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The Gendered Optics of Bridget Riley’s “Op Art”:
Her Artistic Dismissal and Influence on the 1960s Mod Era

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in University Honors and Art History

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Abstract

The English painter Bridget Riley (1931—) is widely regarded as one of Britain’s most successful international contemporary artists. The progression of her career to reach such acclaim, however, has been marked by consistent misperceptions, the greatest of which arose during the beginning of her ascent when she was pointedly positioned as a leading figure of both Optical Art and United Kingdom Mod fashion. The critical reception of Bridget Riley’s early work (1961-67) and its appropriation by Mod fashion retailers provide interesting case studies of (1) the commercialization of art before the establishment of US copyright law and (2) the conversations surrounding institutional and gendered biases experienced by women artists prior to their mainstream problematization by the Feminist Art movement in the 1970s. Although discourse exploring Riley’s inadvertent body in Op and her experience as a woman artist during the 1960s exists, critical scholarship on the intersecting impact fashion played in her reception and subsequent misconceptions is lacking. This thesis centers on the exploitation of Riley’s art in fashion as the setting in which her critical reception and artistic dismissal can be understood.
Introduction

The English painter Bridget Riley (1931—) is widely regarded as one of Britain’s most successful international contemporary artists. The progression of her career to reach such acclaim, however, has been marked by consistent misperceptions, the greatest of which arose during the beginning of her ascent when she was pointedly positioned as a leading figure of both Optical Art and United Kingdom Mod fashion. Emerging in the art realm in 1961, Riley’s innovative abstract works dealing with perception quickly grouped the young artist with the emerging Optical Art Movement—a movement that executed systemic and precise manipulation of shapes and colors to imply the presence of an illusion through the stimulation of the retina.1 Referred to as “Op art” by the press, Riley’s association with the movement would be solidified by her inclusion in New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) 1965 exhibition The Responsive Eye, the first recognition by an American museum of Optical Art.2 With her composition Current (1964) on the exhibition invitation and catalog cover, she became the representative artist of Op by default.3 In this role, she subsequently became the main target of scrutiny by critics and exploitation by designers who transferred her abstraction on canvas to patterns on fabric. It is this crucial moment at the MoMA that piqued my interest to explore Riley’s forced participation in two movements she did not consent to represent, and the repercussions of commercialization and gendered criticism she experienced prior to the establishment of both US copyright law and the Feminist Art movement in the 1970s that affected her career.

2 Ibid.
Riley’s 1965 debut in the United States incited comparison between her paintings and prints with textiles due to their patterning. Unlike her male counterparts similarly exploring Op art in the exhibition, the connection of Riley’s work with a medium traditionally referred to as “women’s work” labeled her resolutely abstract art as “feminine” or “domestic.” In the sexist climate of western 1960s art and culture, referring to art and artistic practices as feminine was deemed an insult, and thus Riley’s work was devalued based on gender. This association with textiles and femininity was deepened by the immediate response of fashion designers to her work, exploiting her patterned illusions in their designs to the detriment of her career. Walking along Fifth Avenue shortly after the opening of the exhibition, Riley was confronted with black and white clothing “inspired” by her artwork in department windows and defeatedly commented “it will take at least twenty years before anyone looks at my painting seriously again.” It would in fact take over thirty years for Riley to reach the artistic acclaim and recognition she desired and deserves.

The critical reception of Bridget Riley’s early work (1961-67) and its appropriation by Mod fashion retailers provide an interesting case study of the conversations surrounding institutional and gendered biases experienced by women artists before their mainstream problematization by the Feminist Art movement in the 1970s. Due to Riley’s refusal to align herself with feminism during her career, connections between the artist’s challenging of art/craft hierarchies and her decorative dismissal have rarely been made. Although discourse exploring Riley’s inadvertent body in Op and her experience as a woman artist during the 1960s exists,

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5 Ibid.
critical scholarship on the intersecting impact fashion played in her reception and subsequent misconceptions is lacking.

This thesis centers on the exploitation of Riley’s art in fashion as the setting in which her critical reception and artistic dismissal can be understood. My thesis will be divided into five parts. First I will situate Op art during the 1960s and the cultural context influencing its formation and reception. I will then discuss *The Responsive Eye* exhibition and how Riley’s practice can be understood outside of Op’s terrains. After solidifying Riley’s artistic identification, the third section will explore the misperceptions of her work due to gendered bias amplified through the appropriation of her prints in fashion and their intersection with feminist thought. I will then briefly explore the commercialization of her prints in comparison to those of her male counterparts, particularly Victor Vasarely, to emphasize the difference in critical reception due to gender. Lastly, I will analyze the irony of UK Mod fashion materializing as a form of empowerment for London’s “modern woman” while representing the disempowerment of the woman artist inspiring the style. Examining Mod fashion reveals the similarities in how both the woman’s body and the woman artist were politically contested sites during the 1960s. By applying a feminist lens, my thesis aims to provide retrospective nuance to the misconceptions regarding Riley’s art and associations with fashion in the first decade of her career.

**Situating Op Art**

Gaining precedence during an era marked by technological, political, and social uncertainty, Op Art’s exploration of psychology and physiology through color, shapes, pattern, and movement resonated as a reflection of the turbulent climate of the 1960s. The movement

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was subsequently a revolutionary art emerging during a revolutionary time.\textsuperscript{10} In both the UK and the US, the sixties were marked by radical change with civil rights movements, environmentalism, women’s liberation, and an increase in psychedelic usage. The era also heralded innovations in science and technology— mediums that informed the “community-oriented geometric visual language” of Op that “relinquished individual practices” according to the “father of Op art,” Victor Vasarely.\textsuperscript{11} Additionally, Op art was directly implicated in 1960s psychological advancements, particularly engaging with Gestalt and experimental psychology regarding concepts of consciousness.\textsuperscript{12} The decade emphasized a mandate to “expand one’s consciousness”—a notion inherent in Op’s conception and designed to test the limits of conscious perception.\textsuperscript{13}

Op art concerned itself with the literal difficulty in efforts to “see the world,” proposing a pleasure in the anxiety of the unknown—thereby manifesting as paintings that resisted interpretation.\textsuperscript{14} This, however, combatted the central and self-evident activity of visual analysis—or the process of seeing—traditionally associated with the fine arts.\textsuperscript{15} This distinction is described in the catalog of the \textit{Responsive Eye} exhibition:

Before the advent of abstract art a picture was a window through which an illusion of the real world could be viewed, and a statue was a replica. Nonobjective painting and sculpture defined a work of art as an independent object as real as a chair or a table. Perceptual abstraction—its existence as an object de-emphasized or nullified by uniform surface treatment, reflective or transparent materials, and a battery of optical devices exists primarily for its impact on perception rather than for conceptual examination. Ideological focus has moved from the outside world, passed through the work as object, and entered the incompletely explored region area between the cornea and the brain.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, \textit{Optic Nerve}, 19.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 13
By obscuring the perceptive efforts of the viewer, Op art established an aesthetic viewpoint that employed the process of perception as both tool and subject.\(^\text{17}\) This process was not a passive action as it had traditionally been, but rather an active one as Op’s integrated illusions centralized the viewer and their movement in front of the artwork. Op embodied the art world’s growing embrace of the notion of participation during the 60s, as the viewer was not “a counterpart of the art work but an integral part of it.”\(^\text{18}\) They became immersed in the art as Op’s perceptual emphasis involved both the eye and mind through the employment of structural variations, “‘centrifugal’ compositions, linear patterns, and color interactions to generate formal ambiguity, spatial incongruity, and retinal vibrations.”\(^\text{19}\) The use of structural variations of perception somewhat mimicked the experience of psychedelic drugs, insisting on “the absolute otherness of a world beyond us by dramatizing the threshold at which our ability to interpret that world begins to degrade and disintegrate.”\(^\text{20}\) Subsequently, Op art combatted elitist notions of the repertoire of knowledge required to understand art and instead provided an egalitarian pleasure of disorientation—of trying to understand something impossible to discern.\(^\text{21}\) Op art exemplified how perception is an expression of the body’s thought, or as Bridget Riley calls it, “the eye’s mind.”\(^\text{22}\)

However, the notions of consciousness and perception involved in the movement were less of the interest or appeal to the public when Op began to emerge, but more so its “trickery and illusionism.”\(^\text{23}\) Critics met this art with censure, considering it as “merely glorified basic

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\(^{17}\) Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, *Optic Nerve*, 17.


\(^{19}\) Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, *Optic Nerve*, 17.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 12.

design or psychology textbook illustration,” and therefore unoriginal. The immediate success of Op was thereby met with critical cynicism that considered its popularity and practice as limited to the superficial aspects of the work itself.

On two occasions, American art critic Lucy Lippard contributed to this superficial dismissal of Op, referring to it as “The New Illusionism… an art of little substance with less to it than meets the eye.” Lippard also called it fashionable “psuedo scientism” holding “no lasting interest for serious artists.” In an article for *Artforum International*, art historian and critic Barbara Rose claimed that “Op art… goes Pop art one better by being considerably more mindless.” Later, she also remarked the movement was “expressively neutral, having to do with sensation alone.” This assertion demonstrates the theoretical divide privileging the conceptual over the experimental. To summarize, Op’s detractors considered sensation to be inferior to expression, failing to understand the basis of Op’s defining feature: “that its significance lies in the emphatic shift from the object of art to the experience of art.” It is within these frames that we can understand the initial context in which Riley’s art began to be recognized and received in the Western art world.

**The Responsive Eye**

On February 25th, 1965, the Museum of Modern Art opened its doors to New York’s public to introduce the new aesthetic, cultural, and commercial phenomenon of Op in an

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24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 22.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 66.
29 Ibid. 66-71.
30 Ibid., 22.
exhibition called *The Responsive Eye.* Its curator, William Seitz, chose the title as a way to indicate activity and avoid pigeonholing the art on display, cognizant of the limited definitions of the term “Op art.” Instead, Seitz wanted to emphasize how the exhibited works of art were an “essentially perceptual experience,” one to which the eye responded. Although galleries in Europe were already presenting exhibitions of work experimenting with “anomalous optical and kinetic effects,” and museums spanning London, Rome, and Zagreb had organized group exhibitions of the emerging abstract tendencies since the beginning of the decade, MoMA’s *The Responsive Eye* was the first recognition by an American museum of the growing movement of “perceptual abstraction.” American recognition placed Op art and its artists into global mainstream consciousness. The exhibition featured ninety-nine artists from fifteen countries, with participants including notable figures like Victor Vasarely, Josef Albers, Larry Poons, Ad Reinhardt, Gego, and Bridget Riley. Other than Vasarely who was referred to as the “father of Op art” many of the artists shown did not associate with the term nor consider themselves Op artists. Bridget Riley fell into this category.

According to Thomas B. Hess in his 1965 article “You Can Hang it in the Hall,” the *Responsive Eye* suffered from “acute Exhibitionemia,” a term used to describe how exhibitions glossed over “significant differences while emphasizing superficial resemblances.” Hess highlighted how the *Responsive Eye* merged many contrasting genres of art, including

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31 Ibid., 17.
33 Ibid.
34 Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, *Optic Nerve*, 17.
35 Ibid.
Color-Field painting, Hard-Edge Abstraction, revivals of Bauhaus and Constructivist ideas, and what he referred to as “Hard-Core Op—shapes that provoke strong, often violent, ‘retinal’ illusions, such as after-images, sensations of motion, of blinking, pinging, popping, glowing.”

Although Op emerged in kinship to the aforementioned movements and the works chosen for the exhibition resembled each other in regards to theme, focusing on how the eye responds to experiences, the generalized display of the artworks instigated a veiling rather than a clarification of the artist's intentions.

Bridget Riley’s association with Op became impossible to avoid with her two works Current (1964) and Hesitate (1964) being so centrally featured in The Responsive Eye. Riley had previously been included in exhibitions grouping her under the guise of Op and continued to maintain her autonomy as an abstract artist exploring perception. However, she could not have anticipated the global reckoning and reach The Responsive Eye would have in solidifying her as an Op artist. Although Riley’s work aligned with Op’s aesthetic principles of geometry and illusion, she insisted in an essay published the following October after the blockbuster exhibition, that her process differed from the movement because a direct link with science was absent, noting “[...] I have never studied ‘optics’ and my use of mathematics is rudimentary and confined to such things as equalising, halving, quartering and simple progressions.”

Riley’s reluctance to associate herself with the movement was also due to superficial understandings and criticisms of Op. Returning back to Hess’s thoughts on acute Exhibitionemia, Riley’s artistic intentions failed to be clarified and were instead veiled under Op’s characteristic of “deliberate confusion of vision,” implying it could be entirely defined by how it was

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
perceived. Developing her art through systems of empirical analyses and syntheses, Riley instead regarded the physiological phenomenon of perception as “the medium through which states of being are directly experienced” rather than the sole content. Regarding perception as the medium in her earliest pure abstractions fundamentally negated critical assumptions of superficiality as her work was not based entirely on illusionism. Rather, Riley’s art was concerned with simulating an experience of nature for the viewer, inspired by her “own visual experience, developed in close contact with nature and works of art seen in museums.”

The attempt to simulate natural experiences was one she shared with French Post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat (1859-91), whose work inspired her exploration into optical vibration. It was through her initial explorations of painting landscapes in Seurat’s pointillist technique that Riley formed her own distinct method moving beyond “conventions of representation into the realm of pure sensation.” “Sensation” is perhaps the preferred descriptor of her work rather than the term “perception,” which is more often than the former used to describe Op art, because it provides an added ambiguous notion of both sensing and feeling her work. Her abstract compositions aimed to trigger the sensations of nature, “the events that animate it [landscapes], such as the movement of grass in the wind or the reflection of shimmering light on water.”

Riley’s works on display at The Responsive Eye exemplify the natural sensations her art aimed to replicate. The hand-painted undulating black and white lines of Current (Fig. 1), appear

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41 Ibid., 23.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 24.
44 Ibid.
45 Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, Optic Nerve, 62.
46 Ibid.
47 Bridget Riley, et al., Bridget Riley Rétrospective, 23.
48 Ibid., 24.
to vibrate and give the illusion of three-dimensional depressions that quiver on the painting’s surface.\textsuperscript{49} The sinewy contours shift direction and gather into tight folds, making it difficult for the eye to focus.\textsuperscript{50} The juxtaposition of black and white activates the appearance of other colors and a sense of movement, reminiscent of the motion of a water current.\textsuperscript{51} In this piece, Riley activates the space between the picture plane and the spectator, drawing the eye in to materialize the dizzying sensation of drifting along the current.\textsuperscript{52}

*Hesitate* (Fig. 2) featured even rows of circular and elliptical shapes also simulating a sense of movement through variation.\textsuperscript{53} The top row, composed of circles, gives way to subsequent rows of increasingly flat ovals, before expanding back into rows of circles in the lower portion of the painting.\textsuperscript{54} Situated a third of the way down on the piece are the slimmest ovals which form a compressed band three rows deep.\textsuperscript{55} The shapes are painted in grey tones beginning in the top left corner which darken as they progressively move along a diagonal axis, becoming almost black before fading back to pale and darkening once again in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting.\textsuperscript{56} The combination of shifting shapes and tones presents the viewer with a feeling of movement and receding, “or as if a wave is oscillating across its surface.”\textsuperscript{57} Riley’s use of abstraction to create a somewhat equivalent of the elusive and evanescent experiences of nature served as pointed deviations from the scientific and superficial aspects of Op art. However, Riley’s translation of nature seemed to conversely corroborate a


\textsuperscript{50} Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, *Optic Nerve*, 84-90.

\textsuperscript{51} The Museum of Modern Art, “Bridget Riley, Current, 1964.”

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
tradition in Western thought that situates women in proximity to nature—“passive, without agency, bound to reproduction”—highlighting the sexist assumptions and associations Riley would have to combat during her early career.58

**Bridget Riley’s Gendered Dismissal and Artistic Appropriation**

A major factor that contributed to the unique hostility Riley received—compared to her Op peers—was due to her identity as a woman, inadvertently implicating her work in gendered debate and dismissal of art valuation. The art world during the 1960s was at “best indifferent and at worst hostile to women artists.”59 Unlike Riley’s male colleagues featured in *The Responsive Eye*—many of whom explored perception similarly through periodic structures and moire patterns—only her work elicited comparison with textiles, “suggesting an inclination on the part of some critics to discern something reassuringly feminine or domestic in her abstract works.”60

The referral to textile designs could deem Riley’s work as craft, decorative, or utilitarian, subsequently jeopardizing her “high art” status. Until the problematization of the art/craft hierarchy by feminists and the Pattern and Decoration Movement during the late 1960s and early 70s, any artistic practice associated with women’s work or of utilitarian purpose was relegated to the “craft” category rather than claimed as art. As described by Sally J. Markowitz in “The Distinction between Art and Craft,” “art” was positively associated with traditional practices of painting and sculpture, while “craft” referred to women’s work or functional and utilitarian purposes originated by marginalized identities—especially women of color—such as ceramics,

60 Arnason and Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, 504.
sewing, or weaving.\textsuperscript{61} Conversation surrounding these practices perpetuated sexist and racist notions that these mediums (and women) were nonintellectual, decorative, and intuitive.\textsuperscript{62} Eva Hesse, a post-minimalist sculptor practicing art at the same time as Riley and who faced similar backlash noted how referring to something as “decorative” wielded to diminish: “‘decorative’ was, and overwhelmingly still is, one of the worst accusations to hurl at an artist— a dirty word, a profanity, the ‘only art sin.’”\textsuperscript{63} Due to these existing structures, the primary aim for many women artists in the 1960s “was precisely to avoid being categorised, and so marginalised, solely as ‘women’ artists.”\textsuperscript{64}

Just as Riley rejected the notion she was an Op artist, she was also quick to challenge the inclination that she be considered a “woman artist” as opposed to an “artist.”\textsuperscript{65} Riley made various statements attempting to distance herself from biases associated with notions of the “woman artist,” claiming in 1973

[w]omen’s liberation, when applied to artists, seems to me to be a naïve concept. It raises issues which in this context are quite absurd. At this point in time, artists who happen to be women need this particular form of hysteria like they need a hole in the head.\textsuperscript{66}

Riley is not dismissing the importance of women’s liberation, but rather the immediate classification of her works portraying a feminine stance merely due to her identification as a woman. Emerging feminist artists centered their work in representing the (cis) woman’s experience often through the reclamation of traditionally devalued mediums of “craft.” Riley’s seemingly aggressive statement was her once again trying to distance her practice from being categorized in a movement she did not align with on the basis of slight similarities—in this case,\textsuperscript{61} Sally J. Markowitz, “The Distinction between Art and Craft,” (Illinois: The Journal of Aesthetic Education, 1994), 57.
\textsuperscript{62} Markowitz, “The Distinction between Art and Craft,” 65.
\textsuperscript{63} Pattern & Design
\textsuperscript{64} Jo Applin, "Mobile Subjects," 96.
\textsuperscript{66} Jo Applin, "Mobile Subjects," 96.
her gender. Riley instead believed that the realm of art-making was gender-neutral, noting “I have never been aware of my femininity as such, when in the studio.” Especially considering her early work in the context of the 1960s, feminism was not explicitly on Riley’s mind as she began to exhibit as an artist prior to the establishment of second wave visual or political feminist language with which to identify.

Riley attempted to negate the relevance of gender in relation to her art due to the frequency at which it was mentioned in reviews and critiques. As in the instance at *The Responsive Eye* and elsewhere Riley’s technical skills were considered to “derive from the conventionally underprivileged crafts of the domestic sphere.” The observations of one critic, paraphrased by Riley claimed “If I had to track down a feminine footprint here, I would point to a certain unforced patience, that quality which can add the thousandth stitch to the 999th without a tremor of triumph.” Despite the fact that Riley had employed studio assistants to carry out her work since 1961, the artist was tasked with the image of the patient, modest, and laboring craftswoman. Another critic of her early work wrote that the artist “assumed the modest patience of a sewing-woman, but it was a disguise of a femme fatale.”

The perception of Riley as a “femme fatale” exemplifies how Riley’s body and physical appearance were as much an object of scrutiny as her works were. A 1965 New York Times article discussing Riley’s emergence in the US art scene describes Riley as “slender, shy and garbed all in black—as achromatic as a Riley canvas, though much easier on the eye.”

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68 Jo Applin, “Mobile Subjects,” 96.
69 Pamela M. Lee, "Bridget Riley’s Eye/Body Problem," 34.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 35.
72 Ibid., 34
newspaper condescendingly (and incorrectly) described her as a “pretty smiling Irish girl.”

Similarly patronizing, a 1964 *Guardian* article referred to Riley as a “slight, dark-haired girl, unassuming and unspoilt,” despite her being thirty-four years old at the time and established as an internationally recognized artist. The condescension and objectification persisted amongst her male colleagues as well, with American painter Ad Reinhardt writing in a letter to curator Samual Wagstaff, “… I guess you must have thought I was kidding when you asked me if I saw any interesting English painters and I answered ‘Bridget Bardot and she’s a nice girl too’? I meant to answer ‘Bridget Riley and she’s a nice girl too.’” In this instance Reinhardt failed to recall Riley’s first name, instead, naming “an erotic association” in the form of the French actress Brigitte Bardot, along with the degrading use of “girl.” These instances of physical commentary and association demonstrate how similar to Op, Riley herself was deemed tolerable by superficial measures.

Pamela M. Lee’s essay “Bridget Riley’s Eye/Body Problem” points out how Op’s virtual fetish of visuality requires a reading of the *body* in its practice—a body which more often than not through association “is specifically gendered and feminized and thus deemed impotent.” Thereby discourse surrounding Op was oftentimes directed at Riley, using her body of work—and “her body itself”—as the platform for Op’s controversies. These abstract associations with the feminine body and Op would, unfortunately, be deepened and justified by the exploitation of Op patterns—particularly Bridget Riley’s—by designers in what would be physically applied to the woman's body, becoming 1960s UK Mod fashion. Due to this, the critics' remarks regarding Riley’s patterns existing in likeness to textiles would escalate,

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74 Pamela M. Lee, "Bridget Riley's Eye/Body Problem," 34.
75 Crow, *The Hidden Mod in Modern Art*, 103.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 28.
78 Ibid.
solidifying the impression of her as a craftswoman through their application in clothing. Under these conditions, she could not escape comparisons of her art to the weaving of textiles and sewing of clothing.

The designer that pointedly forced the association between Riley and fashion was art collector and dress manufacturer, Larry Aldrich who exploited the Op aesthetic most famously in his clothing line Young Elegante.\textsuperscript{79} A week before \textit{The Responsive Eye} opened, the \textit{New York Times} publicized that the new Op fashion was “being paraded this week in the Seventh Avenue showroom of Young Elegante in dresses that will sell for $60 to $110 (considerably lower than an op art painting, where the price tags can run in four figures).”\textsuperscript{80} Aldrich had purchased works by various Op-associated artists and was inspired to create fabrics with designs taken from paintings by Riley, Stanczak, Vasarely, and Anuszkiewicz.\textsuperscript{81} Aldrich’s inspiration to create fabric using Op designs was allegedly due to the insistence of the exhibition curator, William Seitz, potentially as a way to advertise the upcoming exhibition and elevate the commercial frenzy of Op in America.\textsuperscript{82} The fabrics were used to make dresses for his high-end women’s wear line and distributed for use by other designers, without the artists’ knowledge.\textsuperscript{83} US Copyright law had not yet been established to protect artists from infringement and would not take place until 1976, eleven years after the exhibition. This law would have made Aldrich’s appropriation of Riley’s prints illegal, as a collector can only reproduce artworks with the explicit permission of the artist.\textsuperscript{84} However, as US copyright law had not been enforced yet, the events that transpired left Riley feeling violated, recalling later:

\textsuperscript{79} Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, \textit{Optic Nerve}, 150.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.  
I had absolutely no idea of what lay ahead when I arrived. I was driven from the airport down Madison Avenue, and to my amazement I saw windows full of versions of my paintings on dresses, in window displays, everywhere. My heart sank.\textsuperscript{85}

Reflecting on the nature of Op art, it does seem as though the genre was just ripe for the taking by the textile industry. A deeper observation also reveals the movement’s patterning resembled weave structures shaping textiles. For example, the checkerboard patterning of Victor Vasarely’s \textit{Vega III} (1957-59) (Fig. 3) and Riley’s \textit{Movement in Squares} (Fig. 4) resembles the structure of plain weaving (Fig. 5). The illusions of these Op pieces presented a configuration of the movement of the patterns, or weave structures, on the body. Additionally, Riley’s specific dedication to composing the geometrical shapes of her early paintings in black and white mirrored the two-color grid format weave structure diagrams (Fig. 6) are often rendered in, providing a guide for the warp and weft of fabric. The geometric designs of works within and adjacent to the Op art movement were thereby inherently more transferable than previous art movements to textile and fashion design, unfortunately to the detriment of Riley’s early career due to the art canon’s sexist and racist devaluation of such realms.

An additionally frustrating phenomenon was that a number of patrons invited to the MoMA opening arrived in the ready-to-wear fashions that Aldrich designed.\textsuperscript{86} Under these circumstances, it is no wonder critics immediately associated the patterning of Op with textiles as they physically witnessed the paintings on the wall translated onto the clothing walking past them. Riley especially could not escape this association as Aldrich was interviewed and recorded standing in front of the artist’s work \textit{Hesitate} at the MoMA opening. In the interview, he explains his interest in using optical illusions in clothing and refers to his rendition of \textit{Hesitate} to fit the

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 150-51.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
feminine form and “descend to one side of the dress.”

Despite Aldrich using other artists' paintings in his designs, it is seemingly only Riley who received such pointed criticism at the exhibition, thereby invalidating her status as a fine artist. The natural experience Riley wanted to simulate through her black-and-white abstract geometric paintings was lost and overshadowed by a different type of natural experience: the systemic exploitation of women.

**Commercializing Op**

A month into the exhibition, *Life* published an article titled “It’s OP from Toe to Top” discussing the fashion industry’s relationship with contemporary art and the latest Op trend. The article was partnered with a fashion layout, showing models donning Op-inspired collections in the MoMA’s galleries, one of which was the Young Elegante shift dress stolen from Riley’s *Hesitate* (Fig. 7). The article’s phrasing surrounding this art-fashion relationship minimized the exploitation of artists’ works noting, “Though the artists themselves occasionally contribute directly to the designs, the results usually come about more through Op-happy accident.” The article sets a casual tone regarding the “coincidental” similarities between specific Op artworks and the consenting collaborations between artists and designers. It ends by briefly explaining the situation with Riley who “protests her work was sold to hang on a wall, not a girl.” The abrupt ending of the article on this note places Riley in comparison to her male counterparts, framing her and her reaction apart from theirs as aggressive and difficult.

Riley, however, had to be aggressive to counter her participation in fashion and permanently be deemed as a “craftswoman.” It was not only the association with fashion and textiles that threatened Riley’s artistic status but also the mass commercialization of Op,
especially in domestic domains of interior decor, which might have mislabelled her work as “craft” and “low art.” Conversations surrounding the use of popular and commercial culture as a valid medium for art counter to preexisting notions of traditional fine arts were only beginning to appear through the simultaneous Pop art movement. Riley did not intend nor could she afford to participate in such systemic challenging. Those who could afford to engage in those conversations were her male counterparts, unaffected by negative gender bias. One person in particular who encouraged the commercialization of Op and collaborated with fashion designers was Victor Vasarely.

Vasarely was interested in a democratized form of art that would be available to everybody.\textsuperscript{90} This new social form of art could exist in a middle-class context “in homes where discretionary income was not the sole criterion for owning art.”\textsuperscript{91} Therefore, Vasarely encouraged unity between fashion and art, enthusiastically collaborating with designers and textile firms. Vasarely did experience a form of exploitation as gallerists and dealers in both Europe and New York used his new socialist stance of art against him by creating signed and numbered editions of his prints and Plexiglas objects to appeal to a mass market.\textsuperscript{92} Vasarely's work was also deemed as having a decorative appeal, similar to Riley.\textsuperscript{93} However, this accusation held less impact without the pretense that his gender assured an essentially decorative element to his art. Despite these associations with decoration and commercialization that could have negatively impacted Vasarely’s career, he became “the unassuming celebrity of the American art world” in the 1970s and was still applauded by critics.\textsuperscript{94} Vasarely’s situation exemplifies a growing trend among male artists during that period, pointed out by the post-minimalist visual artist, Brenda Miller in a

\textsuperscript{90} Morgan, et al., \textit{Vasarely}, 17.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 11.
letter to the editors of *Artforum* regarding her own experience with the sexist assumptions of “craft” applied to her art. Miller provides various examples in which male artists in the 1960s had adopted nontraditional media, “but their work neither was subject to nor initiated a critique of the gendered nature of materials, technique, or the boundaries separating art from craft.”

Additionally, Vasarely’s participation in the realm of commercialization and craftlike associations was consensual—a privilege Riley was not granted.

**UK Women’s Mod Fashion: Implicating the Personal and Political**

*The Responsive Eye* not only garnered Riley international acclaim but also labeled her as the burgeoning figure influencing UK Mod fashion. The Mods were groups of young people in Britain in the mid-1960s who came to be “associated with sartorial innovativeness and modernity.” They would eventually become closely linked with ideas of urban London style, national identity, and renewal, being a part of the first generation not to live through WWII or experience the effects of post-war rationing. The root of the style was musical as “Mod” was an abbreviation from “modern jazz.” The Brooks Brothers’ clothes that jazz musicians such as Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Quartet wore, epitomized the British-influenced Ivy League style popularized at American elite universities and acted as international intermediaries popularizing the style among young Londoners leading a new scene around Soho’s jazz clubs.

The jazz origin of Mod fashion emphasizes how the trend’s appropriation did not stop at gender

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97 Heike Jenss, “Icons of Modernity.”
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
as it did with Riley, but included race with the style of Black musicians being incorporated into the white mainstream. An idea central to Mod fashion was the notion that men and women were entitled to wear “handsome and dashing clothing.” Attracted to the city life that would shape 1960s “Swinging London,” Mods embraced a lifestyle associated with “speed, extravagance, and consumerism.”

After Aldrich’s commercialization of Op, various designers quickly responded to the appeal of the new art movement, and again, particularly Riley’s artworks. In 1965 André Courrèges designed a checkered dress eerily similar to Riley’s Movement in Squares (1961) (Fig. 8). Their similarities were not only due to the use of the checker pattern but also the disruption of the pattern two-thirds of the way over from the left in both pieces. The same year actress and model Crissie Shrimpton was pictured with and wearing a patterned jacket by designer Ossie Clark which resembled the zig-zag shapes of Riley’s 1965 painting Fragment 3/11 (Fig. 9). Pierre Cardin’s 1969 collection also incorporated stripes like the ones found in Riley’s Fragment 1/7 (1964), elongating the model’s figure (Fig. 10). The abstract patterns of Op and Riley’s work, especially checkers, stripes, and dots, were common details in women’s Mod dress. Her prints were also featured in prominent fashion magazines like Vogue and used as a backdrop for models. The most famous of these is a photoshoot of supermodel Twiggy by Bert Stern, posing in front of Riley’s 1964 painting Amnesia (Fig. 11). Subsequently, Riley’s artwork and association with fashion were inseparable. In 1967, a magazine poll named Riley as one of the three most famous women in Britain after the Queen. However, considering the other two women were fashion designer Mary Quant and supermodel Twiggy suggests that the character of...

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100 Tortora and Marcketti, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 548.
101 Ibid.
Riley’s fame had shifted “into a frame further from Bond Street galleries and the ICA and closer to the King’s Road boutiques, which had figured prominently in the emergence of the female Mod.”

The female Mod was defined by bold Op patterns and colors, mini skirts, an adoption of men’s clothing styles, short Sassoon-styled haircuts, and makeup emphasizing the eye with graphic liner, dark eyeshadow, and pale face powder. The Mod woman’s adoption of traditionally masculine clothing instigated a rupture in the rigid gender binary mediating clothing. Similarly, Op’s initial associations with masculinity via its relationship with science were disrupted by its application in the “feminine domain” of fashion, interior design, and cosmetics. Women’s Mod fashion was a drastic shift from the more conservative and traditional women’s fashion of the 1950s as the 60s marked a new wave of women’s liberation: “The body itself had become a politically contested site in 1965, centered on legislation over reproductive rights, and the National Organization for Women formed shortly thereafter.” Op fashion resonated with this climate of women’s self-empowerment. The complex and aggressive stance of the movement, both seductive and repellent, reflected the desire of women to assert themselves and their autonomous identity. It is ironic that Riley’s works used in clothing and worn by women as a form of empowerment, were reversely a form of disempowerment for the artist herself.

103 Ibid.
106 Anjula N, “‘Anything Goes’”; Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, Optic Nerve, 150.
107 Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, Optic Nerve, 150
108 Ibid.
A popular picture of Riley (1965) shows the then thirty-three-year-old artist emerging from between the disassembled walls of her installation work *Continuum* (Fig. 12). She strikes a pose between the walls fashionably, leaning forward with her right leg and the other hidden behind, while her left arm is bent to balance against the wall and her other hand, just barely able to see, cups her face. The lines of her artwork on the surrounding walls draw the eye into Riley, almost as though she is the picture’s vanishing point. Her emergence and disappearance in the picture communicate a symbolic understanding of how Riley is inseparable from the artwork. Paul Moorhouse’s book *Bridget Riley: A Very Very Person* argues that “while the work stands alone, it acquires its unique character from concerns and experiences that are deeply personal […] Central to her being—and, hence, to her work—are the visual pleasures she has always derived from looking at her environment.” In this respect the disillusionment and violation Riley felt from the exploitation of her art in fashion was more than artistic pride, it was the violation of her autonomy and her experiences.

The violation Riley experienced through her lack of consent connects to the aggressive language used to describe the Op movement itself and its converging implications during the second wave of feminism. Just as Op’s bold prints were worn by the modern woman, reflecting the feminine empowerment and sexual freedom taking place with the dispersal of the contraceptive pill in 1960, the reception of the movement and Mod clothing also mimicked the reception and aggression towards women as a result of these shifts in status quo. The 1964 *Times* article that coined the term “Op” and introduced the movement to the American public did so

110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
through the opening headline “Op Art: Pictures that Attack the Eye,” immediately drawing a connection between the art imposing violence against the body.

Although observers found aesthetic pleasure in Op’s precision, it was oftentimes referred to as a visual “assault,” which critics ascribed to Riley’s works in particular.\footnote{113 “OP ART: PICTURES THAT ATTACK THE EYE.” (New York: TIME, 1964), 42; Houston and Columbus Museum of Art, Optic Nerve, 139} As one critic noted,

What (Op) does aim to do is to assault the eye and stimulate it, often with devastating results [...] At a Kensington boutique not long ago an Op Art dress on a dummy dazzled so many shoppers that it had to be removed and at one of Bridget Riley’s exhibitions—she is perhaps the best known British Op art painter—someone is said to have fainted after looking at her paintings.\footnote{114 Pamela M. Lee, “Bridget Riley’s Eye/Body Problem,” 36.}

According to the contemporary art historian Pamela M. Lee, the statement addresses a number of concerns within Op’s reception. Notably how the movement of the body in fashion is compared to the movement of the viewer in their reception of Op; the eyes are hypnotized and attacked by the paintings leaving the body “physically destabilized as a result.”\footnote{115 Ibid., 39-7.} Literature on Op often includes descriptions of bodily repulse, headaches, and vertigo (in fact, Riley’s Current would inspire packaging for anti-vertigo medication) and retellings of gallery visitors passing out.\footnote{116 Ibid., 34.} At the opening reception of The Responsive Eye, one viewer was interviewed saying “I wish it was more quieter [...] it wouldn’t upset my stomach so much.”\footnote{117 Brian De Palma, “The Responsive Eye.”} The characterization of Op’s body in these regards deemed it as powerless and hysterical, unable to resist its seductions. However, as mentioned previously, if the body referred to in Op is feminine—which was fully embodied by women’s Mod fashion—then it is more the feminine body that is found objectively pleasing but powerless; seductive but in danger of assault. These attributes applied to views on women in the 1960s and the treatment of Bridget Riley in the art world during that period. It seemed as
though, referring back to the sentiments of the exhibition guest, that men in society vis a vis the critics of the art world wished women—or Bridget Riley—were quieter so as not to disrupt the art canon. This was an aspiration almost achieved through the dismissal of herself and her art through fashion.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has explored Riley’s interaction with the art and fashion world of the 1960s, focusing on the structures of art valuation and sexism that affected the trajectory of her career. Art history textbooks have regarded Riley’s sensitivity to the commercialization of her designs in mass culture and UK Mod fashion as relating more to her previous experience as a graphic designer at an advertising agency, implying it was merely the realm of consumption of her work that upset the artist.\(^{118}\) However, this is a limited scope on the repercussions in which Riley’s work—and the artist herself—were consumed, failing to acknowledge the intersecting facets of gender and art valuation at the time affecting her career. Riley’s art was perceived and subsequently commercialized as decoration, specifically by taking the work from the wall and putting it on the body—ultimately creating an alignment with women’s fashion rather than art. Although male counterparts as shown through the example of Victor Vasarely also faced similar scrutiny of their work holding a decorative element, the consequences of such classification were not as severe as it was not infringed with negative gender bias or inherently deemed of lesser value. As exemplified through Vasarely, the use of male Op artists’ work in other forms of commercial media was often regarded as a collaborative effort rather than an assumed designation.

\(^{118}\) Arnason and Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, 505.
Riley adamantly opposed such assumptions, using her platform to vocalize issues of appropriation prior to the establishment of copyright law and related notions of consent simultaneously but separately to mainstream feminist conversation. Exactly ten years after Riley’s emergence in the art scene, Linda Nochlin published her 1971 pioneering essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”; a revolutionary reckoning in art historical discourse of the social and institutional barriers that have prevented women artists from being granted the same status and accolades as their male colleagues. Nochlin addresses the “white Western [cis] male viewpoint” shaping the canon and rigid ideas of what art is. Feminists and Pattern and Decoration artists of the 70s concisely problematized Western thought that vilified women and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities “as degenerates and primitives, which terms were deployed toward the dismissal of the decorative.” These institutional dismissals Nochlin addresses apply directly to the devaluation Riley experienced early in her career due to her assumed association with fashion and textiles. However, Riley’s reluctance to align with feminism and the feminist art movement—in part due to its second-wave perpetuation of binary notions of feminity and art-making which Riley did not identify—caused her situation to never be brought to the forefront of art historical discourse. While this essay has focused on appropriation and gender, further examinations of appropriation and race are needed in this field.

In a 2000 interview with the New York Times, Riley retrospectively noted, “Fashion always plays a part in the art world, but when it gets the upper hand it spells a vacuum.” Here Riley acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between fashion and art, but specifies the level to

120 Ibid., 1.
121 Anna Katz, et al., With Pleasure, 47.
which her early prints and patterns were exploited in Mod fashion, becoming so popularized that they were separated from her original artistic intentions altogether. Appropriation of art in fashion was and is not a new phenomenon, and has in western society most egregiously exploited the work BIPOC communities. The instance of appropriation with Riley signified a decisive shift in the commercialization of art in fashion in regards to the extent of which Op became an uncontrolled international craze. The fact that Riley’s prints were in designer window displays in New York City prior to the artist’s formal introduction to an American audience and worn by museum visitors at the opening of *The Responsive Eye* marked a new trend in the consumption of art and consideration of the artist. Although the intention of Riley’s abstraction was to challenge the perception of the viewer and mimic experiences of nature, the MoMA exhibition instead became a space in which the perception of Riley’s art was challenged. The exhibition ultimately represented a space of division in Riley’s artistic valuation: one in which Riley’s work was on the wall recognized as art and one in which her work was on the woman’s body, placing it in an estate of anonymity and utility.

The appropriation of Riley’s patterns in Mod clothing not only affected her artistic value but also put her work at risk of being depreciated as a fad as the fashion quickly was. In the 50 years since *The Responsive Eye*, Riley’s perceptual abstraction has evolved and she has reached artistic acclaim and recognition. However, the events of the exhibition and the UK Mod trend continue to have a profound impact on the understanding of Riley’s art and involvement with the Op Art movement indicated by the various surveys labeling her as a leading figure in both realms. This image of Riley, however, is a myth and it is the responsibility of contemporary art historical discourse to *listen* to the artist and avoid the perpetuation of restrictive interpretations imposed on her.
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Figure 1. Bridget Riley, *Current*, 1964. Synthetic emulsion on board, $58\frac{3}{8} \times 58\frac{7}{8}$ in. board. The Museum of Modern Art, Philip Johnson Fund, 1964.
Figure 2. Bridget Riley, *Hesitate*, 1964. Emulsion on board, 42\(\frac{1}{8}\) x 44\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. Tate: Presented by the Friends of the Tate Gallery, 1985.
Figure 5. Detail of plain weave diagram.

Figure 6. Example of two-color grid format weave structure diagrams.
Figure 7. Young Elegante Shift Dress by Larry Aldrich. Photographed by Milton H. Greene, *LIFE*, 1965.
Figure 8. (Left) Bridget Riley, *Movement in Squares*, 1961. Emulsion on board, 122 x 122 cm. Arts Council Collection; (Right) André Courrèges checkered dress, 1965.

Figure 9. (Left) Chrissie Shrimpton & Ossie Clark shot by David Bailey; (Right) Bridget Riley, *Untitled [Fragment 3/11]*, 1965. Screenprint on Perspex, 615 × 797 mm. Tate Collection.
Figure 10. (Left) Pierre Cardin collection, 1969; (Right) Bridget Riley, *Untitled [Fragment 1/7]*, 1965. Screenprint on Perspex, 657 × 828 mm. Tate Collection, 1970.

Figure 12. Riley with Continuum. Photographed by Lord Snowdon, 1965. Copyright Snowdon/CameraPress/RETNA