

ART: VIEW FROM THE MODERN

For artists, more success, for the public, more art

“THE one prediction on modern art we can be positive about is that it will change.” The authoritative speaker: William C. Seitz, Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. The Museum's latest triumph is, of course, “The Responsive Eye,” the lively, provocative (and provoking) exhibit of “perceptual” and “primarily visual” art—a form which has been inevitably dubbed “op.”

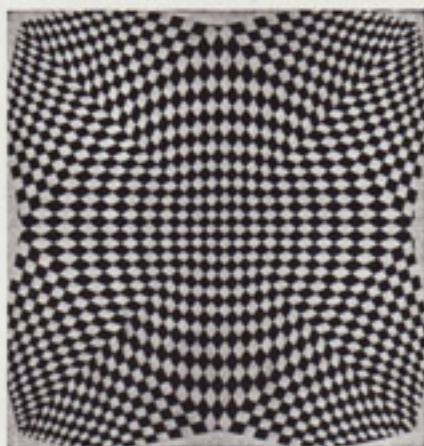
Commenting on the background which must influence any prediction, however tentative, Mr. Seitz explained: “All during this century—in fact, since Impressionism began, around 1865—we have had revisions in attitude and direction in painting and sculpture every five to fifteen years. The sequence of attitudes—or styles, if you will—has been drastically accelerated in the past fifteen years.

“Of course, these are successive, not isolated phases, certain of them happening simultaneously—Neo-Impressionism, Symbolism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, and so on. Nearly every tendency influences what comes later. And of course Hans Hofmann and Willem de Kooning can still paint masterworks even though Abstract Expressionism as a group style has ended.”

Is Pop Art a genuine movement or just a “way station”? “Genuine, in part, yes. And certainly a way station. All schools and phases are way stations, as well as ends in themselves. Before Pop there was Assemblage. Pop may well be an unexpected answer to the call for a return to ‘the figure.’”

“Although much of today's art is surely not great, we are unquestionably in the middle of a vast ferment of talent and ideas and degrees of genius that is historically astounding. Short of a catastrophe, nothing will stop this from intensifying more.”

Mr. Seitz was willing to predict this same intensification for most other aspects of today's art world. “In every way, one looks for more success for more artists, more teaching of art on all levels, more and more buying and collecting. The integration of art into society will continue. In the past, what was called avant-garde art was rejected by society, accepted only by a few critics and artists and friends of artists. Today modern art is a status symbol that influences and



ERNST BENKERT'S "Black and White Op-Tickler" (left), in Modern Art's "Responsive Eye"; from Museum's collection, Robert Rauschenberg's combine-painting, "First Landing Jump"



dictates to society—as Op is doing with fashion. Collectors, curators, professors, businesses, industries—they all patronize, even commission modern art. The experimental is sought after.

“Once, a Paris studio was the peak of artistic life. Today it is a dirty New York loft. Today there is no doubt that New York is the commercial center of the art world—and also perhaps the creative center. It is an intensely active world now. The number of galleries and exhibits is constantly expanding. Until the war, American art was ‘provincial’ in relation to Europe. When European artists came here they were caught up in what was going on here. The New York School of Abstract Expressionism which began around 1945 was the result of the cross fertilization of European ideas with a kind of raw energy. It resulted in the widest spread of one style of art in history—to the Orient, Europe, behind the Iron Curtain. It would have been felt, too, in Russia, had it been permitted. For the first time, American art became central to Europe.”

Mr. Seitz admitted to being disturbed by some of the artificial aspects of the art world: “Instant communication—faster than instant, really—gives journalists a hand in forming art history. It has reached the point where *Time Magazine* can give a name to an art movement, an art movement which begins to take effect almost before it happens.

“I am sometimes frightened by the influence a museum can have. Art in any period is the form and direction creativity takes. Artists should decide the direction of art, not critics or museums or

collectors. The future must not be decided by ideological racketeering or esthetic gangsterism. I think it important for museums and critics not to push art in any direction artificially.

“If it is true that art is a reflection of society, then why not cartoons and billboards as a source for art? We have had a whole generation which has grown up with billboards and Brillo boxes and comic books—a dynamic vulgarity—as its environment. It is only natural that this should be a subject for painting and sculpture. I often think today that the house of modern art is a combination of temple and advertising agency.

“Twenty years ago, when we thought of a closer integration of modern art into modern society, we overlooked one obvious thing: if art is absorbed by a society, then it inevitably takes on the color of that society, so that every characteristic we admire will somehow be altered. It would be wonderful if art could spiritualize and enrich society as much as society materializes and impoverishes art.

“A work of art used to be the last handmade thing in an industrial society. But now an intensified marriage of science and art is taking place, along with a new relationship of art to psychology, technology and even cybernetics.

“To end these rash predictions on a hopeful note: the mass audience will continue to learn more, to travel and see more, to own more art. It will continue to mature in its sophisticated and subtle intelligence, in its enormous ability to distinguish and understand ideas.”

—FLORENCE FLETCHER