

In 2015, I was in the middle of working on an exhibition that would open the following year at the Kunsthalle Basel. I was interested in the main local industry there, pharmaceuticals, and had asked the institution to arrange some related site visits. In April, I went with Renate Wagner, the Head of Exhibitions, to a number of sites in and around Basel, meeting with various experts in their fields, all to understand how this particular industry had formed in this particular city. Over the course of three days, we visited the archives of Hoffman-La-Roche, the Pharmazie-Historisches Museum, the Novartis Campus, and the Natural Science section of the Goetheanum in Dornach.

All of these visits proved to be greatly inspiring and gave me material to work with and think about long after the exhibition at the Kunsthalle closed. So, this essay is about the surplus content that emerged from the images I saw at that time as part of my research. My show was titled *Dyed Channel*, somewhat inspired by the 1986 Sandoz chemical spill which had turned the Rhine river a deep red hue. Even now, some images from those site visits five years ago are still being activated. For example, the Forel-Ule Scale has made its way into some new works. This is a color scale used to test water impurities, ranging from deep blue through green, dull yellow and finally red, as the contaminated Rhine was the year I was born.

This brings us to the Yolk Color Fan I encountered on our tour of the Hoffman-La-Roche corporate headquarters. First, we visited the archive, where Dr. Lionel Loew, the company’s archivist, pulled out many items he thought would interest me (and which certainly did), such as images of the early Roche factories in the Russian Empire, which had been the company’s largest market share before the Revolution, when all its plants were destroyed.

We looked at all sorts of top-selling products from the company’s past. Sirolin, Hoffman-La-Roche’s breakout star, a placebo sugar syrup, which was marketed with all sorts of giveaways such as trading cards of the Wonders of the World or the Stations of the Cross. Or Roche’s first heart medicine, Digalen, made from double-extracted glycosides from the poisonous Digitalis flower, a bright magenta pill which came in a little heart-shaped bottle.¹ Dr. Loew didn’t hesitate to mention that Fritz Hoffman-La-Roche’s main interest and background was in marketing, more so than pharmacology. In fact, he attributed the company’s success to this factor, which distinguished it from competitors that had evolved from producing chemical dyes.

After the archive, we toured some of the historical offices, with corridors lined with ancient ceramic medicine jars in cases embedded in the walls. One long hall led to a fantastical mural by Niklaus Stoecklin, and at the other end was an enormous Robert Delaunay painting. We wound through several buildings before returning to the office of our host, Micheline Duperrex Burgess, the Visit Manager. In the lobby were more displays about the company’s history, including the Seveso disaster of

1976, in which thousands of people in northern Italy were exposed to dioxin after a runaway reaction in one of Roche’s subsidiary plants. In 2010, it was ranked as eighth in the list of worst man-made environmental disasters by Time Magazine². Renate and I were slightly surprised, even impressed, by Roche’s transparency in this display—Sandoz had dissolved and re-formed as Novartis in the wake of its man-made environmental disaster.

Nearby that display, overlaid on a turquoise-black-and-white hallucinatory op-art background, was the Roche Yolk Color Fan, spread out in an array of yellows and oranges. I snapped a photo. Later, it became part of a slideshow made up of research images I’d taken in various locations while working on this project. And after seeing this photo over and over through the various working stages of the slideshow, I finally looked into the Yolk Color Fan on its own.

According to the website of DSM, formerly Dutch State Mines controlling the coal mines in Limburg and now a biotechnology company to whom Roche sold the Yolk Color Fan in 2003,

Consumer studies indicate that people worldwide have strong cultural preferences regarding the color of the food they eat. DSM’s color measurement tools allow feed producers to supplement their feed with the type and quantity of carotenoids that will deliver precise and consistent food color and meet consumer expectations around the world.³

The Yolk Color Fan was developed to assess such local market preferences for egg yolk color. It has 15 shades ranging from pale yellow to a deep red-orange. After the average customer’s favorite color is evaluated and identified, local poultry farmers or feed suppliers can adjust the pigments to achieve the correct hue. To this end, DSM offers the product line Carophyll®, a “range of carotenoid additives” which “allows producers to deliver precisely-colored and pigmented food reliably and consistently.”⁴ There are, of course, natural ways to influence the color of egg yolks, such as adding marigold petals or red peppers to chickens’ regular corn feed. But whether artificial or natural, the common belief that deeper orange yolks equal more healthy eggs (or chickens) is rarely true in the modern world.

Some type of standardized yolk color chart has been in use since at least 1933, when Payne and Wilhelm used the Munsell color notations (a type of color system still used today to evaluate rock and soil colors in the field) in a study “to ascertain the effects on egg yolk color due to the various ingredients of common poultry feeds.” White corn, yellow corn, kafir, wheat, oats, yellow milo, alfalfa and several succulent green feeds were used in this study. The first workable standard of egg yolk color comparison was introduced in 1935 with Heiman and Carver’s Color Rotor.⁵ Roche’s Yolk Color Fan has been in use since at least 1962, which is the earliest mention of it I could find,⁶ and is now “widely accepted throughout the food chain as the standard for measuring yolk colour on a routine and reliable basis.”⁷

The Yolk Color Fan is not a product of our current era of genetic engineering with techniques such as CRISPR gene editing. Nor is it a historical relic of the industrial 20th century, or at least one that’s been laid to rest. Like the tractor or the combine, the Yolk Color Fan has quietly been a part of the mechanized and standardized agricultural landscape for a long time, close to a hundred years now, and is still in use, everywhere. It has pervaded people’s daily lives in the most unconscious way, both leveling and tailoring the universally beloved and consumed egg.

The more I learned about the Yolk Color Fan and looked at its image, the more I saw it as a sort of icon. So, about a year after I had first encountered it, I finally had the thought to paint it, as one would an icon. I tried to obtain my own color fan, normally available only to industrial poultry farmers or clients in agribusiness. I called the national branch of DSM and asked if they would be able to send me a sample. I told them I was an art conservator currently working on the restoration of a medieval painting made with egg tempera, and the pigmentation in the eggs I was using was interfering with the pigments to make the paint. Amazingly, this fantastical story seemed to convince the person on the phone, and they sent me a Yolk Color Fan, as well as a SalmoFan, and a SalmoLineal, its products for evaluating *salmonid* filets.

After the fan arrived, I made some small, long, rectangular and V-notched panels out of special super-thin plywood used for architecture models and prepared them in the same fashion as medieval icon panels, with many layers of rabbit-skin glue and marble dust, sanded down to a super-smooth finish. For the next month or more, I spent every day matching the colors of the Yolk Color Fan painstakingly with hand-mixed egg tempera under the emerging spring light of my backyard.

Some months before that, at the same time the exhibition in Kunsthalle Basel had opened, it had also been publicly announced that I was being newly represented by 303 Gallery in New York. The first opportunity to exhibit with them came that June at the main art fair in Basel, and they happily agreed to show the Yolk Color Fan at the booth.

Meanwhile, I had been invited by some friends I had met over my multiple research visits to Basel to join a project or *residency* on the edge of town, in an old multi-family house that was slated for demolition soon thereafter. We all lived in this house for a month, starting in May, and could do anything we wanted to the building. I lived and worked in the old hayloft, cutting out the floor and making a glowing gooey installation between the boards. Since the house was beyond the town center, no gallerists came out to see the house project, but many friendly neighbors or former occupants came to visit. The Yolk Color Fan quietly sat in my suitcase in a corner of the unlocked hayloft, undisturbed, until the fair started weeks later.

Once the time came for installation, I biked over to the Messeplatz and brought the fan in person to the install crew, where it was placed on a specially-made small shelf in a tiny room in the back part of the fair booth. After the first preview day, I received some good news—the work had sold! Over the next few days I saw friends, went to some gallery dinners and parties and celebrated.

Then, on the day before the fair was ending, I received another call from the gallery—the fan had been stolen.

Apparently, the thief had snatched the artwork in a brief moment when the small back room of the booth was unattended. Perhaps they had folded it up and simply put it in their pocket? The gallerists suspected that the booth was being watched, that the theft was highly calculated, not a simple crime of opportu-

nity. The fair was an extremely high-security environment—all bags had to be checked in an office across the street before entering the main fair hall, and everyone went through a metal detector coming in and out of the building.

As I listened to the story over the phone, how it might have happened, I felt shocked, confused, but also a little giddy. My artistic ego was definitely flattered—someone had liked my work enough to do something desperate and illegal to possess it.

When I discussed the matter with friends, the conversations led to all sorts of wild speculations about what could have happened to the artwork. Had it been taken by a kleptomaniac and simply thrown in the trash? Or was it now sitting in the house of a greedy collector, or a rival artist, or a jealous gallerist, or a spurned lover? Each recounting of the story led to further intrigue.

Of course, when I told my mother, she beamed with pride. And as the story absorbed up the branches of the family tree, everyone considered the event an auspicious one. Even family members with no interest in Contemporary Art (meaning everyone) still considered that now, since my work was worthy of stealing, I was a success. Even my then-92-year-old grandmother, not known for doling out gratuitous compliments, congratulated me.

Meanwhile, the on-the-ground reality of the situation was rather messy for everyone involved. Filing a police report proved difficult, as the theft was in an unknown category somewhere between regular and *grand*, according to the gallery director who had the sad job of giving testimony to the irritated officers at the scene. The artwork was also filed with the Art Loss Register, in case it ever came up for re-sale. I asked the gallery to file a report with Interpol’s Stolen Works of Art Database. This proved impossible because the Basel police would have had to submit the report to Interpol themselves, and they were not particularly cooperative. So, my work is still lost. The last time I went to Art Basel, about two years ago, I stopped by the Art Loss Register desk to ask if my work was still missing, which they confirmed.

And there was another problem: the collector who had bought the fan still wanted it. They even asked me to make a bigger version this time.

So, I had to set to work making an exact match of the first, albeit somehow larger, and I had to summon the work ethic to carry me through the long process of re-painting the artwork. There are no shortcuts within such a painting process, even if I knew the colors so well by then it felt like a rote exercise. And while the second version was probably objectively better executed than the prototype, the element of discovery that had animated the making of the first version was gone. That is, except for one detail.

That year, 2016, a new 16th shade was added to DSM’s Yolk Color Fan, a deep red, to meet expectations in newly emerging markets that want maximally pigmented eggs. DSM had kindly sent me the fan when the first printing was released that summer. So, the new version of *Plein Air (Yolk Color Fan)* was indeed bigger than the stolen one, by about three millimeters in thickness, to account for the extra blade. The metal fastener holding the fan together also had a 5mm extension added on the 2nd version. I flew to New York that September with the newer, fatter *Yolk Color Fan* in my luggage, delivering it myself to the gallery director, who then gave it personally to the collector later that day.

As for the still missing prototypical *Yolk Color Fan*, if you have recently seen this object—a pale yellow to deep red-orange fan with fifteen (not sixteen) blades, with two royal blue end-pieces—please immediately call or write 303 Gallery or myself.

1) *Von der Giftpflanze zum Schrittmacher der Herzmedizin*, <https://www.roche.de/about/stories/herzmedizin.html>, last accessed December 8, 2020.

2) Gilbert Cruz, *Seveso Dioxin Cloud*, Time, May 3, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,198645700.html>, last accessed December 7, 2020.

3) DSM, https://www.dsm.com/markets/anh/en_US/products/products-solutions/products_solutions_tools.html, last accessed December 1, 2020.

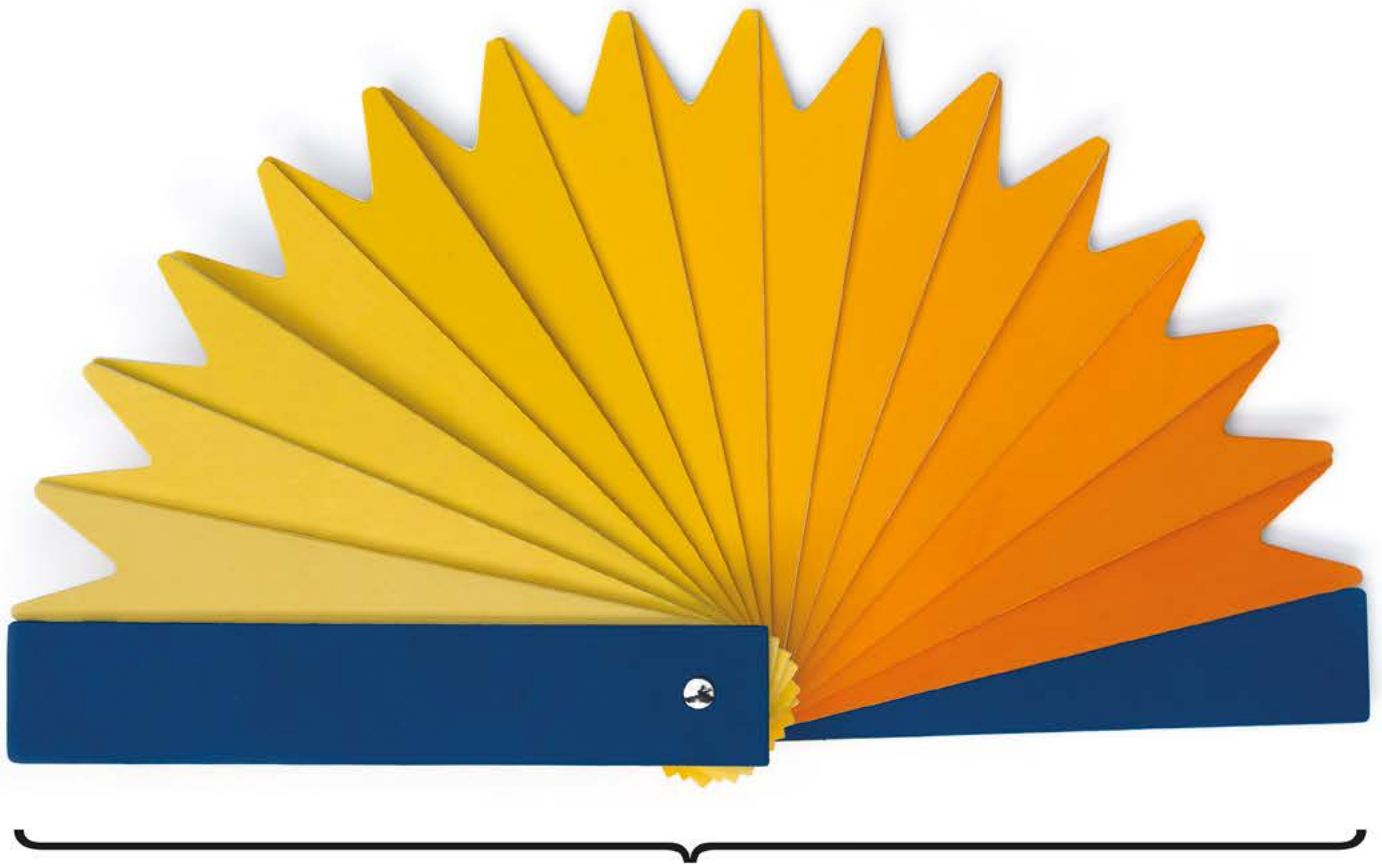
4) DSM, https://www.dsm.com/markets/anh/en_US/products/products-carotenoids/products-carotenoids-carophyll.html, last accessed December 1, 2020.

5) L. A. Wilhelm and Victor Heiman, *The Effect on Yolk Color of Various Ingredients in Poultry Feeds*, State College of Washington, Pullman, Washington (Received for publication May 29, 1937).

6) Jean Paul Vuilleumier, *The ‘Roche Yolk Colour Fan’—An Instrument for Measuring Yolk Colour*, F. Hofmann-La Roche & Co. Ltd., Basel, Switzerland (Received for publication August 15, 1968).

7) P. M. Beardsworth, DSM Nutritional Products, and J-M. Hernandez, DSM Nutritional Products Europe, Switzerland, *Yolk Colour—An Important Egg Quality Attribute*, in “International Poultry Production”, Vol. 12, No. 5, <http://www.positiveaction.info/pdfs/articles/pp12.5p17.pdf>, last accessed May 10, 2021.

WANTED



OBJECT

Dimensions: 2 ¼ x 17 ¼ x 10 inches
(5.7 x 43.8 x 25.4 cm)

By: Marina Pinsky
Theft: 18 June 2016
(Art Basel)

On June 18th, 2016 between 17.30 and 18.00,
this item went missing from Art Basel,
Messeplatz, 4058 Basel, Switzerland.

*In the event of discovery or information leading to the recovery of this object,
please contact wanted@marinapinsky.com*