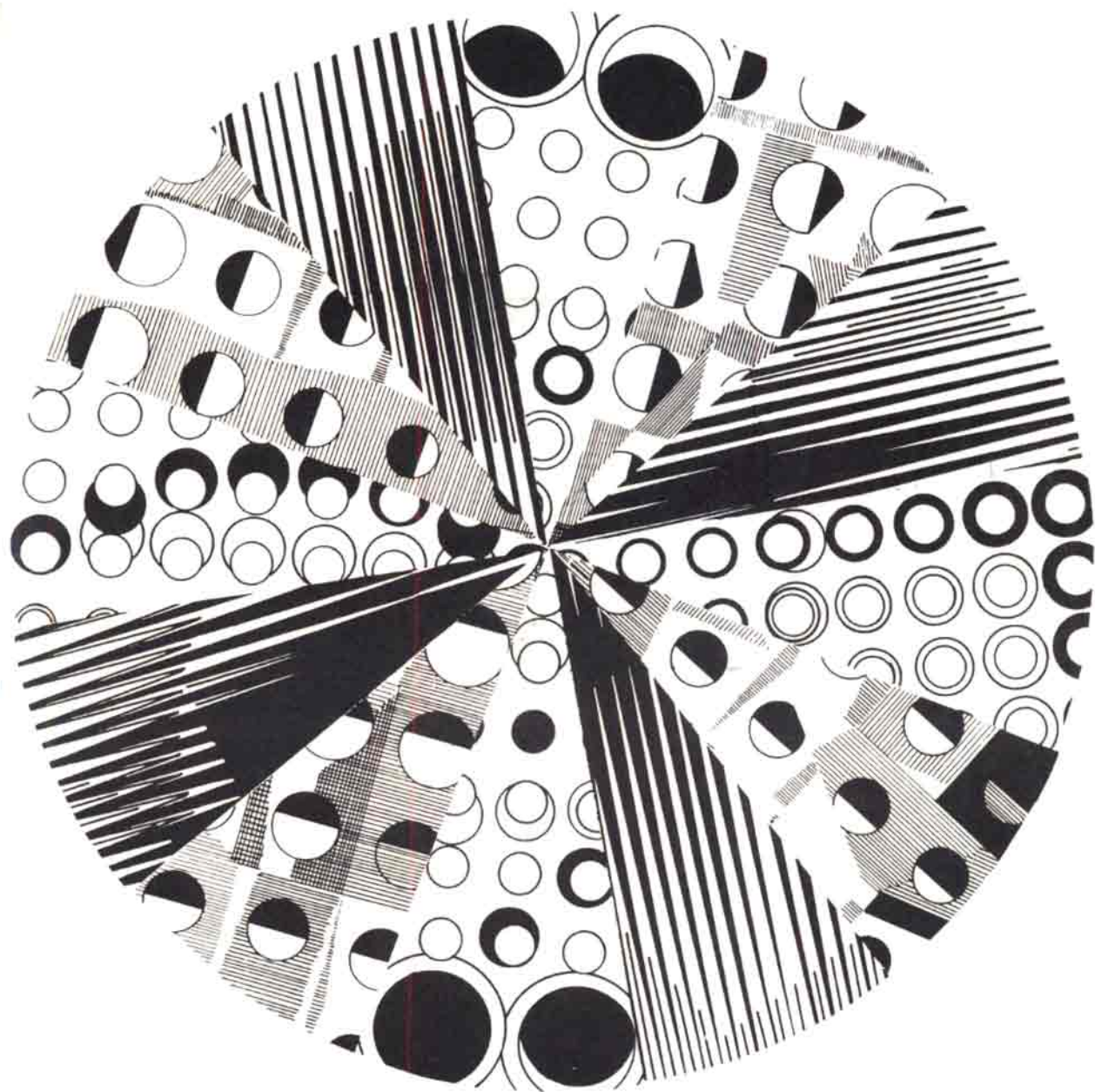


# ANONIMA



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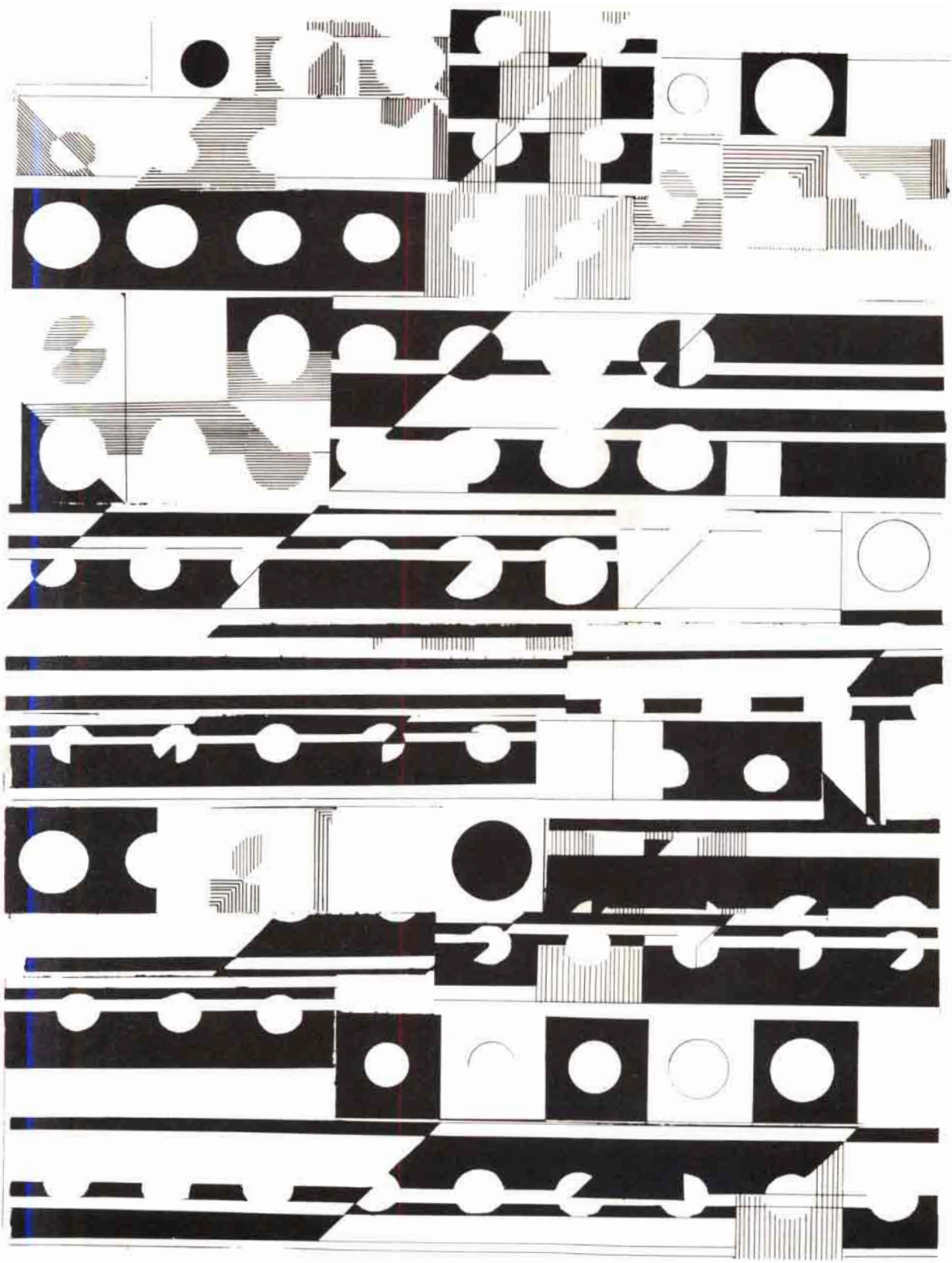
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## INTRODUCTION: THIS MAGAZINE

*This is the second edition of a magazine whose first edition was printed under the title "IN-OUT". The present title, "ANONIMA", may only serve this edition. On the other hand, it may stick. In any case it was selected to coincide with the exhibition held by the so-called ANONIMA GROUP in New York in April, 1964. It is meant to accompany that exhibition and to serve as an introduction to it. The editor hopes, however, that the magazine may become more than an apologia for the group and its work. The aim is to produce whenever possible a magazine written by artists for artists, and to encourage and print new, outside material. A larger, more comprehensive issue is contemplated in the near future. Anyone interested in contributing to it should contact the editor.*

DICTIONARY OF MORRISON ARCHAICS  
*(Clichés Used to Describe the Work and its Makers):*

Qualities

Random Activity

Systems

Possibilities

Rigour

Men with Energy and Ideas

Process

Conscious Control

Perception

Implication

Sequential Development

Progressions

Cues

(Distal Cues)

Lattice

Grid

Formulating

Sessions

Information

Unfamiliar

Rewards

*"George B. Morrison"*



# THE ANONIMA GROUP

*Helen Weinberg*

*The most immediate and important problem facing a painter in New York is not finding studio space, a gallery, or a part-time job, but rather shifting twenty years of accumulated history. If painting is to be re-examined, it can best be done in New York. Most of what is worth fighting against has blossomed there beautifully, more surely than in any other place. It is not patriotism that leads me to say this; a virus can settle in any part of the body.*

This statement, Ernst Benkert's "Note to a European Painter," has at its heart a vision of "what is worth fighting against" in modern painting. Benkert, Edwin Mieczkowski, and Francis Hewitt established themselves originally as a "group" when they first regarded themselves together in opposition to that which had become faddish or imitative in modern painting, in their own work as well as in that of others, and saw themselves involved in a fight against it; they hoped to define a fresh area of phenomenological investigation in visual art that they might completely try and explore.

Although the decision to occasionally work, paint, write and talk together in a formal way, which is one, though not the only, reason I call them a "group," was a conscious and considered choice finally, the coming together of the three men just "happened" in Pittsburgh and Oberlin in 1958-1959. Mieczkowski, who had recently been graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art and was teaching at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, met Hewitt, a student at the Carnegie Institute. After his graduation from Carnegie, Hewitt went to Oberlin to take a Master's degree. (Eventually he wrote a thesis there on perceptual psychology which was to have

a significant place in the ideas of the three artists.) Benkert, whose formal degree had been in Art History at Harvard, was now convinced that he should devote himself to painting, and was studying also for an M.A. degree at Oberlin. At first simply friends, Benkert and Hewitt visited Mieczkowski in Pittsburgh frequently; the friendship became a more-than-casual, serious dialogue on art when one day Benkert mocked the almost unconscious technical skill of Mieczkowski, who is still the most "painterly" of the three, and Hewitt made of the mockery a manifesto in which he traced the history of the revolt against the "cult of the unconscious hand" from Kandinsky to Albers. In this paper, "The First and Last Manifesto of George B. Morrison" (which was in fact the first but not the last paper of George B. Morrison if we recognize that name as a kind of temporary pseudonym for the group), Hewitt, in the name of all of them, espoused "visual form that finally exists as an idea" - anti-emotional, anti-automatic. They embraced the ruler and the compass as proper and delicate tools to be employed in the name of "art" which might again be precise and conscious, the mindful making of a new intellectual constructs in the field of visual perception. This was the most basic statement in the "manifesto," written in 1959, but with this were some corollary observations on new possibilities in the development of form in painting. Hewitt noted that when the Cubists made a simultaneous presentation of many aspects of a simple object, they made it necessary for the spectator to move his "focus and attention over the surface in order to fully see the picture," thus "creating localized entities, unrelated to a total Gestalt." Out of this rec-

ognition of the shift in Cubist painting away from a nineteenth century idea of organic form, the group drew its own idea of a sequential form. Furthermore, idealized concepts of space found in classical perspective were contradicted, along with the shibboleth of organic form. "A single systematic spatial progression, as in linear perspective, is dropped in favor of localized 'readings' that at times confirm the perceived distance and at times contradict it." On the basis of a grid, an obvious ordering device, Hewitt proposed that "spatial ambiguity or fluctuation of moving planes" be encouraged to happen. The grid would provide repetition, sequence, and continuity - it would be a reference to which the spectator's eye might constantly return after swinging out into the changes, the movements, and the ambiguities which the painter had initiated.

The expression, in this 1959 paper, of what the three men now believed to be the area in which they all wished to work grew out of questions which they had been asking as individuals. Their early work had been in a wide area of experimentation, culminating before 1959 in Formal and Informal Abstraction for Mieczkowski, Table-Top Cubism for Benkert, and Action painting for Hewitt. Each recognized in himself a wish to go beyond the sort of painting he was doing, each saw the sort of painting he was doing as imitation of fully realized avenues in modern art. The question of where the most potent and direct access to the new in art lay at that moment was the one "The First and Last Manifesto of George B. Morrison" tried to answer. Finding that pure geometric form bordered on simple design and mere technical skill on the one hand, and finding that the growing mystique of painting as an expression of psychic, moral or spiritual self was too obscurely personal, automatic, unconscious or random on the other hand, they had limited themselves to a thorough investigation of the complexities of determined and undetermined visual experience.

Their first experiments in the area they had chalked out for themselves were made in the summer of 1960, when they were together for two months in East Hampton -

these summer months were spent in drawing and painting images that explored a number of perceptual problems. Each of the three, starting with their shared general premise about visual perception, ventured something of his own. The tempera paintings of Benkert were invariably simple figure-ground studies; the drawings of Mieczkowski were combinations of washes and fine hatchings not at all primary and austere, and clearly executed with a personal touch; Hewitt's pen drawings were heavily formal and complex. But, after these initial drawings and sketches, while the group's main idea was still formative, each began in his own work to close in somewhat more on the idea that all had embraced. The following summer the three worked together again in East Hampton. Between that summer, which was the second time the three men worked together for a long period, and the first show that they had together (in Cleveland, Ohio, in November, 1962), Benkert in Paris and London, and Hewitt and Mieczkowski, teaching at the Cleveland Institute of Art, in Ohio, worked out the idea in their paintings. Benkert juggled with preconceived constructs of circles on square panels; these were not made by the painter's hand, but were prescribed to a sign painter who executed Benkert's instructions. This rejection of execution has as its precedent the much earlier example of Duchamp and Moholy-Nagy. Such total rationality and control over the personal is extreme; while such "painting" insists on purity in art and in the experience of art it is overwhelmingly more intellectual and rational than visual. Meanwhile, Mieczkowski's painterliness was absorbed in an interest in color, and his lines became more sharply defined, his form more sequential, or serial; Hewitt played arbitrary games with scientific archetypes, as in a black and white painting "Generation of Tesseracts;" he also made several paintings in which perceptual conflicts occur in parts of highly controlled spaces, while in the other parts complementary structures, not provoking uncontrolled visual stimulation, appear. This juxtaposition of eye-play and mind-fact represents a happy achievement in his painting.



The paintings made between the summer of 1960 and the fall of 1962 were shown in November, 1962 at a gallery improvised from an old dress shop for the event. The name of the dress shop gallery was The 10021, its number on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio. The decision to have the first show together, to have it at a gallery of their own devising, and to have it in Cleveland rather than New York City was an important one. The simple decision consolidated them as a group, though they were in different places, Benkert in New York and Mieczkowski and Hewitt in Cleveland. The manifesto, about which they had all agreed, although it had been published in a university periodical (*Polemic*, Western Reserve University), could hardly be construed as a position-taking in the world of art. (Nor could two summers' experiments, nor constant debate in letters and visits and paper-writing.) That they would very consciously declare themselves as artists - together in Cleveland rather than New York was an expedient choice, since two of the three were in Cleveland actively involved in the life of the Art Institute and the Museum there. That they established their own gallery rather than appear under the auspices of an existing gallery or gallery-hall in an institution is an interesting fact that demands some consideration here since they will do the same thing in New York with a show planned for this coming April. Since they have, through their discussion and work, developed a position in painting that is the group's own, they feel that they should be responsible for presenting it and governing the terms of its presentation: they wish the work not only to "speak" for itself but also they wish to speak for it. The presentation of their paintings, then, is both visual and verbal. (Papers, their own and others, on the subject of their rational perceptualist art, were read at the Cleveland show and they will discuss their ideas at the New York show in April.) This is clearly against a long-standing opinion that says that the painting should stand alone, speak for itself, not mean but be, etc. And, of course, they want that for their paintings, too. But since all truly contemporary painting is a continuous re-

newal of tradition, it lacks a ready-made context into which it may come on its own merit. Because of this the painter himself often feels compelled to provide a context. A controlled showing of the painting, with talks, papers, and symposia based on its "art," may be a way to improvise such a context so that the spectator learns to participate in a new way of seeing. And the particular paintings of this particular group of three artists are "difficult" paintings. Not only are they difficult to make in that they require the working out of complex structures and the spending of patient time on precise and intricate execution, but they are also difficult to see without some recognition of significant cues. The contention of the group is that the recognition of the cues may first be understood verbally, and/or conceptually, and then they may become ordered on a visual level. It is true that without verbal context, the paintings still have an existence: indeed, they have a distinct and vibrant existence, and some of their effectiveness is quite dependent on pure visual perception. But visual perception and retinal stimulation are not enough. For the completeness of their being they need a verbal context, at least originally, because they are conceptual as well as visual constructs. Hence, the Show-Under-the-Roof-of-One's-Own-Gallery concept.

The Cleveland show, in 1962, was a happy event of three days and three nights. In its confirmation of the three painters as a recognizable and intelligible group lay the show's most important success. In spite of the personal emphasis in their own canvases, the similar intention of the three was clearly visible when these canvases were hung side by side. New commitments to their experiment were made by each, and a summer of work was planned: they worked together, then, in a studio in North Carolina, this past summer (1963). The summer's work was devoted to drawing and not painting. (It has been their practice to draw, formulating visual ideas in the summer months of mutual activity, and to paint alone in the other months.) Hewitt and Mieczkowski had a drawing show at The 10021 dress shop gallery in Cleveland in mid-January of this year. The



show included not only the summer's drawings but also work of former years - it was in fact a "retrospective," and included one or two drawings of the boyhood of each, a sort of self-irony that was overwhelmed by the final and total impact of the show which revealed a clear development from knowledgeable studies of blots, strokes, soft-edgeness, and delicate penings of lines, to strong geometric shapes, to the latest subtle experiments in visual constructs. These latest drawings provide some of the "grids", primary devices on which the intricacies of a fuller visual experience may be predicated, for the new paintings which Hewitt and Mieczkowski will show in New York. Benkert, although he did not contribute to the drawing show, has used his summer work in his fall painting also.

Within the definitions and limits of the group, Mieczkowski is Benkert's polar opposite, allowing the impurities of qualities-for-their-sake and of happy chances to appear in an otherwise carefully planned canvas. True to his early characteristic of painterliness, he is the most intuitive in his approach to the new stuff of this rational perceptualist vision. His richness, as Benkert's asceticism, is persuasive in its own right, and the distinctions possible within a limited area glorify the fact that the spontaneous and the personal always survive in art, even in the New Abstraction. That here the personal is a style of the conscious mind rather than of the subconscious gives it more credence perhaps in a time when consciousness is regaining its power, and we look for perceptual, not ideal, distinctions.

If we propose Benkert as the group's Ascetic, and Mieczkowski as its Intuitionist, Hewitt is the Intellectual whose position is the detached one which puts one visual idea next to another to make a new visual phenomenon and examine it. He most clearly exemplifies the concept of control over both the determined and the undetermined in his canvases. Never does a rationally conceived construct occur simply, without its complicating complement or contradiction; he intentionally establishes change, movement, and ambiguity - intellectual impurities that ini-

tiate conflict in the painting.

In April (April 4-18) the second self-sponsored show of the group will be held in New York at 23 W. 56th Street. The gallery will be called the Anonima: the insistence on anonymity may be a means of divorcing the group from others already defined and of establishing a separateness and, thereby, a freedom. Or it may be that in so naming the gallery they wish to underline the idea of anonymity in their paintings, from which have been removed the distinctive and identifying touches of personality. (It is interesting that, in the establishing of a formal group, they perpetuate for themselves a sense of their persons and their history together, while they keep personality out of their paintings. The artist, more than others, depends for his energy on the personal, in the Berdyaev sense of the personal as the intensely subjective view of the world which is truly and freely one's own; but these artists keep, as Mieczkowski has said, the "poetry of their lives" out of their paintings. However, the poetry of these lives is partly celebrated in the group, which seems as functional in this way as it is in its role of Clearing-House for Ideas.)

In the show at the Anonima gallery in April, talk about the paintings will be conducted by a panel, which will include Charles Parkhurst, Anthony Hill, Don Judd, and the three painters. This panel will direct itself to questions about the new art, particularly those concerning Geometry, its uses and abuses.

Through recent shows stressing a new "classical spirit" in art (notably the one at the Janis) it has become apparent that there is emerging a new kind of serious, visually-concerned art (mistakenly and confusingly, perhaps, connected with Pop Art which seems a very different art, representing, sometimes in a complacently accepting fashion, the absurdities of contemporary life) - a new kind of art which proposes to push pure visual experience to its furthestmost limits. In the art of visual perception, when visual experience is pushed to its extreme, it may, ironically, annihilate itself. When the painter uses techniques that force constant eye movement so that the eye may never focus on a

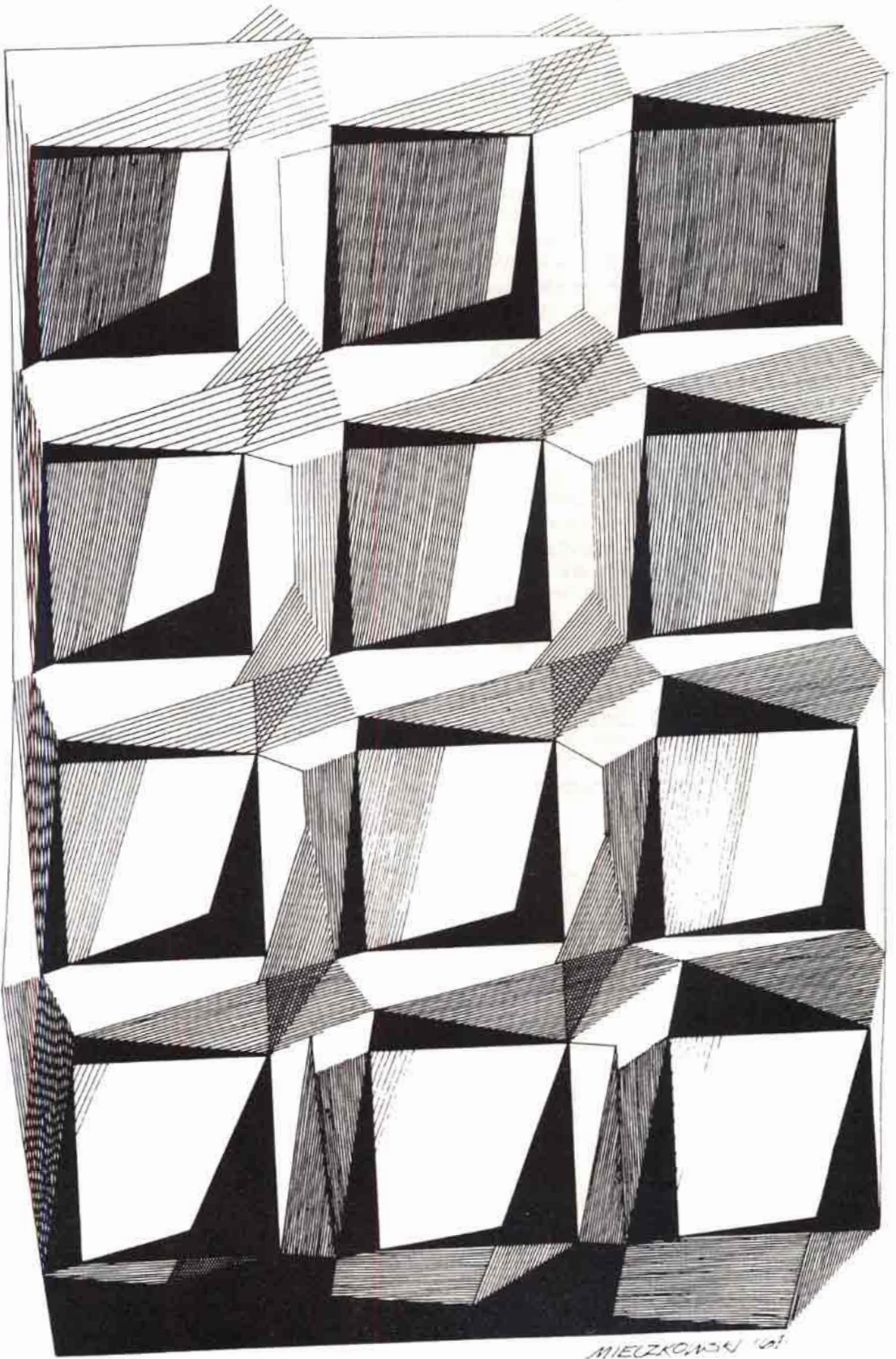
place in the canvas and come to terms with what it sees, or when the painter creates such vivid sensations that the eye is turned away finally, he has perfected a new kind of anti-art. In short, retinal play is "destructive" of itself because if carried to its ultimate extreme its nature forbids that it be looked at. Working on problems similar to those of the new artists of Optical Sensation, Hewitt, Mieczkowski and Benkert have kept "retinal play" and retinal disturbance as only a part of the whole work.

The mechanical nature of simple physiological sensation, as well as the impersonal precision of these painting constructs, brings up the question of the machine. Anti-emotional and anti-romantic, ruling out the self and personality, are these painters making themselves into mere tools of the hand and eye? Again, this seems true if one considers only the simplest paintings of this sort. Wherever complexity and conflict enter the canvas to stop the eye or change the sensation, the conscious mind of the painter clearly overwhelms the mechanical eye-hand. Far from being a "machine-like" art, as Brian O'Doherty calls it (The New York Times, February 16, 1964), it seems, when viewed in terms of its own ideality, a very human, though objective and depersonalized, art.

At its most basic it shows man as the machine's rival. Through it, man says to the machine: "I am precise and accurate. But, I can turn logic to my own uses as you can not; I can even take logic to its extreme where it becomes conflict and contradiction. I can give a kind of information which surprises. I am still man, the artist, the maker of the surprise!"

"Painting does not stress predictability as does science," wrote Mieczkowski in a paper called "Painting and Prediction." Science, in establishing predictability, "strives to give us 'the assurance of a constant world.'" Painting may use some of science's findings and set them up with apparent machine-like logic, but man-as-artist usurps their absoluteness when he manipulates them in structures of his own; when he makes of them a new system of his own conscious choice; and when he introduces into them unexpected, arbitrary, willful, and therefore "artistic" change. Ideally, the artist "lives his life in a state of suspense with the conviction that he can and is about to add to what is already present, this conviction being the focus and fount of his integrity. ...[He] is capable of generating the courage and arrogance necessary to deal with the inertia in the present." □





No Name - Edwin Mieczkowski



# THE NEW ABSTRACTION AND ONTOLOGY

*George M. Reid*

*Shine out, fair sun, till I have a glass  
That I may see my shadow as I pass.*

*Richard III, I, ii*

## I

The work of the new Abstractionists represents in the confusion of post-Action painting a vigorous, clear and exciting position. Because the critical consideration of post-World War II geometric painting has begun to find its vocabulary and by so doing to delimit the area of possible exploration, it is necessary to push for as broad a base of inquiry as is possible. That is, one must look carefully at the work and allow it to have its say, to let the work lead, hint and reveal itself, always keeping the explanation of it in a subservient relationship to the work itself. The goal is to let the artist finish what he has begun and not allow the critic to pirate a few articles from his insights, but of more importance, not to allow the art expert to close and finish for the future a promising avenue of creative artistic expression. This paper in its way deals with suggestions, possibilities and areas of explanations. It means to pursue a thoughtful line of investigation into a highly intellectual art form.

Their style is not Mondrian's brought up to date. Their paintings are not eye charts or optical tricks. Their aim is not to create fun and games, i.e., "retinal play," nor are they helping to explain complex scientific discoveries by making them visual. They have a concern with each of these areas. Their interest in Mondrian is one of method. He is the major 20th century exponent of a kind of painting relying for its effects on control and ordered thought. His idealism they reject. They know about optics and have studied the

visual impact of charts. They are also familiar with the games the eye can play. The basis for any relationship here is the common one of perception. Optics, charts, and tricks are small parts of the larger human factor - perception. They build their art on the knowledge of perception.

In an outline of what their art is not, its relationship to modern science and scientific discoveries is interesting. These paintings at times seem to be almost visual equivalents of sub-atomic theories. They seem to be to quantum theory what a molecular-model is to the theoretic organization of molecules. In fact these paintings do assist in understanding concepts of indeterminacy and relative probability, but this is an incidental feature of them. This coincidental similarity grows out of a common way of examining the world - i.e., the way of intelligence, thought and logic. Science, in the limiting sense of quantum theory, is problem-solving while these paintings are relevant irreducible parts of the world.

## II

It is to be expected that the serious contemporary artist would reject the current fashions in painting and recognize that, for himself, painting in the manner of the Action painters is a paradox. Such a decision though, has the effect of setting him adrift from ways of painting. Finding young artists working effectively in "new" areas is exhilarating. The work at hand is an example.\* Its careful consideration shows it to be highly consistent in method and idea. Its weakness and failures are consonant with its high purpose, and do not reveal false attitudes or affected postures. The production of the group is large enough to accommodate serious study and such study is rewarded.

\*Anonima Group show, New York, April, 1964

An approach to their work is through perception. The dictionary definition of perception is "awareness of objects". Such a definition emphasizes the sensory aspect of perception and underestimates its functional role. These artists are concerned with perception as function rather than as pure sense. For them perceiving is that part of the process of living by which each one of us from his own particular point of view creates for himself the world in which he has his life's experiences and through which he strives to gain his satisfactions. Such an understanding implies that the individual sees a world outside himself of which he is a part. Too, he must be able to see himself in that world. In seeing himself so, in that world, he is able to extract himself from that world. From this position of being extracted from the world, he puts himself back into the world. This is the act of creating for himself the world in which he has his life. This view makes the perceiving individual central, the point of departure in life in the world as well as in art.

That which makes this definition possible is consciousness. Perception and consciousness are the factors out of which this group's art is built. Consistent with their understanding of consciousness is their critical attitude towards forms of Action painting. They disregard private ineffable experience. This basic tenet of Action painting being denied, they have to forego most of the physical method of this sort of painting. Action as a manifestation of some deep hidden trace of unique personality is not acceptable. The drip as accident and the gesture as action are denied. The use of the intuition has changed - it is not allowed to rise uninhibited bursting forth into blinding truth. For them it is carefully filtered through consciousness. Brushes are no longer tools or theatrical props. They become instruments again. The paint understood as material by the Action painter must be dematerialized. All optional qualities of color, texture, composition, etc. are brought under strict control. Coarse drama, the appearance of disorder and confusion cannot be tolerated. They have rejected the possibilities of the unconscious in painting. Having swept away blood and

guts, they are faced with the task of building an art-of-consciousness.

Such an art must be an art of things, a phenomenological art. This is a requirement because it is with things in the world that consciousness deals. In fact this is what they strive for in their painting. They do not paint pictures of things; they do not devise metaphors of ideality and/or essences, a la Mondrian, and they do not throw personal fits in the manner of the Action painters. They construct; they build unique structures of concrete reality.

Utilizing the information gathered by psychology (usually about perception) and science, they set themselves the task of constructing a real thing. The result must be neutral in the sense that it does not appear to be like something else one is familiar with. It must be neutral in that nothing about it involves one's emotions. In fact it must in no way elicit the feelings or ideas which one may have had before confronting it. (Here the anti-"nature" aspects of their position begin to come to light.) The painting is meant to be consciousness' own exercise of itself in the world. A description of the appearance of this kind of painting would have to include recognition of geometric shapes (neutral shapes), repeated sequential elements, and an underlying ordering grid. Also, order, limitation, complexity would have to be discussed. These are conscious human factors in perceiving the world. Because of the demands these paintings make upon the spectator, he experiences a kind of exhaustion of consciousness - and in so doing he comes closer to what it is the paintings ultimately are doing.

Putting it another way, to see the ever-present and pervasive realms of the concrete reality, and to be able properly to inspect, describe and analyse its structure a special kind of object is called for. Their painting is this object. It is the possibility of holding the intentional object of consciousness steady and in focus, before the inspecting consciousness, the consciousness in the process of inspecting, having been freed from all scientific and metaphysical preconceptions. It (the painting) is in its special phenomenological state, separate from the artist who constructed it,



and it is unique in that it relates only to itself as consciousness. It is the proposition of this question: what is the nature or aspect of the system which makes it possible for consciousness to reflect upon itself? In more orthodox philosophical terms the question is: what is the nature of Being? In being able to form the question they have assisted in finding answers.

A. N. Whitehead in discussing the situation we are describing says, "Divest consciousness of its ideality, such as its logical, emotional, aesthetic and moral apprehensions, and what is left is sense-awareness. This sense-awareness is consciousness minus its apprehensions of ideality." If we follow this argument, sense-awareness is the consciousness of consciousness. It is the reflective aspect of consciousness. In his terms the painting has divested consciousness of its ideality and in so doing has turned us towards the consideration of the pivotal question of Being.

A problem related to these paintings is the one of their machine-like qualities. Many aspects of their appearance plus their deliberate neutralness suggest to many that they could be made by a machine. We will see that they have non-machine-like aspects which are in a way included to indicate that a machine did not make them. Too, such inclusions are sometimes explained by the artist as successful attempts on his part to outdo the machine. Beat it at its own game. Most important in this regard is that it is absolutely necessary that these paintings include the man, i.e., the individual, the artist. A machine could make half of such a painting. Such a half would be only information - a kind of compilation of statistical evidence about man-in-the-world. For the painting to transcend this level it has to involve itself with the subject more deeply. In our discussion this deeper involvement would be the inclusion of information which reported on man in counterdistinction to man-in-the-world.

Because of their method and approach, this passage from the artistic limitations of the machine to the possibilities in art is crucial for the individual paintings. If this transition is not successfully made the painting is dead and banal. The crisis-

like aspect of this passage can be sensed in the delicate balance, in the effect of the painting, between deadness and life.

It is not possible to keep man separate from man-in-the-world nor is it desirable. But the nature of their insight requires a careful presentation, in their painting, of a total vision. The object must be constructed with man's own individual aspects of consciousness as well as with those things consciousness grasps in the world outside man. Some of the coarser - coarser in the sense that they can be easily seen - elements included (which refer to the individual and human aspect of the investigation), are wit, surprise, and "accident". Those are also the kinds of things which outdo the machine. Besides the usual witty or ironic titles of the paintings the subject matter may be funny. There is often an element of wit and play connected with the outrageousness of the attack the painting makes upon the eye. And, then, there is the surprise. In spite of the dead serious use of extended sequences - perhaps circles increasing in size - the sequence will at times be interrupted, as when an unexpected-sized circle appears. An example of "accident" would be a smudge on an otherwise perfectly rendered and technically correct surface. Such an accident is always tampered with - i.e., filtered through consciousness.

In such a manner, subtle as it may be, the artists introduce individual man into their work. Their interest in hiding as much as possible of the artist's personality is partly a reaction to the personality aspects of Action painting. Another obvious manifestation of this anonymity is that the paintings are not signed.

### III

The artist's problem of communication is dealt within an interesting way in this work. In comparison to the "retinal play" of other geometric painters there is very little play here. When the indeterminateness of space and ambiguity are evidently of major importance to the artist it seems contradictory that these effects are not fully exploited. Their exploitation would be a kind of communication. It would at least communicate the fact that contradictory space can be created in a painting. In



these paintings the communication of this fact is made deliberately difficult. Every spatial effect has to be worked out to be realized. All the optical tricks found in so much painting of this kind are turned into problems which require a certain amount of decision to be realized. We have referred to the fact that the paintings demand to be read. The effect of which is to force one's thought processes, require one to be conscious. This approach is a contradiction of the easier communication possibilities discussed earlier. In effect, the artist has chosen to make communication as difficult as possible. In fact such a difficulty is part of what he is communicating.

Another aspect of communication in their method of painting is the possibility, within this style, of universal communication. Lacking in our present civilization is an underlying unifying cultural idea such as the Church was in medieval times. Nor do we have as they did in Italy during the Renaissance an aristocratic class patronizing the arts. It does not seem likely that such stabilizing factors, on which we might build a modern communicative art, will appear.

The work of the artists under consideration has an element which seems to suggest a road back towards greater communication. That is to say, within certain limits, their paintings are "understandable." Though their work is not for the large public it is theoretically understandable by all. The geometric, mathematical, and so-called scientific aspects of it relate to rational thinking and the rules of logic. These are conscious mental activities for most people. The perceptual information out of which their paintings are constructed has been scientifically discovered and proved. These perceptual transactions are common to us all. This perceptual information is a common denominator, and it could theoretically serve in art the same purpose the Church did as a common denominator in the art of medieval times. The wit, surprise, and "accident" already discussed is accessible. Also, when one considers the built and/or constructed aspect of these paintings which makes them things, rather than metaphors, that this art could become clear for the large public appears a real possibility. □

# A MIXED BAG: QUOTES, ETC.

*Ernst Benkert*

## FIRST PRINCIPLES

*Vladimir Nobokov: "Reality: one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes."*

## WARNING:

*Compare the 'logic' of Malevich's paintings with the incoherence of his writings.*

## OF INTEREST TO FOREIGNERS:

*Calvin Coolidge: "The business of America is business."*

*Elbert Hubbard: "The path of civilization is paved with tin cans."*

*Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America."*

*Col. Williard D. Vandiver: "I'm from Missouri; you must show me."*

*Harold Rosenberg: "The Frenchman has so much tradition he can easily say anything, except what he wants to say."*

*Col. C. E. Stanton: "Lafayette, we are here."*

## AMERICAN ARTIST WATCH OUT

*The ground for today's Social Realism in the U.S.S.R. was laid by the artists themselves, especially the old avant-garde. Tatlin, Mayakovsky, Lissitsky, Malevich. The-Death-of-Art-Artist, the Artist-as-Engineer, the Artist-as-Publicist, the Anonymous Artist, the Proletarian Artist, etc., all these postures place society in a primary position, the artist in a secondary one. The life of a socialist society becomes the personal life of the artist. He expresses no desire for another life, especially not a disinterested creative one which pursues art as knowledge, as revelation, as contemplation. Art for him is arguments, propaganda, and social comment.*

#### STILL MAKES SENSE:

Marsden Hartley: "Modern Art must of necessity remain in the state of experimental research if it is to have any significance at all. Painters must paint for their own edification and pleasure, and what they have to say, not what they are impelled to feel, is what will interest those who are interested in them. The thought of the time is the emotion of the time." (1928)

#### A LITTLE PLAY IN FOUR ACTS:

Degas: "The air we see in the paintings of the old masters is never the air we breath."

Courbet: "Beauty as given by nature is superior to all the conventions of the artist."

Degas: "...the study of nature is of no significance, for painting is a conventional art, and it is infinitely more worthwhile to learn to draw after Holbein."

Henry Ford: "History is bunk."

#### THE GOOD OLD DAYS:

Antonio Canova: "You are searching in nature for some beautiful part of the body and you cannot find it? Do not lose heart. Undress some more persons and you will find it. In nature there is everything, provided you know how to look for it."

#### DON'T LOSE HEART:

"No work of art is worth the bones of a Pomeranian Grenadier." (Bismarck)

#### ANYHOW:

"Art is a kind of illness." (Puccini)

#### PROOF:

"Statistics show that only four professional groups wear sideburns in the U. S.: truck drivers, adolescents, motorcyclists, and painters."



# PERCEPTUAL CONFLICT AND THE NEW ABSTRACTION

*Frank Hewitt*

New painting by definition, is an object outside the critical and historical pattern. It offers few apparent consistent features when compared to older, more established styles. Recently painters have become more interested in visual phenomena that are in themselves contradictory or in conflict. This interest might be described as a search for a visual situation which both is and is not P, at the same time and in the same relation. This kind of painting has variously been typed "hard edge", "chart painting", "visual dynamics", "visual optics", "visual games" and even "retinal play". "Retinal play", a painter friend of mine recently noted, was cause for spanking if he caught one of his children indulging in it. It is generally agreed that the images presented by this painting are difficult, even frustrating in their resistance to categorization. It seems that the production of such visual fields actually generates confusion and contradiction at the critical level as well. For we find the most determinate procedures being used to beget the most indeterminate and unstable visual results, even the most vague and subjective emotional states.

It may be that painters using these perceptual and intellectual contradictions have finally succeeded in doing what has been traditionally most difficult, to frustrate the game of communication. Painters have always been best when they are not playing that game. Convention is stifling painting as it always has. When any general agreement or consent, as embodied in any accepted usage or standard, dominates either in an individual style or an epoch, painting deteriorates. The new determinate abstraction has no agreed upon aesthetic or intellectual foundations. Its purposes are as diverse and contradictory as its practi-

tioners. To maintain this position is basic to the life of the movement. For this confusion and contradiction allows a maximum of ambiguity and freedom. The inability to completely conceptualize and categorize this painting results in a type of anonymity.

It is because the New Abstraction is not committed to some dogma or paradigm (i.e., to a particular way of viewing and investigating formal elements) that it seems so diverse and engaging to the vanguard audience and painters. In the long view there does seem to be one formal attribute or procedure that has been common to the old and the new abstraction: inconsistency and contradiction. In some cases, as in analytic Cubist painting, and more recently in the doctrine and work of Klee, Moholy-Nagy, Albers and Vasarely, formal conflict and contradiction have been systematically developed and employed. Multiple, often opposing, interpretations, perceptions and meanings have been presented and suggested by the work of these painters. And since these works are non-representational, they do not have the same regular connection with matters of fact that representational painting seems to enjoy. The visual structures of both the forementioned "classical" abstractionists and the contemporary "new" abstractionists have no empirical correlations with physical objects or no consistently logical methods for procedure in the construction of the painting. The artist has been free, but bound, to devise his own devices, systems and ultimately his own justifications. This fact has left the modern audience confused and often annoyed at the arbitrary, unreasonable, fluid form of the works and words created within this tradition.

Generally, up to the end of the nineteenth century, painters either slavishly

tried to learn correct perspective as part of their preparatory training and partially, or even completely disregarded the finer points of geometrical construction, and relied on the obvious tradition of diminution and a general intuitive spatial scheme. In general, we can say that painters worked with homogeneous consistent spatial ideas that were constructed to logically place objects into their relative positions. One historian has characterized a consistent perspective space as having: 1.) no distortion of straight lines, 2.) no distortion or foreshortening of objects or distances parallel to the picture plane, 3.) orthogonals converging to a single vanishing point on the fixed position of the observer's eye, and 4.) the size of objects diminishing in an exact proportion to their distance from the observer so that all quantities are measurable. That last phrase, so that all quantities are measurable, is the basis of spatial construction that completely distinguishes a clear perspective system. These systems were reasonable and followed a set of clearly determined rules. The proper employment and comprehension of these rules guaranteed a consistent and thereby, reasonable space.

The proudest achievement of Reason was the creation of Euclidean geometry which served as a model for precise thinking for two thousand years. The solution of the "rationalization of sight" in the Renaissance only naturally employed the tools of clear thought of geometry to construct the pictorial representation of the perceptual experience. But this pictorial representation was rigidly bracketed by numerous a priori assumptions about the visual world. These were: 1.) that the spectator maintain a single viewing position and eye level, 2.) that the object did not change its position while viewing, and 3.) that the viewer uses only one eye to view the object. Given these basic assumptions and following the rules of perspective construction, reasonable and consistent results could be attained. Unfortunately, the proponents of Reason confused consistency with truth. Truth involves empirical experience as a mediator; a theorem of mathematical perspective is true if it is a perfect description of the

state of affairs of the experiencing viewer. When we look at twentieth century painting, mathematical perspective is an inadequate representational form. Consistency is a logical question that does not involve the perceptual observations of the thinker.

It is now generally accepted that all thinking and most doing originates in the human mind, or more specifically, the brain. It is assumed that "all art originates in the human mind, in our reactions to the world rather than in the visible world itself", as E. Gombrich has said. Whenever we perceive, we supplement, rearrange and, from the most radical position, invent and organize visual experience. We invent hypotheses that are more or less adequate to allow us to operate in and adjust to the world. These hypotheses require answers in the form of some further visual information that will disprove or confirm them. In looking at a painting, we often start with very simple questions, such as "what is it?", or "where is it?". In a representational space the clues to the answers are well schematized and consistently presented. But in the New Abstraction any hypothesis which hopes to answer even the most elementary perceptual questions has necessarily to be relatively uncertain, tentative, and capable of revision and correction throughout the painting. It is the fluidity and instability of the order impressed on these visual fields that interests certain painters.

Psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated that any sensory field, if inspected for a long enough time will begin to shift and flow beneath our eyes, revealing its truly ambiguous character. This will occur even if the artist did not deliberately make the array a conflicting one. As one psychologist characterized it, visual "perception is perversely unstable". When artists invite conflict and contradiction into the process they are merely coaxing what is already a shifty situation. Although to some these deliberately inconsistent fields are more intriguing than simple logically ordered surfaces, certain principles of conflict or disorder must be utilized, or the chaos of independent elements is resolved into a simple decorative array of qualities. (Evidence: Faurier, and some-



times Jackson Pollock.)

Because of the uncertain, unstable and fluid nature of ambiguous patterns, it is all too common to dismiss the whole pre-occupation as an interest in "illusions", and to minimize or reject these "illusory" patterns for more "truthful" or "real" pictorial orders. As we have pointed out, a pictorial scheme is not true or false. By carefully qualifying the popular usage of "illusion", since it usually implies a defect or error in the visual judgement, we assert the fact that there is no one correct way of perceiving a stimulus pattern. Illusions should be treated simply as mis-judgements which can later be verified by reobservation. To experience figure-ground reversals or the Necker cube fluctuations is not to experience illusion, but to be aware of the fact that the interpretation is alternative.

The most provocative new view or "new look" at perception has centered around the work of the group known as Transactionalists. They are so called because of their emphasis on the transactional nature of perception - between the set or anticipation (guess or hypothesis) and the attributes of the object seen (cues). Such a view is substantiated by the statistical, probabilistic nature of perceptual judgements, as opposed to the precise, determinate and phenomenologically certain results achieved through conceptual inference. The Transactionalists have suggested that much of everyday cognitive life is probabilistic. Most of our judgements on whether an object is near or far, for example, rely on combinations of only partially valid cues. These cues may be absent or indeterminate on any given occasion when a categorization is made. This theory of perception is basic to the New Abstraction.

The tradition and history of looking at pictures has taught us to expect to see things in the picture in different relative locations. When we look at the picture we have certain expectations that are either confirmed or denied. As we have mentioned before, a "perception may be regarded as primarily the modification of an anticipation". One psychologist has termed this notion a "prognostic directive". In

expecting or being "set" to experience a certain kind of thing, we establish concepts or categories. These categories arise from anticipations we receive from the clues before we finally class an event as a certain thing in a certain place. But in a painting there is no absolutely certain way of determining a thing's position. We cannot call on other senses (touch, for example) to help us confirm our anticipation or guess. Position is relative and depends upon first, scanning the clues and then establishing the object's temporary identity or categorization. This categorization may determine the object's position. For example, an ellipse, if it is categorized as a circle, suggests a different spatial position: a circle seen on a slant.

The visual clues for the prediction of spatial position in a painting such as overlapping, relative size, direction of illumination, etc. could be criterial, that is, they could combine co-operatively to reveal a certain position (as in traditional perspective), or they could just conflict and produce, two, three or more possible positions (as in the New Abstraction), or they could just occur gratuitously across the field, not validifying or even suggesting a position (as in much of Kandinsky's work after 1920).

It is well known that the assumptions in one category of attributes or cues can affect perceptions in another. For example, if we assume the shape of a figure we perceive in the painting determines the shape at a unique slant but at an indeterminate distance, we might be viewing a trapazoid and not a rectangle seen at an angle, or an oval and not a circle seen at an angle. We know from experience that a figure's shape is a very important determinant of slant and that slant thus determined is closely involved in the observer's distance judgements. If we assume the slant of a figure, we then determine its unique shape at this slant, again with the distance indeterminate. If we add the assumption of the relative size of the figure to either the slant or shape assumptions, we have uniquely determined the distance. In our effort to find out what the cues "mean" or signify in painting, we are often guilty of overlooking the cues themselves,



and thus don't realize that we have isolated and identified or categorized a number of attributes at a very rapid rate indeed. We are unaware that we have selected certain attributes of the figures as critical (angles and intersections) points to search for in conformation of our anticipations. It may be that we have chosen only between the more or less possible interpretations and picked the most probable.

In the case of selecting one position from a number of possible interpretations in an ambiguous figure, we are simply deciding between alternative categories, i.e., in front of, behind, etc. In this sense the viewing of painting is a process of decision making. It is clear that the relative information one needs in various paintings often varies considerably. If the field is consistently organized, we might need only one or two highly reliable indications to make the decision. But if the field has conflicts or contradictions, then many cues have to be searched out before the choice is made. The tolerance level for this conflict is different for each. Some viewers take "risks" and go quickly to the categorical level from cue information, whereas others are more cautious and try to accommodate many cues while weighing their decision. The viewer has to be capable and willing to venture many possible "guesses" or "bets" in order to understand the highly variable schemes of the New Abstraction. The ultimate vitality and form of the schemes depends in turn on this willingness to venture guesses and to keep making them. In the most simple sense the decision or choice is hinged on three aspects or terms; and/or/not. The main question to be asked about the choice is, what are the probabilities of the several alternatives? If the probabilities are strongly in favor of one choice there is little uncertainty. But if the probability is low, the uncertainty is correspondingly high and the decision is difficult. It then is revised several times in the process of viewing the picture. This revision or new trial at accommodating a guess to the field (such as in the figure-ground phenomenon) is the basis of variable interpretations of

the picture.

Our first attempt to read the painting is to search for consistency, and this probabilistic interaction of the cues is upset in the event of antagonistic tendencies. Certain "hitches" develop, and break the smooth, easy assimilation of the incoming information. The interruption occurs because of the simultaneous presence of these incompatible tendencies. The perceptual conflict results from these relatively equal alternative routes and the absence of an accommodation of the visual field to our hypotheses. These hitches may be irritating as well as provocative. Viewers with little patience or skill for the game will soon become frustrated and antagonized by the work and its designer. It demands that they resolve the simultaneous presentation of the incompatible tendencies they observe. They are unwilling or unable to assume the "beholder's share". It is this period of perceptual lag during which the perception changes while the pattern remains constant that gives the uniqueness to this kind of schema in painting today. It is the result of a direct and conscious attempt by the painter to reduce our certainty in the choice or decision making process, to produce a kind of shaky confidence in any particular categorization. The contradiction is resolved only very slowly and is even then open to a number of revisions and doubts. In the New Abstraction the conflict is in the observer, and the contradiction is in the painting.

Conflict situations can give rise to intense arousal, with the viewer exploring the painting much more thoroughly than with simply resolved fields. It seems that the frustration (within tolerable limits) generated by the conflict keeps the search continuing. Beyond the tolerable limits curious situations develop. Berlyne, a noted psychologist, has pointed out:

Both Pavlov and Freud arrived independently at the conclusion that conflict produces neurosis, although the types of evidence on which they based this conclusion and the kinds of conflict they had in mind were very different. A whole host of writers, taking their cue largely from Freud's work, have interpreted many forms of normal

behavior as devices for reducing or minimizing conflict. They include not only dreams, parapraxes, and other relatively isolated departures from rationality discussed at length by Freud, but also distortions of perception and thinking and pervasive and lasting personality traits. Conflict has frequently been cited as the principle source of emotion, whether emotion is thought of as violent motor activity, autonomic activation, or as a disruption of outgoing processes.\*

Certainly the conflict generated by a painting is not capable in itself of producing neuroses, but it might be a cognitive and perceptual metaphor for this very much more complex and serious state. The tension caused by uncertainty of action or decision is the basic variable that is often dangerously close to disrupting the viewer's pleasure and search in the visual field. If the complexity is too great or the number and range of the values that a variable may hold is too large, than the uncertainty will isolate the beholder from his share. In a painting then, it seems wise for the painter not to generate maximum uncertainty (when an event has an equal chance of both materializing and not materializing).

It is interesting to consider why most of the New Abstractionists use geometric forms in their schemes of perceptual conflict. Is it an accident, or does there seem to be something achieved by geometrical figuration that is impossible using more fluid organic shape? A great deal of redundancy is needed to assimilate a very complex visual field. It is an attribute of geometric figures that they possess more inherent redundancy than any others. It is also curious that to produce an image that is most indeterminate or in conflict it is often necessary to rely on the most determinate and planned procedure. Geometric elements are necessary to produce a painting in which it is impossible to finally determine comparative lengths or distances. Shapes that are redundant, such as two-dimensional, closed outline shapes with properties of symmetry, simplicity, good continuation, good closure, and other forms of regularity are associated with the

Gestalt concept of figural goodness. It has been demonstrated that such forms of regularity may all be considered redundant in visual stimulation. Forms known to be "geometric" exhibit these properties to a very high degree. Thus, visual redundancy, figure-goodness and geometricity may be considered partial synonyms, redundancy being the most general term and geometricity referring to a more limited aspect of the same general property. Another related concept is familiarity. It may be considered as situational or external redundancy, as contrasted with redundancy built into the shape itself (internal redundancy). With geometric forms then, it is easier to move from the cue to the inference or the category - it is a circle, not an oval, it is a rectangle not a trapezoid. What can one say about the spatial position of an amoeba?

The purely formal concern with perception, ultimately has led to an interest in conflicting or inconsistent schemes, so little investigated by previous painters. This interest in ambiguity is admittedly a contemporary, even out-modedly, fashionable concern. But we have been made well aware of the ambiguity of our dreams, fantasies, reveries and most recently our "end of innocence". And of the uncontrolled and unstructured doodles, the codification of the unconscious by the surrealists and their New York heirs, who were also finally concerned with ambiguity, contradiction, and conflicts that resulted from undirected "psychic improvisations". The problems we have been discussing belong to artists who attempt to process and control the painting in a conscious and maximumly controlled fashion. This ambition has often been confused with the area of science, both by the critics and by the artists. But, as we have pointed out, visual art cannot give us knowledge of the physical world as does science. Rather we would emphasize that it demonstrates the various relationships between phenomenal events and presents the possibility for reflection on these visions. Though these visions are rooted in conflict and contradiction, this should give us no over-concern. As Oppenheimer has reminded us: "...we live by being ambiguous, by not settling things because their co-pres-

\*Berlyne, Conflict, Curiosity, and Arousal, 1959.



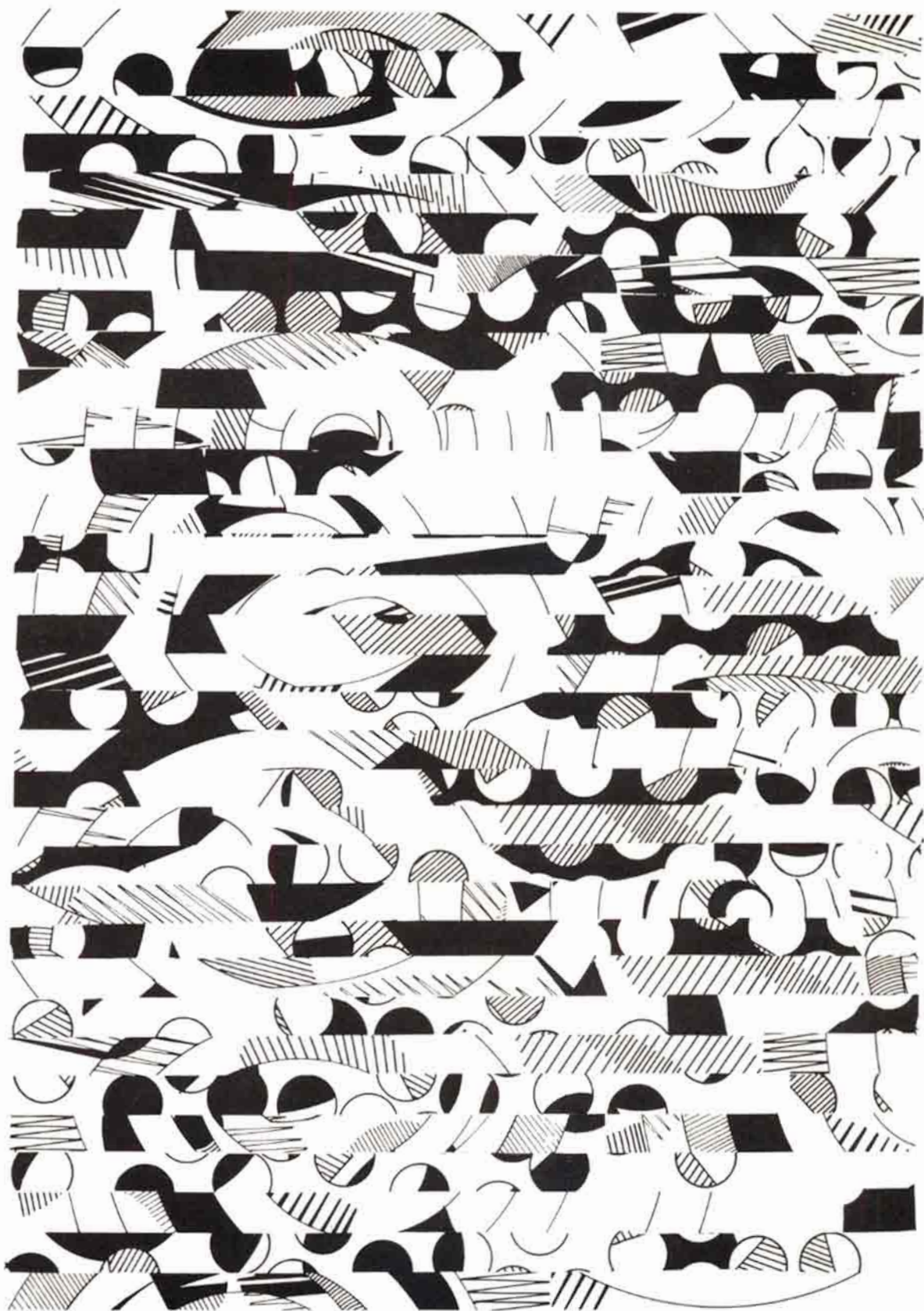
ence in the mind may be a source of beauty." Science, on the other hand, he says, "...consists of two things: first and ever more strikingly, an absence of inconsistency. Thus, we may talk of life in terms of purpose and adaptation and function, but we have found in living things no tricks played upon the laws of physics and chemistry. We have found and I expect we will find a total consistency, and between the different subjects, even as remote as genetics and topology, an occasional sharp relevance."

No matter how rigid the claim of the formalistic artists may be, painting, or any perceptual field is not a closed system of formal relations. The only necessity is that we define the suggestive or affective experience of the work in terms of the visual field itself rather than in terms of extra-perceptual content.

It is naive to claim that this is an art for everyman. The quality and depth of the experience depend on the willingness to perceive and the persistence to overcome certain levels of frustration. This is the beholder's share. "The willing beholder responds to the artist's suggestion because he enjoys the transformations that occur in front of his eyes", as Gombrich reminds us. No theory of social, biological, psychological improvement or social progress is advanced here to justify the use of conflicting perceptual schemes in the New Abstraction. It is not an individual or social moral "pacer", but finally only a sensory pleasure, and secondarily, it is often worthy of intellectual scrutiny. What finally seems a hopeless tangle of intellectual remoteness turns pre-verse (Bat Guano in Dr. Strangelove) and sensual when we look at one of these New Abstractions.







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