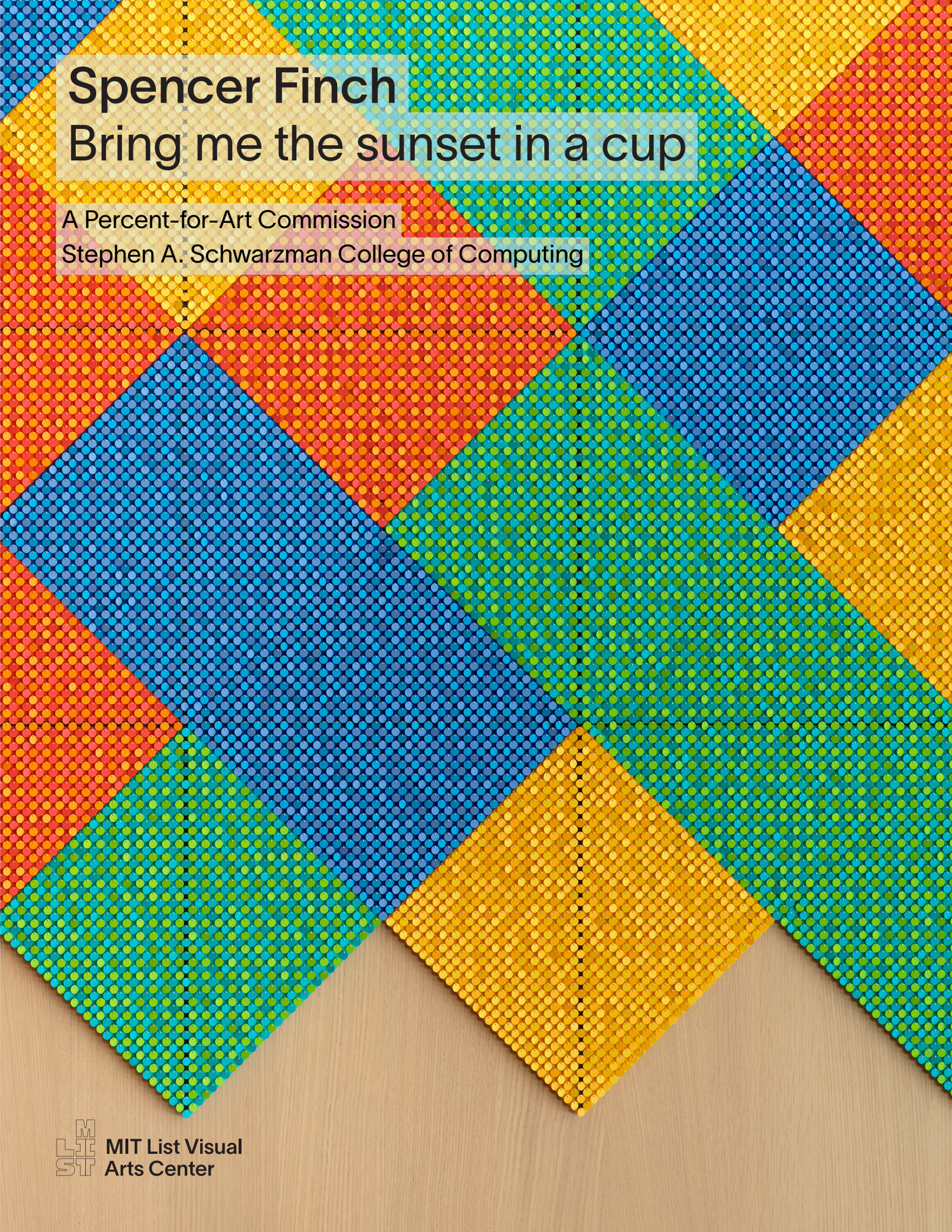
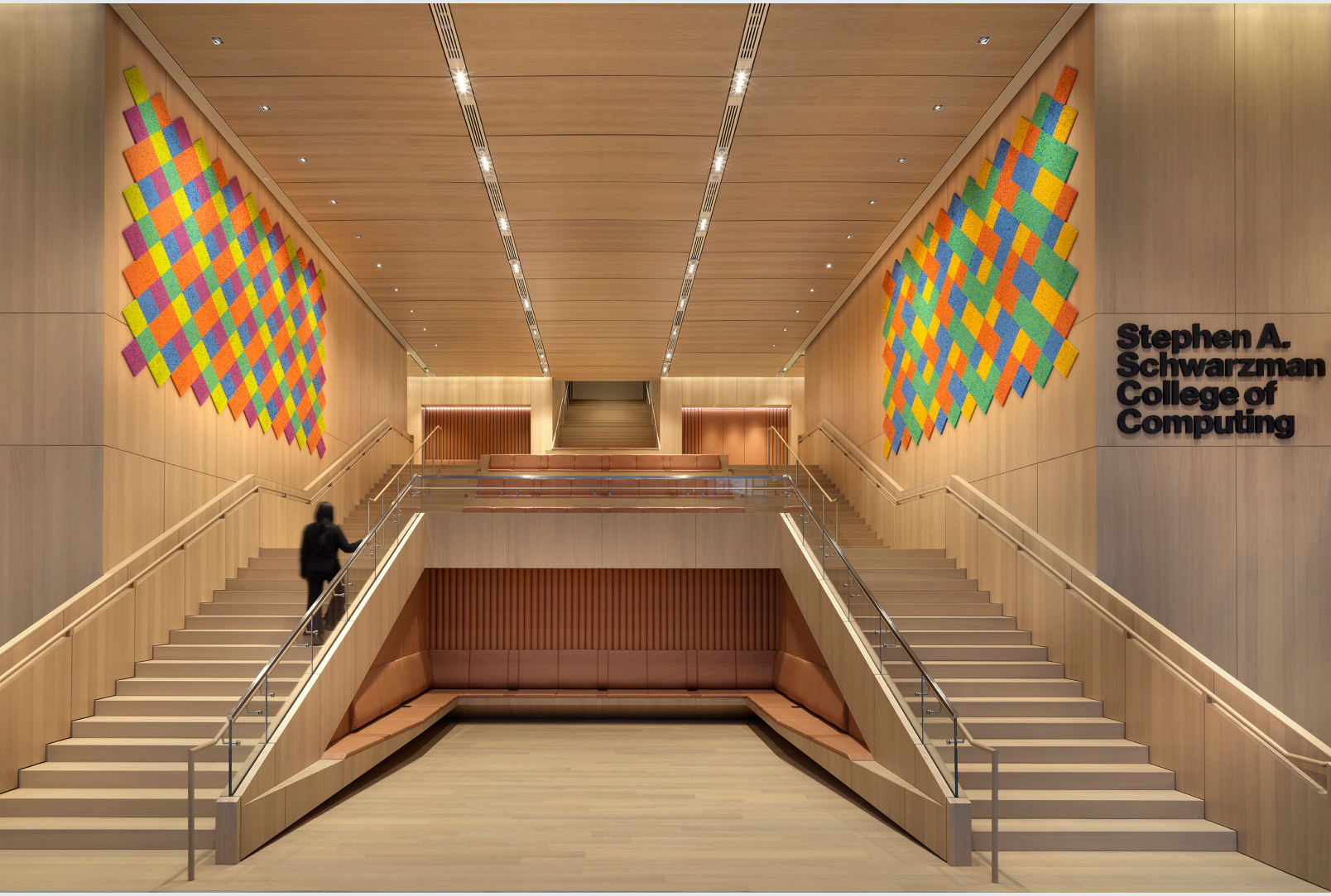


Spencer Finch
Bring me the sunset in a cup

A Percent-for-Art Commission
Stephen A. Schwarzman College of Computing

MIT List Visual Arts Center



All photos: Spencer Finch, *Bring me the sunset in a cup*, 2023.
Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art funds.
Photo: Dario Lasagni

Spencer Finch's *Bring me the sunset in a cup*

Pablo Larios

Spencer Finch's Percent-for-Art commission *Bring me the sunset in a cup* (2023) elegantly uses analog materials to articulate complex questions surrounding memory, computation, and representation.

Materially, the piece is a large-format permanent wall installation whose patterned, colored panels flank both sides of the lobby of MIT's Stephen A. Schwarzman College of Computing. Thousands of small, colored discs produce a flotilla of colors on two parallel walls, in turn forming even larger tiled patterns.

Finch's installation implements a rule-based sequence of colored patterns, but you don't need any specialized knowledge to appreciate one of the work's immediate features: while physically still, it is hardly static. Once you begin to move, the work's surface appears to modulate, too. On either side of the stairwell, a shimmer of colors seems to morph as you go up or down the staircase. Depending on the gradation of light, time of day, and trajectory and speed of your movement, the specific hues and colors subtly transform. Quintessentially, for an artist revealing the complexity of the perceptual images we create of our experience, there is much more here than initially meets the eye. Taking its title from a poem by Emily Dickinson, *Bring me the sunset in a cup* is an invitation to explore concepts of ambiguity, perception, complexity, and memory that are also fundamental to the history of computing. Using simple materials and means, namely, colored tiles, Finch's installation asks us to look anew at computation and spatial representation—and what it means for human subjectivity.

Bring me the sunset in a cup can be seen as incorporating a basic aspect of present-day computing: a binary system. The panels making up the work are composed of thousands of discs, and each panel is composed of an organization of discs in two colors: a given disc is one color or the other, similar to "on" or "off" (1/0) in a binary switch. The individual composition of this initial 1/0 variable generates the illusion of a consistent color within each tile. In doing so, Finch has constructed an analog framework built from a multitude of binary elements that are tangible and physical, much like early mechanical computers made from gears and levers.

This cue to binary systems and color-based variables leads to one of the work's anchors inspired by mathematician Hao Wang's thought experiment proposed in 1961—a classic contribution to the theory of computing in the twentieth century. Imagine you are playing a normal game of dominos—where the front of every tile is divided in two with a number of spots on each half, and the goal is to match the number of spots with another domino that has the same number. Now, imagine a related game: instead of spots, each section contains one of several colors, and, to make things harder, instead of two halves, we are using an object split in four. Like dominos, the goal is the same, so when all the tiles are placed on a specific plane, the color of each section matches the adjoining tile's color. This pattern of colored tiles can represent a logical sequence of numerical operations: an algorithm.

In his much-cited paper from 1965, Wang demonstrates how a game of tiles can be constructed to compute arithmetic, implement computer algorithms, and even emulate Turing machines (another foundational thought experiment concerning the limits of computability). Wang explains: "All mathematics can be reduced, by means of Turing machines, to a game of solitaire with dominoes."[1] Over sixty years later, Wang's thought experiment—in the form of Wang tiles—is still frequently applied when realistic "worlds" are digitally rendered in video games, designing textures, or the analysis of DNA sequences. In contrast to prevailing computing paradigms such as Turing machines, however, Wang tiles offer a different perspective that is deeply rooted in geometry and color.

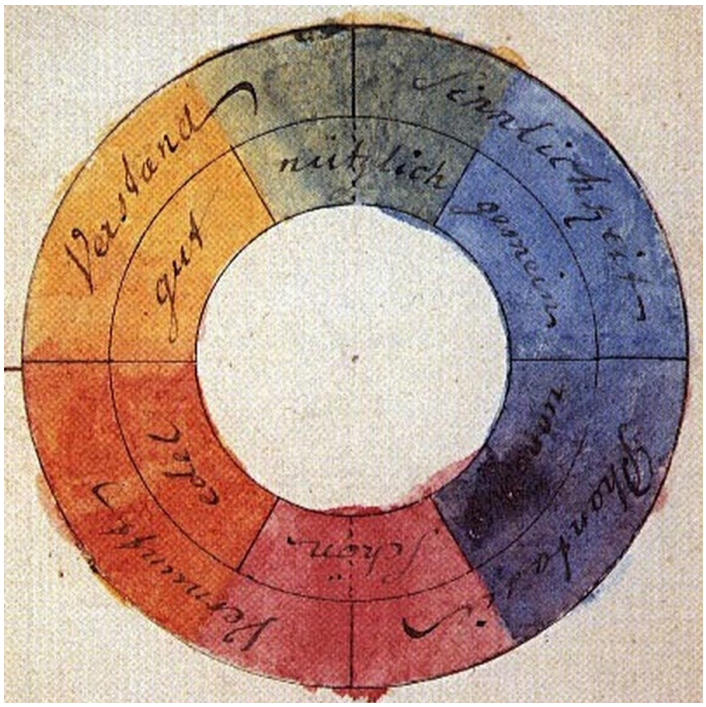
Finch's work takes Wang tiles even further by deconstructing aspects of our experience of color. In the installation, the Wang tiles are composed of the intermediary colors generated by individual combinations of discs of two colors. Looking closer at a given "tile," we see that no such color is homogenous or "pure"—it is determined by the color of the disc that seemingly takes the majority and, thus, forms our perception of a tile's single color that is actually two colors. This color ambiguity leads to a new, profound philosophical question: What can we know for certain, and can our perception of reality ever be translated outwardly? Can we ever have a shared picture of reality when that picture itself is never entirely coherent?

This second line of questioning relates to Finch's long-term use of color as a way of exploring highly unreliable relationships among perception, naming, and memory. For example, Finch employed color to elegiac effect in *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* (2014). The 2,983 hand-painted watercolors making up the work contain slight variations of blue, each standing for a victim of the September 11 attacks. The work suggests that representation and mourning remain ineffable while commemorating the singularity of each victim's perception and, therefore, life.

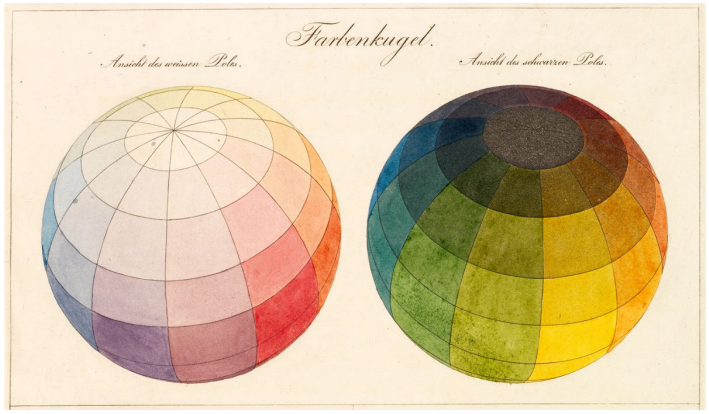
His earlier fresco piece, *Ceiling (Above Freud's Couch, 19 Berggasse, Vienna, 2/21/95, Noon Effect)* (1995), studied color to explore divergences between memory and representation. In that work, Finch lay on the floor of Freud's Vienna practice and painted eleven versions of the psychoanalyst's ceiling as the color changed throughout the day. The results demonstrate, much like Freud himself did, that a single experience unfolds into potentially endless meanings and associations. And for *Study for a Groovy Unnameable Color (Greenish Yellow)* (1997), Finch constructed a color grid consisting of 228 different shades of the same color (greenish-yellow). These works all make use of color ambiguities to suggest that naming, memory, and even representation itself might be incommensurate with the diversity and subtlety of our actual sensory experiences.

The second anchor to Finch's installation is philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's work on color, logic, language, and representation. The philosopher began to think about color, and the language we use to talk about it, as a way of illuminating some of the paradoxes and contradictions we routinely utter when we communicate—"colors," he wrote, "spur us to philosophize."[2] Most of us learned about color wheels in elementary school, yet our *experience* of color and our *language* around it are often irreducibly complex and eccentric. Ultimately, our concepts of "color" don't really fit onto the neat, representational grid of any color wheel.

Alongside Wang tiles, then, Finch's work directly relates to the theory of impossible colors. The notion of an impossible color—such as red-green—dates back to Goethe and the painter and draftsman Philipp Otto Runge, who expanded the color wheel to form a *color sphere* between 1809 and 1810.



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Color Wheel*, 1809. Pen and dark gray ink over traces of pencil (erased) and watercolour, sheet (diameter): 2¾ in. (6.9 cm), cardboard: 4⁹⁄₁₆ × 3¹⁄₁₆ in. (11.7 × 7.9 cm). Freies Deutsches Hochstift/Frankfurter Goethe-Museum, David Hall



Otto Runge, *Farbenkugel* [Color spheres], 1810. Hand-colored engraving, 11 × 17⅓ × ⅜ in. (28 × 44 × 1.5 cm). Courtesy The Getty Research Institute, 85-B14127

Wittgenstein once quoted Runge as saying, "If we were to think of a bluish-orange, a reddish-green or a yellowish-violet, we would have the same feeling as in the case of a southwesterly northwind."[3] As any color wheel or color sphere shows, when we mix primary colors such as yellow and blue, we make green. When we combine the primary colors red and yellow, we make orange. When we mix the primary colors red and blue, we make purple. But when we blend red and green, we don't get an in-between color but a non-color at best resembling brown. It is possible to see red and blue in the color purple, yet we see neither red nor green in the (impossible) color red-green. Combinations such as red-green or blue-orange are de facto "impossible" because they stand outside the logical system that organizes color. But what exactly is that system, and is it ever intelligible to us?

Goethe's influential text on color is also frustratingly incomplete and reads, at times, almost as a mystical document. Wittgenstein picked up on Goethe's inquiry in his *Remarks on Colour* (1950), a set of notes that have as their goal not a color theory but a "logic of color concepts."[4] For Wittgenstein, our perceptions of colors contain many gaps, which reveal broader inconsistencies in the pictures we create more generally to understand the world. These inconsistencies are not limited to color but also extend to all forms of representation, including language and numbers, and basic phenomena of bodily expression, such as pain. Through a series of thought experiments, Wittgenstein effortlessly shows how the picture of the world we construct is endlessly paradoxical and incomplete. It's as if we previously believed that the world resembles the landscape in Monet's *L'Escalier* [The Stair] (1878), but, looking closer, it appears more like M. C. Escher's impossible staircases. Color concepts continue to perplex, acting as Wittgenstein's spurs to philosophy.

Finch's work asks us to consider: What do we mean by "computation"? According to one definition, a computer is a device that can perform and recall a defined sequence (algorithm) of operations.[5] Medieval and early modern scholars, drawing from the invention of complex mathematics (algebra), gave the term "algorithm" to a set of rules. Finch finds a fitting visual representation of algorithms and computation, and the emergence of pattern and texture in *Bring me the sunset in a cup* brings present-day concepts in computer science and artificial intelligence back to basics. Yet, not stopping at simply representing these concepts, it illuminates a certain undecidability or irreducibility in representation itself. Like Wittgenstein before him, Finch finds exemplary value in showing how color, shape, and pattern can reveal the infinite ambiguities that persist in our theories of knowledge and our subjective experiences of the world.

In past works, Finch has referenced Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists—painting *en plein air,* they were not only visual artists in the contemporary sense but also natural scientists of our visual experience. Finch has attributed his appreciation of Impressionism to how such works flicker between surface and representation. Seurat's Pointillism occurred during a time of immense philosophical and technological ruptures, such as the Kantian revolution in philosophy, the Romantic construction of nature, and the development of photography. Likewise, Finch suggests our own time—and its incipient challenges and opportunities provided by nascent technology—brings an opportunity to reconsider the irreducible, complex set of mental pictures that form what we call, ever provisionally, "reality." Or, put differently, it's as ineffable as the colors of the sunset in a cup.

Pablo Larios is an author living in Berlin, Germany. He writes for numerous art magazines and journals and is a 2023 Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grantee.

1 Hao Wang, "Games, Logic and Computers," *Scientific American* 213, no. 5 (September 1965): 98–108.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 66c.

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 5.

4 Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, 5.

5 According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, a computer is "any device capable of carrying out a sequence of operations in a defined manner." Simon Blackwell, "Computer," in *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001/acref-9780199541430-e-655.

The List Visual Arts Center, MIT's contemporary art museum, collects, commissions, and presents rigorous, provocative, and artist-centric projects that engage MIT and the global art community.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Spencer Finch (b. 1962, New Haven, CT) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. His works explore color, subjectivity, and perception in a variety of media—ranging from large-scale public projects to light installations and watercolors. His material investigations are driven by what he has described as "the impossible desire to see oneself seeing." Finch's major public projects include *A Cloud Index* (2022), a site-specific commission for Paddington Station in London; *Orion* (2020), a light work for San Francisco International Airport; and *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* (2014), a commission for the 9/11 Memorial in New York. His work has been exhibited throughout the world and is in the permanent collections of institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

ABOUT PUBLIC ART AT MIT

MIT's world-renowned Public Art Collection reaches across the Institute and is enjoyed by students and visitors alike. New works are added through the Percent-for-Art program on the occasion of new campus construction. Formally instituted in 1968, the program continues to expand MIT's Public Art Collection through artworks by important and critically acclaimed contemporary artists, including Olafur Eliasson, Jeffrey Gibson, Sol LeWitt, Sarah Sze, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, among others. The List Visual Arts Center oversees MIT's art collection across campus and presents contemporary art exhibitions at the museum located in I. M. Pei's Wiesner Building (E15). The Public Art Collection and museum are free and open to all.

ABOUT THE COMMITTEE

Finch was selected for the commission by Percent-for-Art committee members, including: Jon Alvarez, Director, MIT Office of Campus Planning; Richard Amster, Director, MIT Campus Construction; Bonnie Berger, Simons Professor, MIT Mathematics; Emma Corbalan, Senior Project Manager, MIT Campus Construction; Paul C. Ha, Director, MIT List Visual Arts Center; Nicolas Hadjiconstantinou, Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Co-Director of the Center for Computational Engineering, MIT Mechanical Engineering; Daniel Huttenlocher, Dean, MIT Schwarzman College of Computing; Colin Koop, Design Partner, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Eileen Ng, Assistant Dean for Administration, MIT Schwarzman College of Computing; Sonia Richards, Director, MIT Capital Projects; Krystyn Van Vliet, Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Research, MIT Office of the Provost; Travis Wanat, Senior Project Manager, MIT Campus Construction.

MIT List Visual Arts Center

MIT List Visual Arts Center
20 Ames Street, Bldg. E15
Cambridge, MA 02139
listart.mit.edu

Follow us on social
@mitlistarts