

Richard Anuszkiewicz

Richard Anuszkiewicz (pronounced “Anna-skev’-ich”) was born in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1930 of Polish immigrants. Anuszkiewicz received his BFA from The Cleveland Institute of Art in 1953. His most influential formal training was in the Bauhaus tradition: he was a student of Josef Albers at Yale University from 1953-55, when he received his MFA. While he was at Yale, Anuszkiewicz was a roommate of Julian Stanczak.

Anuszkiewicz’s first show in New York of what have been called “OP Art” paintings occurred at The Contemporaries gallery in 1960. The Museum of Modern Art purchased one of the paintings from that exhibition. In 1963, he participated in group shows at The Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 1965, he was included in the landmark show “The Responsive Eye” at The Museum of Modern Art. In connection with these exhibitions, “OP Art” and Anuszkiewicz were the subjects of articles in numerous periodicals, including Time and Life.

Although the phrase “OP Art” has remained attached to Anuszkiewicz’s work, it has caused some confusion, and various attempts have been made to select words that more specifically describe his work. Some, including Josef Albers, have preferred to call this kind of work “perceptual art” since it causes the viewer to become aware of the difference between what is actually there and what the viewer “perceives” to be there.

More recently, a distinction has been made between those artists who primarily explore the perceptual qualities of line, form and pattern, and others, including Anuszkiewicz, who focus on the perceptual qualities of color. The phrase “color function painting” has been used in connection with this second group of artists since their work explores how colors function together to change and influence each other. The phrase was derived from something Anuszkiewicz once wrote about his work:

“I would like to point out that the image in my work has always been determined by what I wanted the color to do. Color function becomes my subject matter and its performance is my painting.”

For example, several observations can be made about the use of color in Sunset Rainbow (pictured on the cover of this card). First, the lines shift in color from yellow (in the left horizontal bar) through red (in the center vertical bar) to off-white (in the right horizontal bar). Each shift in color is in equal “steps” so that the color of the lines in any given bar is exactly the “middle mixture” (or average) of the colors of the bars on either side of it. Thus, the orange in the bar that is third from the left is the middle mixture of the yellow-orange of bar #2 and the red-orange of bar #4. The orange in bar #3 is also the middle mixture of the pure yellow of bar #1 and the pure red of bar #5.

Second, the lines appear to change color depending upon what colors are next to them. This phenomenon is very noticeable in the painting, yet it can only be seen to a limited degree in the photograph. For example, the lines at the base of the center vertical

bar (bar #5), in the area next to the yellow of bar #1 and the off-white of bar #9, appear to be a much purer red than they do toward the top of the bar, where they are near the much closer red-orange colors of bars #4 and 6. Yet these lines are identical in color and do not change from top to bottom. In addition, the center vertical bar appears more three dimensional, somewhat like a rounded or fluted column, at the base (where the lines appear to be pure red and very different from the yellow and off-white surrounding them) and more flat or two dimensional at the top (where the lines are very similar in color to and “reach out” to join the red-orange colors surrounding them).

Third, the dark background color is exactly the same shade of navy blue throughout the painting, although it appears black in some areas and lighter blue in others depending upon the colors of the surrounding lines.

Finally, the painting somehow seems both flat and three dimensional. Unfortunately, this effect can be seen to only a limited degree in the photograph, although it is quite pronounced in the painting itself. This effect is caused by the contradiction between the image (which appears to be three dimensional with the center area being in front) and the color (which, if it could be seen separate from the image, would also appear to be three dimensional, but with the center area being behind the left and right wings). If you make a black and white photocopy of this card, it can easily be seen that the colors of the lines are very light on the two outer bars (bars #1 and 9), and that they get progressively darker in equal steps toward the center bar. All things being equal, lighter colors appear to be closer to us than darker colors do. Thus, the colors chosen are opposite of the image chosen in terms of what appears closest to us and what appears farthest away.

Whether his work is called “OP Art”, “perceptual art” or “color function painting,” it is clear that Anuszkiewicz is an important 20th Century artist. His work is included in most of the major history of art textbooks and in over 70 museums, including The Museum of Modern Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Hirshhorn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The National Museum of American Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as museums in Japan, Denmark, Venezuela, Germany, Israel and Korea. A monograph on Anuszkiewicz’s work was published by Harry N. Abrams in 1977. A major retrospective of Anuszkiewicz’s work will tour Europe during 1997 and 1998.