



The New Tendency (Nouvelle Tendence--Recherche Continue)
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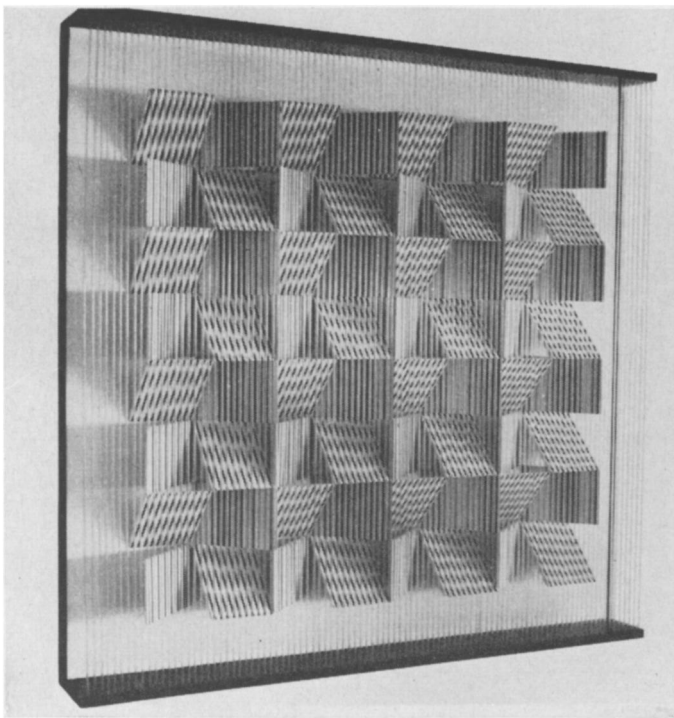
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THE NEW TENDENCY (NOUVELLE TENDANCE —RECHERCHE CONTINUELLE)

It is clear by now that the recent reaction against Tachism, Action Painting, and the various other forms of *art informel*, takes one of three forms—realism like Diebenkorn's, new realism like Arman's, of which "Pop Art" is an American outgrowth, and "hard edge." The phrase "hard edge" is an invention of the California critic, Jules Langsner, who suggested it at a gathering in Claremont in 1959 as a title for an exhibition of four non-figurative California painters. The term had been used twenty years earlier by Alfred Barr in lectures at Wellesley, but it seemed too new to Feitelson, Benjamin, Hammersley and McLaughlin, who finally showed at the Los Angeles County Museum as "four Abstract Classicists." However, when this show went to London in March 1960 it became "West Coast Hard Edge."

That this phrase should have caught on so readily is a measure of its timeliness rather than the novelty of what it described. A hard edge had, in fact, been in 20th century art since 1913 and was a principal component of Constructivism. The early drawings of crosses and squares of Malevich (1913) and circles and lines of Rodchenko (1915) were hard edge. The Constructivist tradition which exploits this edge has continued unbroken, though not static, for fifty years. It is, in

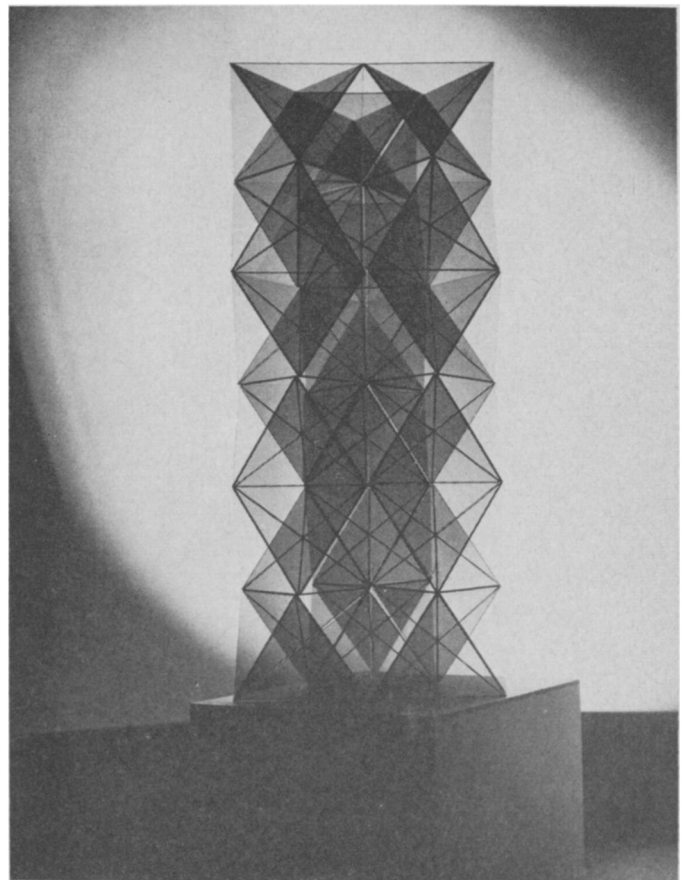


Yvaral (Groupe de Recherche), *Acceleration #18, Series B*, 1962. Optical effect (moiré) with strings.

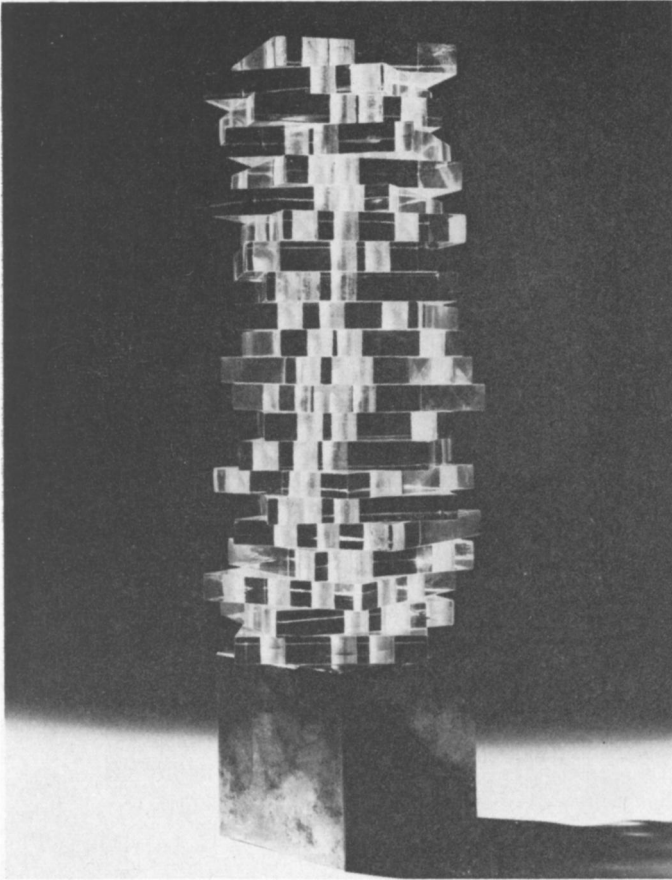
fact, the most continuous and viable strain to come out of abstract art, stretching from the non-objective world of the Russians and the neo-plastic relations of de Stijl of the time of World War I all the way to Albers, Diller, Reinhardt, Pasmore, Kelly, Vasarely and Baerling of the present.

Yet "hard edge" does not at all typify Constructivism. Crisp contours have always been with us; armorial bearings and flags, intarsia and parquetry, Islamic designs, the decoration of parchment by the Sioux and the Blackfoot. Decorative art had prefigured abstraction and hard edge, in both two and three dimensions, in a way that higher caste painting and sculpture were not permitted to do, though Woefflin saw hints of them in the "linear" style. Constructivism is characterized not by the edge or geometry but rather, by the *image*. This must be intrinsic—independent of recollection, association, or suggestion of objects in the environment, free of subjective expressiveness, symbol, or personal handwriting. It calls no attention whatsoever to the maker. In this it is polar to 19th century Romanticism, to cubist subject matter, and, most of all, to action painting. It can even have soft edges.

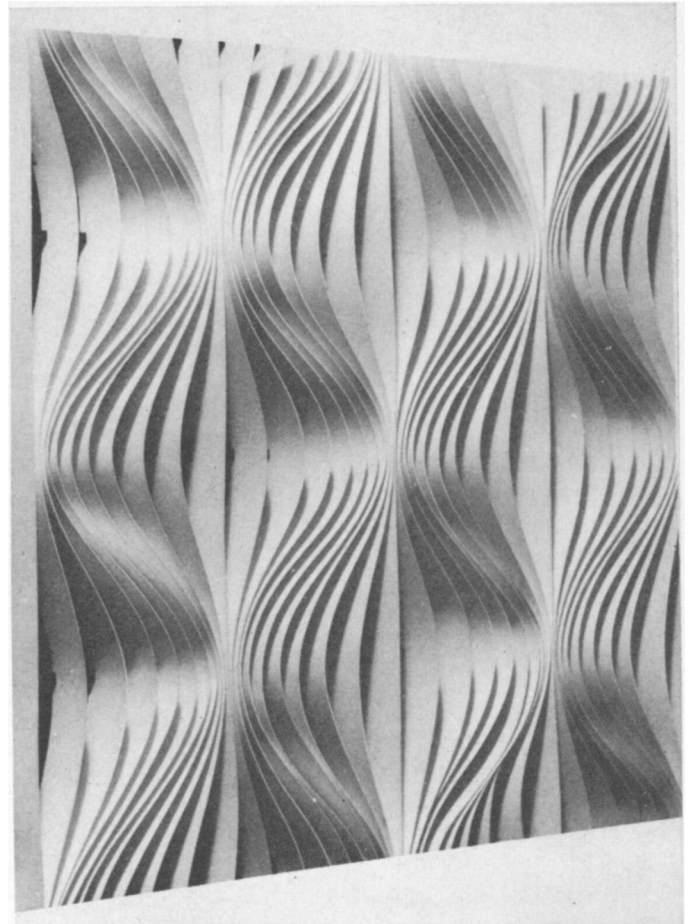
Constructivism and de Stijl began as reactions against the early degeneration of Cubism; but the fifty years of their history are notable for their indifference to modish styles, rather than for reaction from them. The Constructivists are the quietest 20th century school; they have pursued their disciplined studies without publicity, without stars and, relatively, without exhibitions. The last Biennale in Venice contained, out of hundreds of artists, only four who could be even loosely



Sobrino (Groupe de Recherche), *Unstable transformation, juxtaposition superposition 1*, 1962. Stern Collection, New Orleans.



De Vecchi (Gruppo T.), *Lpiano*, 1963. Equal square plastic prisms pierced and superimposed are pivoted vertically and can rotate independently, varying and multiplying the image by angular refraction.



Gruppo N. Structure of plastic ribbon.

thought of as Constructivist. The nearest the Modern Drawing exhibition shown at the Guggenheim and the Fogg comes to it is with a single Albers and a non-constructivist Kandinsky. The Tate and the Boston Museum are pathetically bare of Constructivist work while the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris has only Pevsner, who had become a French citizen.

In its quiet and self-effacing dedication Constructivism has not hardened into a sterile mould. To be sure, there are survivors from its early days like Vantongerloo and Stajewski, and a second generation who are already old masters like Nicholson, Albers, and Magnelli; but there are also a great many young, energetic and inventive artists, in Europe and the U.S., who are working within the Constructivist canon while extending its range. Their burst of activity had come, like Abstract Expressionism, with the release of energies after the war. But their disciplines were not what the public was looking for then and they have remained, not idle, but unsung.

Among the means these artists have been developing in the last fifteen years have been:

- a. New ideas of space—as a continuum in both two and three dimensions, rather than the negative surround in a figure-ground dichotomy.
- b. The use of micro-elements, too numerous to count, too small to be seen as separate forms, too large to be merely texture.

c. Non-Euclidean geometry of curves, pressures, tangents, overlays and interlockings which are computed, but not mathematically.

d. Light itself as expressive means.

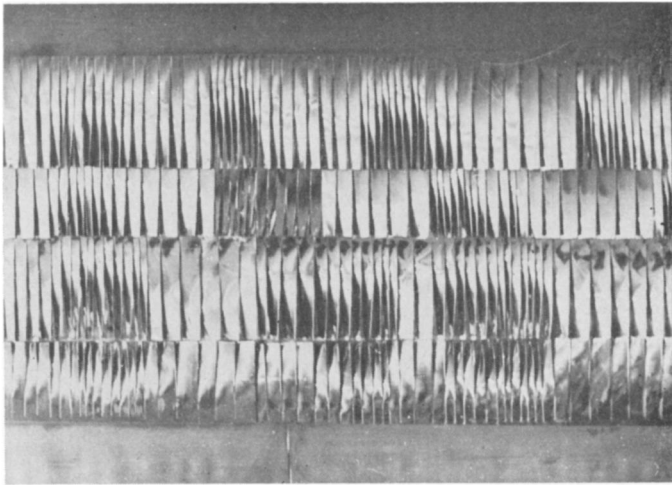
e. Movement itself.

f. Optical phenomena, where the artist uses the reaction to stimuli of the eye itself, rather than what the eye surveys and the brain interprets.

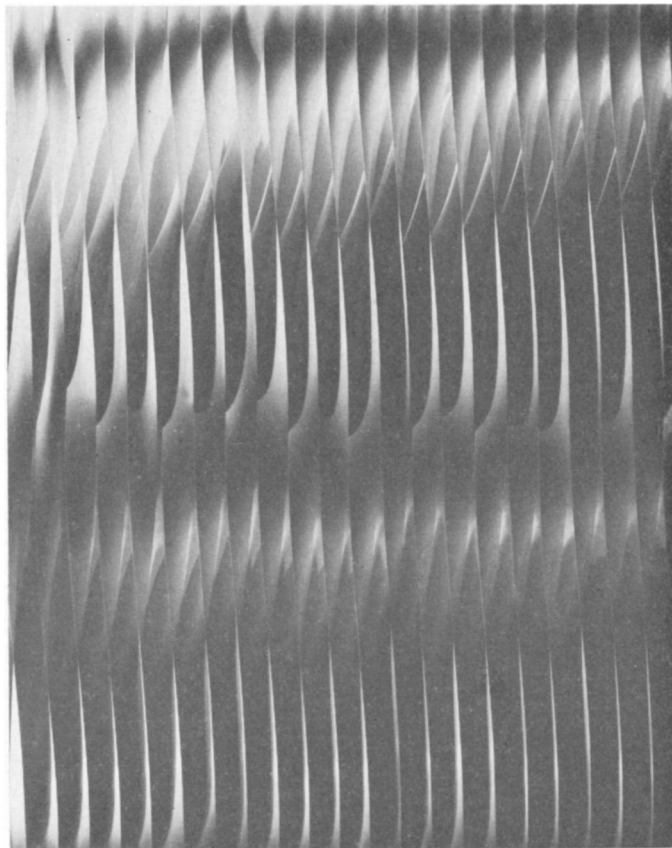
g. Objectification of the work (this had been sought earlier though the phrases confuse—"the non-objective world" of Malevich was also a non-subjective world); the Constructivist tendency is always toward self-effacement and concentration on the object as an entity independent of the Maker—"art untouched by human hand.") by means of:

- Mathematical relationships instead of those chosen freely (subjectively) by the artist ("Concrete Art").
- The use of chance and randomness.
- Spectator participation.

h. Bypassing traditional materials. (The early Constructivists were interested in industrial materials for ideological reasons. Now, there is generally an assumption that *all* materials are permissible; in Constructivism there is still a strong feeling for appropriateness and craftsmanship.)

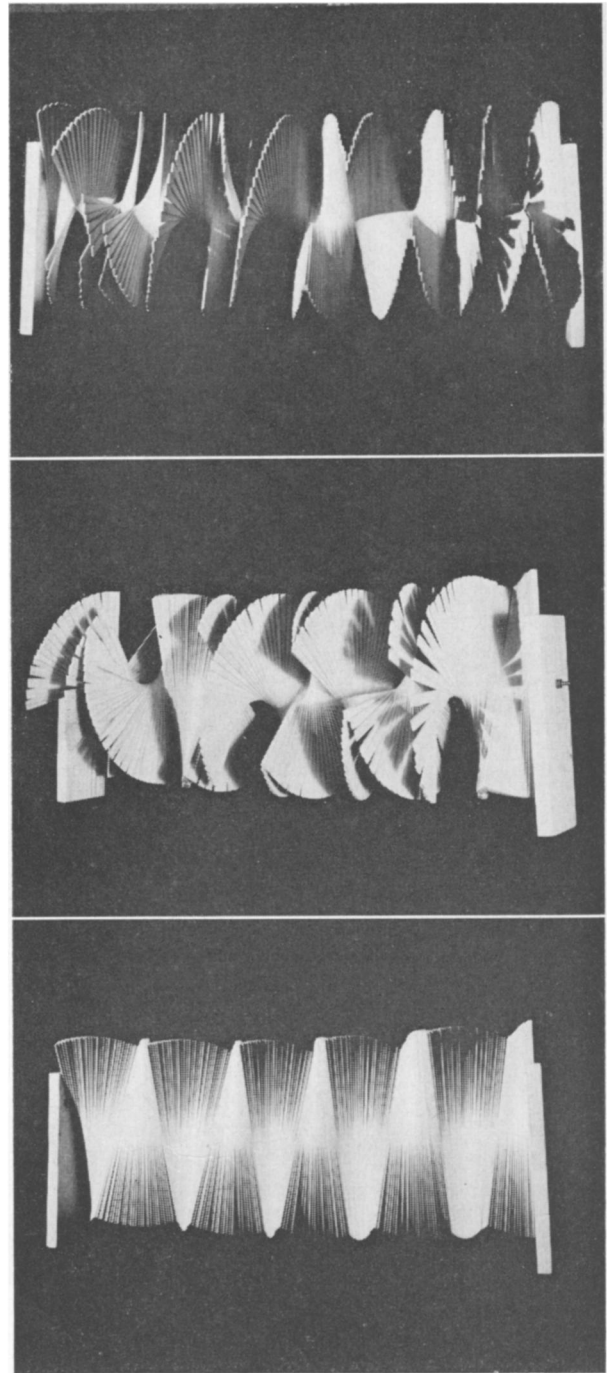


Mack, *Light Relief*, silver, 1962.



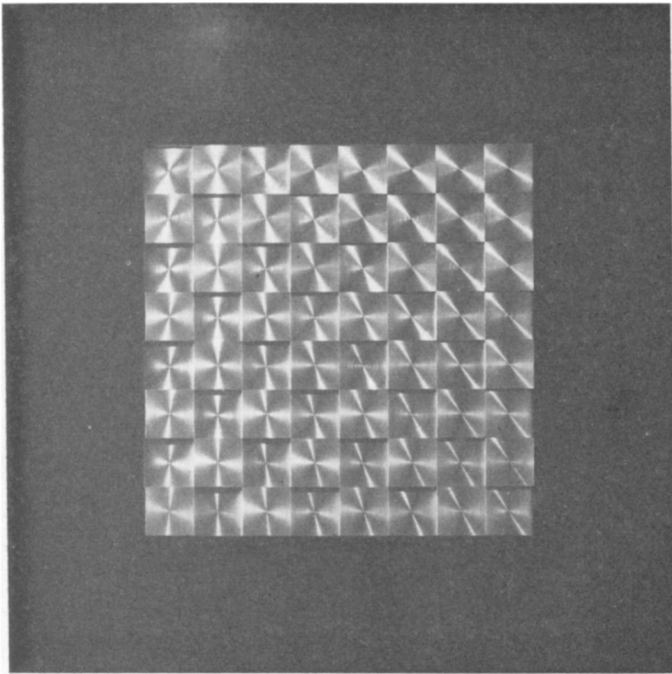
Leblanc, *Static Mobile*, 1960, plastic ribbon. Light shadow relationship changes with spectator movement.

These tendencies permit enormous diversification in style. The geographical distribution is also wide. Highly evolved Constructivist tendencies appear in Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, through Western Europe, including Poland, Yugoslavia and Spain. There has been no great comprehensive exhibition of these tendencies though signs of recognition begin to appear. There have been two "New Tendency" exhibitions in Zagreb. Denise René in Paris has shown much Constructivist art, and the Museum of Schloss Morsbroich, Leverkusen, under Udo Kultermann, has concentrated on its recent

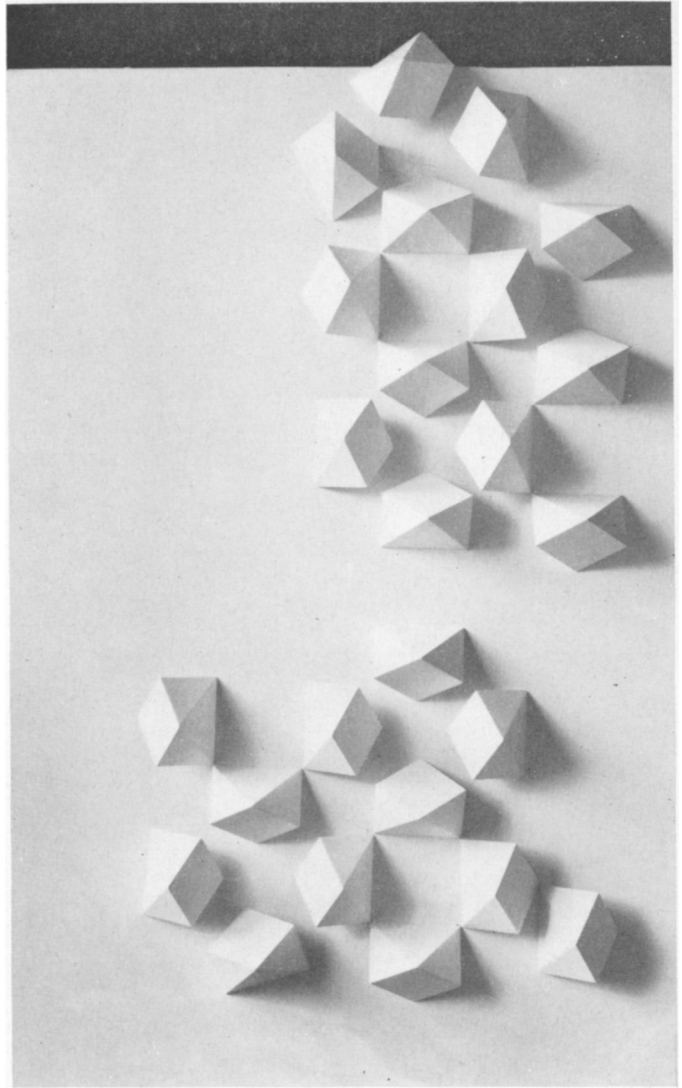


Gruppo N. Study for a structure to be arranged by the spectator, wood, 1962.

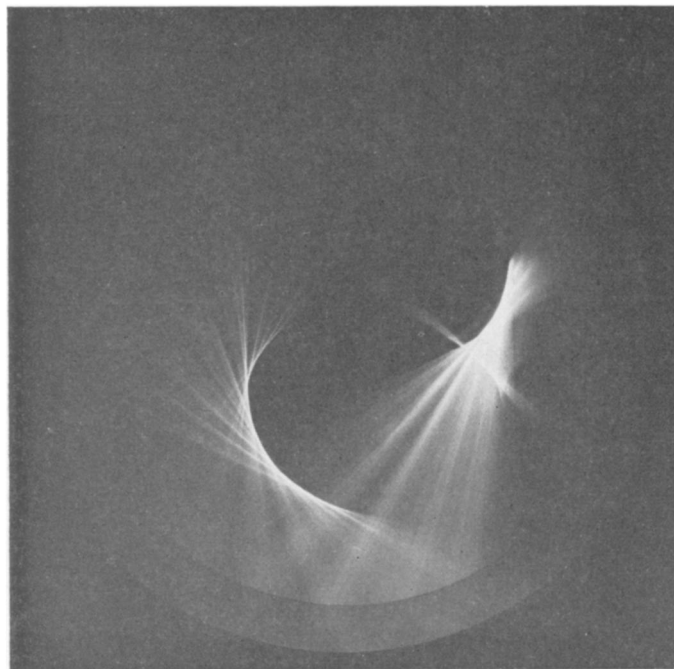
manifestations; Chalette in New York has shown the classical Constructivists for some years while Janis and Marlborough have this year revived their interest. The Contemporaries Gallery shows the young generation. A group in Paris were featured in the Biennale in the Grand Palais last year and the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in the Louvre shows the New Tendency this summer. In 1965 the Museum of Modern Art will present Constructivist optical phenomena in an exhibition called "The Receptive Eye."



Gerstner, *Carro 64*, 1962-63. Reflections on machined surfaces move with change of light direction.



Tomasello, *Reflection #48*, 1960, Musée de Beaux Arts, Buenos Aires. Under-side of each prism is colored and reflects on white panel as an aura.



Le Parc (Groupe de Recherche), *Instability*, 1962. Moving light source reflects from polished metal cylinder projecting varying images on screen.

Do these tendencies constitute a movement? Constructivism has been a movement for fifty years. There is no Neo-Constructivism. There is something necrological about isolating and labeling a movement, at any rate by an outsider. But if the participants become aware of what they have in common and begin to pool their thinking, an event of some importance in history takes place. Such awareness has developed in Europe in the last three years and action has been taken. In the U.S. isolated figures, such as Anuskiwicz and Goodyear, coincide

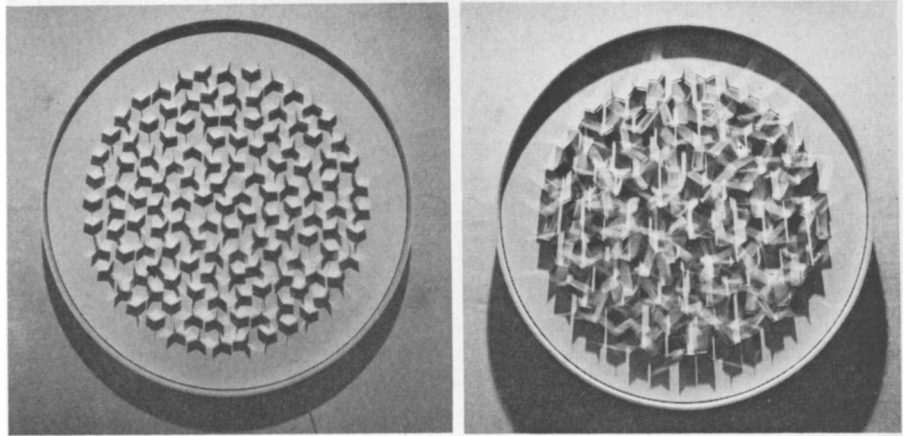
with some of the European tendencies, but there is, so far, no American equivalent. The movement is old; activity as a group is new. Even in Russia the artists were highly individual and often antagonistic. Tatlin and Gabo were ideologically opposed. Mondrian and Van Doesburg split.

In January 1963 a meeting was held in Paris of artists from several countries who had come to feel that they shared a "new tendency." They adopted a simple title, "Nouvelle Tendance, recherche continue," which they abbreviated to NTrc. Yvaral, son of the painter Vasarely, and a member of the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel in Paris, writes: (in a letter to G. R., December 1963)

"Nouvelle Tendance—recherche continue"—is an international movement which was born at the time of the first *Nove Tendencije* exhibition in Zagreb in 1961. It comprises about sixty young searchers working in the same ideal.

Its principal characteristics are:

- Primacy of research
- Depersonalization
- Open communication and collective work
- Development of a group of visual ideas held in common which could lead to anonymous work



Von Graevenitz, *Proposed Light Architecture #3*, mobile, 1963. Structure is transformed as light source moves.

"NTrc does not recognize the paternity of any artistic movement in particular. Its existence is the result of diverse origins. Its most fundamental characteristic is to remain free of a definitive formula, and equally, to ensure continual evolution.

"Finally, NTrc considers 'continuous research' to be:

- Indeterminate works
- Multipliable works
- Aloofness at the production level
- Clarification of the problem in hand
- Activation of the spectator
- Appraisal in the most precise terms of the creative act and the act of plastic transformation

"NTrc has exhibited on several occasions since 1961; at the time of these international exhibitions, discussions and debates took place to try to clear up problems and to set forth opinions as well as put out a list of members.

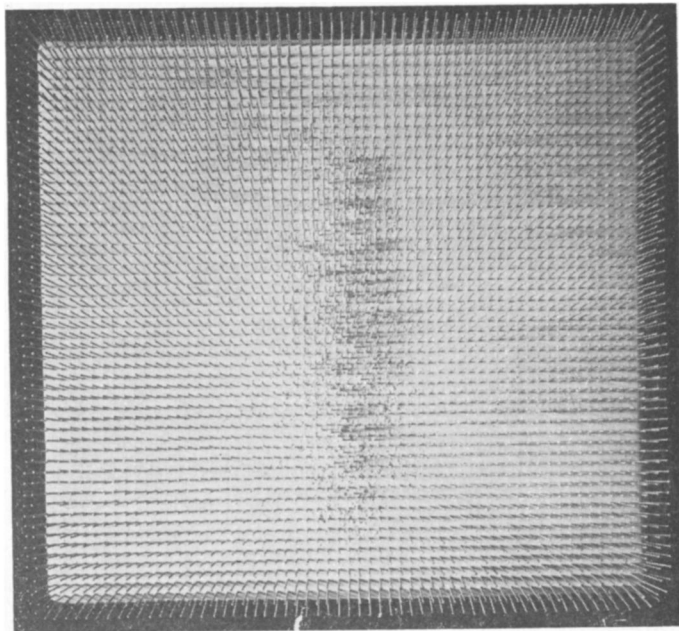
"The term 'oltra la pittura' (beyond painting) was given by the Galleria Cadario (Milan) to an exhibition devoted only to members of NTrc. But there is not a gallery fully devoted to NTrc; Cadario, Bussola in Turin, Ad Libitum in Antwerp, one in Venice, and Denise René in Paris, are the only private galleries which have exhibited in part the works of the New Tendency.

"As far as the Museums are concerned, one must certainly list Zagreb, perhaps Leverkusen, and certainly the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris in April 1964. One could obviously list other museums which have exhibited such and such a member of NTrc but who have not yet seen or understood the movement as a whole.

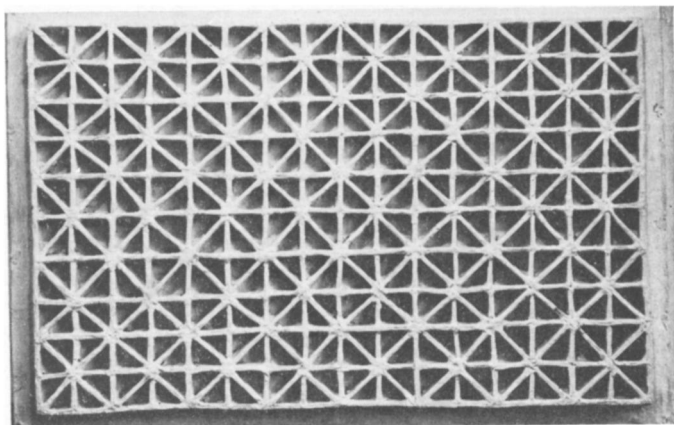
"Zero and NUL whose spirit is a little touched with Neo-Dada, are slightly earlier movements than NTrc. Several of their members joined NT at the start but strayed later, their positions being too far from the general spirit of NTrc and one can say that there is no affinity with the exhibitions called Zero and NUL."

The artists who now clearly identify themselves with NTrc were, naturally, some time in coming to a clear view of their direction. The idea of depersonalization has existed since Malevich; the non-aesthetic, the indeterminate works, the emphasis on the spectator are new developments. In their Paris pamphlet of 1962, the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel writes:

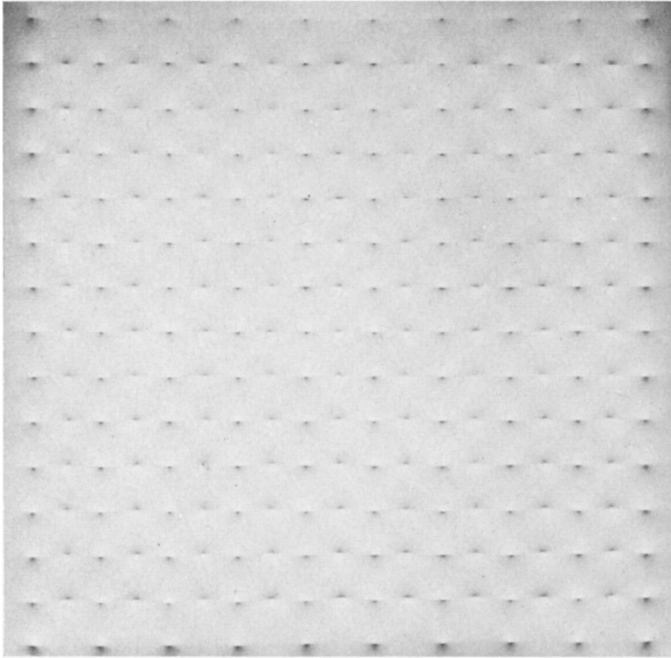
"We employ this term which was already used on the occasion of the 'Nove Tendencije' exhibition in Zagreb in 1961. It is a phenomenon which appeared simultaneously among young designers at different points in the world. International shows and sporadic contacts began to give a more homogeneous character. Improved communication produced awareness of what was being born in the visual arts.



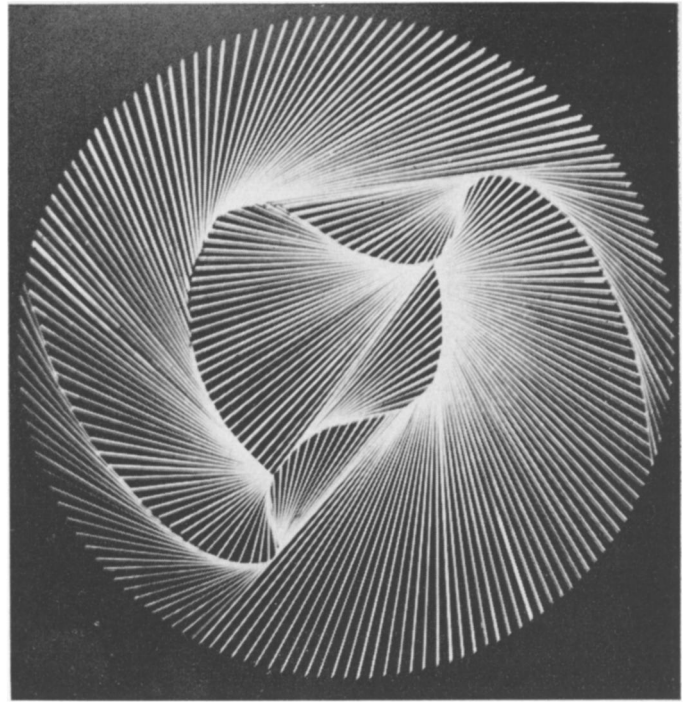
Uecker, *White Picture*, 1962. Nail painting.



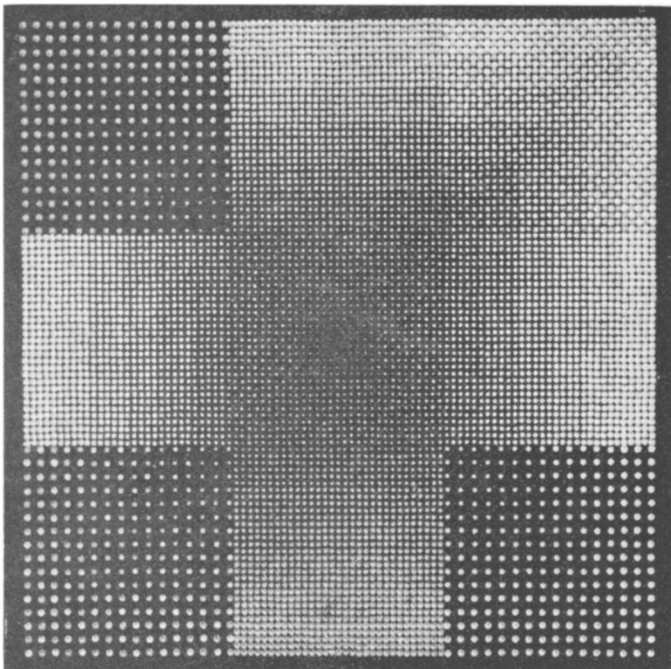
Schoonhoven, untitled, 1961.



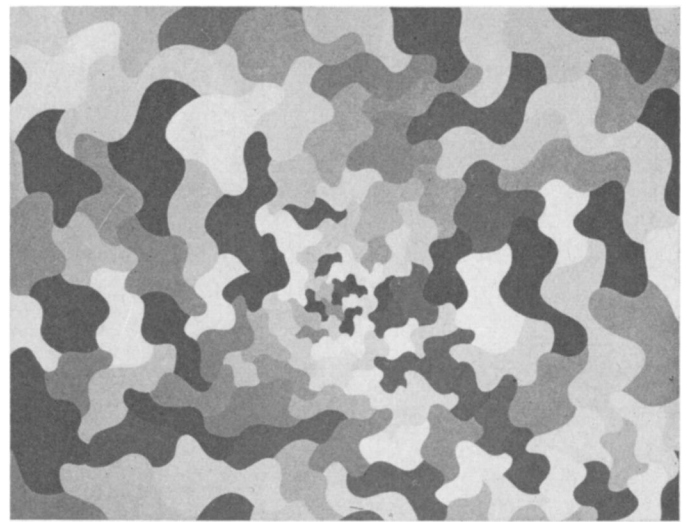
Castellani, *White Surface*, 1961-63.



Equipo 57, *Interactivity VI*, 1962. Etching on glass with mirror one inch behind it, giving rich optical effect.



Mavignier, *Dot Painting*, no date.

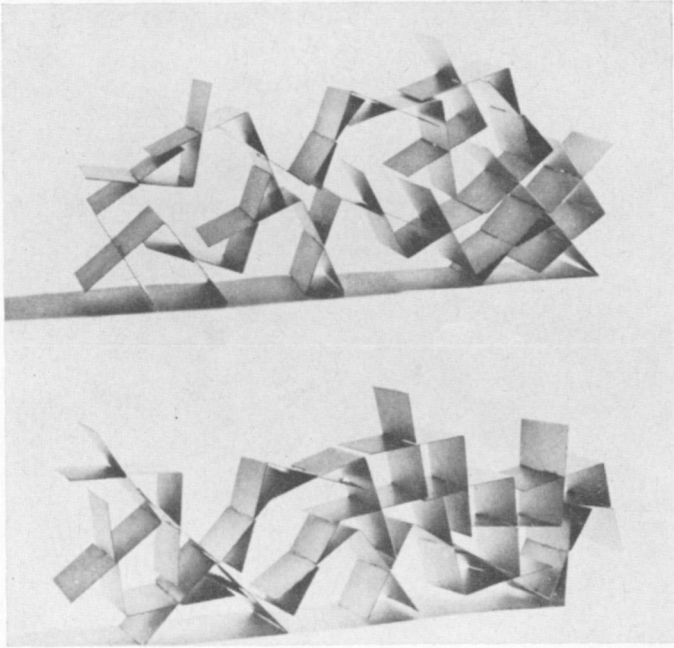


Equipo 57, *Interactivity R_s*, 1962. Interpenetration of space abolishing figure-ground relationship.

"The New Tendency does not have a definite character . . . (It is) against the sterile situation which now produces, day after day, thousands of works labelled lyrical abstraction, formless art, Tachism, etc., and also against the fruitless extension of a lagging mannerism based on the geometric forms . . . of Mondrian and Malevich. Again, once the positive aspect of the Neo-Dada or New Realist's irreverence for traditional considerations of beauty is noted, one sees the contradiction between their anti-art and their effort to baptise the object anew. It is evident that the New Tendency, although reacting against these currents, contains certain qualities derived from them. One sees in it the refinements of Concrete Art or Constructivism, as well as hints of Tachism and ties to Neo-Dada.

"But the New Tendency is, above all, a search for clarity. One must therefore be concerned with indeterminate work, with visual values, with more precise terms for valuation than 'the creative act,' with what is basic to a new view of the artistic phenomenon."

Gruppo "N" in Padua, like other Italians before them, writes manifestoes. In theirs of 1962 they have listed their topics for study: ". . . from a conceptual point of view a universal hypothesis is needed which will include all the variables in the object-spectator relationship." They then list:



Munari, *Articulated Sculpture*, 1960, aluminum. It changes each time it is lifted.

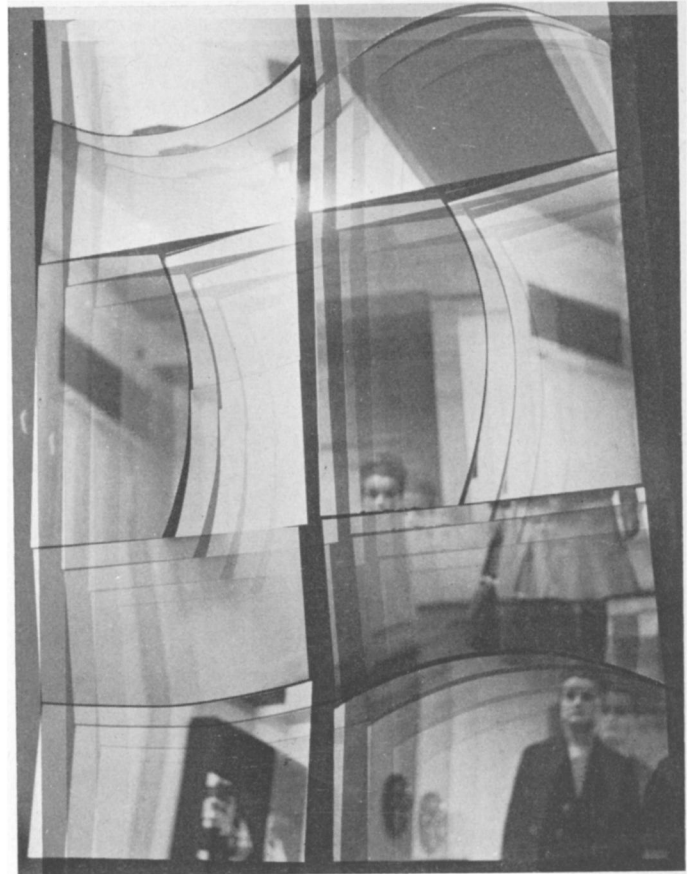
- variability of the system object-spectator
- reciprocal variation of the position object-spectator
- variation in relations to the environment and to light
- psychological situation and perception time of the spectator
- psychological perception in all its aspects: perception capacity of the retina, peripheral vision, eye movement, perception at the level of the retina and cortex, focus, visual acuity, color perception.

Their “working hypothesis” they summarize as follows:

- “Optical phenomena” in normal human vision involving retinal and cortical responses, peripheral vision.
- “Movement” (the work has no “normal” condition; past, present, and future are present simultaneously)
- “Instability” (a “visual equivalent of ambiguity”)
- “Indeterminacy” (works are not composed as aesthetic wholes; but more often as sample segments of stimulating situations)
- “Objectification” (the work is depersonalized and often the result of group activity; mass producible work and repetition of identical elements carry this further)
- “Spectator as organism” (he is not audience but a participant; he has no training but reacts to stimuli)
- “Visual information” (this phrase they find more precise than “art”)
- “Randomness and chance”
- “Programmed” works—introducing chance within planned limits by means of motors and audience participation
- “Achromatic” works—all white, all black, or black and white (color leads to subjective expression and response)
- “Anonymous” works
- “Group activity”—solitude leads to subjective art.

This may seem like extended Bauhaus exercises. However, many of these artists have had no contact with the Bauhaus. Both, rather, spring from a common source. Much of this is not new, yet there are indications of a concerted, and possibly revolutionary, change in the definition of the artist-work-spectator relationship.

A notable characteristic of the New Tendency is the work in groups or teams. Groups have always been a disease of the young; the most active of these artists were born after 1930. Groups tend to dissolve as members achieve success and fame,



Megert, *untitled*, 1964. Structure of pieces of mirror creates accidental composition from chance reflections of the environment.

or change purpose or lose their fire, like “The Club” in New York or *Konkrete Kunst* in Switzerland. With maturation individual differences sharpen, horizons broaden; there is more money for the successful ones and they travel. The New Tendency artists could be different; the very nature of the “research,” their aesthetic (or non-aesthetic), and their principle of self-effacement preclude individual expression and display of talent. Personal style, preference, and bias are eliminated. This brings their cooperation close to the anonymous teamwork of scientists; two groups, “N” and “Equipo 57,” sign works collectively with the name of the team.

Complete group anonymity is the extreme position. Sometimes the group agrees, more flexibly, on a set of objectives and then marks out distinct areas of research, still depersonalized in style, but easily identifiable, as in the *Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel*.

Similar principles guide many individual artists, who are not actually members of NTrc. For example, Herman de Vries, an independent living in Arnhem, writes:

“Objectification is important as part of my occupation with ‘visual information’ . . . the term more appropriate to the new conception than the term ‘art.’ As an extreme consequence of my objectification I tried to eliminate the personal—not the human! — . . . by way of the random method. [He then describes a method of choosing random numbers where the digits are distributed in their ‘probable’ frequency and goes on] . . . “I gave a ‘value’ to each digit: a color, gluing on a square or leaving it out and, in this way I obtained results which were acceptable for the spectator and gave the impression that they were in-

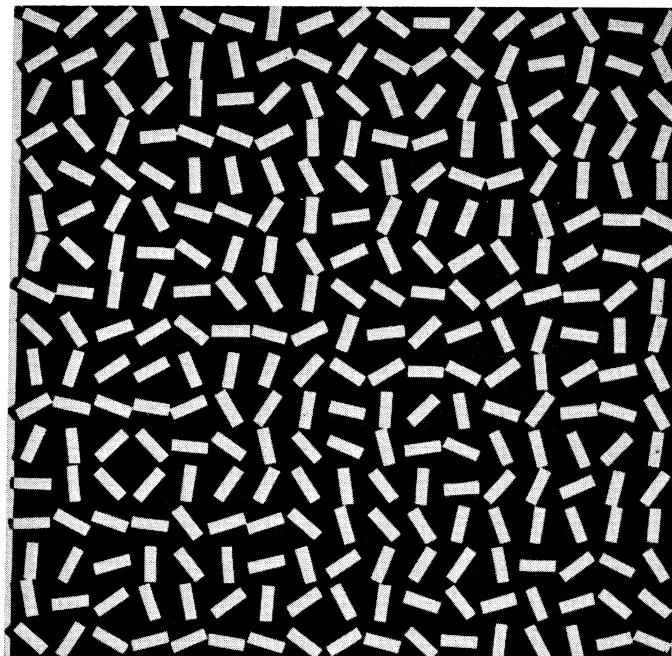
tended as art. . . . All compositions are of equal quality if they are sufficiently large, i.e., made with more than twenty or thirty numbers. The random objectifications I started in 1962. Other things I am doing are: white collages, white paintings, reflecting objects and surfaces (made with glass granules), blocks and columns (mostly of wood painted white), white books. . . . The choice of the depersonalized act is as important as the creative act itself." (from NUL = 0, series 1/#2, 1963)

In their disciplined activity, their appraisal of solitude as a danger for the artist, their suppression of identity, their objectifying art as "visual information" and their rejection of the age-old cult of artistic personality, the NTrc seems to repeat, consciously or not, some of the history of Russian art between 1917 and 1920. At that time the debate was hot between Malevich, Kandinsky, and the Pevsner brothers on one side, for pure art as a spiritual activity, and on the other, Tatlin and Rodchenko, who were against easel painting and for the artist as a technician who uses the tools and materials of modern production to make "laboratory art" which emerges as "object." (The Great Experiment, Russian Art 1863-1922, C. Grey, p. 244)

While it is possible that there is a connection between the NTrc ideas of depersonalization and the hospitality of a Yugoslav communist government to the exhibitions of 1961 and 1963 in Zagreb, it is certain that NTrc art has nothing in common with what is now acceptable as art in Russia. Even before the destalinization and the thaw in the cold war, Yugoslav artists were working in the same idioms as their colleagues of the West and Western art was shown in Zagreb and Ljubljana.

The basic thinking is international. The representation at the meeting in Paris, January 1963, was: Gruppo "N" (Biasi, Chiggio, Costa, Landi, Massironi); Gruppo "T" (Anceschi, Boriani, Colombo, De Vecchi, Varisco); Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (Garcia Rossi, Le Parc, Morellet, Sobrino, Stein, Yvaral); Munich group (Von Graevenitz, Kämmer, Müller, Pohl, Staudt, Zehringer); Dusseldorf group (Mack, Piene, Uecker); Holland group (Peeters, Armando, Schoonhoven); Equipo 57 (Duarte, Duart, Ibarola, Serrano, Cuenca); Demarco, Garcia Miranda, Tomasello, Cairoli, Cruz Diez, Dada Maino, Debourg, Vardanega, Martha Boto, Mari, Munari, Dorazio, Gerstner, Talman, Diter Rot, Getulio, Mavignier, Yayoi Kusama, Knifer, Picelj.

What now seems sure is that the reaction against *art informel* is at last in the hands of extremely able, active, intelli-



Von Graevenitz, *Mobile II*. Bars rotate at different speeds.

gent, and often articulate artists with a half century of uninterrupted development behind them. Time will determine the viability of this phase of the long Constructivist tradition. In its present form NTrc is quite extreme. Cracks have appeared already in solidarity. Anonymity is not every artist's dish. Experiment is not art. Discovery and invention are that and no more. Newness is irrelevant to art in which there is change, but no evidence of progress. I believe much great art is impure; the impurities, like trace elements, strengthen it.

Depersonalization is, after all, but another form of the piety of Fra Angelico. As with him the personal, however unsought, will appear. What artists make of NTrc will be art. It offers scope to talents which an art of expressive gesture cannot employ. ■

Mr. Rickey, well known as a kinetic sculptor, is a frequent contributor to the *Art Journal*. The present article is based on a chapter for a book, "Heirs of Constructivism," to be published in 1965.

Anacreontic after Titian

The slender bather walking along the blue sand,
Isolated for a moment from her companions,
Steps down into the reeds there at low tide;
And in a cool wind sweeping the water,
A bull appears who is no other than glorious
Zeus himself. He kneels that she may mount
And carries the Sidonian girl, Europa,
On his back over the wide sea and cleaves
The waves with his hoofs. And no other
Bull of the herd dares the sea save this one.

Thomas B. Brumbaugh