

September 14 – December 17, 2023

## L'ŒIL ATTENTIF [2023]

### GUIDO MOLINARI FOUNDATION

*L'œil attentif* reenacts a fragment of the *The Responsive Eye* exhibition presented in 1965 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It brings together works by Johanna Barron, Tammi Campbell, Ellsworth Kelly, Guido Molinari, Barnett Newman and Claude Tousignant, exhibition views by photographer George Cersna and some sixty documents that offer a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes of *The Responsive Eye* and the unparalleled circulation of artworks during one of the most critical periods of the Cold War.

## THE RESPONSIVE EYE [1965]

### THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Regarded as the landmark exhibition of “Op art” or optical art, *The Responsive Eye* featured 99 artists and 123 works from 15 countries in Europe, South America, Asia, Israel, Canada and the USA. MoMA describes it as one of its most popular exhibitions of the period. After New York, it toured four U.S. cities: St. Louis, Seattle, Pasadena and Baltimore. To announce the exhibition, the museum exceptionally issued a series of press releases in several of the artists’ home countries. The one sent out to the Canadian media presented the three Canadian-born artists, who have since become historical figures: Agnes Martin (born in Macklin, Saskatchewan), Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant (both born in Montreal). The discovery of this press release in the MoMA archives was the starting point for *L'œil attentif*. Could bringing the three artists’ works together again, this time in Montreal, recreate the special atmosphere the 1965 exhibition must have generated? By experimenting with visual processes—the grid, vertical stripes and the target—their paintings give one an idea of the “responsive eye” that curator William C. Seitz sought to describe in Op art: an art in which colour, rhythm, the impression of movement and vibration generate optical sensations.

*The Responsive Eye*’s international character, and the number of artists and works it presented together for the first time, set it apart from the highly prized American art exhibitions of the period

that built up the Museum of Modern Art’s reputation both at home and abroad. Despite being known as an art historian who champions American Abstract Expressionism, William C. Seitz attempted to distance himself from this institutional image. As he writes in the opening pages of his catalogue text: “*The Responsive Eye* is concerned not with only one tendency, group, or country but with groups and individuals representing tendencies from over fifteen countries. Before distinguishing one direction from another, however, it is essential to indicate those characteristics that—despite divergences of form, intention, ideology, or personal style—these [artists] have in common.” Several pages later, he continues: “The varied works brought together here because of an historically significant similarity relate quite different means, materials, and aims. [...] No reference will be made to national, ideological or group alignments.”

The exhibition thus signalled a change in the rhetoric of MoMA’s exhibitions. It was no longer a question of modern art, but of contemporary art. The term “American art” was replaced by an affirmation of Op art’s international dimension. Moreover, the title, *The Responsive Eye*, refers to the experience and perception of the works, rather than to a national movement or concept. By selecting a new generation of artists, William C. Seitz wanted to show a different conception of abstraction and propose an experience of art based on optical effects. With the exception of Joseph Albers and Victor Vasarely, the two pioneers of Op art, the majority of the artists were between 25 and 35 years old. *The Responsive Eye* also introduced US viewers to artists such as Gego from Venezuela and Bridget Riley from England, whose work *Current* (1964) was featured on the cover of the catalogue.

## INVESTIGATIVE MUSEOLOGY

*L'œil attentif* is part of a research project entitled Investigative Museology which focuses on the circulation of artworks. How are artworks transported? How and why do they travel from one country to another? How are they exhibited, and for what purposes? *The Responsive Eye* caught our attention because of its international scope, which was quite rare at the time. The exhibition archives that we were able to access reveal various aspects of the complexity inherent in this project,

which involved transporting artworks across several continents. *L'œil attentif* explores this new mobility of art and compares it with the circulation of exhibitions at the height of the Cold War, and the role that MoMA sought to play on the international scene, both artistically and geopolitically. While our investigation provides a glimpse of the artistic atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by numerous exchanges between Montreal and New York, it has most of all led us down unsuspected paths to the offices of the CIA—the Central Intelligence Agency—in Langley, Virginia.

*The Responsive Eye* is a fascinating case study in the economic, social, institutional and political determinations of the exhibition space. *L'œil attentif* endeavours to reveal these subterranean structures.

– Marie Fraser