

Op Art (Optical Art)

On September 8, 1964, an exhibition titled "Julian Stanczak-Optical Paintings" opened at one of New York's most prestigious art galleries, the Martha Jackson Gallery on Madison Avenue. The exhibition was the first show in New York of paintings by the Polish-born Stanczak.

Stanczak was unaware of the title of the exhibition until he attended the opening, and he was immediately perturbed by the redundancy the title implied. As Stanczak stated recently: "Painting is visual, so why do you say 'visual' twice? ... This is ridiculous. 'Optical [paintings], what does it mean? For other paintings, you don't use your eyes?!" Stanczak approached Martha Jackson about changing the title of the exhibition, but Jackson held firm, telling Stanczak that the title was merely "something for the art critics to chew on." The critics bit.

In a review of the Stanczak exhibition published in the October, 1964 issue of *Arts Magazine*, artist and art critic Donald Judd described Stanczak's work as "Op Art." Judd arrived at the phrase by shortening the "Optical Paintings" exhibition title and rhyming it with "Pop Art" (which was the current "big thing" in the 1960s New York art world). Judd's review of Stanczak's exhibition appears to have been the first time that the phrase "Op Art" was used in print. Shortly thereafter, a feature article titled *Op Art: Pictures that Attack the Eye* appeared in the October 23, 1964 issue of *Time* magazine. The article was written by Jon Borgzinner, and it featured work by Stanczak along with other artists involved in the new art movement. It seems likely that Borgzinner came to the "Op Art" phrase independent of Judd, although Borgzinner was likely also prompted by Stanczak's exhibition since Borgzinner's mother worked at the Martha Jackson Gallery (which had hosted Stanczak's "Optical Paintings" exhibition the month before).

Thus named by Donald Judd and Jon Borgzinner, "Op Art" took the art world by storm. In 1965, an important exhibition of Op Art titled *The Responsive Eye* was held at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It was the most visited exhibition in MoMA's history up to that point in time. Other museum exhibitions followed, the movement received significant press attention, and, suddenly, "Op Art" was everywhere.

Yet at its height, Op Art suffered from a strong backlash. Part of the reason for the backlash was simple jealousy, as those who had staked their reputations as artists or art critics in connection with other art movements fought to regain their place in the limelight. But the attacks also stemmed from a good-faith misunderstanding of the movement and its aims. In all art movements, there is good art and bad art, complex art and simple art. Op Art is no different. To the horror of the most serious practitioners, though, distinctions like these were ignored, and all Op Art was grouped together and dismissed as simplistic pattern-making. Most of the seminal artists became very disillusioned. Many of them quit working as artists or shifted to radically different styles.

Op Art was misunderstood, in part, because it was so different from the art that came immediately before it. Unlike Abstract Expressionism (such as the "drip" paintings of Jackson Pollock or the "mad women" of Willem de Kooning), Op Art avoided overt emotional expression. Rather, Op Art was cool, detached, and almost mechanical in appearance. Although the Pop Art of artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein shared the cool detachment, mechanical appearance and bright coloration of Op Art, Pop Art relied on cartoons, commercial advertisements and celebrities as subjects, whereas Op Art avoided subject matter altogether.

To the Op Artists, overt emotion and recognizable subject matter were distractions that prevented the viewer from looking at the work of art itself. Although the act of "looking"

sounds simple, it isn't. It is, actually, far easier NOT to really look at a painting but, instead, to think about the emotion being expressed by the artist or about the whimsy of a cartoon love story displayed in large format. Op Art purposely avoided those distracting crotches so that we are left with one thing and one thing only: a requirement that we look at the thing that is physically in front of us.

When forced to look at what's there, what do we see? First and foremost, we begin to understand that rarely do we see what is actually, physically, there in front of us. Although we operate on the assumption that we see things as they are, what we see is much more complicated than that. By carefully presenting visual information in just the right way, Op Art presents us with something that our brains can't easily reconcile. What is physically a flat, two-dimensional surface, for example, might look like a warped, three-dimensional space. We become confused and disoriented.

What the art critics at the time missed, though, is that the best Op Art uses this visual disorientation not as an end in itself, but, rather, as merely the first step as it seeks to prompt an aesthetic response in the viewer. Although paintings that display the artist's emotion or that tell a "story" through subject matter can also prompt an aesthetic response, the response is frequently limited since we try to understand the particular emotion or particular story being presented by that particular artist. Op Art seeks to free itself of those limitations and to use purely visual energies to prompt responses that are more general, more universal. Just as music can "communicate" without words, Op Art seeks to "communicate" through a completely abstract language.

Notwithstanding the attacks by art critics at the time, Op Art's influence has persisted, and a new generation of artists and art critics has embraced it. More than 40 years after the movement first came to the public's attention, Op Art is alive again and is being seen through new eyes. There will be several museum exhibitions about Op Art during 2007, including a major retrospective titled *Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960s* at the Columbus Museum of Art (www.columbusmuseum.org). The exhibition will feature work by 56 artists from throughout the world. In connection with the exhibition, Merrell Publishers (London) will publish and distribute internationally the first comprehensive book in English about the movement in more than 25 years.