

A HISTORY OF OP ART

Op Art is derived from the constructivist practices of the Bauhaus. This German school, founded by Walter Gropius, stressed the relationship of form and function within a framework of analysis and rationality. Students were taught to focus on the overall design, or entire composition, in order to present unified works. When the Bauhaus was forced to close in 1933, many of its instructors fled to the United States where the movement took root in Chicago and eventually at the Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, where Anni and Josef Albers would come to teach.

Origin of "Op"

The term first appeared in print in *Time* magazine in October 1964, though works which might now be described as "op art" had been produced for several years previously. For instance, Victor Vasarely's painting, *Zebras* (1938), is made up entirely of curvilinear black and white stripes that are not contained by contour lines. Consequently, the stripes appear to both meld into and burst forth from the surrounding background of the composition. Also the early black and white Dazzle panels of John McHale installed at the This is Tomorrow exhibit in 1956 and his *Pandora* series at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1962 demonstrate proto-op tendencies.



An optical illusion by Hungarian-born artist Victor Vasarely

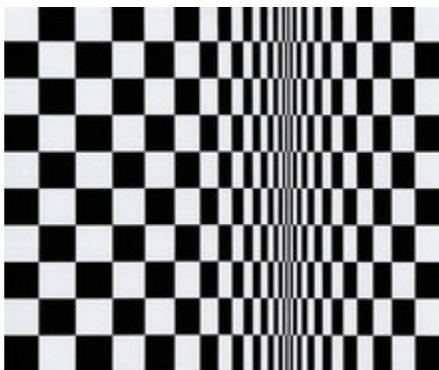
The Responsive Eye

In 1965, an exhibition called *The Responsive Eye*, created by William C. Seitz was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The works shown were wide ranging, encompassing the minimalism of Frank Stella and the smooth plasticity of Alexander Liberman, alongside the masters of the movement: Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley. The exhibition focused on the

perceptual aspects of art, which result both from the illusion of movement and the interaction of color relationships. The exhibition was enormously popular with the general public, though less so with the critics. Critics dismissed Op art as portraying nothing more than *trompe l'oeil*, or tricks that fool the eye. Regardless, Op art's popularity with the public increased, and Op art images were used in a number of commercial contexts. Bridget Riley tried to sue an American company, without success, for using one of her paintings as the basis of a fabric design.

How op works

Black & white and the figure-ground relationship



Movement in Squares, by Bridget Riley, 1961.

Op art is a perceptual experience related to how vision functions. It is a dynamic visual art, stemming from a discordant figure-ground relationship that causes the two planes to be in a tense and contradictory juxtaposition. Op Art is created in two primary ways. The first, and best known method, is the creation of effects through the use of pattern and line. Often these paintings are black and white, or otherwise grisaille. Such as in Bridget Riley's famous painting, *Current* (1964), on the cover of *The Responsive Eye* catalogue, black and white wavy lines are placed close to one another on the canvas surface, creating such a volatile figure-

ground relationship that causes one's eyes to hurt. Another reaction that occurs is that the lines create after images of certain colors due to how the retina receives and processes light. As Goethe demonstrates in his treatise *Theory of Colours*, at the edge where light and dark meet color arises because lightness and darkness are the two central properties in the creation of color.

Color

Bridget Riley later produced works in full color, and other Op artists have worked in color as well, although these works tend to be less well known. Josef Albers taught the two primary practitioners of the "Color Function" school at Yale in the 1950s: Richard Anuszkiewicz and Julian Stanczak. Often, colorist work is dominated by the same concerns of figure-ground movement, but they have the added element of contrasting colors which have different effects on the eye. Anuszkiewicz is a good example of this type of painting. In his "temple" paintings, for instance, the juxtaposition of two highly contrasting colors provokes a sense of depth in illusionistic three-dimensional space so that it appears as if the architectural shape is invading the viewer's space. Although Riley has gained international fame, the fact is she conceives of the work, but does not execute them herself.



Stanczak's compositions tend to be the most complex of all of the color function practitioners. Taking his cue from Albers and his influential book *Interaction of Color*, Stanczak deeply investigates how color relationships work.

Intrinsic Harmony, by Richard Anuszkiewicz, 1965

Victor Vasarely

Victor Vasarely (1906-1997) is internationally recognized as one of the most important artists of the 20th century. He is the acknowledged leader of the Op Art movement, and his innovations in color and optical illusion have had a strong influence on many modern artists.

In 1947, Vasarely discovered his place in abstract art. Influenced by his experiences at Breton Beach of Belle Isle, he concluded that "internal geometry" could be seen below the surface of the entire world. He conceived that form and color are inseparable. "Every form is a base for color, every color is the attribute of a form." Forms from nature were thus transposed into purely abstract elements in his paintings. Recognizing the inner geometry of nature, Vasarely wrote, "the ellipsoid form ... will slowly, but tenaciously, take hold of the surface (. . .) Henceforth, this ovoid form will signify in all my works of this period, the 'oceanic feeling'...I can no longer admit an inner world and another, an outer world, apart. The within and the without communicate by osmosis, or, one might rather say: the spatial-material universe, energetic-living, feeling-thinking, form a whole, indivisible ... The languages of the spirit are but the super vibrations of the great physical nature."

Vasarely was born in Pecs, Hungary in 1906. After receiving his baccalaureate degree in 1925, he began studying art at the Podolini-Volkman Academy in Budapest. In 1928, he transferred to the Műhely Academy, also known as the Budapest Bauhaus, where he studied with Alexander

Bortnijik. At the Academy, he became familiar with the contemporary research in color and optics by Jaohannes Itten, Josef Albers, and the Constructivists Malevich and Kandinsky.

After his first one-man show in 1930, at the Kovacs Akos Gallery in Budapest, Vasarely moved to Paris. For the next thirteen years, he devoted himself to graphic studies. His lifelong fascination with linear patterning led him to draw figurative and abstract patterned subjects, such as his series of harlequins, checkers, tigers, and zebras. During this period, Vasarely also created multi-dimensional works of art by superimposing patterned layers on one another to attain the illusion of depth.

In 1943, Vasarely began to work extensively in oils, creating both abstract and figurative canvases. His first Parisian exhibition was the following year at the Galerie Denise Rene that he helped found. Vasarely became the recognized leader of the avant-garde group of artists affiliated with the gallery.

During the 1950's, Vasarely wrote a series of manifestos on the use of optical phenomena for artistic purposes. Together with his paintings, these were a significant influence on younger artists. According to the artist, "In the last analysis, the picture-object in pure composition appears to me as the last link in the family paintings,' still possessing by its shining beauty, an end in itself. But it is already more than a painting, the forms and colors which compose it are still situated on the plane, but the plastic event which they trigger fuses in front of and in the plane. It is an end, but also a beginning, a kind of launching pad for future achievements."

Text taken directly from E-Fine Art.com <http://www.e-fineart.com/biography/vasarely.html>

