

# **COLOR-BLIND** by Ben Russell

**30', 16mm, 5.1, 2019**

Produced by A Perte de Vue, in coproduction with CaSkFilms,  
La Bête, TVR, Tébéo and Tébésud. With the support of Région Bretagne, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg,  
Procirep-Angoa and the participation of CNC.



Locarno Film Festival  
Official selection

# SYNOPSIS

A deliriously synaesthetic 16mm portrait made between French Polynesia and Brittany, COLOR-BLIND recruits the restless ghost of Paul Gauguin as an uneasy spirit guide in excavating the colonial legacy of a decidedly syncretic post-post-colonial present. Featuring im/material guest appearances by: white-tipped reef sharks, Aldous Huxley's Island, Marquesan techno, authorized Gauguin reproductions, Bretagne dance competitions, an illegal kava ceremony, the beach from the 4th season of Survivor, the long decay of French nuclear testing in Polynesia (1960-1996), and so much more.

Featuring : Freddy "Feeling Fingers" Fournier / Marc Kucharz / Yvonne Moke / Kokauani Mahuaani / Ludovic Puhetini / The Kimitete Kids / Angéline Mati / Pierrot Kewahana / Michael Koch / Michel Habert.  
Opening Text Adapted From "A letter to Mette Gauguin from Paul Gauguin, 8 Déc. 1892".  
Filmed in Polynesia and Bretagne, France.



# COLOR IS A FACT

I am a non fiction filmmaker and so I decided to make a film in which color is the main character, the subject that catches everything else in its net. This film has been shot between the Marquesan Islands and Bretagne, both territories under the rule of France, albeit under quite radically different circumstances.

The first subject I approach as a medium for my larger subject of color takes the form of a man visiting his family in the village of Vaitahu on the island of Tahuata. I like the sound of his voice, I like the clothes he wears, and I've been reading about the Polynesian « third gender » and suspect that he might be a *mahu* —and so I ask him to wear a bright shirt, to sit in a plastic chair with the palm-filtered light on his face, to look at a series of fabrics in solid colors, to name in Marquesan the first object that comes to mind. I balance my Aaton S16mm camera on a picnic table, my sound recordist Erwan claps the slate, I begin rolling.

YELLOW = Sun  
LIGHT BLUE = Cloth  
DARK BLUE = Ocean  
LIGHT GREEN = Wood  
WHITE = Cloth  
RED = Money  
DARK GREEN = Tree trunk  
ORANGE = Table  
GREY = Cloth  
PURPLE = Ocean  
PINK = Cloth  
BLACK = Sky

LIGHT BLUE/WHITE/GREY/PINK all have the same word associated with them.  
At the end of the take, he says « I like clothes and these colors remind me of clothes. »

I do the same exercise again, asking him to name objects in French. When use are finished, I pay him 3000 XPF for the thirty minutes we spent filming what amounts to a three-minute shot. Erwan turns his recorder on and I ask the man to name the colors in order, without filming. He looks at Erwan with uncertainty, stumbling over the color swatch names in both French and Marquesan. With some degree of embarrassment, he tells us that he is daltonien. Color-blind.

Color is a fact of perception.

Fittingly, I was brought here via a painting of orange plantains made by the French painter Paul Gauguin that hangs in the Musée d'Orsay — I stepped out of a wet Parisian winter many years ago and into a room that glowed orange-red. The light of an equatorial sun radiated outwards from a series of static paintings. I don't remember if the ceiling lights were on (they must have been), but I remember thinking/

feeling: *here is a feeling and here I am in it.* I stayed in that room forever, trying to pull all the red hues into my sun-starved skin until slowly moving into the room adjacent, the one with a collection of paintings made by Gauguin under the blue-grey sky of Pont-Aven. It was there that I felt my emotions shift and I understood the transition from orange and blue-grey or warm to cold as a movement from the Pacific to the Atlantic, from Polynesia to Bretagne, from France (!) to France. I marveled at the color of those bananas, I began to form a theory of paint and light and reflection in a moment that coincided with the invention of cinema, the preceded the color photographic image. I imagined Gauguin sailing from Pont-Aven to Hiva Oa and then back to Pont-Aven with a makeshift Polynesian color wheel in his hand, with the feeling of the orange sun in his mind, trying desperately to hold onto the feeling of a color of a place as the temperature of the sky slowly turns from warm to cool. I left the museum and went back into the French winter, carrying the color in my hands.

Color is a fact of geography.

Color is the ostensible subject of this film and filmmaking, along with color, becomes a reason to travel from Los Angeles to the Marquesas and again from Los Angeles to Bretagne. Color is a reason to but is surely not enough — it is a fact of perception but, taken at face value, it is also a modernist trap, an abstract expressionist scheme to think of form as a thing that just *is*, without us or maybe only just with us. My now-decades-old studies in post-colonial theory won't let me accept this, so after a long spell of preparation, application, research, I fly to Hiva Oa in a gambit to understand color not just as a fact of perception and geography but as a fact of culture. I am in over my head, always — and in a bid to avoid the naming of island or the histories involved in those names, I find myself searching for another way to understand culture and difference and travel and discovery and colonialism and utopia. Color is an entrance, it is a thought that is also a feeling.

I go to the market where, I am shocked to see a bunch of orange plantains in a blue container next to the onions. Orange plantains! What a disappointment! What I had imagined to be Gauguin's fiction, his perceptual projection of one color field onto another, turns out to be a fact. Surely his yellow dog, his mauve beach, his burgundy sand are not also facts? Erwan and I talk to the Marquesan docent at the Gauguin museum, a space where everything is a replica (even the self-portraits have been copied by another artist and re-presented in multiple), and she proposes that, while she sees traces of her grand-parent's faces in Gauguin's portraits, she thinks that his color palette is a fabrication. She says that is an effect brought on by morphine or alcohol or simply because he ran out of pigment. It was a long journey, after all. There is a red flowerer whose seeds are used to paint faces red. Ginger can be crushed to make yellow. I can't help but think again of the color-blind mahu who calls YELLOW = « sun » and BLACK = « sky » and RED = « Money » and WHITE = « cloth. »

I conduct another color test with a Frenchman in a yellow t-shirt who worked as a 20-year-old military mechanic from 1965-70 and witnessed seven (!) nuclear tests in the Pacific. The hairs on his arm still stand up at the thought of it. WHITE = « mushroom cloud. »

Color is a fact.

**Ben Russell**



## ARTISTIC AND TECHNICAL TEAM

**Director, image, sound, edit: Ben Russell**

Executive producer: Colette Quesson, A Perte de Vue  
Coproducer Germany: Guillaume Cailleau, CaSk Films  
Coproducers France: Fabrizio Polpettini, Pierre Malachin, La Bête

Sound Recording French Polynesia: Erwan Kerzanet  
Sound Recording Bretagne: Guillaume Cailleau

Sound Mix: Frédéric Hamelin  
Color Grading: Sergi Sanchez

Production Secretary France: Inès Lumeau  
Production Manager Germany: Jana Cisar  
Production Assistant France: Giulia Oliveri  
Production Intern: Maeva Ferdonnet  
Best Boy Bretagne: Jonathan Cailleau Slak  
Translation Marquesan: Michael Koch  
Translation German: Uli Ziemons



## BIOGRAPHY OF THE DIRECTOR

Ben Russell (b.1976, USA) is an artist, filmmaker and curator whose work lies at the intersection of ethnography and psychedelia. His films and installations are in direct conversation with the history of the documentary image, providing a time-based inquiry into trance phenomena and evoking the research of Jean Rouch, Maya Deren and Michael Snow, among others. Russell was an exhibiting artist at documenta 14 (2017) and his work has been presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, the Museum of Modern Art Chicago, the Venice Film Festival and the Berlinale, among others. He is a recipient of a 2008 Guggenheim Fellowship, a FIPRESCI International Critics Prize (IFFR 2009, Gijon 2017), and premiered his second and third feature films at the Locarno International Film Festival (2013, 2017). Curatorial projects include Magic Lantern (Providence, USA, 2005-2007), BEN RUSSELL (Chicago, USA, 2009-2011), and Hallucinations (Athens, Greece, 2017).

## FILMOGRAPHY

2019 Color-Blind (short)

2018 The Rare Event (co-directed w/Ben Rivers) (medium-length)

2017 Good Luck (feature)

2016 He Who Eats Children (short)

2015 YOLO (short)

2015 Greetings to the Ancestors (short)

2014 Atlantis (short)

2013 A Spell to Ward off the Darkness (co-directed w/Ben Rivers) (feature)

2013 Let Us Persevere In What We Have Resolved Before We Forget (short)

2012 Ponce de León (co-directed w/Jim Drain) (short)

2012 Austerity Measures (co-directed with Guillaume Cailleau) (short)

2010 River Rites (short)

2009 Let Each One Go Where He May (feature)

2009 Rock Me Amadeus by Falco via Kardinal by Otto Muehl (short)

2008 Tjúba Tén/ The Wet Season (co-directed w/ Brigid McCaffrey) (medium-length)

2007 Workers Leaving the Factory (Dubai) (short)

2005-2010 Trypps #1-7 (short series)

2005 The Red and the Blue Gods (short)

2005 The Twenty-One Lives of Billy the Kid (medium-length)

2004 Last Days (short)

2004 The Ataraxians (co-directed w/Sabine Gruffat) (short)

2004 Extra Terrestrial (co-directed w/Robert Rhyne) (short)

2002 the quarry (short)

2002 Terra Incognita (short)

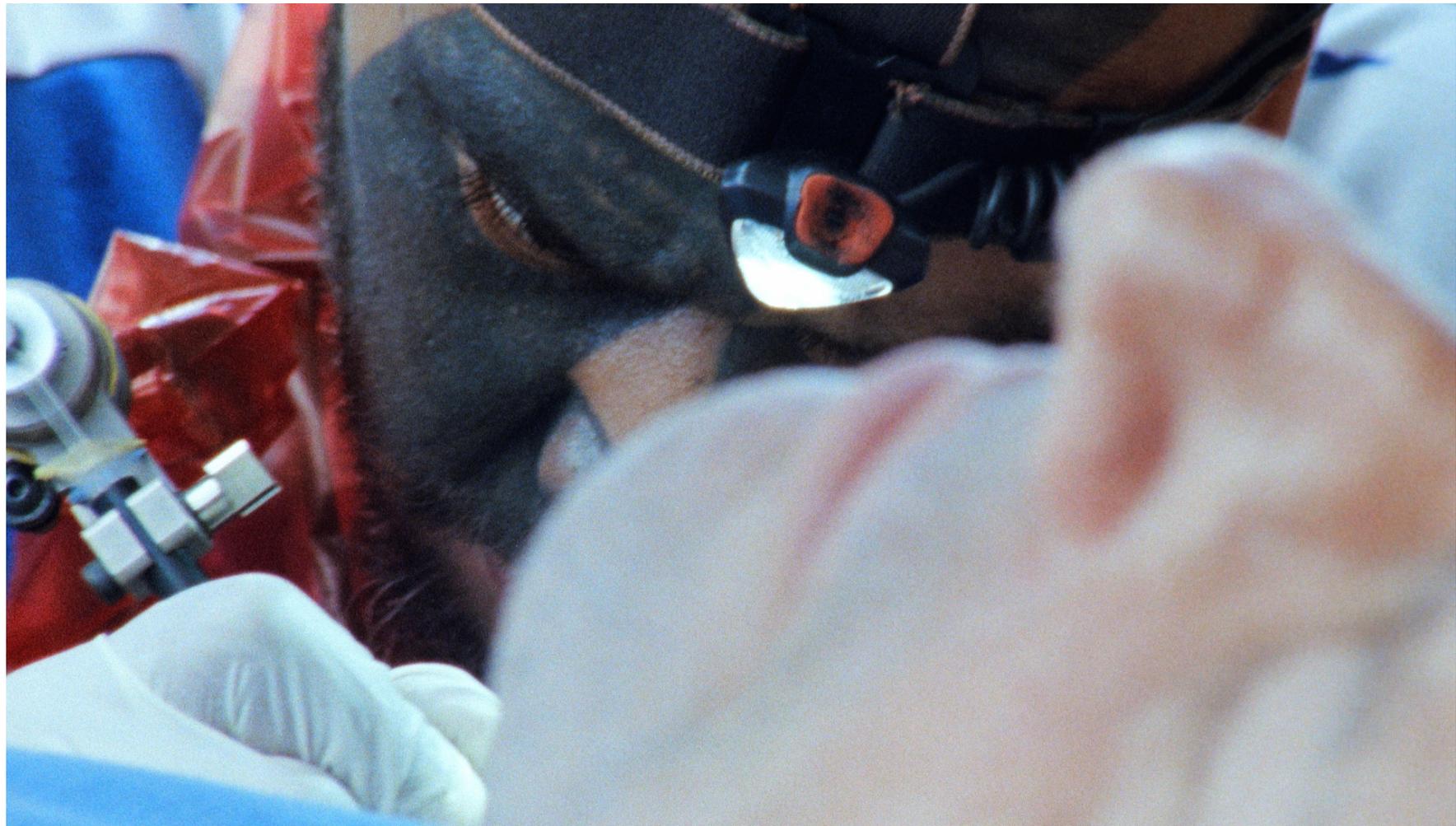
2002 The Breathers-In (short)

2000 Daumë (short)

**A Perte de Vue** is a company created in Brittany in 2011 by Colette Quesson. En 2018, Emmanuelle Jacq joins the company. We produce short and feature films, fiction, documentary and animation. Our vocation is to produce films that open the horizon, affirm a style, raise and stir the spectators. We are convinced of the benefits of inter-regional and international co-production, to work in complementarity and to ensure the feasibility of ambitious projects.

**CaSk Films** is a young company run by Guillaume Cailleau interested in production and co-production of high quality experimental fiction and creative documentary cinema for theatrical release. Guillaume Cailleau produced and directed a.o. the short film "Laborat"; which won the silver bear prize of the Jury at the 64th Berlinale. CaSk films co-produced the feature length "Good Luck" by Ben Russell which premiered at the 70th Locarno film festival and was displayed at the Documenta 14.

**La Bête** is a Paris-based production company created by Fabrizio Polpettini and Pierre Malachin in April 2014, and joined by Giulia Olivieri and Jasmin Basic in 2016, with the ambition of experimenting innovative forms in the field of documentary filmmaking through the production of films that blur the boundaries between cinema, television, new media and contemporary art.



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Film available in English, French, German  
DCP 2K, color, non encrypted, 24 fps, 1:1,85, son 5.1  
Apple Pro Res & H264 available.  
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