

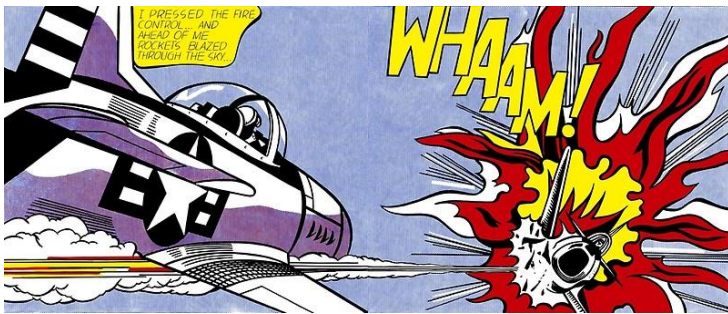
P & D in Context

Look beyond style to meaning, and find and confirm meaning in context.

First, take a look at American art of the 1960s as a model for this point of view.



Loaded with fat, carbs, and salt, French fries are a heart attack on a stick. They are junk, but then again they are so cheap. Fifteen cents a bag when I started eating them, and Oldenburg sculpted them soft.



Lichtenstein's storyboard is not Shakespeare, but who has time for Shakespeare these days. 'Wham!' and I have the whole story.



As for John's beer cans: in New York we put them in a machine that grinds them up and gives back a nickel. But if you were to take one to the Bishop of Chartres in 1250, he just might put it on an altar: so perfectly round, so miraculously thin - the very essence of a vessel, and so a fair avatar for the Holy Chalice.

Pop Art investigates our ambivalence about mass-produced things.

On the other side of the coin, 60s Minimalism hopes that purity will reestablish our once precious and now degraded connection to manmade things.



A lot of expensive machinery went into making these Judd boxes as close to their platonic archetype as possible. There is a hidden frustration about communication in them: it's a box! it's a box! it's a box! Or perhaps, (in a Jack Nicholson voice), "you can't handle a box."

Implicit in Judd's work is the statement that we makers of things are on the defensive.

What was the context of 60s art that informs both styles? What was the problem that both tried to fix?

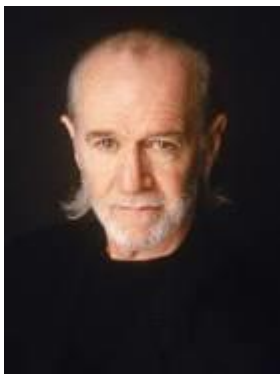


Here is my house in the country. There are lots of 19thC farmhouses like this in Schoharie County, NY. And they all come with outbuildings. Aside from the first thing that comes to mind, there are wood sheds, tool sheds, chicken sheds, tractor sheds, and horse barns, cow barns, coach barns, maybe goat barns too.

And yet, not 500 yards from my house, down the road and around the corner, there is self-storage.



In fact, there is about 100 square feet of self-storage for every man, woman, and child in the country, and if you put all those pieces together, you would have enough square miles to cover Manhattan Island – THREE TIMES.

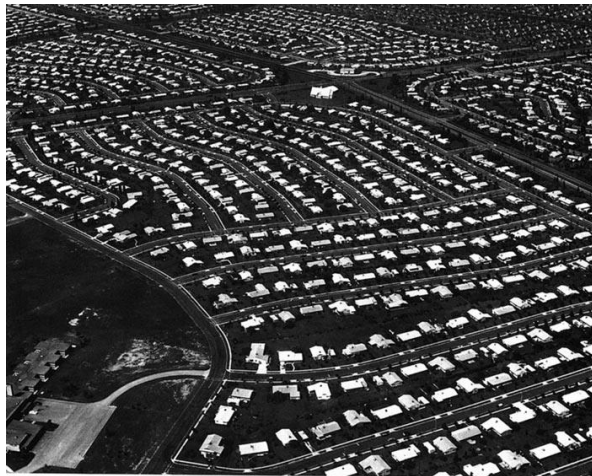


As the prophet George Carlin so succinctly put it: “Hey man, it’s your shit. But it’s my stuff.”

It is a problem, and a big problem for the artist.



In this Summer, 1967 issue of ARTFORUM, with a Bell cube on the cover, Michael Fried wrote a long essay, widely referenced, seldom read, that purports to define the art of the 60s. Fried covers Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures, and Specific Objects. He could have saved us all a lot of time if he had looked beyond style to meaning, and found and confirmed meaning in context -- if he had just included Pop Art. Yet Fried does have a magnificent title: Art and Objecthood. "Objecthood" isn't that what I have been trying to pinpoint. (The OED does not find the word before Fried, so give him credit for the neologism.)

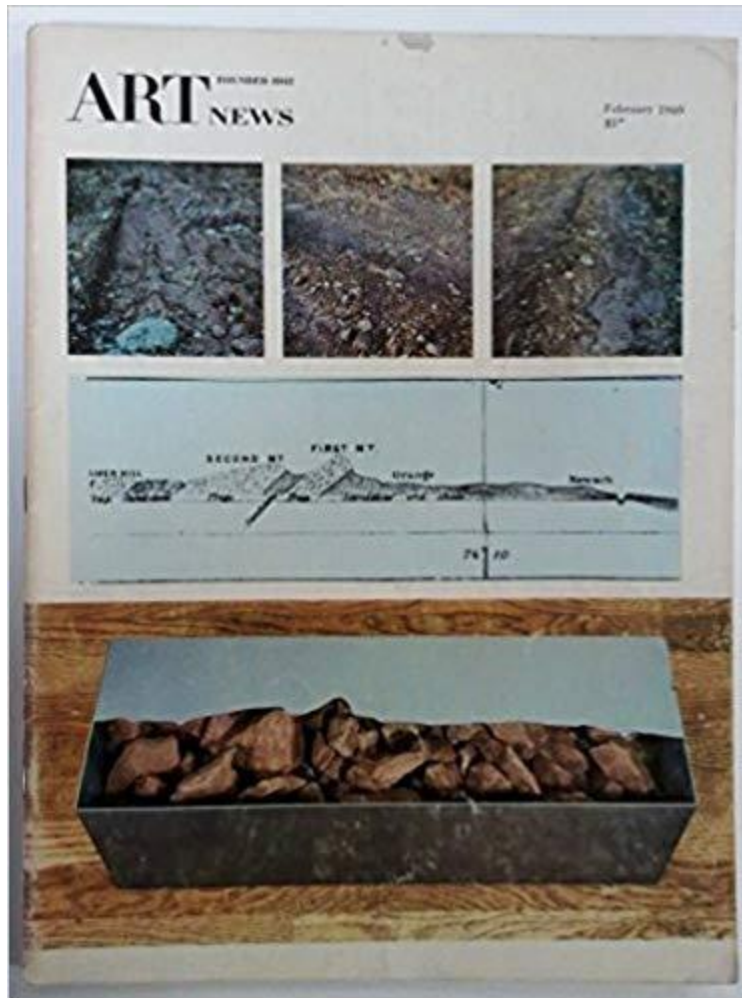


And it all happened so fast, in one generation, my parents' generation: Start out during the Depression; live through the war at the front or the Homefront; and in the 50s, get your shit together and get more stuff!

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Now consider the art of the 70s with that template,
look at my cohort, artists who came of age artistically in the 70s.

First the other side of the coin:



in February 1969, I wrote this cover story on Robert Smithson's exhibition *Sites and Non-sites* at the Dwan Gallery in New York. The Non-site was the gallery where large metal bins held rocks. They were heavy, and there was a question if the floor could support the weight. The Site was Franklyn, New Jersey. Many years later, as part of a New York Geological Society field trip, I visited this famous mine to scour slag heaps for mineral samples. Our guide threw an empty Coke can down the shaft, a shaft that follows the Marcellus Shale from the surface in Franklyn all the way under New Jersey to end deep in Pennsylvania. The can rattled its way bouncing down the shaft. At first it was amusing, then it was boring as the can rattled minute after minute, then it was terrifying: the can just would not hit bottom. I tell you this to say that both the

site and the non-site had a strong physical presence.

Connecting the Site and Non-site was ephemera: Smithson's mundane Instamatic snapshots, his purposefully, equally mundane written notes, also topo maps, and sectional maps from New Jersey to Manhattan. These multiple, trivial connections between site and non-site began to seem arbitrary. In Smithson's words, they were "exactly arbitrary." What is "exactly arbitrary?" In the mathworld, we have a joke: Math is when you don't know what you are talking about. You say you started out with 3, then pretty soon you got 3 more; now you have 6, what? Oranges? Battleships? Lovers?

Smithson had a point. **Meme, Construct, Trop** – these are new words. In the late 60s into the 70s, we began to question just how either rigorous or arbitrary were our conventional perceptions: between existence and our thoughts about it, a small chisel was placed. Tap. Tap.

Pattern Painting

My side of the coin:



Japanese kimono is the mother lode of pattern: there are male patterns, and female patterns, spring and winter, geometric and floral, bold and delicate, for youth and elderly, for brides and warriors. On a trip to Japan for the summer of 1972, I spent a good deal of time in kimono shops.

In 1971, the Japan Society built its current headquarters building in New York, with a large exhibition space, and a large budget to bring exhibitions from Japan.

The Asia Society followed suit in 1980 with its new building with large exhibition space.



Moving west along the silk road, Ikat adds a brainiac element to woven patterns: the woof and warp are stretched out and dyed before weaving, allowing a more thorough saturation of color. But the weaver must anticipate what pattern the threads will make when tightly bound together.



Shiek Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan is replete with patterns and color. I saw it myself in the late 1950s, when my family lived in Iran.



The Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp, A Kings Book of Kings from 1552, was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1972. Above is Folio 188a, “Solomon and Bilqis Sit Together and Converse Frankly,” (detail) from Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s *Haft Awrang*, 1556, shown later at the Freer Gallery in Washington.



Here’s a useful tip: a Venetian inlay marble floor, when photographed at an angle and then projected on a canvas, can be a drawing for paintings, like this 1976 painting of mine.



Still moving westward across the globe, I photographed this pattern in Alcazar in Seville. Two-fold symmetry of right angles and three-fold symmetry where six items are rotated about a central star are combined in this complex and elusive pattern.



I visited Mayan ruins in the Yucatan for the first time in 1969.

The Whitney Museum of American had an eye-opening show of quilts as art in 1971. The women's movement encouraged us to take quilts more seriously.



Above, red and white American quilts were shown in the Armory in New York in 2011.



In the 80s, collector Norma Canelas Roth gave me this commissioned Seminole textile in the hope that I would treasure it and keep it safe, which I have done.



You may ask why this clay pot is considered an influence on fine art; you say it was probably made by some old woman living in a mud hut. But consider it more closely. The pattern is continuous around the pot – no starting and ending point. It is also curved top to bottom; that makes it a compound-convex pattern; it swoops inward, concave near the neck, and further it projects down towards the bottom (a kind of curvature in Projective geometry.) So, there are four kinds of curvature in this 2-manifold. It is a little bit like -not really- but a little bit like the $+++$ curvature of the Minkowski metric for Special Relativity.



Lucy Lewis, 1880-1992, started painting pottery when she was eight, and by her 90s she was very good at it. And the fact that this small clay pot was made by a woman, who was elderly, and who lived and died in the Acoma Pueblo, in no way -- in no way-- disqualifies her pot from being an important cultural object and a source for my painting.

As a child and teenager, I lived in Japan, Okinawa, and Iran. We collected carpets and handicrafts. I did not see any Western painting until I was 14, when my mother took me to Europe. At the Orangerie in Paris I saw Monet's cathedrals, all in a row. I was Godsmoacked. I decided to become a painter that day. Which cluture was I appropriating?

Pattern and Decoration.



Young artists working in a movement are like popcorn: they all look alike. You can't tell the difference between Braque and Picasso, or Morisot and Cassatt, or Kozloff and Robbin.

Then, each kernel pops and flies off, each with a different shape, and each with a different intention. And it is no longer accurate to just call it pattern painting:

It can fly off to global politics in maps like Joyce Kozloff.



Or fly off into a lovely Feminist mock like Miriam Schapiro's.



Or fly to higher-dimensional mathematics like Tony Robbin.



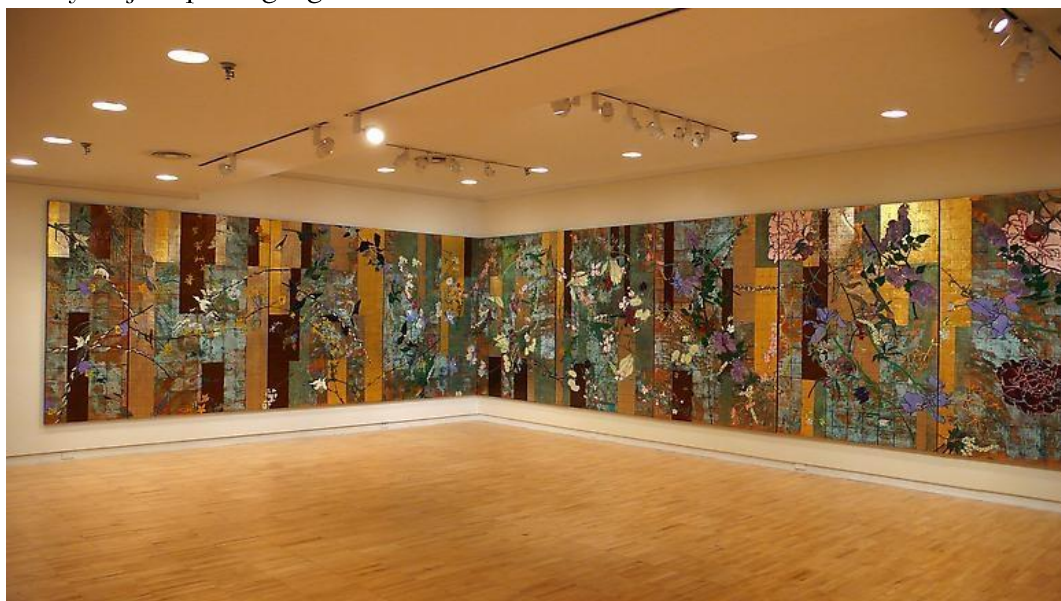
Or fly off the canvas and on to a wall like Cynthia Carlson.



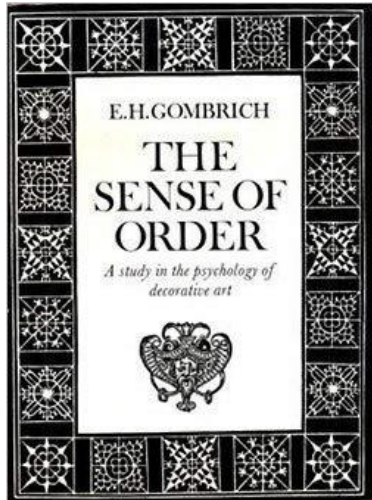
Or fly to craft like Jane Kaufman.



Or fly to just plain gorgeous like Robert Kushner.



It is the mark of a movement, and a criterion of its value, how many different individual styles it launches.

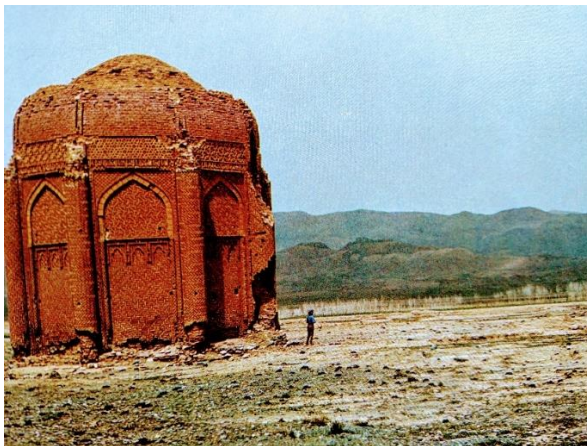


Gombrich's 1979 wonderfully researched and documented book claims that patterns are universal because they speak directly to the right hemisphere of the human brain. Surely true. But the book does not quite explain the fascination patterns have for us. Consider what patterns might mean to us.



I took this photo in 1969 in the winter in Montreal. I just did the math: with a full tank of gas and good snow, one could make about 20,000,000 little hearts.

Patterns are endless.



In Western Iran, tomb towers built in 1067 and in 1093 presented patterns that are among the most widely used, even today. From the 1093 tower, the following one (center arch detail) is most captivating:



Imagine that the dark is a wooden lattice, and that you are looking through it to the sky. Or notice how easily the pattern can be drawn on a triangular grid. If the pattern were to be made with hexagonal tiles, only two decorations of the tiles would be necessary: a star, and a y.



Here is the same pattern with the negative shapes brought forward. Now they are pinwheel shapes dancing around centers.

Patterns have inherent multiple readings; they are themselves several spaces in the same place at the same time.

I have tried to find a catch phrase as good as **Art and Objecthood** to sum up the 70s, but none that I can think of are as evocative: Global Village, Multi-culturalism, Gender Role Fluidity, Pluralism, Proteanism, Globalism, World Art (as in World Music). These were exciting terms filled with optimism fifty years ago; now, all have a tinge of fear. Perhaps Marshall McLuhan's **Global Village** is the best. But how to imagine the excitement and

confidence of that time?



At this concert November 15, 2018, Bela Fleck is playing a banjo from Appalachia, Edgar Meyer is bowing a double base from Europe, Zakir Hussain is playing drums from south India, and Rakesh Chaurasia is playing a Persian flute. These instruments were never meant to be heard together; they represent totally different ideas of music and how it is structured. Yet, it was wonderful to hear their unanticipated and exhilarating harmony, and it filled me with hope. There is so much to gain by bringing separates together. **Cut free of time, place, traditions:** a liberation for us, a threat to others, a necessity for all. Our existential problems are transnational: climate change, over population, income inequity. We need to become citizens of the planet; in this we were prescient.

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I have saved the best for last. But it is also the most difficult.



In 1550, Giorgio Vasari published his *Lives of the most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. He states that there are two kinds of painters: those who bring their canvas' to life with "disegno" by which he meant not only drawing but perspective, and those who bring their paintings to life with "colore". As an example of the later, he praised the Venetian painter Giorgione.



I saw this painting once in my late 20s on a honeymoon, again in my late 40s when I too was a man of respect with sold out shows and a family to take care of, and finally in my late 60s, ill and when mathematics was my solace. I mention it to say that a painting that masters color can carry one through life.



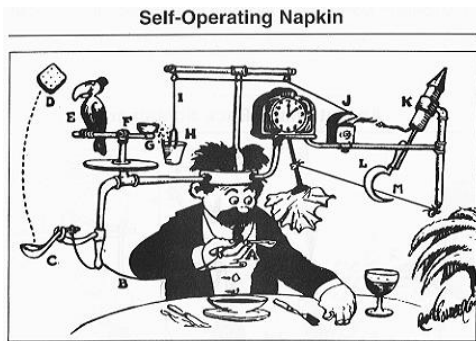
Compared to the discussion of drawing, composition, and perspective, not much has been added to Vasari's writing about color in the last 450 years. The best attempt to say what color is and how it works is by Josef Albers who started working on color in the Bauhaus, brought his study to Cranbrook, and finally to Yale. When I was a graduate student in painting at Yale, I took the Albers Color Course, (though not from Albers himself), and the following year I was the teaching assistant of the course. When they finally let me out of Yale, I taught studio and the Albers Color Course, over and over for several years. And I can tell you that it is not the complete story, not the last word. Here is something about color that you know, but probably have not thought about lately:



Seventy years ago when I was a boy, I got a magic red dot in my bubblegum. The instructions were to stare at the red dot for two minutes, without blinking! and then by magic you would see a green dot on a white wall. Try it, though not for two minutes, because we are not six, after all. Even then, I knew it was not magic: I knew that red was coming in, and that green was going out to block it. But I did not know the full meaning of after images until recently.

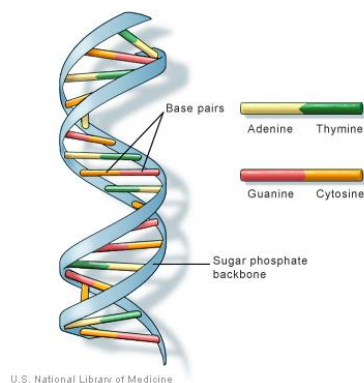


We usually think of ourselves as muscle and bone taking action in the world. But you could lose an arm and a leg and still be you. No, you are the squishy parts inside oozing glop to one another; lose any one of these organ systems and you are toast. Below, I have a medical illustration to show how the body works:



And it seems that the purpose of this comic contraption that is the body is to ultimately get some enzyme or protein or glop up to your brain to damp down, discount, block, or in other ways to sidetrack that moment to moment of color stimulus that could carry you through life.

I do not know why nature thought it was such a good idea to do this to us, but I have a theory. Imagine a bunch of Neanderthals or Paleolithic Sapiens standing around in their leopard skin onesies, stoned out of their minds by the color of the sky: “Blue, yeah blue, blue”. Those guys are not going to be much help in the mastodon hunt.



If this is all true, and I just sort of proved it to you, then what a gift it is to have paintings that bring you back to color. What an incredible gift. How amazing! And what an achievement to overcome physiology and evolution to give you what is yours for the taking.

So, the award for a lifetime of achievement in color goes to (in alphabetical order):



Cynthia Carlson

Brad Davis

Valerie Jaudon

Kim MacConnel

Jane Kaufman

Joyce Kozloff

Robert Kushner

Tony Robbin

Miriam Schapiro

Ned Smyth

Robert Zakanitch

