

Abstract Expressionism: Overview of Critical Reception, of Key Ideas, and Stylistic Sources

By the mid-1930s, communism and the popular front were the "home" of radical artists and writers who believed that art should not be divorced from political realities. This meant that abstract art was increasingly seen as untenable because it was a-political and purist—if by purist, one meant that it did not visibly appear to address social issues. But at the same time, American painters of the 30s were reacting against social realism and regionalism, the two predominant forms of American painting and the two forms of figuralism or realism which could have been used for a political art but were not. American scene, the dominant form of the late 20s and early 30s, was losing hegemony. Second, the Stalin-Hitler pact at the start of WW II induced many American painters to turn away from realism and its possible associations with totalitarian or fascist art. This turn could have been a statement of independence, and not necessarily a rejection of political ideology but a rejection of the appearance of being manipulated.

Further, by the end of the 1930s, some writers and artists were arguing that all art is rooted in the conditions that produce it; consequently, abstract art could have more social relevance than it was sometimes believed. This argument provided a way out for artists who still sought an alliance with politics but did not want to find it in realism.

With the fall of Paris, editorials depicted fascism as the “devourer” of culture, although in reality, the only culture to which it was opposed was modernism. In the U.S., artists and writers began to call for the use of art as a means of "national defense," in other words, the means of keeping culture alive. They also began to call for the use of art to achieve American cultural hegemony in the world scene: for example, Buy American Art Week. With the influx of European emigrant artists to the New York art scene, it became important for NY artists to find a way to maintain their identity and establish new US leadership in art. To many, this meant the development of something new, the rejection of academic and Parisian traditions, and risk-taking--imperfection and authenticity rather than technical perfection. So, and not for the first time in the history of American art, there is a call for the development of a unique American art, this time resulting in a counter movement to the American Scene.

Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, the key critics associated with the promotion of abstract expressionism, a movement which does not truly cohere until the end of World War II, the late 1940s, each in his own way finds reasons to call this movement the answer to the need for a political art which is uniquely American and which would appear to have no connection with traditional propaganda art or with the Popular Front, which by the time of the War had lost its credibility, at least with intellectuals.

The challenge facing Clement Greenberg, at the end of the 30s, was to find a way of establishing that modern art was not **irrelevant** to modern life. This became the challenge of

proving that "in an age of social decay, it is only by rejecting the specific and immediate values of society that the writer [or artist] can preserve...general and eternal human values." Greenberg attempts to do this through two strategies: on the one hand, he will try to show that modern art results from the inevitable evolution of art from the Renaissance and classical art; and second, he will essentially recast the puritan/pioneer argument¹ once again, this time establishing high art in the anomalous position of being the pioneer tradition, but not a low-brow pioneer tradition: high art will reflect "real life," and it will stand in opposition to low-brow or a new entity, middle-brow, culture but it will also reject the emptiness of gentility or puritan culture. Part of the argument is made in his article on the "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

Greenberg's Theory

Greenberg begins to develop his ideas about the avant-garde before abstract expressionism exists. One of his most important articles in which he sets out his ideas and attempts to establish a political rationale is the 1939 article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." He continues to develop his ideas and eventually accommodates them to the work of Jackson Pollock and the later avant-garde. They seem to lose the political thrust over time, if it is truly there in the beginning. But his theory begins with an attempt to explain the oppositional role of the avant-garde.

The avant-garde emerges, he says, when artists and writers can no longer count on communication with their audience. Their response, in the past, has been stasis, or freezing in an academic neo-classicism. In contrast, during the mid-19th century, a new response emerged--artists formed an avant-garde which deliberately isolated itself from society and made its goal that of keeping culture from petrifying. This motion involved a focus on absolute issues of the artistic medium and the avoidance of "external" issues like content.

A focus on the absolute leads to abstraction; abstraction is a type of purity and validity in art that is comparable to the validity of nature--what the artist is doing is "imitating" the processes of art--imitation of imitation, since art is imitation in its inception. This action cannot be criticized, but it is an action which the usual supporters of culture do not appreciate. So as a solution to a communication gap of sorts, a deliberate and perhaps larger one is created.

In tandem with the creation of an avant-garde, isolated culture, there emerges a rear-guard, or a culture which is derived from and appeals to the universal tastes and knowledge of the masses: kitsch. Kitsch is a commodity culture, developed specifically for the purpose of alleviating the boredom of the new proletariat. Kitsch exists in a symbiotic relationship with the other, dominant cultural system--it borrows its tools and transforms them to fit into its own system, and turns them out "mechanically."

Kitsch places technique above value and erases the distinctions that exist between values which can be found in art and those which are found elsewhere. In other words, kitsch merges art and life because it gives the viewer the answers, it gives the conclusion to a story which does not have to be guessed at and no effort has to be expended in order to understand the ending.

¹this argument is not new in American culture; it was already stated cogently in the early part of the 20th century by George Santayana

Kitsch and avant-garde art are thus inextricably bound together, and although superficially, at least, it might appear that kitsch is more likely to represent a political position, it cannot, because kitsch is the direct result of the culture created by capitalism and industrialism; it fills what is basically a commercial need; it is a commodity. But given the tandem existence of the avant-garde and of kitsch, the avant-garde, at least indirectly, assumes social relevance. But Greenberg does not stop here. In a second article, he goes on to establish the connection of the avant-garde to eternal and universal human values. It is an ambiguous and somewhat convoluted argument which has its origin in the Renaissance relationship between the pictorial and the literary arts, a relationship which painting must strive to reject. He links the eventual rejection to changes in the socio-economic climate, such that he finds an increasing emphasis on the materiality of painting to reflect the rejection of bourgeois social illusions, and the increased rejection of perspective, or the acceptance of flatness, of the two-dimensional picture plane as the dominating device of painting, to be a statement which contains social meaning.

At the same time, even though this art evolves as a rejection of Renaissance tradition, it retains the underlying values of the Renaissance. For Greenberg, key steps in this evolution occur in the 19th century, with impressionism and later in the early 20th century with cubism; also for Greenberg, the battle is essentially re-staged or taken to a new plane with abstract expressionism, leading him to conclude that in the work of Jackson Pollock, an art of universal values and truths has emerged from the raw material and sensations of real life. What we might read as a contradiction in terms, Greenberg perceives as a dialectic between a goal towards purification of the arts and the isolation of the avant-garde from society, versus an art that emerges from the "jungle of concrete emotions and sensations." The resolution of this dialectic is an experimental art which appears to be inscrutable but which, in fact, is an art of self-discovery and an art in touch with contemporary life.

Key points and problems from Clement Greenberg: a formalist narrative of the evolution of art with some attempt to embed it in a political framework. Greenberg maintains that several painters simultaneously responded to certain artistic challenges: loosening up the pictorial space of cubism; and loosening up the geometric regularity of cubism. This is a formalist or aesthetic explanation which derives from Greenberg's view of art as following certain inevitable paths of development. The political rationale is ambiguous at times, and can seem contrived in his positioning of two cultural systems with diametric political positions--kitsch versus the avant-garde or modernism. Further, his attempt to imbue form with political and universal values reverts back to his argument of the inevitable evolution of art from the Renaissance, and in this way, he undercuts the political contextualization of his argument.

Rosenberg

In an important but preliminary article, Rosenberg comes out in favor of modernism as it was represented in Paris in the early part of the twentieth century. The article is called "The Fall of Paris," written in 1940, and concerns what Rosenberg sees as a loss to the cultural world. The international world of culture, which had its capital in Paris, was a culture of individualism. This modernism was a rupture with the past in that no one past was seen as the inevitable path

to the future; all the pasts were given equal due and this equality essentially negated the idea of evolution. It was also a rupture with nationalism in art, and it was an openness to folk traditions. Modernism was the movement of people who did not march in lock-step but who each found his or her own way into the present and presumably the future. But by 1940 this was threatened by Fascism. On the one hand, the fascist rulers were outlawing modernism in the countries where they had power. On the other hand, the antifascist movement was almost as dangerous because to this movement as well, unity was everything, and this unity spread to culture. It was a unity in "defense of culture," but it was dictating conformity of thought, creating a herd of formerly independent minds.

Rosenberg at first believed that a return to the individualistic modernism of before 1940 was the true answer to the threat of communism but when fascism was defeated by the end of World War Two, and the conformist culture continued to grow, Rosenberg saw in this culture a mass culture alternative to individualist culture, and like Greenberg, he, too, came out against mass culture. Unlike Greenberg, this was not an inherently political position for Rosenberg. Rosenberg's solution really lies in existential philosophy. And in his version of existentialism, the American, as a symbol or metaphor, not really as a national category, is the model of the type of individual who has no history and who does not contemplate or meditate but acts and lives in his actions.

Thus, in Rosenberg's major article on abstract expressionism, which he entitles "The American Action Painters," he essentially merges the idea of this American as symbol with the individualist of Paris Modernism of the first half of the twentieth century. In Rosenberg's description of these artists, it is the act of painting which takes precedence over anything else, over the object or the result of the act. The object is, in fact, extinguished, and this is what makes the new American painting different from other phases of modern art. The image is the result of the artist's encounter with the canvas; it is not a preconception, it is not a plan that dictates the final result. And so, "the apples are brushed off the table, they had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting." The revelation is what matters, and nothing else. Therefore, rather than representing a state, the artist enacts the state in physical movement. And the painting becomes a moment in the artist's life; art and life are truly inseparable.

To Rosenberg, the decision to "just paint" liberates the artist from politics, morals, from the world, because the canvas becomes his or her world. Action painting cannot be judged by previous critical standards because what becomes important is the degree to which the painting truly becomes the reality of an action--it must be a "genuine act, associated with risk and will"; it is a private ritual made public. But ultimately, this new action painting does not have an audience--it has a market, but not an audience because an audience must come from understanding, and the public does not understand this form of art.

Summary of Rosenberg: an explanation which seems to unite politics and process in his interpretation of the action painter as a prototype for the mythic symbol of the "American," but ultimately it is not a political narrative since he finds all meaning in the action of painting and sees this as a means of avoiding politics in art; the existentialism seems to shift his narrative over to the realm of individualist (biographical) narratives, but he does not engage in

biographical, existential analyses of individual artists, not to the extent that Jonathan Fineberg does; Fineberg more clearly represents a writer who centralizes the latter type of narrative (the individualist narrative, a type of interpretation which takes as its starting and ending points the life of the artist). He unites this individualist narrative with the more existentialist position of Rosenberg.

Sociocultural and Marxist Explanations of Abstract Expressionism

Serge Guilbaut, in *How NY Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago, 1983), focuses on an interpretation of abstract expressionism which derives from understanding the social-historical context. Guilbaut makes the most concerted effort I have found to contextualize the developments of abstract expressionism largely in terms of the changing political and historical developments within which the artists operate and which not only impart particular meanings to abstraction but which create an ambience which is either favorable to or unfavorable to abstraction.

In the mid 1930s, radical artists and writers were likely to be affiliated with the Popular Front or the communist party, if they believed that art should not be divorced from political realities. This belief made abstract art untenable for them because it was considered to be a-political and purist. But in 1937, in the article "The Nature of Abstract Art," Meyer Schapiro argued that all art is rooted in the conditions that produce it; that the abstract artist only has the illusion of independence; and as a result, the significance of abstract art is greater than formalists believed. This argument began to offer a way out for artists who were allied with left wing politics but looking for a different aesthetic solution.

Political arguments became unnecessary after Russia invaded Finland and many radical artists did not feel that they could continue to support communism or Stalin. In the U.S., artists and writers began to call for the use of art as a means of "national defense" or a way to keep culture alive. It would also help the U.S. to gain hegemony in the world. For example, during "buy American art week" Americans would buy "native" art and support American culture. This was not a movement in support of avant-garde culture but the impetus for the latter came from the influx of Europeans to the NY art scene. With the large number of immigrants, it became necessary for NY artists to find a way to maintain their identity and establish US leadership in art. To many this meant the development of something new, the rejection of academic and by implication, Parisian, traditions, and risk-taking and authenticity (which were considered to be innate American characteristics) and imperfection, as a sign of the rejection of academicism. So there was a countermovement to the nationalistic art movement which strove to present a "different" image of American art, an image which would represent a "new" America.

The American Modern Artists show of 1943 was to represent this new strain in Amer. art. This movement also allied itself with the new international theme in American politics although at the same time it tried to maintain an a-political stance. In 1943, E. A. Jewell, the critic for the *New York Times*, failed to see how new American art was achieving its goals of placing Amer. art in the center of world attention; he also criticized three paintings by Gottlieb, Rothko, and a third artist (Schewe). In response, Rothko and Gottlieb issued their 5-point program in which they called for the "simple expression of the complex thought." In this

manifesto they also called for the use of primitive imagery. This reflected a new anti-historical position. In order to avoid politics, they will avoid history; to avoid history and to achieve a more universal type of relationship to humanity, they will use the archetypal imagery of primitive art.

Between Jewell on one side, and Gottlieb and Rothko on the other, two camps were defined: one which was engaged with history and reality, and one which rejected this engagement in favor of a more "global" individualism which transcended history. Surrealism tended to be associated with the first position and was seen by radical artists such as Robert Motherwell as "enslaving" the artist to the tyranny of the unconscious; it was seen by Clement Greenberg as being academic and a form of kitsch.

Jackson Pollock's work of the mid-40s was thought by some to be the answer – it was the American version of or alternative to surrealism; it was "unpredictable, undisciplined, explosive" – positive qualities because they signified the freedom of the artist. But Pollock also had the approval of the nationalist camp since he had started out his studies with Thomas Hart Benton and therefore had begun in the nationalist/regionalist tradition. But this assimilation of Pollock by two opposing tendencies would lead to a domestication of Pollock or co-opting of him in a way that will undercut his own aspirations.

An impact of WW II on art was the creation of a middle class that had money to spend on art, and wanted to buy American paintings. It also wanted emotional paintings and paintings that were "new." Buying audacious modern art instead of academic paintings functioned as a form of elitism which allowed the upper class to distinguish itself from the middle. Art becomes, in this respect, an "object of desire," to be advertised along with fashion in current magazines. A final impetus for the new art was the sense of destruction, incomprehension, power, etc. associated with the imagery of the atomic bomb, and seemingly captured in Pollock's all-over painting style.

The end of the war and the detonation of the atomic bomb brought disillusionment to radical intellectuals and artists who now turned to anarchism, rather than communism which no longer appeared to offer a viable form of hope for the future. Once again, these more radical artists saw in the use of myth an alternative to the aesthetics of the nationalist Popular Front. At this point, however, myth assumed a different character; and the nature of myth was less the archetypal Jungian myth than the myths of primitive or native American art which was believed to suggest raw and unenculturated responses to horror. These artists wanted their work to be more than artifice; they wanted to respond to the horrors of the modern world; and their attraction to primitive art resulted from what they saw to be its "demonic" and "brutal" imagery. The direction of the abstract expressionists, by the late 40s, was therefore not an a-historical one, and it was only a-political in the sense that they were not aligning themselves with liberals or conservatives, but they were clearly intent on making a statement of some sort about the world. To this end they rejected pure abstraction as being "purist constructions" and pure surrealism as being "personal tragedy." Yet, as the period evolved, American politics became impossible for radical intellectuals who began to desert politics entirely, and to assume a nearly nihilistic stance. In painting, this meant the elimination of "all

vestige[s] of physical reality" from the canvas.² Also at this time, with the Marshall Plan and the development of ties to France in order to prevent communism from gaining the upper hand, the export of American culture receives renewed support as a political strategy of sorts. But for many artists, alienation starts to be seen as a viable mode of existence, rather than as a form of deviance, because alienation is equated with liberty and privilege; consequently, the American artist works to develop an art which can depict or express alienation.

In popular culture, an interesting phenomenon begins to emerge – abstract expressionism was associated with elitism, being unusual and different from the middle class, and was a sign of prestige. For the middle class, it was an object of scandal which perversely guaranteed its success. In the taking up of abstract expressionism by the political center, Pollock was hailed as a cultural hero who could be the catalyst for the acceptance of the new American "school."

The value of this narrative lies precisely in its explanation for the co-optation of abstract expressionism and its ability to serve as a corrective to explanations which are rooted almost entirely in formalist observations. But it comes up short in terms of explaining the particular look and nature of abstract expressionism, especially in its variations from artist to artist. This, however, tends to be a weakness of most of the narratives – they are guided by the assumption of stylistic connections among these artists, and at times they assume or posit likenesses where none actually exist.

A more recent narrative, proposed by Michael Leja, does not implicitly accept the existence of a New York school and suggests that if we do identify the existence of one, it will probably have to be on the basis of historical and ideological grounds, "attending to the shared concern with adapting modernist artistic practice to notions of human nature and mind undergoing urgent revision in the culture." For Leja, as well as for Stephen Polcari (another historian who fits this type), this basis of ideology is largely a discourse about what he calls the "new man" and what others refer to as the "modern experience." Leja's use of history is therefore quite minimal, relying largely on cultural history and the facets of the environment which create a desire to signify, through style and content, a dynamic between control and the loss of control, or, on another plane, between unconsciously driven actions and rational or conscious acts. [It is difficult, by the way, to include Krasner in a group dedicated to the evocation of the "new man" – her narratives may be implicitly and inherently female and this may itself preclude her from membership in the abstract expressionist rubric, unless we identify a competing and complementary discourse to that of the "new man."]

Part 2. Style and Stylistic Sources of Abstract Expressionism

Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKooning, Arshile Gorky, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Lee Krasner (Krasner is difficult to place – she seems to fit on the basis of visual stylistic parallels, but ideologically, or in terms of the narratives which she centralizes, she

²Guilbaut, p. 142.

raises issues that set her apart from abstract expressionism): with the exception of Krasner, these are the artists who generally share the title of abstract expressionists. Others (Clyfford Still, Wifredo Lam, Franz Kline, for ex.) are often included, depending on which book you read.

For all these artists, I would suggest that the issue is not existentialism, at least not in Rosenberg's terms, nor is it an issue of making the act of painting into the painting – the issue is that of finding oneness, finding it as an artistic process and as an inner quest for survival, and finding it as a social and historical entity: a oneness of people, of the past and the present, and of the living organism and nature. In this respect, the art reflects the process and result of revelation or self-discovery, with self-discovery becoming a metaphor for the artistic quest.

In this quest, I think the science of alchemy becomes relevant, and it may actually give support to Greenberg's argument of continuity between the Renaissance and abstract expressionism, since alchemy was one of the myths of northern Renaissance art. It is also a myth which sheds understanding on, which illuminates, much of modernism, especially artists who have been associated with an interest in theosophy – Mondrian, for example, and so it may provide a connection between Newman and Mondrian, Newman and Malevich, or even Rothko and Mondrian. This connection does not establish inevitability of the evolution of art, but it does provide developmental connections which may again, oddly, provide some support for Greenberg's way of thinking.

To the extent that this is art about making art – and this is actually one of the rather few ways in which the art of someone like DeKooning can be grouped together with Newman or even with Pollock – we again return to the possibility of a formalist inevitability, but also again, I see this as serving a metaphoric role. In this case, the metaphor is one for creating a new world, and this, ultimately, is the real theme of abstract expressionism, and in that sense, abstract expressionism can be seen to be political. At the same time, these artists are consummate artists, by which I mean they approach the act of making art as the most important act anyone can engage in. That may sound like an obvious statement to make about an artist but with the exception of the surrealists before them, the notion or feasibility of making one's life about nothing but art was not the practice of most artists.

I see two main divisions or currents within abstract expression and related to this goal: one is an ontological current, having to do with origins, with coming into existence; and the second is a spiritual current, finding meaning in existence. To define these divisions further, the ontological current in its struggle to come into existence involves a process of creating chaos, because it is out of chaos that new worlds can emerge. The key artists of abstract expressionism whom I associate with this goal are Jackson Pollock and Willem DeKooning, and to a lesser extent, Arshile Gorky and Robert Motherwell. I say to a lesser extent for the latter two because they are in between the two currents. The spiritual current has as its central focus the resolution of chaos, and the key artists here are Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. This manner of dividing the artists into two currents is hardly unique, although the label of the second current, as "spiritual," is subject to change.

What are the characteristics of chaos? Liminality, or a state of in-between, ambiguities, instability of forms and values and beliefs, and excessive complexity. These can all be attributes of an artistic style or language and are identifiable in the language of abstract

expressionism. The language of abstract expressionism derives from philosophical premises and stylistic roots. The philosophical sources lie in existentialism and Freudian and Jungian psychology, as well as in a stylistic and philosophical rejection of traditional history paintings, American scene realism, and the illusionary paintings of surrealism. Yet, this does not lead to a rejection of meaning in art--it implies a search for new methods of communicating meaning. The artists of abstract expressionism shared a belief in art as a means of establishing a public dialogue, a dialogue in which seemingly private material is treated on a public scale. They also shared the belief that art could not be descriptive, since description meant acceptance of the current state of things. In place of description, art had to emphasize the impossibility of description – this becomes, in some ways, an art of erasure, an art which covers its tracks. It also strives to be an art which embodies the idea of "freedom" and in this way, to become the quintessential American art. Also from these sources, taken together, comes the belief that the expression of the unconscious can be an act in one's life, this act can be art, and art can be a part of the person's biography. But this goes beyond Rosenberg's sense of the art work as an act in the artist's life because it is also a deliberate search for a pictorial expression of the complexity of the inner self – and this expression, when it is found, becomes a metaphor for the complexity of the era (the post-world war II world). Art, in this way, serves as the means for a transformation of social and intellectual despair into redemption and transcendence.

The role of primitive mythology and images/ideographs and the sublime relate to the influence of Jung as well as to native American art, and becomes the means for bringing a more universal and at times primordial meaning to art – so that these art works, which begin in private acts or rituals, become "the visual remembrances of archaic experience."

Inner versus outer; personal versus archetypal; private versus public--in addition to these dynamics is a dynamic which more completely relates to the visual strategies: control versus loss of control; order versus disorder – dynamics expressed in the process and forms of the art work but reflecting the dynamics of post-war society.

Stylistic sources or commonalities:

- the shallow space and planarity of abstract cubism
- the psychic automatism and biomorphism of abstract surrealism: Automatism is not used in the same way by each of these artists, but in general, it is a means of overriding rational thought, and along with biomorphism it allowed the artist to begin to build a reality derived from inner life and thought, and to transform it into something new.
- from Kandinsky: freedom of brushwork, a moral/spiritual tone, painterliness, spontaneity
- from Hans Hofmann: exposure to the ideas of Kandinsky, the combination of fauvist colors and cubist space; the use of automatism to generate form
- elimination of the "closed-form" canon (the circumscribed form) in favor of the mass image, the overall composition
- native American or other forms of "primitive" imagery
- increasing scale, so that the painting becomes an environment--the critical source here are the murals of the Mexican muralists, some of whom were intimately involved with WPA, and virtually all the abstract expressionists had ties to WPA

- from the American Scene: the belief that painting can convey a narrative

The narrative strategies, or the language, which dominates these paintings are strategies of negation, of disjunction, of opacity. These are layered narratives of ambivalence and boundaries and frustrations, with plots that are enigmatic and chaotic and at times, incomprehensible. Ultimately, these paintings contain a shifting balance between negation and assertion, between a desire to signify and a desire to erase.

Unanswered questions:

Taken together, the changing political climate and its expectations from art, along with the arguments of Greenberg and of Rosenberg, certain key questions emerge with respect to abstract expressionism:

- 1) Is abstract expressionism "inevitable"? (This would be the implication of Greenberg's theory.)
- 2) Does it really reflect self-discovery and revelation (as Rosenberg believes)?
- 3) If it is an act of risk-taking, what type of risk is this?
- 4) Is this art a form of a-political expression or is it, in fact, a potent political statement?