

Bridget Riley

Arnauld Pierre

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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REFERENCES

Riley, Bridget. *L'Esprit de l'œil*, Paris : Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2008, (Ecrits d'artistes)

Bridget Riley : rétrospective, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2008

- 1 Give or take the odd exception, French art circles have hitherto remained somewhat aloof from the rediscovery that Bridget Riley has been enjoying for a good ten years now, making her one of the rare survivors from that last generation of modernist abstraction¹. Even though she is not a perfect stranger either—far from it—the joint publication of a collection of her writings and interviews, under the title *L'Esprit de l'œil*, and the catalogue that accompanied the retrospective at the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art, fills a real gap, and helps us focus on how we can nowadays understand and embrace a body of work that has been unfurling with noteworthy coherence ever since the 1950s.
- 2 When you read some of the contributions to the catalogue—an ambitious one both in its content and in its flawless production—one of the major challenges of the moment seems to be to free the artist from her past, and relativize the inclusion of her work in the sweeping movement of optical and kinetic art. This is understandable enough : what is at issue is an encouraged emergence—and one that is thoroughly deserved, to boot—of a Bridget Riley who, like all great figures, transcends her origins as well as the classic pigeonholes of art history. But this is in order to bring forth a no less classic construct, that is both used and misused by museums and universities alike : the monographic retrospective, justified by the hypostasis of the lone genius. In this context, optical and kinetic art is systematically and derogatorily called “Op Art”, a purely journalistic and advertising term, accommodated late in the day by the Anglo-Saxon world, and one that other artists laid no more claim to than Bridget Riley herself. Let us remember that Jesus Rafael Soto based his refusal to take part in the New York MoMA's *Responsive Eye* show in

1965 on this tale of labelling—as well as on a shared reluctance to be taken for a pupil of Victor Vasarely—, thus sidestepping the disillusionment that his colleague would suffer when faced with the corrupted use that would be made of “perceptual abstraction” in the exhibition, and through the various by-products of the day (artistic and commercial alike). Only Frances Follin, author, incidentally, of a notable monographic essay on Bridget Riley’s 1960s², tries to re-incorporate the artist’s approach in the realm of optical and kinetic art (a thoroughly honest attempt, but one sadly blemished by certain factual errors, such as the fact of numbering Iacov Agam among the members of the GRAV³). His study nevertheless points out useful distinctions between Riley’s oeuvre and the work of her fellow artists, in the use of black and white for example, in their different positions with regard to the aesthetic and political legacy of Constructivism, and in the significance of the cybernetic model.

- 3 Another loaded trend in the “isolationist-oriented” discourse on Bridget Riley involves replacing contextual time by historical time, by showing that her oeuvre stems from the Impressionist tradition, and more specially from the neo-Impressionism of Georges Seurat, closely examined by the artist. But this, too, is a constant feature of the way optical and kinetic art has been received, ever since the writings of Jean Clay, relating the lineage of this tendency with the one that Félix Fénéon—for whom Riley expresses her admiration—rightly, for the time, called “optical painting”. In a word, this catalogue at times expresses a recurrent bias towards a form of visual thinking and painting made in order to favour the exercise of this thinking (Svetlana Alpers has shown in her own field how understanding of Dutch art in the late 17th and 18th centuries—the *grand siècle*—suffered from this critique of intellectual inadequacy, and we are acquainted with Odilon Redon’s fierce verdict on Impressionism, extended in Marcel Duchamp’s critique of “things retinal”).
- 4 Going beyond this artificial break of the classical *episteme* between sense and spirit, Jonathan Crary and Semir Zeki re-balance things. The former by situating Riley in the prolongation of a typically British tradition which, along with William Blake and J.M.W. Turner, rejects “the Cartesian ban on perceptual bedazzlement” and turns sensations into the primitive source of the construction of the subject and of the only authentically tried and tested reality. With Zeki, who has, for several years, been referring to Riley’s “patterns” in his experiments to do with perceived movement, there is back-up from the neurosciences for this conception of artistic perception: its role thus involves an exploration of the visual brain and the production of empirical knowledge about the way it functions.
- 5 To know whether Bridget Riley is an “eye”—an eye that thinks—you just have to read her. With words which are deeply aware of her visual thinking, and with the same degree of tact in the way she puts her visual emotions across, she describes with equal skill impressions of landscapes from her childhood, her own painting, and also—and above all—the painting of others. Her writings on Seurat, Paul Cézanne and Piet Mondrian must be the envy of even those art historians best versed in analytical vision and in the need to “dismember and dissect the visual experience”. An unquenchable thirst for looking at things is forever pushing her towards everything that is intelligently organized for the exercise of seeing, and the fulfilment of her pleasures seems to govern the most obvious factors in her relation to the visible world (“The Pleasures of Sight” is the title of a 1984 essay). Her lengthy dialogue with Robert Kudielka on the works by Titian, Veronese, Rubens and Poussin in London’s National Gallery is a joy to read, such is the perceptible

intelligence that flows from it (resulting, in effect, from a lengthy practice of contemplation). In her interest in colour, design and composition, “it’s the precision of their connections that counts in the end”. This was already the lesson of abstraction, which she credits with having encouraged the exercise of pure visual judgement ; her admiration also extends to Mondrian, whose “meticulously painted surfaces reflect his belief in the work of the mind as both constructor and composer.” The latter term refers explicitly to music, for the reader of Shakespeare’s sonnets and the lover of great music is also an ear, attuning the latest paintings to rhythms and cadences that can be seen as well as heard—their impressions mingling in a sense of motion that uplifts the onlooker.

NOTES

1. The term deliberately calls for caution: we should perhaps talk of a European-style modernism, based on a hyper-opticality that is as much the exacerbation of the opticality of orthodox modernism as its nightmare: cf. Rich, S.K. “Allegories of Op”, *Artforum*, vol. XLV, n° 9, May 2007, p. 316-318.
2. Follin, Frances. *Embodied Visions: Bridget Riley, Op Art and the Sixties*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004
3. It is true that the catalogue *Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960s* (Colombus Museum of Art, 2007) declared, in spite of itself, that optical and kinetic art was an essentially European affair, and contained worse things still, like putting Ulm in Switzerland; clearly, for the United States, Europe sometimes seems very remote!