

Understanding Tibor Freund

To understand Tibor Freund's art it is helpful to explore the background of Op art and its best known artists: Bridget Riley, Julian Stanczak, Richard Anuskeiwicz, and Victor Vasarely. This way we can draw together some of the strands of thinking that emerged in painting between the early and mid 1960s, as they helped form the context in which Freund was making art. By understanding something of the context in which he worked, which includes Op art, kinetic art, and the Bauhaus school, the nature of Tibor Freund's preoccupations, as well as the singularity of his accomplishment, will become very apparent. He is, after all, a neglected artist who seems to have flown under the radar during his lifetime. It is time we begin consider what his place in history should be.

The term "Op art" first appeared in print in Time magazine in 1964 in response to an exhibition titled *Julian Stanczak: Optical Paintings* at the Martha Jackson gallery, New York. Stanczak, who was born in Poland in 1928, studied with Josef Albers at Yale University. Stanczak and Richard Anuszkiewicz, who was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1930, and who also studied with Albers, are considered the best-known American Op artists.

Bridget Riley was born in 1931 in Norwood, London. She studied art at Goldsmiths and the Royal College of Art and had her first solo show in 1961, which consisted of hard-edged geometric paintings done in black and white. These early painting, done before she began exploring optical phenomena, share something with the hard-edged geometric paintings of Ellsworth Kelly. Riley, it should be noted, started out painting in a semi- impressionist manner. In 1958, she began painting in a pointillist manner.

Clearly, her interested in light and opticality laid the foundation for her intense preoccupation with opticality, and the often disorienting, highly analytical paintings in which viewers becomes conscious of the process of observation, of looking. They don't simply see the painting; they become aware of themselves seeing.

The fourth artist is Victory Vasarely, who created what many consider to be the first Op art piece, *Zebra*, in 1930. Born in Pecs, Hungary in 1930, Vasarely began studying medicine in Budapest in 1925. In 1927, he left medical school and began studying

traditional art. The following year he enrolled in a workshop run by Sandor Bortnyik, a Hungarian painter and graphic designer who had studied at the Bauhaus. Bortnyik's school had little financial backing, so that the courses taught there were graphic arts, rather than painting. Vasarely started out as a graphic artist, and worked in several styles as painter without ever achieving something of his own. In the early 1950s, he became interested in kinetic art—art that moved.

Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) is considered the first piece of Kinetic art. In the 1920s, the Russian artist Naum Gabo and the Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy began experimenting with kinetic sculpture. Moholy Nagy, it should be pointed out, taught at the Bauhaus from 1923 to 1928, overlapped with Josef Albers, who taught there from 1923 to 1933, when he came to America.

Albers and Moholy Nagy were teachers at the Bauhaus School before—again out of necessity and world events—they came to the United States to continue teaching in safety. The architect Walter Gropius started the Bauhaus in 1919. It existed in three different incarnations in three different cities: Weimar from 1919 to 1925, Dessau from 1925 until 1932, and in Berlin from 1932. Along with Gropius, the directors were Hannes Meyer and finally Mies van der Rohe. The Bauhaus was a state-sponsored school, which emphasized the merge of craft tradition, particularly as William Morris formulated it, with modern technology. There was a Basic (or required) Course in aesthetic principles, as well as courses in color theory, industrial design, and architecture. Basic to Bauhaus teaching was the belief that there was no separation between form and function, which is central to the international style of modernist architecture and the buildings of Mies Van Der Rohe, for example. In art there was an emphasis on the rational, the functional, and the reconciliation of mass production and the individual artist. It was a school in which expressionism and the romantic belief in the artist as isolated, rebellious individual had no place.

As an architect Freund would have known of, as well as been interested in the principles of Modernism as they were taught at the Bauhaus. He certainly would have been aware that Gropius founded the school and that Van der Rohe was its final director in 1932-33, around the time he was getting his architecture degree in Zurich. There is no doubt that he knew that fellow Hungarian, Moholy-Nagy taught there.

Tibor Freund, who was born in Budapest in 1910 and died in New York in 1999, exists at the juncture of Op art, kinetic art, and the Bauhaus. He belongs to the generation of Hungarian Modernists who were influenced by the Bauhaus, and, in Freund's case, the thinking of Moholy-Nagy, particularly his book, *Vision in Motion*, which brought up the issue of the mobile viewer, a person moving, rather than standing still, in front of a painting. This book, which Moholy Nagy wrote shortly before his death in 1946 at the age of fifty in Illinois, where he had gone to teach, was central to Freund's interest in the possibilities of the kinetic.

Both out of choice and out of necessity occasioned by world events, Freund led a nomadic life before he moved to America in 1953. He was then in his early 40s, so that in a very real sense one could say that Freund came to painting late in his life, by which time he was married and had a family. Trained as an architect—he got his degree in Zurich in 1932—Freund lived and worked in Teheran from 1940 until 1947, while war and devastation raged across Europe. During that time, under the auspices of the Shah, he built a sample town, was the maintenance artist for the Golden Mosque, had a portrait studio, and supervised the building of the Palace of Justice. In 1947, he returned to Budapest but in 1949 he relocated to Israel because of the Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe, and the beginning of the Cold War.

Although Vasarely, who, as stated earlier, was trained as a graphic artist, is rightfully considered a pioneer of Op art, he became more and more interested in optical illusions and trompe l'oeill trickery, albeit of an abstract nature. Never really a painter, this ultimately weakened his work, as well as made it too rooted in design. Freund's interest in the kinetic—in what he called “motion pictures”—is different from Vasarely in that he has Bauhaus principles in mind, the idea that art could serve a useful social function, be integrated into our daily lives. Freund may have seen himself as taking up where Moholy Nagy left off, when his project was terminated by his early death.

Freund's interest in what we now called Public Art is one of the things that distinguish him from mainstream Op artists. Although Stanczak and Riley have made public art, that possibility was not foremost in their minds when they became artists. It was, however, foremost in Freund's mind, may be one reason he is not better known. While he exhibited his paintings at various points in the 1960s, his work was not included in *The Responsive Eye*, which was organized by William Seitz for the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, a group exhibition that made the work of a number of artists associated with Op

art known to a wider public. Rather, during this period when Op art was becoming popular, Freund was involved with, among other things, a public mural in the lobby of Public School 111 in the Bronx, which had been designed by his former employer, the architect A; Gordon Lorimer. In contrast to Stanczak, Anuskiewicz, and Riley, Freund not only remained true to the utopian beliefs associated with the Bauhaus, but he was also extremely optimistic and to some degree naïve. The mural in the lobby was based on a painting he had already finished; it was entitled: *The Universal Dissemination of Knowledge*.

However, the reason Freud isn't better known has little to do with the fact that he was optimistic and openly and almost innocently naïve. It has to do with the fact that unlike the best known Op artists already mentioned; Freund did not paint on a flat surface. In 1957, before Stanczak, Anuskeiwicz, and Riley began painting in the style for which they would gain attention, Freud, after years of experimentation, began what he called "motion pictures." This form, which would preoccupy him for the rest of his life, was based on a rudimentary 19th century invention called the "three-sided picture."

Essentially, it is a flat surface from which an evenly spaced row of thin slats extend forward, thus giving Freund three sides to work on—the flat surface, as well as both sides of each slat. The slatted form enabled Freund to contain as many as six discrete pictorial views in a single painting, with the viewer's movement being the key to which view became visible.

After arriving in New York, having come from Israel and before that Teheran and postwar Budapest, Freund was understandably dazzled by the bustling crowds and constant cacophony of neon lights, advertising, and changing signs. This common experience inspired him to try and capture what he felt was intrinsic to both modern and daily life. And in that regard, he should be seen as a "painter of modern life," which is the title of Charles Baudelaire's seminal essay published in 1863. That essay, which influenced the Impressionists, as well as subsequent generations of artists and poets, exhorted artists to be of their time, and to capture the essential features of modern life: the fugitive, constant change, and contingency. Certainly, Freund's paintings live up to Baudelaire's standard, but they do so in a way that stands apart from what his contemporaries were doing.

In fact, Freund's visionary beliefs can even be read as either evidence of his latent hostility towards the fine arts and two-dimensional painting or as his adhering to Bauhaus principles. My sense is that it is a very particular brewing of both. Talking about his work in the Long Island Star Ledger in the early 1960s, he said without hesitation: "My new art form, 'painting in space,' will set canvas-bound painting free. It will show future painters how to express by contemporary means, the liberation of earthbound man – 'man in space.'" This is not something other artists or even the art world wants to hear.

This is how Freund outlined his project:

- Painters create the illusion of 3 dimensional SPACE
- by putting paint onto 2 dimensional PLANES.
- In order to create the illusion of 4 dimensional MOTION
- I am putting paint into 3 dimensional SPACE.

In stating that he is creating "the illusion of 4 dimensional MOTION," Freund is suggesting that there is a reality that cannot be seen, and that the palpable moving one that we exist in is actually a small part of something far more complex and invisible to us. Such thinking connects him to the Cubists and Futurists, and to the theorems of Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Werner Heisenberg.

The other thing that didn't help Freund's cause was the scale of his work. In the 1960s, at the height of Minimalism and Pop art, and before the advent of Conceptual Art and the so-called "Death of painting" and its many comebacks, Freund was working on what we would call an easel-sized format when many of his contemporaries, following in the footsteps of the Abstract Expressionists, worked on a very large scale, and thought of easel-sized paintings as quaint and even obsolete. Given his own belief in public art, one senses that Freund would have worked bigger if he was able to do, but that circumstances required that he worked on a smaller, more manageable scale.

Finally, in contrast to the Op artists mentioned, Freund did not develop a signature style or motif. He didn't work in black-and-white as did Riley. He didn't try to attain the architectural illusionism that Anuszkiewicz did, and he wasn't interested in the complex patterning and subtle tonal shifts that are a feature of many of Stanczak's best-known works. In fact, Freund was rather restless and even promiscuous when it came to

subject matter. He painted biomorphic forms, geometric structures and interlocking planes, and things derived from nature. He didn't believe, as his work makes clear, that geometric abstraction was painting's highest calling, that nature, at least any overt reference to it, had to be banished from painting.

With the evidence presented, it is useful to consider what we have. Tibor Freund was born in 1910. He was trained as an architect in Zurich, Switzerland. He worked in Teheran, Budapest and Israel before coming to America when he was in his early forties, where he had no connection to the art world. In fact, there are no records of his having made friends with other artists living and working in New York, which, if you think about it, is bracing. Rather, living in Queens, New York, experimenting in isolation, and with little regard about what was going on in art at that time, he discovered the "three sided structure" that was central to his work. In a local newspaper, he declares that his work will set "canvas-bound painting free," which would have probably irritated Andy Warhol and Frank Stella. His colors aren't graphic, as in Riley's black-and-white paintings, nor do they have the bold optical flutter we associate with Stanczak and Anuskeiwicz. They aren't big. They show little interest in the picture plane, in warping, bending, or breaking it. In fact, Freund's paintings don't really seem to have a picture plane, a stable, flat surface to which the paint is bonded.

Freund's paintings stand apart from the mainstream, but they should not be seen as being isolated from it. Rather, they exist in counterpoint in a way that shares something with Ron Gorchov's bent planes; both offer an alternative to the rectangular, flat surface that is the cornerstone of western painting. One sees in his paintings lessons absorbed from Impressionism, biomorphic surrealism, and geometric abstraction. However, all of this is mediated by Freund's slatted structure, his commitment to a vision of a world that changes radically before our eyes. His accomplishment is singular, and his work is unlike anyone else's. It stands on its own, and for that it should be known.

- John Yau

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