Synaesthetic Colour Responses to letters of the Alphabet: an investigation through Fine Art Textiles

This paper is concerned with ways in which grapheme synaesthetes experience colour and the potential of that experience through its replication within a fine art textiles practice. In order to unravel some of the complexities that this area presents, it needs to be established whether the colour sensations perceived by grapheme synaesthetes can be reconstructed.

Synaesthesia has been defined “as occurring when stimulation of one sensory modality automatically triggers a perception in a second modality” (Harrison and Baron-Cohen, 1997). A letter of the alphabet may for example involuntarily trigger a specific colour. This form of synaesthesia is called grapheme synaesthesia.

In this paper I will be addressing the problem of colour re-construction from the perspective of my practice as a colour specialist within the field of fine art textiles. This is a participant-led study, which does not aim to quantitatively analyse grapheme synaesthesia, but rather to work qualitatively with a small number of participants to understand the stability and specificity of their letter colour photisms.

I have utilized my long-term experience as a dyer and weaver to establish a series of art works that relate to the information gathered. To date I have produced a series of ltd edition Alphabet colour books, five sets of coloured alphabets, matched to the synaesthetes specifications and am working on a series of woven textiles that reflect my responses to the colours re-created. These take the form of woven paint charts that set out to explore classifications of colours extracted
from the combined alphabet sets. I will be gathering data from the synaesthetes on their responses to this work once the series is completed and intend to exhibit the work alongside their responses and draw together the complex threads and connections that have manifested themselves in the course of the research.