

PRESS RELEASE

VICTOR VASARELY. IN THE LABYRINTH OF MODERNISM

FROM 26 SEPTEMBER 2018 TO 13 JANUARY 2019

STÄDEL MUSEUM, EXHIBITION ANNEX

Frankfurt, 25 September 2018. From 26 September 2018, the Städel Museum shows the special exhibition “Victor Vasarely. In the Labyrinth of Modernism”. The retrospective presents the founder of the op art of the 1960s with more than one hundred works. Victor Vasarely’s (1906–1997) oeuvre, however, spans more than sixty years and makes use of the most diverse styles and influences: Key works of all phases of his production trace the development of the once-in-a century artist. Often reduced to his op art, the artist forged a bridge between the early modernism of Eastern and Central Europe and the avant-gardes of the Swinging Sixties in the West. He drew on traditional media and genres throughout his career, incorporating the multiple, mass production, and architecture into his complex work in the 1950s. The exhibition also looks back at Vasarely’s beginnings as an artist with such works as *Hommage au carré* (1929) or figurative paintings like *Autoportrait* (1944). The selection spans from early works like *Zèbres* (1937) and his *Noir-et-Blanc* period of the 1950s to the main works of op art such as the *Vega* pictures of the 1970s. The wide-ranging retrospective understands itself as a rediscovery of a crucial twentieth-century artist who reflects modernism in all its complexity like no other.

Next to important loans from the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, or the Michele Vasarely Foundation, the exhibition presents not least the dining hall created for the Deutsche Bundesbank as an outstanding example of Vasarely’s room-spanning architectural designs. „Victor Vasarely. In the Labyrinth of Modernism” was prepared in close collaboration with the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which will present the exhibition „Vasarely, le partage des forms” immediately following the show in Frankfurt. The two exhibitions share crucial loans like the dining hall, which has been especially dismantled for the presentation in Frankfurt.

The exhibition could be realized thanks to the support from German Federal Cultural Foundation and Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States. Another

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important foothold for the show was provided by the long-term sponsorship of Deutsche Bank as partner of the Städel Museum, which allows the Contemporary Art Department to pursue its collecting activities.

“With ‘Victor Vasarely. In the Labyrinth Of Modernism’, the Städel Museum dedicates itself not only to one of the perhaps best-known unknown figures of European post-war art but once again to one of the central issues of contemporary art: the continuity of first and second modernism and their importance for present-day art,” says Städel Director Philipp Demandt.

“Vasarely brought the Renaissance space that had been ignored by modernism back into the picture. Yet the central perspective coordinates were no longer reliable. The spaces he designed are dynamically inviting, labyrinthine, and problematic all at once. Only if we recognize his room-spanning op art compositions’ breath-taking abysses in terms of both form and content will his art turn into a fascinating testimony to what we call modernism,” adds Martin Engler, curator of the exhibition and Head of Contemporary Art at the Städel Museum.

In the show, Victor Vasarely can be rediscovered as one of the most crucial representatives of twentieth-century art, whose pictorial language has taken root in the collective memory without having been exactly located by art history. Vasarely’s origins as an artist are marked by his encounter with early modernism. He was influenced by theories of the Bauhaus and suprematism. His later technoid and psychedelically colourful works, which pushed into space, were aimed at deceiving the viewer’s perception. These works are representative of those years of awakening and their society with its faith in the future. They define the appearance of modernism in the 1960s and 1970s and are part of both the avant-garde and popular culture. Spreading his works in the form of multiples and editions made Vasarely’s works omnipresent. The popularity he strove for, concerned with a democratisation of art, also made them a mass product—in the best and in the worst sense. If we read his labyrinthine compositions, his illusionist works, the abysses of his early oeuvre, and his—at first sight—primarily colourful op art pictures within the context of their time as regards both painting and content, we will come to understand his art as a fascinating testimony to modernism’s project of the century in all its contradictory nature.

Tour through the exhibition

The exhibition “Victor Vasarely. In the Labyrinth of Modernism”, which highlights the origins and development of the artist’s work across two floors, follows a reverse chronology. The visitor will first come upon Vasarely’s key works of the 1970s and 1960s, before he will be guided through his varied oeuvre back to his early production of the 1930s and 1920s. “The reverse chronology of the presentation with its free-

standing display panels is mainly intended to make the work of one of the best-known unknown twentieth-century artists, which abounds with concatenations and contradictions, accessible as a visual experience. The impossible as a possibility was Victor Vasarely's impellent: a project with which he both unsettled and extended the traditional notions of space in the fine arts in a visionary way," Jana Baumann, curator of the exhibition in the Städel Museum, explains. Thanks to the multiple visual axes resulting from the open architecture of Kuehn Malvezzi, the presentation reveals how consistently Vasarely's work evolved throughout several decades despite the formal differences of individual groups of works.

The show starts in the basement of the Exhibition House with the dining hall of the Deutsche Bundesbank designed by Vasarely and his son Yvaral, which was specially dismantled for the exhibition in the Städel Museum. The work impressively exemplifies the artist's endeavour to extend his work from the canvas into space and to penetrate into the quotidian world in this way. Vasarely's reproducible pictorial system opened up the possibility of a democratic dissemination of his art. With his architectonic integrations and multiples—like *Kroa Multicolor* (1963–1968) or *Pyr* (1967)—he, following in the tradition of Bauhaus, pursued the goal to intervene creatively in the everyday realm. The year 1972 found him at the peak of his career, his work omnipresent. He not only designed the logo for the Olympics but was also commissioned to go over the brand logo by Renault.

Subsequently, the visitor comes upon Vasarely's psychedelically colourful *Vega* series. These technoid compositions still define the image of op art and the artist today. The cuboids, spheres, and rhombi of the series push their way into space in a trompe-l'oeil-like manner. Vasarely achieved this visual effect by a systematic distorting enlargement or reduction of individual squares or circles. In his two-times-two-meter-large work *Vega Pal* (1969) or in *Vega 200* (1968), the composition virtually shoves out from the picture as a dynamic hemisphere. Vasarely's painting in oil or acrylics anticipates the computer-generated aesthetics of later generations. Deliberately unfolding in a polyphonic way from here on, the continuation of the tour reveals to what degree Vasarely stretched the modernist heritage, particularly of geometric abstraction, and made it vibrate. Visitors will not find themselves confronted with a geometry resting in itself but rather with room-filling paintings extending into space that irritate them and unfold a dynamics which sucks them into an abyss.

Starting from the *Vega* pictures, different visual axes afford insights into the artist's *Folklore planétaire* period, powerful in both its forms and colours, and the invention of "unité plastique", from which the works of this period emerged. Vasarely's rigid pictorial system combines two basic geometric shapes, the square and the circle,

with an equally clearly defined colour spectrum comprising six local colours. The outcome is a pictorial method that allows to “produce” ever-new pictures requiring hardly any artistic decisions: the “plastic alphabet”. Within the open exhibition architecture, works like *Calota MC* (1967) or *CTA 102* (1965), which are based on the “plastic unity” principle and evolved from the “plastic alphabet”, enter into a dialogue with the *Vega* works as well as with those of the *Noir-et-Blanc* period preceding them. Apart from the reduction to black and white, this phase of Vasarely’s production saw the artist’s final turn towards geometric abstraction—albeit an abstraction that was already gently set in motion, anticipating the picture-immanent dynamics of the *Vega* series.

Positioned in the centre of the basement, the programmatic picture *Hommage à Malevich* (1952–1958) connects Vasarely’s early period and main work and presents itself as key for his entire oeuvre, with Malevich’s *Black Square* being set in motion, geometric shapes swivelling into space, and squares turning into rhombi, creating various levels. The exhibit *Tlinko-II* (1956), whose clear grid pattern is dynamized by single squares tilting from the picture surface and thus turning into rhombi, exemplifies this in a similarly impressive manner. Such solutions laid the foundations for Vasarely’s art that declared the issues of seeing and perceiving a field for experimentation and strove to overcome the statics of modernism.

The artist’s *Photographismes*, which mark the beginning of his *Noir-et-Blanc* series—and thus of op art—are equally important for his pictorial language. Vasarely explored the black-and-white principle of photography and used it in his India ink drawings for his early *Photographismes*. It seems as if the positive and negative versions of a photograph have been inaccurately stacked on top of each other. The tightly packed strips in black and white create the impression of a shimmering pictorial surface. The section featuring works like *Naissance-N* (1951) or *Fugue* (1958–1960) thus sheds light on the early beginnings and preliminary stages of op art.

Pursuing the story of the reverse chronology further, the second part of the show on the upper floor of the Exhibition House begins with three very different groups of works, which the artist worked on more or less in parallel, however. The pictures of the *Belle-Isle*, *Gordes-Cristal* and *Denfert* series are abstractions that still indicate their subjects in their titles. The works of these groups are not only independent but also wonderful modernist achievements in the best sense; their skilled compositions as well as their formal and intellectual austerity presage the perfectionist of future decades. The organic colour and form surfaces of the *Belle Isle* series were inspired by the shells and stones the artist found on the beach. The *Gordes-Cristal* works, on the other hand, hark back to optical impressions Vasarely received in Gordes, a mountain village in the South of France. Its crystalline roofscapes with their many

nooks and crannies tilt into the two-dimensional and turn into abstract geometric compositions. When Vasarely contemplated a rectangular window opening in the dark interior of a house, however, he no longer perceived this opening in the sun's rays as flat but as a light cube. This was the cornerstone for Vasarely's idea of the reversibility of two-dimensional forms and stereopsis, the perception of depth and three-dimensional structure, linked with it. The *Denfert* series takes its name from the Paris underground station Denfert-Rochereau, which the artist regularly passed in the 1930s, finding inspiration in its cracked tiles.

The last part of the exhibition highlights Victor Vasarely's beginnings in the milieu of the historical avant-gardes in Budapest. His first known works, such as *Hommage au carré* (1929), already suggest the room-spanning dynamics of the op art of the 1960s. The modernist statics resting in itself was set in motion, albeit only ethereally at the time, with differently coloured squares subtly converging when receding into the depth of the picture plane. Yet even here, there can be doubt that the artist is not concerned with the merely visual, with an optical game. The technically perfect *Études de mouvement*—finger exercises of the commercial artist Vasarely originally was in Budapest and Paris—shed light on the significance that applied art had for his work and thinking from the very beginnings. Yet it is above all the parallel creation of the first *Zèbres* and such a bewildering figuration as *Les bagnards* (*The Convicts*, 1935) that astounds us beyond measure. Very different in their objective and aesthetics, the pictures share the reduced black-and-white repeat that, reducing the subjects in a markedly similar way, makes both zebras and convicts oscillate and irritates the viewer optically and in terms of their contents. This also reflects the interwar years in Moscow and Berlin, which were determined by totalitarian regimes. Historically and as regards the respective subjects, a dark, uncanny undertone makes itself heard in Vasarely's play with pattern repeat and irritation even in his early work. In view of its genesis on the eve of the Second World War, it is as logical as telling that the pictorial worlds designed by him in the wake of modernism are unstable and fugitive, that they oscillate and elude us.

The geometry dissolves; what was once static goes into a spin; optical shallows undermine the austerity of modernism—a diagnosis confirmed by Vasarely's early geometric playful forays as well as by *Vonal-Prim*, *Reytey*, or the *Vega* works presented at the beginning of the tour through the show. Whether in the 1920 or in the 1960s, the artist's pictorial spaces are always dynamically inviting as well as labyrinthine and problematic. Only this feeling of unease and insecurity makes the decorative surfaces of his art complete. The viewer needs to glimpse the abysses in Victor Vasarely's room-spanning op art compositions to understand his art as a body of fascinating evidence of modernism's project of the century.

Victor Vasarely. In the Labyrinth of Modernism

Exhibition dates: from 26 September 2018 to 13 January 2019

Curators: Dr. Martin Engler (Head of Contemporary Art, Städel Museum),
Dr. Jana Baumann (Research assistant Contemporary Art, Städel Museum)

Information: www.staedelmuseum.de

Visitor services and guided tours: +49(0)69-605098-200, info@staedelmuseum.de

Venue: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Opening hours: TUE, WED, SAT, SUN 10 am – 6 pm; THU, FRI 10 am – 9 pm; closed on Mondays

Special opening hours: 3 October 2018 10 am – 6 pm; 24 December 2018 closed; 25, 26 December 2018 10 am – 6 pm; 31 December 2018 closed; 1 January 2019 10 am – 6 pm.

Admission: Sundays and holidays 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR, Tuesday to Friday 14 EUR, reduced 12 EUR, family tickets 24 EUR; free admission for children under twelve years of age; groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: reduced admission fee per person. Groups are required to book in advance: please call +49(0)69-605098-200 or contact info@staedelmuseum.de.

Advance tickets: tickets.staedelmuseum.de

Admission to the special exhibition is free for members of the Städelische Museums-Verein.

Accompanying programme: The party celebrating the Vasarely exhibition will take place on October 27, 2018 in the Städel Museum, starting at 8 pm.

General guided tours through the museum: TUE 3 pm, THU 7 pm, SAT 2 pm (not on 13 October), and 3 October 4 pm. The number of participants is limited; no reservations are necessary. Tour tickets will be available starting two hours before each tour for 5 EUR at the cash desk of the Städel Museum or under tickets.staedelmuseum.de.

Catalogue: The exhibition will be accompanied by an eponymous catalogue edited by Dr. Martin Engler and published by Verlag für moderne Kunst. With contributions by Martin Engler, Györgyi Imre, Michel Gauthier, Jana Baumann, and Valerie Hillings and a foreword by Philipp Demandt. The catalogue will be published in a German and an English edition. 249 pages, 39.90 EUR each (museum edition).

Exhibition booklet: A booklet in German will be forthcoming to accompany the exhibition; 7.50 euros.

Audiotour: A German and English audio tour through the exhibition will be available. The German version is spoken by the theatre, film and TV actor and Grimme Prize recipient Sebastian Blomberg. The tour is available free of charge as an app from either Google play or the Apple Store and can be comfortably downloaded to the smartphone from at home. Visitors may rent an audio guide for 4.50 EUR (two audio guides for 8 EUR) in the museum.

Digitorial®: The digitorial is available under vasarely.staedelmuseum.de.

Social Media: The Städel Museum communicates the exhibition in the social media with the hashtag #Vasarely.

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Exhibition architecture: Kuehn Malvezzi

An exhibition organised by the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, Paris