Art Criticism and Perceptual Research

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Rebellion in the ranks of the perceptual psychologists of the 1950's is finally having its repercussions in the art world. New perceptual theories, based on Dewey's Transactionalism and the more recent experiments of Franklin Kilpatrick and F.H. Allport (see footnotes 10 and 11) have invaded the thinking of artists and critics. Until quite recently, few art critics or theorists were aware of the new developments in perceptual research. The older gestalt approach was (and still is) widely accepted by many artists and critics as the "correct" way of seeing. According to Douglas N. Morgan, the core idea of gestalt psychology is "the belief that perception (and perhaps other psychological phenomena as well) can be explained in terms of neutral factors tending to produce organized, though dynamically changing patterns or segregated groups of units, or 'wholes.'"

Building on this basic gestalt approach, Rudolf Arnheim asserted that in "perception there is a tendency to the best possible equilibrium," and that "well organized visual form produces in the visual projection areas of the brain correspondingly balanced, organization." Thus he supplied a physiological explanation for his aesthetic claim that well ordered form gives pleasure.3

This correlation of aesthetic pleasure with what appeared to be scientific fact, made gestalt thinking an important part of many critical theories of art. It was only natural that the art of the last twenty years was viewed through eyes seeking the essential "whole" image. Clement Greenberg, in his "American Type Painting," attributes Pollock's strength and originality to his "power to assert a paint-strewn or paint-laden surface as a single synoptic image."2 Barbara Rose, in interpreting Pollock's works also speaks of the "total unity and indissolubility" of the paintings.24 In almost any Pollock criticism of the last two decades, one finds a critical awareness of the art's "all-over" pictorial use.

Using these interpretations of Pollock's paintings as a point of departure, many critics and historians have concerned themselves with finding similar gestalt patterns in the works of other painters and sculptors. The success or failure of "color field" paintings is often measured by the artist's ability to produce configurations that project the most easily read "universal" patterns on the receiving mechanisms of the viewer. Michael Fried be-

For Robert Morris, gestalt theory has played an essential role in the meaning he wished his works to convey. In his "Notes on Sculpture," Morris says that constancy of shape is to be obtained by the use of polyhedrons with "strong gestalt sensation." The viewer's acceptance that the pattern within one's mind corresponds to the "existential fact of the object, enables him to become more intensely aware of other phenomena such as light, space, and shape itself."

Today the gestalt approach still dominates the thinking of many art critics and aestheticians. However, there are others who have become cognizant of the revolution that has taken place among the perceptual theorists. They have discovered that "configurationism has achieved its success at the cost of practically ignoring the motor side of the organism.""16

According to Franklin Kilpatrick, the gestalt approach appeared perfectly credible as long as psychologists examined perception from object to subject. Using that method, the same object would always produce the same stimulus pattern on the retina. However, when the operation was reversed, the experimenters discovered that "any given visual stimulus pattern can be produced by an infinity of different external conditions." It was also observed, that though there were many configurations for the same objects, only one was chosen by the receiving organism. This implied that some form of pre-conceived selection was taking place, and that the method of choosing was the key problem in perceptual science.

Going back to Dewey's transactionalism and Whitehead's occasionalism, Kilpatrick and Allport construed new theories for dealing

with perception. Though Kilpatrick conceded that some stimulus is necessary to produce a configuration, the form in which it is projected is a result of a "dynamic fusion involving cues from the environment, assumptions, and actions." The concept of perception must include past experience as well as immediate mental and motor responses. To those accepting this line of reasoning, it is obvious that no person ever receives precisely the same message from the same environment. Each individual develops his own way of reading each new situation. Perception is now viewed as an aggregate of behavior. It can not be seen as separate from learning.

These new perception theories have brought about a crisis in the field of behavioral psychology and in other academic areas as well. Aestheticians, however, have not made use of these recent findings. Only through the writings of Gombrich, has some of this fascinating new material seeped into art theory and criticism. In the past two years, however, criticism and writers on aesthetics have demonstrated their awareness of the new developments in perceptual psychology. Works of art that have previously been interpreted from a gestalt viewpoint are now being examined in terms of these newer, more inclusive theories. Toby Munsman has pointed out that if Pollock's paintings are only interpreted by the optical field theory, then the nature of their production is bound to be ignored. "It is true that the optical nature of the work holds up at a distance," says Munsman, "but, close to, the issue of opticality vanishes, and one is absorbed with how the pools of paint have formed and how one color may have become mixed with another." Max Kozloff, William Rubin, and Robert Rosenblum have all remarked on a similar phenomenon in the works of Morris Louis. In a critical analysis that could be cited as a superb example of the new perceptual approach advocated by Kilpatrick and Allport, Rosenblum responds to Louis's paintings on many different levels. He understands that their formal construction is a combination of all-over design and natural configurations of accident. He also sees them as "images of the intangible core of nature's energies—a vital, chromatic substance that may alternately dissolve into thin air or crystallize into a geological stratum."

The perceptual discoveries of the experimental psychologists have also had effects on the latest work of Morris, Judd, and many younger artists as well. Morris is now involved with amorphous materials such as felt, rubber, mud, cotton thread, splattered paint, etc. Judging by the productions of his recent exhibitions, this writer would guess that Morris would be the first to attack his own premise of 1966 which states so positively that characteristic of a gestalt is that once it is established, all the information about it, qua gestalt, is exhausted. On the contrary, his new works indicate a realization that the act of perceiving, even the simplest of forms, is an on-going, dynamic process which provides each viewer with different choices and information. Indeed, in the April, 1968 issue of the Artforum, Morris writes that the positive characteristic of his new work is a "disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things."

His recent arrangements can be seen as the perfect vehicles with which to demonstrate this conception and the new perceptual theories to which it is related. On viewing the largest work at the Castelli warehouse, one is enveloped in a sea of objects, and perception changes drastically with even the slightest movement. Solid metal forms are juxtaposed with soft, undulating bands of rubber and felt. On entering this complex arena, which resembles a child's construction set many times magnified, one has the sensation of being stranded in the midst of a rapidly rushing rivulet. However, instead of stepping onto solid substances in order to maneuver about successfully, one must avoid all the concrete objects scrupulously. In the act of navigating through this maze, one realizes that perception depends on past experience and immediate kinetic and tactile responses.
as well as visually patterned data. Even from a vantage point outside the debris-strewn area, one must mentally practice the same kind of all-encompassing activity in order to make any sense out of the objects on view.

To a lesser degree, all of Morris's constructions, be they of mud, cotton or felt demand the same kind of participation. He externalizes the dynamic quality of perception by using soft materials or flexible formations that are subject to reformation at any given moment. Other artists, employing similar substances and techniques are Claus Oldenburg, Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, David Paul, Keith Sonnier, and Stephen Kaltenbach.

Some artists reflect the new, more comprehensive perceptual theories by using different means. In a recent exhibition, Donald Judd, with the aid of mirrors, constructed a box which unites the object, subject, and environment into an indissoluble, but open structure. His earlier discretely whole images have melted into ever-changing reflections of environmental activity. The end product is an in-
terming of internal and external forms in which illusion can not be disentangled from reality. This work is perfect metaphor for Allport's directive state theory of perception, which the psychologist describes as presenting the very picture of a self delimited and self contained structuring of ongoings and events. . . It appears as a structure that is closely knit, yet not isolated from surrounding happenings that is built up of the events of ongoing and interacting elements. . .

Larry Bell, Charles Ross, and Michael Kirby are among those who use transparent reflective surfaces to fuse environment, object, and subject into a total unit of perception. Other artists work with chemical properties that dissolve and change structure in the process of being activated in order to stimulate perceptual awareness. David Medalla and Bernard Hoke use soap foam for this purpose; Zorio uses acid on copper.

Even those artists involved with conceptual art are reacting to the new perceptual theories. They too have discovered that perception is more than a patterned message flashed from a carefully organized visible object. Therefore, they believe that only a minimum number of visual clues (if any) are necessary to elicit perceptual experience. As Lucy Lippard and John Chandler a p numel put it, "visual art is still visual art even when it is invisible or visionary."

Since the concept of perception has been expanded to include past experience and environmental influences, figuration, illustration, and allusion are again becoming acceptable to critics and art theorists. If it is permissible to view Ollitks's color fields as sunsets and Louis's configurations as organic images, it is also possible to admit the validity of literal figurative paintings by such artists as Philip Pearlstein, Paul Georges, and Sidney Tillim.

With the realization that perception is a complex process combining sensual response with past experience, the unchallenged authority of the older formalist art doctrines is beginning to crumble. Perception is now being conceived of as a highly personal experience influenced by a variety of factors. Artists are enthusiastically exploring the newly opened field of perceptual theory; critics and aestheticians are beginning to concede that contemporary art can be perceived from more than one point of view. Today new theories and interpretations are superceding one another with breakneck speed. Confusion seems to reign. Yet out of all of this seeming chaos, there may emerge a new, more inclusive order. In any case, this recent probing into the many aspects of perception has injected a vitality and energy into an art scene that, only a few years ago, was in danger of becoming rigid and sterile.

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6 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Morse Peckham discusses these theories extensively, as they are fundamental to his own ideas about the meaning and function of art. See Morse Peckham, Man's Rage for Chaos, New York, 1965, pp. 207-217.
16 Ibid.
17 Robert Morris, op. cit., p. 228.
18 Robert Morris, "Anti Form," Artforum, vol. 6, no. 8, Apr., 1968, p. 35.