

ANONIMA GROUP

Henry P. Raleigh*

To a young painter in the middle to late 1950's it was not the best of all possible worlds. The odds were fairly good that a painter in his twenties, especially if he had the good fortune to live in New York City, would be closely or loosely identified with the ill-fated but not inaccurate title, Second Generation Abstract Expressionism. This generation learned much in those years. One lesson was fatal to Abstract Expressionism: there was very little left to do. The vernacular, if not the style, appeared to have exhausted itself immediately upon its inheritance. Historicism was an alternative but retreat by default is not the most appealing choice to the young. Other choices and other values had to be sought. Cynicism was not the least of these and furnished an avenue of escape that was peculiarly the New York artists'. But what was it like then outside of the American centers of this activity? Disillusion advanced only a bit more slowly. The well-paying side-shows of art operated by higher education very quickly closed the gaps between city and hinterland. In 1960, a 24-year-old art instructor at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, wrote:

We 'know' about Action Painting. We are even so sure of its methods, its persuasive devices, its psychological and philosophical justification, that we *teach* it in the professional art schools and academies.

And the consequences of that knowledge:

This affirmation of the value of the individual's *felt* response, his self-centered reaction to his narrow view of the world, has recently caused no end of boredom, impatience, and dissatisfaction.

In 1962, another man, a painter who had been the teacher of the first, wrote in a private publication called, *In-Out*:

Unfortunately, in being incoherent and cryptic in meaning, action painting and other informal schools of similar propensities, come very close to an approximation of the messages delivered to us by external perceptions. The viewer is left with the dissatisfactions that are experienced in any uncoded appearance that is continuous with the external world. The quarrel here is with the unprocessed fact of paint presented as paint, the return to a worship of raw 'nature.'

But idealism is an alternative to ennui. The above two painters were to join a third and in the early spring of 1964, the three, in the Lydo bar on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, selected a name for the group from the frontispiece of an Italian book on steamships. They were not to learn until later that the name of their group, *Anonima*, means 'incorporated' in Italian. The history of the organization, from the chance meeting of its members in 1957 through its development up to 1964 are chronicled by Helen Weinberg in the second magazine of the group (*Anonima*) (cf. Fig. 1). To have one's own written history is, after all, an existential act of absurdity, a point implicitly stated in the brochure for the group's exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1966 [1] (cf. Figs. 2, 3 and 4). But what remains interesting is the fact that a rare event in American art which took place over eight years ago involving a few painters of ability has persisted.

It is perhaps unlikely that three artists living in New York City would have, during the last decade, banded together and accepted an intellectually Spartan program of study and work, renouncing, "... Commercial Galleries, Biennales, Competitions, Prizes, Commissions, Mass Media, Publicity, Critics and Architects" [2]. These were the desires and prizes offered by the scene and the increasing socialized and ritualized means of attaining them were well known. Aspiring strangers to New York were swiftly taught at loft *soirées* and the classrooms at The Cedar Bar and Dillon's. Novitiates waited eagerly for *entrée*, the waiting lines extended from New Jersey to California. One recalls with some nostalgia the *au courant* displays of the Museum of Modern Art of the late 'fifties in which the young and the old painters were happily mixed. Painters still on the wrong side of the inner circles jealously scanned the biographical notes of the shows' catalogs, calculating the ages of the artists to see how far yet they might be from ultimate, official success. Ernest Briggs, Sam Francis, Grace Hartigan and Larry Rivers were the youngest of the '12 Americans' show in 1956. A few years later, Alfred Leslie, Joan Mitchell and Jasper Johns were younger still. In 1959, the situation was summed up as follows:

The big difference between the generation of painters included in this book and the ones that preceded them is that the present generation

* Chairman, Division of Art, State University College, New Paltz, N.Y. 12561, U.S.A. (Received 3 September 1968.)

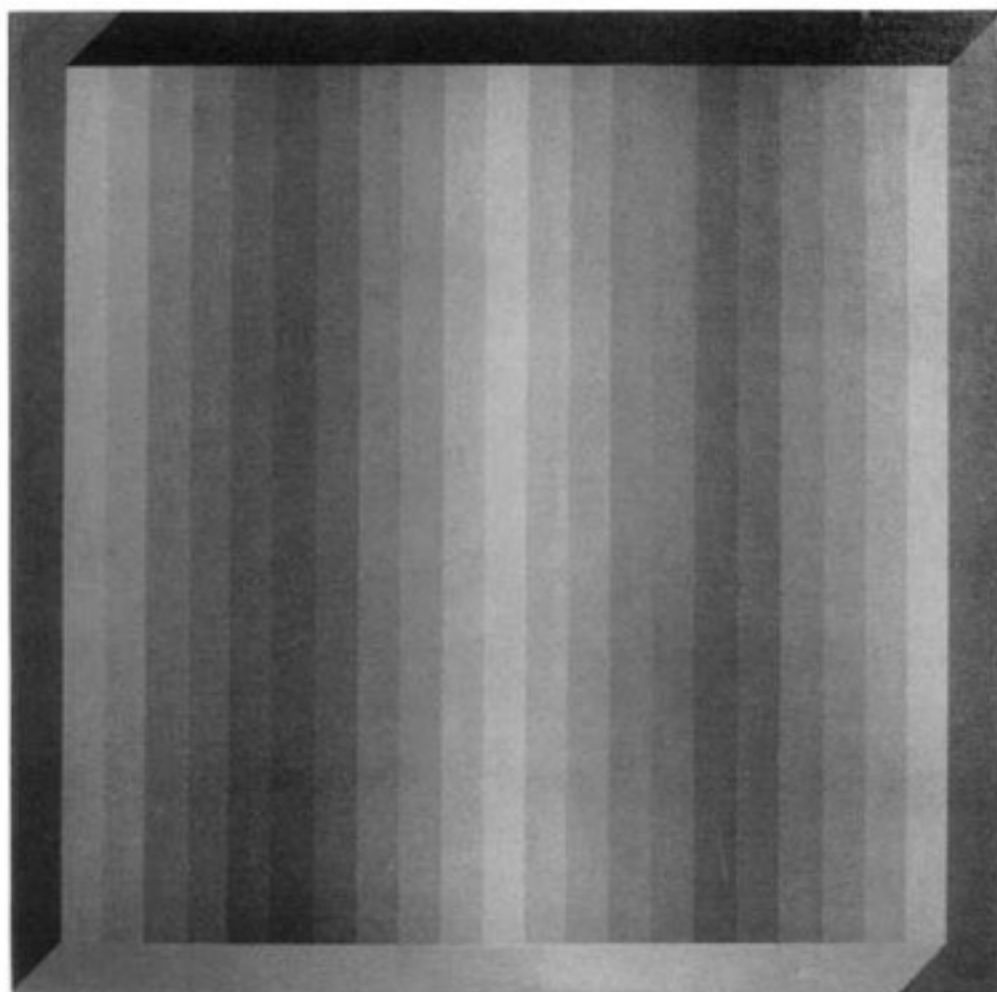


Fig. 1. Ernst Benkert, 'Lattice Prey', acrylic paint on Masonite, 24 × 24 in., 1964.

for the first time in the history of American art, has had domestic heroes [3].

All of New York was a group. Stuart David called it, "... the only locus in the Western Hemisphere where Art can properly incubate" [4]. The nearest thing to an organization of artists was the co-operative galleries of the Lower East Side, concentrating on East 10th Street and now having left their fame on these few cherished blocks. No programs, no intellectualized disciplines held the co-operatives together. In that same issue of *School of New York*, James Schuyler quotes from *The Chekhov Cha-Cha*, a play by Alfred Leslie:

(Young Painter)—Listen . . . among the things
I hate is ideas as programs
[3].

Large in membership, often to large, noisy and quarrelsome, the co-operatives were simply the first impatient step in the trip uptown.

By 1967 all members of *Anonima* lived in New York (cf. Fig. 5). Two had been living there for some years. The *Anonima Art History*, compiled partly in jest, partly in conviction, lists New York as the best place to live—the Creative Center of the World. Cited here too are the five best painters from 1920 to the present: de Kooning, El Lissitzky, Mondrian,

Klee and Miro. Few of these artists are among the usual domestic idols. The presence of Mondrian and Miro is significant for one is hero, the other anti-hero. The development out of the aesthetics of Miro, Masson and Surrealism led to the impasse of Expressionism; from Mondrian austerity of collective thought and the intellectual palatability of sameness was accepted against the criteria of universality—whether spiritual or empirical makes little difference except in style of proclamation. Romantic spirituality was more a nineteenth century fashion, less appealing for the twentieth, which prefers worldly protest. One can generalize to the extent of saying that all group movements are products of this century; they are invariably intellectual in their professed programs and probably manifest expressions of frustration with an aesthetic that is viewed as devoid of value and, therefore, intolerable to younger artists.

Obvious comparisons can be made between European groups and the American, *Anonima*. All may be born of situations that are thought to be oppressive either aesthetically, socially or politically. The latter two conditions have been of more fundamental concern to European groups and Marxism weaves throughout their manifestos as intellectual sustenance. But *Anonima* is American,

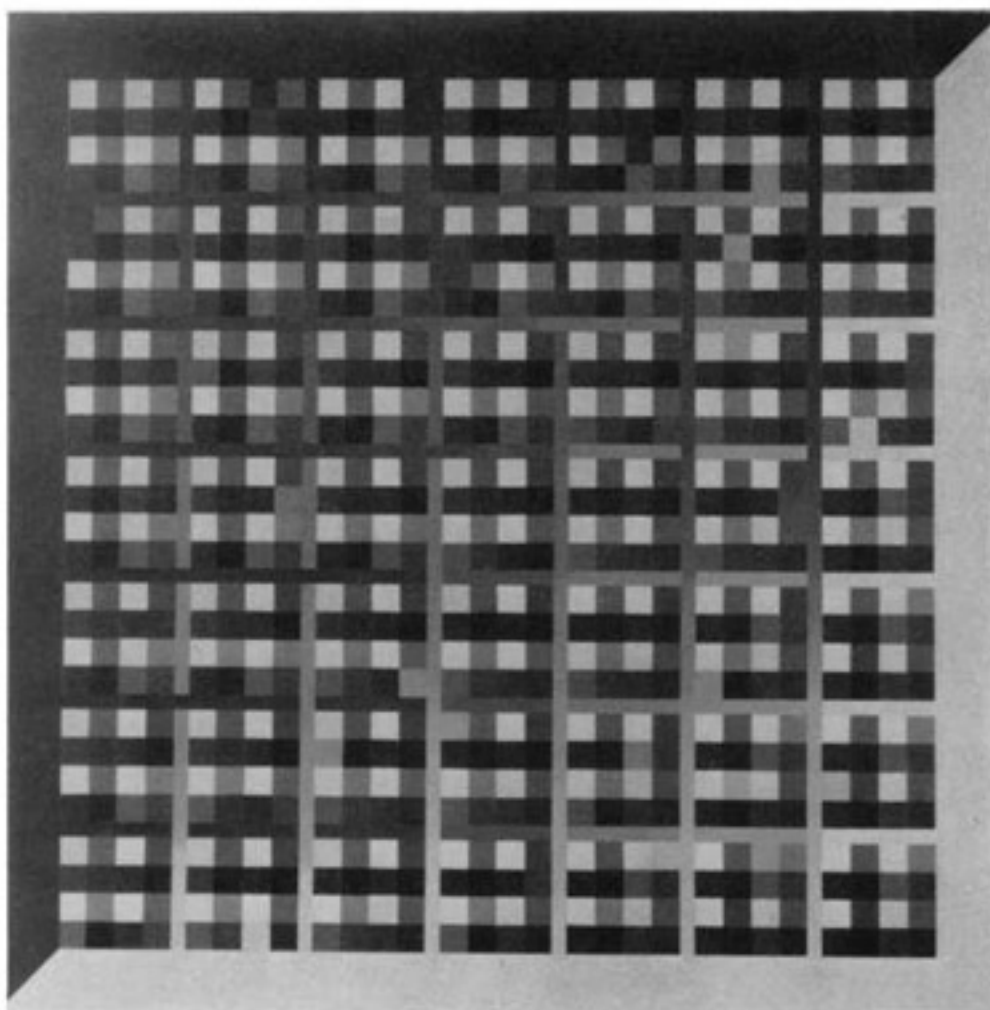


Fig. 2. Frank Hewitt, 'Overlap Series No. 9', acrylic paint on Masonite, 36 × 36 in., 1966.

social and political regeneration is absent from its beliefs and the brand of intellectualism is distinctly pragmatic. George Rickey once commented that groups were the disease of the young—neighbourhood gangs so to speak, marking out their turf and defending it against all comers. Age, fame and apathy quickly demolish groups and this fate has befallen several European ones. The demise of *Equipo 57*, *GRAV* are the better known examples. This does not really explain the cause. Group phenomena are a symptom of something whenever or wherever they appear. In the case of *Anonima*, the membership is no longer young. It is one of the few groups in this country and perhaps the only group movement in New York City. And the group has survived eight years without sign of internal disintegration. The actions of a young artist are, in some measure, a commentary on the age and activity of art that he observes. Any parallel action on the part of two or more artists sustained over a period of time becomes a stronger and more indicative statement that informs us as much of the nature of the thing reacted to as the reaction itself. The formation of a group is an act of protest against a prevailing condition. The intellectualized platform and work programs have no great definitive meaning in themselves. It is the fact of rejecting the aberrations

of the historical present and affirming the necessity of historical continuity that has meaning.

Anonima knows this very well. A statement of the group, from the catalog of an exhibition called '1 + 1 = 3,' sub-titled 'Retinal and Perceptual Art', is recognition of the need of clarifying this point:

1. Although the term 'optical' has been used in the past in a general way to refer to vision in all its aspects, it does have a specific designation; namely to that branch of physical science which treats of the nature and properties of lights and lenses and other optical instruments.

Any book that used the words 'optics' or 'optical' in its title today would be a highly technical and mathematical study of the geometrical projection of light and its effect on lenses. This would indicate an exclusive use of the terms 'optical' and 'optics' outside of the realm of general visual experience.

2. Since as painters we do not study or employ any of the theories or data of optics as defined above, it would be misleading to use this term to describe our work.

3. We have studied and employed the theory and data of perceptual psychology and have found it

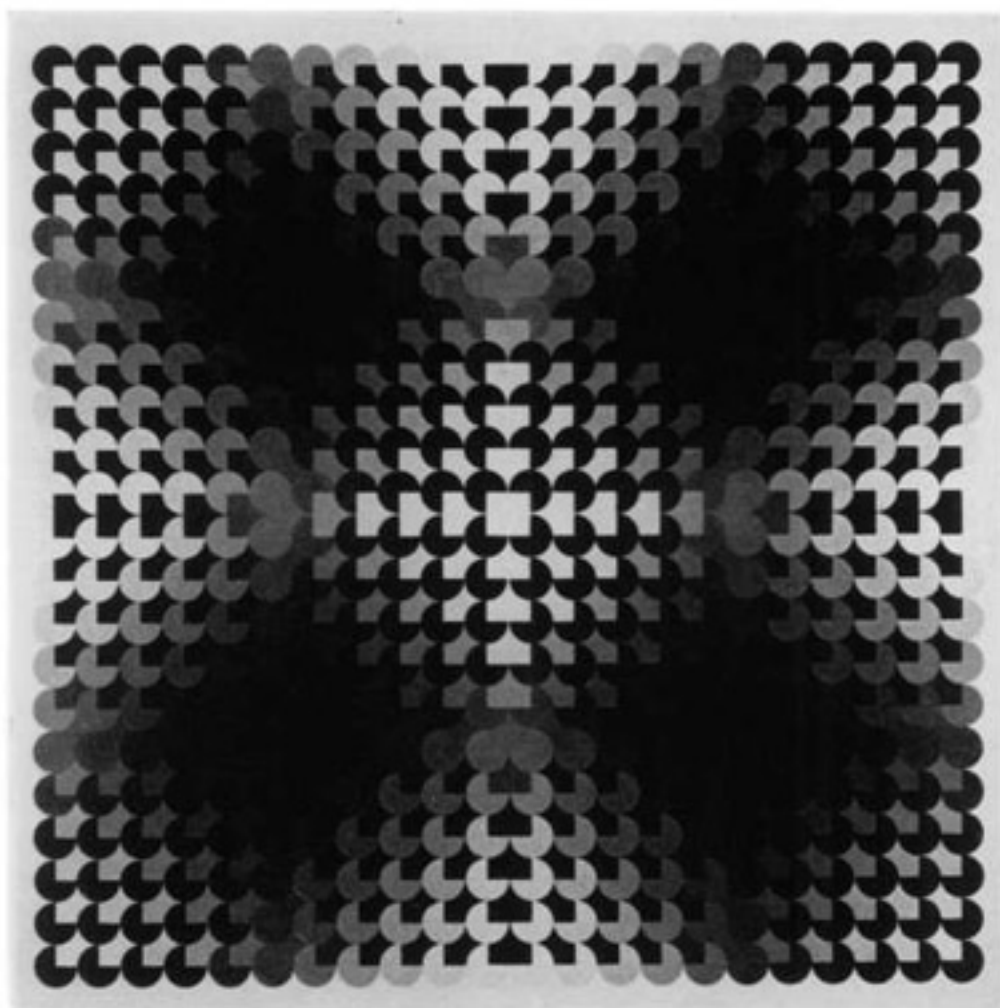


Fig. 3. Edwin Mieczkowski, 'Small Blok, No. 2', acrylic paint on Masonite, 24 × 24 in., 1966.

relevant and useful in the construction of visual schemes. If we have to refer our work to any field outside of the history of painting, we would prefer that it be to the psychology of perception. But we are reluctant to employ any name or suggestion of a name which so limits the description of our work that its persistent connection with the history of painting is lost sight of [5].

Only in very rough fashion can groups be seen as rational reactions to an irrational situation as say, modern groups have rebelled against the vagaries of *art informel*. By and large, all group movements at this time as well as in the past have attempted to recapture a stable condition that they feel to be missing in their time. *Anonima* seeks its historic progenesis in the form of Platonism that underlay some of the most significant movements in Western art: the regard for 'measurable qualities' in a distinct spatial order. In one of the publications of the group, a member speaks of the group's alliance with 'New Abstraction', that is, those objects outside the current critical and historical patterns made by painters who apply perceptual and intellectual contradictions. This would include Analytic Cubism and, more broadly, systems of perspective which,

'... 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' [6]. The appeal is to order and not to anarchy.

With the exception of Constructivist groups, de Stijl and, possibly, the Italian Futurists, and to the extent that they can be characterized as group movements and not generic parts of a general style movements, only a few group advocate a stylistic revolution and more often than not they stand indirectly for some form of style revival. This appears to be as true of modern groups as it was of older groups such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Barbizon School. Despite the verbose credos of recent European groups, all outlining problematic research proposals, implied discipline is without great substance. None has produced new ideas of representing space nor has discovered facts of light or movement or optics that were not exploited by earlier movements, notably Constructivism and, even more revealing, that are not well known to those areas of science which have been ransacked for usable language and cursory projects. Non-Euclidean geometry and systems analysis in the hands of artists is too often amateurish, a *tour-de-force* of the mind that serves other ends,

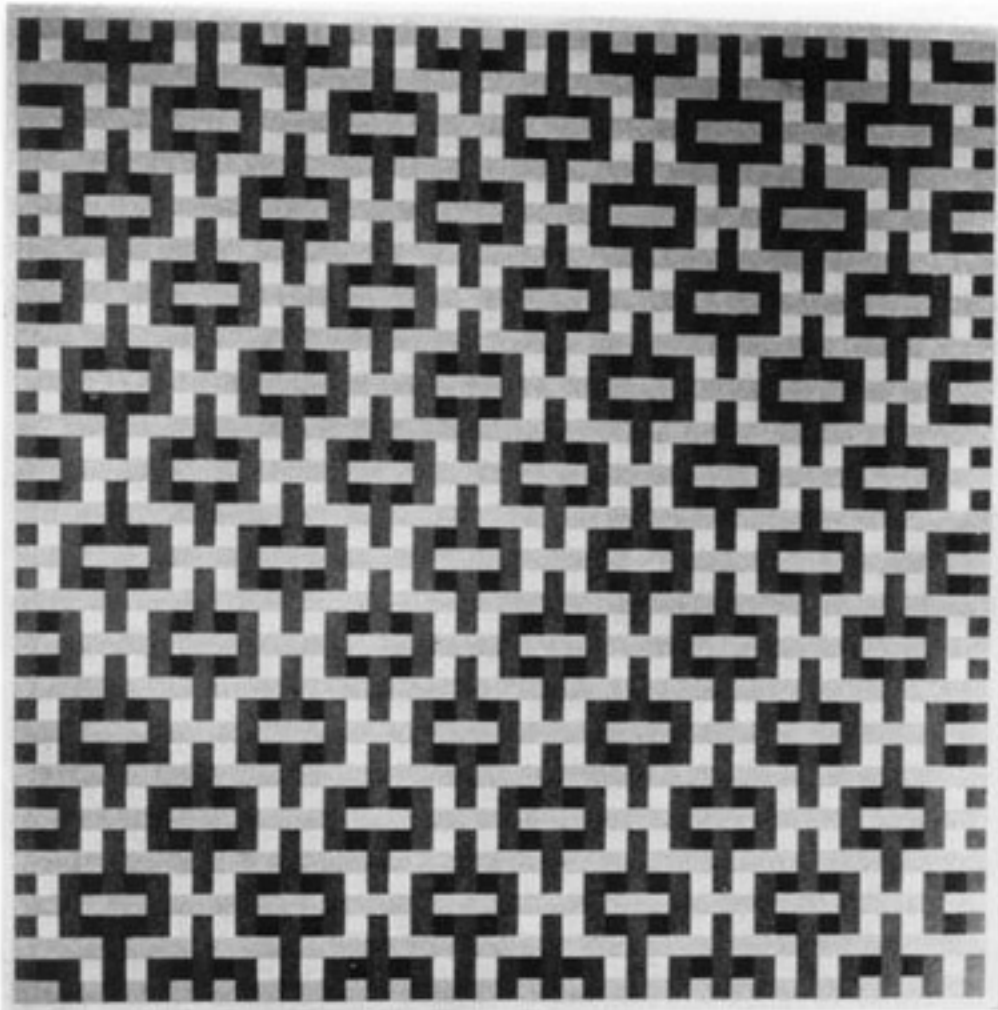


Fig. 4. Ernst Benkert, 'Overlap, No. 3', acrylic paint on Masonite, 24 × 24 in., 1966.

certainly not pure research. On this point, the *Anonima* group is an interesting contrast to European colleagues.

Perhaps because *Anonima* has no social overtones, perhaps because it is now distinctly New York-American, the members agree that the restrictive and highly definitive work program and problems it poses, which is unusual for groups generally, is arbitrary. Any problem, so long as it is intellectually tough, would do as well. Such pragmatism is seldom risked by European groups, nor will they conscientiously permit personalization of their members' works, although, paradoxically, their espousal of programs of enormous latitude and ambiguity encourages this. The *Groupe de recherche d'art visuel* (GRAV), for example, before its demise outlined a program that included surface movement in various aspects from optical to stylistically formal; animation of surfaces, static relief, cinematic motion and virtually all other possibilities of visual motion, real and illusionistic. Consequently, work from many of the European groups has been highly varied and comparatively individualistic, most commonly representing the various ideas of hard-edge abstraction and kinetics under the guise of a regulated and non-stylistic movement.

Anonima's program is distinct, its intellectual

ground is simply revealed by: Gestalt perceptual psychology, reflected particularly in the work of E. H. Gombrich; transactional psychology and most recently the ecological orientation to perception taken by James J. Gibson [7, 8]. The 1966-1967 publication of *Anonima*, sub-titled *Perceptual Inquiry: Overlap*, notes the current preoccupation with two-dimensional presentation of the 'just noticeable differences' above the critical perceptual threshold. The later black paintings of Ad Reinhardt are good examples of this. The group's specific work project is drawn from the generalized premise that perception is understood as probable mental schema. From this same publication, a member writes:

Very basically, there are six kinds of perceptual tasks that are used in psychophysics and these could easily be said to be the methods of a section of the work of *Anonima*.

1. the relatively simple detection of a change;
2. the detection of the change of a specific attribute;
3. the detection of a change with attribute and direction specified;
4. the detection of a change with amount specified;

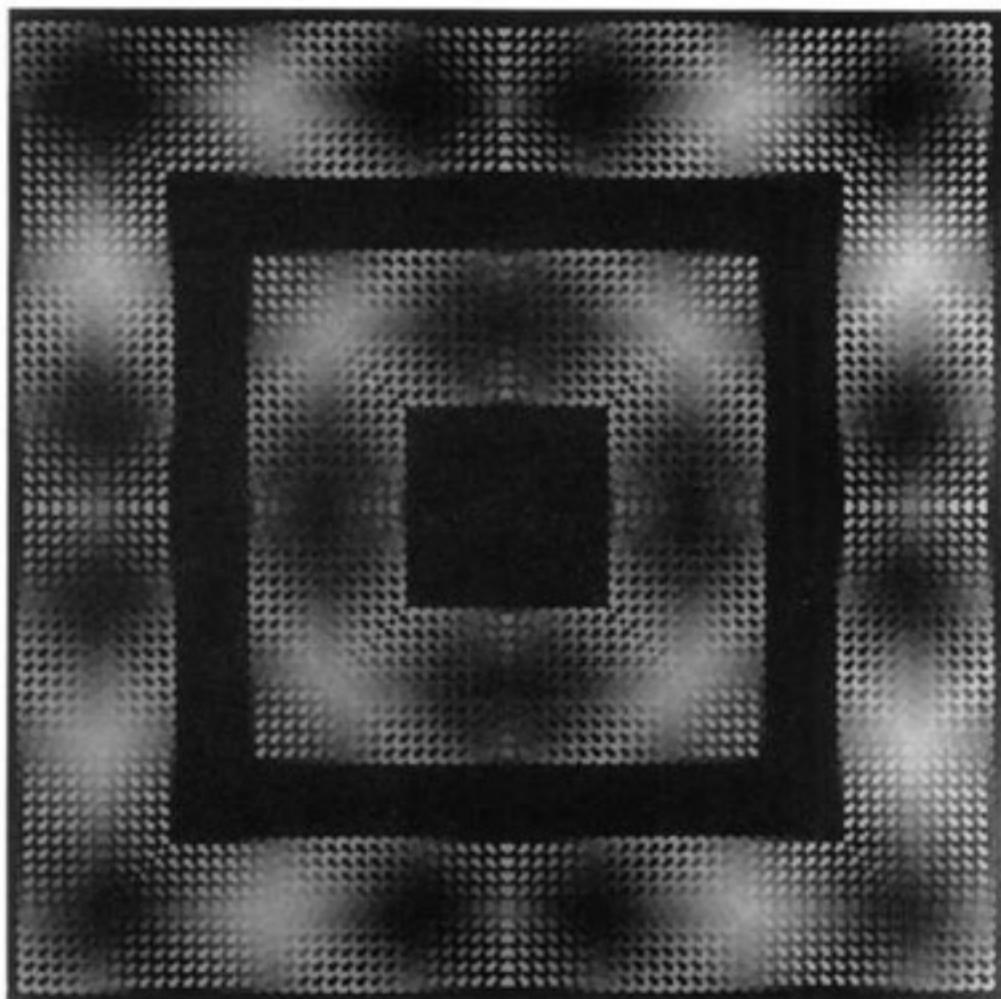


Fig. 5. Edwin Mieczkowski, 'Color Blok (Overlap)', acrylic paint on Masonite, 72 × 72 in., 1967.

5. similarity judgments;
6. recognition thresholds and identification thresholds.

A characteristic problem of the painter is to produce a difference with the same materials that fulfills the limitations of any given problem, structured to meet his own visual tolerance as well as another viewer's. The problem may be more or less complex but its essential perceptual nature is not altered. *Anonima* does not confuse nor attempt to identify the methods of the painter with those, vastly more measured, of the scientist. But, in either case, phenomenological judgments have to be made.

Anonima enunciates a monotonously limited and precisely defined program of four related perceptual stages. Its 'agreed upon limitations' are based on the study of the psychology of visual perception and its application to stable two-dimensional schemes. A four-year plan, now in its third phase, forms an outline or control:

The plan will focus on certain definite features of visual structures: the obvious two-dimensional monocular cues of an implied three-dimensional experience, listed (and to be examined) in order of their (1) overlap (or interference phenomena), (2) relative size changes, (3) brightness ratio (or

relative contrast phenomena) and (4) light and shade. (*Anonima* Statement—June 1966.)

The group members engage in, one stage at a time, an equally severe work regime that determines the minimum number of paintings to be produced over a given period of research, usually limited to one year for each step in the perceptual problem. Such working arrangements are imposed by the group on its members and each member may set within this his own Draconian schedule. One member, working on a nine-foot plane, may establish for himself a production quota of three stripes a day; another may turn out one painting a week. The restrictions of their format make such schedules painfully repetitious. No other activity in painting is encouraged or even really permitted by the group. There would be little time to stray from the group's program of work without breaking membership entirely. While conformity to a visual standard is not demanded, the group's work shares very close visual similarity; partly because of problem limitations, partly because the paintings (always paintings) are most generally in acrylics on panels, often squares of equal dimensions.

As in European groups, *Anonima's* visual style is that of hard-edge abstraction, overall planar

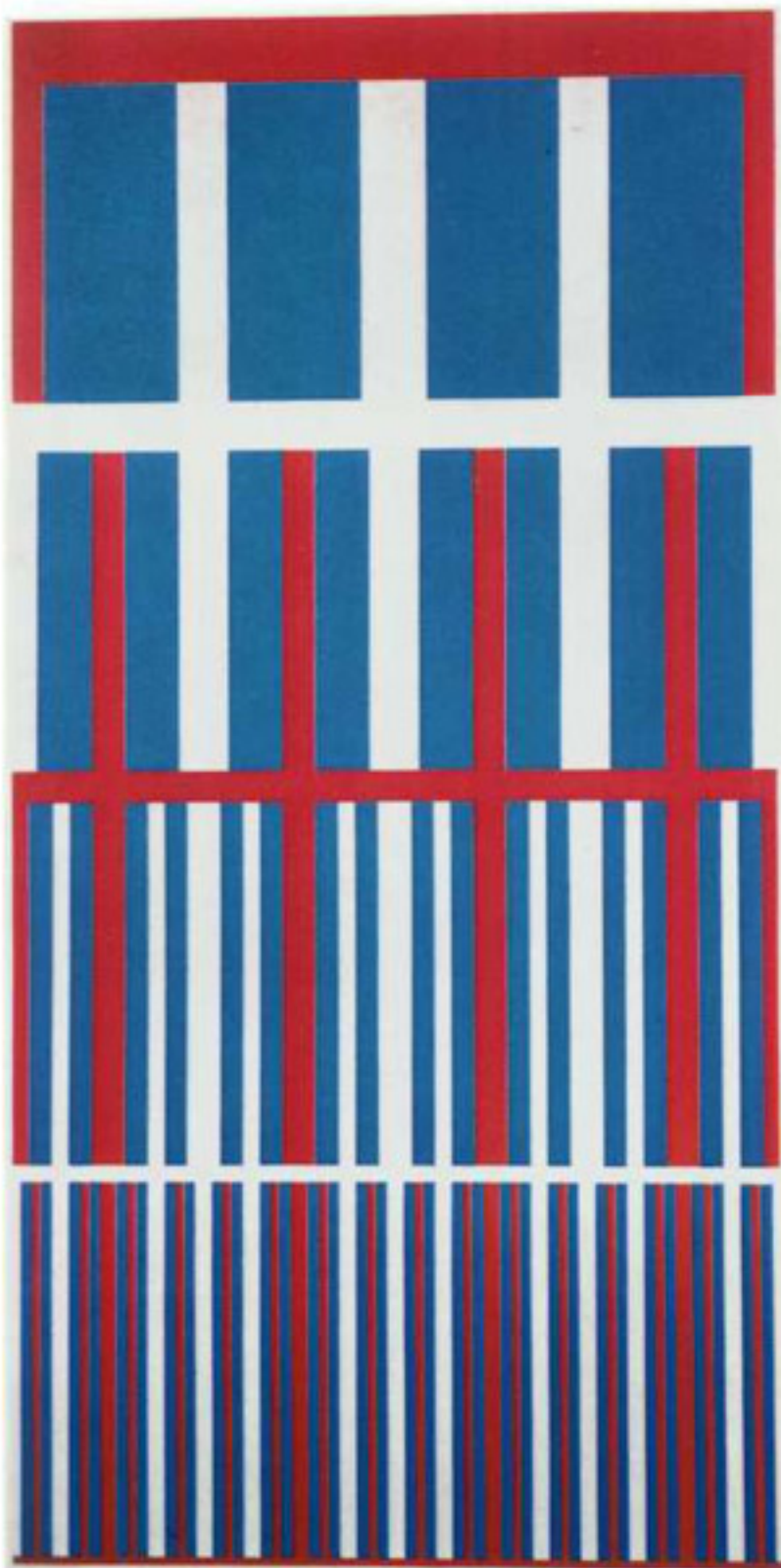


Fig. 6. Ernst Benkert, 'Size Change, Blue and Red', acrylic paint on Masonite, 96 × 48 in., 1968.

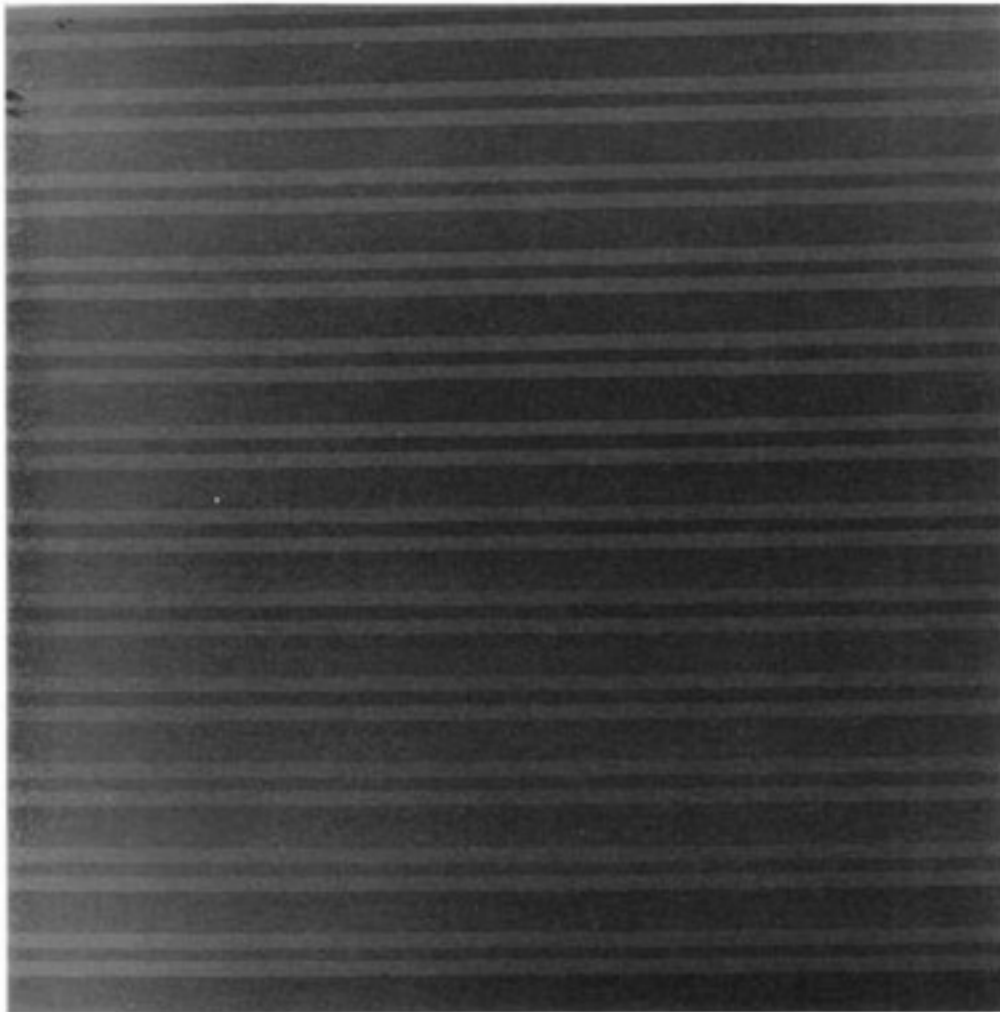


Fig. 7. Frank Hewitt, 'Brightness Ratio, Pythalocyanine Green', acrylic paint on Masonite. 72 x 72 in., 1968.

structures, quite without figurative imagery. Abstraction is considered to be the simplest, most reduced scheme by which to study abstract problems. Although the group admits that these problems may be translated into any stylistic idiom, figurative treatment has yet to be attempted. I believe a fundamental common denominator of all groups is that their products are unfailingly abstract, and this is the most significant motivating value for contemporary groups.

Abstraction, one distinct inheritance of the last stylistic developments in the history of Western art, is thus divested of its accumulated historic convention and symbol and is preserved as an arbitrary and impersonal technical vehicle for the artist. In this manner, the compulsion for change is removed and the debilitating necessity of engaging in personal competition promoted by the doctrines of absolute creativity, the terrible requirement that each artist must have his own 'thing,' is absent. The paranoia of revolution is replaced by a security of conviction and the permanency of forms that are neither eclectic nor outrageously and insanely in flux.

The pioneers of group spirit, men who heralded the notions of depersonalization, of unsigned works, of

team projects (artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Rodchenko and Malevich) fought a tradition. But now there is no enemy. All is freedom for the artist. Attacks on the market place are hypocritical, for the market place does not exclude the wares of the groups. Many group members, with the exception of *Anonima's*, have accepted personal patronage while collectively condemning it. Where tolerance and critical good will have become a vice, *Anonima* can take pains to be ignored but it has not been rejected. Its only commercial gallery showing at Martha Jackson in 1965 ('Vibrations II') was a relative commercial success. One member sold almost all of his works and the other two were not without sales. Yet the subsequent withdrawal from the gallery was not due to any feelings of displeasure with the management but only because *Anonima* no longer had full control over its enterprise. The principle is important for:

... at stake is the freedom to make the work, to exhibit the work, in whatever form and whenever it seems necessary, or simply to withhold it, following the rhythm of the artist and the development of his work, rather than the market or any of its more subtle extensions (*Anonima Statement*).

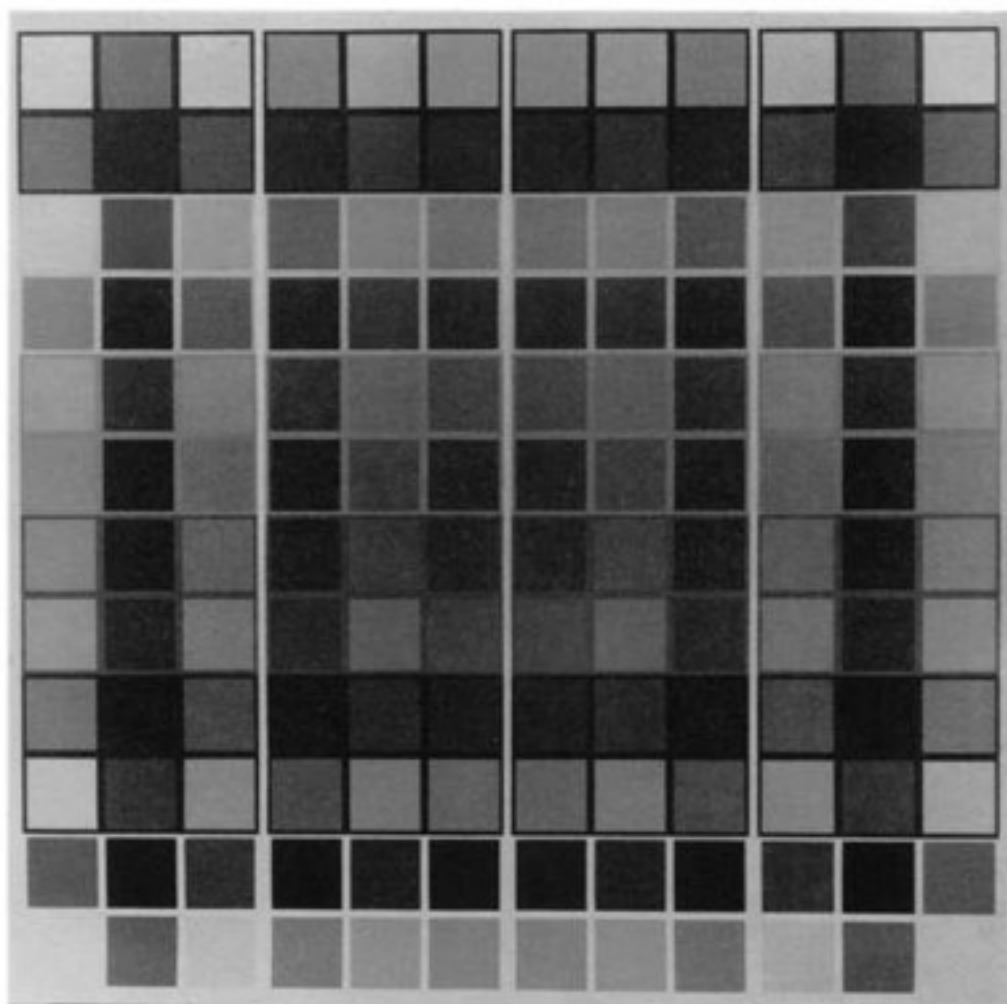


Fig. 8. Edwin Mieczkowski, 'Brightness Blok', acrylic paint on Masonite, 60 × 60 in., 1968.

Anonymity in the world is the basis of "... any group which values the results of collaboration more than the individual distinction of the collaborators".

Annually, in its working loft and private gallery in lower Manhattan, *Anonima* presents the past year's work, which demonstrates a single aspect of its chosen perceptual problem. In 1968, it was size-change (cf. Fig. 6) 1968-1969, brightness ratio (cf. Figs. 7 and 8). Invited friends, other artists, students and merely the curious attend these openings which are among the most lively in New York. The group's magazine, *Anonima*, is issued on an irregular schedule and at its own expense. Occasional discussion meetings are held for those who may be interested in the work of the group. Still, the invitation below, extended in 1966, has

met with little or no response:

Anonima has begun its own four-year plan. This program would move further and more quickly if other groups, or individuals who might have ideas in common with *Anonima*, would participate in it, even in part. Such research on an agreed-upon problem would provide a concentration of many resources in ideas, materials, and techniques that are obviously not available to the *Anonima* group. Even more important, an exploration of a limited area of visual experience, carried out by a variety of widely scattered groups (and individuals) would put the ideas to a more critical and thorough examination than would otherwise be possible [2].

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8. J. J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).