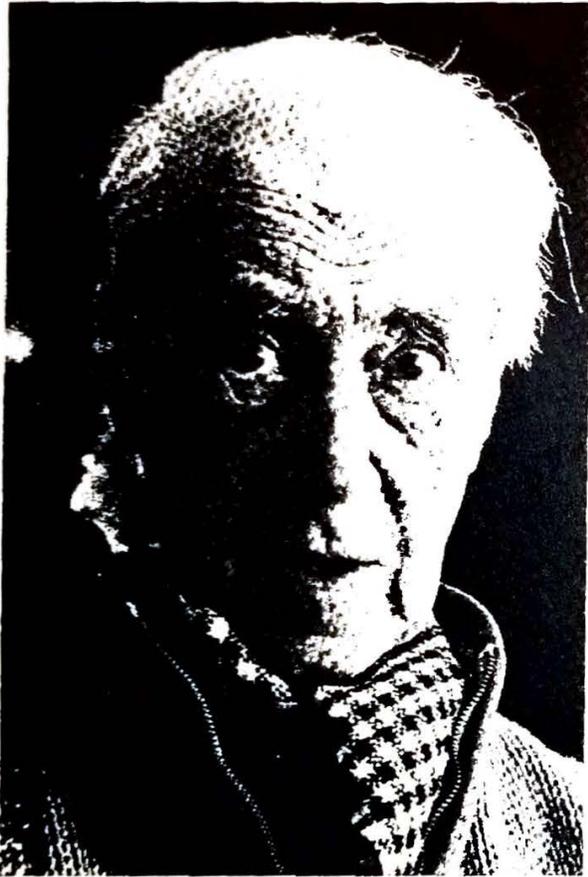


His writing goes back to the 1920s when he published and edited the magazine *G* (for *Gestaltung*), edited with Mies van der Rohe and others, stressing form and order as the necessary polar opposites of eccentricity and chance. In 1929 Richter published a book on film demonstrating film techniques with stills and word explanations of significant avant-garde films of the time. The book was reprinted 50 years later in the original German; no English version has yet appeared. He has also written a number of art books, mainly about the Dada movement.

In his eighties, Richter remained an active and energetic painter, writer, and collage artist, living in Switzerland and with his wife Friedl, and spending summers in the Connecticut home. After visiting him there in 1973, when Richter was 85, Jonas Mekas wrote: "Seeing Hans



Hans Richter in 1974 (Photo by Robert Naughton.)

restored my faith in humanity... He refreshed my dream, my longing of seeing, of being occasionally with, men and women who are old and wise and beautiful and who are like bridges or examples or signposts for the others, and also crowns of humanity—they are the furthest extensions of man's body and spirit in time and space. If you want, you can look at them as humanity's works of art, crowns of Life as Art."

Richter died in Switzerland on February 2, 1976, at the age of eighty-eight. Two hours before he died he told his wife he had an idea for a new film he wanted to make.

#### EASEL—SCROLL—FILM

by Hans Richter

"The square is the sign of a new humanity. It is something like the cross of the early Christians." That is what Theo van Doesburg told the Swedish painter, Viking Eggeling, and me on his arrival at our country retreat in Klein Koelzig, Germany, in 1920. We were a little perturbed and skeptical about van Doesburg's statement, but we understood its spirit. We felt as he did. Through some magic, a new unity of purpose in the arts had developed in Europe during the isolation of the war years. Now that the war was over, there suddenly existed a kind of esthetic brotherhood, secretly developed. Whether or not the square was its symbol seemed to us of no importance in comparison to the fundamental issues upon which we could all agree.

We had seen, after 1910, that representation of the object had declined. We saw it finally vanish as a goal of painting. The self-respect of abstract art was increasing. A new set of problems arose. The overwhelming freedom which the "abstract," "pure," "absolute," "non-objective," "concrete" and "universal" form offered (which, indeed, was thrust upon us) carried responsibilities. The "heap of fragments" left to us by the cubists did not offer us an over-all principle. Such a principle was needed to save us from the limitless horizons of possible form-combinations, so that we might attain a sovereignty over this new matter and justify this new freedom.

The upheaval of World War I, I am sure, had something to do with this urge for "order." I myself felt the need to establish an Archimedean standpoint, to penetrate the chaos which threatened from every direction. It appeared a physical necessity to articulate the multi-colored darkness with a definite simplicity. But whether it was a desire for "security," as the psychologists would see it (to find order in chaos), or an overwhelming gen-

eral trend towards collective standards, as the sociologists might call it, or the all-penetrating influence of science—the fact remains that a new generation approached this task with the energy of pioneers, the curiosity of explorers and the unperturbed objectivity of scientists.

task = creating 2 principles

It was with this aim, in this spirit, and at this time, that Malevitch in Russia decided to start from the very beginning again, from "nihil," with his *White on White*; that in Holland, fifteen hundred miles to the west, Mondrian, Doesburg and their friends discovered in the "equivalence of opposites" a working principle, a principle of style which they termed "neo-plasticism," based on the opposition of horizontal and vertical (excluding all others); and that six hundred miles to the south again, in Switzerland, the Swedish artist Viking Eggeling and I found another way to tackle the same task: by approaching it with the principle of counterpoint in mind, from the standpoint of polarity. The principle of counterpoint is not limited to music. For us, it was more than a technical device; it was a philosophic way of dealing with the experience of growth.

So strong was this historical impulse to establish "a 'New Order' that might restore the balance between heaven and hell" (as Arp put it), that it expressed itself practically simultaneously, though independently, in various places on the globe. It carried Eggeling and me (painters and nothing but painters) eventually, and half against our will, out of the world of easel painting to that of scrolls, and finally into film.

An account of the path we followed, our considerations and doubts, the experiences we went through thirty years ago, may be of some value to the ever-increasing number of artists who prefer the world of non-representational visions to the temptations of the representational object. It may also help to break down the stupid prejudice that plastic problems in the art of our time can be solved only on canvas or in bronze.

Influenced by cubism and its search for structure, but not satisfied with what it offered, I found myself between 1913-18 increasingly faced with the conflict of suppressing spontaneous expression in order to gain an objective understanding of a fundamental principle with which I could control the "heap of fragments" inherited from the cubists. Thus I gradually lost interest in the subject—in any subject—and focused instead on the positive negative (white-black) opposition, which at least gave me a working hypothesis whereby I could organize the relationship of one part of a painting to the other. In doing so, "form," as such, became a handicap and was replaced by straight or curved divisions of the canvas, which in itself became a surface on which opposites were to be organized. Repetition of the same element on different parts of the canvas, and repetitions with minor or major variations, permitted a certain control...

As much as we [Eggeling and Richter] both loved the

*Fugue*, Hans Richter, 1920, fragment from the painted scroll.

early work of Kandinsky, we still thought that such free improvisations as his would have to come "later," after a general principle had been established. (What made it right in Kandinsky's work was the still existing impressionistic basis, or at least a definite contact with a definite object.) This principle would be the challenge, a point of resistance, against any anarchistic abuse of freedom and, as such, a psychological stimulus—not a chain.

We saw in the completely liberated (abstract) form not only a new medium to be exploited, but the challenge towards a "universal language." This, as we wrote in a pamphlet called *Universelle Sprache* [Universal Language] which we published in 1920, was to be a means of emotional and intellectual experience for all, one which would restore to the arts its social function.

We sought to achieve a more than purely subjective solution; we felt very definitely prepared to sacrifice whatever had to be sacrificed of individual spontaneous expression, for the time being, in order to clarify and "purify" the material—form and color—until the very principle itself became expressive: "to carry on in the same way as Nature organizes matter, but to use only its principles, not its forms," in Eggeling's words.

Two years after our first meeting, these ideas were to bring us into association with van Doesburg and later with Mondrian, Malevitch, Gabo, Mies van der Rohe, Lissitzky and others.

The collaboration between Eggeling and myself had a number of consequences: 1. Our research led us to make a large number of drawings as transformations of one form element or another. These were our "themes," or, as we called them, "instruments," by analogy with music—the art form which inspired us considerably. We felt "the music of the orchestrated form." 2. This methodical contrast-analogy, "orchestration" of a given "instrument" through different stages, forced upon us the idea of a continuity. 3. When in 1919 we finally established a definite line of continuity on long scrolls, we became aware of a multiple and dynamic kind of relationship which invited the eye to "meditate." The contrast-analogy process had created an energy which grew as the relationships multiplied. The beginning set up, as planned, rapports with the end, the first part with the second, the second with the third, left with right, top with bottom, every part with every other. Without intending to, we had arrived at a kind of dynamic expression which produced a sensation rather different from that possible in easel painting. This sensation lies in the stimulus which the remembering eye receives by carrying its attention from one detail, phase or sequence, to

another that can be continued indefinitely. This is because the esthetic theme is just that: the relationship between every part and the whole. In so following the creative process, the beholder experiences it as a process, not as a single fact. In this way, the eye is stimulated to an especially active participation, through the necessity of memorizing; and this activity carries with it the kind of satisfaction which one might feel if one were suddenly to discover new or unusual forms of one's imagination.

These seem to me the main characteristics of the scroll, which offers sensations that the easel painting, by its very nature as a static form, cannot offer. Van Doesburg, though, tried to make a different point. "It makes no difference whether one who looks at a Mondrian canvas moves his eyes (from one 'opposite' to the other) or whether a scroll 'moves' before the eyes of the beholder." Well, I think he had a point there but only a polemic one, as the attitude of the creator and the spectator is different in each case.

I consider the scroll as a new (dating from 4000 B.C.!) art form which, despite "sociological difficulties" that it might encounter (such as being despised by art dealers as too difficult to sell, or finding no room for its display over a potential purchaser's fireplace) ought to become a modern medium of expression. It must, in fact, as there are sensations to be derived from it which can be experienced in no other way, either in easel painting or in film.

I see in the elongated, horizontal paintings of artists like Tanguy, Klee, Miro and others, the same impulse to express similar sensations. There are "messages" to be told and "messages" felt which make the traditional limits of easel painting inadequate as communication.

One may assume that the Egyptians and the Chinese felt the appeal of this particular form of expression, and that they enjoyed arresting time in this way. Otherwise this form would not have evolved nor been preserved, as it still is in China today. The static unity which binds together the dynamic sequences is the form of the whole scroll. The unity of time is the same as in the easel painting, although its expression is fundamentally different. In the scroll painting, the orchestration of all stages of development of form is seen and felt simultaneously—backwards and forwards. This is one of the main distinctions of this new plastic expression and a source of its real beauty. "Becoming and duration are not in any way a diminution of unchanging eternity; they are its expression. Every form occupies not only space but time. Being and becoming are one. . . . What should be grasped and given form are things in flux" (Eggeling).

The logical step we had taken to the scroll had already thrown us, so to speak, out of the world of easel painting. It precipitated us a step further. After each of us in 1919 had finished his first scroll, we began to understand that we had gotten more than we asked for: the necessity to release this accumulated "energy" into actual movement! Never during our collaboration had we dreamt of that. But there it was. And movement implied film!

Few people have ever come to this medium so unexpectedly and with so much inner resistance. We knew no more about cameras and film than what we had seen in shop windows.

In 1921 Eggeling finished the first version of his *Diagonal Symphony* (after his second set of scrolls) and I completed my film, *Rhythm 21*. We were in a new medium altogether. It was not only the orchestration of form but also of time-relationship that we were facing in film. The single image disappeared in a flow of images, which made sense only if it helped to articulate a new element—*time*.

We realized that the "orchestration" of time was the esthetic basis of this new art form. Eggeling stuck to the graphic elegance of the forms developed in his scrolls. He endowed the different "instruments" with certain well-defined ways of motion. He really used them according to the musical term "instrument." But as they were products of the painter, they put innumerable obstacles in the way of the "filmer." It was then, and especially for him, a non-professional, a Herculean task. His film was remade three times under the most incredible conditions before he was satisfied.

I dissented from the start. It had taken an UFA technician more than a week to animate a single drawing of my scroll, "Prelude." The technician was not very encouraging to begin with, and I felt like a blind man being led by another blind man. I wanted to understand better what I was doing and decided, very much against Eggeling's arguments, to start from scratch again—using the principle of counterpoint to guide me. This time I did not concentrate upon orchestrating *form*—but *time*, and time alone.

The simple square of the movie screen could easily be divided and "orchestrated." These divisions or parts could then be orchestrated in *time* by accepting the rectangle of the "movie-canvas" as the form element. Thus it became possible to relate (in contrast-analogy) the various movements on this "movie-canvas" to each other—in a formal as well as a temporal sense. In other words, I did again with the screen what I had done years before with the canvas. In doing so I found a new sen-



From *Rhythm 21* (1921) by Hans Richter. "My first film was *Rhythm 21*. I did the shooting partly on an animation table, partly in the printing machine by stop motion and forward and backward printing. The printing machines at that time were not fully automatic and you could use them like a camera. In these years, 1920, 1921, and the following years, I learned, by myself and by trial and error, the fundamentals of film techniques. The original title of this, my first film, was *Film ist Rhythmus*, (but since I made others in 1923 and 1925 I just called them *Rhythm 21*, 23, 25)... I made three *Rhythms* in between odd film jobs between 1921 and 1926. *21* was only square forms; in *23* I used line; and in *25* I used both bands and lines but I also painted it in color... (*Film Culture*, Winter 1963-1964.)

sation: *rhythm*—which is, I still think, the chief sensation of any expression of movement...

In the meantime, the scope of the experimental film has grown. The principles which we followed with our first abstract film are not limited to the articulation of lines or squares alone. The rhythm of a swing or a clock, the orchestration of hats or legs, the dance of kitchenware or a collar—could become expressions of a new sensation. The experimental film has at last come into its own. It has created its own realm, which we may term "film poetry," in contradistinction to the "novel" of the entertainment film or the "reportage" of the documentary.

Twenty years ago, the documentary was shown and considered exclusively as *avant-garde*; today it is accepted as a legitimate film species. Twenty years from now, film poetry may well be accepted as a legitimate part of filmmaking and recognized as part of the tradition of modern art, whence it came and to which it belongs.

The artists of the coming generation will seriously consider the camera as well as the brush their medium of expression.

(From *Magazine of Art*, published by  
The American Federation of Arts, February 1952.)

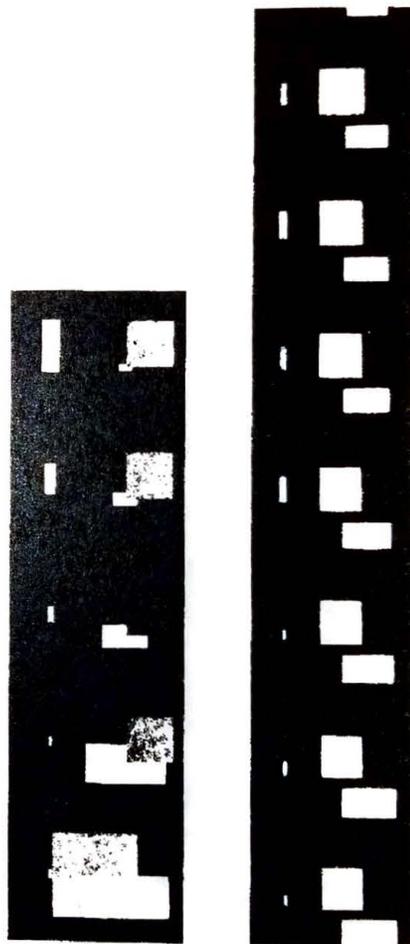
#### RICHTER'S "RHYTHM 21"

by Brian O'Doherty

... To recover the pristine amazement of *Rhythm 21* demands an act of restoration, for our vision has been prejudiced by the thousands of abstract films made since. What is remarkable is the complete control of syntax, the exact coincidence of intent, means and result. It is a very conscious and classic piece. The repertory of movements are simply Richter's linguistics of movement *actually* realized. In this sense it is dialectic in motion, that modernist dialectic of opposites—but deprived of any mythic qualifications or "psychology." It presents itself as a rigorous purism.

The majority of motions are clearly transferred from the two-dimensional plane of the canvas—up and down, side to side, in series of exits and entrances. The third kind of movement, in which rectangles and squares rapidly increase and decrease in size, can be construed as in and out, an idea of depth. But such is the two-dimensionality of the screen that this motion remains exactly what it is—an *idea* or notation of depth. Strictly, all we see is things getting larger and smaller. Reading in depth is *our* projection. What is new here is the application to the screen of the two-dimensionality of the

canvas. What we see are literally "moving pictures." Treating one medium with the assumptions brought from another can be dangerous. But Richter removes the fictive space we habitually project onto the screen. He flattens it, so that his images are *on* it, instead of *in* or behind it, and so refuse to break through to the universe of illusion. In announcing the formal integrity of the screen as a flat surface, Richter made his first and perhaps most important contribution to the esthetic of film.



From *Rhythm 21* by Hans Richter. "...Its forms, like those of an abstract painting, seem to have no physical extension except on the screen... the film is a totally self-contained kinetic composition of pure plastic forms." (Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*.)

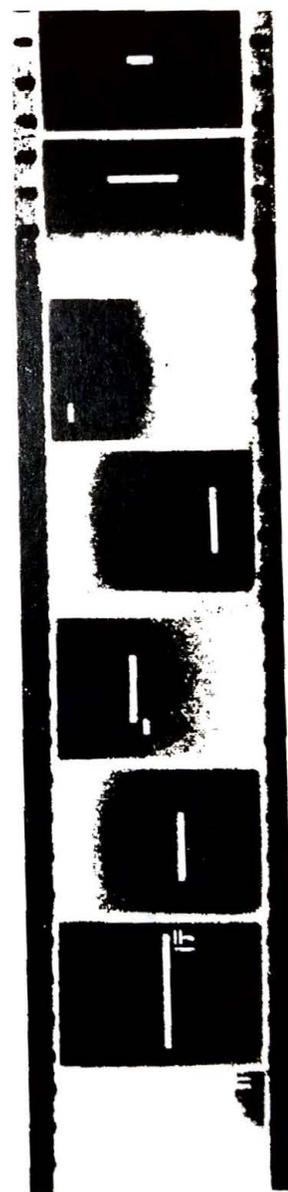
All *Rhythm's* forms are families of lines, squares, and rectangles in horizontal and vertical alignment. Compositions vary from very simple to complex—from the opening shots, where the screen itself is used as the major part of the composition, to compositions *within* the screen. The syntax is often serialized perfectly. Sometimes rectangles in different parts of the screen change size inversely in precise counterpoint. These serial occasions are used as blocks which are manipulated within larger, less serialized structures (i.e. time-spans). Figure-ground switches are used as punctuations or modes of rephrasing a sequence that seemed to be locked into a programmatic development. (There is a particularly majestic example of this towards the end of the film when a large black square turns white). Such is the formal compression of the film that its few minutes seem very long.

This matter of speed is important. Unlike the scrolls, where we are free to compare and carry data back across blank intervals of canvas, the film forces its time on us. Thus memory becomes involuntary, since we cannot conceptualize and remember clearly (only after seeing the film repeatedly do we begin to see its structure). The rapid succession of images "collages" our memory, and instinctive processes are brought into play. The sharp, exact image before us is maintained in an ambiguous sea of remembering and forgetting. There are certain kinesthetic components to watching the film, kinesthesia of a very different kind from that of reading at the scrolls. In the scrolls we are constrained to locomote and remove our bag of viscera from one place to another, and this creates a kind of physiological static accompanying perception. In *Rhythm*, though we are at rest, there is a kind of conceptual kinesthesia, a paradigm of body reaction. The effect is tonic, sudden, and invigorating.

Taken out of context, some of the individual frames from *Rhythm* are formally very daring. There are dazzling degrees of marginal composition, minimal reductions, large vacancies, and single vertical strips, etc., that look like the advanced work of the fifties and sixties. However, Richter never aborted these discoveries out of the relational system in which they were discovered. In general, the composition of the frames has very marked connections to the purist art of the period. There are a few frames, amounting to less than a second, which are puzzling. Towards the latter half of the film, two oblique bars appear in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, breaking the vertical-horizontal rigor.

In *Rhythm 25*, now lost, Richter added color to the vocabulary he had used in *Rhythm 21*. This was done

systematically in terms of primary and a few secondary colors with contrast as the vocabulary. This greatly increases the total vocabulary. Some idea of *Rhythm 25* may be gathered from the scroll "Orchestration of Color," 1923, and the sketches for the film 1923-24. Since the drawings are all available, one hopes Richter will remake this film. (Only one copy was made in 1925, and it was quickly lost.) Also of great interest is Richter's system of notation on graph paper, scoring *Rhythm 25*.



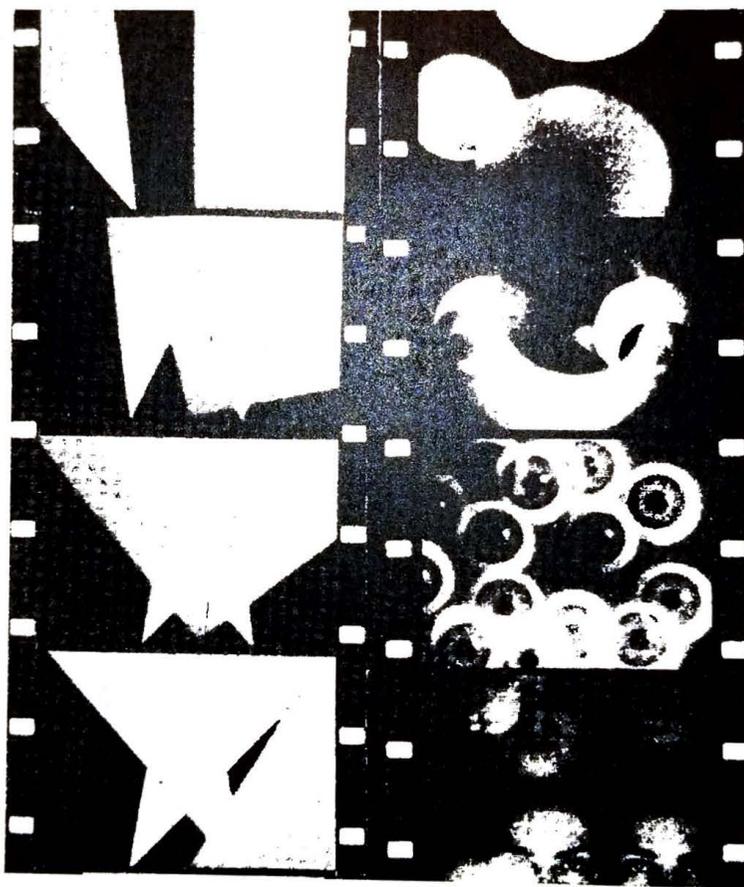
From *Rhythm 23* (1923) by Hans Richter

This promised a method of composing films according to scores, where both musical and visual considerations could come into play. Richter did not follow up this idea. His other abstract work, *Rhythm 23*, is less classic than *21* or *25*, but it is another major film. After this, Richter made no more purely abstract films, though for years a sense of their structure underpinned everything he did, in effect contributing his idea of montage to film.

*Film Study* (1926), uses a larger repertory of abstract devices than any previous work. Circles, all-over patterns, soft-edge (out of focus) forms, dart-like shapes frequently produce formal occasions that break current

compositional laws in painting. These forms are collated with objects, particularly artificial eyes and multiple repetitions of the same head. The attempt is to cut across the abstract-real dichotomy by using it as dialectic. The result, seance-like and spooky, is ambiguous. The expected exchange between poles (abstraction looking more psychologically motivated, the heads and eyes more abstract) takes place. But the use of the heads, lit from below, locate the film in expressionist country. From this on, Richter's films join the mainstream of film as it developed in Germany....

(From *Hans Richter*, catalogue for retrospective exhibition, Finch College Museum, Contemporary Wing, 1968.)



From *Film Study* (1926) by Hans Richter.