

1993 MONDRIAN LECTURE
PIGMENTS OF IMAGINATION

—
RUDY KOUSBROEK
—

Kousbroek started his lecture with his memories of his first embrace at the age of ten, in the toilets of the swimming pool in Indonesia. When he returned forty years later, everything was still as he remembered it: the doors, the wood, the cement, as though he had been there a quarter of an hour before. The only thing he did not recognize was the light blue color of the cubicles. The whole incident was etched in his memory in complete detail, and only that one element – the color – was something he could not remember.

This is a generally known phenomenon, the lack of ability which most people have to remember color, quite apart from the limited range of words which are available to adequately describe the memory of a color. Josef Albers, the Bauhaus lecturer who was well known for his color theory, compared this poor visual memory with the much stronger auditory memory, which enables us, for example, to repeat a melody which we have only heard once or twice.

Kousbroek examined some of the scientific tests for the perception of color which show that man does not perceive colors so much objectively, but composes them in the brain in a way which can be influenced by all sorts of circumstances and stimuli. The colors we see are the pigments of the imagination.

Kousbroek then explored a number of aspects related to color, such as the purpose of the beautiful shapes and colors of shells or mollusks, which cannot be perceived by the weak eyes of the members of their own species or may even be invisible in the darkness of the deep sea bed, or the fact that for many people dreams do not have a color, which could be explained by the fact that colors are forgotten first, or the reverse, that color is added to dreams afterwards. The fact that color blindness was only described in the 17th century and scientifically examined in the 19th century is another indication that color is clearly not very important for existence. .