

WHAT'S THAT MURAL NEAR THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER?

A brief look at Julian Stanczak's largest public work, located in the heart of downtown Cincinnati.
By Henri Robbins - August 18, 2023



Photograph by Henri Robbins

Just above East Sixth Street and across from the Contemporary Arts Center, the intersecting chromatic lines of Julian Stanczak's *Additional* (2007) are an iconic part of Fountain Square's public artwork, even if it's easy to assume the work is just an architect's creative flair. So what is *Additional*, and who is the artist behind it?

Stanczak was a Polish-born painter and printmaker who was one of the progenitors of Op-Art, a movement of the 1960's focused on using light and color to create complex visual experiences that engage the eye.

The Op-Art movement has roots in abstraction, neo-plasticism, and the trompe-l'œil movements, fusing together the optical properties of trompe-l'œil and the sharp, chromatic lines of preceding abstract movements.

The Op-Art movement was not received well by critics, but many of the movements' exhibitions did incredibly well with the public. At the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), *The Responsive Eye*—one of the most well-known Op Art exhibitions, which Stanczak exhibited in—set attendance records for the museum despite being panned by both critics and other artists, such as Donald Judd, who saw the movement as a temporary trend with little staying power.

MOMA described the Op-Art movement (a phrase they distinctly avoided at the time, due to its origins as a criticism) as being able to “initiate a new, highly perceptual phase in the grammar of art,” in a press release, and said the works could “establish a totally new relationship between the observer and a work of art,” referencing the movement's fascination and experimentation with human vision. One member of the movement, Victor Vasarely, even saw his works used in research on perceptual psychology.

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However, some of the critic's perspective ended up being correct in the long run: Op-Art has fallen into relative obscurity, with even the most successful works from the movement almost entirely being relegated to exhibitions surveying the history of abstract artwork.



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Stanczak has a direct connection to Ohio—he worked as painting faculty at both the University of Cincinnati and later the Cleveland Art Institute and lived in the state for 60 years, from 1957 until his death in 2017.

Before coming to the United States, Stanczak experienced one of the largest influences on his work: Hard labor in a Russian camp during the Second World War, where he lost use of his right arm. While his works were often criticized for being primarily focused on optical illusion and lacking depth, Stanczak's works—much like Piet Mondrian's—were made in direct response to these experiences and the political turmoil of the time. The impact of these experiences drove him to create abstract works removed from the politics and conflicts which previously defined his life, exploring a clean and idealized form of expression separated from the realities he previously faced.

The majority of Stanczak's works were based on painting and printmaking, with this work being the only known sculpture/installation work done by him. His only other public work was done by painting directly onto a brick building and, as a result of issues with contractors, did not last particularly long before changes in weather caused it to dilapidate.

Additional was commissioned by Fifth Third Bank to cover the second-floor parking garage on East Sixth Street. Creating the work posed some trouble, though: Regulations on garage ventilation meant the installation had to go through multiple revisions before it was up to code.

During the revision process, the work had metal piping added and removed, structures changed, and ultimately saw some unique solutions to have the work meet requirements for air flow and ventilation. As a result, the work was distinctly different from the original plans presented by Stanczak.

Since its installation, the work has remained unchanged besides maintenance, with its brightly-colored aluminum lines becoming a mainstay of the area even as the surrounding businesses and buildings have changed.