

**Julia Fish : Practical Expression / Infinite House**

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## § Hermit

The painter adopts attributes of hermit: solitary, percipient, at her studied work. The score and field of each painting encodes the studio's capacious silence. A painting's acute irregular grid transposes identifiable interior elements. So the work doubles the space that surrounds it, enfolds it, and out of which it has appeared; archiving its internal coordinates in scaled mathematical precision, and translating tones of an exact settled and select moment in the spectrum of day's capricious illumination. *early to mid-afternoon is the best; morning light can be distracting, especially if it's a clear day—it's angular, even disorienting!* Designed by architect Theodore Steuben in 1922, the street-level storefront contained the Chicago Pure Milk Company in the 1950s. Perhaps the coach house functioned as overnight parking for a delivery vehicle. Here the mode of hermit overtakes the painter. Like the benthic-dwelling, shell-seeking hermit crab, adapted to find and occupy a castoff scavenged mollusc shell to protect its fragile exoskeleton, the painter draws on her wellspring of fascination with and within an adopted home, examining each interior surface, the investigation the sole conduit from one focal episode to the next. The light, the enveloping house, the whole prior to its parts, parts conceived in terms of the wholes that they compose, remains always other to itself. . . . *a brick two-flat storefront that nudges the sidewalk, as a storefront should.* Even in the urban surround it has the capability to withdraw, to turn to the past, to unfold endlessly its concentrated interior detail; to become hermitage.

## § Identity of Wood Pile and House

...whatever whole, however it is, requires a proportionate union of parts, and is nothing beyond those parts taken together and so conjoined. From whence a pile of wood that must be considered as entirely one with its parts requires, in addition to individual pieces of wood and their multitude, their proximity. For if they were in distant places, they would not compose a pile. And thus a pile is nothing other than all the pieces of wood taken together and constituted in such a place with such a proximity. But a house, because it requires a greater union and composition of parts (for beyond proximity it requires an order and disposition and artificial conjunction), possesses a greater unity, but not a greater identity with or distinction from all its parts taken together and their union.

Francisco Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations*,  
(*Disputationes metaphysicae*), 1597.

## § Ethic in dual expression

Every turn inward reflects a turn to the spirit. Slower craft, longer look; a dwelling's floors and plans and profiles—of the inviolable fruits of such study, one could convincingly say, after Spinoza, something has been achieved: ethics expressed in the geometric. We recognize the geometries that web the mesmerizing textures, but what of the ethic? It has a two-fold manifestation. First it turns its attention to the ordinary: “humble subject matter derived from her immediate surroundings...the true repository of not only the sublime but also the abstract, both of which are potentially situated immediately underfoot.” What does abstraction do in this instance if not “imagine things to be stable which are in flux”? The artist discovers “immediately underfoot” both the living elements in their dynamic instability and the stable laws that govern their abstract fixity. These reveal themselves through double attention, not only the close look but also the long look. Here we find the second ethical turn, the underfoot of the ordinary *domestic*, as not only the interior of a house but also the mode of engagement with it. As Gertrude Stein in 1933 wrote in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “I always say that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it.” The statement turns a skeptical eye toward those painterly objects less invested, the posed and the arranged, while also suggesting an equation between visual image and written word. This artist's ethical task becomes to extricate the forms of the ordinary domestic from concealment and to disclose them to public view. She paints with the authority conferred on her in relation to her subjects by years of coexistence, living with inherited elements, devoting to them the daily attention of care. Sleep in their proximity, wake to their return, apprehend them mysteriously in a wakeful midnight, in a pool of moonlight, the presence undeniable in the long duration, like a guardian house spirit, the plumb sovereign of the passage-way. Perhaps that which we live with every day, day after day, for years and decades, has chosen us. In time our souls will dwell there. Daily our angel of the unfamiliar reanimates the pre-articulate ordinary, rousing us from lassitude, returning to us the miracle of infinite difference.

## § Chroma 1 / and form

Color manifests first as pair; the diatonic, or complement, its smallest unit. Complementarity completes through necessary opposition. It makes of color a biconditional: red $\Leftrightarrow$ green (red if and only if green), blue $\Leftrightarrow$ orange, yellow $\Leftrightarrow$ violet. The presence of one stabilizes the force of the other. Furthermore, both situate on grounds of varied densities, enveloped in heathered or marbled textures, held in place by traces of guide-lines like music staves. Color cannot survive in solitude. Alone it does not exist, since each individual color depends for its apprehension on adjacency, on neighboring nearness, and every pairing relies on a further triangulation of relations. Color operates in this way not as object but as event. One might say that the threshold persists in a way that its assigned color does not. Colors exist conditioned by space and light but outside of time. Green does not age. The nature of the threshold's persistence concerns how time holds and secures it. Like all forms, the threshold degrades, decomposes, and grows older with passing days. Green remains an event distinct from the form that embraces it. Out of this nexus of relations—the body of the form, the bottomlessness of color—arises the concept of color as the soul of form. Form, not static, not given, visibilizes variation. We call this form: the frame of image that traverses the same landscape over again, in ceaseless series and revelation.

## § Chroma 2 / note-chords

Paired chromodynamic indivisible stabilities, primary to secondary—a red beside a green, a yellow beside a violet, a blue beside an orange—resemble the subatomic particles assigned a quantum number that physicists identify as “color.” At their most microscopic perceptible instance, the blocks that build our universe exchange chromatics and quantity as mutual fused currencies of quality. So too with the house whose interiority stands in for the universe, and within the house the (six) thresholds each with their corresponding system. The “note-chords / color stacks” derive in correspondence from a painted “threshold plan,” reflective of relative location, east to west, on the house's second floor, commencing with “SouthEast—Two” / orange threshold, proceeding through “SouthEast—One” / yellow, “North” / blue, “SouthWest—One” / red, “NorthWest—One” / violet, and “SouthWest—Two” / green. Such spatial encoding draws out the soul of the dwelling, and assembles of it a vibrant array. Some may not recognize the expressiveness of these painted gestures, the harmonic and disharmonic edges that play on the retina, despite the always visible work of the hand, couched as they seem in rude formalities that stymie the ego. Yet the geometry exerts its noetic expression of a certain essence, an unlimited, infinite quality, implying an intellect that perceives it. The expressive attribute

relates essence to substance, and the intellect grasps this immanent relation. Still, the artist has not so much *invented* as *rendered*, and done so through the most extreme acts of portrayal, affirming the notes that make the melody, and the woodpile inherent in the house’s disposition.

### § Chroma 3 / the idea of underpainting

The house is not indivisible. It divides into parts that one may delineate and name. Thresholds enact their own definition, rules, and forces; the common hourglass shape, the family resemblance of awkward foreshortened stacking, the act of suturing distinctly defined spaces, all situated within the fundamental nature of floor. Like Janus they face in two directions at once: “a decision point on a path,” and “the joint between path and node visible and expressive.” One can further divide each threshold into strips, or planks, and then into smaller squares of measure or grains of wood. Concerning color, no unit constitutes the terminal point of this divisibility. One divides colors into subcolors, layered and conflicting. If surfaces proliferate in a house, underpainting speaks to the depth behind the surface, the built nature of surface out of which emerge forms and colors. In this respect we may liken the house, or what we know of it, to mist lifting in the morning. We awaken incrementally to the emergence of the apparent world, form fashioning shape, color claiming form, out of a fog’s endless depthless occluded bewilderment. Events of color issue as the resonant result from superpositional forces of light and shape, like musical tones that crystalize out of interactions of vibrations with ear mechanisms. Deep within the ear, the otolith affords perception of linear acceleration, gyroscopically stabilizing the perceiver relative to gravity. Color like sound plays a part in placing us who perceive it. Color changes with our position. One finds no absolutes in this house, but only portals into clusters of harmony and dissonance, motion and rest, revelations of fixed and radiant harmonies.

### § Chroma 4 / democratic and reflect

Out of the analytic systems deployed to render interior elements of the artist’s house, transferrable possibilities manifest. They migrate to other interiors. The disciplines of abstraction—of diagramming stabilities that inhere in the continuous flow of change—stalk the interdimensional echo. These strategies in practice draw distant rooms together in common transport, isolating salient similarity in recitations of readable kinship, bound by spectra. The work in this way actualizes the prophetic ideal: the house with no outside, the infinite house, the background not overlookable. Events of geometrical intuition, products of a set of systems, take on their own life, out of the artist’s hands, akin to the way the twelve-tone constraint guides the

serialist composer. The piano keyboard repeats its pattern after every twelve keys. What if we limit ourselves to playing each of those tones once before repeating any of them? This speculative question generated some surprising results. The music became more “democratic” in that no tone received the emphasis of frequency over the others. Then the melodic line, a minimum of twelve notes, seemed almost too elongated to retain in the mind’s ear. Out of such experimentation—assembled upon meticulous scaffolding—another ethic in geometry. “In two notes: not built, but ‘*expressed!*’” wrote the composer Schoenberg. Similar fundamentals hold true in the string of six threshold colors progressing in their parade according to dictates of direction (*west to east to west*) rather than wavelength, their alternate continuum of values doubled and palindromically mirrored at the center.

green/violet/red/blue/yellow/orange//orange/yellow/blue/red/violet/green

In this case, however, color’s relationality complicates time’s permutations. The red with violet to its left and blue to its right distinguishes itself from the red with blue to its left and violet to its right. Reflection reverses the harmonies at play. To reflect, to “bend back,” makes of each line a complete and encircling wheel.

At the start I saw a patch of grass I remember as square radiant green I had fallen on or maybe could not yet walk possibly age 2 still in Flint the bright eloquence of early summer cast in sunlight I know now yet of the memory only that purest color field of that I confessed to Julia

on a sidewalk at North Clark Street and West Randolph a chance meeting 1995 in front of the State of Illinois Building early one afternoon early too in our friendship she had rendered so deep a measured textured scaled green specimen of surface I recall as square that it brought it back “first memory”

earliest body perhaps counterintuitive to align that closely held emotion to a strict formalist drawing and not my most careful moment to speak it so plainly opening wide privacy’s window but her invested exactitude that would one day compose the phrase *west to east when west is green* intimately reflects

what rises from that origin persistence and now decades on I imagine guided by her paintings’ eyes I will see that green appear again once again at the end.

### § Auroras of ordinary

Call this elongated form extreme and say this painting has made itself. See it as a choir of bricks, their silent harmony defined in the arrival of its own repetition. Call it a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities it synthesizes. Through it the many become one, and are increased by one. Say that its shapes divide then divide again, that its colors cause its shapes. It engenders semblances of life out of self-replicating structure, a thing which is its own cause. Why speak of cause, of the cause of color, when shape becomes a material presence? We might say that color and shape register the same external causality in different dimensions. They overlay upon one another: the angular morning light cast from window athwart a threshold surface. Out of illumination, color and shape express their certain essence, each constituting a whole prior to its parts. They become countersubjects to one another. Stacked modules both reflect and repel their nearest neighbor. Can we find the painter in this architecture? How must she have unscrolled it and guided us here, must have fostered these conversions of looking, in this oddly familiar compression and extension of place arranged gently atop place. Say this extremeness accosts us.

Say this painting encircles with a ribbon of linearity, embracing us more at its scale than scaling itself to ours. We know it as a house’s interiority that maps aspects and degrees of inner detail across and within its own expanse. We may read it as a timeline flowing as time’s river left to right, or the sun’s apparent arc across the sky, moving east to west describing the ecliptic. Light and shadow follow. We might sense this painting as we know the forest from the path. We apprehend it as both the score and the music—it has issued from the *as if* that architecture composes. I am of a doubly unsettled mind that finds itself here, settling before this stretched presence. It has revealed to me my need for the stillness that it offers. If we choose as we may to walk into it, we find, sheltered in the overflow of tangibilia, in the plan and overlay of information, that every idea becomes the shadow of an idea. Even clouded, effaced as by rain and frost to granular grays, “dwindled and twinkling,” the event of color, the self-evident event, remains forever in transit.

Imagine it’s late October and we can arrest the burnished cellular latticework inside a leaf of Sugar Maple. We copy precisely each intricate groove and cross-hatched striation—the flat surface, exploded and unfolded, through a delicate process that echoes science but placidly, patiently, and at a larger scale than usual. Diagram grows to the size of its subject. We may read it with ease: the event midway between yellow and green.

In music the chromatic scale relates to notes outside of the diatonic, or the key of a musical passage’s composition. Chroma, chromatics, color, thus exceeds the skeletal armature of melodic line. A cluster of musical notes catches on a staff, like a body on softly roughened wires. The grid supports the figure, and the figure, thus supported, performs. How the hand rests uneasy on the keyboard: five over twelve. That is to say, the keyboard repeats after every twelve tones, and the hand consists in five. But five does not exactly describe the hand, whose nest of relations more accurately actualizes four plus one. The hand bypasses equal pentagon for stable quincunx ∴ with thumb opposing at the center, five elements but four sides. In the quincunx, the “five twelfths,” a durable relation to the keyboard arises: square to hexagon. In a memory, the piano teacher lifts her hand. One tone sounds with gentleness equivalent to the touch, then another at the half step up, and synesthetic colors follow—the modulation of complementarity.

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds  
Not often realized, the lighter words  
In the heavy drum of speech

These are the edgings and inchings of final form,  
The swarming activities of the formulae  
Of statement

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,  
A philosopher practicing scales at his piano,  
A woman writing a note

It is not the premise that reality  
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
A dust

It may be this: in the unruly network of blossoming florets, a glimpse of a world in which the catalogue of pleasing pattern, designed and regulated to recede into overlookable background, might include this pattern too in all its complexity, that stretches and shrinks according to the same logic but multiplied and released from the timid constraints of containment, of decorum, to grow into a transverse unbounded set demonstrating the ordinary sublime in the extreme. *Say that it has an individuating form that results in the persistence of a certain internal ratio of motion and/ to rest.* In these rooms so enchanted we may reimagine our many chambered selves and every function of our world. Traverse and obbligato, orientation and insistence, scouring and quick counterpoint. Lift a floor and turn it to a wall. Trace a thin

rectilinear parade of colors that pattern as reinscription what we know of hearth, earth, heart, heat, ear. The earliest soul of the room has become its history.

See how she guides us, this artist, along a new channel. Memory implicated in the present folds in upon itself, falls on us, as music and afternoon light fall on every surface, multiplied with strategy and depth in endless sourceless echo—every color an author of form, every shape a color’s aurora.

§§§

Roots and sources

“This is one of the many qualities that makes the fugue unique among musical forms: its statement is defined and framed by the arrival of its own repetition.”  
Daniel Barenboim, *Music Quickens Time* (2009) pp. 24–25

Gregory Bateson described the physics of the hand as “a nest of relation.” Thanks to Judith Leemann for this reference.

“Devotion is never abstract; it always has duration, and it must leave its mark, whether outwardly or inwardly, on the devotee.”  
Clare Carlisle, *Spinoza’s Religion* (2021) p. 24  
Carlisle adopts Michel Foucault’s phrase “conversions of looking” to describe the spiritual element of Spinoza’s practice of philosophy. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981–82/2005) p. 15

“Each attribute ‘expresses’ a certain essence. If the attribute necessarily relates to the intellect, this is not because it resides in the intellect, but because it is expressive and because what it expresses necessarily implies an intellect that ‘perceives’ it. The essence that is expressed is an unlimited, infinite quality. The expressive attribute relates essence to substance and it is this immanent relation that the intellect grasps.”  
Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1970) tr. Robert Hurley (1988) p. 51

“Form is not a static given; it is that by which variation becomes visible; it is the frame of the image that traverses the same landscape over again, ceaselessly revealing it otherwise.”  
Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk* (2019) tr. Steven Miller, p. 115

Julia Fish, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, *Julia Fish: bound by spectrum* (2019)  
Julia Fish, Kate Nesin, David Nolan, *Julia Fish floret : unbound* (2021)  
Julia Fish, correspondence with the author (2021)  
Hannah B. Higgins, *The Grid Book* (2009)

“Ethics requires an infinite movement, it requires disclosure.”  
Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (1843) tr. Bruce H. Kirmmse (2022) p. 136

“a decision point on a path,” and “the joint between path and node visible and expressive.”  
Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (1960) p. 102

“your angel of the unfamiliar”  
Ed Roberson, *City Eclogue* (2006) p. 30 *Sit In What City We’re In*

“In one important respect, Spinoza’s conception of the Infinite Individual is similar to Schaffer’s conception of the cosmos as a whole. In particular, Spinoza is committed to the position that in the case of this individual, the principle that composition is not identity holds. For just as each of the finite bodily individuals that compose the Infinite Individual has an individuating ‘form’ that results in the persistence of a certain internal ratio of motion and/to rest, so also the individual composed of these other individuals has as its own distinctive form that is causally responsible for the persistence of the overall ratio of motion and/to rest in the material world as a whole.”  
“These finite individuals have features that can be conceived through their own forms, apart from any consideration of their relation to the whole they compose.”  
Tad M. Schmaltz, *The Metaphysics of the Material World—Suárez, Descartes, Spinoza* (2020) p. 262  
On pages 86–87 of this volume that one may consider an extended explication of mereology, or the study of relations between parts and wholes, Schmaltz quotes Francisco Suárez on the differences between the woodpile and the house.

“... they cogitate, / they meditate their food, they muse it through their many-chambered / selves...”  
Diane Seuss, *frank: sonnets* (2021), p. 44

Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics—Geometrically Demonstrated and Divided into Five Parts* (1677) tr. George Eliot (1856)

“...the human intellect on account of its peculiar nature is prone to make abstractions, and imagine things to be stable which are in flux...”  
Benedict de Spinoza, Letter to Henry Oldenburg (critique of Francis Bacon), September 1661

Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) p. 113

Wallace Stevens, *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950)

“...then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him.”  
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* (1854)

“For Fish, whose humble subject matter is derived from her immediate surroundings, the exclusion of the everyday is unthinkable. The everyday is the true repository of not only the sublime but also the abstract, both of which are potentially situated immediately underfoot.”  
Hamza Walker, *The Joy of Looking*, The Renaissance Society (1996)

“The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the ‘many’ which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive ‘many’ which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities it synthesizes. The many become one, and are increased by one. In their natures, entities are disjunctively ‘many’ in process of passage into conjunctive unity.”  
Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929/1979) p. 21

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