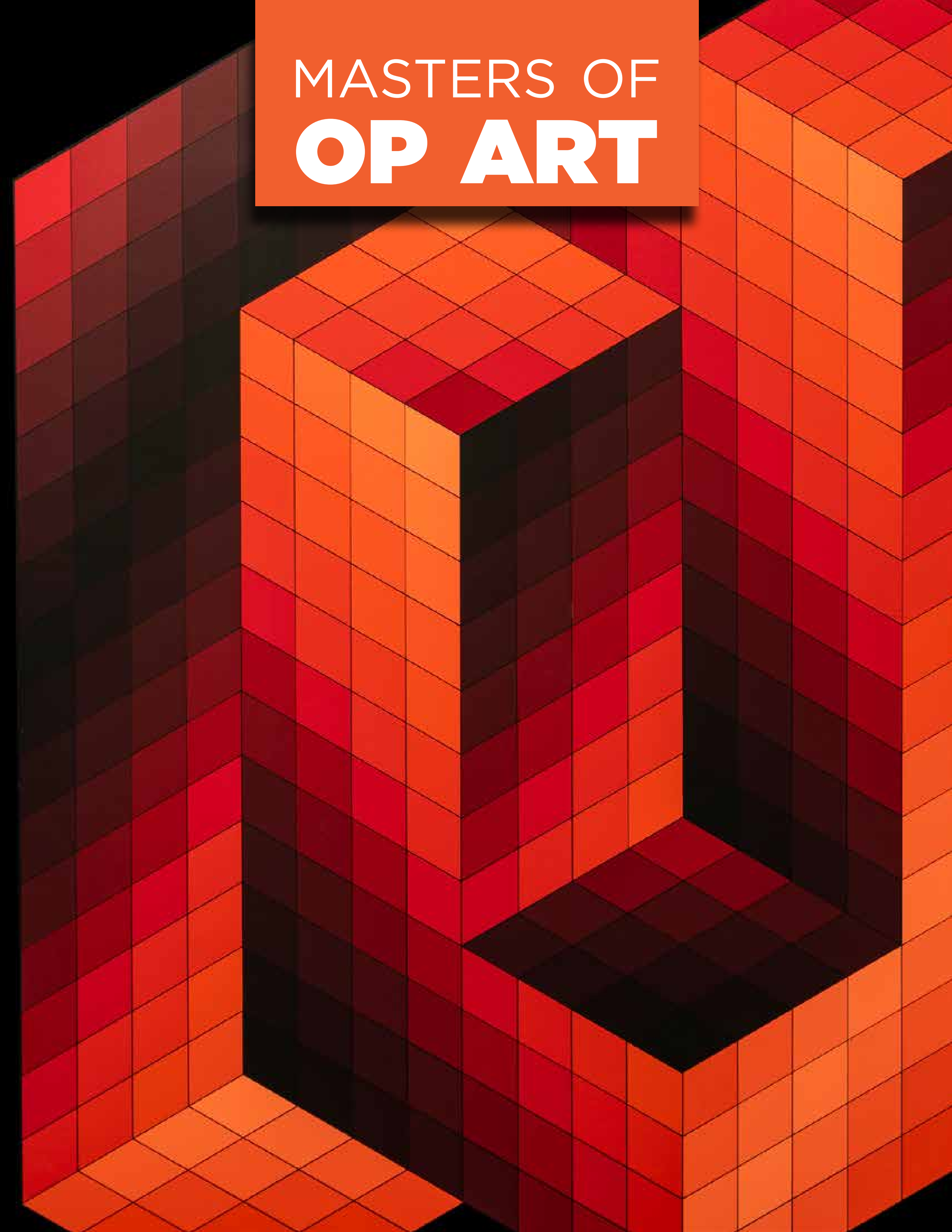
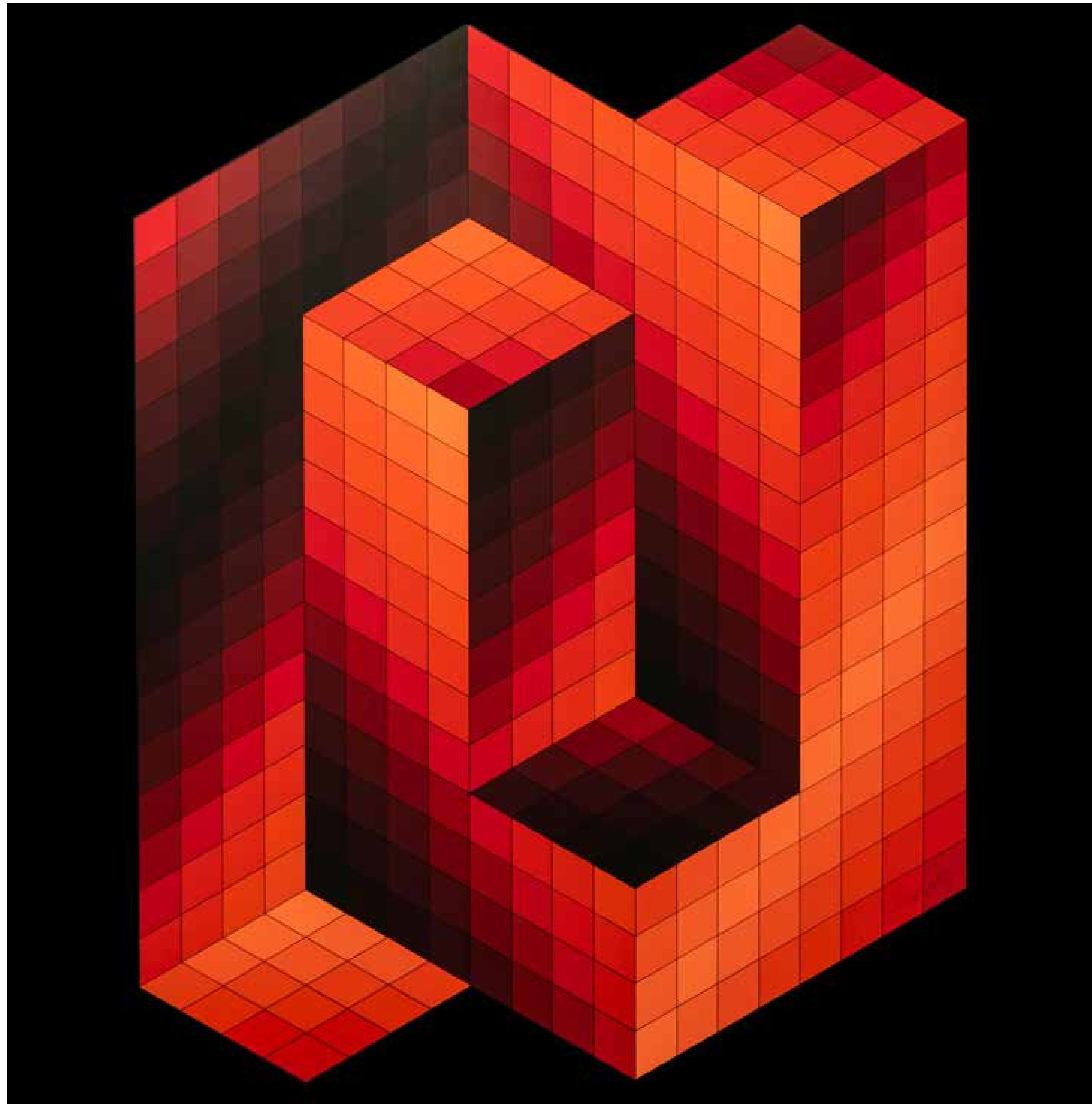


MASTERS OF OP ART



Victor Vasarely

French/Hungarian, 1906-1997

Izzo Rouge (from the Gestalt Album), 1970
Serigraph on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Woods

1988.03.12.02

MASTERS OF OP ART

Essay by Sarah Churchill
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Curated by Robbin Zella
Director of the Housatonic Museum of Art

Maters of OP Art

by Sarah Churchill

Op Art, or optical art, was a short-lived, yet innovative global offshoot of the Kinetic art movement that dominated the mid-1960s. But unlike the playful mobiles of Alexander Calder (1898–1976) or the frenetic "Méta-Matics" of Jean Tinguely (1929–91), Op artists recognized that literal motion was not a prerequisite of Kineticism. Rather, their art preyed on the fallibility of human vision, using static compositions and unresolvable visual tension to generate the perception of movement and depth. Drawing inspiration from a long tradition of illusionism in art history, and from a wave of Atomic Era technological innovation, artists like Victor Vasarely (1906–97), Josef Albers (1888–76), Bridget Riley (b.1931) and Richard Anuszkiewicz (1930–2020) unsettled art world elites. Their compositions refused to sit still and behave.

Consumed by the nature of optical effects in visual art, the Op artists rejected the angst and obsessive individualism that defined their predecessors, the Abstract Expressionists. Embracing repetition and automation, anonymity and austerity, Op art instead spoke to a new era of postwar optimism and a positivist attitude to progress and technology. The work was both astonishing and playful. Yet it could also be equally nightmarish, its darker, more unsettling impulses conflicting with the more egalitarian and promising technophilic impulses of the age.[1]

In the competition to become the new art world avant-garde, Op Art was not alone. Debates of the day centered around not only artistic practice and aesthetics, but on the relationship between the artist, the work and the viewer.[2] American art critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried championed Post-Painterly Abstraction, or Color Field painting, a purely optical experience meant to be appreciated with dispassionate detachment.[3] Greenberg's rival Harold Rosenberg emphasized artistic process, promoting the Neo-Dada assemblages of Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) and the "happenings" of performance artists like Allan Kaprow (1927–2006).[4] By contrast, MoMA curator William Seitz prioritized the viewer response over either the work itself or the actions of its creator. In *The Responsive Eye*, an international survey of more than one hundred works of what was then called "perceptual abstraction," Seitz repositioned the spectator from the negligible periphery to the nucleus of artistic production. With Op Art, the viewer participated in the work's creation. Their visual perception, in effect, completed the piece.

The Responsive Eye (1965), according to Seitz, dramatized "the power of static forms and colors to stimulate dynamic psychological responses."[5] This supposed "new tendency" in art was a movement which reckoned with emerging Gestalt approaches to human perception and with vision itself as a unifying design principle. Exploiting the eye's struggle to process compositions of hard-edged, geometric abstraction, Op artists explored contradictory attitudes to the relationship between art and reason. Theirs was a polemic that had been foregrounded particularly at the brief, but influential German art school known as the Bauhaus and by Constructivism, a modern art movement rooted in functional design and "truth to materials."

The Bauhaus, born during the German Weimar Republic in 1919, radically re-imagined art and design education, marrying the late nineteenth-century nostalgia for craft with modern European industrialization. Under the leadership of critical figures like Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Johannes Itten (1888–1967) and László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), artistic production became cross-pollinated with emerging theories of psychology and economics. In its philosophical embrace of both the industrial and natural material worlds, the Bauhaus unified competing strains of art and technology. Moholy-Nagy and his contemporary Josef Albers (1888–1976), centered vision in their pedagogy and believed themselves to be producing a "new type of designer" with specialized training in science and craft technique. Under their guidance, a new generation of artists began to see art as a valid method of scientific inquiry in which invention was fundamental to artistic production.[6]

While commercially successful, Op Art critics argued that it was too facile and decorative to have deeper meaning.[7] However, *The Responsive Eye* exemplified the most pregnant discourses of the atomic age, responding with both fear and fascination to recent advancements in nuclear energy, aerospace, computer science and film. Much like the invention of scientific perspective during the Renaissance or the Impressionists' investigations of color theory, the emerging dominance of modern photography, it was argued, significantly informed twentieth-century perception.[8] Consequently, the arts were rapidly being rethought according to new ways of seeing and being in the world.[9] Abstract films like Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926), for example, imagined new, purely formal languages of rhythmic, geometric abstraction, while concepts of design practice codified at the Bauhaus guided mid-century explorations in painting, collage, design and architecture across Europe and the Americas. In seriality, simplicity and repetition, Op artists founded a universal visual syntax with utopian potentiality.[10]

Through this new experimental language, adherents to the Op Art movement imagined a world in which progress was not only possible, but inevitable.[11] But in the end, the movement was the victim of its own success. The commercial embrace of *The Responsive Eye*, one of the first blockbusters in contemporary art, proved to be the kiss of death. Luxury department stores, textile designers and fashion magazines crassly commercialized Op Art techniques as mindless mirth, emptying the movement of its theoretical significance. Meanwhile, the failure of the May '68 student protests in France, the murder of Martin Luther King in America and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam eroded the optimism that had buoyed the postwar generation. As the bubble burst, taste for the psychedelic effects of color and form waned. Op Art became kitsch, synonymous with the spirit of the "swinging sixties." However, critically acclaimed retrospectives have, in recent years, revised Op Art's unfortunate underestimation. Its visionary spirit and fearless experimentation are today celebrated for helping to clear the path for Post-Minimalism's break with conventional painting and sculpture.

> "In visual perception a color is almost never seen…as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art. In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually."[12]
>
> —Josef Albers (1888–1976)

Of all of art's formal elements, color was the most profound and most "magical" for Josef Albers. In *I.S.E, Homage to a Square, Variant II* (1966) we see not a square, but a series of nesting rectangles in mustard, cream, gray, green and turquoise. Playing with the scale of simple, geometric forms, *Variant II* delights in subtle washes of gray and gold that modulate the colors beneath. The compositional motif, which features two small, slender rectangles framed within concentric fields of contrasting colors, follows from Albers's observations of adobe, or mudbrick, houses seen and photographed during his many trips to Mexico and the American Southwest. The "Variant" series inspired his most famous collection of paintings and prints, *Homage to the Square*, a theme he explored until his death in 1976.

The pre-Columbian impulse toward abstraction resonated powerfully with Albers. Beginning in 1935, Albers and his wife, textile artist Anni Albers (1899–1994), traveled to Mexico over a dozen times, visiting and documenting major archeological sites like Chichén Itzá and Monte Albán. Inspired by the geometric simplicity and colors of Mexican and pre-Columbian architecture, Albers produced richly chromatic paintings and prints that reflected his admiration of their craft. "Mexico is truly the promised land of abstract art," he wrote, "For here it is already thousands of years old."[13]

Not before, nor since, has the humble square had such an impact on the trajectory of modern art. Born and raised in Germany, Albers joined the Bauhaus in 1920, first as a student and later as a master craftsman and professor, expanding his working interests from glass to furniture design and typography. Following the dissolution of the Bauhaus and the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Josef and Anni fled to America, where their presence at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina and at Yale University ensured that the reach of the Bauhaus would be global. The intensity with which Albers pursued the phenomenology of color had profound effects on art and design pedagogy. He not only created the first course in color theory based exclusively on the direct observation of color's behavior, he also drafted the most comprehensive theoretical analysis of color in the twentieth century, the influential *Interaction of Color*, now in its fourth edition.[14] His philosophies and teaching touched countless artists, including Elaine de Kooning (1918–89), Ruth Asawa (1926–2013), Cy Twombly (1928–2011) and Kenneth Noland (1924–2010). Robert Rauschenberg considered him the most important teacher he'd ever had.[15]

While Albers was among the best-known masters of perceptual abstraction, he was overlooked by contemporaries as too modish.[16] However, it would be impossible to imagine the Op Art movement without Albers at its theoretical core. His repetition of standardized forms, systematic organization and fascination with the optical and with the psychophysical effects of color in painting and printmaking became critical facets of Op Art experimentation.

"Form can exist only if called attention to by some color quality and color is a quality only when defined by form."[17]
—Victor Vasarely (1906–97)

Educated in a Bauhausian-style private academy in Budapest, Victor Vasarely's lifelong fascination with vision, illusionism and economy of design was evident even among his earliest works as a graphic designer in Paris in the 1930s. Inspired by domestic design and architecture, Vasarely recognized that geometric patterns and forms could be exploited to create the impression of depth in the two-dimensional picture plane. Moving towards the fine arts, he eventually co-founded the Galérie Denise René, which became an important center for Op Art in mainland Europe. The gallery's 1955 exhibition Le Mouvement, accompanied by Vasarely's signature text the *Yellow Manifesto* (1955), baptized Kineticism and launched Vasarely's reputation as Op Art's founding father.

Early works, like *Zebra* (1937), demonstrate Vasarely's skill at manipulating the eye's natural tendency to make sense of abstraction. As his work matured, he turned to the newly popular principles of Gestalt psychology, a twentieth-century school of thought grounded in the science of perception, and to the compositional simplicity of Albers and the Russian Constructivist, Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935). Vasarely's faith in science and technology inspired him to radically re-imagine techniques of perspective and distortion exploited by painters since the Renaissance. Seeing in Op Art a universal, repeatable and democratic language, he boldly declared the end of easel painting and the beginning of "art for all."[18] In declaring that the creative act could be both programmable and scientific, he proclaimed that clarity, objectivity and order would fulfil the "post-traumatic" needs of mid-century optimism.

Part of Vasarely's third significant body of work known as the "Gestalt" series, the intense *Izzo Rouge* presents the viewer with a visual riddle that refuses resolution. As your eyes scan the print's surface, your brain is working hard, observing small, tessellated squares of varying chromatic intensity and value and imagining planes and depth where there essentially is none. The strategic arrangement of light and dark squares creates the impression of highlights and shadows from which a tangled mass emerges. Huge and red, the resultant form is mysteriously weightless and yet solid and imposing; safely contained and yet indeterminable.

''Color is my subject matter and its performance is my painting… I've taken color a step further than it had been taken by the Impressionists and the Neo-Impressionists."[19]
—Richard Anuszkiewicz (1930–2020)

Much like his mentor Josef Albers, Richard Anuszkiewicz built his career exploring the experience of color, focusing particularly upon the ways in which color's behavior is largely dictated by its context. Take for example the serigraph *Sequential X*, which features a pair of slender rectangles constituted by bright, vibrating laser-like lines that appear to advance and recede. One of several plates in the "Sequential Portfolio" series, *X* plays with color temperatures and with the phenomenon of simultaneous contrast, a psycho-physiological effect following from the interaction between colors of different saturations and hues. When placed side by side, the color in greater quantity influences the eye's perception of the other.

In this instance, the cool cobalt in *X* is modulated by two very similar, but nonetheless different reds. Look closely, and you'll note that the blue appears darker and muddier next to lines of a warm, cherry red and cooler and cleaner opposite lines of magenta. While the juxtaposition of magenta and cobalt is more harmonious, the combination of red and blue creates a struggle for chromatic dominance. This is because the richly saturated red is creating a negative after-image. As the cones in your eyes tire, almost imperceptible green stripes emerge, altering the adjacent blue and making it look muddy and desaturated.

The radiating lines in *Sequential X* have a hypnotic quality that is characteristic of Anuszkiewicz's oeuvre, reflecting his desire to create something romantic and contemplative out of what might otherwise appear sterile and mechanical.[20] Dubbed by the New York Times as a "*Wizard of Op*," Anuszkiewicz's career was as marked by obsessive precision as it was a compulsion for color. While much of his early education was steeped in the regionalism and social realism of his native Mid-West, Anuszkiewicz was drawn to study at Yale, where he absorbed Albers's influential color theory and propensity for modular forms and rectilinearity. Immersed in Impressionism, yet driven by technical virtuosity and minimalism, Anuszkiewicz's colorful geometric abstraction rectified the spiritual against the rational to stunning effect.

"Impermanence of visual experience is the only constant reality."[21]
—Josef Levi (b.1938)

An overlooked figure in the legacy of Op Art, Josef Levi has, throughout his career, created works that confront the act of looking at art and challenge the idea of visual permanence. After graduating from the fine arts department at the University of Connecticut, Levi spent several years in the United States Army and its reserves while also studying art history at Columbia University. His first mature body of work, which emerged in the mid-1960s at the height of Op Art's popularity, was abstract and is represented here in light constructions like *Eromanga* (1965) and *Periapt* (1965) and in the serigraphs that followed, like *XWZCB* (1968).Levi's light constructions were exhibited at Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery in 1966, a venue renowned for its bold and innovative curation.

Periapt, a term which means charm or amulet, imbues industrial materials like Formica, wire mesh and fluorescent lighting with their own kind of modern, technological magic. Like a conjuror, Levi masterfully fools the eye into seeing shapes and patterns that reveal themselves only when one stands at the proper vantage point. When illuminated, Periapt produces the illusion of four small, white circles, suspended within four white squares of equal size. Black polka-dots large and small swim in and out of focus, forming patterns that delineate shape and generate the impression of buoyancy and transience. The illusion is repeated with *Eromanga*, but with a large, solitary circle of a brilliant cobalt.

Up close, the trick is revealed to be little more than the artful juxtaposition of double layers of perforated wire mesh. This technique produces what is known as a *moiré* effect, a visual interference generated by the juxtaposition of two slightly misaligned grids laid one over the other. This moiré pattern produces a hologram, magnifying patterns and shapes to various strengths. Elegant in simplicity, both *Periapt* and *Eromanga* prioritize the experience of the viewer over formal aesthetics. With the most mundane of materials, Levi's light constructions bewilder and delight. Light animates the built environment and seduces the viewer into closer inspection. The subject here is less the work of art itself, but a playful experiment in how to capture and hold our attention.

> "I knew I wanted this linear movement…with the creation of apparently parallel lines, creating shapes that almost collide and describe a more specific area. From that time on it became pure abstraction, no more mountains, valleys, illusion."[22]
>
> —Henry Pearson (1914–2006)

Visually speaking, Henry Pearson's work stands solidly among the best within the perceptual art tradition. But theoretically, Pearson diverged markedly from his contemporaries, being more interested in culture, poetry, literature and drama than in science or technology. Trained initially as a set designer, Pearson came to fine art in the mid-1950s, when he began to draw upon his own formative experience as a topographical artist in World War II.[23] While his *Black on White* (1964) was included in MoMA's blockbuster *The Responsive Eye*, Pearson himself rejected the Op Art label, arguing that his work was "more romantic" than the movement against which he was so often compared. Nonetheless, Pearson, much like Vasarely, found inspiration in the Suprematism of the painter Kazimir Malevich, who shared Pearson's fascination with the "bird's eye view" [24] in aerial photography.

In New York, Pearson studied at the Art Students League under Reginald Marsh (1898–1954) and Will Barnet (1911–2012), where he became a fixture among the New York Abstraction scene. *Expanding Yellow* (1959), a striking expanse of lemon and gold, precedes Pearson's progression towards the undulating parallel lines for which he would become known and reflects the influence of Hard-Edge painting. In Pearson's massive and severe architectonic forms, we can begin to see his interest in playing with aerial perspective and topography. However, the flatness of *Expanding Yellow* and its absence of figuration and emotion, heightens the viewer's awareness of the canvas as "an object," refuting the illusionism that characterized so many within the Op Art movement.

END NOTES

[1] "Op Art: Pictures That Attack the Eye." *Time Magazine* vol. 84:17 (October 23, 1964), 78.

[2] Jeffrey Saketnik, "Juxtapositions and Constellations: Albers and Op Art," *Intersecting Colors: Josef Albers and His Contemporaries*, Vanja Malloy, ed. (Amherst: The Amherst College Press, 2015), 65–75.

[3] Ibid, 67.

[4] National Gallery Podcast, David Gariff, "Washington D.C. Color School;" The Art Story Contributors, "Harold Rosenberg," TheArtStory.org (October 15, 2012) https://www.theartstory.org/critic/rosenberg-harold/, The Art Story Contributors, "Art Critics Comparison: Clement Greenberg vs. Harold Rosenberg," TheArtStory.org, https://www.theartstory.org/critics-greenberg-rosenberg.htm.

[5] William Seitz, "The Responsive Eye," Exhibition Catalog: *The Responsive Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 41.

[6] Hal Foster, "1923," *Art Since 1900*, Vol. 1, Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, Yve-Alain Bois, et. al. editors (New York: Thames & Hudson, [2004] 2016), 211 and Yve-Alain Bois, "1947a," *Art Since 1900*, Vol.2, Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, Yve-Alain Bois, et. al. editors (New York: Thames & Hudson, [2004] 2016), 399–403.

[7] Saketnik, 67.

[8] Bois, 399

[9] Ibid.

[10] Dorothea Eimert, *Art of the 20th Century* (New York: Parkstone International, 2014), 281.

[11] Bridget Riley, cited in Rich.

[12] Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

[13] Dennis Zhou, "How Pre-Columbian Art Influence Josef Albers," *www.HyperAllergic.com*, (March 23, 2018) https://hyperallergic.com/433441/pre-columbian-art-influenced-josef-albers/ accessed 7/21/20.

[14] The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, https://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/interaction-of-color/publications/#slide1 accessed 7/9/20.

[15] Bois, 400.

[16] Jeffrey Saketnik, "Juxtapositions and Constellations: Albers and Op Art," *Intersecting Colors: Josef Albers and His Contemporaries*, Vanja Malloy, ed. (Amherst: The Amherst College Press, 2015), 65.

[17] Yve-Alain Bois, "1955," Art Since 1900, Vol 2., 442

[18] Ibid; Phillip Barcio, "Developing the Optical Abstraction or How Victor Vasarely Found His Own Style," *Ideel Art*, (August 29, 2016), https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/victor-vasarely accessed 7/16/20.

[19] David R. Shirey, "A Colorist Still Flauts Convention," *New York Times* (Feb. 3, 1985), https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/03/nyregion/a-colorist-still-flouts-convention.html, Section NJ, p. 11.

[20] Jillian Steinhauer, "Richard Anuszkiewicz, Op Art Pioneer Who Made Eyes Pop, Dies at 89," *New York Times* (May 27, 2020) https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/arts/richard-anuszkiewicz-dead.html, Section B, 12.

[21] William S. Wilson, "In the Eye of the Beholder," *ARTnews*, February 1970. pp. 52–3, 71.

[22] Nina Parris, "Henry Pearson," catalog, *Southern Heritage Series: Henry Pearson* (Columbia: Columbia Museum of Art, 1988), 2.

[23] Ibid, 1.

[24] The Art Story Contributors, "Suprematism Movement Overview and Analysis," TheArtStory.org, https://www.theartstory.org/movement/suprematism/ (Jan. 21, 2012), accessed July 15, 2020.

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Josef Albers
German/American, 1888-1976

I.S.E. Homage to a Square,
Variant II from Ten Variants, 52/200, 1966
Serigraph on cream paper

Student Government Purchase

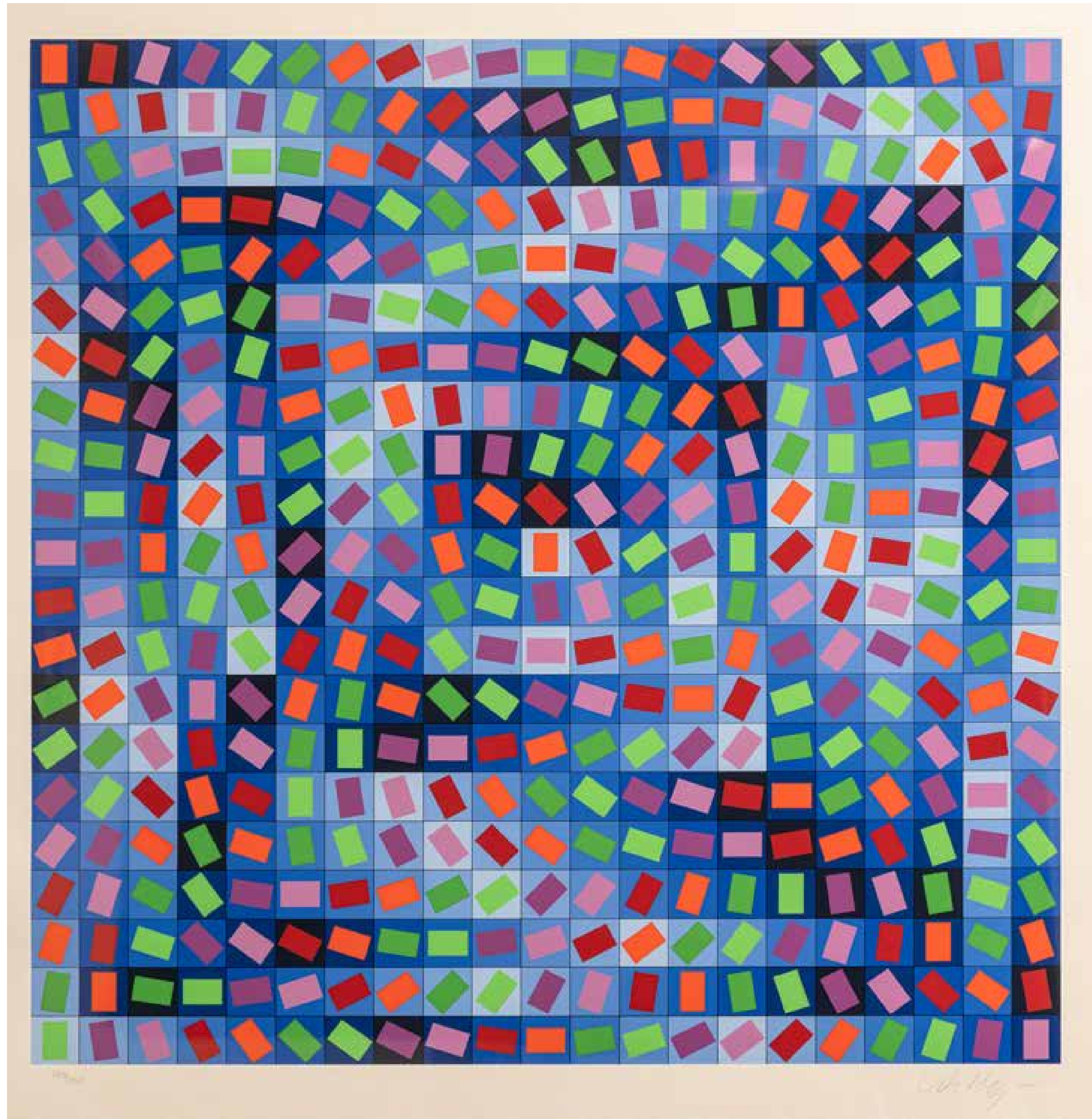
1975.15.01

Victor Vasarely
French/Hungarian, 1906-1997

Omega V, 1979
Screen-print on cream paper

Gift of Bernard Manuel

1980.47.04

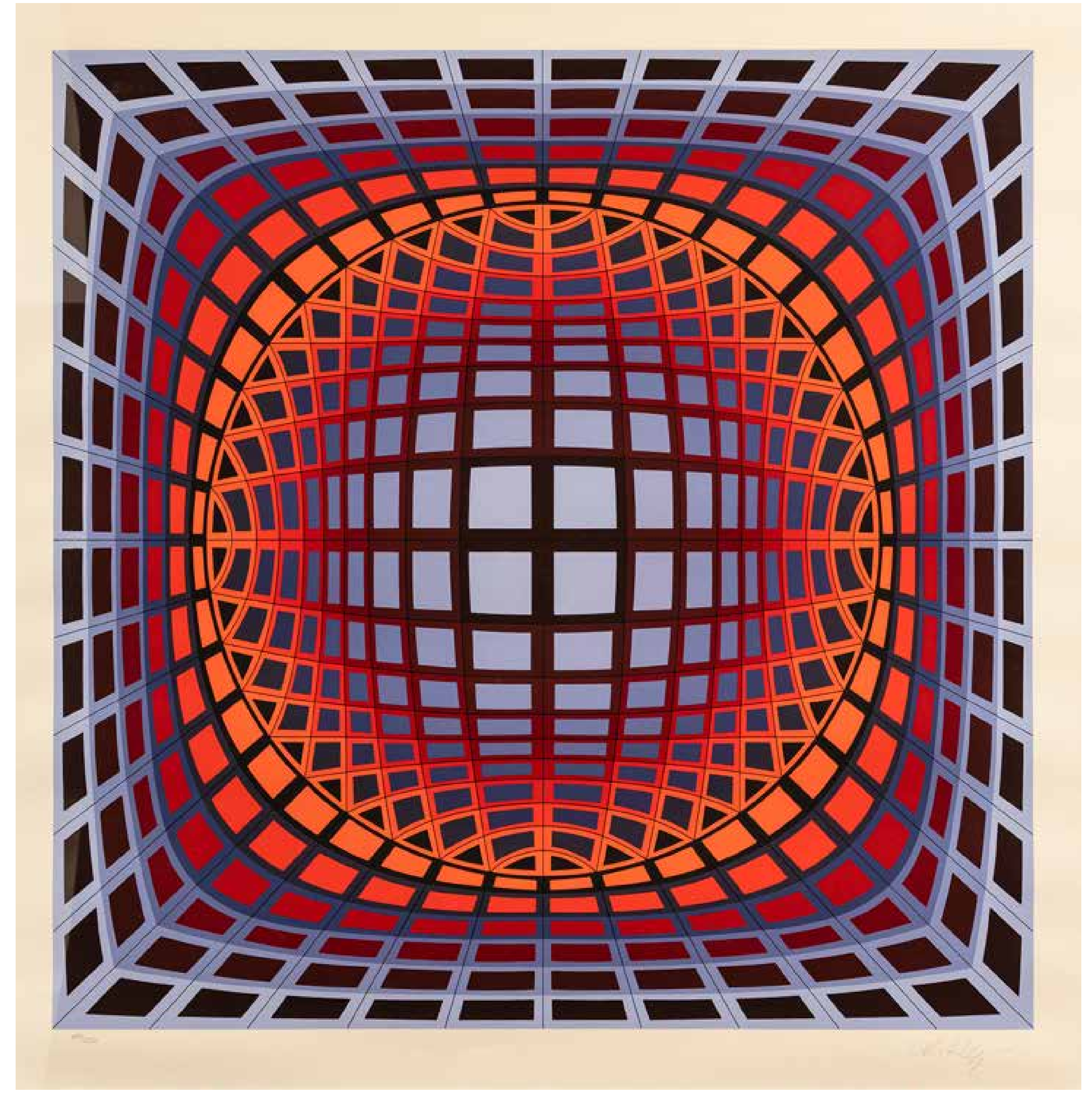


Victor Vasarely
French/Hungarian, 1906-1997

Kass-MC-"Rhythm,"183/250, 1970
Serigraph on cream paper

Gift of Bernard Manuel

1980.47.02

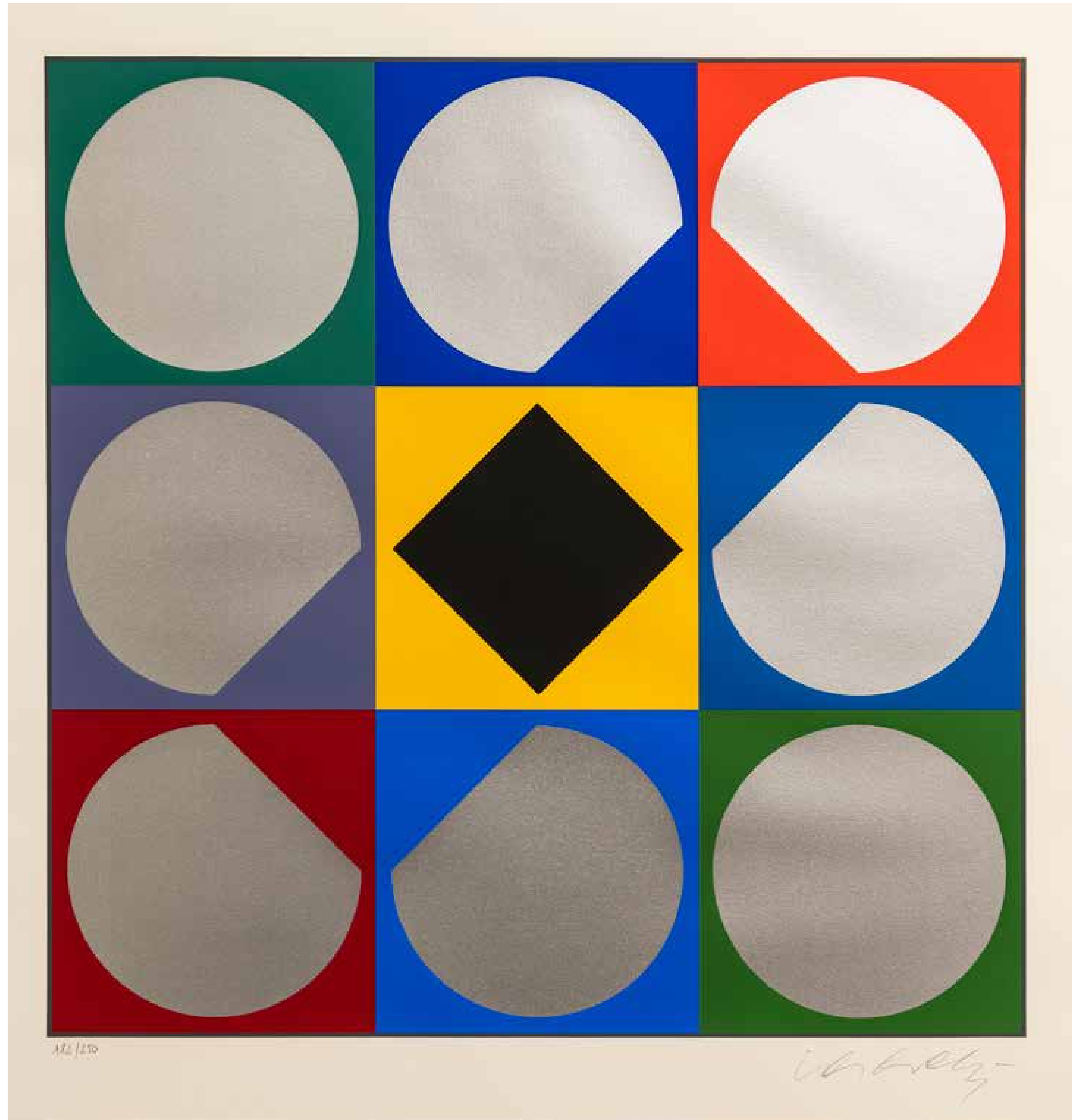


Victor Vasarely
French/Hungarian, 1906-1997

Uran II, 60/250, 1979
Serigraph in colors

Gift of Bernard Manuel

1980.47.03



Victor Vasarely
French/Hungarian, 1906-1997

Opale-3 from "Clarities" in the Amiel Album, 182/250, 1970
Serigraph in colors

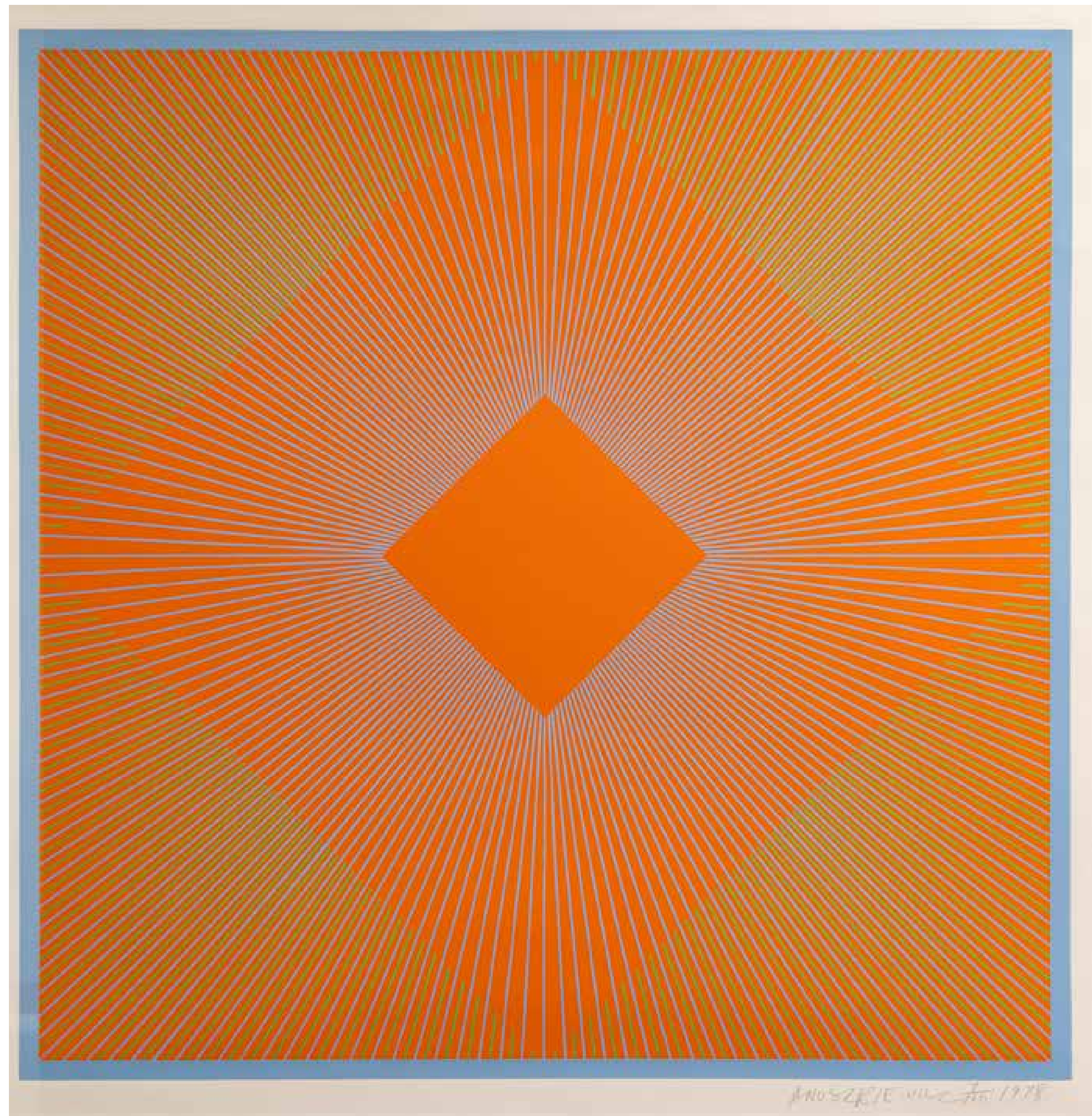
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Woods

1988.03.10

Richard Anuszkiewicz
American, 1930

Sequential X, 124/200, 1972
Silkscreen on cream paper

1982.46.01



Richard Anuszkiewicz
American, 1930

Splendor of Orange, 82/100, 1978
Serigraph on paper

Gift of Hugh Levin

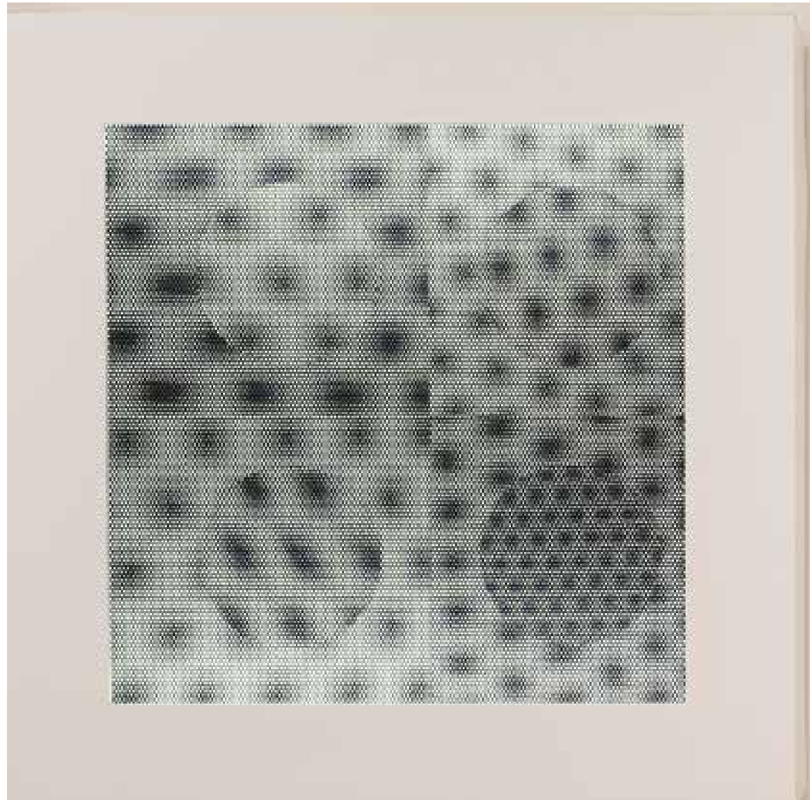
1993.23.10

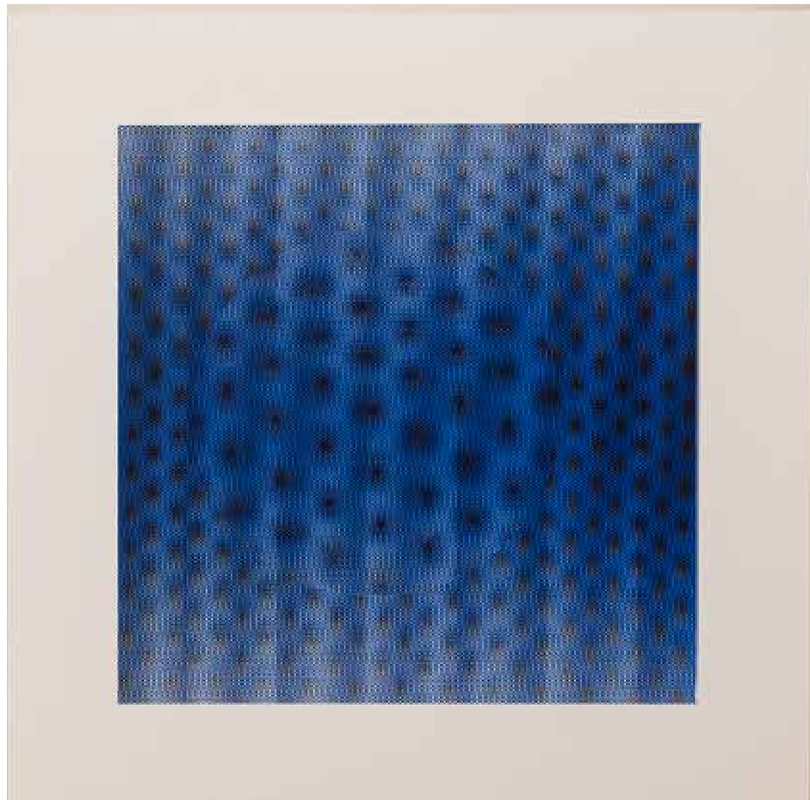
Josef Levi
American, 1938

Nyotitrobic II, 1965
Perforated metal and Liquitex

Gift of the artist

1967.09.01



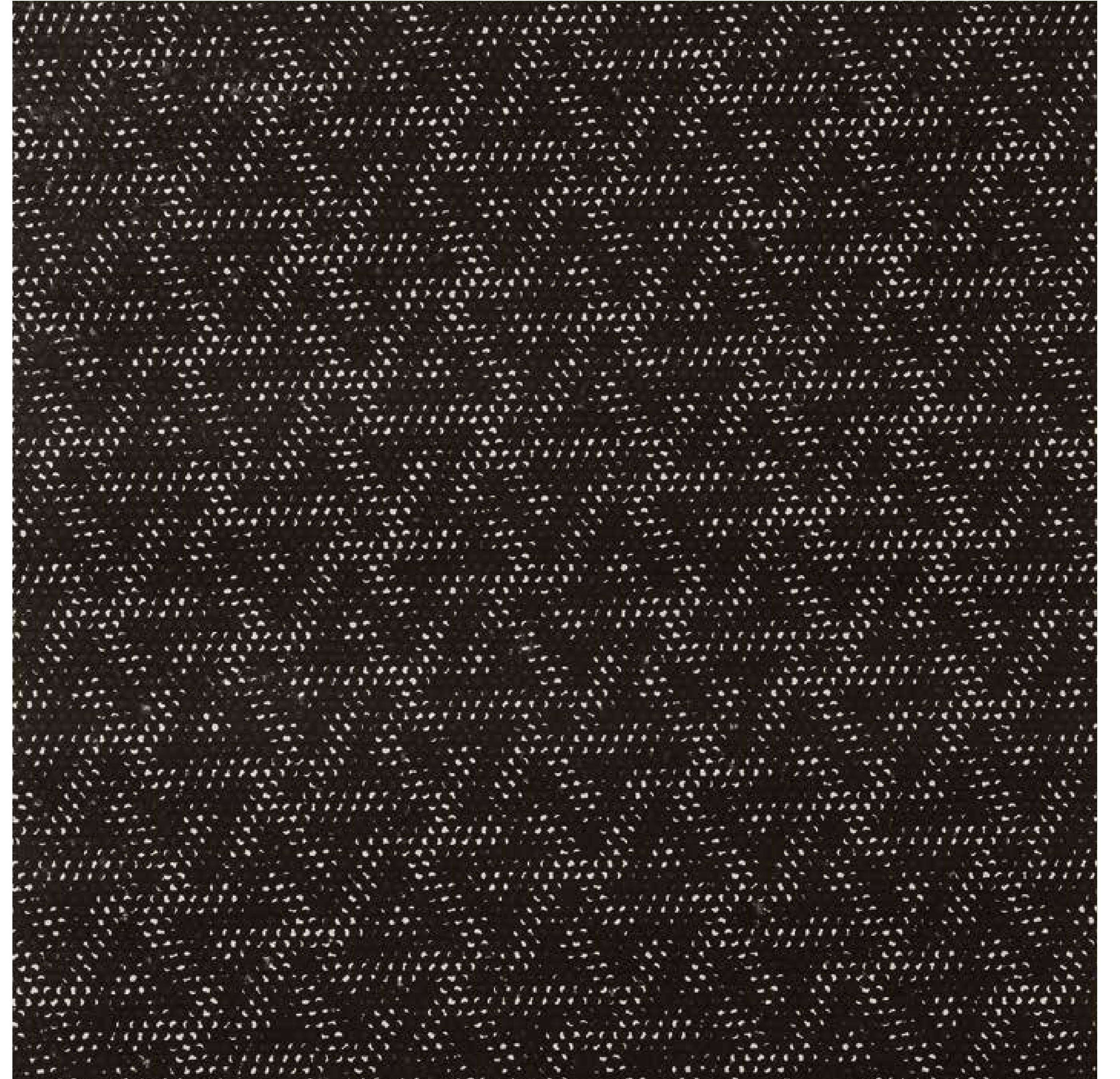


Josef Levi
American, 1938

Periapt, 1965 and Eromanga, 1965
Wood, perforated wire mesh, fluorescent lights and formica

Gift of Aaron Furman

1980.03.01 and 1980.03.02



Josef Levi
American, 1938

XWZCB, 1968
Screen-print on cream paper

Gift of Mark Greenstein

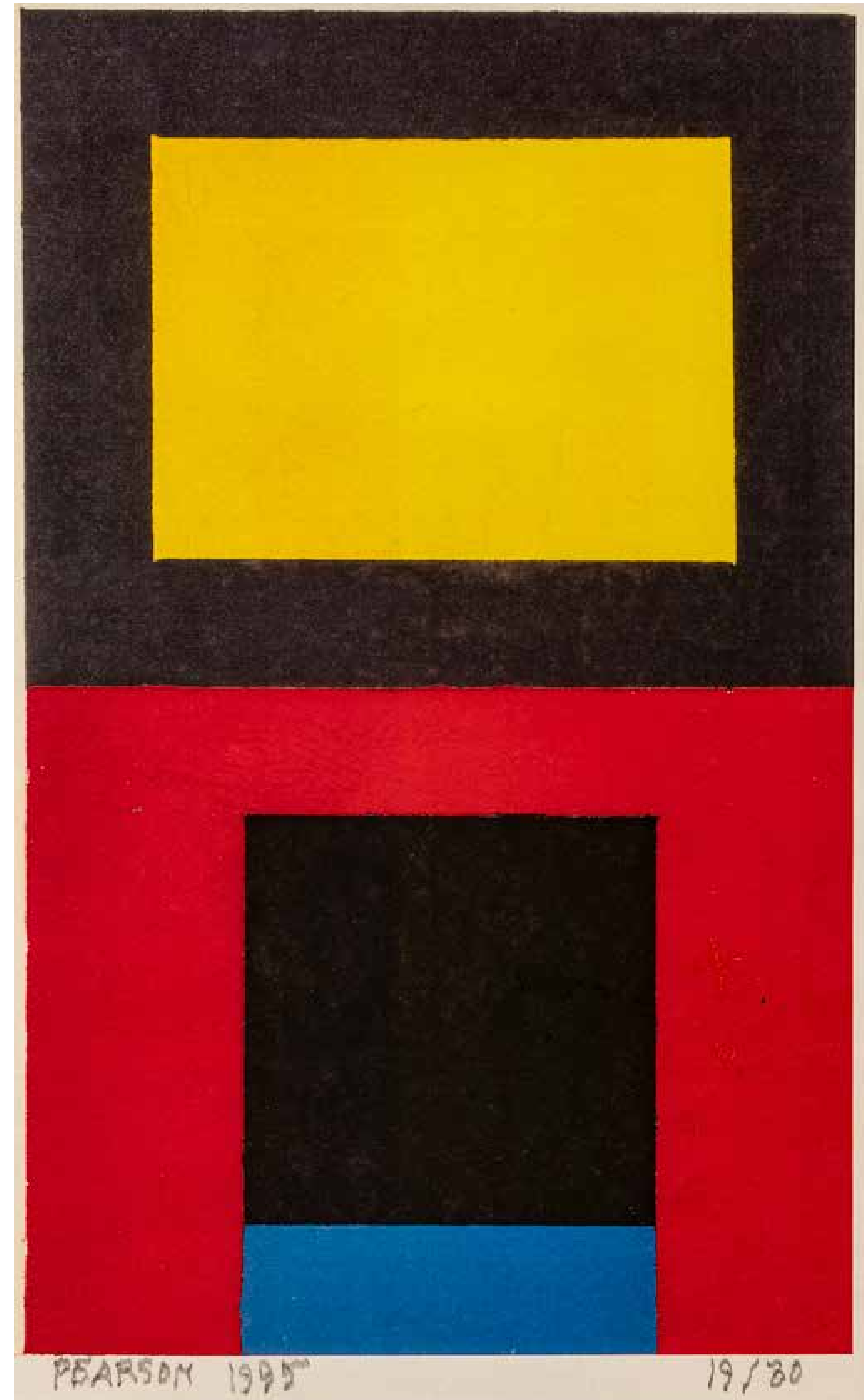
2001.02.06

Henry Charles Pearson
American, 1914-2006

Expanding Yellow #10, 1959
Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist

1969.08.01



Henry Charles Pearson
American, 1914-2006

Untitled, 19/30, 1995
Screen-print on off-white wove paper

Gift of Mark Greenstein

2001.02.08

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