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JACK TWORKOV: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW; PART ONE: FROM GESTURE TO GEOMETRY

LOIS FICHNER-RATHUS

Late within the first generation of the New York School, Jack Tworkov's hegira from Abstract Expressionism to a disciplined geometry of painting is characteristic of the artist's sustained originality and development. Informed by contemporary painting, Tworkov's art is formed in the first generation's freedom but impelled, in the 1960s, to measure and control.

In 1964 the Whitney Museum of American Art held a major retrospective exhibition of Jack Tworkov's work, recognizing his contribution to American painting over a span of some thirty years. Tworkov's current retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum reflects his accomplishments of the last decades and speaks of the passion, originality, and adventurous persistence of a man whose "mature" works were assumed to have been painted many years ago.

What sets Tworkov's retrospective apart from recent exhibitions honoring fellow Abstract Expressionists is its celebration of a style in progress rather than a tribute to things past. Indeed, progress has been Tworkov's tradition. His refusal to be locked into a style that he no longer believed had relevance for the present or promise for the future precipitated his divorce from Abstract Expressionism after establishing a successful career as one of its proponents. In the late 1950s he imposed a systematized structure on his painterly works, seeking a reconciliation between geometry and gestural brushwork. At the age of sixty-five Tworkov put his reputation on the line, produced less-than-fully satisfying transitional works, and then emerged as one of the innovative geometric painters of the later 1960s and the 1970s. Today, after years of paintings that rely heavily on a predetermined structure, he struggles to break free of his self-imposed geometric restraints and to return to a completely free style based on calligraphic, impressionistic brushwork.

To some degree, this originality and persistence have taken their critical toll. Although Tworkov is often quoted at length on the principles and practices of the Abstract Expressionists, his own critical attention over the years has been most often based on what is heard, not on what is seen. Part of the lack of recognition may stem from Tworkov's not having been in "the right place at the right time." He was, to all intents and purposes, out of the painting scene while Pollock was painting the *She-Wolf* and while de Kooning was baptizing gestural painting. During the years from 1942 through 1945, while he did not paint, Tworkov was designing tools in collaboration with the war effort. This happenstance worked to categorize him erroneously as a translator rather than an inventor.

Another possible reason for his lack of critical recognition derives from the art historical division between the first and second generation New York School. Although a member of the first generation, Tworkov actually completed his mature Abstract-Expressionist works at the same time that the second generation was emerging. In fact, many of the later gesture painters are a poor fit for the first or second generation and have similarly suffered a lack of attention over the years. These artists, including Tworkov, Guston, and Brooks, seem to have been forced into the unhappy position of a "middle child," competing for the recognition that was attracted by the first-born artists of the New York School, and at the same time having their short-lived attention diverted by the clamorings of the more recently born second generation. Artists who resist pigeon-holing have been the casualties of art criticism. They have often been left by the critical wayside or fashioned to the critic's Procrustean bed. As Tworkov represents two divergent trends in twentieth-century American painting, his head and feet have taken turns falling victim to the proverbial ax.

Although Tworkov studied at the Art Students League as early as 1925, he did not turn seriously to painting until two decades later. His early work included some experiments with abstraction and automatism but focused primarily on still lifes and figure compositions in the Post-Impressionist/Cubist tradition. By the late 1940s Tworkov had become a full-fledged participant in the Abstract-Expressionist movement. His Odyssey canvases —*Ulysses, Athene, Nausicaa, The Sirens, House of the Sun* (Fig. 1), *House of Rocks*—represent a successful combination of gestural brushwork with mythological narrative. They have in common a loose, gestural application of bright pigment and a strong central image that spews out from a chaotic core toward the edges of the canvas, barely contained by its perimeters. The figure remains prominent, but an attempt is made to integrate it with the background by means of an overlapping, slashing, diagonal stroke. Form and content are in dynamic balance. They complement rather than cancel each other's effects.

Over the period of 1955-1979 there are three strong identifiable influences on Tworkov's work: Cézanne, Abstract Expressionism, and mathematics. To one degree or another these three elements have shaped his style and determined its course. Tworkov appears to have been attracted to Cézanne's ability to reconcile spontaneity and structure and to evoke form and space with simple painterly strokes. He may also have seen his situation as historically analogous to Cézanne's. Both artists were departing from a style characterized by liberal application of pigment, a strong palette, and spontaneity in the rendition of fleeting impressions—whether they were of the optical world or the evasive mecca of the unconscious. Both reacted to this style by returning to a solid geometric base and lush, though tightly controlled brushwork. Cézanne's influence remains strong as Tworkov's works continue to exhibit a classical balance between emotion and restraint, spontaneity and structure, chance and choice. These polarities form the basis of Tworkov's work regardless of stylistic changes.

Tworkov's concept of art is highly complex and intellectualized. It centers, at any particular time, around sets of polarities. April Kingsley has spoken of Expressionist/Constructivist tendencies in Tworkov's work[1]; Edward Bryant has enumerated opposing concerns such as form/subject, line/painterly mass, movement/solid structure, and surface/depth.[2] Tworkov himself has wrestled with stylistic polarities: calligraphic and structural, movement and meditation.[3]

Painterly Abstractions

Attempts to resolve these opposites came during the late 1950s in what I call Tworkov's Painterly Abstractions. At this time, the solidity and painterliness which he admired in Cézanne, and the spontaneity and brushwork he culled from Abstract Expressionism coalesced into a unique style that combined restraint and emotion in its firm structure and broadly brushed, slashing strokes. His palette shifted from subtle, pastel hues found in his paintings of the early 1950s to bold combinations of red, blue, and green. Color no longer flowed throughout the composition independent of form, but was instead synonymous with it. Assertive strokes and stripes of discordant hues thrust across the canvas in sweeping diagonals, or intersected at near-right angles to form a more stable, expressionistic grid (Fig. 2). Space in the canvas was collapsed, as the brushwork of the background gently overlapped the imagery of the foreground with feathered strokes of more muted tones. In many of the Painterly Abstractions, continuous surface hatching lends uniformity and forces the viewer to peer at the underlying imagery through translucent textured veils of brushwork. The treatment of space and figure-ground relationships differs significantly from the alternate emerging/submerging of imagery in earlier paintings. The viewer no longer waits for the imagery to materialize from the brushwork. Rather, he is placed in the active role of discerning the forms that are obscured by surface strokes. The activity of the brushwork and the boldness of the palette override the imagery in their intensity, but the imagery never dissolves into the background. It stands firm behind the tumultuous foreground hatching. Tworkov, like Cézanne, uses color structurally. Each brushstroke stands as a distinct form.

Fig. 1. Jack Tworkov, House of the Sun, 1953. *Oil on canvas, 50 x 45". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*

As he began to structure his compositions with geometric elements, Tworkov maintained the use of random activity, the spontaneous execution, and the emphasis on stroke that were part and parcel of the Abstract-Expressionist credo. However, unlike Newman and Rothko, Tworkov's stroke was never subordinated to sensuous, absorbing expanses of color. Instead it visibly created them. His stroke, or brush-trace, played a predictable structural and surface-descriptive role. It took precedence over all formal elements until the early 1970s when the burden of surface description was divided between stroke and line. Freed from referential subject matter and the psychoanalytic baggage of the automatist method, Tworkov's forms and techniques became the subject matter that he organized rather traditionally. Like the Cubists, he used a grid to define space, collapsed planes, and emphasized the canvas surface.

Two predominant compositional types are evident in the Painterly Abstractions. In one, a central image is surrounded and overlapped by slashing diagonal strokes. The other is based on decentralized striping. The "central image" compositions are related to the Abstract-Expressionist paintings and the so-called Nuance works,[4] in which a figure looms large in the center of a square canvas. The "stripe" paintings, on the other hand, were inspired by the horizontality of the Cape Cod landscape and also appear related to early works by Newman, Motherwell, and Kline.

From the central image Tworkov developed a compositional format in which the prominent image was placed off-center and balanced by horizontal lines extending from the figure to the farther edge of the canvas. These works were termed the Barrier series, after the painting entitled *West Barrier*. They share a bold, asymmetrically placed image consisting of, and overlapped by, slashing diagonal brushstrokes that cancel pictorial depth and emphasize the canvas surface. Variations on this theme include works that contrast lush color fields with distinct stripes.

While working on the Barriers, Tworkov began his Brake series. These compositions consist of bluntly painted, near-vertical strokes in close fence-like alignments across the width of the canvases. Although the prominent forms of the Brake series differ markedly from those of the Barrier series, both block the viewer from entering the picture space. The viewer is "fenced off" or held back by a horizontal barrier, and must be content with surface, form, and color. Once again the image looms large and is integrated with the background by feathered, overlapping brushstrokes that are applied in subtle diagonals from upper right to lower left.

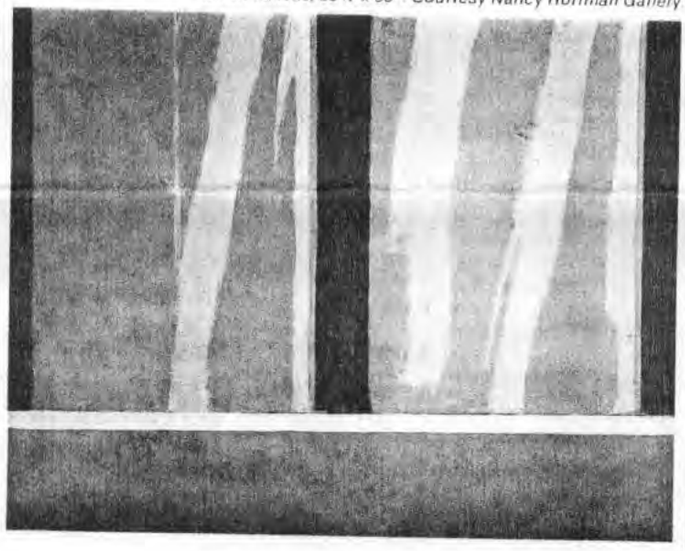
Tworkov's stripe had thus first appeared among heavily painted brushstrokes and became the basis for several groups of works throughout the 1960s. Its use was first prominent in *Homage to Stefan Wolpe*, which honored a contemporary composer and fellow member of the Black Mountain College Circle. The brushstroke is less agitated and more deliberately applied than that of earlier canvases. The structure imposed by the horizontals and verticals lends stability to the expressionistic painting and vibrant color. Tworkov's bold palette stemmed from his desire to confront difficult, discordant hues,[5] a task he still often sets himself.

Tworkov's emphasis on the predominant stripe image was expanded in the RWB series, begun in 1961. Unlike other canvases in which he used a red, white, and blue palette, the RWB works are based on a horizontal format and lack a central image. In this respect, they are closer in style to the late Barrier canvases. For the most part, white pigment blocks out the underlying blue and red brushstrokes, but in some areas of the composition the white serves as ground for this bold striping. This ambiguous use of positive and negative space provides tension among the elements, which are stabilized only by the assertiveness of the unimpeded progression of horizontal bands.

Fall's Edge (Fig. 3) provides an important link between the Painterly Abstractions and what I call the Fields series, begun

Fig. 2. Jack Tworkov, Script I, 1962. *Oil on linen, 84½ x 75½". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*

Fig. 3. Jack Tworkov, Fall's Edge, 1964
Oil on canvas, 63½ x 80". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.



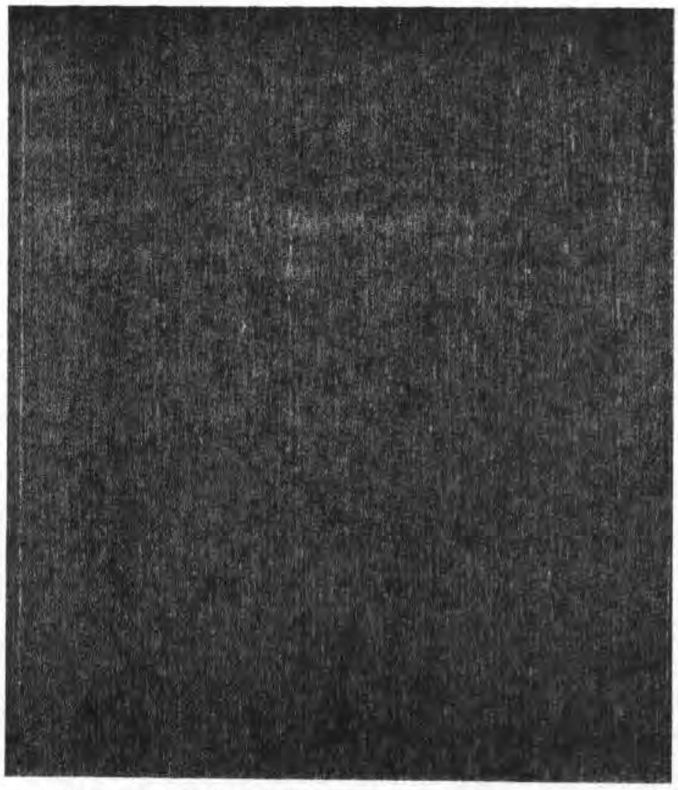


Fig. 4. Jack Tworkov, Redfield, 1969-72. *Oil on canvas, 80 x 70".* *Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*

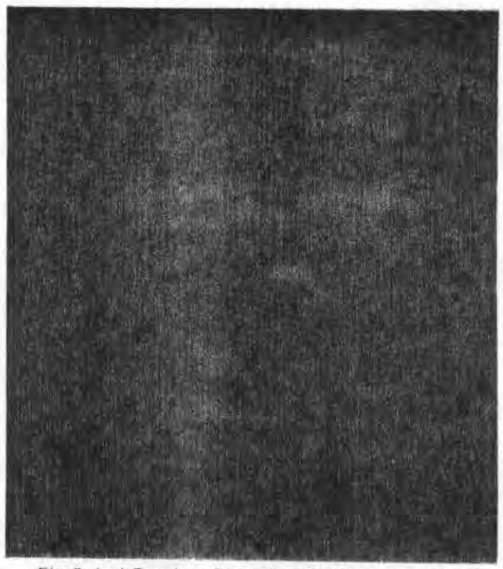
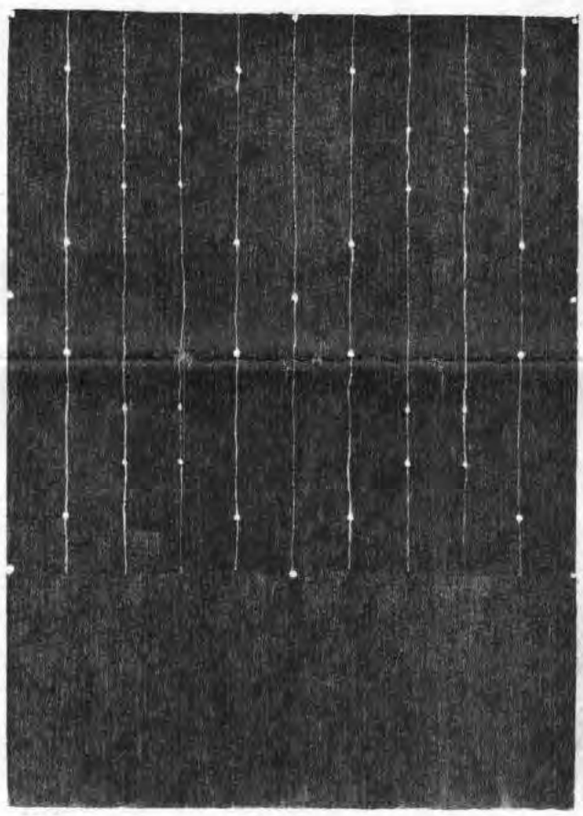


Fig. 5. Jack Tworkov, Ground, 1966. *Oil on linen, 50 x 45".* *Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*

Fig. 6. Jack Tworkov, D.A. on P#8, Q2-73, 1973. *Acrylic on paper, 25½ x 18¼".* *Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*



during the latter part of the 1960s. It is based on the stripe theme, which recalls Painterly Abstractions like the late Barriers and the RWB series, but the canvas is divided horizontally into two sections by a crisply drawn white line, presaging the sort of divisions Tworkov would use in the Fields series.

Fields

Tworkov's affinity to the process of painting and his desire for structure and rhythm led to his Fields series (Fig. 4). In terms of structure and imagery, the Fields developed from the striped Painterly Abstractions and were an extension of preoccupations with a uniform surface treatment that were carried over from Tworkov's Abstract-Expressionist paintings. In order to achieve this emphasis on surface, depth was eliminated with the removal of form, and form was dissolved by the elimination of the broad strokes and strong colors that functioned as shapes in the Painterly Abstractions. The overlapping of broadly brushed strokes that could not guarantee a lack of illusionistic space in the Painterly Abstractions was translated into a tapestry of thin, woven strokes that were applied predictably and rhythmically. The significantly refined brushwork deemphasized the role of stroke as form and relegated it to a position secondary to surface. Toward the same end, color exists in the Fields to communicate an energy that pulsates evenly across the canvas surface.

Most of the Fields share certain canvas divisions, a vertical emphasis, and a surface treatment whose rhythmic play of controlled brushwork is liberated from the structured background. The vertical striping of the later Painterly Abstractions became more regular and rhythmic in its progression across the canvas. Likewise the brushwork was refined and assumed characteristics of a rigid calligraphy, progressing from left to right, line after line. For the most part the strokes are vertical. However, in some compositions suggestive of landscape, there is some diagonal hatching.

Within the Fields series there are approximately five compositional formats. Some of the canvases are divided into two unequal segments by a line and/or a change in the density of

brushwork. Others consist of an overall patterning of thin, slashing strokes. At least three of the formats are powerfully vertical, as communicated by regular striping or a dominant vertical hatching. Some of the Fields have been stratified, while others begin with a grid pattern underlying the brushwork. Within these strata or individual squares there is vertical hatching, crosshatching, or other patterning.

Tworkov had experimented with these treatments as early as 1958 in a group of sketches in which the entire surface was consumed by layers of hatched strokes applied in varying thicknesses and densities, and moving delicately in opposing directions. At first glance the gesture seems to subsume all else, but in some areas of the compositions heavy concentrations of brushstrokes coalesce into nondescript forms beneath the surface. In 1966, Tworkov translated these ideas and techniques to a more permanent medium in his first Field, *Ground* (Fig. 5). This work presaged the compositional format and brush technique for the entire series in its canvas divisions, regular stripes, and compacted layers of vertical strokes superimposed on a field of hatched brushwork. In later works of the series, the large forms that materialize behind a screen of stripes were eliminated, but the basic compositional scheme was unaltered.

During the 1970s, Tworkov alternately simplified and complicated the basic Fields format in paintings that reflected a growing preoccupation with a systematized structure. In *D.A. on P #8, Q2-73* (Fig. 6), for example, the seemingly random placement of points along irregularly drawn stark white lines is, in actuality, derived from a specific system in which the junctures of horizontal, diagonal, and vertical lines are coordinated with the borders of the canvas and punctuated by white dots. Although such a painting is a logical extension of the basic compositional format of the Fields, the use of perimeters of the canvas to determine the imagery within the work links it to later canvases. Tworkov had arrived at this point within the Fields series after having executed a myriad of paintings whose imagery was derived solely from the connection of points along the edges of the canvas.

Fig. 7. Jack Tworkov, Crossfield II, 1969. *Oil on canvas, 80 x 70". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*

Fig. 8. Jack Tworkov, Situation L (SP-67-3), 1967. *Oil on linen, 80 x 70". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.*

The next step in the evolution of a style that combined structure with gestural brushwork focused on the introduction of drawing. In a subgroup of the Field series called the Crossfields (Fig. 7), patterns of diagonals repeated in consecutive bands were sketched as a scaffold for the slashing strokes. The imposition of such a program of design in the Fields series and the introduction of drawing as a powerful compositional element marked a turning point in Tworkov's style and presaged future stylistic preoccupations. But for the time being, structure remained subservient to brushstroke and uniform surface treatment. This obsession with surface and stroke remained Tworkov's "constant" in his geometric explorations after 1966. During the mid 1960s Tworkov also developed the idiosyncratic slashing stroke that transcended variations in style over the subsequent decade.

The shift toward a more contemplative execution based on drawing may have further isolated Tworkov from the automatist Surrealist and Abstract-Expressionist apotheosis of spontaneity. But for Tworkov, spontaneity did not preclude the more meditative, intellectual aspects of painting. For him, freedom in execution was linked to technique and pure gesture—the more mechanical elements—rather than tied to the purging of the unconscious. Tworkov has always argued that spontaneity need not be synonymous with lack of preconceived ideas about subject and technique. He has maintained that art, regardless of the degree of automatism, is never free from preconceptions. Thus, Tworkov set about to reconcile the concepts of control and spontaneity. In his compositions of 1966 to 1976 that combine gesture and some degree of structure, he emphasized painterliness and artistic "signature." Tworkov's gesture, whether diagonal slashing stroke or patterned vertical hatching, is as individual and spontaneous, as controlled and manipulated as Gottlieb's ideograms or Pollock's drips. The role of accident in creation, a love of the painting process, and insistence on artistic participation—as opposed to anonymity of execution—link Tworkov's Fields with the spirit of Abstract Expressionism.

Structural/Geometric Works

During the year that Tworkov painted his earliest Fields, he combined overall layering of vertical hatching with geometric division of the canvas in the innovative *Situation L (SP-67-3)* (Fig. 8). At about this time Tworkov forsook titles for his canvases, replacing them with a code to signify the origins of the work. Thus, *OC #4 Q3-75-#5* indicates that the work is oil on canvas #4, the fifth work painted in the autumn of 1975. He was concentrating on technique rather than subject, and such coding further removed reference from his paintings.

The majority of the Fields were based on gesture independent of structure. However, the geometric works of the late 1960s were moving toward structure that included, but was independent of, gesture. As early as 1960, Tworkov's works showed a tendency toward structure and away from automatist, gestural painting. In the Painterly Abstractions, broad swaths of color function as structural forms or provide a grid for loosely brushed strokes. The Fields themselves, with their emphasis on a tweed-like surface, are also divided into major sections or grids. But both series are linked to the process of painting. They differ markedly from the detached, precise structure of the lines in subsequent geometric paintings.

Situation L is divided into two unequal parts by a vertical line just right of center that forks in the bottom third of the composition, sending diagonals to the lower corners of the canvas. The painting's surface consists of layers of brushstrokes through which we catch glimpses of background. The slanted strokes split away from the vertical line like branches of a fir tree. They overlap the forking diagonals and run off the upper and lower edges of the canvas. As in the Fields, the dense surface texture suggests a magnified view of foliage. But the underlying geometry prevents an interpretation as landscape, which was so strong in the earlier canvases. Throughout the later 1960s, Tworkov solidified his commitment to geometric structure with variations on this particular format. He persistently combined this new-found constant with free and gestural spilling and dripping of paint in vertical strokes—a technique carried forward from the Fields.

After Tworkov first combined a simple geometric structure with overall gestural brushwork, the systemic possibilities must have seemed endless to him. Until 1977, Tworkov's geometric canvases were linked to his gestural past. But after 1977 he changed his brushstroke, experimenting with different surface treatments. In these later compositions the system is his constant—as in his prior paintings overall gestural brushwork remained constant amidst structural and geometric experimentation.

In 1972, Tworkov painted a series of canvases that once again tried to reconcile geometry with spontaneous brushwork. These works—the Bisections series—have in common a vertical bisection of the composition, regardless of the size or shape of the canvas or the number of subdivisions. The left and right segments of all canvases are also bisected from upper right to

lower left by diagonals. Then perpendicular lines are dropped to the bisecting diagonals from the upper right and lower left corners of the segments. The works also share stark white structural lines and dense layering of vertical strokes in various color combinations. Most of the works are painted to the borders of the canvas, with the points from which lines are drawn placed along the edges.

Large rectangles that slant from left to right are derived from the intersection of these few lines (see Fig. 9). The rectangles echo the position of the diagonal bisectors of the segments. The geometric structure of the composition is fairly straightforward. Most lines intersect at right angles, and the resultant forms are balanced and regular. Diagonal lines connect the lower left and upper right corners of the canvas. They sweep across the central imagery, tie the forms to the surface, and deemphasize the depth of the overlapping parallel planes. Rhythmic application of paint echoes the serenity of the forms and stabilizes the imagery. Only occasionally do the background strokes pull loose from the streams of paint and snap back like broken twine, coiling amidst the vertical drips.

In further canvases of the Bisections series, Tworkov divided the rectangles of the canvases into five equal parts, proceeding with the basic diagonal and perpendicular divisions of the series format. To the perpendiculars of earlier works, Tworkov added another intersecting perpendicular.

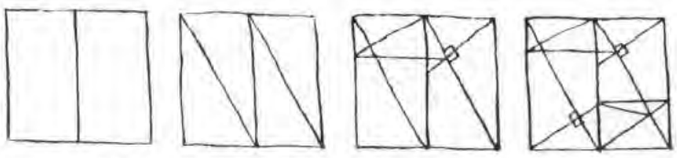


Fig. 9. Author's diagram.

The derivative imagery consists of slim rectangles within the larger, slanting rectangles (see Fig. 10). The resultant rectangular canvas offers interesting perceptual shifts. Divided into five equal sections, the progression of vertically aligned rectangles is balanced. The third rectangle from the left serves as a center point. Ordinarily such a progression would be symmetrical and more stable than, say, an even number of rectangles, which offers no central visual anchor. But in some canvases, six slanting rectangles result from the bisecting diagonals. They proceed off the left and right edges of the canvas and negate the stability of the vertical segment. Thus, the imagery is perceived as an infinite series of slanting rectangles with no center. The structural format is the same, but the imagery is radically different. Some canvases present an even number of geometric shapes extending left and right, suggestive of infinite progressions to the sides. The sequential perception is independent of canvas dimensions—evident in square canvases as well—and related only to the situation of the derivative shapes.

These derivative shapes vary and can indeed become extremely complex despite the sparcity of connective lines. In 1973, Tworkov combined these points and lines to derive a trapezoid and opposing triangles. Thus, in paintings such as *P-73-#7*, the connection of two more points with an additional diagonal line replaces rectangles with trapezoids.

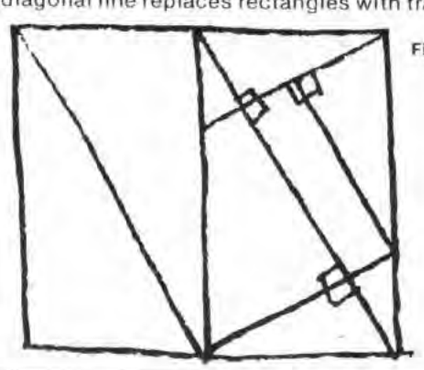


Fig. 10. Author's diagram.

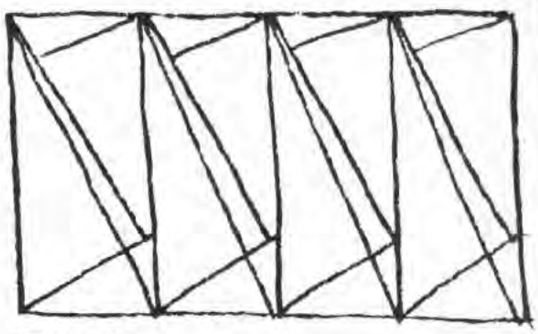


Fig. 11. Author's diagram.

The imagery is more elaborate and draws the eye to the center of the composition (see Fig. 11). But the slanting of the forms and their progression off the right edge of the canvas compel us again to perceive the composition as a segment of an infinite series of shapes. The rhythmic tonal variations of the shapes enhance this impression.

As was often the case, a particular painting within a series would inspire Tworkov to derive a group of works. In *P-73-#2*, Tworkov delineated a central figure within the Bisections format that seemed to double back on itself and zigzag away from the viewer. In a group of works painted in the fall of the following year, Tworkov integrated this folding and overlapping with the divisions of the Bisections. He also simplified the shapes, his palette, and the number of connective lines. For the first time, he used expanses of primed but unpainted canvases as compositional elements. The foci of these works appear to be transparent shapes within architectural space, but surface treatment is also emphasized. In *Q3-74-#2*, a screen-like image derived from now standard structural divisions pulls away from the background. It folds in upon itself and moves across the viewer's space, parallel to both.

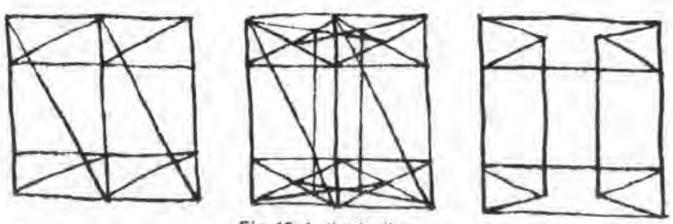


Fig. 12. Author's diagram.

A continuous translucent "screen" is painted in horizontal bands of uniform strokes (see Fig. 12). The areas of overlap, caused by the folding of the screen, show increased density of brushwork. The underlying structure of this expanding image is complex, but the composition seems simpler and more straightforward than it is. The brushwork is tightly controlled and largely uneventful. The simplicity of the works is accented by a monochromatic or dichromatic palette that contrasts with large areas of void.

Tworkov painted variations on these screens until 1975. In more complicated versions, the overlapping of void and solid is more complex, and the viewer is given a choice of perspectives. The intricacy of geometric structure, the relationship of forms in space, and the tension that stems from attempting to integrate the elements of the compositions create works of dynamic simplicity. In time the structural lines grew too complex and the derived geometric shapes less fluid. The more gestural patterned brushwork no longer echoed the quiet simplicity of the forms. It became clear that this compositional type no longer met Tworkov's evolving formal concerns.

Parts I and II of this article were derived from my doctoral dissertation, completed at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I am indebted to Wayne V. Andersen and Mark W. Roskill for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

1. April Kingsley, "Jack Tworkov," *Art International*, March 1974, pp. 24-27.
2. *Jack Tworkov*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 25-May 3, 1964; Introduction by Edward Bryant.
3. Conversation with Jack Tworkov, October 4, 1979.
4. Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
5. Conversation with Jack Tworkov, January 12, 1980.