# Optical Illusions

Hagai Ulrich talks with Oran Hoffmann about perception, photography, perspective, and optical illusions, about Cézanne, Albers, Vasarely, and about performativity in photography, following Hoffmann's exhibition "Love-Sick Heart," which had recently been shown at The Lobby - Art Space.

Conversation / Hagai Ulrich August 12, 2020

In "Love-Sick Heart," his recent exhibition at The Lobby - Art Space in Tel Aviv (curator: Orit Mor), Oran Hoffmann presented several photographic works offering "an overview of the photographic practice that Hoffmann has been developing and evolving," in the words of Sivan Raveh, the author of the exhibition text.1 On the wall facing the entrance, he put up three large, unframed photographs. Each shows a close-up image of a hand, which is a part of a statue. The hand is colored. The coloring was done as part of the photographing process; it stands out against the rest of the image, which is in black-and-white. Hoffmann printed the original image and re-photographed it, one or more times, against the particleboard used for hanging the finished works in the exhibition space. Photographing the space and bringing it into the printed image is a practice he has used before, in his 2014 exhibition "Objektiv: Josef Albers, Oran Hoffmann" (curator: Dalit Matatyahu) at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. In that show, he photographed the gallery space, as well as its corners and columns, and pasted the printed images on the walls. They did not match the walls exactly, which created an aberration in the space and a sense of disorientation. Over the works pasted directly on the wall, he had hung other works of his - small, framed prints, as well as original works by Josef Albers from 1972, showing geometric shapes such as squares and rhombuses, in different colors, lying over one another.

## unnamed.jpg



[1]Oran Hoffmann, from the series Dialogue sur le Coloris

Installation view from Love-sick Heart, The Lobby Art Space, curator: Orit Mor, Tel Aviv, 2020. Courtesy of the artist

oran hoffman TLV Museum.jpg **[2]**



[3]Oran Hoffmann, from the series Le Cinquième Mur

From Objektiv: Josef Albers, Oran Hoffmann, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2014. curator: Dalit Matatyahu
Courtesy of the artist

OranHoffmann_Objektiv_installation_2.jpg **[4]**



[5]Oran Hoffmann, from the series Le Cinquième Mur

From Objektiv: Josef Albers, Oran Hoffmann, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2014. curator: Dalit Matatyahu
Courtesy of the artist

Albers had taught at the Bauhaus school in Germany. He escaped to the United States after the Nazi rise to power, and headed the art department at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. For his classes, he created exercises that demonstrated the optical illusions present in nature and reality. These activities showed how colors and shapes perform: they alter their appearance when positioned one over or alongside the other, and the way we perceive their dimensions or weight changes too.2 The varying way shapes and colors perform, or appear, under temporary circumstances of observation is a kind of "performativeness," confronting the students with the uncertainty at the basis of their sensory perception.

A central issue in "Objektiv" has been the technology of photography as an instrument for demonstrating the instability at the basis of sensory perception, which is generating a uniform image of space. Hoffmann adheres to Albers's approach and to the understanding of the disruption in perception. Curator Dalit Matatyahu has written that “the medium reorganization proposed by the encounter between Albers and Hoffmann thus calls for observation not of or through the thing, but rather with it: how does one see with a square?"3

Between September and November of 2018, Hoffmann had three exhibitions in Aix-en-Provence in France. In them, he repeated, to some extent, the tactic of following artists who were interested in the illusion of perception as a meta-idea. At Atelier Cézanne, the studio where Paul Cézanne had worked toward the end of his life, Hoffmann presented still-life photographs that included original objects that had appeared in Cézanne's paintings – objects that are usually on display in the atelier. The works seem to try to adopt Cézanne's way of looking; he is considered to have preceded Cubism by describing his objects from several points of view simultaneously. Another exhibition in Aix-en-

Provence, "Simulations et Illusions," was shown at Fondation Vasarely, founded by Victor Vasarely in 1976. It holds monumental mosaic works, which comprise color interplay and mathematical arrangements of abstract geometric shapes: triangles, squares, circles, dots, and lines that create optical illusions of movement. Hoffmann worked with ceramic tiles similar to those used by Vasarely, turning them into sculptures, which he had displayed in the show. He also worked on the artist's book *Vasarely Material Archives*, containing dozens of photographs of the original tiles, along with other original materials Vasarely had used, such as paper and glass – a small part of the extensive raw materials collection. In the third show, *Sur le Motif*, he presented photographs in the gallery of La Non-Maison Centre d'Art, in Aix-en-Provence.

1280px-Cézanne,_Paul_-_Still_Life_with_a_Curtain.jpg **[6]**



[7]
Paul Cézanne, Still Life with Curtain, 1895 **[8]**

I met Hoffmann just before his exhibition at The Lobby, and we discussed a few issues I have been thinking about regarding his work.

**Hagai Ulrich**: In Vasarely's work, repetitive arrangement of geometric forms create optical illusions that make materials meld together and lose their volume and independence as things in the world. At the same time, the repetition generates something else as well, something with a presence, which is not only influenced but has influence. When I visited the Fondation a year ago, the act of looking at the works created an experience of losing the self in the space, and a sense that something was affecting my body, causing my brain to put together shapes and points of view, ignore others, and end up with a general picture of something I cannot really evaluate. It takes us back to reality, to the outdoors, to the street. Many things occur in our perception that are incomprehensible; they are overwhelming – the brain chooses to see that which is instrumental to orientation, but there's a sense of a uniform image.

**Oran Hoffmann**: Vasarely wanted to initiate the illusion of depth, as I understand it. He wrote in his manifesto that there was no two-dimensionality in nature. There is no such thing as a flat surface to paint on. To allow an artwork to act, you must return something to nature, and for that purpose, you need the optical illusion and the illusion of depth. To let the work exist.

unnamed (2).jpg **[9]**



[10]

**Victor Vasarely at Fondation Vasarely, Aix-en-Provence, France**
[11]

**HU**: And this interested you at Fondation Vasarely? You've created an artist's book containing dozens of photographs of the pieces and materials he had used to create the illusion.

**OH**: I had the privilege of using the original materials – ceramic tiles, colored paper, and glass. I wanted to photograph them, each one by itself. I arranged them by color. It was complicated because I hadn't wanted an index; this is a catalogue of potentials. These are raw materials that contain the possibility of being an artwork. That was one of the things that really interested me – Vasarely's concept of nature. Each element received different treatment. I separated the parallelograms and placed each one in the same place and in the same way, and took the shots. I changed the position of the camera every time. It is, in fact, the same position, but the point of view is different. It's hard to explain, but when you see them in sequence, paging through a book, then the tile begins to blink at you. The space moves, but the tile remains stationary. There's a sense of flickering.

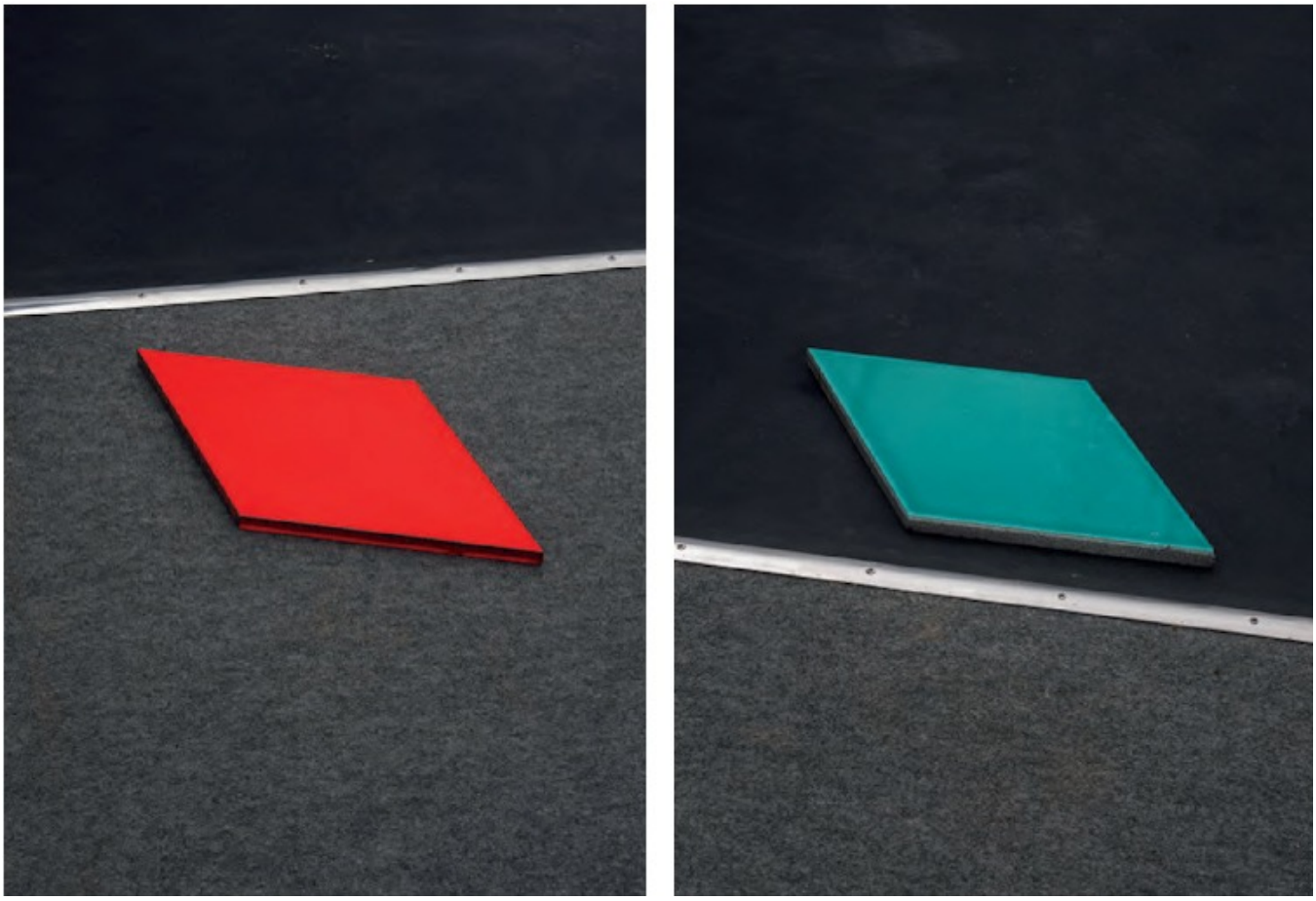
**HU**: Albers has taught that colors possess a performativenss that changes according to the shifting relationships of the colors, the pieces, and the human gaze at a particular time. So for you, the performativeness of photography is the blinking, so to speak? You are saying that through systematic photography and gradual progression the sequence generates a flickering, as if the images directly relate to whoever is looking at them? It's like you've taken small parts of the general effect of his monumental works and tried to transform them into personal action, or into a specific, tiny, isolated one.

**OH**: It's a kind of touch and go. I've tried to take into account his works and his thoughts about the meaning of production, how to produce, and to consider it in the process leading to the work. Because this is the raw material, it enables thinking about what to do with it. A pile of stones does not necessarily mean that you'd build a house. Each person will produce something different.

**HU**: What did you make of what you'd done with Vasarely's raw materials?

**OH**: There was the documentation of the raw materials from the archive, which took about a year. Toward the end, I built sculptures from the archive's physical materials. A year later, the book of the documentation project (which was not included in the exhibition) came out, but it's not exactly documentation. It's been a Sisyphean work, which took a long time. On the one hand, there was the cataloguing of the materials, finding out what was in the archive, numbering items, sorting by color, and on the other hand – to think of a way to visualize this stuff, which would allow me to see that this has been the basis of his work. The moment I've been given permission to work with these materials, what I would do with them. They showed me the place, and I'd noticed that some of the works were falling apart. The mosaics were missing pieces. The guide who has shown me the place, Pascale, is a restorator who works there in a different position. I asked her how they intended to deal with it, and she said they had another room, not open to visitors. In that room, I saw the containers with all the pieces. She explained that this was how they would restore the works, and what a fascinating, unresolved problem that was. I was interested in the fact that a materials archive such as this would eventually be gone. For the restoration, they will use the original elements (including the parallelograms), so that in the end the archive itself would disappear, with only the documentation remaining. I began to consider the idea of nature, the two-dimensionality and the illusion that would affect people, and to think that these parts he had manufactured, or have been made for him in a factory, were the basis and the way to bring things back from abstraction to nature. You can visit churches everywhere, look at the mosaics, and see that the abstraction, the reduction of information, comes from images of nature – such as flowers.

oran hoffman Vasarely Archive4.jpg **[12]**



[13]
**Oran Hoffmann, from the book Vasarely Material Archives**
RVB Books, Paris, 2019
Courtesy of the artist

**HU**: In many paintings, Cézanne had a way of looking that saw several points of view simultaneously. Not to get into the whole history of where it's placed, he has started, perhaps, this deconstruction that demonstrates that in nature there's a multiplicity of layers underlying the perception of images in a uniform, orderly way. Was that the connection between the two exhibitions?

**OH**: I visited the Atelier Cézanne, and they, too, showed me around the place. A lovely woman who worked there, Marie-Chantal, opened cabinets and drawers for me and showed me everything. She told me fascinating stories. She is *the* expert on Cézanne. She specializes in "living with Cézanne" – she buys the apples in the market, and she knows what color apples have been in which painting - many, many stories. I thought it was a place with a very interesting ambiance. You walk in, and while you are there, in his studio, where he used to create artworks, you see a wall like a display window, a kind of installation they had made. I then realized it was impossible to photograph like Cézanne. I would like to bear in mind Cézanne's way of seeing and make the camera see in the same way he had.

unnamed (3).jpg **[14]**



[15]

**Atelier Cézanne, Aix-en-Provence, France** [16]

**HU**: Because Cézanne is seemingly objecting to the linear perspective in painting that the camera is based on. It is a whole civilization based on a one-dimensional world view, creating a single way of understanding reality.

**OH**: What you say is true. I think that if you cannot pick up a camera and through it get access to Cézanne's vision, you can imagine he might have used several cameras or lenses. He does the same thing with landscape and with still life. When you start blocking certain parts, you see that his tabletops, in many cases, are a little off, with an odd perspective; we sense it and don't see it. I was

trying to show the inability of photography to get close to Cézanne's way of thinking, even today.

_D4S9700.jpg **[17]**



[18]
**Oran Hoffmann, installation view from the exhibition l’Atelier vu à travers un Miroir**
Atelier de Cézanne, Aix-en-Provence, France, 2018
Courtesy Institut Francais/T.Chapotot 2018

**HU**: This ties into the exhibition with Albers in 2014. You've created an encounter with his works that makes a connection between photography and a disrupted perception of reality. The camera produces the object it photographs, objectifying it in some kind of leveling, easy-to-understand uniformity while also making it separate, embodying a difference that defines the photographer as a subject. Michel Foucault, if I recall correctly, tried to outline attributes of similarity in the Renaissance and wrote that one of the characteristics of similarity is a "hinge,"connecting two different things. He called it a convention. He said there was certain logic between two things even though they are different, and that because they are connected they are generating their similarity. I think this is something the camera does – it's as if it generates similarity between two opposites. Similarity between subject and object, between my projection and the thing that is there. I am intrigued that this has come up through Albers's works.

**OH**: When you are at home, and it's dark outside, you turn on the lights inside. Suddenly the glass, which you can look through during the day, turns into a mirror, becomes reflective. And if you are very particular and you light the interior and the exterior with the same intensity, then the glass - the window – is reflective, but it also adds information. I used glass to photograph the space in the museum. The exhibition's title has been "Objektiv," which means 'lens,' but also 'objective,' as well as 'goal' and the 'act of objecting.'

**HU**: it appears that you also use the camera as a tool for describing reality and examining the action you perform with it, an act that contains a multiplicity of conventions, and of psychology. That is interesting to me, too, in my motivation to make art through photography.

**OH**: for me, this is an act of disclosing, showing something from a different angle, and disappearing. It is essential for me. It's like when you read a book over and over again – it doesn't mean the book is getting any better – but you sense that there's something you need to keep addressing, and it takes into consideration the way these artists – Cézanne, Vasarely, Albers – have viewed the world. For me, this is a rational action, without psychology… it is a revisiting. Finding words is complicated, and that's why I make artworks. There's not one artwork I'd made where I thought, this is it. I always prefer to think of the works as studies, in a way. These are options that keep me working because there are always new things to examine and think about. Every single thing adds a little, and, perhaps, in the general scheme of things, something is created.

oran hoffman Atelier Cezenne.jpg **[19]**



[20]Oran Hoffmann, from the series l’Atelier vu à travers un Miroir, color photograph, 56X70 cm, 2017
Courtesy of the artist

**Performative Photography**

The lens, in alignment with the logic of linear perspective, creates a uniform, reductive image, which conceals a multiplicity of engagements and promotes a sense that things are the way we see them – but it is an illusion. Hoffmann is reflecting this idea by aligning with artists who have emphasized the unnoticed multiplicity that is at the heart of the unification of the normative vision: with Cézanne it is different viewpoints and the experience of perception from different directions; with Albers, the colors and shapes whose appearance is affected by various circumstances; and with Vasarely – the abstract gradation that stems from repetitiveness. The unification, which thins out the array of

processes, expressions, and characteristics, is what Homi K. Bhabha has called a 'stereotype.4 As an example he calls upon the colonial 'other.' The stereotype is related to the seeing of the other as an object of repulsion and of passion simultaneously. It comprises several identities that are not only skin color or facial structure, but also involve local culture, tradition, religion, gender; it is created as a complex dialectic process in which whoever signifies the stereotype affects the one signified as such, and vice versa – they are not objectively separate, autonomous, different parts. Bhabha is using Freud's concept of the fetish to explain the stereotype as an example for such a situation, in which the difference is created (in the case of a fetish according to Freud, between man and woman) and acknowledged, but at the same time denied and replaced by an object that recalls it, as an expression of desire. Photography, as a reflector of perspective and therefore the human vision that had created it, simultaneously generates images that appear as separate objects – things in the world – but in fact performs a reduction of a multiplicity. The object of photography, the making of the single, flattening image, is the fetish in this sense.

According to Bhabha, the existence of the stereotype as a uniformity that creates a difference is in fact supported by a multiplicity that is concealed by endlessly repeating the existence of the stereotype (telling stories, jokes, protests, creating discriminatory laws, clothing items, etc.). The repetitiveness stems from the fact that the stereotypical image is based on an illusion. Judith Butler named this type of repetitiveness "performativity," arguing that this performativity can also be employed to destabilize the image that's perceived as self-evident (Bhabha's stereotype). Thus, similarly, Albers's insistence that colors and shapes have performative qualities (relating to how we percieve them), and that the purpose of art is not to ask what you look at, but how you look and what you perform. These acts are also present in works by Vasarely and Cézanne, and they are apparent in Hoffmann's photography, which can thus be categorized as performative.

Hoffmann's return to the original materials used by Cézanne and Vasarely, and to Albers's artworks, once more emphasizes the fetish, the actual objects, or at the least questions the fetish, as the original things that create the space (of the show, the studio, the image, of reality) as if it is normal and ordinary, having always been there. In fact, it is a product of a violent, colonizing (flattening), subconscious desire to gain control, not dissimilar from ideas that create "normativity," hetero-normativity, and stereotypes.

Hoffmann's works emphasize the avoidance of the stereotype and attempt to achieve multiplicity by encounters, not through, but rather 'with' time, place, circumstances. The fetish as an expression of desire refers to touch, concealing, in its quintessence, the complex, non-self-evident connection between object and subject. In the three images that hang at the entrance to "Love-Sick Heart" as well, photography's fetish is stressed in the hands of the sculptures (hands are associated with making, but also with perceiving – as in perceiving reality, or "grasping" it - and also with touching). The hands are re-photographed several times, representing semantic multiplicity. In these senses, in many of Hoffmann's works, points of view become points of contact or encounter. The fact that he uses in his projects original materials of other artists who have addressed "seeing" emphasized it further because they, too, tie contact to seeing.

Oran Hoffmann's exhibition "Love-Sick Heart" (curator: Orit Mor) was on view at The Lobby - Art Space from January 16 to February 22, 2020.

- 1. Sivan Raveh, "Love-sick Heart" (exhibition text) [21], the Lobby Art Space, January 2020
- 2. See, Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2006.
- 3. Dalit Matatyahu, "Windows of Perception [22]," from *Objektiv: Josef Albers, Oran Hoffmann* (exhibition catalogue, editor: Dalit Matatyahu), Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 2014, pp 89-98.
- 4. Bhabha, Homi K. "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" (first published 1994 by Routledge), from: *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics, London and New York, 2004, pp. 94-210.

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