



THE RESPONSIBILITY  
THE RESPONSIBILITY  
THE RESPONSIBILITY



# **The Responsive Eye**

BY WILLIAM C. SEITZ

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE CITY ART MUSEUM OF ST. LOUIS, THE CONTEMPORARY ART COUNCIL  
OF THE SEATTLE ART MUSEUM, THE PASADENA ART MUSEUM AND THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although an appropriate title had not yet been determined, *The Responsive Eye* was announced in November, 1962. Besides showing recent works with a primarily visual emphasis, it was to have documented the development from Impressionism to what came later to be called "optical" art. So rapid was the subsequent proliferation of painting and construction employing perceptual effects however that demands of the present left no time nor gallery space for a retrospective view.

Albers and Vasarely are the best-known masters of perceptual abstraction, and they are represented with a few more works than other exhibitors. This attention does not imply, however, that they are the sole initiators of such a multiform and widely spread tendency. Many artists, from Balla, Malevich, and Mondrian to several of those here exhibited must also be seen as originators of some aspect of perceptualism. The various roots of "optical" and less pointedly ophthalmic painting and construction will be studied in detail in a book scheduled to appear after the exhibition. They branch in several directions, going beyond what we call "art" into graphic design, technology, psychology and other sciences.

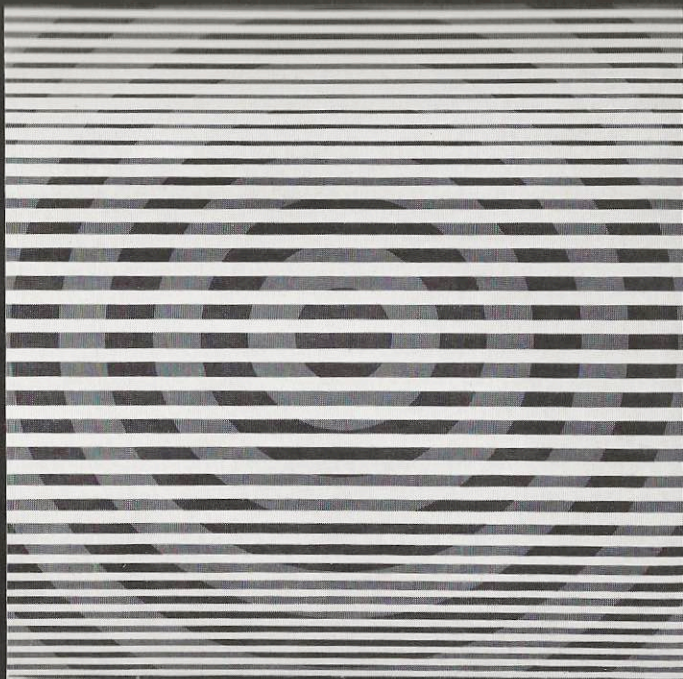
Important assistance in ferreting out artists of more than fifteen countries, many of them unknown in the United States when work on the exhibition was begun, was given to us by George Rickey, who opened the files and correspondence for his forthcoming book, *Heirs of Constructivism*, at a stage when less generous authors would have kept them under lock and key. Madame Denise Rene, whose gallery in Paris was a fortress of geometric art during its lean years, gave her cooperation and expert advice.

On behalf of the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art, the City Art Museum of St. Louis, the Contemporary Art Council of the Seattle Art Museum, the Pasadena Art Museum and The Baltimore Museum of Art, it is a pleasure to thank those who worked on the exhibition and the catalogue: Alicia Legg for curatorial assistance, Jennifer Licht for preparing the catalogue and biographical notes, Margaret A. Hargreaves, who handled a long and complex correspondence, and Helen M. Franc for suggesting the final title of the exhibition. The catalogue was designed by Joseph Bourke Del Valle of the Museum's Department of Publications, directed by Francoise Boas. Dorothy H. Dudley, Registrar, supervised the difficult problems of shipping and handling fragile works with her customary skill.

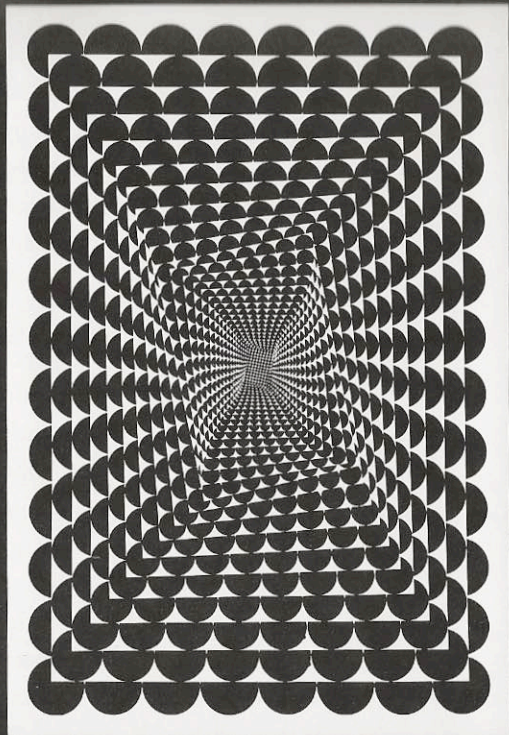
Gratitude is also extended to the artists, collectors, museums and dealers who have lent works; and, for special assistance, to Mrs. Bagley Wright, Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull and Mr. Arnold Glimcher.

WILLIAM C. SEITZ,  
*Curator of Painting and  
Sculpture Exhibitions*

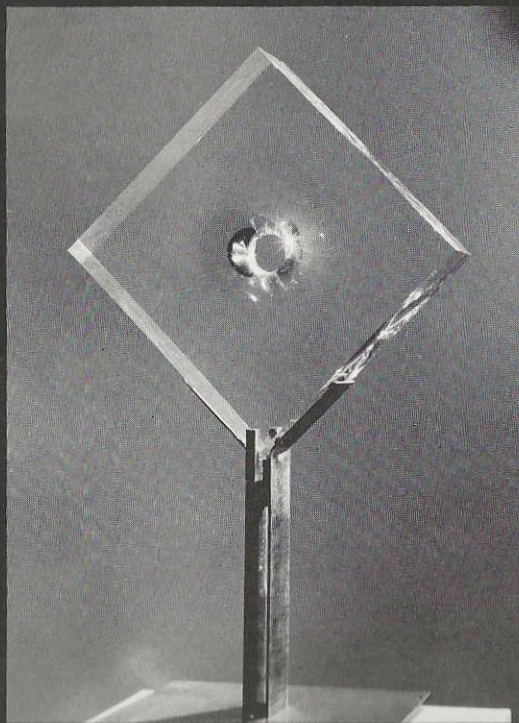




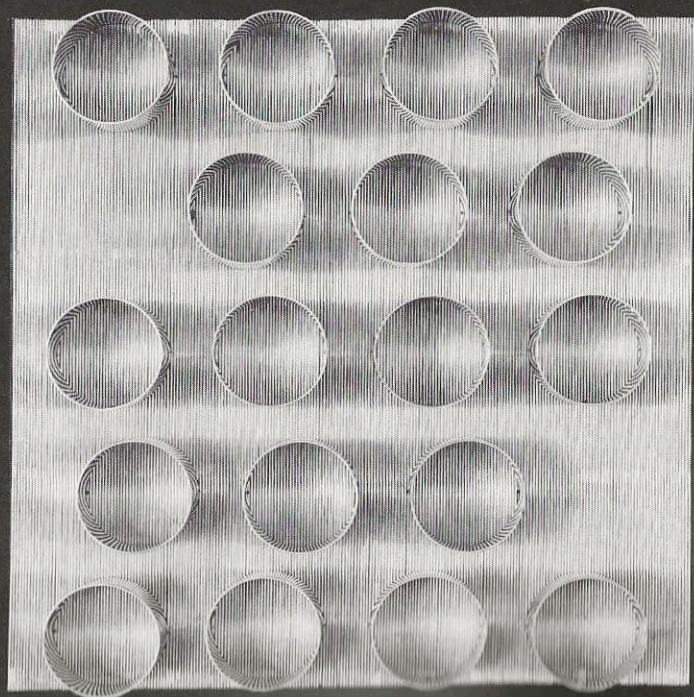
1



2



3



4



IN A FAMOUS ESSAY written in 1883 about an exhibition of impressionist painting, the poet Jules Laforgue asserted that “the eye of the impressionist is . . . the most advanced eye in human evolution.” Surely we do not believe (nor, one suspects, did Laforgue) that nineteenth-century eyes differ anatomically from those of previous epochs. The history of art provides voluminous evidence, however, that creative visualization has indeed changed from century to century and even from decade to decade. One must agree in general also with the contention that the perception of artists has not changed aimlessly but has evolved. The ideational images of pre-Greek representation gave way to the sculptural forms of antiquity and Renaissance Italy, after which visualization became progressively more optical, approaching a peak by the year of Laforgue’s article—just at the time impressionism was about to be systematized by Seurat, Signac, and other neoimpressionists.

The work of some of the artists represented in this exhibition has been labeled “optical” or “retinal.” Although these designations are in part correct, one must beware of assumptions as positivistic as those of the 1880s. On the basis of expanded knowledge, our idea of the “eye” must be more embracing. We know how hard it is to distinguish between seeing, thinking, feeling, and remembering. We know also that our knowledge of the billions of nerve paths and connections that relay images to the mind is incomplete.

At the end of the nineteenth century a controversy led by two famous German scientists raged as to whether the phenomenon of simultaneous contrast of colors was physiological, as Ewald Hering contended, or psychological, as Hermann von Helmholtz claimed. “To this day,” Harry Asher wrote in 1961, “it is not known for certain whether the process underlying the effect takes place in the eye or the brain.”

Back in the eighteenth century George Berkeley asserted that *esse is percipi*—that the existence of the physical world consists solely in its perceptibility—and Hume found the source of all conceptual thought in sense impressions. Later this view tended to be dismissed as solipsism. Writing on the subject of visual illusions late in the nineteenth century, the psychologist Oswald Külpe called them “subjective perversions of the contents of objective perception.” But now, as Paul Kolers writes in a recent issue of *Scientific American*, most contemporary investigators regard illusions as “genuine perceptions that do not stand up when their implications are tested” and as “putting in question any belief in ‘objective’ perception.”

The “eye” referred to in our title cannot therefore be assumed to be identical with the anatomical orb or an inert optical instrument. In the light of present knowledge (or, more accurately, in realization of its incompleteness) the “eye” that responds seems almost as difficult to delimit as is the eye of the connoisseur. But, thus qualified, Laforgue’s definition of an impressionist can be borrowed whole for the perceptual artist of 1965: “a modernist painter endowed with an uncommon sensibility of the eye.” Impressionism and neoimpressionism were the peaks to which perceptual art was carried within

1. SEDGELY: *Blue and Green Modulation*. 1964. Emulsion on composition board, 39½ x 39½". Howard Wise Gallery, New York
2. STEELE: *Baroque Experiment: Fred Maddox*. 1964. Oil on canvas, 60 x 40". Collection The Hon. Anthony Samuel, London
3. POHL: *PX II/3010—59/64*. 1964. Plexiglas, 27¾ high including base x 16⅞ x 3⅞". The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Collection
4. GRUPPON: *Unstable Perception*. 1963. Metal, 17⅞ x 18 x 3½". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the Olivetti Corporation

the limitations of representation. The perceptualism of the present, which barely existed twenty years ago except as a scientific study, is more concentrated than that of impressionism because the establishment of abstract painting has made it permissible for color, tone, line, and shape to operate autonomously.

When a critic or curator brings works of art together because of alleged common qualities he should make known the criteria that govern his selection, and the central principle toward which the various works point. *The Responsive Eye* is concerned not with only one tendency, group, or country but with groups and individuals representing tendencies from over fifteen countries. Before distinguishing one direction from another, however, it is essential to indicate those characteristics that—despite divergences of form, intention, ideology, or personal style—these paintings, reliefs, and constructions have in common.