa Sabbagh, 'XI Commandment: You Shall Not Forget', anthological exhibition, 'Onore al Nero-Atramentum', site-specific installation, Musei San Domenico, Forlì, 14 October 2017-14 January 2018. Installation project: Antonio Ravalli, Mustafa Sabbagh, realization: Visual Exhibition, Modena.



Mustafa Sabbagh,
'Onore al
nero'_untitled,
2016, fine art
print on dibond,
cm 100 x 100,
ed. 1 of 5 + 1
ap. Courtesy: the
artist, private
collection [bg].

The fashion world, with which I worked a lot, might have been an influence. Black in clothing is a sign of mourning, at least in the West. At a certain moment, in the 19th century, black also became the colour of refined people, a trendy colour. A poem by Baudelaire² dedicated to a woman dressed in black he had seen in the street highlights the poignant, majestic elegance of mourning.

2. Charles Baudelaire, 'A une passante', *L'Artiste* (1855).

3. Michel Pastoreau, *Noir. Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

GC Pastoreau traced back these events in history. Somewhere in his book on black,³ he writes that dyeing fabrics black has long been complicated and, therefore, very expensive.

AR The first dresses that could convey a true darkness were made of velvet: a particular fabric whose depth, according to the incidence of light on the direction of the fibres, always produces different, iridescent effects.

When we talk of black, however, we are talking about a multiple range of phenomena. Black is never 'black': it is a material condition with its specific depth, texture, filigree... A stratification that other colours cannot reach.

In general, we don't use black, we employ a dark colour that reacts to light in a complex way.

MS Last year I exhibited my series of works entitled 'Honour to Black' in Palermo. It is yet another tribute to its generosity: white gets dirty, black fades. We come pure into the world and acquire darkness by living.

In the colours synthesis, black is 000: the sum of three absences that amounts to a totality... Black is a whore: it is very erotic, not only for the fetish imaginary it feeds upon: depending on the Kelvin degree it meets, it produces various ranges of shades. When the colours we use get lighter, this inclination to unite and transform tends to get lost.

GC Do you photograph in colour?

MS Yes, always: it's a rather absurd challenge...

AR Indeed, your blacks are never simply such. The photograph I have in front of me shows a blue, petroleum colour cast, as almost always in your work.

Nothing like black matter expresses an ability to react differently to the surface. Think of a polished or opaque marble, their changing effects under the light. It is a surface that takes depth.

MS In the West, we have lost the notion of colours assembly. It is a form of laziness, almost a cowardice. In *Incomplete Manifesto*, Bruce Mau says: 'Don't be cool.'⁴

I have a deep love for black and I want to redeem it. It must be something more than fashion or an excuse to avoid other possibilities.

AR However, now I remember that we got to black because of fashion, with that first store we made together.⁵

At the first meeting, the client explained that it was strategic for them, as part of the sales process, to have the shop perfectly clean, and the staff was always busy keeping it shiny. They sold very expensive items by Margiela and other similar brands.

So we thought to do something that got so dirty that it would be impossible (and senseless) to clean it all the time. We started with the India ink blackened oak floor: as you entered, you left a series of footprints and there was this continuous action of overlapping and erasing.

GC So black is not always that generous.

AR Not always, that's true. Anyway, we decided to do everything black in order to make the characteristics of the materials visible. Different woods interact with the dark finishes in a very varied way and the Canadian plywood absorbed the colour differently from the oak.

We used a paint that was a mixture of glossy and opaque: it became reflective on the vein, while the sapwood absorbed it with an effect similar to graphite. It was with these experiments that I explored the possibility of obtaining black different depths and colour casts.

Pierre Soulages is reference from this point of view. In some of his earlier works, a background colour is covered with black, which, according to its thickness, lets the former get to the surface. There you can perceive how the depth of this black stratification interacts with the cooler blue or warmer brown nuances.

GC Yes. On the other hand, Soulages' *outrenoir*, which came later in his research, provides an ability to absorb the colours of the environment, to react with its different conditions, the daylight, the position of the observer...

It is a sensitive hue, which becomes automatically contextual, even though, in architecture, we tend to associate darker co-

lours with northern attitudes (tarred wood, clinker bricks...) and white plaster with the Mediterranean. Is fashion a factor in its widespread reception?

MS In fashion, at a certain moment, some Japanese designers such as Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons proposed all-black collections. It was also a way to deal with costs: making a complete collection of one hundred, one hundred and fifty items and managing a wide palette of colours can be very expensive.

Just two types of black fabric guaranteed an impact without spending too much. Moreover, from a symbolic point of view, black has completely different meanings in the East.

AR Southern latitudes force us to defend ourselves from light. White protects from heat, and whitewash sterilizes.

GC Indeed, one of the reasons for its success in the early modern times was the obsession with hygiene.

MS Mediterranean light is precise, violent, intrusive, long-lasting.

AR However, in the South black took on a sacred character too. Think of the Ka'ba: a black cube inside a very white space. An absolute monument.

GC Like the monolith of 2001: *A Space Odyssey*?

MS Yes, black is an accumulator of physical and symbolic energy.

AR Nowadays, however, things changed and black, used for example with a ventilated cladding, can facilitate the recirculation of air and get better efficiency even in hot places.

MS It is not just a matter of energy. The function of social and political control carried out by monuments is now entrusted to other, more effective and penetrating media. A darker architecture can also be explained in this way.

GC It seems to me that the transition from white to black as a contemporary colour could be the consequence of an inversion between figure and background on many levels.

By the way, displaying your photos on the white walls that are so widespread today in art galleries must be challenging. What do you think of the white box phenomenon?

4. Bruce Mau, *An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* (2010-14), <<http://www.manifestoproject.it/bruce-mau/>> [accessed 05 May 2018], '14. Don't be cool. Cool is conservative fear dressed in black. Free yourself from limits of this sort.'

5. Antonio Ravalli, Mustafa Sabbagh, Tasmania, Ferrara, 2003.

- MS** It is a disaster. I use dark backgrounds whenever possible.
- AR** In this exhibition of Mustafa's works we have just completed in San Domenico in Forlì, we dealt precisely with this problem. The depth of the blacks of his photos results decisively from the conditions of perception. A too bright background makes it difficult for the eye to adapt, and reduces the complexity of nuances to a uniform black spot. Inside this very white church, with so much diffused light, we have inserted a thirty-five meters long black prism. But what kind of black? We needed something to enhance the depth of colour unfolded by his photographs. Therefore, we opted for material, natural or 'unpremeditated' blacks, derived from combustion. (I always find it difficult to think about colour, unless it is a feature of the material.) On the ground there are surfaces covered with charcoal, while we burned the large prism with flame. Again, it is a process that produces an imperfect black (knots and veins resist to the fire more than softer parts...), with a certain wealth of texture and overall pattern: all the wood planks come out different, with warm or cool colour casts, more opaque or shiny depending on how intensely they have been burned. From a distance, support and works merge into a single object, but at a closer look the former recede in the background while the latter offer themselves to the view without the need of further adaptation.
- GC** Art aspires to become figure in the individual and specific, while architecture is condemned to act as a backdrop (Benjamin defined it as 'the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction'⁶).
- MS** Art wants to break through...
The attraction of the white cube for an artist lies in a misunderstood connection with the contemporary, but I think it is something out of date. I would say that it is a very Nordic form of separation between container and content. Here we are used to a greater integration between art and architecture, figure and ground.
- AR** The nudes portrayed by Mustafa are, paradoxically, very Nordic types, very white, and their skins let us see the veins in depth. We tried to make this transparency visible.
- GC** Although it is possible to trace the emergence of black even at our latitudes, these are all in all isolated phenomena and linked to specific situations. Its obscurity is hardly attributable to local



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cultures. Did your proposals face any difficulty in being accepted by clients or other actors involved?

AR Black is quite absent from our landscapes and can represent a disruptive element. In our design for the new museum at Palazzo Massari in Ferrara, we treated all the new parts in black. Whether polished or opaque, glass or metal, black was meant to display its otherness as a metaphysical presence with respect to the historical stratification in this building. Of course, there was an immediate refusal by the heritage protection authorities, precisely because of this otherness.

GC But this is a reasonable, even traditional approach: in Valadier's interventions on the Arch of Titus or the Colosseum, colours and materials make the restoration distinguishable from the original parts.

AR In this case, the fundamental point of the project – which finally convinced our counterparts – concerned the visual connection with the landscape, the park outside the palace. To bring it 'inside' the museum – inside its dark, synthetic and super-controlled rooms, especially from the point of view of lighting –, it was necessary to lower its brightness by sixty percent. Therefore, we opted for a very dark glass that Saint-Gobain began to produce in the 1960s. In this way, visitors could enjoy a seamless transition from looking at the pictures to seeing the landscape outside and back without waiting for their eyes to adapt. The glass surface required to achieve this effect has brought the graphite finish of the metal parts and the result is a large black mass that would have hidden in its darkness any clues about the internal partitions, the transparencies and the opaque panels, the casings of machines and other installations.

GC This sounds as an anti-functionalist disguise. It should be familiar to the preservation authorities.

AR But it would have been a strong presence. A water surface at the base of this black mass multiplied its vertical dimension by reflecting a glossy double, thereby conferring it a further strength. Again, black offers an extremely wide range of effects. It would have allowed us to obtain a pattern of different depths and nuances on a completely flat surface, thanks to the irregularities of the iron, to its degree of purity... It is a sort of decoration: a problematic issue for the designers of our generation that we usually deal

6. Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1936), Eng. trans. in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008) p. 40.

with by confiding a little in chance, orchestrating a field of possibilities in which the accidents of processing matter can play a role.

GC The opposition of the authorities is hardly surprising. What happens with private clients?

MS The architect deals with clients, while an artist works in solitude. He or she doesn't have any duty or the need to be understood. It happens that someone falls in love with a work or an approach for reasons completely different from those that led the artist to produce in a certain direction. Things are done and then shown as accomplished facts. Antonio must find a rational justification; I try to get short circuits. There are some exceptions, for example, the church with the burnt formwork inside designed by Zumthor has a strong character of freedom.⁷ However, when there is a lot of money involved, motivations must be strong.

If I think of my experience, I find that black convinces in spite of and thanks to its darkness. It fascinates because it leaves you a little bit outside. It is not a reassuring or understandable colour. It requires an effort that can paradoxically prove to be a positive factor in attracting patrons and observers. Of course, it can also elicit a refusal.

Once, in an exhibition of mine, I saw a couple entering. The man stopped for a long time in front of each photograph and, suddenly, his wife took his arm and abruptly dragged him out while exclaiming: 'Let's go out, I'm anguished!' It was one of the best compliments I ever received.

AR We have never encountered any particular problems in proposing black finishes. Usually people come to us because they appreciate what we do. However, since our chromatic or material choices do not come from prefabricated ideologies but draw their reasons from the project, it is on these grounds that we negotiate with the client. If those reasons are good, people understand in the end.

GC How do we end this conversation? Do you have any advice on interesting issues, aspects and situations for my research?

AR The use of colour, including black, in Bruno Taut. The same in Le Corbusier: his *Clavier de couleurs*⁸ shows great skill. And then all the Mediterranean blacks: plaster made with lava in Catania; the funeral carriages in Southern Italy, with their range of effects, from the skin of horses to the lacquering of wood; the black

velvet edges in Neapolitan churches; the dramatic black forged by fire in wrought iron; the black backgrounds of 17th century Spanish painting, full of complex depths...

MS There are so many things we didn't have enough time to discuss. The alchemical concept of *nigredo* introduces black as the state of a material in transformation. Now we no longer aspire to produce something that lasts forever and the duration of the black we discussed before does not derive from resistance but from an ability to react, to change over time without losing its identity. Black moves away, breaks through... The small underground clubs of the 1960s and '70s were black to erase borders and double the space. At the same time, black is a wound, it is a strong affirmation of presence: it wants to be there. It is its paradox. Black becomes a mirror, like no other colour...

7. Peter Zumthor,
Bruder-Klaus-
Feldkapelle,
Wachendorf,
2005-07.

8. Le Corbusier,
Clavier de couleurs
(Basel: Salubra, 1931).



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Mustafa Sabbagh,
'Onore al
nero'_untitled,
2015, dyptich,
fine art print on
dibond, cm 66 x 60
each, ed.1 of 5 + 1
ap. Courtesy: the
artist, Farnesina
Contemporary Art
Collection, Rome.



