

Ettore Sottsass: the colour in photography, the colour in design

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ABSTRACT

In 1935, two American musicians with a passion for photography, Léopold Mannes and Léopold Godowsky, developed the first and famous colour film, which became known as Kodachrome. Nearly a century after the birth of photography, this new invention – soon produced and distributed on the mass market – sparked both interest and curiosity on the one hand, and perplexity and even denigration, in some cases, on the other. It raised new questions for photographers, theorists, exhibition curators and museum directors about the photographic means and its potential languages. Several decades had to pass before colour photography achieved proper recognition and full artistic maturity, which was realized in particular thanks to the pioneers of the so-called *New Color Photography* [1]. Colour so became not only an expressive tool, but also a subject of reflection and debate within the realms of art, aesthetics, and design. From this perspective, the figure of designer and architect Ettore Sottsass Jr., whom the essay focuses on, is emblematic. The article, situated within the context of the emergence of colour photography and the debate surrounding its recognition, analyzes the figure of Sottsass as a photographer, comparing him to key figures in New Color Photography – and later with the New Topographics photographic movement [2]. It confirms that his vision of color – both in photography and in architectural and design projects – was strongly influenced by his encounters with American culture and society, as well as by his numerous journeys around the world.

KEYWORDS Ettore Sottsass, photography and design, colour photography, Kodachrome, New Topographics, american landscape

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1. Introduction

Although research and experimentation related to colour in photography dates back to the 19th century, intensifying over the first thirty years of the 20th century, it wasn't until the invention of Kodachrome film in 1935 by two Americans, Leopold Mannes (1899-1964) and Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938), that colour photography became truly practical and accessible (Gilardi, 1972, p. 8) [3].

This new invention, which positioned itself as an alternative to what had until then been the only real form of photography – black and white – provoked mixed feelings and reactions, as often happens with the introduction of new technologies. While it was quickly appreciated commercially for its ability to reproduce reality, becoming a widely used medium among amateurs and advertisers, on the other hand photographers, curators, museums, and galleries were initially reluctant and even opposed to its acceptance. Curators such as John Szarkowski (1925-2007) considered most early color photography to be childish and amateurish (Eauclaire, 1981, p. 8; Meyerowitz & Shore, 2024, pp. 8, 34).

Although the world and reality are in color, the presence of color in photography was initially considered with suspicion and even, in some cases, seen as vulgar – as was often remarked by Walker Evans (1903-1975), the American photographer known for his social documentary work (Evans & Baier, 1977, p. 20, cited by Eauclaire, p. 9) [4]. Even Edward Steichen (1879-1973), though not immune to the allure of color techniques – as seen in his famous 1904 image *The Flatiron* or during a two-month trip to Mexico in the late 1930s – declared that the introduction of Kodachrome colour film was initially more of a burden than a benefit. The images produced were not simply “in colour” but overloaded with colour, or, as Eauclaire (1981, p. 9) puts it in interpreting Steichen's writings, “too coloriferous.” [5].

The suspicion towards colour in photography – and in cinema as well – was also attributed to the fact that the colours were not true to reality, but saturated to the edge of believability. The overemphasis on colour and the difficulty of combining the vivid tones of the visible world made the medium appear kitschy (Eauclaire, 1981, pp. 9-10). The use and production of these flamboyant tones – which led to the visual character of color photography being described with the expression “more is more” – was particularly prevalent in advertising, where colour photography became a dominant medium (pp. 9-12).

During those years, despite photographers such as Paul Outerbridge (1896-1958) [6] – one of the most innovative advertising and still-life photographers of the 1920s and

1930s – creating non-commercial colour images as well (Koetzle, 2015, pp. 442-443), the documentary tradition kepted on preferring black and white, and the belief took root that colour weakened the sense of truthfulness and corrupted the photographic image (Clarke, 2009, p. 18).

Robert Frank (1924-2019), one of the greatest photographers in American history, considered black and white to be the only possible colours in photography. In 1955, thanks to a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, he embarked on a journey that lasted about two years, traveling through forty-eight states to photograph and document the lives of Americans during a period marked by consumerism and the exponential growth of industrial production. Out of the wide number of photographs Frank produced, eighty-three were selected to form one of the most important books in the history of photography, first published in the French edition *Les Américains* (1957).

While Frank was traveling across the United States, capturing in black and white the lives of Americans and the changes impacting their everyday experiences, designer and architect Ettore Sottsass Jr. (1917-2007) boarded a flight to New York in 1956 (Berard, 2023, p. 8). Although he never defined himself as a photographer, Sottsass can be compared – as we will see – to figures like Joel Meyerowitz and other American photographers such as Stephen Shore (1947-) and William Eggleston (1939-), who traveled throughout several countries photographing everything, driven by a deep and insistent curiosity about the world. It is not difficult to find similarities between Sottsass's photographs and those of these authors, who obsessively documented the “banal” ordinariness of everyday life [7]. Sottsass, whose design vision was undoubtedly shaped by his many travels and encounters with the cultures of the places he visited, deeply reflected on the issue of colour, considering its role in photography as well, as evidenced in his writings, his designs, and his photographs. Sottsass's vision of design was certainly also the result of his numerous travels and his encounters with the cultures of the places he visited. Obsessed with the act of photographing, the images he captured could spark impressions in him of colors and of natural and artificial material forms. What he was able to perceive with his attentive gaze became a source of inspiration for his projects. He himself once stated: “Sometimes I travel through the imaginary world of my projects. The project is perhaps the true journey, more so than the finished work. My creations are the result of an internal journey, and the external aspect – the object – I leave to others, to those who, in some way, undertake their own journey within what I have built.” (Gentili, 1995) During these journeys, both physical and internal, Sottsass reflected deeply on the question of color. It was the influence of his father and of

his friend, the painter Spazzapan, that guided and shaped his “research in the field of expressive and chromatic freedom. As a student of Spazzapan, he learned to recognize color as a psychological and emotional element, rather than as a scientific or chemical study, and above all he developed the idea that color itself could become and generate space” (D’Ambrosio, 1997, p. 6). In this way, color took on – for Sottsass, as evidenced in his writings and photographs – a central role and a defining trait of his design work. This characteristic was already present in his very first objects designed for the Italian company Rinnovel, where he skillfully combined the use of aluminum with bright colors. It continued during his collaboration with Olivetti, where once again he succeeded in creating perfect harmony between the industrial object and color [8].

2. The innate vocation for colour of Ettore Sottsass: origins in painting and the comparison with New Color Photography

Throughout his life and professional career, Ettore Sottsass Jr. traveled extensively, always carrying with him his notebooks and colored pencils, along with his rich and varied photographic equipment. Colour and photography were fundamental elements in the architect and designer’s research and his project practice, as evidenced by his writings and projects. His figure can indeed be considered emblematic for exploring the relationship between design culture and photography at a time when the introduction of colour film was reshaping the visual imagination.

Sottsass used photography to observe and study the world – both natural and artificial – defined by countless forms and colours, which are also the two principal elements represented by the photographic medium. Before the invention of Kodachrome, only the form was subject to representation in photography. In the 1930s, the introduction of color raised new questions and sparked reflections on the possible languages of the photographic medium. As long as black-and-white film was the only available option, photographic images were the result of contrasts between light and dark areas; they often appeared abstract and typically offered only two dimensions: perspective and contrast [9]. The introduction of Kodachrome film allowed photographers to choose between two fundamentally different expressive means (Feininger, 1968, pp. 9-12; pp. 33-35).

Faced with this possible alternative, Joel Meyerowitz, one of the leading figures of New Color Photography, decided to equip himself with two cameras in order to photograph the same scenes and subjects using both colour and black-and-white film, so he could compare the two images

[10] (figure 1). This led him to reflect on the two options: “Sometimes the black-and-white photo turned out better because the content was graphically strong enough not to need color, but, in most cases, the colour images seemed much more expressive to me. They better conveyed the atmosphere, the time of day, the season; sometimes, the colour itself – the shades of skin, the tone of a dress – had an intrinsic luminosity” (Meyerowitz & Shore, 2024, p. 42).



Fig. 1 Joel Meyerowitz, *The Bronx, New York City, 1968*. ©Joel Meyerowitz, Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery

The figure of Sottsass presents many parallels with that of Meyerowitz. What connects their paths is, first and foremost, their background and passion for painting, which had a significant impact on their understanding and vision of colour. Both, when attempting to define themselves, claimed not to be true photographers and admitted to knowing little or nothing about photography. Before turning to photography – where he demonstrated a particular attention to details – Meyerowitz had aspired to become an abstract expressionist painter (pp. 23, 147). He stated: “Photography wasn’t my field: I was a painter making a living as an art director at an advertising agency” (p. 8); “I painted by spreading colors with a broom” (p. 147).

Ettore Sottsass was steered towards a similar path, first by his father, an architect, who placed a pencil in his hand at a very young age. Later, the Slovenian-born painter Luigi Spazzapan (1889-1958) helped to deepen Sottsass’s innate connection with colour. Between 1934 and 1938, during his university years – he was enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture in Turin – he often skipped lectures to spend time with his painter friend, who would tell him about his encounters with Klimt, Kandinsky, and the artists of that era. Sottsass studied French painting, German Expressionism, the New York School, and read Kandinsky, van Doesburg, and Klee. Captivated by painting and colour, he began painting himself (Radice, 1993, p. 37). Of the stories and teachings on painting and colour that he received from his painter friend, Sottsass left traces many decades later in his work *I Colori* (1992). This can be considered a eulogy to colour and an original and unusual reflection [11]. He describes to have grasped the presence of colours, even as a child, in every ‘invention of the nature’. With time, “driven by an inexplicable curiosity

for artificial inventions” – as he himself declares – he realised “that colour could remain attached, indeed was inevitably attached, even to artificial inventions”. He painted more or less until 1965, until he realised that he was not a painter. ‘I am more capable of spreading colours in space than on a piece of paper’ he said (Sottsass quoted by Radice, 1993, p. 36). Unwittingly, it was also his mentor who dissuaded him from taking the path of painting and steered him towards a career as a designer (Berard, 2023, p. 7). Thus, he realised that colour – of which “no one but a few painters” (Sottsass, 2007, p. 241) spoke about – is enclosed in space, and throughout his life and work, he would bring it back to objects, his architecture and his photographs, finding his vocation.

Photography was certainly the tool that, more than drawing and painting, allowed him to observe and preserve the memory of objects and spaces he encountered. 1950 was the year when he used colour photography for the first time in Sardinia (Bomel, Carrel & Pasquet, 2024, p. 113).

The experience of the trip was decisive for Sottsass as it was for Meyerowitz. Sottsass's trip to America in 1966, at a time of great development in industrial production and consumerism, had a strong influence on his vision of design, contaminated by the perception of colour. The designer returned to the American continent many times, as we can see from his photographs collected in various volumes, all of which are visual witnesses to his descriptions [12]. Meyerowitz had also set off from New York to North America in 1964, with an old Volkswagen van, a bed and a small table, about ten years later than Robert Frank and before William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, who respectively started photographing America in the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1966, thanks to a well-paid advertising assignment, Meyerowitz was able to afford to buy a Volvo and also travel to Europe, where he visited the UK, Ireland, Spain, France, Germany, Eastern Europe, Turkey and Greece (Meyerowitz & Shore, 2024, pp. 66-68).

The figure of Meyerowitz was in time recognised for his significant contribution to colour photography [13]. From this comparison, however, it can be deduced that the figure of Sottsass could also be fully included among those who, like Meyerowitz, Eggleston and Shore, created the so-called New Colour Photography [14]. Travelling deeply marked his vision of the world and the use of colour, both in photography and in design. In *Fotografie, 1995* he writes: ‘To understand how a door can be drawn, even to understand how a door can be understood, I took photographs of doors: certainly not of all doors, almost only of those through which I wanted to pass’ (Carboni & Radice, 2002a, p. 470). Meyerowitz's words very much reflect the figure of the architect and designer: ‘I liked the

adventure, the fact of not knowing, the curiosity. [...] The experience of photographing in Europe changed me and gave me the perspective I needed to see myself and - once home – America differently’ (Meyerowitz & Shore, 2024, pp. 73, 82). On colour in photography, Meyerowitz states: “Colour taught me to remain ever alert to the frame” (p. 154). It can be deduced how colour fostered and made possible a better knowledge and perception of the world.

In the 1990s, Sottsass, having used colour photography for decades, also wrote his thoughts on the use of colour in photography, leaving a trace of them in *Fotografie, 1995*:

Once it seemed right to me to always photograph in colour. The world is made of colours, or rather we read the world because there are colours, and on days of grey, dull weather, when the sun can't even get through the clouds, colours are hardly seen and the world is hardly seen either; so as soon as I could, it seemed right to photograph with colour film to better read the world. Over the years I have discovered that sometimes it is right to photograph with colour and sometimes not. I have thought that I should only photograph in colour when I cannot do without it, when the colours put together have their own more or less unveiled story, their own story to tell; I should photograph in colour when there would be no story (or it would exist as castrated) without the colours. If these very special colour stories are not there, there is no point. There is no point in consuming colour. There is no point in doing as tourists do, who have been taught by Kodak that colour is better anyway. ‘It all looks more real’ – they say. [...] I have a great respect and love for colour, just as I have a great respect and love for words. I struggle to consume colours and to consume words (Sottsass, E. (2002a). *Fotografie, 1992*. in Carboni & Radice, 2002a, pp. 467-468).

His thought, rich in awareness and the result of contaminations with different cultures, directs him towards a conscious use of colour, reflecting not only an act of merely recording reality, but also of interpreting it. Sottsass understands, with time and experience, that, in photography, colour is essential when, in the subject to be photographed, it represents a decisive element for its recognisability.

3. From Colour to Black and White: Sottsass's “Metaphors” and the Comparison with the Photographers of “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape”

The 1970s were a turning point for colour photography. In 1976, MoMA presented the first exhibition of photographs in colour, curated by John Szarkowski, who had replaced

Steichen as head of the photography section. The exhibition dedicated to the American photographer William Eggleston constituted one of the most incisive moments in the legitimization of colour photography. Also in New York, in the same year, a group exhibition entitled *MAN TransFORMS* curated by Hans Hollein with Lisa Taylor was organised at the Cooper Hewitt Museum, which hosted the photographs, this time in black and white, of Sottsass's design *Metaphors*. Precisely during the years in which New Colour Photography was asserting itself, Sottsass had almost abandoned colour. After having fully experienced the period of radical design and radical architecture [15] on which we find some of his reflections in *Controdesign, 1971* (Carboni & Radice, 2002a, pp. 225-226), photography – together with drawing and writing – accompanied him in a particular period of introspection and critical reflection in which he abandoned design and began to travel around Spain like a nomad, together with his lover, the young Catalan artist Eulalia Grau. His photographs of his Spanish travels already testify to a departure from colour [16]. During that period of hermitage, the project *Metaphors* was born, recently presented, from 29 September 2023 to 21 April 2024, at the Triennale Milano in the “Sala Sottsass” titled “Ettore Sottsass”. *Design Metaphors* is realised in collaboration with Studio Sottsass and with the art direction of Christoph Radl. *Metaphors* encapsulates the questions that Sottsass was asking himself at the time in relation to the meaning of architecture and design and the relationship between man, environment and space.

These questions were the same as those shared, in those years, by the photographers of the so-called New Topographics that gave rise to the exhibition ‘New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape’, held in 1975 [17].

The decades following the Second World War were characterised, as is well known, by an increasing impact of man on nature. This also led to a change in the photographic representation of the landscape, which was no longer natural and unspoilt, but rather urban, suburban and industrial. The need to critically investigate the new landscape, in order to understand what role architecture, town planning and design could play, was shared by Sottsass, who began working in the 1970s on a series of architectural drawings that he called “constructions” and that represented studies of architectural language, reflections and, indeed, metaphors, of atmospheres and environments; it was a sort of introspective analysis of the meaning of building (Radice, 1993, p. 182). His reflections on this took the form not only of drawings, but also of actual installations on the landscape, which he himself constructed and subsequently photographed. With gentleness and caution, he intervened in the landscape;

initially he used small, fragile elements, such as string and bits of wood, leaves, branches, stones, straw, sand, strips of fabric to “build” temporary structures within the landscape, which metaphorically depicted architecture and the architect's craft. With time, always maintaining the value of temporariness, he began to build more complex structures, using more complex objects, which he rented or built on purpose.

For each of these constructions - mostly made in Spain, but also in Italy - Sottsass took a photograph and thought up a title. Subsequently, the photographs were divided into three groups: Design for Human Destinies, Design for Human Rights and Design for Animal Needs. *Metaphors* has some affinities with the work of the American artist and photographer John Divola (1949-), who in the same years produced his famous works *Vandalism Series*, between 1973 and 1975, *LAX NAZ (Noise Abatement Zone)* of 1975 and *Zuma* of 1977 (figure 2). With his projects, both in colour and black and white, Divola specifically questions the issues of the abandoned landscape and, like Sottsass, but in different ways, takes possession of the space he is in and interacts with it, through the creation of sculptures and the use of spray cans, with which he alters the settings of the dilapidated properties he photographs. In the black-and-white photographs of the *Vandalism series* (figure 3), one can observe the intervention of the photographer artist, who paints a series of abstract signs, similar to constellations and graffiti, on the walls of abandoned and dilapidated houses. Through these installations, which in Sottsass's case were temporary and in Divola's case permanent, the documentary approach is combined with performance to question the reciprocity of the relationship between man and space. The momentary, though not absolute, abandonment of colour in Sottsass may have been determined not only by a temporary departure from design and the end of his radical moment, but also by the influence of the photographers of the ‘New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape’, who, with the exception of Stephen Shore's colour survey, always preferred the monochrome.

His black-and-white photographic research continues and extends into the following decades, as is evident from a publication he dedicated to the contemporary landscape [18].

4. Color in Sottsass's projects

The change of the landscape in the post-war decades did not only concern urban and suburban space, but also home and domestic space. Sottsass's reflections on the design of living objects and interiors were strongly determined by the American experience. When he returned to Italy in the late 1950s, he found a country



Fig. 2 Zuma Series (folder one) / c Z27F06 John Divola 1977); Courtesy by John Divola.

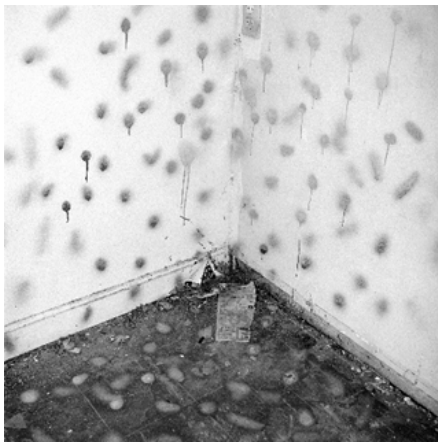


Fig. 3 Vandalism Series (folder one) / E John Divola 1973-75); Courtesy by John Divola.

desperate for a breakthrough and realised the need to create something new and modern (Balena Arista, 2016, p. 142). His contact with America allowed him to forcefully confirm his idea that objects should be designed and conceived to respond to the function “of existing together with men” and be “instruments to curb the consumption of existence, loneliness and despair” (Radice, 1993, pp. 36; 53). He had understood, from the experience of American modernism, “that production was a phenomenon not only of practice but of culture and that design had to take production into account and no longer be artistic” (p. 36). His 1947 and 1949 writings on the meaning and beauty of the standard, which preceded the American trip, already anticipated this idea [19]. Sottsass made the ideas he supported concrete through a decisive use of colour. He himself stated: “from the very beginning I had the obsession of introducing colour into the furniture, so into the environment, because it seemed to me that colour would bring a greater sensorial reading into the environment itself” (Balena Arista, 2016, p. 142). The strong centrality of colour in design was manifested – first

and foremost – through the collaboration with Poltronova that gave rise to radical productions, such as the famous *Ultrafragola* mirror that embodied the Italian echo of American pop culture, and then with the post-radical experiences of Alchimia and Memphis (figures 4-5). For these objects, Sottsass used colors, shapes, and materials—along with symbols and references drawn from Eastern cultures—that he had never previously experimented with in the domestic environment (D’Ambrosio, 1997, p. 8). But colour is present and alternates with the use of monochrome in all his production: from furnishing objects to ceramics [20]. In the field of architecture, Sottsass's idea on colour was inspired by certain artists, such as the sculptor Antoine Pevsner, who believed that colour – an expressive material capable of generating emotion – was complementary to the structure, not to be considered a supplement or decoration, but an essential and determining element of architecture itself [21].

Issue of the magazine *Terrazzo*, published in the spring of 1990, opens with a text entitled *Colors*, the result of research by Viola Marquez and Gail Wittwer, which constitutes a collection of quotations on the theme of colour from different works - from scientific to literary, from novels to poems and even Greek tragedies [22]. Starting with a scientific definition of colour from Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, the text is an important reflection on the different aspects of colour – scientific, psychological, philosophical and cultural – and the influence it has on human life. Presumably, all these works were scientific and cultural references shared by Sottsass, so much so that he chose to include them in the magazine, once again testifying to the value he attributed to the question of colour and excellently representing his approach to design, always based on curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. Sottsass always posed numerous questions about the world and purpose of architecture and design, always finding the answer in the need to offer man the possibility of living well in relation to things and in space.

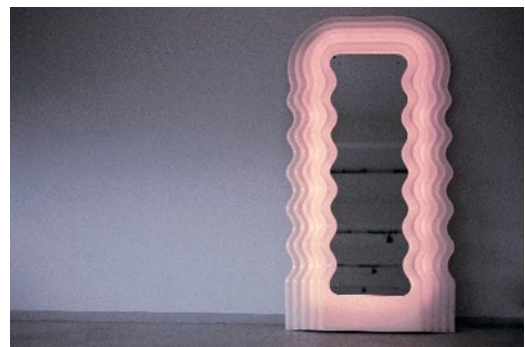


Fig. 4 Ettore Sottsass, *Ultrafragola mirror*, Poltronova, photograph by Tortoioli. Courtesy by Archivio Centro Studi Poltronova

Colour occupied a significant space in the achievement of this aim, as catharsis, a mirror, a means through which to recognise oneself and feel embraced, in an intimate dimension, the one he always advocated.



Fig. 5 Ettore Sottsass, *Mobili Grigi*, photograph by E.Sottsass and A.Fioravanti. Courtesy by Archivio Centro Studi Poltronova

5. Conclusion

'I often photographed things that I saw from the windows of my studio in the Beaux Arts Building on Fortieth Street [...] I also took my camera around New York and tried to express the significance of the skyscrapers and the bridges.' These are the words of Edward Weston accompanying a series of photographs taken between 1925 and 1938 in New York, Connecticut and Mexico [23]. Reading the writings of authors from the history of photography, one often seems to hear echoing the thoughts that Sottsass himself expressed [24]. The gesture of looking at and photographing the world through the window is also reminiscent of his well-known photographic project *Foto dal finestrino* [25]. Photography was, for Sottsass, a tool through which he could explore reality along with its colors, and throughout his life, he dedicated himself – like other authors – to the search for the exotic, photographing people in the countries he visited and their cultures, which, in cases such as India and Mexico, are closely tied to a distinctive chromatic richness. Yet, upon closer examination, his stance on the use of color was never entirely unambiguous.

In both photography and design, color was perhaps the element that most consistently prompted deep reflection for Sottsass. Its use was always the result of conscious choices, often connected to the creation of spaces and furnishings designed to positively influence everyday human experience [26]. A "man entirely devoted to the pursuit of a culture of sensuality," [27] Sottsass was fully aware of the power of color – its ability to affect the temperature and atmosphere of a domestic space and, as

a result, to influence the spirit, while also reflecting the personality of the person inhabiting the home [28].

Despite his varied uses of color – which, in some cases, also included the deliberate choice of neutral tones or black, not only in his designs but also in photography through the use of black-and-white film – color always remained a fundamental element, one that he felt compelled to constantly investigate.

In a sense, one could say that color defined Sottsass's design poetics, acting as the connective thread across all his experiences in design, architecture, and photography. Far from being a decorative element, color became for Sottsass a natural impulse – an essential starting point from which to give life to his projects.

6. Conflict of interest declaration

The author declares that nothing affected their objectivity or independence and original work. Therefore, no conflict of interest exists.

7. Funding source declaration

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8. Short biography of the author

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Notes

[1] New Color Photography is an American movement that emerged in the late 1960s, when the new photographic medium reached its maturity and full recognition. Between 1981 and 1983, an exhibition titled *The New Color* was held, featuring 200 works and touring internationally through museums. Sally Eaclaire is the author of the critical text *The New Color Photography*, in which she dedicates extensive space not only to the articulation of the visual and conceptual standards that characterize the movement but also to key photographs by major photographers who contributed to the development of this new medium. (Eaclaire, S. (1981). *The new color photography*. New York: Abbeville press).

[2] New Topographics is a photographic movement that emerged in the second half of the 1970s, giving rise to the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. The photographers featured in the exhibition left an indelible mark on contemporary landscape

photography, offering a radically different view of the American landscape – one that was cooler and more detached, with a minimalistic approach to 'style'. (Baltz, L. (2024). *Scritti*. Lissone (MB): Johan & Levi Editore. Introduction by Matthew S. Witkowsky; Italian edition edited by Antonello Frongia; translation by Emilia Sala, pp. 50–51).

[3] United by a dual interest in music, chemistry, and photographic reproduction techniques, from the late teens they worked together to develop a color film. Only in the 1930s did they have the opportunity to develop their innovation, working at the Kodak Research Laboratories in Rochester, New York. On April 15, 1935, Kodachrome film was announced as the first subtractive color film, which proved to be a commercially successful technology and of fundamental importance for the development of color photography.

[4] Regarding Evans' opinion and attitude towards colour photography there are some ambiguities, as although he often stated that he considered colour photography vulgar, at the same time he experimented with the new medium and encouraged its use as early as 1945, when he first tried colour photography himself for *Fortune* magazine. Evans, W. & Baier, L. K. (1977). *Walker Evans at Fortune, 1945-1965: Wellesley College Museum, Wellesley, Massachusetts 16 November 1977-23 January, 1978*. Wellesley, Mass.: The Museum, 1977, p. 20.

[5] Steichen, E. (1963). New York, Connecticut, and Mexico. In Steichen, E. (1963). *A life in photography*. New York: Doubleday & Company.

[6] Between the 1940s and 1950s, Outerbridge documented Mexican and Californian culture through colour photography, observing their curious intermingling. Considered too commercial in the 1960s and 1970s, these photographs were recently brought together in an exhibition entitled "Paul Outerbridge: New Colour Photographs from Mexico and California, 1948-1955", curated by William Ewing and Phillip Prodger. <https://www.vbmuseum.org/paul-outerbridge-new-color-photographs-from-mexico-and-california/>.

[7] The photograph of a refrigerator taken by Sottsass in 1977 in California is very reminiscent of the photographs of refrigerators taken by Stephen Shore during his travels and published in "American surfaces". They can be found in the following publications: Bonito Oliva, A. (a cura di). (2004). *Sottsass: Napoli, Museo di Capodimonte*. Napoli: Electa Napoli, print 2004 Catalogue of the exhibition held in Naples in 2004 On the title page AA, *Annali delle arti, Regione Campania*, p. 174 e in Shore, S. (1999). *Stephen Shore: American surfaces 1972*. Munchen: Schirmer Mosel, pp. 94 e 102.

[8] The Valentine typewriter – which received the Compasso d'Oro award in 1970 – is emblematic of the collaboration between Ettore Sottsass and Olivetti. What made it groundbreaking was the use of red in place of the traditional grey.

[9] Within the Bauhaus school and thanks to the pedagogical reflection of the Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, photography became one of the fundamental teachings and a tool through which to narrate objects. László Moholy-Nagy's theories have influenced several generations of designers. He advocated the creative and abstract power of photography, which, through its recording methods, use of light and visual language, proves to be a privileged tool in learning and enriching design (Cancellieri, 2021, pp- 51-53). Recurring elements emerge from the photographs produced by the Bauhaus: black and white, strong use of "chiaroscuro", unconventional angles, reflective surfaces; with regard to the photographs of Bauhaus objects, historian Robin Schuldenfrei emphasises their belonging to modernism (Challine, 2021, p. 7). Cancellieri, A. (2021). *Expérimenter dans la rue*. Chicago photographié par les élèves et les professeurs de l'Institute of Design (19461969). *Transbordeur Photographie histoire société*, 5, 50-61. <https://doi.org/10.4000/12gz4>; Challine, E. (2021). Introduction. *Photographie et design, rencontres de deux arts industriels*. *Transbordeur Photographie histoire société*, 5, 6-17. <https://doi.org/10.4000/12gw6>

[10] The two photographs, in black and white and colour, taken by Meyerowitz in 1967 and depicting two bridesmaids at the New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, call to mind Sottsass's two photographs of two young women taken in 1978 in Tamil Nadu, India published in Sottsass, E. (2017). *Ettore Sottsass: There is a planet: Texts and photographs*. Milano: Electa: Triennale design museum, pp. 100-101. In both Meyerowitz's portraits and Sottsass's two female subjects, colour is an essential and distinctive element, as the women wear very colourful clothes. Unlike Meyerowitz, Sottsass has no doubts about the use of colour film, despite the fact that the images were taken a few years after his *Metaphors* project, with which he had abandoned colour.

[11] "I remember the ultramarine blue of the gentians, the yellow of the buttercups and wasps, the orange of the lilies, the blue of the bellflowers, the chocolate colour of the negritellas, the pink of the heathers, the purple black of the blackberries, the brown of the porcini mushrooms, the egg-yellow of the chanterelles, the special red of the poisonous mushrooms and all the other colours... [...] Everything had its colour, it was distinguished by its colour, everything was what it was with its colour attached. For me at that time there was no colour that was "detached" from any object or animal or plant, there was no "detached" colour, abstract colour in my catalogue of perceptions, discoveries, notions: it did not exist then, and as far as I am concerned, if I really have to say the truth, the colour "detached" from an event, be it natural or even artificial, does not exist now either. The "detached" colour, the classified colour, the Pantone, as the detached colour is now called, the "scientific" colour, does not exist for me now either. [...] Colour was the very space where I seemed to sink and disappear, embracing the whole world, which was nothing but a sweet dustbowl of colours" (Sottsass, I colori, 1992, in Carboni & Radice, 2002a, pp. 432-436).

[12] "The most brutal impression one gets when touring America this year (which is 1966) is that of the immense quantity of products filling in overlapping layers the department stores, the shopping malls, the shops, the streets, the restaurants, the stations, everything; an immense wealth without luxury, an overflowing opulence without pomp; stacks and stacks and stacks of boxes and boxes, bottles and bottles, pieces of paper and writing and signs and colours; millions of products of all kinds all packed, all packaged and all ready to be consumed, to be bought, put in a trolley of chrome wires, paid for in front of a till with a bell, thrown into a huge car full of children, taken home, opened and peeled and unpacked, all the papers, packets, bottles, bottles, boxes of all kinds thrown out in the garbage can, taken in the morning, emptied into the lorry, thrown who knows where, mixed, pulverised, shredded, burnt, who knows what happens" (Sottsass, "Viaggio a Occidente. Nr. 1: che cosa fanno li dentro? 1966" in Carboni & Radice, 2002a, pp. 156-161).

[13] In 1976, MoMA mounted an exhibition with William Eggleston's photographs and that was considered one of the turning points in the legitimisation of colour photography. In 2010, on the occasion of an exhibition at the MEP in Paris, the curator of the Parisian museum, Jean-Luc Monterosso, saw the pairs of Meyerowitz's black-and-white and colour photographs that he had long kept aside and realised that Meyerowitz had anticipated the issue of colour as early as the 1960s. The cause of this delayed recognition was a missed opportunity for Meyerowitz. In 1966, John Szarkowski was collecting material for the exhibition *New Documents*, which was supposed to feature not only Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander, but also Joel Meyerowitz. However, he, who was about to leave for Europe and could not financially afford the travel expenses to return to America, decided not to participate. Perhaps if he had accepted, *New Documents* would today also be considered a turning point in the history of colour photography (Meyerowitz & Shore, 2024, pp. 63-65).

[14] Sottsass's photograph "Tahiti, French Polynesia, 1978" published in Sottsass, E. (2017). *Ettore Sottsass: There is a planet: Texts and photographs*. Milano: Electa: Triennale design museum, pp. 100-101, strongly recalls, in terms of its colours, geometries and atmosphere, William Eggleston's famous 1970s photograph of his distant and elderly

relative and friend Devoe sitting on a sofa in the corner of his backyard in Jackson. The colour and pattern of the sofa in Eggleston's photograph visually recall those of the curtain in Sottsass's photograph; the shape of the fence behind the sofa hints at the white and fuchsia chequered paving grid in Sottsass's photograph. Finally, the natural atmosphere and the green of the plants define a strong visual similarity.

[15] The Italian radical design movement developed between 1966 and 1973-74. Its official beginning coincides with the exhibition *Superarchitettura* by the Florentine groups Archizoom and Superstudio, which opened in December 1966. In the period of student protests and strong political activism, the values of modernism were questioned in order to make room in the design for a social and critical dimension. Contributing to the development of the radical movement were the exhibitions on British and American Pop Art and Arte Povera and the research of the youth counterculture. This resulted in projects that, taking pop art as a creative model, aimed to denounce the mechanisms of the mass market and industrial logic, to stimulate reflection on the social issues, desires and complex needs that were emerging in the new consumer society. Pettena, G. (ed.). (2004). *Radical design*. Florence: M&M. Catalogue of an exhibition held in San Giovanni Valdarno in 2004, pp. 15-21.

[16] "There is a Planet" (2017), which opens with a black-and-white photograph taken in Spain between 1973 and 1974 and divided along the diagonal between the sky and the mountain, features seven photographs from that particular period. Taken between 1973 and 1975, all of the images, with the exception of one depicting a young girl playing in Barcelona, depict the territory in black and white: rocks, ravines, cliffs and a small, simple stone building.

[17] The exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape", held in 1975, curated by William Jenkins and co-organised by the Center for Creative Photography, the University of Arizona and the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, brought together photographs by ten photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel. These images reflect the relationship created between human beings and the environment, visible in what man himself has built: motels, petrol stations, houses, industrial structures, trailer parks and car parks.

[18] Sottsass, E. (1995). *Paesaggio contemporaneo: 40 foto di Ettore Sottsass*. Roma: Stampa Alternativa.

[19] Sottsass believed that mass – and therefore standardised – production was necessary, because it allowed democratic participation and accessibility; he believed it was urgent, at the same time, to remove objects from the ruthless logic of consumerism that was rampant, in order to give them a deeper meaning capable of helping people to perceive their existence more intensely. Objects were to have not only an ergonomic and utilitarian function, nor even a decorative one, but a therapeutic one (Radice, 1993, p. 50). Ettore Sottsass's writings on the standard have been published in: Sottsass, E. (2002). *Significato dello standard, 1949*. in Carboni, M. & Radice, B. (eds.). (2002). *Ettore Sottsass: Scritti, 1946-2001*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza. pp. 48-51; Sottsass, E. (2017). *Standard, May 1947*. in Codignola, M. (ed.). (2017). *Ettore Sottsass: Per qualcuno può essere lo spazio*. Milano: Piccola Biblioteca Adelphi. pp. 124-127; Sottsass, E. (2017). *Bellezza dello Standard, February 1949*. in Codignola, M. (ed.). (2017). *Ettore Sottsass: Per qualcuno può essere lo spazio*. Milano: Piccola Biblioteca Adelphi. pp. 128-132).

[20] Sottsass's production related to ceramics is significant for understanding that his use of colour is never accidental but always due to precise motivations. In the case of the lava ceramics (1957) or the ceramics of darkness (1963), the use of black is in both cases linked to reasons (Ferrari, F. (1996). *Ettore Sottsass: Tutta la ceramica*. Torino: U. Allemandi). In the first case, to narrate both through the rough material and through colour, the lava stone; in the second case, the use of black

and the other colours used, is linked to the period of hospitalisation (Sottsass, *Le ceramiche delle tenebre*, 1963, in Carboni, & Radice, 2002, pp. 127-132).

[21] To emphasize the equal importance of the two elements discussed in his 1954 writing "Struttura e colore" Sottsass recalls the case of the Parthenon, which "was not a set of white volumes in the sun against the blue of the Mediterranean, but was colorful, just as all Greek architecture was colorful." (Sottsass, *Struttura e colore*, 1954, in Carboni, & Radice, 2002, p. 84).

[22] The magazine *Terrazzo*, consisting of only thirteen issues, the first of which was published in 1988, was born from the desire of Ettore Sottsass and Barbara Radice - together with their collaborators, Santi Caleca, Christoph Radl and Anna Wagner - to give form, through the refinement and elegance of paper, to the ideas and visions they shared, on the themes of architecture, the city and design, analysed through different disciplines, such as drawing and photography, with a focus on the contemporary and an eye on the international scene. Leafing through the pages of *Terrazzo* is like embarking on a kind of journey, an exploration of places and characters that represent anthropological and cultural traces. The essay *Colors* brings together quotations on colour from important works. Some scientific, such as "The basic law of colour theory" by Harold Keuppens, published in 1982 which describes the nature of colour, the workings of the human eye and the phenomena of light and colour perception; others related to the study of art: from the oldest such as Leonardo da Vinci's "The Treatise on Painting" to the most recent such as "Gauguin. Noa Noa's diary and other adventures". It includes quotations from literary works, from different countries and cultures, such as "The Pillow Book" by the Japanese writer and poet Sei Shonagon, dating back to around the year 1000; we also find philosophical works such as Voltaire's "Lettres philosophiques", Lucretius' Latin poem "De rerum natura", Aeschylus' tragedy "Agamémnon", and even passages from the Bible (Numbers 15, 37-39).

[23] Reference is made to the text Steichen, E. (1963). *New York, Connecticut, and Mexico*. In Steichen, E. (1963). *A life in photography*. New York: Doubleday & Company. The paper also contains the author's reflections on colour photography.

[24] "I also took photos of skyscrapers here and there, in places where they say civilization is at its peak, and I don't know why it occurred to me that those who live in skyscrapers never sing". (Grattacieli, in Sottsass, E. (2002a). *Fotografie, 1995*. in Carboni, M. & Radice, B. (a cura di). (2002a). *Ettore Sottsass: Scritti, 1946-2001*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza, p. 474-475.

[25] Sottsass, E. (2009). *Foto dal finestrino*. Milano: Adelphi. Barbara Radice (1993, p. 23), his companion and second wife, recounted that, on an aeroplane, Ettore 'loved to sit by the window'. Perhaps it is from this desire to observe the world that the title 'Foto dal finestrino' (Photos from the window) of one of Domus's columns, conceived by Stefano Boeri between 2003 and 2006, derives. In 2009 it took the form of a small booklet published by Adelphi that brings together 26 photographs taken by Sottsass while he was travelling the world with his Leica M6. Boeri, editor of Domus at the time, aware of Ettore's extraordinary ability to combine words and images, asked him to write an editorial for each issue of the magazine that represented his vision of the world; so he began sending the editorial staff photographs, accompanied by his thoughts, travel memoirs and reflections on architecture, town planning and design, as if they were postcards, which he called 'Foto dal finestrino'. In 2022, from 23 March to 22 May, the project also took the form of an exhibition at the Milan Triennale. The exhibition *Ettore Sottsass. Foto dal finestrino* (Photos from the window), conceived in collaboration with Studio Sottsass and designed by Christoph Radl, exactly reproduced the 26 colour and black and white shots associated with the respective texts that Sottsass published in Domus, constituting a precious atlas of correspondences between places, emotions and thoughts.

[26] In the field of psychology, the influence of color on human moods and emotions has been widely explored. Although there are different schools of thought, color is commonly associated with affects – a psychoanalytic term referring to the emotional sphere, including desires, impulses, and passions. Both Freudian psychoanalysts and Jungian analytical psychologists place great importance on color in the manifestations of the unconscious, such as dreams and fantasies. (Birren, F. (1982). *Colore*. Milano: Idealibri, p. 44).

[27] D'Ambrosio, G. (1997). *Ettore Sottsass jr.: Nomade Shiva pop*. Torino: Testo & immagine, p. 5.

[28] As when, in 1968, Sottsass designed the apartment for Arnaldo Pomodoro, who wanted a space that would not feel like a real home filled with memories, but rather an empty environment created solely for being – a place without all the colors that Sottsass usually used “to give the idea that life is something important and fun, to be approached with gentleness, serenity, and humor.” Sottsass, E. (April 1968). *La casa metafisica di Arnaldo Pomodoro*. Vogue Italia, 202, 160–163.

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