Conceptual Art
Marcel Duchamp had wanted to bring the idea back into art following Impressionism, with its emphasis upon capturing on canvas one's perceptions of changing atmospheric conditions. Duchamp, who characterized painters as olfactory creatures, in love with the smell of their paints, insisted that he did not want to be "stupid like a painter." He meant by this that, in making art, the intellect ought not to be dominated by the senses.

Not only was Duchamp very much alive during most of the 60s decade (he died in 1968), but he also exerted a great influence on artists like Jasper Johns. Johns' ideas always ended by being materialized in artworks. However, some artists began to question the need for a physical work of art. Might not the art idea that remained an idea be more pure than an actual work resulting from an idea?

Politics and Art
The decade of the 60s was marked by intellectual, social and political upheavals. A confused populace experienced the Civil Rights movement with attendant riots and burning in cities, as well as police brutality, which is recorded in Andy Warhol's *Birmingham Race Riot*. Massive protests in this country against the continuing war in Vietnam met with violence at Kent State and the death of several students. There were, indeed, student uprisings in many countries, including France, Japan, Germany, Ireland, China, and Mexico, especially in 1968. A renewed feminist movement took off (to become much more powerful in the 70s). Key political figures were assassinated: John F. Kennedy in 1963, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968. The public at large was no doubt less puzzled by the moon landing than by cultural and political changes occurring all around them. The United States—indeed the entire world—was becoming altered simultaneously on a number of fronts in fundamental ways that are still playing out today.

SMS Portfolio
The collaborative studio project called SMS was one of a number of such efforts that exemplify an egalitarian, altruistic, and Utopian spirit within the intellectual and political climate of the 60s. Because he believed as an American Surrealist painter that art and life should be unified, William Copley purchased a third-story loft on Manhattan's Upper West Side and offered other artists a space in which to collaborate freely. Copley himself provided enough money to realize any project proposed. The effort resulted in a collection of 73 original multiples presented in six portfolios limited to 2000 sets. Why the portfolio format? Copley said:

Well, it was the idea of keeping the work individual art, you see. We didn't want to editorialize at all. We didn't want any critical comment. I wanted something that would just open up and be full of what was going on.

Art of the Sixties
October 5 - December 15

an exhibition curated by
Dr. Susan Havens Caldwell
Associate Professor, Art History

Text by Dr. Susan Havens Caldwell, 2002

Cover Image: Bridget Riley (England b. 1931)
Untitled (Fragment 5), 1965
Screenprint on Plexiglas, 24-1/2 x 32".
Copyright 2002 Bridget Riley. All Rights reserved.
Courtesy Kasmin Schuhen, London.
Art of the Sixties
October 5 - December 15

This vibrant exhibition of works from the 1960s evokes the sometimes forgotten diversity of that decade. It has been a delight to me and to the curatorial staff of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art to discover just how rich and varied are the works in the permanent collection from this time period. Surprisingly, some of these have never before been on display in the museum.

We are hoping to introduce, or reintroduce, the public to the excitement and color of an era that many people see as a turning point in art of the twentieth century.

Susan Havens Caldwell, Guest Curator

Op Art

Op Art is the label given to paintings and prints that featured optical effects of movement, or kineticism. In 1965 William Seitz curated a show called “The Responsive Eye” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which featured paintings of this sort along with three-dimensional pieces that actually moved, or kinetic sculptures. Seitz said he “wanted to bring together a survey of current artists who manipulated perceptual effects in a formalist—as opposed to an expressionistic—mode.”

Op artworks share many features with Minimal and other modernist paintings and prints of the 60s. All these tendencies tend to work in series; they are all concerned with symmetry and frontality.

Common to Minimal, Color-Field, and Op works is their avoidance of subject matter. For artists of these groups, art is something quite apart from life; the viewer brings only his or her perception to the works; all personal or worldly concerns are beside the point.

Pop Art

In a number of ways Pop Art was a reaction to Abstract Expressionism. As Robert Indiana said in 1963:

Pop is everything art hasn’t been for the last two decades. It is basically a U-turn back to a representational visual communication, moving at a breakaway speed in several sharp late models. It is an abrupt return to Father after an abstract fifteen-year exploration of the Womb. Pop is a Re-enlistment in the world. It is shock the Bomb. It is the American Dream, optimistic, generous and naive....It springs newborn out of a boredom with the finality and over-saturation of Abstract Expressionism which, by its own aesthetic logic, is the END of art, the glorious pinnacle of the long pyramidal creative process. Stifled by this rarified atmosphere, some young painters turn back to some less excited things like Coca-Cola, ice-cream sodas, big hamburgers, supermarkets, and ‘EAT’ signs. They are eye-hungry; they pop....

Pop Art brought images back into art after the non-objectivity of the Abstract Expressionists and alongside the iconoclasm of Color-Field painting and Minimal Art.

Robert Indiana (U.S., b.1928)
LOVE
1968

Minimal Art

Group exhibitions of Minimal art began in the mid-sixties, although the simplest, most straightforward and elegant Minimal sculpture was made by Tony Smith in 1962—his Die, a six-foot cube, originally in mock-up of plywood painted dark gray, and ultimately constructed of steel.

Minimal paintings, prints, and sculptures present simplified, usually geometric forms. In both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, scale is important, for the viewer’s body and his or her perception of the piece is considered part of the work itself.

Simple shapes afford immediate understanding; one recognizes a cube at once. However, conception and perception are not the same: one can never see a cube at a glance; one must move around it to be sure that it really is a cube. Simple geometric shapes of a scale that imply the human body, then, can cause the viewer to experience the difference between concept and perpect.

Plans, Proposals, Play

During the 60s a number of artists began to make works that were never intended for a museum or gallery. Robert Smithson’s Asphalt on Eroded Cliff and Christo’s École Militaire are examples. Since Smithson’s pieces were usually realized in remote sites that very few people would ever actually visit, he thought that art journals carrying documentation of these pieces would replace the museum or gallery in importance. Smithson’s most famous work, Spiral Jetty, begun in April, 1970, was constructed in an abandoned industrial site in a corner of Utah’s Great Salt Lake that was far from any habitation.

If such artists make works that shun the museum or gallery, they do use these venues to raise money to realize their works. The drawings, prints, and collages of such works are not only interesting records of the artist’s process in conceiving and actualizing pieces, but they have become valuable as works of art in themselves.