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AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- THE UNAVOIDABLE NUISANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Fig. 1: 100-100000
Collection 100-100000

Fig. 2: 100-100000
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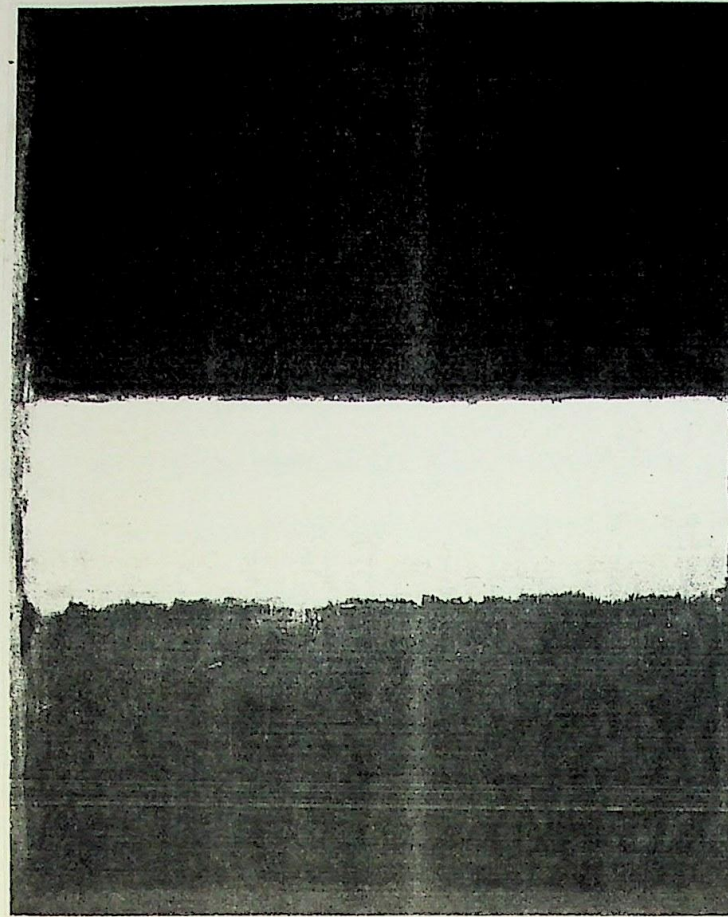
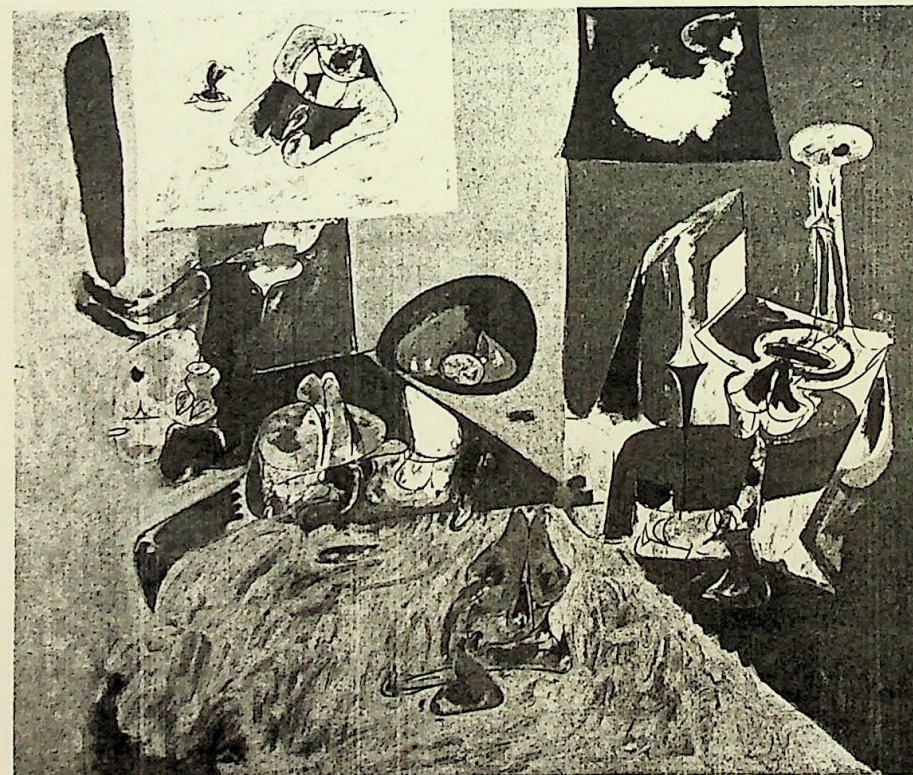


Fig. 1 : NUMBER 61 by Mark Rothko. .
1953 oil on canvas 116 1/2 x 92 in.
Collection Panza di Biumo.



Fig.3: SOUND IN THE GRASS:
SHIMMERING SUBSTANCE by Jackson
Pollock. 1946. Oil on canvas.
76.3 x 66.6 cm. Museum of Modern
Art, New York

Fig.2: THE CALENDERS by Arshile Gorky
1946. Oil on canvas. 50 x 60 in. Private
collection N. Rocaerfeller, Destroyed by
fire, 1961



American Abstract Expressionism was less a common style than
shared attitudes. (c.f. page 6 7, footnote)

This thesis will discuss misrepresentation in the particular case of American Abstract Expressionism.^①

The question will be posed whether because of the particular political and economic/social circumstances of the United States and the world in the immediate post-war period (and indeed increased media attention to art), what was said about American Abstract Expressionist art came to matter as much if not more than what American Abstract Expressionist art actually was. It will be asked whether non-aesthetic factors (i.e. American nationalism, post-war prosperity) in fact conditioned the misrepresentation of an art that was avowedly purely about art. Did the representation of American Abstract Expressionist art by the critics of its time turn into a misrepresentation, coming between the art itself and the viewer, distorting how the art was perceived? Was the consideration of individual paintings sacrificed for the generalities about American Abstract Expressionism which served to enhance the status of the critic rather than the truth about art? If American Abstract Expressionism was a misrepresentation in this sense, was it an inevitable misrepresentation arising out of the circumstances of the time - an inevitable nuisance?

1/ American Abstract Expressionism was a movement in abstract art developed in New York in the 1940s. Originally applied to works of Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky but soon more widely embraced Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, who were not strictly Expressionist, and William de Kooning and Adolph Gottlieb, who could hardly be (to page 8)

We will consider how this misrepresentation could be said to have led to the exhaustion of American Abstract Expressionism and how critics in the 1970s^② exposed it as such with the benefit of hindsight. But the presentation of art cannot avoid being of its time and therefore qualified and flawed by this fact. The revisionist view of critics in the 1970s is therefore only a conditional view as were the views of the critics of the 1950s - and as indeed must be any conclusions of this thesis. It is in the nature of art to be endlessly reinterpreted in the light of the current circumstances of each age.

Thus the word expressionist meant something different for the American Abstract Expressionists than it originally had for the German expressionist^③, who thought of it in terms of one who

"disse^④nts" or expresses" his or her self~~ly~~ against current trends or fashions. For the Americans it seemed to have more to do with ~~the~~ the process of making art - ~~which~~ which would explain why it was sometimes called action painting^④ - and with the attempt to create a consciously American style of art.

The period of early 20th century art history that German expressionism occupie^d ~~was~~ had fostered a more idealistic concept of art as coming out of a spirit of cooperation and

~~TERMINAL~~ termed abstract. What they had in common was not a style but an attitude which caused them to be seen as an authentically American movement renouncing the European art traditions.

2/ i.e. Eva Cockcroft Abstract Expressionism-Weapon of the Cold War

3/ In particular Der Blaue Reiter, founded by Kandinsky and Marc in Munich in 1911 out of a desire to go "behind the veil of appearances." Also Die Brücke, which included Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff and Nolde.

communication on a popular level due to the example of enlightened man believing that individual feelings and the instinct to press beyond appearances were values worth fighting for. It was a belief thought to be deep-rooted in man's psyche, a belief that somewhere, someday the drawbacks of the reality of the day would be erased through evolution. But it was a belief soon shown to be particularly vulnerable with the coming of another world war and with it the breakdown of Europe and the emergence of a prosperous and dominant United States.^⑤

The pattern of history has always been that the centres of power re-present reality to suit their own ideology. For instance, in the midst of all the excesses of the Renaissance there appeared a more gorgeously clothed "Mary", gestures became more heavily theatrical and the setting changed from simple gold to Florentine palaces and aristocratic gardens.^⑥ In the same way American Abstract Expressionism would re-present the art history of the twentieth century Europe through a flood of propaganda and self-righteousness. Irving Sandler in his book The Triumph of American Abstract Expressionism,^⑦ claimed that the American artists working in the Abstract Expressionist manner understood, for example, more about Matisse's colour than Matisse.^⑧ So we must bear in mind that history tends always to repeat itself however accidentally or haphazardly: the pattern of twentieth century art is nothing new in the pattern of man's behaviour through time.

4/ Action painting was a term first used by critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952 to describe the technique of painting made famous by Jackson Pollock in which paint is poured or splashed over the canvas on the floor.

5/ America enjoyed an economic boom while Europe found itself bankrupt. c.f. How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art From Paris

There i^s of course a bit of the propagandist in every expressionist artist:he exaggerates his inner compulsions to let them be known.

But it would se^em that this never approa^ched the cunning and blatancy of American Cold War tactics which led to an abyss between the public and art. It could be said that albeit unintentionally ~~x~~ there i^s an abyss between the public and art expecially since the withdrawal of reality from the power of painting after Manet⁹. When the German expressionist showed the ideal for man,it was as much a the^rapy for himself and his friends, a wish for great minds to think alike. Art can lie.But so can science and physics. Truth is not enough¹⁰. The noblest scientific la^ws are seldom quite true.

Minor ~~discrepancies~~ discrepancies are over-ridden in the interest of breadth of vision or the power of simplicity. So man is full of contradictions. Given the line of career and opportunity, if there's a chance ~~to~~ to profit the cause ,what do you do? What does it depend on? The artist is like anyone even when marginalised by society as a ha^rmless curiosity seeker.

The nuisance of American Abstract Expressionism is that it wallows in this "ha^rmless" role, making it the essence of the activity of the artist. We will attempt to show that the emergence of Americaⁿ Abstract Expressionism ~~as~~ the movement and its promotion by influentia^l critics and dealers as the ultimate pure art. uncontaminate^d by anything happening in society around it was ~~a~~ itself a consequence of economic and political forces unique to

6/Donald Horne The Great Museum

7/publishe^d 1970

8/reference to Hans Hofmann

9/ starting with the Impressionists,who shifted the emphasis of painting to being a visual impression rather than a factual record of nature.

the immediate post-war America that nurtured it. In this sense despite its claims to the contrary it was as much if not more an art of its time than any other art before or after. Its failure to acknowledge this lie about itself generated the tensions and frustrations that led to its eclipse. The individual artists found themselves trapped by the critics and the art market in a rigidly defined asocial and apolitical role - a denial that in art there were "values worth fighting for" - which they found difficult if not impossible to live with despite the fame they belatedly began to acquire (witness the despairing deaths of Jackson Pollock⁽¹⁾ and Mark Rothko⁽²⁾).

10/ Thus Newton's law of gravity was subsequently qualified by Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Science is a constant process of refinement in the light of new information and insight.

11/ Jackson Pollock, born ¹⁹¹²~~1923~~ on a ranch in Ohio (which helped his subsequent promotion by critics as the authentic American cowboy hero of art). Felt he had exhausted the possibilities of the drip-painting technique on which his critical reputation had been founded. Relapsed into alcoholism and died in a drunken car crash in 1956.

12/ Mark Rothko, born Russia 1903. Like many of the New York artists, a displaced emigre. He sought to arrive at the ultimate sign, obliterating subject matter totally to arrive at colour fields of mystical power, an art based on one idea. In 1970, his original group of artist companions dispersed and in many instances by then hostile to one another, he committed suicide.

CHAPTER ONE

THE INVENTION OF AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

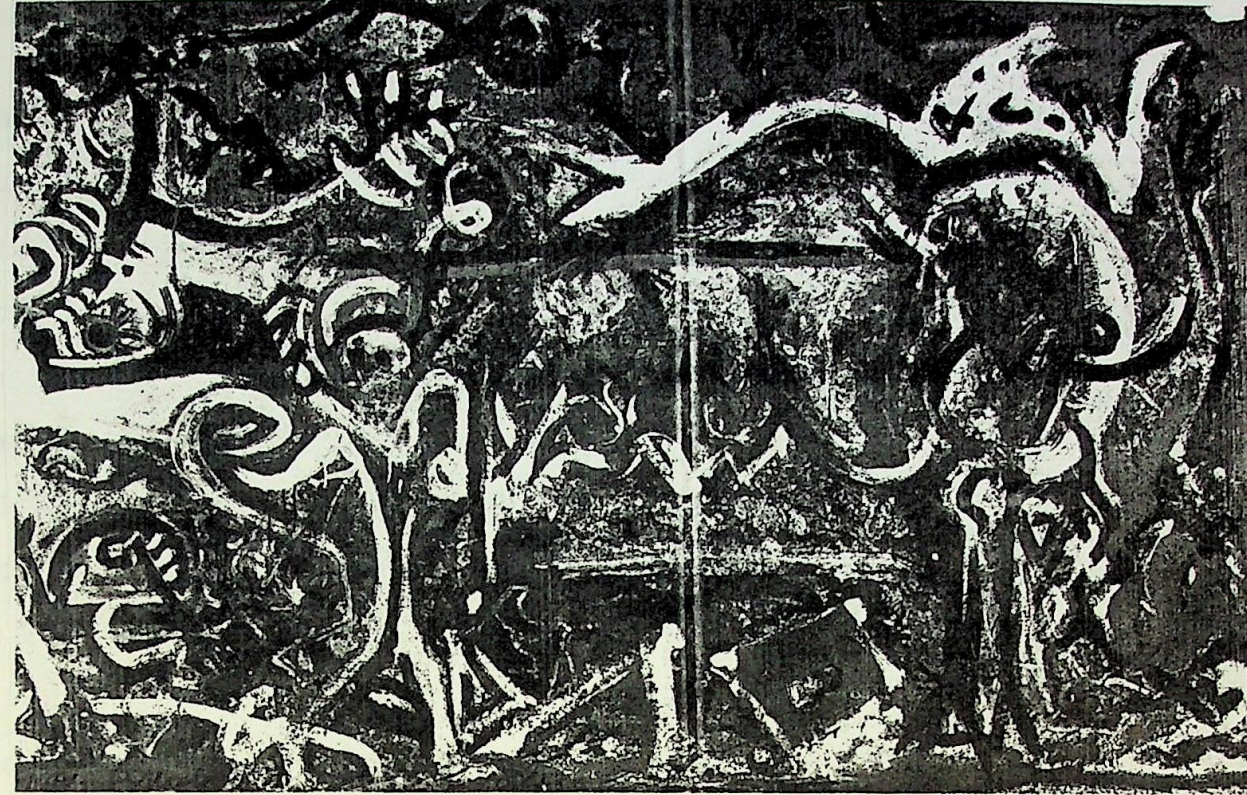


Figure 4. SHE WOLF by Jackson Pollock. 1943. Oil, gouache and plaster on canvas, 41 $\frac{7}{8}$ x67in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
 "Any attempt to explain She Wolf would destroy its meaning"
 (c.f. page 22)

Since the withdrawal of reality from the power of painting after Manet, the redundancy of the artist had been nothing short of celebrated with movements like Dada.⁽¹⁾ But before Abstract Expressionism the focus on the source of art's communication was more penetrable. Nazism stood as the perfect anti-thesis to the German Expressionists, destroying a lot of their work, even burning their paintings, thus giving them a special credence. With the advent of Abstract Expressionism and the articulation of modernism, meanings became more twisted and ambiguities were created. I'd like to clarify the nature of these entanglements and their sources to throw perspective on the argument.

After the 1930s high culture in America was symbolised by the European tradition. This gave rise to a popular fine art tradition that was not identified with a ruling class world view. A megav-visual tradition displaced fine art professionals before they were fully established. Vulnerable American artists were supported by the Federal Arts Project (WPA)⁽²⁾ to ~~work~~ subsidise and save them. They were even more subject than their European counterparts to critical loss of both an appropriate area of experience (subject matter)⁽³⁾ and effective visual means (aesthetic conventions).

1/ Dada, an anti-art movement with a nonsense name dedicated to producing meaningless works in order to show up the alleged shallowness of a western civilisation that had culminated in mankind's worst ever world war.

2/ Work Progress Administration (WPA), introduced by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s as part of the New Deal to combat the Great Depression.

This prompted the advent of art critic Clement Greenberg^④ who claimed a need for an American avant-garde that would rid America of its debased culture - what he called kitsch^⑤ - and eventually liberate America from the contamination of all non-American culture.

"Avant-garde"^⑥ was not a new term and throughout the 20th century major art movements carried the term to support and evoke new ideas and thoughts. Misunderstanding, as we shall see, played a large part in the establishment of an American avant-garde which came to stand more and more for the values of a majority which only a minority could understand (and query).

Throughout history it has always been the powerful and more privileged minorities of society that have told the majorities what they were about. Peasants who were persecuted in their own time were subsequently preserved as heroes to the future peasantry or common public to make people believe that history had respected what they stood for. This now has more to do with tourism and the national heritage and the idea of America as a nation of free minds that will not tolerate suppression.^⑦

3/ Peter Fuller Beyond the Crisis in Art, pp 70-73

4/ Clement Greenberg (1909-). Played key role in promoting Abstract Expressionism. Modelled his critical style to meet a populist view, stripping the image of its meaning and content, a style that emphasised the technique and individuality of the painter.

5/ in his essay "Avant-garde and ~~xxx~~ kitsch"

6/ Avant-garde (from the French vanguard), meaning a group of artists claiming to be ahead of their time in techniques, attitudes and subject-matter.

7/ For example, Engelbrekt, the Swedish popular leader who became a martyr after being aced by a trusty friend. c.f. Donald Horne The Great Museum, pp 51-52

The icon of worship of the sacrificial figure is a result of history's installation in our imaginations of the need for such a thing. Relics of art can be preserved in such a way that their presentation upholds whatever are the requirements of the dominant ideology. In this respect it is interesting to find that the emphasis on the crucifixion of Christ in Christianity was not ~~always~~ always so. We don't quite know when it began. It wasn't a feature of the early Church. The British Museum has an ivory plaque, perhaps from the fifth century, that shows the crucifixion, but it is presented as a triumphant formality. A classical athlete, naked except for his lioncloth, is going through a necessary ceremony. The suffering is reserved for Judas⁸, who is hanging from a tree. Gradually the emphasis ~~is~~ changed and Christ's sacrifice became important in various ways according to the time and how history wished to use it to filter through its own ideologies. A random example would be ~~Peter~~ Peter Paul Rubens' cruel and stark three crosses, with all three bodies hanging in a stormy landscape like dead meat. So today we have this image of the crucifixion as a liberation through sacrifice - what seems large on earth will be small in heaven or will be small in the secular heaven of the future. Clement Greenberg upholds such a tradition with his claim that all great art is ugly at first⁹. He also upholds the doctrine of worshipping as in the crucifixion, in this case the avant-garde. Faith is believing, an adulation which is quite easily manipulated, as we shall see. In reference to the art of Jackson Pollock, he was

8/Donald Horne The Great Museum, pp 51-52

9/ quoted in Tom Wolfe The Painted Word

tackling me rely the formal surface qualities of his art,

criticising the academic surface of the surrealists which he saw as too literary but defending those aspects of surrealism which he considered useful to his theory, for instance the automatic techniques of Joan Miro⁽¹⁰⁾ in his constellations etc.

Circumstantially the time was right to appeal to the minority of the dominant class to pay attention to "ugly art". As the post-war economic boom had dramatically reduced the unemployment figures that had haunted the Great Depression era of the 1930s, Americans suddenly had in the region of a quarter of a trillion dollars to spend during the first year of peace. An art boom followed the economic boom. As investment in diamonds and paintings soared, the number of art galleries soared. They resembled high class supermarkets, appealing to cultured man to purchase art at bargain prices. Social groups reorganised. People of higher status were ~~eager~~ eager to maintain a distinction between themselves and the new rich. Hence the pressing interest in the avant-garde as status symbols. Quality magazines of the rich like Harper's Bazaar⁽¹¹⁾ made the final persuasion through erotic symbiosis of Leger and Modrian, works appearing as backdrops in glossy photographs of new dresses. Through this departure the middle classes took over the wealthy man's shopping ground, causing the wealthy to consume Abstract Expressionism to maintain their exclusive image. And the word ugly took on a new glow in the higher echelons of the art world which led to the elaboration of a theoretical framework for avant-garde culture. Jackson Pollock was accepted with little shock.⁽¹²⁾

10/ Miro would allow his hand to move without rational control in order to articulate subconscious impulses.

11/ In 1944 Harper's Bazaar presented a collection of new dresses using paintings by the left-wing Leger and the mystic Mondrian as a setting.

12/ Serge Guilbaut. How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art From Paris, pp 92-95

However, the image given at the time and consumed by informed readers of magazines like Fortune was that these all-over paintings actually represented the Modern Age. The Chief of Fire (harking back to the purification ~~by~~ by fire phenomena started by Greenberg) typically is pictured like sound in the grass: shimmering substance. The effect recorded by Pollock, we are told, is of bedazzlement, of staring in the sun too long. The titles of these paintings and ~~that~~ their look were in keeping with Greenberg's "ugly art" and his "purification by fire" syndrome, thus qualifying them as far as those who could be manipulated were concerned and as far as Greenberg's career was concerned.⁽¹³⁾

Why had artists chosen the abstract idiom to express themselves? This was seen as the only way out for the artist thanks to magazines like Partisan Review⁽¹⁴⁾ and the attention aroused by critics such as Greenberg. ~~Amidst~~ Amidst all the political hypocracies the left was in a state of confusion following the Stalinist purges in the 1930s and the assassination in Mexico of Leon Trotsky and the explosion of the myth that all anti-fascist organisations in all parts of the world were in agreement as to the line to be followed. Now communism seemed to be serving up the same kind of injustice as fascism, whose threat to culture had been entirely misrepresented. Fascism too had sought to get rid of a certain kind of culture - modernism - and to use culture in a very convincing way, as now would do the Americans.

13/ Ibid, 96-97

14/ Partisan Review was an influential magazine attended to by all the aspiring artists of the time from 1937 and during most of the Abstract Expressionism era. It declared that its political line was to establish a revolutionary force in opposition. There were differences in the magazine between its editors Dwight Macdonald (literary) and Philip Rahv and William Phillips (political issues). The differences stimulated tense and impassioned debate, fruitful

The apolitical stance was seen as the only way out, drawn from a mistrust of the ways of society. Isolation and alienation were deemed to be the only option for the artist desiring to remain free. With the exposure of war horrors and the impossibility of their depiction (as this was seen as tantamount to accepting them) they chose to express themselves in an abstract manner that allowed them to work under the illusion of freedom. The trouble was that isolated from society they were not able to grasp the full implication of this apolitical stance. Isolated, alienated estranged man was seen as a radical man. Partisan Review even at on stage ⁽¹⁵⁾ claimed it to be a revolutionary force in opposition.

Another key tactician working on the myth created by notoriety was New York art dealer Samuel Kootz who worked in the same mould as the Parisian art dealers (he'd buy up a lot of art before it became popular and then amass a large fortune when his tactics promoting it proved accurate). ⁽¹⁶⁾ He was forever staging shows to attract new audiences of collectors. With the post-war shutting off of Europe a potential audience of connoisseurs were kept at bay. He circulated names of artists to the press through bi-monthly installments (a famed parisian tactic) to familiarise and precondition the public. The unfortunate painter Byron Browne was rediscovered by Kootz to meet the needs of this tactic. He promoted Browne to the role of leader. Kootz wouldn't go as far as to describe individual works but exploited what was relevant to his predetermined idea of what new American painting should be. As soon as Browne no longer fitted the needs of the Kootz avant-garde ⁽¹⁷⁾ aspirations, he was turned to the scrap heap.

~~144~~ for the elaboration of a theoretical framework for avant-garde culture. Ibid, pp184-86

15/ Ibid, pp49-50

16/ The Maeght Gallery show made the necessary breakthrough for American avant-garde in Europe in the eyes of Americans who sought European approval. Ibid, 149-150

17/ Ibid, pp70-71

Such an air of tyranny was being created surrounding abstract expressionism that there was little room for any other form of expression to be seen to exist. Future surveys of American art in the 1970s would reveal that there had been a wealth of artistic activity throughout this period after the war that was in no way inferior: it simply didn't fit the predetermined labels. A case in painting is the artist Edward Hopper⁽¹⁸⁾ who only found his name listed in modernist surveys of art by virtue of the fact that he depicted what were described as precursors of pop art images, i.e. gas pumps, filling stations etc.

And for a wider perspective of the field of events we must see what President Truman and subsequently President Eisenhower (and most notoriously Richard Nixon and Senator Joe McCarthy) were getting up to. Communism, now that the war was won, was no longer useful to the Allies and had to be stamped out at all costs. They had the power to persuade people that this was the right thing to do by virtue of having created an abyss between the public and politics by ~~new~~ unwritten laws which forbade any form of real questioning groups. They used their power to turn people against anyone labelled as communist in American society. They created hysteria which made ~~new~~ people feel that the threat of a Third World War was a distinct reality. The introduction of the Marshall Plan⁽¹⁹⁾ was in certain keys areas more like martial law. With the British withdrawal from Greece and Turkey (a consequence of Europe's economic problems) Truman decided to act in pretence of removing the threat of communism⁽²⁰⁾. In effect he wanted to get a step nearer the rich

18/ Peter Fuller Beyond the Crisis in Art, p 92

19/ Called after US Secretary of State George Marshall. A European Recovery Plan under which the US pumped money into the weakened European economies to prevent them becoming destabilised and vulnerable to communism.

20/ The Truman doctrine, a foreign policy to combat communism throughout the world. Proposed to Congress, March 1947

oilfields of the Middle East. The Russians in actuality were merely fortifying the bastion accorded to it during the Yalta Conference.⁽²¹⁾ Truman said he was trying to break the crest of the advancing wave of communism. Truman was vouching for American nationalism instead of communism or Nazi nationalism. In the fervour of this and many similar activities the word democracy came to mean very little: as, for example, when 125,000 workers could work unknowingly to make the Atom Bomb. An array of cultural propaganda (of which the ideology behind Abstract Expressionism was to be a subtle part) fortified the Truman policies, such as the book One World by Walter Lippmann, published in 1943. The desire to build a world in America's image was the main theme in bestsellers such as this and many like it. Abstract expressionism would be seized on in the same spirit as a way of rebuilding art in America's image.⁽²²⁾

Alongside the Truman doctrines came the more cunning, subtle and undercover double dealing of the CIA, which took advantage of the artists' apolitical stance.⁽²³⁾ Before joining the CIA in 1950 to supervise its cultural activities from 1951-54, Thomas W. Braden had been New York Museum of Modern Art's executive secretary from April 1948 to November 1949. In defence of his political/cultural activities Braden would in May 20, 1967 publish an article, "I'm glad the CIA is immoral", in the Saturday Evening Post. According to Braden enlightened members of the governmental bureaucracy recognised in the 1950s that dissenting opinions within the framework of agreement on Cold War fundamentals could be an effective propaganda weapon abroad. The value of using abstract expressionist artists for this purpose was that it demonstrated the virtues of freedom of expression in an open and free society.⁽²⁴⁾

21/ The Yalta Conference (February 1945) for the West meant free elections in the European parliamentary democracies. For the Soviet Union it meant ~~that~~ the establishment of a ring of friendly nations along its borders.

Politically and culturally the then generation of American citizens were deliberately misinformed.

The next tactic was to educate the youth population (as they were ~~the~~ most vulnerable and would eventually become the new leaders of society) by introducing textbooks which outlined the virtues of democracy in the context of the propagation of modern art and abstract expressionism with their apolitical stance in schools and universities.

Irving Sandler brought out his The Triumph of American Abstract Expressionism listing all the main stars contributing to the triumph. It gave a rundown on their contributions, always taking care to insist that some of the less purely American painters such as Arshile Gorky were mere synthesisers rather than innovators, although he ^{ca}red to mention that Gorky was the first to recognise Kandinsky's automatism which was supposedly overlooked by the surrealists. Others like the prophet of abstract expressionism Hans Hofmann were said to know more about Matisse's colour than Matisse. The book was most profound above all for what it left out.

The Americans were attracted to tales of success and grandeur. Magazines like Life in effect neutralised artists like Jackson Pollock and what they stood for by posing the question "Is he the greatest living American painter of this century?" amidst the glossy pages of the very fashionable magazine and by throwing in quotes of Jackson's like, "Any attempt to explain She Wolf would destroy its meaning". Printing all this effectively annihilated the picture and tamed the She Wolf into a lamb. What people paid attention to was the James Dean image with the cigarette dangling from the mouth and hinted tales of debauchery.

22/~~How New York Stole~~ (ibid), How New York Stole... (ibid), p 162

23/Eva Cockcroft Abstract Expressionism-Weapon of the Cold War

24/For example, the Venice Biennale show with De Kooning, Gottlieb and Pollock.

25/Americans were first to use terms like "greatest" and "best" in terms of art.

We have already shown that the freedom to create from the apolitical stance was now the main characteristic of abstract expressionism. It came to be signified more and more by talk about generalities rather than specific paintings. The actual process of creating a painting was promoted as the important thing more than the finished painting (thus doing away with the need to discuss the individual painting). This was first illustrated through Has ~~Xam~~ Namuth's famous film and photographic recording of Jackson Pollock while working. Clever film work put the viewer behind the canvas which in a particular instance was a sheet of glass through which the viewer could see the painting materialise. Expert photographs captured Pollock in movement scarcely aware of the camera. The mythology of the shaman was created and inspired, causing art critic Harold Rosenberg to coin the phrase "action painting" to describe like-willed artists such as William de Kooning (c.f. illustration 1 - De Kooning in his studio). Thus realism authenticated the process of an art that rejected realism. ⁽²⁶⁾

I'd like to end this chapter by stressing the importance of the art museum, in this case the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and ~~how~~ how it can invent its own truth, how it shaped the truth of the art history of today through terminologies and hierarchies of "best" and "most important" in relation to individual artists and to art movements, suggesting a logical and inevitable progression of art to the final triumph of American Abstract Expressionism.

Survival, proof of culture, the relics and icons, were used as evidence to support the dominant class, informing the visitor and the outsider and explaining all and sundry. Nelson's Column and Napoleon's column affirmed the legitimacy of imperial domination. Present was used to explain the relics of the past and the meanings given to the past were used to justify aspects of the present or to justify beliefs about how things should change.

The art museum was a phenomenon of the last century and a half, ancestor of other cultural museums from the time of the first all-explaining Encyclopedia. A survey in France in 1966 showed that 8 out of 10 people associated the art museum with a church. Such a church was the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) under the directorship of the prestigious Alfred H. Barr, the single most important taste maker, who shaped the success or failure of individual American artists and art movements. (27)

Barr played an influential role in the success of abstract expressionism. He was also adviser to Peggy Guggenheim, whose surrealist-orientated Art of This Century gallery gave some of these artists their first shows. For example, Jackson Pollock in 1943, 1945 and 1947. MoMA was also supported by that wealthiest of wealthy families, the Rockefellers, making it a very secure institution. (28)

Under Barr the museum was built in the International Style of architecture. He made plans to expand beyond the narrow limits to include furniture, a library of films, a sport and leisure centre, in short nothing less than a nine-ring circus appealing to all. The way he displayed his paintings produced a way of looking at art that became standard, a maze-like plan of rooms with captions in chronological order, a journey through art history culminating in the triumph of American art. He virtually invented the exhibition guide, making it a souvenir and work of art in itself, ~~proof to the~~ Tourists, ~~who~~ were given a taste of aristocracy, of what it felt like to possess art through posters and postcards of their favourite paintings to take home. Vivid indoctrination indeed. Certain

27/ Donald Horne The Great Museum, p16

28/ Eva Cockcroft Abstract Expressionism-Weapon of the Cold War

movements in the plan were made to look more important (seen as autonomous 'isms'). Exhibitions were revealed in a way that made logic out of the progression of all art to the ultimate peak of American Abstract Expressionism by giving the necessary contrast with proceeding movements in ~~the~~ 20th century art. ⁽²⁹⁾

CHAPTER TWO

HOW AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM BECAME
A VICTIM OF ITS OWN CLAIMS



Figure 5. NUMBER 7 by Jackson Pollock. 1951.
Enamel on canvas. 56 x 65 in. Private collection.

A return to more prominent subject matter.
(c.f. page 29)

The essence of abstract expressionism and its contradictions can be unveiled through the example of one particular individual, the painter Jackson Pollock. History had deprived the abstract expressionists of representational conventions valid even for a single class world view. They tried but could not transcend their own subjectivity. Their combination of myth⁽¹⁾ and personal obsessions had moments of becoming, but their intentions remained opaque.~~xxxx~~ Matters were helped none by the exposure given to the artists. Press coverage articulated their intentions and aspirations without ever really talking about specific work.⁽²⁾ Furthermore the painters and critics has different ideas of the merit of the paintings. The drip technique of Jackson Pollock was so open-ended that it could easily be mis-represented to suit the aspirations of the critics. Pollock was in fact using this technique just as much as a therapy as anything else (it is worth mentioning that he suffered from an alcoholism which was part of a psychological malaise). He was in and out of psychiatric care (which formed part of the compulsion for his surrealist automatic⁽³⁾ techniques). The drip paintings were done at a time of his abstinence from alcohol which created an increased need for this frenzied search for tranquility. A mixture of irritation that bystanders

1/ In the mythic, the abstract tried to transcend conventional modes and reach man's primitive instinct

2/ Peter Fuller Beyond the Crisis in Art, pp 70-73

3/ He was influenced by Freudian and Jungian ideas

saw no talent in his work (coupled with the fact that he felt he had acquired a certain wisdom from the drip technique that would enable him to enliven old themes and former subjects from before the drip paintings) dictated his return to more prominent subject matter which proved to the disclaimers that this was not easy and required talent. In paintings such as Number 7, 1951, he hoped that he might indeed have empowered his subject (the drip paintings no longer dealt adequately with personal issues). The work illustrates the precision which Pollock could exercise on his subjects.

The post drip paintings met with less than critical acclaim, it is true to say. "The painter stressed importantly that there was no such thing as a good painting about nothing while Greenberg (in effect) said that there was no such thing as a good painting about anything." Greenberg ignored the subject in defense of the integrity of the picture plane which shows a complete indifference to the moment of abstract expressionism. ⁽⁴⁾

If these formal devices were the most important thing than all the more absurd to distinguish the work from the decorative arts like ceramics and carpet-making where the all-over pattern could be compared as structurally or decoratively similar. The insistence on the authenticity of the work, which Greenberg claimed, was either present or not depending on its conviction. It was hit or miss. It was prone to a case of mistaken identity. Sometimes one had to look long and hard in case a mistake was made (unless one was very sympathetic). Too often it was mere apocalyptic wallpaper. The paintings were very restrictive and since Greenberg had reduced the appreciation to that of formal qualities, great patience was needed.

The innovation of the technique was also perhaps doubtful as the decorative arts practised similar techniques. Also the non-focal element is common to the work of those categorised as insanes and Pollock was not without his mental problems. The drip technique can also be traced back to the ritualistic art of the Navajo Indians: as part of their ritual they spilled coloured earth to form elaborate designs and then destroyed them.⁽⁵⁾

John Berger put it most eloquently when he compared Pollock to a man brought up in a cell isolated from all outside influences who is suddenly given some sticks and bright paints.⁽⁶⁾ By lacking all external visual stimuli this man would come up with apolitical and asocial gestures and actions rooted in his immediate physical sensations of gravity, time, energy and death. This would be the only experience he'd have to express. By the same virtue this is theoretically what the drip technique of Jackson Pollock stands for in its professed isolation from the realities of the current atomic age and its threat. It stands as a metaphor for apolitical man in the 20th century. Only this is not simply what the work came to express. The work took on a life beyond the theoretical concept of the artist. Viewers were to read into it intentions that were not there. They projected on to it their own fears and hopes. They saw in it content of their own imagining. Greenberg with his indifference to subject matter - with his denial of its relevance - seems to have posited as the goal of modernism its dissolution, since an art absolutely without content is ultimately a contradiction of the nature of art and the way people read and experience art.

5/Sandler Triumph of American Abstract Expressionism, ibid. Section on Jackson Pollock

6/ John Berger Permanent Red

It was remarkable that art searching to give form to emotional experience immediately after the most cataclysmic war in history should have been completely lacking in overt references to the hopes or absurdities of modern industrial power. None of the artists had been directly involved in the war. The generalised brush strokes echoed this exalted tragic spirit. The spontaneity and wilfulness of their work was largely innocent of the mockery and ~~xxx~~ despair, the charnel elements in such Europeans of their own generation as Francis Bacon and Jean Dubuffet, whose work flared with atrocious memories. ^⑦

The simple latitude these artists enjoyed became part of the necessary content of their work, a theme they reiterated with more intensity, purpose and at a greater length than in other prior movements. An example of the ambiguities of abstract expressionist art's premises and doctrines was provided during the 1948 discussion on modern art organised by Life at which Pollock and Greenberg were the central focus. Distinguished critics and connoisseurs were brought together to clarify the strange art of the day. Greenberg, with his insistence on the brutality and virility of ~~xxx~~ Pollock's work, was astonished to hear European specialists refer to Pollock's Cathedral as "agreeable and pretty" and "very lovely." ^⑧ Yes, confusion was the rule everywhere. The qualities George Biddle, for instance, claimed to be lacking in the abstract expressionists were ironically the very qualities they thought they possessed - to ask nothing less of art than it be worthy of our destiny, to create a painting with subject matter, profound and important, linked to man's fate, a painting that is moving but neither too

7/ Max Kosloff American Painting: Weapon of the Cold War, p

8/ How New York Stole..... ibid, p186



Figure 6. CATHEDRAL by Jackson Pollock. 1947.
Oil and aluminium paint on canvas. $71\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{1}{8}$
Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

Confusion of interpretation: "brutal", said
Greenberg; "very lovely", said the French.
(c.f. page 31)

aesthetic nor too functional. Modernism was more concerned with artistry than with life.⁽⁹⁾

The critical potential of modernist criticism was increasing in its uncertainty but it was very difficult for the protagonists to stop as there were inevitable investments of an economic, social, intellectual and psychological nature. There were increasing prescriptions to dogmatic assertion and manipulative lines of argument⁽¹⁰⁾, typified by the way critic Edward Alwen Jewell was caught out in his annual critique of the season's shows in the New York Times of June 5, 1943. On commenting on the work of Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb he judged the aesthetic standards high but failed to catch the surrealist influence. A bad move for a connoisseur of surrealism. Rothko and Gottlieb needed just this chance to use the press (New York Times June 13, 1943) to publish a strict programme that showed the influence of surrealist ideas.⁽¹¹⁾

According to modernism's own principles it needed tension between theory and culture in order to exist and maintain critical power. It was nothing unless it was oppositional yet when avant-garde became accepted and re-radicalised modernism remained in culture as a source of market predictions, a working definition of the conservative in culture.⁽¹²⁾

Modernism failed to grasp an adequate concept of expressionism. It tried to naturalise individual response to expressive effects - ~~which~~ which identifies "This is what I feel" with "This is what the work expresses" and thus accords universal authority to a contingent psychological state. The critique tended to favour artists who knew what they were doing with their technical resources, such as

9/ Ibid, p18

10/ Colin Harrison Expressionism and Exhaustion, Section of art and criticism in the 1960s **Section I**

11/ Sandler, *ibid*

12/ Harrison, *ibid*

Pollock (who was technically highly proficient with his limited means). However it is also true that his cultural materials were eclectic, intractable, half-digested and almost paranoid. It's easier to say how Pollock's paintings were made than to say what they express. The expressive content remains open to real inquiry.^⑬ Clement Greenberg tended to label Jackson Pollock "gothic" by virtue of what he termed his harsh brutality (specifically referring to the picture surface), a literal expression of anxiety. In the light of several factors this would seem to be untrue. Wilhelm Worringer in Abstraction and Empathy, written during the German expressionist period, described his theory of empathy as a relative condition. He explained aesthetic enjoyment as objectified self-enjoyment, which left us helpless in the face of the artistic greatness of many ages and peoples. He goes on to separate two contrary practices which artists have followed throughout the history of art. One is the organic, grounded in perceptions of the phenomenal world and reflects the desire to depict objects without distortion, marking an emphatic and harmonious relationship to the world. The other and opposite ~~practice~~ practice is the abstract style which is grounded in feelings of unrest at the phenomena of the outside world, a fear of space. It seeks to remove the arbitrariness of the object in its space through the expression of geometric non-organic shapes which deny an affinity with nature.^⑭ Such a style could be readily equated with contemporary expressionism in its frenzied quest for principles of pattern within a world of collapsing spiritual and psychological certainties. Or it could be.

13/ Ibid

14/ Modern Art and Modernism edited by Francina & Hartigan

Harper and Row publishers ©1982. Section 4 on
Expressionism - Abstraction and Empathy Wilhelm
Worringer.

argued that in representing a symptom of a spiritual malady, abstraction should be seen as its "cure", the solution to the problem. The immense need for tranquility in reaction to

appearances of unrest in the outside world brings about a way of living and coping. Kandinsky and his associates offer a spiritual synthesis whereby reality more deeply understood becomes the basis for a sense of unity and belonging. (15)

This calls into question Greenberg's use of the word "gothic" in reference to Pollock. In addition we have also seen how Pollock's drip process was indeed a treatment for a personal inner unrest. If Pollock's work was to be taken as "gothic", then it was more aggressive than abstract.

One of the main reasons for Greenberg's assertion that abstract expressionism was a brutal art was to present it as an anti-thesis to the art of Paris (which it was so eager to eclipse as main ~~threat~~ threat to avant-garde supremacy). The art of Paris was refined and finished and labelled effeminate as opposed to the rough unfinished nature of the virile and "gothic" American art.

War had made communication between Paris and New York less than perfect. French culture was busily trying to sustain itself. It was worried about the rise of abstraction which it saw as a kind of Anti-humanism. In "Opinion d'un peintre d'aujourd'hui" Adramov ~~objec~~ objected that abstractionism brings us back to our position of impotence in the face of the unknown. The French Communists were inclined towards an optimistic realism expressed with a similar dissent to that of abstract expressionism, echoed in the precocious statement of Bernard Buffet- "I prevent myself from thinking in order to live."

Greenberg found the French timid and too conventional and anti-experimental by virtue of what he saw in a few exhibitions (i.e. Painting in France 1939-46 at the Whitney) which were not altogether representative of what was happening. Greenberg didn't bother to inquire into the complexities of the situation. An ideological blindness sustained the illusion. In fact American cultural imperialism towards Europe was enforced by economic pressures. Thus as a condition of American economic aid in the Monnet plan, the French were obliged to import a higher proportion of American films. This film clause spelt doom to France's once proud film industry. The film market became swamped with Hollywood films, almost no one was employed in the French film industry and an entire culture was debased i.e. rendered into kitsch. French moviegoers assimilated the Hollywood image as did other Europeans and lost touch with their own images. Similarly the triumph of American Abstract Expressionism had as much to do with the domination of "effeminate" Europe by aggressively male America as with the actual aesthetic of abstraction.

So what exactly are the factors of merit that distinguish abstract expressionism? On a fundamental level the most triumphant part was that of rhetoric and art theory, as Tom Wolfe said in The Painted Word: "To lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial - the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify."

Abstract expressionism as we have just said expressed aggression more than anything else. It was so exclusive that it ignored a lot of what was happening even in its own country. The Cobra Movement

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in Europe and Leon Golub in Chicago both shared similar ideologies. Was the ~~the~~ nothing to be gained by cooperation between these camps? Leon Golub's "Critique of Abstract Expressionism" in 1954 talked of the non-referential and diffuse "unfettered brush, ~~discursive~~ discursive improvisatory technique, motion organisation" all of ~~which~~ which could be said of the Chicago school. Golub realised the inadequacies of the ~~xxx~~ perspective-based picture space - as did the abstract expressionists - and sought to make images retrieved from the unconscious as historical metaphor. His Burnt Man was prophetic of images of napalmed men and women which were to become part of the numbing iconography of American intervention in Vietnam. Golub echoed the art of one imperial movement in order to paint accurately about experience within another. (17)

All these points were put forward not to deny merit to abstract expressionism. Only by unraveling and putting into context - by bringing it down to earth - can we ever attempt to decipher it, if indeed that is possible given its exalted sense of importance. Even the artists contradicted their work, one of the dangers inherent in giving the painter too much coverage, too much of a chance to express his or her concerns. Ad Reinhardt was perpetually attacking (and losing) his friends for going on their ego-trips on radio.

So how do they stand up against the earlier 20th century movements with whom they found affinities to give credence to their own work? Not that we should use as examples only those artists that were of service or use to the abstract expressionists and dismiss others as non-progressive, i.e. surrealists such as Dali, Magritte etc.

Pollock found a sympathy with the automatic surrealism of Joan Miro which in turn went back to Kandinsky (first recognised by Arshile Gorky and allegedly overlooked by the surrealists)

Let us view abstract expressionism then in the light of being a continuation of the movement of Expressionism and the continued fight for "wrothy values". One would have to exercise a sense of cognition which the expressionists were so adept at. To begin with, the expressionist picture always demanded the attention of the sympathetic viewer who had to some extent to be already in line with the emotions of the relevant picture. The expressionists demanded an audience. To express is a performance: To let a feeling be known in an amplified way, to reach the sort of state that lovers enjoy where every movement and impulse or even ~~xxxxxxxx~~ non-movement -silence -becomes an expression which is part of an entirety. The expressionists, to attain this feeling of intimacy, exaggerated and distorted, making communication penetrable by leaving the trace of the human body: the dance of the wrist, frenzied indecisive hyperbolic gestures (as in the work of Soutine). ⁽¹⁸⁾

Since there was so much tampering by the likes of Greenberg on the communication side before it reached the spectator, the gestures were thus not just carrying the trace of the artist in abstract expressionism but of all the propaganda and theories expressed by the artists and critics in ~~xx~~ constant press and radio outpourings (not to mention the politically changing climate and the assertion of abstract expressionism as a sort of aggressive American male domination). As Irving Sandler tells us, Wilhelm de Kooning's vision stems from an aspect of the American experience so prevalent in other arts like literature, for example Henry Miller. ⁽¹⁹⁾ His Woman 1, 1950 (MoMA collection) first comes across as an abstraction (in the aggressive sense) of pictures like Picasso's Girl With Cock. The affected surface with its abrupt cancellations of

18/ Cardinal, *ibid* pp 15-17

19/ Sandler, *ibid*, Chapter on de Kooning

Fig.7: WOMAN I by
Wilhelm de Kooning.
1950-52. Oil on canvas.
75 x 58 in. Museum of
Modern Art, New York



Fig.8: SELF-PORTRAIT
AS MARS BY Otto Dix.
1915. Oil on canvas.
Deutsche Fotothek,
Dresden.



Fig.9: GIRL WITH COCK by Pablo
Picasso. 1938. Oil on canvas, Private.



In different ages with different painters similar paintings
acquire different meanings. (c.f. pages 39-40)

line and form trying to seek calm in the storm is something that was not being tried for the first time. For example Otto Dix expresses a similar effect in Self-Portrait as "ars" in 1915, with mouth and chin prominent in a mass of agitated surface. All this anticipates the complacency with which all three works are currently viewed.

Artists enjoying their own latitude for a theatre of dramatics, of course, take the picture out of their contexts. But this is the sort of state we're at because of abstract expressionism. We ~~mistrust~~ mistrust the idea of a picture's content and the truth of the matter even though the facts are in front of us. German expressionism was very evenly balanced by Nazi and Socialist ideology which stand as a perfect contradiction of it. It is almost possible to define ~~the~~ the latter purely as the inverted version of the former. ⁽²⁰⁾ Nazis destroyed a lot of expressionist works, thus giving credence to their ideals. In post abstract expressionist days we view things with a sort of numbness, ~~and~~ an inhibited natural response which we are weary of. This is attributable to the abstract expressionist mistrust of the facts and figures in front of them and the desire to be isolated, to be free in order to create.

And so to get back to the man we started with, Jackson Pollock. Is it possible to use a cognitive analysis? If we remember that to an extent the expressionist picture anticipates a sympathetic audience, do we find ourselves inclined to see a certain awesomeness and active ~~energy~~ energy of bedazzling proportions manifested in an all-over pattern of unrest or, still using our cognitive powers, do we see the actual trace of a manic cowboy going wild with a lasso? It is very difficult to validate a liking for such works even if you sense a worth in them. Sometimes we end up with a notable value i.e. a sense of American space in the all-over drip paintings, and

then realise that the same could be said of the uncatalogued painter Edward ^Hopper, whose sense of American space is spectacular. Can we use the theory that a work is potent even when misunderstood, the theory of paintings that are misunderstandings misunderstood? The fact is that the whole thing is a roundabout ~~if~~ if we agree with the art theory that triumphed at its own expense.

CHAPTER THREE
-(CONCLUSION)-

THE AFTER EFFECTS OF AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

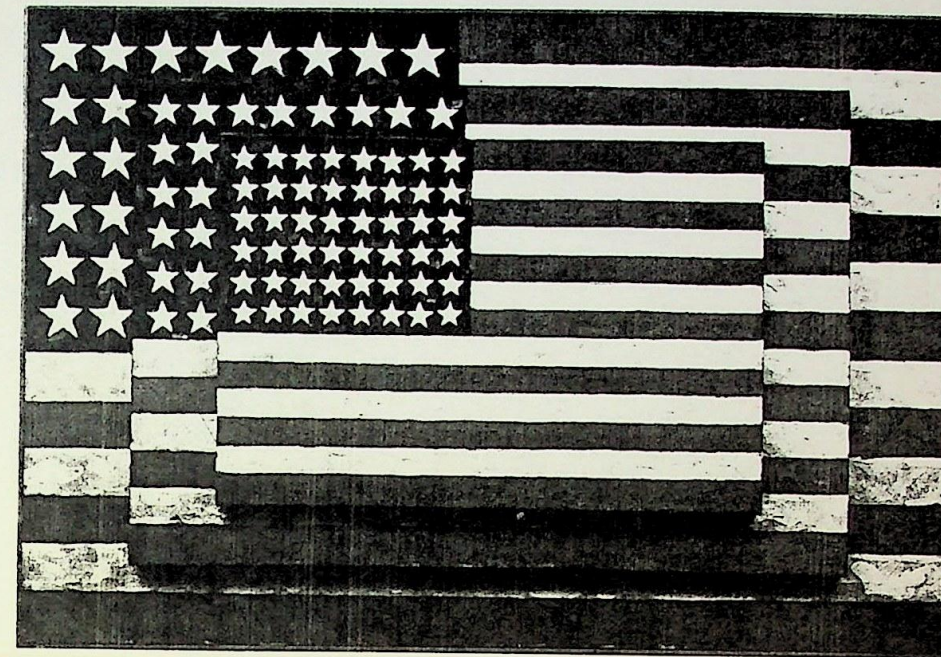


Figure 10: THREE FLAGS by Jasper Johns. 1958.
In caustic on canvas. 78½ x 115.6 cm.
Collection of Mr & Mrs Burton Tremaine, Meriden,
Connecticut.

Highlighting the exhaustion of abstract expressionism.
(c.f. page 44)

The work that immediately followed abstract expressionism highlighted its exhaustion. Jasper Johns' depiction of the American flag (Three Flags 1958) in the expressionist manner illustrated quite clearly what was being expressed: an endless array of permutations fitting the theme of American nationalism, symbolised by the American flag.

Johns' clowning echoes the exploits of Marcel Duchamp^②, a comic relief from the drab seriousness of abstract expressionism. He was to say in 1965: "The final statement has to be not a deliberate statement but a helpless statement. It has to be what you can't avoid, not what you set out to say."^①

Greenberg, who was always being caught out by the trouble he so helped to create and had continuously to update, rephrase and change his mind to keep his career intact, referred to the style of Johns' work ironically as "homeless representation". Johns' flat brush-strokes exposed the pseudo "delimitation of flatness" of the abstract expressionists who were seen to deal in "open atmospheric effects" and an illusionistic space which put them in the same league as Rembrandt, Giotto and a whole line of tradition.

1/ ~~Peter Fuller Beyond the Crisis in Art, pp 70-71~~ Colin Harrison Expression and Exhaustion, *ibid.* Part II

2/ Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Brother of Jacques Villon who moved to America in 1913 where his ready-mades anticipated the anti-art Dada movement. Later became the father figure of New York surrealists. Came back into his own in the post abstract expressionist 1960s through his influence on Johns and Rauschenberg

Greenberg responded with a re-evaluation of abstract expressionist brush-strokes. "There was something very obviously illusionistic ~~xxx~~ about the brush-strokes, very painterly like the blurred, broken loose definition you find in baroque art" (whatever that meant). Roy Lichtenstein responded to this theory with screenprints of blow-ups of brush-strokes with no brush-strokes used at all! (3). During the 1960s the goal which Greenberg had posited for modernism was clearly reaching its dissolution with works like Richard Serra's black walls and Robert Mangold's evacuated formalism etc, works lacking even significant development of stylistic features, a product of artists having nothing to say and now way to say it. What was happening or what was failing to happen was affecting painters working as far away as Buenos Aires, New Delhi, London and Paris. Movements that lacked persuasive theories, ~~like~~ like photo-realism, played havoc with critics. (4)

Many representations of Pollock were understood and ²stulated. All seemed to lead to a condition of confusion which in one sense could become a condition of unrivalled freedom. There was a critical potential here. It lay perhaps in the de-stabilisation of critical, aesthetic and curatorial categories which, it was assumed by some, would have to follow up on the recognition of the exhaustion of modernism.

However, the purportedly anti-modernist art of the late 1960s failed to achieve significant penetration of the market during the 1970s or at least to achieve it on its own terms. The subsequent development from the reductive and destructive modernism was post-modernism, which brought a sigh of relief to those curators who had never fully understood modernism. Alistair MacIntyre in

3/ Tom Wolfe, *ibid*

4/ Fuller, *ibid* Pg 70-71

After Virtue attribute^s this to a failure of consensus and understanding concerning the casual and historical origins of a catastrophe in moral speculation. Post-modernism came out of a desire to go back to works and admit what could not be done. ⁽⁵⁾

Time is the great revealer about man and his contradictions. We need the perspective of time to see the truth of man's ideological wishes and needs. This explains perhaps the massive wave of revised criticism of abstract expressionism during the 1970s.

It would seem that expressionism can not be sustained as an ~~ideology~~ ideology because, as a continual state of throwing into perspective what has gone before, it only leads by anti-thesis to a cyclic resurfacing of an increasingly familiar set of values. This can be spotted through ~~quick~~ quick reference to encyclopedias and exhibition catalogue^s etc: time as an accordion of the past interrupting the present in mid-speech. Movements become too transparent. We take a conservative angle on appreciation. We can imagine that one main reason man continues to express himself is the age-old idea of challenging a person to be alive to other people's feelings: a very "human" characteristic.

The history of painting is itself unwritten philosophy: man viewing the world according to his attitude towards it at a particular time. The pursuit of painting is not necessarily or specifically attributable to a practical urge to improve on the history of art (or contribute to it) but to the more human urge to satisfy personal curiosity and, as in the prevalent abstract tendency of the Eastern world, to seek and to render the threat of nature manageable or, as in realism, to correspond to a harmonious unity with nature: an act of therapy. This penchant might be seen as interference with the critical faculties in one sense but critical faculties need to

occupy some shape or form to communicate. No matter how narrow the field of discovery allowed, even if hypothetically it is non-existent, man still continues. We deduce from the contradictions ~~that~~ that history and movements and isms place

on the artist's significance that man still holds precious his creative faculties. Once he becomes detached from his instincts and has to resort to ~~xxx~~ analytical processes he becomes more vulnerable to misrepresentation and less in tune with his own inspirations.

An unnatural response is required for a natural urge. Any response ^{to} the history of art may thus seem self-defeating in that the power of art to be misrepresented is stronger than ~~it~~ ever.

Is there a certain potency in misrepresentation? ("The cognitive power of man"?) Reductions and statements like this might seem to contradict various points I have made in this thesis but the study of art theory vis-a-vis man's urge to create is not very easy to verbalise logically. This is an age in which we can prove wrong any statement simply by adopting a different stance. It's a theatrical age (theatre of the absurd, almost) in which the honesty of the ~~artist~~ artist is not always considered relevant.

Institutions (i.e. MoMA) that "invent" truth demonstrate the danger of those who rely too much on such "truth". The proponents of abstract expressionism could in this way make rubbish of all those outside of what they proclaimed to be the dominant style. Critics who didn't catch the drift ended their careers in obscurity. We fail to take heed of the power of the lie in art history at our peril. This point is particularly relevant to the experience of abstract expressionism and the way it was taken over and propagated by ~~xxxxx~~ critics and the media for their own purposes outside the realm of

the actual abstract expressionist artists (the ultimate irony for an art that was supposed to be beyond traditions and untouched by the nitty gritty of socio/political realities).

To conclude: we have attempted to show that if American Abstract Expressionism was ultimately a misrepresentation, it was an inevitable misrepresentation resulting from the nature of art criticism in America in the 1940s and 1950s. The historical circumstances of post-war America made it ripe to ~~be~~ be misrepresented in this way.

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