

## Optics and the Anonima Group

# This Year's Exhibit Model: Art on the Move

NEW YORK CITY.

Nothing better illustrates the breadth—if not the depth—of man's ingenuity than each new art season in New York. Beside it pale even the designers of Detroit, who annually deliver a brilliant, new car to top last year's brilliant, new car. The 1963-64 prize model was Pop Art. The year before, it was Junk Art. Before that, the headlines belonged, on varying occasions, to Abstract Expressionism (or "AE") to Neocubism, to Neorealism: The weary mind may be forgiven if it cannot sort out the precise chronology.

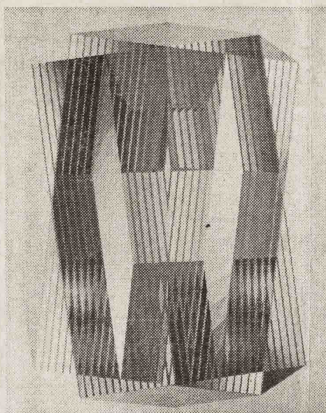
We now have, for better or worse, "retinal" and "kinetic" art—two branches of a phenomenon that certain of its practitioners prefer to call "neoformalism." The mania for terms does not stop here. We have a mainstream of retinal artists now commonly referred to as "the Optics"; and we have, needless to say, a counterstream: The Anonima Group, a band of three painters who publish a magazine to disseminate their ideas. So far the kinetic artists haven't split into factions, but that day should not be far away.

What the phenomenon boils down to, technically, is art on the move—literally and metaphorically. The retinal artists present canvases painted so that the eye must move vigorously to keep up with them. The kinetic artists go one step further: Their products move in fact as well as in theory. Unusual? Perhaps. But the whole business not only proceeds from a premise buttressed with validity; it's clearly the new wave in art. It is, in other words, the 1964-65 model.

### Proof in Three Shows

The proof is threefold: A show just ended at the Martha Jackson Gallery (as well as another in preparation for December); a show that would like to end but can't at the Nordness Gallery; a show due to take place at the Museum of Modern Art in February.

The hero of the past month at the Jackson Gallery was Julian Stanczak. A young Polish emigre who now teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Mr. Stanczak has committed himself without reservation to the new retinal frontier. His canvases make few concessions to the



—Adeleide De Menil

From the Anonima Group: "Adele's Class Ring" by Edwin Mieczkowski.

eye and none to wit. Lines of varying thickness weave their way across fields of color varying from the primaries to the pastels. Rare is the man who can stand before a dizzying alternation of bold blacks and whites, such as those that enliven *Light of Darkness*, without pausing to steady his hold on gravity. Yet Mr. Stanczak has been an early-season hit: Crowds, critics, and buyers (the U.S. Information Agency among them) prove it.

### The Anonima Group

This is partly because the Optics, like Mr. Stanczak and his colleague, Richard Anuszkiewicz, have been careful to explain what they are about. They are learned chaps, by and large, familiar with the sciences of both optics and the reading of academic papers in public. The crowds, whatever their instinctive reactions may be, understand what those canvases are all about—which is, basically, an exploration of human perception. If those lines dizzy and disconcert the eye, they also teach it, say the Optics; indeed, they awaken it to a new awareness.

Three painters named Ernst Benkert, Edwin Mieczkowski, and Frank Hewitt make up the Anonima Group. Their public day is yet to come—at the Jackson Gallery in late December—but random showings have already made them a force to reckon with. The Anonimas are quite as adept as Stanczak and Co. at the art of tricking the eye, but they're interested in doing more than that—in playing with color and meaning. To put it another way, they are not afraid of entertaining people. "There is an outside reference in most of our paintings," Mr. Benkert says. "We are trying to work with many more possibilities in a painting than retinal play."

The result is always colorful and often witty. *Adele's Class Ring*, by Mr. Mieczkowski, is a perfect example. Bright reds, greens, oranges, and yellows interweave throughout the picture; they're pleasing not only in themselves, but also in their illumination of the theme suggested by

the title. Mr. Benkert's *Rumble* is also pleasing to the eye, if less direct in its "outside" reference: Various shades of red and blue play against each other across circles and squares, changing in color, and within color in value.

Around the corner from Mr. Stanczak, Mr. Mieczkowski, and retinal experimentation, John Kingstein is journeying into the domain of kinetic art at the Nordness Gallery. Mr. Kingstein's exhibition officially closed on Sept. 19, but a late—and somewhat misdated—rave review in the *New Republic* is sending droves in to sample the "boxes" that are now his trademark—and which will shortly go on nationwide tour.

### Art on the Move

Mr. Kingstein's boxes resemble primitive television sets. Inside each one, four sheets of gaily decorated plastic revolve across each other, moved by four electrically powered rollers, creating a swift succession of merging and dissolving shapes. Once again we have art on the move.

But Mr. Kingstein says his proximity to the Messrs. Stanczak, Mieczkowski, and Hewitt is purely geographical. "I think these painters are playing optical tricks, playing with illusion," he says. "I am out to make abstract music."

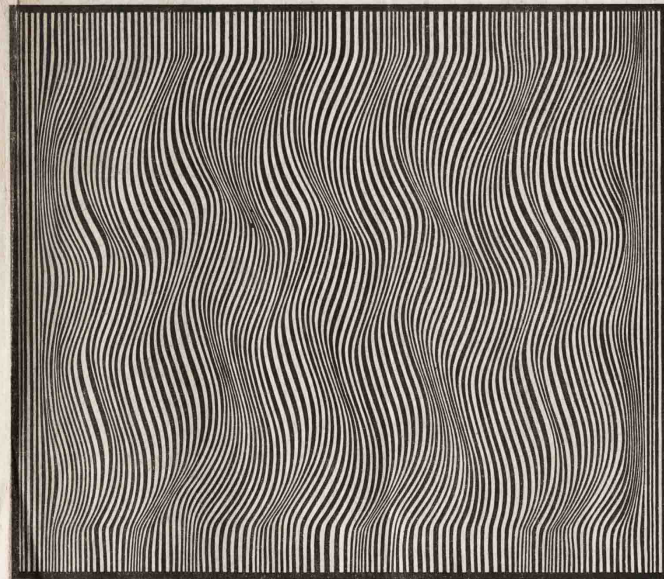
### Repetitive But Pleasant

Few can doubt that he has achieved something like it. Mr. Kingstein's shapes tend to be repetitive—one senses an overreliance on squares, triangles, and abstract fishes reminiscent of Calder's mobiles—but they are pleasingly limned; more important, the kinetic principle guarantees an infinitive variety of combinations. Even so simple a box as *Kinematic No. 12*, which confides itself entirely to basic shapes like the rectangle, square, and circle, presents surprising and unpredictable patterns. Thus the eye is perpetually soothed and refreshed.

As if to confirm the significance of Mr. Stanczak and Mr. Kingstein's success—as well as the promise of the Anonima Group—the Museum of Modern Art has placed its weighty blessing on retinal and kinetic art. On Feb. 25 it will convene a two-month mammoth show entitled *The Responsive Eye*. The show will display more than 125 paintings and "constructions" by artists from 10 countries. In the museum's words, *The Responsive Eye* will document "a widespread and powerful new direction in contemporary art."

### Impulse to Snicker

For all that, the impulse to snicker is strong. It rises even in the most attentive gallerygoer, carefully indoctrinated in the premises of the new art. Why? Surely we have passed the point of demanding that art be representational, or that it confine itself to the small circle of tools available to artists of yesteryear—to oil, canvas, brush, paper, and chalk. When Mr. Stanczak demands, in effect, that he be allowed to use what he knows about the mechanics of the light in painting, he must be granted the logic of his demand. When Mr. Kingstein explains that "nobody seemed to be taking any advantage of the new techniques in plastics and elec-



—O. E. Nelson

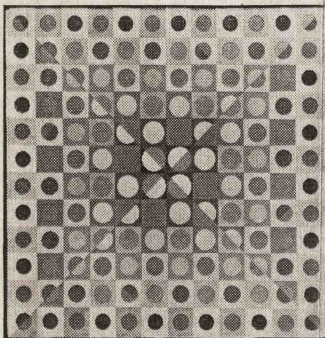
In "Light of Darkness" Julian Stanczak uses an alternation of bold blacks and whites to produce a dizzying effect.

tricity and gearing. . . . I felt that the times called for the use of technology," he is on solid ground.

Why, then, the sense of disappointment? Largely because we are now observing nothing more than spade-work. Yet it is sophisticated craftsmanship—the careful, painstaking manipulation of detail—that makes a great work of concisely constructed art. Such craftsmanship can only be

learned. Rembrandt did not initiate a new "school"; he culminated one. Stanczak and Kingstein are not culminating anything; by their own admission, they are part of a beginning—one that must lead in time to a surer craft if retinal and kinetic art is to survive the fate of faddism. Let us hope it does. The "new direction" makes solid sense—in theory.

—DOUGLAS M. DAVIS



"Rumble": Shades of red and blue.