



ALL ABOUT
YVES

WHAT WE TALK
ABOUT WHEN
WE TALK ABOUT
"YVES KLEIN BLUE."

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES



In her collection *Bluets*, the poet and art critic Maggie Nelson writes about visiting London and seeing *Propositions Monochromes*, a collection of objects and canvases painted by Yves Klein in 1957. The only color used was a shade of ultramarine. Three years later, Klein would submit that color, under the name International Klein Blue (IKB), to the French patent office, resulting in patent number 63471. Nelson writes:

Standing in front of these blue paintings, or propositions, at the Tate, feeling their blue radiate out so hotly that it seemed to be touching, perhaps even hurting, my eyeballs, I wrote but one phrase in my notebook: too much.

Writers have reported seeing IKB appear in runway shows in the last decade, citing collections by Diane von Furstenberg, Giorgio

Armani, and Proenza Schouler. The problem is that International Klein Blue isn't a color you can spot—it's a process. Unless you are standing in front of a work by Klein, or visiting an art-supply store in Paris, you're not looking at it.

Klein started painting ultramarine monochromes in the late '40s but entered the '50s dissatisfied with his results. Soon after his first exhibition 60 years ago, Klein began working with an art supplier in Paris named Edouard Adam, looking to create a blue that was evading him. As he wrote in an unpublished paper, quoted in Philip Ball's book *Bright Earth*, Klein was struggling with the fixatives used to turn powder into pigments: "The affective magic of the color had vanished. Each grain of powder seemed to have been extinguished individually by the glue or whatever material was supposed to fix it to the other grains as well as to the support." With the help of Adam and the chemical manufacturer Rhône-Poulenc, Klein found a synthetic resin called Rhodopas M60A in 1956. When combined with an ultramarine pigment, this colorless medium allowed the powder to retain what Klein described as "pure energy," which may be what Nelson experienced as "too much."

In 2011 I had an encounter with muchness in Nice, Klein's main home until his death in 1962, at the age of 34. After missing a flight to Paris, I ended up in the city on a brutally sunny day. I wandered away from the airport, walked up a hill, and found Nice's largest modern-art museum, MAMAC. The MAMAC was showing a piece made in 1960 at Klein's apartment, a solid sheet of ultramarine covered in white handwriting. It was the manifesto of *Nouveau Réalisme*, a brief, not entirely coherent artistic movement named in 1960 by art critic Pierre Restany, Klein's friend. I wasn't that interested in what the collective was up to—they were kaput by 1970 and I had managed to be invested in 20th-century art without ever hearing of them. I walked past the manifesto, directly into more Klein. A branch, about two feet

high, was standing on end. It was painted entirely in IKB. Next to that sat a dusty pyramid of IKB pigment. I felt the color reach into me and coat my nerves. I had never understood the alleged intensity of monochromes in art, yet here I was, in love with a color and unaware it had its own name.

You can go, right now, to **Adam Montmartre** (96 Rue Damrémont; 33-1/46-06-60-38), a shop in Paris established in 1898 by Adam's grandfather Gaston and now maintained by his nephew, Fabien, after his death this past February. You could buy a one-liter or five-liter jar of Le Medium Adam25 and make



Yves Klein supervises the creation of *Anthropométrie de l'Époque bleue*, in which models coated in IKB paint lay on the canvas.
OPPOSITE: *Air Architecture* (ANT 102), by Yves Klein, 1961.

your own pile or mix it with a medium and paint with it. This would be a genuine encounter with International Klein Blue, but because of the rules laid down by the Klein estate, you wouldn't be able to refer to it as Klein blue. This is confusing, as Klein himself enlisted Adam to create IKB—which is what a jar of Le Medium Adam25 is—but the estates of dead artists tend to be less flexible than the whims of living artists.

Designer Valeria McCulloch, who once claimed that she wears only Klein blue, and France Telecom, which sold a phone in 1998 under the name Klein blue, are only two of many acting under a categorical delusion that is perhaps the most generative part of Klein's patent. All these dresses and phones simply embody various shades of *bleu d'outremer*—ultramarine. France Telecom

was sued by the Klein estate, as it was using the name "Klein" for commercial purposes, but otherwise the Klein estate does not legally disabuse people of thinking they are printing things in Klein blue or wearing Klein blue as long as they keep the name Klein out of it. (Hence, the Adam Montmartre shop selling "Adam25" and not "Klein blue.") You cannot patent a color. The 1960 patent covers only a chemical procedure that fixes ultramarine pigment in a certain way and connects it to a family name.

Hold a jar of IKB and you see something lighter and more intense than all the other things you thought were Klein blue. This is not so surprising, as you're not looking at paint but at powdery granules coated with polyvinyl acetate: the undiluted form of Klein's blue energy. This is part of Klein's cockeyed triumph. His arrogance was unchecked, but his idea ended up more than just conceptual tomfoolery. The idea of chasing the great blue monochrome came to him as a teenager, when he "signed the sky" while lying on a beach in Nice. The color he ended up fixing on had a universal appeal, even as he struggled to make it unique to him. Klein's work hasn't started flipping like Basquiats, and we aren't seeing more museum retrospectives for Klein than for any of his contemporaries. Klein simply

helped make ultramarine popular and led people to believe they loved a color they may have never seen.

This is logical. It's fun to think a person claimed a color, turning the mundane into something you can root for and be slightly snooty about: "This color is a famous blue, not just blue." And IKB does, empirically, live on; anyone can buy the pigment, which is where Klein's concept turns back on itself. For a painter, using IKB would be an act of reappropriation, like writing a song using one of Sonic Youth's guitar tunings. An artist using Adam25 is in Klein's country, working around and against his rules. So many of the artists who might paint with Klein blue likely won't, and the people confessing their love for IKB are talking about a different color. And it's a lovely confusion. ♦

"La climatisation de l'atmosphère à la surface de notre globe"

... la conclusion technique et scientifique de notre civilisation

est enfoncée dans les

entrailles de la terre et assure

le confort par le contrôle absolu du

Climat à la surface de tous

les continents, devenus vastes

Salles de séjour communes.

... C'est une sorte de retour à l'eden
de la légende. (1951.)

.. Avènement d'une société nouvelle, destinée à
subir des métamorphoses profondes dans sa
condition même. Disparition de l'intimité
personnelle et familiale. Développement
d'une ontologie impersonnelle.

La volonté de l'Homme peut enfin
régner libre au niveau d'un

"merveilleux" constant.

L'Homme libre,

l'est à tel point, qu'il

peut même leurrer !

Occupation : des loisirs.

.. Les obstacles autrefois subis dans
l'architecture traditionnelle sont
éliminés.

Soins du corps par des méthodes
nouvelles, telles le lit d'air.