

## Simultaneous Meanings

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In the catalogue relating to the current London Tate Modern exhibition of Sonia Delaunay's work, the term 'Simultanism' occurs at least 20 times, but with no clear definition. I offer some possibilities, while inviting other suggestions. Simultanism is introduced (p. 46) as 'a label for the Delaunays' utopian aesthetic' (oddly implying something impractical), but otherwise it's assumed we know what it means. Paintings from 1912 are the earliest to bear the title 'contrastes simultanés'; and 'couleurs simultanées' occurs in 1913 as a subtitle in Sonia's colour composition that accompanies Blaise Cendrars' poem, 'La Prose du Transsibérien'. 'Composition simultanée' is still being applied in 1942, the year after Robert Delaunay's death. We know that their joint adoption of such terms came from 'De la Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs', the title of Michel-Eugène Chevreul's hefty publication of 1839. Chevreul used it to distinguish between colour modifications induced at the same time either side of a colour boundary (to be seen simultaneously) versus 'contraste successif', meaning colour changes perceived over a period of time, a term he preferred to Johannes Purkinje's 'Nachbild', or 'afterimage' in English. Before then, such illusions were called 'couleurs accidentelles' (as by Louis Leclerc in 1743). A slight problem here is that Sonia did not study Chevreul and states bluntly, in an interview with Arthur Cohen (1970), 'No, I have nothing to do with Chevreul; only Robert did.' Even so, an initial definition of Simultanism could be, 'the art of placing colours side by side, to be seen simultaneously.' Sonia specifically wanted to intensify colour, and colour contrasts placed edge to edge generally do this, as also can enclosing single colours within black contours. Whereas Robert passed through a period of Divisionism (derived from Seurat), Sonia did not. She was more directly influenced by the Fauves – her first husband, Wilhelm Uhde, owning a dozen colourful Braques in 1909. As director of the Gobelins tapestry works, Chevreul's methodical attempt to categorise optical illusions taught artists that colours had inherent structures of their own, bearing in mind that all colours (like all opinions) are perceptions generated within the brain and projected into an 'external' world. As a chemist, however, he didn't fully understand the physics involved, and it was left to James Clerk Maxwell and Hermann Grassman in the 1850s to deduce true basic principles. A second meaning of the Delaunays' term 'simultanéisme' could refer to the simultaneous creation of colour and form. A prime characteristic that pervades their work is the spontaneity with which their paintings were made. As each loaded brush leaves its trail of paint on the canvas, colour and shape are created simultaneously, in a manner that superseded the established practice of drawing first and then colouring in. We know from his writings (1924) that Robert rejected geometry as something predetermined, and Sonia similarly dismissed it (1925) as 'new decoration applied to ancient foundations'. They both believed that colour and form should be improvised simultaneously, guided either by small sketches or printed images, or as she put it (1967), 'to have a constructive basis' that 'eliminates chance, indecision, and mere facility'. Their paintings were made using a spectral palette of unmixed hues (first proposed by Hogarth in 1753) and without further modification by over-painting. Both artists also moved easily between realism and abstraction, so that a third meaning of Simultanism could refer to an image that is both 'real' and 'abstract' at the same time. Colour is abstracted as soon as one imagines it in isolation, as did Kandinsky, but for the Delaunays colour is always comparative, as it is in nature. Sonia was not therefore an advocate of abstraction as such, and commented in 1925 of Gleizes, Robert Delaunay and Léger that 'They were not stopped short by games of abstract forms.' Abstraction was a consequence of what they did, not a goal. A fourth definition could also mean the simultaneous amalgamation of different points of view that became a central feature of early Cubism. Though she observed and admired its adherents, she nevertheless admitted, in 1967, that 'I did not participate in it'. A fifth definition could refer to those paintings by the Delaunays in which a number of events appear to be occurring at the same time, such as entwined dancers in Sonia's 'La Bal Bullier' (1913), or Robert's 'L'équipe de Cardiff' (1913), where a Ferris wheel, rugby players and biplane simultaneously share the same space. Though both paintings have great originality, the depiction of concurrent events could be seen in countless other paintings that preceded them. In 1921 after six year's exile in Spain and Portugal, the Delaunays returned to Paris. By selling furniture and paintings they managed to re-establish themselves, and in 1923 Sonia submitted her first 50 textile designs to a Lyons manufacturer. In 1924 she opened her 'atelier simultané' and registered 'Simultané' as a name for her new fashion house, which flourished until the Wall Street Crash. Simultanism might now be considered a multipurpose trademark, but a further meaning could also refer to Sonia's innovations as a fashion designer. The Tate catalogue (p. 158) refers to Robert's patent for a moving display-device, but he seems also to have patented a 'tissu-patron', a kind of stencil by which, according to Sonia (1926), 'The cut of the dress is conceived by its creator simultaneously with its decoration. Afterwards, the cut and the decoration appropriate to the form is printed on the same fabric. The result is the first collaboration between the creator of the model and the creator of the fabric.'

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