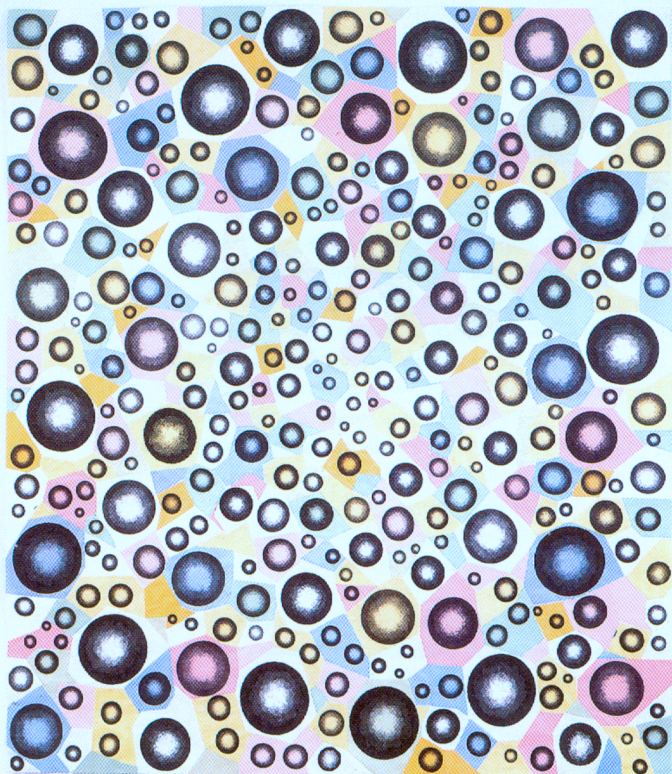


OP ART IN THE '90S

by Tom Moody

"Op Art" is a term originally coined in the 1960s to describe paintings, sculptures, and electronic devices that dazzle or confound the eye. Resembling the "optical illusions" of experimental psychology, these flickering dots and undulating planes typified the heady atmosphere of that decade, when art and science promised to merge and yield new, ever-more-mind-blowing creations. For a time, it appeared that kinetic sculptures, lasers, and holograms would supplant all traditional media, as exhibitions with names like "Electromagica" and "Lights in Action" toured the U.S., Europe, and Japan.

What was arguably Op's greatest moment—"The Responsive Eye" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1965—was also, ironically enough, its swan song. In the late '60s and early '70s, utopian claims for technology began to lose their gloss, and the winds of art fashion shifted. As artists embraced performance, black and white photography, and texts as their principal media, Op came to be lumped in with the "color field" painting promoted by critic Clement Greenberg, who was reviled as a Richard Nixon-like figure by the conceptualist generation. Also, because Op caught on with designers, decorators, and psychedelic poster-makers, it quickly became tainted as kitsch.



After a long period of visual drought in the art world, Op had a second life in the '80s, during the heyday of "appropriation art." This time around, it came with a thick layer of irony and critique. Reversing Marx's notion that history replays itself, first as tragedy, then as farce, artists such as Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe found it necessary to recast what had been wacky fun into a pathetic, "failed movement." In "Painting at the End of History," a 1982 essay on Bleckner, Peter Halley offered a sociopolitical explanation for Op's demise: that it "obeyed perfectly the principle of planned obsolescence of the modernity after which it was patterned." Nevertheless, Op motifs acquired an aura of polish and professionalism in the '80s that would have been unimaginable twenty years before. Bleckner's buff painting surfaces, Taaffe's elegant appliques, and Halley's 50 coats of searing Day-Glo gave collectors the highly-crafted objects they craved, while the artists lampooned their own marketability through the Marxist rhetoric of "commodification."

The 1990s, like the '70s, have been a decade of limits; even the current stock market frenzy has failed to pump the art world back up to its previous steroid-enhanced levels. The themes of this decade have been abjection, "otherness," and interiority, and thus we find Op art reincarnated in yet another set of clothes: from the thrift store rather than Armani or Carnaby Street. The current Op experimenters—including David Clarkson, Mark Dagley, Alicia Wirt, Ray Rapp, and myself—favor the plain-spoken over the artificial, the inept over the expert, and the tease over raw sensation. This group tolerates, indeed encourages ambiguity, letting the viewer determine whether work is "good" or "bad," ironic or straightfaced, or even whether it is "Op." Aspiring to the tonality of Philip Glass and the idiosyncrasy of lounge, they eschew the anger and

lugubriousness of the permanent counterculture, yet stop short of escapism. Unlike the abstractionists of the Greenberg era, they make no claim to be divorced from the quotidian, political world.

