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Abstraction, Expression, Kitsch:
American Painting in a Critical Context, 1936–1951

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**Abstraction, Expression, Kitsch:
American Painting in a Critical Context, 1936–1951**

by

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Dissertation

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To Dad, Mara, and Jami

The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everybody's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.

~ E. B. (Elwyn Brooks) White, *Here is New York*, 1949

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Abstraction, Expression, Kitsch:
American Painting in a Critical Context, 1936–1951

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This following is a study on abstract painting: the critical reception and analysis of painterly practice— performative, experimental, dissenting—in New York from 1936 to 1951. By metonymy, this study also looks at the figure in the political realm via the critiques offered by socially-oriented critics at this time (some of whom were also art critics). As the boundless secondary literature on this period has noted, the painting of the New York School would “triumph” with “stunning success” by the late 1950s. In other regards, the subject of this dissertation is that of failure. The revolution (or, “the idea of Revolution”) that had been hoped for by so many left-wing radicals in the 1930s never quite came to pass or, later, went horribly wrong: first in Spain and then elsewhere. “Modern art, like modern literature and modern life,” Clement Greenberg concluded in a 1948 essay on the Old Masters “has lost much.” Greenberg’s essay on the Old Masters appeared in the same number of *Partisan Review* as Hannah Arendt’s essay, “The Concentration Camps.” This is the generation of critics, intellectuals and artists who bore the brunt of articulating the unspeakable horrors of the Camps and the Bomb—manmade places and events that were “beyond human comprehension.”

This study is also about belief, of kinds: a Modernist belief in the agency of the artist, in the discernment of the critic, and of a “superstitious regard for print,” to which Greenberg referred with irony in a 1957 essay (artists didn’t always believe what they read, he would conclude). Irving Howe, the founder of *Dissent* in 1954, supposedly once quipped that, “when intellectuals can do nothing else, they start a magazine.” The dissertation at hand contains a number of kinds of critical statements: ones of ambiguity and of skepticism, and others of crisis and disinterest, directed towards art objects and elsewhere, and expressed by writers at mid-century, some especially subtle and acute. Modernist belief, even if betrayed too often, allowed these critics often to escape velleities, or other empty gestures, in their writing.

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Chapter I: Introduction

I. Figure/Ground

This following is a study on abstract painting: the critical reception and analysis of performative, experimental, dissenting painterly practice in New York from 1936 through 1951. By metonymy, this study also looks at the figure in the political realm via the critiques offered by socially-oriented critics at this time (some of whom were also art critics). This is, in effect, also a study in time: the dialectic (historical, technical, etc.) was the main interpretive tool of this generation of critics. While, as the boundless secondary literature on this period has noted, the painting of the New York School would “triumph”¹ with “stunning success”² by the late 1950s. In other regards, the subject of this dissertation is that of failure. The revolution (or, “the idea of Revolution”) that had been hoped for by so many left-wing radicals in the 1930s never quite came to pass or, later, went horribly wrong: first in Spain and then elsewhere.³ “Modern art, like modern literature and modern life,” Clement Greenberg concluded in a 1948 essay on the Old Masters “has lost much.”⁴ Greenberg’s essay on the Old Masters appeared in the same number of *Partisan Review* as Hannah Arendt’s essay, “The Concentration Camps.”⁵ This is the generation of critics, intellectuals and artists who bore the brunt of articulating the unspeakable horrors of the Camps and the Bomb—manmade terrors that were “beyond human comprehension.”⁶

¹ From the title of Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

² Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 3.

³ Harold Rosenberg, “The Art World: The Thirties,” *The New Yorker* (30 November, 1968): 206.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, “The Necessity of the Old Masters,” *Partisan Review* 15:7 (July 1948): 813.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, “The Concentration Camps,” *Partisan Review* 15:7 (July 1948): 742–63.

⁶ *Ibid*, 742.

This study is also about belief, of kinds: a Modernist belief in the agency of the artist and in the discernment of the critic, and in a “superstitious regard for print,” to which Greenberg referred with irony in a 1957 essay (artists didn’t always believe what they read, he would conclude).⁷ Irving Howe, the founder of *Dissent* in 1954, supposedly once quipped that, “when intellectuals can do nothing else, they start a magazine.” The dissertation at hand contains a number of kinds of critical statements: ones of ambiguity and of skepticism, and others of crisis and disinterest, directed towards art objects and elsewhere, and expressed by writers at mid-century, some especially subtle and acute. Modernist belief, even if betrayed too often, allowed these critics often to escape velleities, or other empty gestures, in their writing.

II. Tilt

In its own inadequacy, [formalism] brings [hidden or unconscious philosophical presuppositions] to the surface, and thus leads to authentic ontological questions.

~ Paul de Man, “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism,” 1956⁸

Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the canvas, the properties of the pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism, these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly.

~ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook*, 1961⁹

⁷ Clement Greenberg, “New York Painting Only Yesterday,” *Art News* 56:4 (Summer 1957): 59.

⁸ Paul de Man, “The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, intro., Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983): 231. De Man’s essay was initially published as “L’Impasse de la critique formaliste,” *Critique* 109 (1956): 438–500.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 103–4.

I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.

~ Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 1970¹⁰

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At some point, it would seem, formalist art criticism lost its edge, or it was discovered to be inadequate to its object (or, always to have been so). However, as these epigraphs demonstrate, the perceived inadequacies of formalism yielded other possible insights. De Man's 1956 essay, which remains the obligatory starting point for a critique of the formalist method, placed the failures and successes of formalism in touch with each other.

[E]ven if it were at the point of being overtaken, formalist criticism would still have made a considerable contribution: on the positive side, by fostering the refinement of analytical and didactic techniques that have often led to remarkable exegeses; on the negative side, by highlighting the inadequacies of the historical approach as it was practiced in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of critical practice in the United States (or, in the art world here), the discourse turns, ineluctably, to the work of Greenberg, whose mid-century formalist criticism extended the flexible boundaries of the method itself, and whose body of work could be cited in support of de Man's dialectical assertion as to the methodological yields.

Greenberg established himself through the practice of his criticism—his experiences from which he came to conclusions about how modernism works.<sup>12</sup> Greenberg identified what

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972): 84.

<sup>11</sup> Paul de Man, "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism," 230.

<sup>12</sup> For the use of this phrase, see the exchange between Timothy J. Clark and Michael Fried: Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (September 1982): 139–56; Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T.J. Clark," *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (September 1982): 217–94; and Clark, "Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried," in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983): 239–48.

came to be seen by art historians and critics as the orientation of advanced painting towards: “the flat surface, the shape of the canvas, the properties of the pigment.” The initial publication of “Modernist Painting” was accompanied by some striking comparisons between old and new ‘masters’ (figs. 1–3). The formal resemblances are there to be made for those so inclined, if other considerations are suppressed. Lately, it seems, it has been more interesting to discuss that which may have been suppressed (perhaps actively repressed) to arrive at those comparisons. Subsequent publications of Greenberg’s essay are usually stripped of its illustrations, leaving the bare text on the page, ripe for citation and distillation. Perhaps it was the repetition of such distilled phrases by later speakers that rendered Greenbergian formalism cliché. Subsequent generations would be willing to accept a theory in advance of an experience before a work of art (and, later even, images *in lieu* of a body of work). Steinberg’s 1970 essay articulates—possibly better than any other—the limitations against which formalism found itself straining by the 1970s. The critical judgments of formalism—arrived at by its own criterion—became extraneous; by its own refusal to be at play amongst other criteria, it made itself irrelevant.

The cliché of either/or has been re-articulated by Yve-Alain Bois: “Either one is a formalist, hence necessarily oblivious to meaning, or one is an anti-formalist, hence entirely uninterested in formal matters.”<sup>13</sup> Resisting the trappings of this structural binary (however much self inflicted), to which Bois refers as a kind of intellectual blackmail, is one of the endeavors of his text.<sup>14</sup> In his own desire to recover something from formalist methods, Thierry de Duve has sought to arrive at an understanding of modern art beyond

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<sup>13</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990): xvii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.



the (now) clichés of Modernist morphology (the flatness of the canvas and the shape of the support, etc.) De Duve has argued that the *avant-garde* begins when painters no longer know to whom they address their work.<sup>15</sup> He has turned his attention to the structure of modernist painting (i.e. modes of address, how modern paintings speak vulgarly to the bourgeoisie, at times).<sup>16</sup> As with Greenberg, this leaves the content of the work unexpressed. The apparent divide between form and content (and address) in the abstract paintings of the 1930s is the subject of chapter two.

In 1971, Greenberg revisited his own methods and arrived at the necessity of ‘formalism’.<sup>17</sup> Careful readers of Greenberg will note the judicious and consistent use of scare quotes to suggest an extreme that may never be met in culture (or, has never been so, at least in his own rhetoric). This applies to the threat of the blank canvas, a dialectical understanding of history, or an absolute formalist method. Art “gets experienced...for its own sake,” Greenberg concluded in his 1971 essay.<sup>18</sup> This is what is recognized in Modernism as the “ultimate value” of “esthetic value,” however, the “esthetic is not a *supreme* value or end of life.” This distinction is something the “art-for-art-sakers” tended to neglect, and thereby “compromised a valid perception.”<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, like Mondrian, recognized that ‘formalism’ sometimes played in “a little dirt.”<sup>20</sup> Chapters three and four of this dissertation attend to episodes that made manifest the problems

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<sup>15</sup> Thierry de Duve, private communication, 4 May, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> See Thierry de Duve, *Voici: 100 ans d'art contemporain*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Ghent, Amsterdam: Ludion, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> See Clement Greenberg, “Necessity of ‘Formalism’,” *New Literary History* 3:1 (Autumn 1971): 171–5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Piet Mondrian, quoted by Max Ernst, statement in “Eleven Europeans in America,” *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 13:4/5 (1946): 18. Cited in Richard Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” in *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press with the Barnett Newman Foundation, 2004): 25, 98, n. 165. (Hereafter, BNCR.)

associated with methods that insisted upon giving expression to the content of a work of art. The larger point of this dissertation is to examine some of the materialist origins of the approach to art that considers its forms—the “tilt” between nature and culture (two extremes, long sought, though never entirely found nor met).

### III. Empathy/Negation

The perfectly conditioned has no need of action, since it is itself the end.

~ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, Book II, Chapter 12, as cited by Karl Marx in *Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*, 1841<sup>21</sup>

The Greek architect approaches his material, stone, with a certain sensuousness and therefore allows the material to express itself as such. The Gothic architect, on the other hand, approaches stone with a purely spiritual desire for expression and with constructive goals, which were formed independently of stone. Stone for him is only as external and dependent means of realization. The result is an abstract constructive system in which stone has only a practical, non-artistic meaning.

~ Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Götik*, 1911<sup>22</sup>

Watch your hands as they live their own free life....Trainer of man, the hand multiplies him in space and time.

~ Henri Focillon, *La vie des formes*, 1934<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cited by Mikhail Lifshitz, in *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (New York: The Critics Group, 1938): 18. For the citation in its initial context of Marx's dissertation, see *Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie* in *Marx/Engels: Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. I, ed. V. Andoratsky (Moscow: Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, 1927–35): 30.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Götik*, intro. and ed. Herbert Read (New York, 1957). Worringer's book was initially published in Munich in 1911. The epigraph above is cited in M.M. Bakhtin and P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans., Albert J. Wehrle, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1978): 51.

<sup>23</sup> Henri Focillon, *La vie des formes* (Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1934). Focillon's text was translated into English in 1948, from which the above citation is taken. See Focillon, *La vie des formes*, (New York: George Wittenborn, 1948): 66, 78. Greenberg once remarked privately on the occasion of the Wittenborn translation that Focillon's was “the best formalist essay.” See the collected Greenberg Papers at the Getty Research Institute (Series IV, Work Files: clippings and manuscripts, 1939–1994, box 32, folder 4).

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No problem gets solved with finality, or at least not for very long. This does not mean that the always-interim solutions are not meaningful or lacking in finality. (To suggest otherwise would be outrageous proposition to the “acting and suffering subjects of history,” Max Horkheimer concluded in 1930.²⁴) One of the constants in discourse is the self-reflexive restatement of a critique of the method. In an essay that was only published posthumously, M.M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) offered an authoritative analysis of the constructs of formalism, and in doing so, considered the ideological dimension of form:

The basic positions of the formal movement in Western art scholarship that we have summarized give no grounds whatsoever for the denial of content in art. No matter how it is understood, i.e., no matter what elements of the artistic construction we conditionally attach to the concept, all that follows from these basic formalist principles is that content necessarily has a constructive function within the closed unity of the work, the same function as all the other elements conditionally united in the concept of form.

In 1969, de Man made yet another statement (this one regarding early Romantic literature) on the consequences of attaining the closed unity of the work itself:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origins, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self.²⁵

The painful recognition of non-self is what some of the painters, discussed in the following pages, registered in their work—work that grew and formed through their

²⁴ Max Horkheimer, “Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?” *Gründbergs Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, XV (1930). Reprinted in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings of Max Horkheimer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993): 137.

²⁵ De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 207. This initially appeared in *Interpretation*, ed., Charles Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

contact (their ‘dialogic’ technique) with it. There is a vast difference between leaving content unexpressed, suppressing content, and creating art that is about nothing. Tracing the patterns of these ideological (man-made) chasms from the 1930s through the 1950s is one of the purposes of this dissertation.

In his 1911 *Formprobleme der Götik*, Worringer offered a binary between the sensuousness (Greek) and un-sensuousness (Gothic) approach to materials. It’s a traditional divide between Classical and Medieval attitudes constructed in art-historical scholarship. Worringer’s assessment of the Greek (or, Classical) approach to materials transcends (productively) the usual divide between Classical and Modernist modes of creating. With the idea that the Ancients allowed for the sensuous (self-assertion) of their materials, Worringer made the Classical attitude contiguous with (or, resemble) a precept that has come to be identified as Greenbergian. (Even if Greenberg himself argued that Modernism was a historical phenomenon, not a specific attitude.²⁶) One could argue that the trust that Worringer ascribed elsewhere in his narrative to the empathetic, realist artist, in Modernism, was transposed by mid-century artists to a trust in the reality of her materials and technique. Indeed, the self-consciousness of technique could allow the artist to transcend one of the most familiar metaphors/binaries in the history of art: that of Apollo and Dionysus. (These mythic figures appear at various points throughout this dissertation.) “Artisanal hard-headedness” did not exclude “passion” (or, vice-versa), Greenberg argued, not for the first time, in his 1971 essay.²⁷

While Worringer’s ideas were reasserted (posthumously) by Bakhtin in 1978, his texts were never really out of sight. In 1944, Clement Greenberg suggested to Barnett

²⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Necessity of ‘Formalism’”, 171.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

Newman that he read Worringer's *Formprobleme der Götik*, which was, as of 1927, available in English.²⁸ (The artist had just curated the *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* show for the Wakefield Gallery in New York City.²⁹) T.E. Hulme's *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, which was edited by Herbert Read and published in 1926, was the traditional source for English-reading audiences of Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, which was only translated into English in 1953.³⁰ However, as a fluent reader of German, this language barrier would have been transparent to Greenberg. Hans Hofmann, as a native speaker, would not have experienced this barrier either. As Ilya Bolotowsky recalled in an interview with Susan C. Larsen, "the students at the Hofmann school must have known that Hofmann said abstraction was empathy.... Have you ever seen a book by Willem Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy?*"³¹ In that same interview, with words heavily salted with

²⁸ See "An Exchange: Annalee Newman and W. Jackson Rushing," *Art Journal* 48:3 (Autumn 1989): 268–9. For the initial translation of Worringer's work, see: *Form in Gothic*, ed. and intro., Herbert Read (London, Putnam, 1927).

²⁹ The exhibition ran from 16 May through 5 June, 1944. For the exhibition catalogue of this show, see Barnett Newman, *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* (New York: The Wakefield Gallery, 1944). His introduction with a subsequent letter are re-printed in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, intro., Richard Schiff, text notes and commentary, etc. Mollie McNickle (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992): 61–5. (Hereafter, BNSWI.) For Newman's assessment that Worringer's explanation "that man's art is a reflection of his attitude toward the universe," although "interesting" is without "substance," see "Painting and Prose/Frankenstein," in BNSWI, 93.

³⁰ See BNSWI, 92 n. McNickle makes this assertion again in her unpublished dissertation, "The Mind and Art of Barnett Newman" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 1996): 54, n. 16. See Thomas Ernest Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed., Herbert Read, with a frontispiece and foreword by Jacob Epstein (New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc.; London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1924): 82–91. A copy of Hulme's book was held in Newman's personal library along with several volumes written or edited by Herbert Read. See "Barnett Newman's Library," in BNCR: 614–46. For the first English-language translation of Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, see, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans., Michael Bullock (New York: International Universities Press, 1953).

³¹ Susan C. Larsen, "Going Abstract in the '30s: An Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky," *Art in America*, 64:5 (September–October, 1976): 72. This is also cited in the unpublished dissertation of Mollie McNickle, "The Mind and Art of Barnett Newman," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Pennsylvania, 1996): 55, n. 17.

irony, Bolotowsky said that he and Balcomb Greene were either good pure abstractionists or bad ones: “we had no empathy at all.”³²

Indeed, in his own commentary on abstraction, Hulme drew a division between “natural” art (that of the Greeks and art since the Renaissance), in which the lines are “soft and vital,” and that of “other” arts (Egyptian, Indian, and Byzantine), in which the lines are “geometrical” and “non-vital.”³³ He concluded that contemporary geometrical painting was a new manifestation akin to these “geometrical arts” of the past.³⁴ The critical play between gestural and geometric abstraction—with and without empathy—is the subject of chapters three and four; Greenberg’s presence as a student in Hofmann’s seminars in is one of the subjects of chapter five.

IV. Scope & Organization

What constituted abstraction—what the mark as well as the word represented—was at issue for art critics and art historians in the late 1930s. In a brief 1939 essay in the Parisian revue *Prométhée*, Maurice Denis (1870–1943), for one, struck upon an understanding of painting-as-abstraction:

All painters, and especially the colorists, translated nature into marks [*taches*] of color. To reduce nature to nothing other than a system of colored marks is a primordial necessity of the art of painting, only hinted at by the Masters, because of the complexity of the representative and psychological elements of the painting.³⁵

Abstraction, to Denis, was not something new—it was just made manifest by the Modernists. When Alfred H. Barr made his choices for the 1936 MoMA exhibition

³² Susan C. Larsen, “Going Abstract in the ’30s: An Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky,” 72.

³³ Hulme, *Speculations*, 82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁵ Maurice Denis, “L’aventure posthume de Cézanne,” *Prométhée* (July 1939): 193.

“Cubism and Abstract Art,” which serves as the starting point for the dissertation at hand, no representative showing of abstract painting as practiced by Americans was selected. It is clear from the contents of his catalogue essay that the achievements in abstraction of which he wrote were somewhere else (mostly with Denis in France). American abstraction would eventually emerge from its evidently secondary status. In 1948, Greenberg would offer the “impression” that if advanced art (that is, abstract painting) was to have any sort of future, that future was dependent upon what was done in America.³⁶ In 1950, MoMA would acquire Jackson Pollock’s *Number 1A, 1948*, a large-scale drip painting that would become emblematic of Abstract Expressionism (fig. 36).³⁷ Three works by the artist were also exhibited in the Venice Biennale that year, as representative of the achievements of American abstraction, if not also of its culture.

The prefatory chapter begins, admittedly, in a strange place for dissertation on mid-century American abstract painting. This chapter examines an episode in European (Viennese) art history: the publication of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* in Vienna in the early 1930s. Both Walter Benjamin and Meyer Schapiro responded in print to the publication that was edited by Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt. (In this analysis, one crisis situation is exchanged for another.) I argue that the critiques put forth by Benjamin and Schapiro were of consequence for later scholars and art critics, many of whom, under extreme duress, found themselves in New York. This chapter establishes the means by

³⁶ Clement Greenberg, “The Situation at the Moment,” *Partisan Review*, 15:1 (January 1948): 82.

³⁷ This was not the first purchase made by the museum of a work by Pollock. At the recommendation of James Thrall Soby, James Johnson Sweeney, and Sidney Janis, Barr approved the acquisition of *The She-Wolf* (see fig. 80) in May of 1944. The painting had been shown earlier that year at Pollock’s first one-person show at Art of This Century. It was the first Pollock acquired by any museum; the purchase price was \$650. See Kirk Varnedoe with Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999): 320.

which the dialectic (or, the myth of it) became the dominant diagnostic tool for advanced art.

The second chapter traces critical statements made about abstraction in the early 1930s, mostly in conjunction with major exhibitions or spaces of exposition, and those statements made in response to those bodies. These include the trio of exhibitions held at MoMA in 1936–7: “Cubism and Abstract Art,” “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” and “New Horizons in American Art.” I also consider criticism occasioned by smaller exhibitions: such as the 1935 Whitney exposition, “Abstract Painting in America,” and other shows held at Albert E. Gallatin’s downtown Gallery of Living Art. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the ‘Cézanne effect’, circa 1939, as expressed in the critical statements made by of Maurice Denis.

In the third chapter, I continue to trace the competing claims for abstraction in the 1930s through an analysis of wider discursive practice during this decade. This includes select examples of art criticism from a wide spectrum of political journals, including: *The Daily Worker*, *The New Republic*, *The Marxist Quarterly*, *Dialectics*, and *Partisan Review*. This chapter also traces German-language criticism that was in circulation in the U.S. at this time. Specifically, I examine the *Expressionismus* controversy in *Das Wort*.

The fourth chapter attends to the ‘myth’ of the historical dialectic. The discussion encompasses debates staged in the pages of *Partisan Review*, including Greenberg’s celebrated 1939 essay, “*Avant Garde* and Kitsch”, and the formalism of Leon Trotsky, as demonstrated by his open letters published in the journal in 1938 and 1939. These letters were published shortly before his murder in Mexico in 1940. The chapter concludes with

a discussion of John Dewey's efforts on Trotsky's behalf, and with an analysis of their shared concerns about the art object.

Art criticism published in *The Nation* and *Partisan Review* is coupled with that published in the artist-run publications of the 1940s is the central focus of the fifth chapter. These publications include: *Dyn*, *VVV*, *Tiger's Eye*, and *Possibilities*. This chapter concerns the self-representations made by abstract painters themselves, through the mode of criticism or polemical statements. In this chapter, specifically, I examine the controversy surrounding the mid-decade mythological paintings of Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, and the efforts of Barnett Newman made on their behalf in their defense. Secondly, this chapter places Greenberg's early formalist essays within a larger discursive context through an analysis of T.S. Eliot's "Notes on Culture" published in two different forms in the 1940s. Specifically, this chapter examines Greenberg's response to the work of the Jane Street Co-op painters, including Judith Rothschild.

In the sixth chapter, I examine critical and cultural notions of space and topography in relation to abstract painting that were at play in the late 1940s and early 1950s: namely, the terms 'all-over' and the 'center'. These include Greenberg's notion of the all-over Abstract Expressionist composition with regard to Pollock's drip paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the scholarly work of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1949) and Hans Sedlmayr (1950), and their notions of the center (vital and otherwise). This dissertation concludes with an analysis with an analysis of "What Abstract Art Means to Me," a symposium held at MoMA in 1951.

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When Benjamin wrote “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he offered concepts for a theory of art that would be “completely useless for the purposes of Fascism.” Shortly before his death at the Spanish border in 1940, he finished “Theses on History,” in which he argued that the current “‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”<sup>38</sup> In its rhetoric, it is a statement not wholly unlike the one made about abstraction in 1939 by Denis (who took a very different political position during the War from Benjamin). Crisis, for these writers, is nothing new; it is rather part and parcel of modernity. Well after the war had ended, de Man would write (as an expatriate) that in periods without “crisis...there can be no criticism.”<sup>39</sup> For de Man, criticism was a type of “crisis-statement.”<sup>40</sup> This dissertation traces the crisis statements made by critics of abstract painting in its critical formative years. That certain intellectuals, Denis or de Man for example, could be avant-garde in their thinking on art and criticism, yet could also assume politically conservative positions (even reactionary ones) is one of the ironies I investigate. In this dissertation, the abstract mark and the painter’s schema stand as points of contact between the artist, the work of art, and the public (in the body of the critic).

## V. “Background and Paris:” Literature Review<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 257. This essay would be published posthumously in *Neue Rundschau* 61:3 (1950).

<sup>39</sup> Paul de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” 8. This essay was initially delivered as a lecture at the University of Texas and was published as “The Crisis of Contemporary Criticism,” *Arion* (Spring 1967).

<sup>40</sup> de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” 14.

<sup>41</sup> See “Part Two: Background and Paris” in Thomas Hess, *Abstract Painting* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951).

The mid-1930s saw a number of retrospective or historical accounts of abstract painting. Most prominent amongst these accounts were Alfred H. Barr's exhibition catalogues for the Museum of Modern Art, which sought to establish trends in abstraction within a continuum of Western art. Barr, as one critic amongst several, argued that a shift (or, dislocation) was taking place in abstract painting in the mid-1930s: working out of a post-Cubist fatigue, organic or biomorphic abstraction was in the process of replacing geometric abstraction. The end of this study roughly coincides with the publication of Thomas B. Hess's volume, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*. His initial assessment of mid-century American abstraction arrived relatively early: in 1951, just one year past the mid-century mark. It is a reflective history on the accomplishments of abstract painting (mostly expressive or gestural) in the previous decades. Hess sought to establish Abstract Expressionism in a tradition of great art. His volume is skillfully divided between an historical background (Paris) and a then-current foreground (New York). For the purposes of this study, Hess's volume serves as a Janus-faced narrative: the start of the requisite literature review, and as an end for the timeline of the discourse traced. Not everyone was pleased that a book (*any* book) had materialized on this new painting. In an unpublished review of Hess's volume commissioned by *Partisan Review*, Barnett Newman wrote that it was a "very bad" book.<sup>42</sup> That it was, on the one hand, cluttered with mere "imitators of de Kooning," but, on the other, bereft of purported followers Mondrian indicated the extent of the

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<sup>42</sup> Barnett Newman, "Review of *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* by Thomas B. Hess," in BNSWI, 120. For a discussion of the reasons that this remained unpublished, see BNSWI, 118–9 n.

haphazardness and distortedness of his narrative.<sup>43</sup> Newman concluded his review with a cautionary warning on the health of the American art world, which he described as being in “a state of crisis.”<sup>44</sup> It was fine for a critic to argue publicly for an artist of his choosing, but that was “not enough.”<sup>45</sup> Rather, the critic had:

[T]he responsibility of examining with sincerity, publicly, the work they do not like or that they find hard to understand. Only in this way can the milieu be kept open so that every authentic artist becomes visible, whether he fits into one’s theories or not. Only thus can speculation concerning the arts be kept free, so that theories serve not as uniforms but only as elucidations of the experience of art.<sup>46</sup>

By the 1960s, Newman and Hess had reconciled.<sup>47</sup> In the meanwhile, in 1951, the artist had put his finger in the future wound of criticism on mid-century American painting.

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The secondary literature on Abstract Expressionism is seemingly boundless. As Richard Shiff has characterized the situation, “to study Abstract Expressionism is to encounter a surplus of evidence.”⁴⁸ It makes a potentially complete bibliography near impossible, though not necessary for this project as it is not a study of Abstract Expressionism, *per se*. Discontent is perhaps the one constant in the writings on/of mid-century American abstraction. The interventions and re-framings of this subject now seem to out-number authoritative texts within the discipline. This dissertation has its

⁴³ Barnett Newman, “Review of *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* by Thomas B. Hess,” in BNSWI, 120.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See, for example, Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Walker, 1969). A monograph by Hess was published in conjunction with the posthumous retrospective of the artist: *Barnett Newman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art with the New York Graphic Society, 1971).

⁴⁸ Richard Shiff, “Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism,” in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987): 94.

origins in this kind of discursive discontent. This kind of dissenting approach has been applied to the period as a whole: for example, Ann Gibson and Stephen Polcari edited a special number of *The Art Journal* (Fall 1988) entitled, “New Myths for Old: Redefining Abstract Expressionism.” Or, it has taken a monographic form: in conjunction with the retrospective of Jackson Pollock at MoMA in 1999, Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel edited *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches* (1999). This compilation of significant essays by senior scholars put many contributors, such as Rosalind Krauss, in the position of revisiting their own, earlier scholarship. (The possible triangulations are, indeed, manifold.⁴⁹)

One assumption remains held in common, though: scholars have generally agreed that the painters of the New York School trumped their European counterparts during this time. Two causal arguments have frequently been offered to support this thesis: the æsthetic superiority of the post-War American Abstract Expressionism, or, alternately, the expression of post-War American political superiority. Two books best represent these antipodal positions, respectively: Irving Sandler’s, *The Triumph of American Painting* (1976) and Serge Guilbaut’s *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (1983). This binary has been complicated by the work of T.J. Clark in his 1994 essay “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” and Michael Leja’s *Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940’s* from the same year. Both seek to understand Abstract Expressionism as a system of ideological representation: Clark’s essay, written in the form of a Situationist manifesto, attributes the “persistence” of these paintings (that is, an inability to make

⁴⁹ See Krauss, “Reading Jackson Pollock, Abstractly,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 221–42.

them a thing of the past) to their seemingly petit-bourgeois “vulgarity;” Leja looks at this movement as a transparent manifestation of ideologies of “the real” and “the self” in post-War America.⁵⁰ Andrew Hemingway has demonstrated in his volume, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*, that, in fact, the range of opinions within the organized left on the subject of abstraction were more varied than often assumed. In their respective essays, “American Art During the War”(1973) and “Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,”(1974), Max Kozloff and Eve Cockcroft, have attended to the subsequent strategic uses of Abstract Expressionist painting during the Cold War.⁵¹

If all of this implies that the layers of discourse are particularly thick, they are equally rich in many areas. My own research has benefited enormously from a few recent monographic studies: *Jackson Pollock* (Varnedoe and Karmel, 1999), *Barnett Newman* (Richard Shiff and Anne Temkin, 2002), *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Richard Shiff, *et al*, 2004), and *Seeing Rothko* (Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow, 2005). Caroline A. Jones’ chapter on Abstract Expressionism in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (1996) is a highly valuable for her consideration of the studio practice of these painters. That I have gently disagreed with some of the conclusions in Dr. Jones’ recent study, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (2005) only attests to the formidable depth of her scholarship.

⁵⁰ Timothy J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” *October* (Summer 1994): 36; Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940’s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994): 6.

⁵¹ In an interview with the author, Max Kozloff regretted that his essay seems to have been misinterpreted: his intentions were always to make the experience of these paintings “richer.” Author interview, Giverny, France July, 2005.

This study is written in a similar vein to ones that place the aesthetic work of art in proximity to or in contiguity with the cultural or the political. Ann Gibson's *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals* (1990) re-prints many of the essays from the artist-run periodicals of the 1940s and 1950s with a comprehensive bibliography. David Craven's *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique* (1999) attends to the cultural and political conditions in the 1950s, and uses heretofore unpublished documents from the papers of Meyer Schapiro and the State Department. Nancy Jachec's *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (2000) re-examines the post-War political conditions of Abstract Expressionism in the context of the new liberalism. Elaine O'Brien's 1997 dissertation, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg: Theaters of Love and Combat," argues for a common function in Rosenberg's social and art criticisms.

A number of anthologies have traced critical developments surrounding Abstract Expressionism more generally or broadly (beyond the collected work of an individual artist or critic). Most recently, and perhaps most comprehensively in regards to post-1950 historiography, Ellen Landau published in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (2005), which compiles a number of primary documents concerning the movement as well as secondary accounts of the movement arranged chronologically by decade. Landau's substantial work is comparable to the rich bibliographies compiled earlier by scholars, such as those by Stephen C. Foster in *Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (1973 and 1980), and David and Cecile Shapiro in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (1990). However, since one of my principle concerns for this project has been and continues to be the immediate circumstances of the

publication of the criticism, this dissertation has relied most heavily upon my own primary research. Each citation in this dissertation is given at its first instance of publication and then cross-referenced to an anthology, where necessary.

The organizing principle of this dissertation is the art criticism from the period, as a mode of public discourse. I attend to art criticism published in journals such as *Commentary*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Partisan Review*. While those publications remain in print, many other journals from this period were relatively short lived: *Art Front* (1934 to 1937), *Dyn* (6 issues between 1942 and 1944), *Marxist Quarterly* (four issues between 1937 and 1939), *The New Masses* (longer, 1925–1948), and *Possibilities* (one issue in 1948). The consequence of this approach is that, for the most part, the body of paintings considered by critics initially have been included in this account. Relevant examples of abstract paintings (or, many not necessarily considered to be examples of Abstract Expressionism) have been included in this study. The result is an object-oriented dissertation that reconnects the art criticism with the abstract art that occasioned it. Valuable anthologies of critical writing, e.g. *The Collected Work and Essays of Clement Greenberg*, or Rosenberg's *The Anxious Object*, re-print the essays minus the illustrations that were originally published along side them. For example, Pollock's *Grey Center* and *Totem II* were reproduced (though not directly mentioned) in Greenberg's "The Situation at the Moment" (see figs. 86 and 87).⁵²

⁵² Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review* 15:1 (January 1948): 81-84.

Throughout this dissertation, I found it productive to pit the critical attitudes of Harold Rosenberg against those of Clement Greenberg—and vice versa.⁵³ Rosenberg argued in 1962 that, “Almost all the originators of America’s abstract art had been steeped in the political art of the Depression.”⁵⁴ I argue that there is more to that statement than the iconographic (and, now-iconic) evocations of the Spanish Civil War by Robert Motherwell. By way of examples, an early chapter considers the critical response to Arshile Gorky’s murals at Newark Airport. The murals, now mostly lost, have been documented by Ruth Bowman in her catalogue, *Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky’s Aviation Murals Rediscovered* (1978). The work of Stuart Davis and Jacob Kainen figures prominently in the initial chapters, as does the early Expressionist work (not yet abstract) of Mark Rothkowitz and Adolph Gottlieb. American abstract painting, especially the geometric kind, has been extensively documented by John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen in their 1983 catalogue, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927–1944*. This has been an enormously valuable resource of artist biographies and excellent reproductions of works.

In terms of reconsidering critical statements on abstraction in their initial context, I have, in this dissertation, appealed to significant examples of literature that were of consequences for the critics of the time—written in modes other than criticism. Thorstein Veblen’s ideas on conspicuous consumption, first coined in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), were at issue for critics writing on commodity culture, such as Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” (*Partisan Review*, 1939), Adorno’s “Veblen’s Attack on

⁵³ See the undergraduate thesis of a precocious James Herbert, “The Political Origins of Abstract-Expressionist Art Criticism: The Early Theoretical and Critical Writings of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg,” which was published by the Stanford University Humanities Honors Program in 1985.

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, “From Pollock to Pop: Twenty Years of Painting and Sculpture,” *Holiday* (March 1966): 99.

Culture,” and Horkheimer’s “Art and Mass Culture,” (the latter two critiques were published in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 1941). German-language critiques of art and culture figure prominently in this study, in addition to the Frankfurt School writers (Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin). As a study on mid-century abstract painting, this dissertation begins in a strange place (for reasons that I hope become apparent as the narrative unfolds): with the publication of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* in 1931 and 1933. I also examine the *Expressionismus* debate that took place in the pages of *Das Wort* in 1938.

For this dissertation, I have also availed myself of the several academic studies of radicals and intellectuals in New York during this period, two written by participants in the era. Lionel Trilling’s essays, frequently published in *Partisan Review* throughout the 1940s, were later published in the collected form of *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (1950). Daniel Aaron, a former contributor to *Partisan Review*, chronicles left-wing writers in New York from 1912 to the early 1940s in *Writers on the Left* (1961). In *Writers and Partisans* (1968), James Gilbert offers a broad history of literary radicalism and the counter-culture in New York from 1900 to the 1940s. Similarly, Alan M. Wald’s *The New York Intellectuals* (1987) studies this prominent group of thinkers and writers and their variable involvement with radical politics from the 1930s through the 1980s. Taking his title in part from Trilling, Richard H. Pells looks at American intellectuals in the post-War period through the 1950s in *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (1985).

Chapter II:

On the Publication of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, ca. 1933

I. Prolegomenon/Practice Piece

Here it becomes evident that the hallmark of the new type of researcher is not the eye for the ‘all-encompassing whole’ nor the eye for the ‘complete context’ with which the sedate mediocrity of the founding period used to be completely engrossed. Rather, the most rigorous challenge to the new spirit of research is the ability to feel at home in the marginal domains. It is this ability that guarantees the collaborators of the new yearbook their place in the movement that...is filling the study of history with new life.

~ Walter Benjamin, “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,” 1933⁵⁵

The articles, in general, are sketchy, clever, unsystematic, and full of original *aperçus* and untested ‘belles-lettristic’ characterizations. No group of psychologists or physicists would venture to announce articles of such looseness as a contribution toward a more rigorous science of psychology or physics.

~ Meyer Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” 1936⁵⁶

It holds true here, too: one may reject the proffered solution, but one cannot get around the problem.

~ Hans Sedlmayr, “Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft,” 1931⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin (published under the pseudonym Detlef Holz), “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,” *Literaturblatt der Frankfurter Zeitung* 61:31 (30 July, 1933). In 1931, the editors of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* had rejected an earlier draft of the same essay in which the last sentences read: “...(which mediocrity has claimed for itself) but rather the capacity to be at home in the marginal domains. The men whose work is contained in this yearbook represent the most rigorous of this new type of researcher. They are the hope for their field of study.” Interpolated translation reprinted in *The Vienna School Reader*, ed., Christopher Wood, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (New York: Zone Books, 2000): 439–451. For re-prints of this same interpolated translation, see “Rigorous Study of Art: On the First Volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 47 (1988): 84–90; and *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume II*, ed., Michael W. Jennings, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999): 666–672. (Hereafter, WBSW.) Benjamin used the “Aryan” pseudonym beginning in 1933 (see the “Chronology” in WBSW, Vol. III, 431). For an un-interpolated version of each essay in the original, see Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. III, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Intros. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972): 363–374. (Hereafter, WBGS.)

⁵⁶ Meyer Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” *The Art Bulletin* 18:2 (June 1936): 259. Reprinted in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 453–485.

⁵⁷ Hans Sedlmayr, “Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft,” *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, I (1931): 19. In the original: “Auch hier gilt, Man kann die angebotene Lösung ablehnen, aber nicht das Problem umgehen.” Reprinted in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, trans. Mia Fineman, 153.

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In the mid-1930s, Walter Benjamin and Meyer Schapiro each responded in print to the provocative work of a group of scholars who would come to be called the New Vienna School. The impetus for each of their essays was the publication of the journal *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*. The new journal, edited by two young university instructors, Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984) and Otto Pächt (1902–1988), appeared only twice: once in 1931, and again in 1933. Benjamin’s review of the first volume appeared in 1933; Schapiro’s review of the second appeared in 1936. In their respective essays, however, each author gave consideration to Sedlmayr’s essay of 1931, “Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft.” In his essay, which both Benjamin and Schapiro termed “programmatic,” Sedlmayr laid out the differences between the old art history and the new theoretical method of *Strukturanalyse* or *Strukturforschung*.<sup>58</sup> (It was in this essay that Sedlmayr introduced those critical terms.) This new approach necessarily availed itself of the earlier work Alois Riegl (1858–1905), in general, and Riegl’s concept of the *Kunstwollen*, in particular.

The structure Sedlmayr proposed for the new method was two-tiered (perhaps the most familiar binary of Structuralism): the first was factual, empirical; the second, interpretive, speculative. Through *Strukturanalyse*, according to Sedlmayr, the work of art, if properly addressed with the “correct attitude,” could produce new insights into the figuring imagination and material culture that had produced it.<sup>59</sup> In both volumes of the journal, the Vienna group demonstrated this new, structural approach through a series of practical pieces. The essays were far ranging in time, topic, and topography;

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<sup>58</sup> Benjamin, WBSW, Vol. II, 667; and Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” 258.

<sup>59</sup> Sedlmayr, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 148.

circumscribed and monographic in subject.<sup>60</sup> The Vienna scholars wrote themselves, critically, into the marginalia of art history proper of the time. This is where Benjamin found (and recognized) them; Schapiro found their results sketchy. The discordant opinions held by Benjamin and Schapiro on the Vienna School were not limited to issues usually placed (and neutered) under the category of intellectual differences. Schapiro (1904–1996) had the benefit of time; Benjamin (1892–1940) did not.

In 1931, the editors of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* had rejected a pithier and more polemical draft of Benjamin's essay. When Benjamin's assessment of the Vienna group was finally published in 1933, in a heavily revised form, much had yet to happen (or become widely known). In the 1930s and 1940s, Sedlmayr's methodological interest in "*Kunstwissenschaft als Geisteswissenschaft*" would take an obscene turn towards national identity, forcing a complete break with Pächt in 1933.<sup>61</sup> Sedlmayr would become an avid and increasingly public supporter of National Socialism, joining the Nazi party from 1932 to 1933.<sup>62</sup> And, in 1936, Sedlmayr would notoriously succeed his teacher, Julius von Schlosser, as the director of the Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Vienna. Still later, in 1938, Pächt would be forced to leave Vienna, as were many of his fellow Jewish colleagues. He was able to immigrate to England, eventually taking up a position at Oxford University.<sup>63</sup> For his part in 1938, Sedlmayr praised the *Anschluss* of that year in a prefatory note to the *Festschrift* for Wilhelm Pinder and hailed Hitler in its conclusion.

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<sup>60</sup> Studies included: the organizational design principles of fifteenth century Northern painting; the visionary architectural drawings of Claude-Nicholas Ledoux (1736–1806); a study on the figure-alphabet of the Master ES; and an analysis of Hagia Sophia.

<sup>61</sup> Sedlmayr, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 149.

<sup>62</sup> See the Introduction in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 12–13.

<sup>63</sup> Eventually, Pächt returned to Europe; his positions in Britain were always impermanent. From 1963 to his retirement in 1972, Pächt co-directed the art history institute at the University of Vienna with Otto Demus. See Christopher Wood, Introduction in *Otto Pächt, The Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method* David Britt, trans. (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1999):11.

Sedlmayr would lose his teaching position in 1945, though his *Verlust der Mitte*, published in 1948, would go into wide circulation and would be translated into many languages (in English, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* in 1958). He was re-habilitated to the University of Munich in 1951, despite vehement opposition from other German academics. The laudatory letter from the 1938 Pinder *Festschrift* was edited out of the 1960 publication of Sedlmayr's collected works.<sup>64</sup> In the last chapter of this dissertation, I compare Sedlmayr's ideas on the center (lost) to those of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (vital).

The grave reservations with which Schapiro met the work of the Vienna group in 1936 were—and remain—well founded. Yet, Christopher Wood has rightly stated in his anthology of the Vienna School that, “Benjamin’s remarks suggest that the foundation for the objection to Pächt’s and Sedlmayr’s formalism has to be rethought.”<sup>65</sup> It is impossible to know if Benjamin would have come to a different conclusion about the Vienna group had he written at the same moment as Schapiro. He did not return to their work explicitly in the few remaining years of his life (though traces of Riegl’s work can be found in Benjamin’s writing throughout his lifetime).<sup>66</sup> While fleeing appeasement/occupied

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<sup>64</sup> Introduction to Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 12–13, 38, 54 n. 5. See Sedlmayr, “Vermutungen und Fragen zur Bestimmung der altfranzösischen Kunst,” *Festschrift Willem Pinder* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1938): 9–27. Cf. Sedlmayr, *Epochen und Werke*, Vol. II (Vienna und Munich: Herold, 1960): 322–341. A standard reference work like *The Dictionary of Art*, makes no mention of Sedlmayr’s engagement with the National Socialists. See Petra Schniewind-Michel: “Sedlmayr, Hans,” *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 28, ed. J. Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996): 350.

<sup>65</sup> Introduction to Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> In addition to “Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,” see the following works, all of which include references to Riegl, his work, or use of the term ‘*Kunstwollen*’: Benjamin’s Curriculum Vitae (III), written in 1928 and unpublished in his lifetime, (WBSW, Vol. II, 77–78); “Neues von Blumen” (“News About Flowers,”) published in *Die literarische Welt*, November 1928, (WBSW, Vol. II, 155–157); “Some Remarks on Folk Art,” written in 1929 and unpublished in his lifetime, (WBSW, Vol. II, 278–280); “Bücher, die lebendig geblieben sind,” (“Books That Have Remained Alive,”) written in 1929, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. III, 169–171; “Karl Kraus,” published in *Frankfurter Zeitung und Handelsblatt*, March 1931 (WBSW, Vol. II, 433–458); “A Berlin

France in 1940, as is well known, Benjamin committed suicide at the Spanish border, where he found himself “*dans une situation sans issue*.”<sup>67</sup> What follows, in brief, is an analysis of the critical concerns that Benjamin and Schapiro brought to the new *Strukturanalyse* and, for better or worse, its consequences for later art critics and art historians. The historical/methodological problem cannot be evaded: the approbation and reservations press up against each other.

## II. Self Conscious/Bad Conscience

Also characteristic of this manner of approaching art is the “esteem for the insignificant” (which the brothers Grimm practiced in their incomparable expression of the spirit of true philology). But what animates this esteem if not the willingness to push research forward to the point where even the “insignificant”—no, precisely the insignificant—becomes significant?

~ Benjamin, “Strengte Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,” 1933<sup>68</sup>

The change in viewpoint hardly constitutes a new science of art. The break with past methods is more apparent than real....This is palmistry or numerology, not science.

~ Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” 1936<sup>69</sup>

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Chronicle,” written in 1932 and unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime (WBSW, Vol. III, 595–637); “Johann Jakob Bachofen,” written in 1934/1935 and unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime, (WBSW, Vol. III, 11–24); “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,” written in 1935–1936 and unpublished in long form Benjamin’s lifetime, though an edited version, translated into French, was published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in May 1936. (Hereafter, ZfS). For a translation of the ZfS publication, see Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility,” in WBSW, Vol. III, 101–133.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin in a letter to Henny Gurland [and Theodor Adorno?], Port Bou, 25 September, 1940. Reprinted in *Theodor Adorno & Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press): 342.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, “Strengte Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*,” WBSW, Vol. II, 668.

⁶⁹ Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” 259.

The layers of art historical discourse become apparent at the start of Benjamin's 1933 essay: In its opening passages, a reader of Benjamin's essay encounters the earlier work of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) and of Riegl. In the space of a few sentences, Benjamin established a context for the work of the new Vienna group. It becomes clear, quickly, within Benjamin's essay that his fellow feeling is with Riegl (not with the 1915 author of *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*). Benjamin's approving read of the Vienna group can be recognized, possibly in large part, as his own recognition of flickers of Riegl in their methodology. Benjamin valued the work of the Vienna group for the materialist concerns they brought to bear upon the art object, and for their apparent love of criticism and interpretation, or their philological concerns (as the citation above eloquently demonstrates): that the Vienna group considered no detail, no motif too minute or marginal to be beneath consideration.⁷⁰

Benjamin found that the work of the Vienna group bore the hallmarks of the new critical approach, as described by Walter Muschg (1898–1965), the literary critic: “the turn away from an uncritical realism in the contemplation of history and the shriveling up of macroscopic constructions.”⁷¹ Instead, the Vienna group turned towards monographic studies of the art object. Benjamin cited Sedlmayr's “programmatic” essay at length.

⁷⁰ See Christopher Wood's introduction to the translation of this essay where he suggests that Benjamin may have overestimated these aspects in the work of the Vienna group. See Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 437. See also Gershom Scholem's discussion of Benjamin's “passion for small, even minute, things” in *The Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* (1967), 117. Also cited by Hannah Arendt in her Introduction to *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 11.

⁷¹ Walter Muschg, “Das Dichterporträt in der Literaturgeschichte,” in ed., Emil Ermatinger, *Philosophie der Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin: Junker and Dünhaupt, 1930): 311, as cited in Benjamin, WBSW, Vol. II, 667. See also, 671, n. 3, WBSW, Vol. II, for a reference to Benjamin's citation of this same passage in his 1931 essay, “Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft,” published in *Die literarische Welt*, April 1930. Re-printed in WBSW, Vol. II, 459–465.

While the length of citation from the first (unpublished) and second (published) versions of Benjamin's essay vary, the following was included in both:

Once the individual work of art is perceived as a still unmastered task specific to the study of art, it appears powerfully new and close. Formerly a mere means to knowledge, a trace of something else that was to be disclosed through it, the work of art now appears as a self-contained *small world* of its own, particular sort.⁷²

The other essays that appeared in the first volume *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* seemed to have captured Benjamin's imagination as monographic demonstrations: G.A. Andreades, "Die Sophienkathedrale von Konstantinopel"; Pächt, "Die historische Aufgabe Michael Pachers"; and Carl Linfert, "Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung." These studies were all the more rigorous, in Benjamin's assessment, in that they considered "the formal incorporation of the given world by the artist;" and for the art historians' self-conscious consideration of their own activity.⁷³

This is not to suggest that Benjamin swallowed the work of the Vienna group whole: a paragraph from the unpublished first version of the essay records his reservations, regarding:

[T]he advisability of the move that Sedlmayr attempts...juxtaposing the rigorous study of art as a "secondary" field of study against a primary (namely positivist) study of art.... Sedlmayr's essay also demonstrates how difficult it is for a particular course of research...to establish purely methodological definitions without reference to any concrete examples whatsoever. This is difficult, but is it necessary? Is it appropriate to place the new aspiration (*Wollen*) so assiduously under the patronage of phenomenology and Gestalt theory? It could easily be that in the process one loses nearly as much as one gains.⁷⁴

⁷² Sedlmayr, as cited by Benjamin, WBSW, Vol. II, 667. Emphasis in the original.

⁷³ Benjamin, WBSW, Vol. II, 667. NB: There's an unaccounted paragraph immediately following this citation.

⁷⁴ Benjamin, WBSW, Vol. II, 667. From the unpublished 1931 version.

This is prototypical of many of Benjamin's formulations: something new is assessed in terms of the gains and losses its advent occasions. While in the published version of Benjamin's essay, he concluded that the Vienna group was "filling the study of history with new life," the unpublished version concluded with a rhetorically stronger phrasing: that these new researchers "were the hope of their field of study."⁷⁵ Approbation with reservation (or, promise): that, for now, there was hope.

Schapiro's essay is of a different kind from Benjamin's. It cleaves neatly into two parts: a general assessment of the work of the Vienna group, in which he took Sedlmayr to task; and a catalogue of abstracts of each of the essays included in the second volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*.⁷⁶ The synopses of the essays were for the benefit English-speaking students "who have been fairly indifferent to theoretical problems."⁷⁷ It is perhaps this pedagogical aspect in which Schapiro finds the value in the work of the Vienna group in that he felt it was "notorious how little American writing on art history has been touched by the progressive work of our psychologists, philosophers, and ethnologists."⁷⁸ He notes that American students would do well to consider the work of the Vienna School, despite their "defects," for their:

[C]oncern with the formation of adequate concepts even in the seemingly empirical work of pure description, their constant search for new formal

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* See n. 55.

⁷⁶ This second volume, lengthier and more expansive than the first, comprised the following: "Remarks on the Structure of Egyptian Sculpture," by Guido Kaschnitz-Weinberg; "The System of Justinian by Sedlmayr;" "Towards an Analysis of the Florentine Baptistery," by Karl Swoboda; a posthumous (and fragmentary) essay by Maria Hirsch entitled "The Figure-Alphabet of the Master ES;" a second work by Pächt, entitled "Formal Principles of Western Painting in the Fifteenth Century;" an essay by Michael Alpatoff on a self-portrait by Poussin; and, finally, Emil Kaufmann's article on "The City of the Architect Ledoux."

⁷⁷ Schapiro, "The New Viennese School," 258.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

aspects of art, and their readiness to absorb the findings of contemporary scientific philosophy and psychology.⁷⁹

It is difficult for a reader not to greet the work reviewed in the ensuing catalogue with caution as Schapiro's criticisms precede his review of the contributions to the second volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*.

Schapiro gave his most subtle and approbatory review to Pächt's essay, which was a "rarity of thinking and observation" generally lacking in English-language art history.⁸⁰ He reserved his harshest words for Sedlmayr's work: both the 1931 methodological essay and the 1933 essay on Justinian. Schapiro effectively subjected the Vienna scholars to their own methods, and the shortcomings were numerous. On the whole, they lacked an adequate conception or grasp of history (including Pächt); what they had was a *Kunstwollen* with an immanent goal. They preferred—to the point of Hegelian cliché—"teleological deductions" instead of an "empirical study of historical conditions and factors."⁸¹ In particular, Schapiro found Sedlmayr's distinction between the first and second studies of art arbitrary, intellectually faulty, possibly suspect, but most certainly the kind of distinction drawn by "German writers" between the taxonomic sciences and "their own sciences of the spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*)."⁸² It would be a cliché of the hard sciences and of cultural studies, in Schapiro's view, to suggest that the former did not gain from insight and interpretation, nor the latter from method and factual accuracy. Sedlmayr's proposed methodology did not represent "an advance on [hypotheses]

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 258.

employed by the ordinary run of art historians.”⁸³ Nor did it live up to its claims of rigor or its promise of new understandings. Schapiro here did not offer a post-Structural critique of facts or facticity, but stressed that even the most basic data concerning a work of art can be near-impossible to prove with certainty, as anyone who investigated with “real scruple” would know.⁸⁴ As Sedlmayr’s essay on Justinian demonstrated, Schapiro stated, he relied on others to do his research for him. He, Sedlmayr, was too lazy to put his own methodology to the test by dusting off the received certainties of the art and architecture of his study.

The words of Benjamin and Schapiro are, however, in a kind of concord on an atypical art object. Benjamin and Schapiro argued separately the merits of an essay on architectural renderings that appeared in each edition of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*. Linfert’s essay, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung” (“The Elements of Architectural Drawings”), appeared in the first volume; Emil Kaufmann’s essay, “Die Stadt des Architekten Ledoux,” appeared in the second.⁸⁵ Linfert’s essay was accompanied by 26 plates; Kaufmann’s by six (figs. 4 and 5). Linfert’s essay was the most richly-illustrated essay to appear in the brief run of the journal.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ See Carl Linfert, “Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung: Mit einem Versuch über französische Architekturzeichnungen des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* I (1931): 133–246 and Emil Kaufmann, “Die Stadt des Architekten Ledoux zur Erkenntnis des autonomen Architektur,” in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Vol. II (1933): 131–60. Kaufmann returned to the subject of utopian architecture at least twice in his career. See his longer work of 1933, *Von Ledoux bis Le Courbousier: Ursprung und Entwicklung der autonomen Architektur* (Vienna: Passer, 1933) and, later, “Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., xlii (1953): 431–564.

⁸⁶ Sedlmayr contributed an essay on medieval architectural designs to the second volume, but this did not particularly pique the curiosity of either Benjamin or Schapiro. See Hans Sedlmayr, “Das erste mittelalterliche Architektursystem,” in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Vol. II (1933), pp. 25–62.

Linfert's essay, Benjamin argued, was a most fine example of investigating the unexplored margins. The 18th-century French renderings that were the subject of the essay did not *re-produce* architecture: "they *produce* it in the first place, a production that less often benefits the reality of architectural planning than it does dreams."⁸⁷ In a passage that was deleted from the final version of his essay, Benjamin held architectural drawings against painterly representations of buildings, another commonplace way of presenting architecture, the former having the "closest affinity to nonrepresentational work."⁸⁸ In that architectural renderings "do not take a pictorial detour," they create a "specificity" that is:

[I]magined as an objective entity [*Bestand*] and is experienced by those who approach or even enter it as a surrounding space [*Umraum*] *sui generis*, that is, without the distancing effect of the frame of image space [*Bildraum*].⁸⁹

The crucial elements in the consideration of architecture for Benjamin here were the "apprehension of structures" and "the objective effect of the buildings on the imaginative being of the viewer."⁹⁰ Here, Benjamin demonstrated an acutely modern critique and awareness of pictorial conventions; Linfert's choice of subject and his analysis kept pace with the pace of Benjamin's dispatch.

Schapiro was one such viewer when, three years later, he reviewed Kaufmann's essay, "The City of the Architect Ledoux." The city in the title of Kaufmann's essay referred to Ledoux's celebrated plan for a royal salt-works that he had designed in 1776.

⁸⁷ Benjamin, "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*," WBSW, Vol. II, 669.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 670. Cf. Richard Shiff, "Phototropism (Figuring the Proper)," in *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, ed. Kathleen Preciado (Washington: National Gallery of Art; Hanover: Distributed by the University Press of New England, 1989): 161–179.

⁸⁹ Benjamin, "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*," WBSW, Vol. II, 670.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Kaufmann grasped “the unexpected modernity” of Ledoux: his desire to create a new architecture, the rational or utopian tendencies that were demonstrated in the salt-works plan, the published treatises on architecture. These tendencies all pointed to 20th century “architectural propagandists.”⁹¹ Kaufmann attempted to relate these forms to parallels in societal forms: to the conceptions of the insurgent French bourgeoisie (even though the architect was, himself, hostile to the Revolution). In this attempt, Kaufmann did not succeed, in Schapiro’s opinion, but the essay makes him “unique” in the group.⁹² Both Benjamin and Schapiro saw possibilities, if not always realized, in the work of the Vienna group. If Benjamin found value in their work for their ability to realize the potential of marginal areas (and the subsequent, potent, imaginative effect on their readers), Schapiro saw some limited potential in their ability to imagine (or, reconfigure) art-historical objects and method in relationship to their larger contexts.

To return to a question raised at the start of the paper at hand, here stated more forcefully: Can something be recovered from the formalism of Pächt and Sedlmayr? Benjamin rightly recognized traces of Riegl’s methods coming through in the work of the Vienna group. To pose another question (by way of a partial answer to the first): Were the specious political conclusions at which Sedlmayr arrived in the 1930s and afterwards endemic to his art-historical method? Well after the war, Pächt addressed the affinities between Riegl’s work and that of the Vienna school:

With the discovery of a dominant principle [i.e., a *Kunstwollen*] that was verifiable in such diverse artistic media and situations Riegl saw...still wider perspectives opened. The next step would be to investigate the correlation between the artistic mentality and the other contemporary forms of mental life.

⁹¹ Schapiro, “The New Viennese School,” 266 and 265, respectively.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 265.

Which Riegl did at the conclusion of *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie*. Pächt referred to this as the first adumbration of the kind of inquiry that would come to be known under the “programmatic title of art history as history of the spirit.” Riegl, Pächt concluded, “did not pursue this path any further.”⁹³

III. Rigor/Mortis

In Sedlmayr’s “programmatic” 1931 essay, he called for a rigorous study of art that would at once rescue works of art from endgame, taxonomic classification on the one hand, and belletristic appreciations on the other. Sedlmayr advocated for a two-tiered methodological system of art historical practice. He termed the first tier *Kunstleichen*, and the second *Kunstgebilde*. The former was “concrete” (in that it sifted through the artistic remains); the latter, “nebulous,” interpretive.⁹⁴ Sedlmayr found the current state of the discipline to be well practiced in raking over old bones, but less than inspired (or worse, fanciful) in its understanding of the art object. To restore life and meaning to the work of art, the new art historian needed to practice both: the tiers were intertwined and reciprocating. And, here the familiar dualisms of structuralism begin to flesh out in and around Sedlmayr’s methodological armature—a new art history by methodological binarchy, as it were.

Sedlmayr’s methodology had, at its base, the primary pairing of the object and the culture that produced it. But the coupling splits and shifts. Data (of all kinds) about the object is organized under *Kunstleichen* while the sensory perception of that object comes

⁹³ Otto Pächt, “Art Historians and Art Critics—vi.: Alois Riegl,” *Burlington Magazine* 109 (1963): 191.

⁹⁴ In the original, “*massiv*” and “*nebelhaft*.” See Sedlmayr, “Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft,” 12.

under *Kunstgebilde*. Sedlmayr gave value to the observations of the viewer that recreated the art object anew for contemporary society, but also insisted that the art historian determine the “correct” attitude [*Einstellung*] or, the “original” attitude with which the object was initially created.⁹⁵ The art historian was to determine the immanent value of the object. Sedlmayr borrowed Kurt Koffka’s term, the “dynamic character” of an object, to describe the aspiration of that object to meet its ideal—whatever that ideal may have been for the figuring imagination/will at a given time and place.⁹⁶ If done correctly, this process would (and should) bring new insights into the object and its transcendent value. Sedlmayr sought complete knowledge [*vollkommene Erkenntnis*] of the art object, as an imbricated [*eingeorndet*] part of a greater whole [*größeres Ganzen*]. The task of the art historian was to reveal this metonymic relationship to the fullest extent possible. It was to bring about a “new appreciation of self-consciousness” [*neue Schätzung des Bewußten*] on the part of the art historian.⁹⁷ An art historian willing only to experience the art object and not to analyze it was of a “bad conscience” [*schlechten Gewissen*].⁹⁸ By way of conclusion to his 1931 essay, Sedlmayr quoted Ramón Fernandez (1894–1944), the French literary critic, as a kind of *credo* for the new art historian: “*La pensée peut précéder la vie: elle contribuera par là même à la redresser.*”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Sedlmayr, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 148.

⁹⁶ Sedlmayr, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 169. Sedlmayr’s 1933 essay remains an odd position piece: it is not exactly an original treatise, so much as it is a re-statement of the work of other scholars. Sedlmayr, it should be noted, was a capable synthesizer of the work of others, for example, Kurt Lewin, Carl Linfert, and Kurt Koffka.

⁹⁷ Sedlmayr, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 176.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 176. From, Ramon Fernandez, *De la personnalité* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1928). Benjamin would also quote Fernandez, as the opening citation in his 1934 essay, “The Author as Producer:” “The task is to win over the intellectuals to the working class by making them aware of the identity of their spiritual enterprises and of their conditions as producers.” Benjamin may have never delivered this piece, which was originally conceived as an address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism, a Communist-front

In toto, Sedlmayr sought a new concept of the work of art, which, by the terms of the self-reflexive methods that he himself advocated, would point to some potential gains and losses, methodological and otherwise. Sedlmayr's method radically reconfigured the relationship between the object, its maker, and beholder. *Strukturanalyse* breaches the autonomy of the aesthetic category, and situates the art (aesthetic) object in a wider cultural context—albeit on a higher tier within this larger context. Most dramatically, the artist, the individual figuring agent, is potentially at a loss under *Strukturanalyse*: many the Vienna writers chose works made by anonymous artisans, not the Great Artists of Wölfflinian art history. The aesthetic judgment of the contemporary viewer is necessarily critiqued by the rigorous search for the 'correct attitude'. *Strukturanalyse* places relative value over absolute ones, or perhaps it makes for the reciprocating pairing of the two: absolute standards within a specific culture or time. As a methodological model, *Strukturanalyse* could potentially analyze the artistic productions of any culture. In an aside in his 1931 essay, Sedlmayr made a point about the inappropriateness of holding a European attitude towards African art.¹⁰⁰ It's a prescient remark in light of more recent trends within the discipline towards the study of cultures outside the Western traditions and post-colonial studies. It's also a remark that goes to the heart of the matter: in addressing the differences between the art of other cultures through Sedlmayr's means, one could merely

organization in Paris. The essay remained unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. See WBSW, Vol. II, 768–782. For an account of conflicting information on Benjamin's delivery of this address, see p. 781, n. 1. The arc of Fernandez's wartime politics was even more severe than that of Sedlmayr: an early follower of the Socialist and Communist parties, by 1943, Fernandez was a collaborator on the literary front, who had almost been forcibly installed as the editor of the Gallimard publication, *La Nouvelle revue française*.

¹⁰⁰ Sedlmayr, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 149.

buttress these divides, methodologically, between cultures (or, hierarchies within a culture) by putting different works of art into national schools, or, by extension, ethnic or racial groups—if not into different camps altogether. Upon doing this, one could despair in the plight of culture, as did Sedlmayr in *Verlust der Mitte*, where he demonstrated a Spenglerian concern for the fate of Western art and culture.

IV. Antecedent/Teleology

The natural thing would be for every art historical monograph to contain some aesthetics as well.

~ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Klassic Kunst*, 1898, as cited in Benjamin, 1933¹⁰¹

[F]rom the viewpoint of modern taste, it seems absolutely impossible that there should ever have been a positive *Kunstwollen* directed towards ugliness and non-animation...but everything depends on understanding that the aim of the fine arts is not completely exhausted with what we call beauty, nor with what we call animation.

~ Alois Riegl, *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, 1901¹⁰²
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Benjamin's sympathetic reading of the new Vienna School was informed by his reading of and affinity for the work of the 'old' Vienna School scholar. It is useful to consider, briefly, Riegl's earlier concept of the *Kunstwollen* as one source for Pächt's and

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<sup>101</sup> Benjamin, "The Rigorous Study of Art," in WBSW, Vol. II, 666. For the initial publication of this citation, see Heinrich Wölfflin, Preface to *Die klassische Kunst: eine Einführung in die italienische Renaissance*, (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1898). Reprinted as *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Peter Murray, Linda Murray (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1952): xi. In the original: "Das Natürliche wäre, daß jede kunstgeschichtliche Monographie zugleich ein Stück Ästhetik enthielte."

<sup>102</sup> Alois Riegl, Introduction to *Late Roman Art Industry*, ed. and trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985): 11. Originally published as *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, (Vienna: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei), 1927; revised from *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn* (Vienna: K. K. Hof-und-Staatsdruckerei, 1901).

Sedlmayr's intellectual context. When Benjamin set off the work of the new Vienna group from the "sedate mediocrity of the founding period" of art history, Wölfflin served, rhetorically, as the vestigial representative of forefathers.<sup>103</sup> In *Klassik Kunst*, as Benjamin noted in 1933, Wölfflin went on to argue that aesthetics so desired for each art historical monograph should, necessarily, be coupled with a "systematic" section. In its time, this was an "epoch making" pairing. However, as Benjamin continued, acutely:

[Wölfflin] identified the dualism of a flat, universalizing history of the art of 'all cultures and times,' on the one hand, and an academic aesthetic, on the other, without, however, being able to overcome it entirely.<sup>104</sup>

Earlier, in a 1915 letter, Benjamin had described the experience of one of Wölfflin's university lectures in Munich. Benjamin's letter chronicled his disappointment and dissatisfaction:

[Wölfflin] has a theory which fails to grasp the essential but which, in itself, is perhaps better than complete thoughtlessness. In fact, this theory might even lead somewhere were it not for the fact that, because of Wölfflin's capacities to do justice to their object, the only means of access to the artwork remains exaltation, i.e. a feeling of moral obligation. He does not see the artwork, he feels obliged to see it, demands that one see it, considers his theory a moral act; he becomes pedantic, ludicrously catatonic, and thereby destroys any natural talents that his audience may have.<sup>105</sup>

In Benjamin's assessment, it was, rather, Riegl, who grasped the situation in his *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie* and who offered a methodological work-around to this artificial impasse. And, Riegl did so within the relatively short span of time of three years

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<sup>103</sup> See n. 55.

<sup>104</sup> Benjamin, "The Rigorous Study of Art," in WBSW, Vol. II, 666.

<sup>105</sup> Benjamin, letters to Fritz Radt (husband of Julia Cohn, sculptor), 21 November and 4 December, 1915. Cited in Thomas Y. Levin, "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History," *October* 47 (1988): 79. Also reprinted in their entirety by Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and Felix Noeggerath," *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel: Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983): 79–89.

after Wölfflin. By virtue of this, in Benjamin's eyes at least, this made Riegl—not Wölfflin—the “precursor” of the “new type of art scholar.”<sup>106</sup>

In his 1901 work, Riegl examined the artistic productions of what had been, up to that point, an overlooked or maligned epoch: the late Roman Empire (the “dark continent on the map of art historical research,” as Riegl described it).<sup>107</sup> The method he employed did not map out canonical works as plot points within a bell curve of culture. It did, however, identify patterns of change in the visual representations in late Roman art—changes directed towards representational ideals other than the Classical one. Riegl stated his premise simply: it was to seek “a solution to the question concerning the nature and the underlying forces of the end of antiquity” and to “destroy” the “prejudice” that “late Roman art did not constitute progress but merely decay.”<sup>108</sup> *Die spättrömische Kunstindustrie* was groundbreaking, risky, and fruitful work. Even the future author of *The Arch of Constantine, or the Decline of Form* found value in it.<sup>109</sup> One could understand this work as a contrary response to Wölfflin's theory of the double root of style, which was adumbrated in *Klassic Kunst* and later given full form in his 1915 *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. In this later work, Wölfflin established his pairings of formal polarities of linear and painterly; closed and open form; multiplicity and unity; and clearness and unclearness.<sup>110</sup> While Riegl's specific findings on late Roman are

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<sup>106</sup> Benjamin, “The Rigorous Study of Art,” in WBSW, Vol. II, 668.

<sup>107</sup> Riegl, Introduction to *Late Roman Art Industry*, 6.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 8.

<sup>109</sup> “Nevertheless if Riegl turns out to have been wrong as an archaeologist, he remains a great art historian, for he was the first to employ a rare intelligence and method in investigating change of taste, and how it was brought about.” Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts*, (New York: Pantheon, 1948): 168. Berenson published *The Arch of Constantine, or the Decline of Form* in 1954 (London: Chapman & Hall, 1954).

<sup>110</sup> For Wölfflin's later articulation of the double root of style as the expression of an individual temperament and the *zeitgeist* of a time and place, see the Introduction to *The Principles of Art History*,

beyond the scope of the essay at hand, his ideas on taste, style, and immanent value remain of consequence.

In *Die spättrömische Kunstindustrie*, Riegl introduced the critical term of *Kunstwollen*, to which Pacht's and Sedlmayr's ideas of *Strukturanalyse* was greatly indebted. As a German art historical term, *Kunstwollen* has been translated into something greater than the sum of its compound parts. The glossary of the English translation of *Late Roman Art Industry* offers the following: "internal and external force producing art, artistic will, artistic urge, artistic desire."<sup>111</sup> The editors of Benjamin's translated collected works offer the following expanded definition:

Riegl defines the *Kunstwollen* as the manner in which a given culture at a given time wants to see its cultural objects; his assertion that each epoch's art is informed by its own, inherently legitimate *Kunstwollen* posed a significant challenge to reigning theories of art derived from the notion of the classical ideal.<sup>112</sup>

In his Foreword to *Late Roman Art Industry*, Rolf Winkes states that Riegl's use of *Kunstwollen* was a deliberate rhetorical choice, replacing the less forceful terms of *Kunstdrang* (artistic urge) and *Kunstwillen* (artistic will) that Riegl had used in *Stilfragen*, his earlier work of 1893.<sup>113</sup> Winkes goes on to argue that the *Kunstwollen* effectively replaces style in Riegl's methodology, as signifying something deeper and more dynamic than style and the closed periods of time that that term can connote.

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trans. M.D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950; facsimile of the 1932 translation): 1–17. *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* was originally published in 1915 and translated into English in 1932. See Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1915, 1923).

<sup>111</sup> Glossary, in Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, n.f.

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin, "Curriculum Vitae, III," in WBSW, Vol. II, 79, n. 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Kunstdrang* (artistic temperament) and *Kunstwillen* (artistic will) would be more at the level of individual expression and technique, in Riegl's rhetoric.

In a 1952 essay on style, Schapiro argued that Riegl “not only gave up the normative view that judges the later phases of a cycle as a decline, but also the conception of closed cycles.”<sup>114</sup> Schapiro continued, characterizing the grand vista of Riegl’s methodology with the following:

[Riegl] formulates as the poles of the long evolution two types of style, the ‘haptic’ (tactile) and the ‘optic’ (or painterly, impressionistic)...The history of art is, for Riegl, as endless necessary movement from representation based on vision of the object and its parts as proximate, tangible, discrete, and self-sufficient, to the representation of the whole perceptual field as directly given, but more distant, continuum with merging parts, with an increasing role of the spatial voids, and with a more evident reference to the knowing subject as a contributing factor in perception.<sup>115</sup>

Style, in Riegl’s method, is subsumed to (or, at the affect of) a general *Kunstwollen*. Yet, as Schapiro concluded, for Riegl, art making remains “an active creative process in which new forms arise from the artist’s will to solve specifically artistic problems.”<sup>116</sup> Margaret Iversen, in her 1979 essay on Riegl’s historiography, extends this point farther:

Riegl’s thinking is informed by a deep conviction that art has an essential, constant purpose—that of cultivating human freedom. For him, art’s interest lies in its status as a human activity independent of natural or material exigencies...Art cultivates human freedom by formulating relationships with the world....Haptic styles attest to man’s independence of nature through his ability to create spontaneous, abstract design. Optic styles recognize and elicit to a high degree the epistemological spontaneity which makes experience itself a constructive activity.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Meyer Schapiro, “Style,” *Anthropology Today*, (1952): 301.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301–302. ‘Haptisch’ and ‘Optisch’, in Riegl.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 302. See Richard Shiff, “Original Copy,” *Common Knowledge* 3:1 (Spring 1994): 107: “Finding that all art is copy, postmodernists achieve a charmingly ambiguous thought. Beyond it, historians might actively investigate why in certain situations this notion so satisfies intellectual desire that it transfixes critical vision like a lure. Fixes it temporarily. Creation may have already happened, but human agency timelessly changes the form of its copy.”

<sup>117</sup> Margaret Iversen, “Style as Structure: Alois Riegl’s Historiography,” *Art History* 2:1 (March 1979): 67. For an essay written in a similar vein, suitable for advanced undergraduate, see Chapter 5 in Michael Podro, *Critical Historians of Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982): 71–97.

Riegl's proposed binary of *haptisch* and *optisch* were "opposing ways of framing relationships with the world," Iversen concluded.

Both Schapiro and Iversen identified the knowing viewer as holding a privileged position in Riegl's method. In his Introduction to *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, Riegl asked rhetorically what might prevent "even unprejudiced scholars," such as Franz Wickhoff, author of the seminal 1895 treatise on the *Vienna Genesis*, "from appreciating the nature of late Roman works of art open-mindedly?" It was, Riegl concluded:

[N]othing else than the subjective critique which our modern taste applies to the monuments at hand. From a work of art this taste demands beauty and animation, while the scales incline in turn either to the first or the second.<sup>118</sup>

It is at this juncture in his discourse that Riegl asserts the value of an otherly-directed *Kunstwollen*. One of the consequences of Riegl's method was to give an immanent value—that which remains or operates within the domain of reality or realm of discourse—to contemporary taste and judgment.<sup>119</sup> His method did not dissolve artistic production into larger, cultural (or, visual) studies, nor did it reduce art to a question of materials and need.<sup>120</sup> It was (as Iversen rightly argued) about freedom—or, the potential freedom to re-create one's material circumstances:

All human will is directed toward a satisfactory shaping of man's relationship to the world, in the most comprehensive sense of this word, within and beyond the individual. The plastic *Kunstwollen* regulates man's relationship to the sensorily perceptible appearance of things.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 10.

<sup>119</sup> By way of comparison, Riegl did for the category of judgment in *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie* what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would later do for the history of reason in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in 1944.

<sup>120</sup> See Riegl's comments on Gottfried Semper, in Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 9–10.

<sup>121</sup> Riegl, in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 95.



What Riegl's method maintains is a certain autonomy for art objects and for the nascent discipline of art history. As such, art was possessed of an internal logic and should to be studied as such.

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In 1933, the work of the Vienna scholars appealed to Benjamin most likely because their work appeared to be the fulfillment of Riegl's method—the next logical stage of development in art historical method. In a brief 1929 essay entitled “Bücher, Die Lebendig Geblieben Sind,” Benjamin wrote on a quartet of books that had remained alive, the first and oldest of which was Riegl's *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie*.¹²² In a brief passage, Benjamin identified the striking quality of this “epoch-making” work, which:

[B]rought to the monuments of the late empire, with prophetic certainty, the stylistic sense and insight of Expressionism, which occurred twenty years later; while, at the same time, it broke with the theory of “times of decline,” and recognized what had hitherto been called a “retreat into barbarism” as a new sensibility, a new *Kunstwollen*. At the same time, this book is one of the most striking proofs that every great scholarly discovery results, without any intent to do so, in a methodological revolution on its own.¹²³

It was the spark of the reciprocity—that of marginal or neglected areas grasped with a new method, a new sensibility—that, for Benjamin, made Riegl's work so fruitful. It was these sparks that enlivened the work of the Vienna scholars for Benjamin. In 1936, Schapiro came to his very different conclusion about the limited potential of the new

¹²² Walter Benjamin, “Bücher, die lebendig geblieben sind,” written in 1929, WBGS, Vol. III, 169–171. The other three books were: Alfred Gotthold Meyer's *Eisenbauten* (1907), Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (1921), and Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Also cited in, Thomas Y. Levin, “Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History,” *October* 47 (1988): 77–83.

¹²³ Walter Benjamin, “Bücher, die lebendig geblieben sind,” written in 1929, WBGS, Vol. III, 170. Author translation.

Vienna school scholars. In Schapiro's view, the invidious political conclusions at which Sedlmayr arrived in the early 1930s may have been the inevitable/endogenous conclusion of his suspect scholarly method.¹²⁴

V. Magical/Mechanical

Not only was the classic attempt to erect a mechanistic system of causality between individual phenomena no longer valued....Instead, a mechanistic theory of connection between individual shapes no longer seemed satisfactory and was replaced with a different kind of connection—magic.

~ Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*, 1901¹²⁵

The reader who reads Riegl's major work today, recalling that it was written almost at the same time as the work by Wölfflin cited [above], will recognize retrospectively how forces that are already stirring subterraneously in *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie* will surface a decade later in expressionism. Thus, one can assume that sooner or later contemporaneity will catch up with the studies by Pächt and Linfert as well.

~ Benjamin, "Strenge Kunstwissenschaft: Zum ersten Bande der *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*," 1933¹²⁶

[The historical portions of Dr. Pächt's article] correspond to the Hegelian notion of that whatever befalls a being arises from its own inner nature—as in Chesterton's story of the man whose nature it was to be shot at constantly, and whose enemies were therefore exempt from any responsibility.

~ Schapiro, "The New Viennese School," 1936¹²⁷

How should the history of art secure its proper object if the processes that are meant to deliver it actually offer an *ersatz* for sensations of a very different nature?

~ Pächt, "Das Ende der Abbildtheorie," 1930–1931¹²⁸

¹²⁴ See also, Meyer Schapiro, "Race, Nationality and Art," *Art Front* 2 (March 1936): 10–12.

¹²⁵ Riegl, "The Leading Characteristics of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*," in *Late Roman Art Industry*, 232.

¹²⁶ Benjamin, "The Rigorous Study of Art," in WBSW, Vol. II, 668.

¹²⁷ Schapiro, "The New Viennese School," *The Art Bulletin* 18:2 (June 1936): 263.



All of the art historians discussed above grasped art objects as objects of history. It's a statement of the lowest common denominator as to be almost comical. For the art historians held different conceptions of history. Images of organic off-shoots, cyclical changes, binaries, and dualisms cycled through their essays. Even Alfred H. Barr, Jr. rendered his conception of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art as a torpedo moving through time (fig. 6). This is to suggest not a wide range of differences so much as another binary or dualism: open and closed conceptions of history. Most of the art historians considered in the essay at hand subscribed to notions of an open or dynamic system of history. It is, to borrow from Edmund Wilson, the myth of the dialectic.¹²⁹ We tend to associate dialectical systems of history with the materialist descendants of the German Enlightenment: Marx, for one, Benjamin, for another, who, in a 1936 essay, famously introduced concepts into a theory of art that were "completely useless for the purposes of Fascism."¹³⁰ Sedlmayr, who had been an advocate of a dynamic *Kunstwollen* in his youth, sought to end the dialectic in his post-War concept of the center: "For the 'centre' is not the tepid compromise of extremes, but a mighty and radiant encompassing of them."¹³¹ By Sedlmayr's account of the mighty middle, there

¹²⁸ Pächt, "Das Ende der Abbildtheorie," *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* 3–4 (1930–1931): 1–9; reprinted in *Otto Pächt: Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis* (Munich: Prestel, 1977): 121–128; reprinted in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 180–194.

¹²⁹ See Edmund Wilson, "The Myth of the Dialectic," in *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., Inc., 1940): 177–196. An earlier version of this essay was published in *Partisan Review*. See, "The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic," *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 66–81. See also, for example, Henri Focillon, *La vie des formes* (Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1934): 12. As published in the French: "Ces réserves faites, on peut considérer la vie d'un style soit comme une dialectique, soit comme un processus expérimental."

¹³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 218.

¹³¹ Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1958): 257.

would be no pity (or what's more, empathy) for the Chesterton character, who would have to surrender to his true nature. While there is (at least in theory) no end to the dialectic, Sedlmayr sought its totalizing completion in his art-historical practice. To return then, once again, to a question raised above: What can be recovered from the 1930s formalism of Pächt and Sedlmayr. Perhaps this is best accomplished (for now) through a reading of Benjamin's celebrated 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility."¹³²

In his 1936 essay, with its concepts useless for the purposes of Fascism, Benjamin considered the work of art and its aura—perhaps the term most closely associated with Benjamin (the historical critic). Or, as he defined it in the case of the natural object: "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be."¹³³ It is this singular quality that withers away from the unique object in the age of mechanical reproduction. Mechanical reproduction is age old; photography represents its modern form. "Mechanical reproduction of the work of art, however," Benjamin argued, "represents something new."¹³⁴ Characteristic of Benjamin's thinking, this is a potentially positive occurrence at the same time that it gives cause for concern. The work of art now meets the beholder (the masses) "halfway."¹³⁵ In the new age of mechanical reproduction, the viewer has the opportunity to reposition herself to the newly-liberated work of art (a process aided by the mechanical reproduction). What the mechanical reproduction can't do is reproduce the aura of the work of art—its "presence in time and space, its unique

¹³² The full text of this essay was never published in Benjamin's lifetime, although an abbreviated version was translated into French and published in the ZfS.

¹³³ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, 222.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

existence.”¹³⁶ The withering away of aura from the work of art releases it from “its parasitical dependence on ritual.”¹³⁷ Yet this withering away, as a marker of modernist change, also represented to Benjamin a type of loss. In the place of the traditional cult value of the work of art came a modern culture of commodities. Benjamin offered the following analogy in his essay to represent this new (modern) relationship:

Art history might be seen as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself, its course being determined by shifts in the balance between the two. These two poles are the artwork’s cult value and its exhibition value.¹³⁸

By casting out the aesthetic object to be in play with modern culture, Benjamin transformed Wölfflin’s formalist poles of 1915 into materialist ones.

One possible way to read the work of the Vienna group is as Benjamin did, as a prolegomenon to any future materialist history of art. This kind of history, though, as with any kind of dialectical understanding, could go—and did, in Sedlmayr’s case—very wrong. Benjamin’s ideal materialist art historian was akin to the *flâneur*, another modern character who would figure elsewhere in Benjamin’s writing: the art historian offered a resistance to the filmic pace of modern culture by offering a slowed and prolonged encounter with the art object and its forms. Another way to read the Vienna group is as Schapiro did, by turning to the work of Pächt, who did not share Sedlmayr’s political taint—to the contrary, he necessarily (bodily) fled from it. And, here, Pächt is given the last word (for the moment) from a 1930–1931 essay, “Das Ende der Abbildtheorie.” In this essay, which was published in *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*,

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³⁸ Benjamin, “L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée,” *ZfS* 5:1 (1936): 40–68. Re-printed in *WBSW*, Vol. III, 101–133.

Pächt wrote of recovering the art object from the poeticizing tendencies in then-current scholarship and the misplaced narcissism of the viewer:

The works of art...serve as points of departure for arbitrary emotional associations. In this way, the art historian and his public obtain nothing that they do not already latently possess, except that they now wish to find it sanctioned as artistic value by history.

The art historian and his audience have, Pächt continued (by way of his colleague, Benedetto Croce), ““allowed the object to disappear in favor of the work of art.””¹³⁹

VI. Classic/Late Roman/Modern

...[I]ndeed modern art, with all its advantages, would have never been possible if late Roman art with its unclassical tendency had not prepared the way....

While previously one wanted to hear about victory and conquest, so now wanted disgrace and atrocity. Admittedly, these are extremes that were seldom reached, but they indicate precisely and clearly the direction taken by the new ‘unclassical’ way of feeling in the late Roman world.

~ Riegl, *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, 1901¹⁴⁰

Neither extreme is a matter of caprice or arbitrariness....Modernism has found that these limits can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object...

~ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 1960¹⁴¹

...[T]hus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one.

~ Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” 1962¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Otto Pächt, “Das Ende der Abbildtheorie,” in *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* 3–4 (1930–1931): 9. Reprinted in *Otto Pächt: Methodisches zur Kunsthistorischen Praxis* (Munich: Prestel, 1977): 121–128. Also reprinted in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, pp. 180–194. The initial citation from Croce, which was edited and translated by Julian von Schlosser, see “Zur Theorie und Kritik der Geschichte der bildenden Kunst,” in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 4 (1926): 38.

¹⁴⁰ Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 11, 13.

¹⁴¹ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” Forum Lectures (Washington D.C.: Voice of America, 1960). Reprinted in *Arts Yearbook*, 4, (1961): 102–8. For this exact citation, see p. 106.

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The purpose of the following dissertation is not to demonstrate the debt owed by modernist art of the last century to the art industry of the late Roman Empire. (That would be an entirely different thesis.) Rather, the dissertation that follows examines the critical and political attitudes towards American abstract painting from the 1930s through to 1951. Even so, Riegl's point on the unclassical is well taken: the value of modernist art is, methodologically, predicated, in part, on its relationship to the classical tradition, and the ability of modernist art—as a system of representation—to assimilate and trump this classical tradition. Mid-century American abstraction, in general, and Abstract Expressionism, in particular, has not suffered from the lack of critical and historical attention from which Riegl rescued the artistic production of the late Roman empire. To the contrary, the discipline has a surfeit. As one scholar has formulated the issue: “When facts are so abundant, possession of them can leave interpretation as free as when there are no facts at all.”<sup>143</sup> The accretion of this discourse is also the subject of this study, as is the transfer of the discourse from Europe to America during the war years via both scholar-refugees and critical journals. One example of this transference from the 1930s, is the presence of the Institut für Sozialforschung scholars at Columbia University. Through the auspices of Schapiro, they found relative safe haven in New York (if, also on occasion, the “theoretically indifferent” students about whom Schapiro lamented in 1936). At Columbia, they published *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, a

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<sup>142</sup> Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” *Art International* 6 (1962): 28.

<sup>143</sup> Richard Shiff, “Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism,” in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987): 94.

continuation of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which the Institut had discontinued when they left Frankfurt, under force, in 1933.

The following is a study of objects (mid-century American abstraction) and one of their contexts (critical and political journals published during that time). It's a familiar binary in the history of art (if not *the* binary). Other historical tropes—dialectics and dualisms—figure in the following pages as they were invoked by the critics of the time (even if that binary is delimited to the artist in a studio and her medium). An example of this appears above. The extremes of which Riegl and Greenberg wrote were historical and material. It's an analogy that each writer struck upon at a different moment in time. Similar point, made repeatedly, the meaning of which changes, again, subtly under different circumstances. Yet neither Riegl nor Greenberg made easy appeals to relativism; each made claims for objectivity in their respective analyses. As a contemporary scholar has formulated this point, in regards to the lessons learned from Riegl: "The history of art...cannot be written once and for all: it's a continuous process."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Henri Zerner, "Alois Riegl: Art, Value, Historicism," *Daedalus* 105:1 (Winter 1976): 187.



### Chapter III:

Abstract, Abstraction, and So Forth, ca. 1936

## I. Attitudes towards Abstract Painting, circa 1936

The cover of the 1936 exhibition catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art* bore the now-famous chart entitled “The Development of Abstract Art,” (fig. 7), which was prepared by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of the Museum of Modern Art. It is a graphic essay to account of the origins and then-current trends within modernist art. In it, Barr identified two major currents in abstract art: “Geometrical Abstract Art” and “Non-Geometrical Abstract Art.” The first current, Barr argued, which found its sources in “the art and theories of Cézanne and Seurat” and the “widening stream of Cubism” could be described as “intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence upon logic and calculation.” By contrast, the art and theories of Gauguin and his circle were the principal source for “the second—and until recently, secondary—current.” In an animated summation sentence, Barr described the difference in (Nietzschean) patronage between the two:

Apollo, Pythagoras and Descartes watch over the Cézanne-Cubist-geometrical tradition; Dionysus (an Asiatic god), Plotinus and Rousseau over the Gauguin-Expressionist-non-geometrical line.<sup>145</sup>

Barr did not, however, envision the two currents as independent or autonomous. In his chart, a number of arrows representing artistic movements have their points of origin at “Cubism,” which is positioned on the middle-right side at the 1906 mark. The arrows that thrust from right to left signify that the artists of the major movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had assimilated the pictorial lessons of Cubism, for which Barr claimed Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) as progenitor. (It is a graphic representation of Arshile Gorky’s later statement that he was, for a long time “*with Cézanne...* and now naturally I am *with*

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<sup>145</sup> Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936): 19.

Picasso!”<sup>146</sup>) Cézanne is also one of the distant points of origin on Barr’s chart for “Fauvism,” the other dominant mode of representation in the early twentieth century, which is positioned center-left at the 1906 mark. The left-hand side of Barr’s chart notes a progression of artistic movements over time: all of them abstract “(Abstract) Expressionism,” “(Abstract) Dadaism,” “(Abstract) Surrealism,” all leading towards “Non-Geometrical Abstract Art.” This is to suggest that the gentle, playful rivalry of Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) was historicized in mid-stream. Soon, many American painters would find themselves with Matisse (if, via Hans Hofmann).

If taken with the same care and sincerity, with which Barr prepared his chart (and reworked many times over after had been affixed to the catalogue cover), the point of origin for this current study lies in the lower left-hand corner of his chart.<sup>147</sup> Barr offered a kind of dualism in his chart, and in this dissertation, I argue that the main mode of critical interpretation for abstract painting at mid-century was dialectical (or, the use of its myth). In part, this is to suggest that critics saw a play between non-geometrical (or, biomorphic or gestural) abstraction and geometrical abstraction. A critic such as George L.K. Morris, also a practicing abstract painter, saw the mechanics of abstract painting as getting cleaner and more efficient and was optimistic; Meyer Schapiro saw similar

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<sup>146</sup> Julien Levy, “Arshile Gorky” in *Memoirs of a Gallery* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977): 283.

<sup>147</sup> The chart remained a work in progress for Barr. A copy of the published chart is to be found in his collected papers. Barr reconsidered some of the connections drawn between different movements and marked his changes in pencil at an unknown date. Changes include the deletion of the arrow drawn from “Near-Eastern Art” to “(Abstract) Expressionism.” For a discussion of Barr’s undergraduate studies in art history with Charles Rufus Morey at Princeton and the use of charts and diagrams to map the chronology and diffusion of styles, see Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2002): 18–35 *et passim*. See also, Susan Noyes Platt, “Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The *Cubism and Abstract Art* Exhibition of 1936,” *Art Journal* 44:4 (Winter 1988): 284–295. This essay was included in a special number, entitled, “Revising Cubism,” with Patricia Leighton as guest editor.

liberating developments and was deeply concerned for the health of art and culture. Or, in the case of Clement Greenberg's art criticism, the pictorial trajectories re-converged. The best new painters in the 1930s, Greenberg would later argue, innovated from *within* the pictorial conventions of late Cubism. Circa 1935, certain critics began to see gestural systems of painterly mark-making as having (future) potential: that is, it was no longer defined in the negative. (This is the now-familiar arc of histories of mid-century American painting—it's the "triumph" of Abstract Expressionism without Barr's parentheses, for better or worse, as art-historical opinions vary.<sup>148</sup>)

Elsewhere in his 1936 catalogue essay, Barr argued that the abstract painting was "a most positively concrete painting since it confines the attention to its immediate, sensuous, physical surface far more than does the canvas of a sunset or a portrait."<sup>149</sup> In this chapter, I trace critical responses to the major exhibitions of these "positively concrete" paintings in the late 1930s, including the celebrated shows at MoMA and elsewhere. Crossovers between journals occurred often during the 1930s: Meyer Schapiro wrote for *Art Front*, *Partisan Review*, and *Marxist Quarterly*; and, between job descriptions: Jacob Kainen, the painter and printmaker, wrote as an art critic for *Art Front* as well as for *The Daily Worker*. George L.K. Morris wrote behalf of the American Abstract Artist, of which he was a practicing member, and, later, as the art critic for *Partisan Review*. Writing retrospectively in 1956, Morris would write that:

[I]n 1936 it should have been obvious...that something was about to happen in art as in everything else. But there was a comfortable feeling at

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<sup>148</sup> From the title of Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*.

<sup>149</sup> Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 11.

the time as though the critical years of revolution had already been surmounted.<sup>150</sup>

Despite Morris' claims of comfort, competing, dissenting claims were made for abstract painting in politically-oriented journals of the day.



## II. Claiming Abstraction in the 1930s: Four Exhibitions, Plus

Sometimes in the history of art it is possible to describe a period of a generation of artists as having been obsessed by a particular problem.

~ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936<sup>151</sup>

What is abstract art? The question will be answered differently by each artist to whom the question is put. This is so because the idea of abstract art is alive. It changes, moves and grows like any other living organism.

~ Stuart Davis, *Abstract Painting in America*, 1935<sup>152</sup>

There is very little in this work which follows fashionable reputations at home or abroad; no residue of the point of view which in the past has tended to make American art a tasteful *résumé* of European practice. ... The influence of the School of Paris is rather slight. ... The lack of self-consciousness may be an expression of American naiveté.

~ Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art*, 1936<sup>153</sup>

...[A]rt is essentially aristocratic, but I feel it is highly desirable that a carefully selected collection of modern paintings should be constantly available to the general public, especially in a museum which is open in the evenings, as inevitably this will tend to improve the general taste. The value of this collection to a young painter has been fully proven.

~ Albert E. Gallatin, *Museum of Living Art*, 1936<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> George L.K. Morris, "The American Abstract Artists: A Chronicle, 1936–56," in *The World of Abstract Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1956): 133.

<sup>151</sup> Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 11.

<sup>152</sup> Stuart Davis, Introduction to *Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1935): n.f.

<sup>153</sup> Holger Cahill, Introduction to *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936): 34.

<sup>154</sup> Albert E. Gallatin, "The Plan of the Museum of Living Art," in *Museum of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: George Grady Press, 1936): n.f. The frontispiece of the catalogue noted that the



Abstract painting was subjected to a number of retrospective assessments in New York in the mid-1930s. These included *Cubism and Abstract Art*, and Barr's other major curatorial effort at MoMA of the 1936 season, the exhibition of *Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism*. Both of Barr's exhibitions focused generally on European art.<sup>155</sup> The exhibitions at MoMA remain remarkable for their scope and scale: the former comprised over 380 examples of painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic design, film, and theatre; the latter comprised over 584 works, beginning in date from the fifteenth century, plus examples of film and architecture. The previous year, the Whitney Museum of American Art put up 134 paintings for *Abstract Painting in America*.<sup>156</sup> The stated purpose of the *Abstract Painting in America* was to present a survey of an art movement in America that could be "defined in the broadest terms as abstract painting."<sup>157</sup> A brief essay by Stuart Davis, also an exhibitor at that show, accompanied the catalogue. In accounting for his curatorial choices, Barr wrote in his essay that he had purposefully excluded American artists from the Cubist and Abstract Art show because of the close proximity in time of the 1935 show at the Whitney. It would have been redundant, Barr claimed. Yet another exhibition was held at the museum, one that did include American painters working who

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gallery was free and open to the public, Monday through Friday 8AM to 10PM, and on Saturday 8AM to 5PM.

<sup>155</sup> "Cubism and Abstract Art" was MoMA exhibition no. 46; "Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism" was no. 55. "Cubism and Abstract Art" was on view from 3 March through 19 April; "Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism" followed in the autumn, 8 December through 17 January 1937. The third and final exhibition of the series was *Romantic Painting in America* (MoMA exhibition no. 246), which was on display from 11 November 11, 1943 through 6 February, 1944. See also, MoMA press release, 111636-34 (1936) regarding the exhibition dates for "Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism."

<sup>156</sup> This exhibition ran from 12 February through 22 March, 1935.

<sup>157</sup> Davis, Foreword to *Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1935), n.f.

worked in abstract modes: “Art for the Millions,” an exhibition of work produced under the Federal Arts Program, opened the 1936–1937 season at MoMA.<sup>158</sup> Abstract art was on view at yet another space: the downtown gallery of A.E. Gallatin, who also published a catalogue on abstract art in 1936.

*Cubism and Abstract Art*, the catalogue and Barr’s substantive essay, remain significant in the writing of modernist history. In a book review of the catalogue, one critic stressed that “nothing quite as factually exhaustive has ever been published on the subject [of modern art] in a single volume.”<sup>159</sup> (By way of comparison, David Gascoyne, James Thrall Soby, Julien Levy, and Herbert Read all published volumes on Surrealism, the first examples of English-language studies on the movement, near in time to Barr’s latter exhibition.)<sup>160</sup> In a generally favorable review of the catalogue, Harold Rosenberg noted that, in its comprehensiveness, it was “neither critical nor controversial.”<sup>161</sup> The list of exhibitors to *Cubism and Abstract Art* included a now-familiar representation of European artistic movements, all denoted on Barr’s 1936 chart: Post-Impressionists Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, the Fauvism of Henri Matisse; Cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque; the so-called Salon Cubists: Robert Delauney, Raymond Duchamp-

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<sup>158</sup> This was on display from 16 September through 12 October 1936. See MoMA Press Release no. 92536-21. This was the third exhibition of federally-sponsored art at MoMA. See also, 1934: PwoAProject and 1936 Architecture in Government Housing, which notes a “remarkable increase in quality over preceding work done under government patronage.” Cahill and Barr had previously collaborated on a couple of surveys: *Art in America in Modern Times* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934) and *Art in America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1935). Both were produced under the auspices of the American Federation of Women’s Clubs and the American Federation of the Arts with the coöperation of MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Chicago Art Institute and others.

<sup>159</sup> E.M. Benson, “New Books on Art: Abstract Art—Twilight or New Dawn?” *The American Magazine of Art* 29:10 (October 1936): 675. This is illustrated with von Doesburg’s *Aesthetic Transformation of the Object*, ca. 1918.

<sup>160</sup> See David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London: Cass, 1935); James Thrall Soby, *After Picasso* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1935); Julien Levy, *Surrealism* (New York: The Black Sun Press, 1936); and *Surrealism*, ed. and intro. Herbert Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1936). For a critical review of this last book, see Jacob Kainen, “Dream World Art,” *The New Masses*, 12 (November, 1936).

<sup>161</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “Book Review,” *Art Front* 2:5 (June 1936): 15.

Villon, Albert Gleizes; the Suprematists and Constructivists: El Lissitzky, Kasimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko; Dadaists Max Ernst and Francis Picabia. The work of Piet Mondrian represented *De Stijl*. The show also included works by Wassily Kandinsky, Jean Hélion, and the categorization-defiant Marcel Duchamp. Alexander Calder was the one American exception to this august list. In the later exhibition of “Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism,” which traced the fantastical in European art from the sixteenth century on, Calder was joined by fellow Americans Georgia O’Keeffe and Katherine Dreier. The Whitney show was perhaps more ecumenical in its choices. Exhibitors to that show included members of the circle of Alfred Stieglitz: O’Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, John Marin, Charles Sheeler; as well as Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn, and Walter Pach, the painter-curators of the landmark exhibition of the previous generation: the International Exhibition of Modern Art, or the Armory Show, of 1913.

In a light-hearted summary statement written at the close of the 1936 art season, one critic noted that New York had taken “extremes in stride.” The critic offered the following trio (figs. 8): Joan Miró’s *Rope and Personages* (1935) represented “aesthetic leftism” and was “typical of last-gasp European modernism;” while Francis Speight’s *Tamaqua* was “progressive” and “normal fare;” and, finally, Ettore Caser’s *Girl in the Sea-Shell* typified “extreme conservative artistic production.”<sup>162</sup> If Barr’s first exhibition of 1936 focused on the art of aesthetic leftism, the Whitney exhibition of the previous year focused more on the normal fare of the machine aesthetics of Precisionism and some examples of American Regionalism. This was in contrast to the critical vitriol occasioned

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<sup>162</sup> “Field Notes: New York Resumé,” *Magazine of Art* 30:7 (July 1937): 448.



by the Armory Show.<sup>163</sup> Stuart Davis wrote as much in his brief introduction to the Whitney exhibition catalogue:

The abstract portion of [the Armory Show] which consisted of works by European artists, with few exceptions, created a real sensation. Argumentation and dispute were constantly carried on in front of these canvases by laymen as well as artists. Friendships were broken and new ones made in the heat induced by these daily congresses of opinion. There was no American artist who saw this show but was forced to revalue his artistic concepts.<sup>164</sup>

Reviews of *Cubism and Abstract Art* were mostly measured or, at least, engaged.<sup>165</sup>

However, *Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism* received some sensationalist media coverage prompted by the subject matter of the exhibition, and the show had detractors.<sup>166</sup> Others just thought the show was incredible, with all that that word connotes.<sup>167</sup> It was a case of extremes of the advanced art of the day (even if taken in stride): Surrealism was art with demonstrable yet inexplicable content; pure abstraction seemed to be absolutely about nothing.

Clarence Weinstock, who was mostly sympathetic to modernist art, distrusted the pleasure he felt looking at the “pure” abstractions. This reviewer wondered in print if the severely abstract structures of the paintings, seemingly bereft of meaning, wouldn’t

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<sup>163</sup> See for example: Roosevelt, Theodore, “A Layman’s View of an Art Exhibition,” *The Outlook* (March 1913): 718-720; Frank Jewitt Mather, “Art: Old and New Art,” *The Nation*, 96:248 (6 March, 1913): 240-243; Frank Jewitt Mather, “Newest Tendencies in Art,” *Independent* 74 (6 March, 1913): 504-512; Kenyon Cox, “Cubists and Futurists are Making Insanity Pay” *The New York Times* (6 March, 1913): Part 6, 1.

<sup>164</sup> Davis, Foreword to *Abstract Painting in America*, n.f.

<sup>165</sup> For example, see Balcomb Greene, “Abstract Art at the Modern Museum,” *Art Front* (September-October 1936): 5-7.

<sup>166</sup> For example, see Paul Rosenfeld’s review of the exhibition in which he notes his disappointment with the museum for indiscriminate curating that only amused the general public while failing the truly interested; see *The New Republic* (6 January, 1937): 301-2.

<sup>167</sup> See “Modern Museum a Psychopathic Ward as Surrealism Has Its Day,” *The Art Digest* 6:6 (15 December, 1936): 5-6. That review starts as a parody of a psychiatric commitment hearing for Surrealism and Dadaism, the “patients.” The journalistic press presented a range of opinions on this latter show, from affable (Henry McBride at *The Sun*) to dismissive (Royal Cortissoz at *The Herald Tribune*). For a summary of journalistic reviews, see “One Faint Bravo,” *The Art Digest* 11:7 (1 January, 1937): 14-5.

collapse under the weight of modern conditions—and if this wouldn't limit the possibilities for abstract art in culture:

An art in which emotion and ideology are so random must lose out amidst modern conflict. It can exist only in relatively undisturbed societies, or where an artificial stability has been temporarily built by a small section of society, rich patrons and dependent creators.<sup>168</sup>

Barr may have agreed with this critic: that the appreciative audience for modernist art was rarefied (both in the sense of delimited and fragile). While there seems to be little reason to question Barr's standing as a preeminent formalist of his generation, it would, however, be an inaccurate cliché of his formalism to conclude that he was oblivious of the political circumstances of artists' bodies, or the proxy entanglements of their bodies of work. It was the abstracted quality of abstract art, not its content, that engaged it in politics. Barr made exceptions from this generalization on form and content for Futurism and Surrealism: "The former in much of its program anticipated Fascism and the latter has been involved in Communism."<sup>169</sup> In the section of his essay subtitled "Abstract art and politics," he concluded with a dedication "to those painters of squares and circles ... who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power."<sup>170</sup> The immediate source of Barr's irritation was an encounter with the U.S. Customs Department, which reads now like a screwball *avant-garde* comedy.<sup>171</sup> Barr went on to offer a more visceral

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<sup>168</sup> Clarence Weinstock [also known as Charles Humboldt, (1910–64)], "Contradictions in Abstractions," *Art Front* 1:4 (April 1935): 7. A view of the above-mentioned rich patrons can be seen in George Grosz's sketch, *Just of the Dining Room*, which illustrates the essay. While Weinstock was concerned for the negating quality of abstract art, Stuart Davis responded with affirmations. See Davis' reply, "A Medium of Two Dimensions," *Art Front* 1:5 (May 1935), n.f.

<sup>169</sup> Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 16.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>171</sup> In a footnote to this dedication, Barr noted that the U.S. Customs had refused to permit MoMA to enter as works of art 19 pieces of "more or less abstract sculpture" under a ruling that required that sculpture "must represent an animal or human form." This group of sculptures included work by André Derain, Juan Gris, Kandinsky, Malevich, Picasso, and Picabia. The works were entered under bond as raw goods, and

example: he noted that nine of the artists represented in the 1936 show had left Germany since 1933, and only one of them was a “‘non-Aryan’.”<sup>172</sup>

Under Barr’s aegis, the exhibitions he personally curated at MoMA in 1936 included almost exclusively European artists, or European-trained artists who practiced in New York after a forced migration from Europe. The American Abstract Artists Group (AAA), probably the foremost practitioners of contemporary, geometrical abstraction in the 1930s, was also not included in any of the above-mentioned exhibitions. Barr’s claims of redundancy fell flat to the AAA painters. George L.K. Morris, one of the founders of the AAA and a future editor at *Partisan Review*, took to the pen. For the annual yearbooks in 1938 and 1939, he produced, respectively, “On the Abstract Tradition,” and “The Quest for an Abstract Tradition.”<sup>173</sup> The Whitney declined to hold their annual group show in 1938. Still later, in 1940, the membership would take to the streets in front of MoMA to protest their exclusion. Ironically, the graphic broadside designed by Ad Reinhardt that the members distributed in front of the museum was the first work by an AAA member to be acquired by MoMA (fig. 9). In a later interview, Ilya

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the deliberations delayed the opening of the exhibition by a week. For reports on the incident with reproductions of the works in question, see *The Architectural Record* 79:5 (May 1936): 340, and “Cubist Art and Red Tape,” *The Literary Digest* (7 March, 1936): 24, “Solid Abstractions,” *Time* (9 March, 1936): 50–1. See also, MoMA Press Releases (1936) no. 2036-8. A similar incident had happened nine years earlier. In 1927, Brancusi’s *Bird in Space* was assessed an additional import tariff as raw material, as it had not met the definition of art by the United States Customs Bureau. Henry McBride registered his “distaste for the episode” in his column, but also said that the scandal had caused a throng of visitors to the then-current exhibition at the Brummer Galleries. The lighting at Brummer could have been better, in his estimation, as it had been in the “truly excellent photographs” in the Brancusi number of *The Little Review*. McBride continued, “The exuberant Mr Ezra Pound, who shares my aversion to definitions, said in that issue, that ‘it is impossible to give an exact sculptural idea in either words or photography,’ and while he is quite right, the photographs by which his text is surrounded go as far as photographs can to defeat the argument.” Brancusi eventually won the court case, after two years of litigation. For McBride’s account of the giving evidence in court on behalf of the sculptor, see “Modern Art” *The Dial* 84 (January 1928): 75–7. Marius de Zayas also gives an account of McBride’s role in the trial. See de Zayas, *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York*, ed. Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996): 44.

<sup>172</sup> Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 17, n. 1.

<sup>173</sup> *American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks, 1938, 1939, 1946* (New York: Arno Press, 1969, reprint): 14.

Bolotowsky recalled that a museum secretary was sent out by the administration to collect a copy of the broadside for the museum archives.<sup>174</sup>

Exhibitors to *Cubism and Abstract Art* did not include, by reason of style, American Regionalists (such as Thomas Hart Benton), Realists (e.g., Yasuo Kuniyoshi), or Social Realists (George Biddle). One critic, conservative in outlook, wondered in his measured review of the show if Barr's show could be considered "representative" if it excluded representational art.<sup>175</sup> Barr also had a hand in *New Horizons in American Art*, which was curated by Holger Cahill, then National Director of the Federal Arts Program (FAP). In his own foreword to the catalogue, Barr noted that that exhibition was intended "to serve as a visual report to the public: a documented survey of one year's activity."<sup>176</sup> This show included the works of representational artists, exactly such as Kuniyoshi. Painters who worked in abstract modes were in the minority, and in the case of *New Horizons in American Art*, this included many of the AAA painters. (From the exhibition list, one would not surmise that the future of American art would come to be dominated by abstract painting at mid-century.) On display were over 400 examples of work from the easel, mural, and graphic arts projects, and the allied arts projects, including photography, industrial design, and examples of children's art from the education program. Due to the massive scale of many of the murals (and their site-specificity), the exhibition also included scale models of interiors, which were constructed by the model division of the FAP. An example of this was Gorky's *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic*

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<sup>174</sup> See Susan Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History, 1936–1941," *The Archives of American Art Journal*, 14: 1 (1974): 6.

<sup>175</sup> See "Alfred H. Barr, Jr." *Magazine of Art* 32: 6 (June 1939): 323.

<sup>176</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Foreword to *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936): 7.

*Limitations* (fig. 10). The complete series of panels totaled 1530 square feet. One completed panel, a model and photographs were exhibited in lieu of the actual work that was installed at what was then known as Newark Airport. Since lost, the installation is now known only through the reconstructions. A second celebrated example, also lost, was de Kooning's murals for the Williamsburg Housing Projects in Brooklyn, New York (fig. 11). In an unpublished essay from 1938, Stuart Davis cited both of these examples of early, large-scale abstraction not exclusively for their intrinsic formal properties, but for the instructive value of those formal properties: "A vast education in art is being made available to the American people."<sup>177</sup>

In his catalogue essay, Cahill accomplished several tasks. He laid out the goals for the FAP, which could be summed up as Art for the Millions.<sup>178</sup> Cahill took the long view of the development of art and the social context of the artists in America: from the time of the Hudson River School painters, through the American genre painters, and around the country to the Regionalists. In bringing art to the public, the programs of the FAP were nation-wide in scope, though Cahill was quick to note, not necessarily a fostering of Regionalist art. FAP artists, he argued, found their audience, at long last, and found that there was both a need and a use for their art:

A new concept of social loyalty and responsibility, of the artist's union with his fellow men in origin and in destiny, seems to be replacing the romantic concept of nature which for so many years gave to artists and to many others a unifying approach to art. This concept is capable of great development in intellectual range and emotional power. This is what gives meaning to the social content of art in its deepest sense. An end seems to

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<sup>177</sup> See Stuart Davis, "Federal Art Project and the Social Education of the Artist," (1938) in Diane Kelder, ed., *Stuart Davis: A Documentary Monograph* (New York: Praeger, 1971): 165.

<sup>178</sup> *Art for the Millions* was the proposed title of an FAP publication that was only published well after the fact in 1973. See, *Art for the Millions*, ed. and intro, Francis V. O'Connor (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

be in sight to the kind of detachment which removed the artist from common experience, and which at its worst gave rise to an art merely for the museum, or a rarefied preciousness.<sup>179</sup>

American artists in the FAP lost their isolation by ceding the autonomy of their art, as it were, to Cahill. Cahill did not call out differences between representational and abstract art. Rather, he emphasized the diversity of categories in which the FAP artists worked (large-scale murals, easel paintings, sculptures, etc.) and the array of media employed by the artists (oil, pastel, watercolor). Cahill found a deep reserve of talent in American artists, who, under challenging circumstances, “have shown themselves ready to attack new problems and to make fresh adaptations.”<sup>180</sup> Through a kind of organic adaptation to their new environment, FAP artists, in Cahill’s view, were changing the culture in which art was made and viewed in America. It was an experiment in symbiosis, in shared, that is, common, experience between artists and their audience: newly-receptive audiences were cultivated through the program-made, site-specific work of the FAP.<sup>181</sup>

In contrast to Cahill’s art for the millions, A.E. Gallatin (1881–1952) addressed himself to a “general public”—even those (or, perhaps especially those) who could become engaged with *avant-garde* art after the workday.<sup>182</sup> In 1936, Gallatin published an illustrated volume of his collection then held at the Museum of Living Art, housed at the New York University campus in Greenwich Village.<sup>183</sup> One visitor to the gallery was a young Willem de Kooning, who recalled that he:

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<sup>179</sup> Holger Cahill, Introduction to *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936): 44.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> See Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 151–53 *et passim* for a recent discussion of Cahill’s use of the Pragmatist aesthetics of John Dewey.

<sup>182</sup> *Museum of Living Art: The A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: George Grady Press, 1936): n.f.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

[W]ent so many times. I remember a Mondrian, and also the French artist Héliion. When I met Gorky he used to go there often. It was so easy to walk in and walk out again, no charge, it was so nice.<sup>184</sup>

Gallatin took a different approach to the changing of taste on a large scale, assuming such a thing is possible in modern times, from the one employed by Cahill and the FAP.

Gallatin, who had opened the Gallery of Living Art in December 1927, was the only one of his generation of collectors to put forth and publish on his private collection for the public. The gallery was devoted exclusively to modern and contemporary (Cubist) painting. In the 1930s, Gallatin expanded his collection to include other forms of abstraction: Constructivism, Neo-Plasticism, and abstract variants of Surrealism, as well as contemporary sculpture. In 1936, Gallatin re-named the gallery the Museum of Living Art, which he then closed in 1943 under duress from the university. The posthumous “value” of the collection, as Gallatin stated above, was demonstrated through the work of the American Abstract Artists, whom Gallatin exhibited in the late 1930s and 1940s, as well as Gorky and de Kooning.<sup>185</sup>

### III. Abstract, Abstraction, and So Forth...<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Willem de Kooning, as quoted in Susan C. Larsen, “Albert Gallatin: The ‘Park Avenue Cubist’ who Went Downtown,” *ArtNews* 77 (December 1978): 80.

<sup>185</sup> *Museum of Living Art: The A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: George Grady Press, 1936), n.f. See, for example, George L.K. Morris, “The American Abstract Artists: A Chronicle, 1936–56,” in *The World of Abstract Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1956): 133–45.

<sup>186</sup> See Clement Greenberg, “Abstract and Representational,” *Art Digest* (1 November 1954): 7–10. This was initially delivered the Ryerson Lecture at the School of Fine Arts, Yale University on 12 May 1954. It was published in several forms: “Abstract, Representational, and So Forth” in *Art & Culture*, 133–9; “Abstract, Representational, and So Forth,” *Arts* 48:7 (April 1974): 50–51; and “Abstract, Representational, and So Forth,” in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 58–62. All citations in this dissertation refer to the *Art & Culture* version of this essay.

[T]he image of a square is as much an “object” or a “figure” as the image of a face or a landscape; in fact “figure” in the very prefix used by geometers in naming A or B the abstractions with which they deal.

~ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936<sup>187</sup>

Since we forgo all efforts to reflect optical illusions and concentrate on the reality of our canvas, we will now study the material reality of our medium, paint on canvas, or whatever it may be.

~ Stuart Davis, *Abstract Painting in America*, 1935<sup>188</sup>

Then, since all logic of natural appearances may be put aside and shapes deducted from natural forms to be reorganized unnaturally, there is no reason for disallowing the next step in which the artist may express himself directly, with only a subconscious memory of forms to depend on and with no naturalistic intent.

~ James Johnson Sweeney, “Painting,” 1936<sup>189</sup>

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In their respective essays, Barr and Davis arrived at differentiated definitions of abstraction. One way to account for the difference is the job description of the respective authors: Barr wrote on abstraction as an art-historical phenomenon; Davis wrote as a practicing abstract artist. Both played upon the word abstract, in its various grammatical forms to form their arguments. It was customary, Barr wrote, to apologize for the word “abstract” with all of its potential “imprecision.”¹⁹⁰ Abstract, as an adjective, Barr argued, was confusing because its meaning drew upon the definitions of the word in its verb and noun forms. To abstract, to Barr, meant “*to draw out of*” or “*away from*,” while an abstraction was an object in stasis, already drawn out or away from.¹⁹¹ Barr identified two distinct trends under the rubric of abstract: near- and pure-abstraction. Near-abstraction ,

¹⁸⁷ Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 11.

¹⁸⁸ Davis, *Abstract Painting in America*, n.f.

¹⁸⁹ *Museum of Living Art: The A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: George Grady Press, 1936): n.f.

¹⁹⁰ Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 11.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

such as Piet Mondrian's *Composition* (1915), abstracted from nature (fig. 12) and did not achieve pure abstraction. (It's similar to Clement Greenberg's later use of the term homeless to describe the figurative abstractions of Willem de Kooning.) In the example of this painting, Barr noted, the plus/minus idiom was derived from a seascape. Mondrian's later *Composition* (1925) was an example of pure abstraction in its "genesis as well as in its final form" in that it has "no dependence upon natural forms."¹⁹²

Despite the possible confusion, Barr ultimately preferred abstract over the possible alternatives of non-objective or non-figurative art:

Substitutes for "abstract" such as "non-objective" and "non-figurative" have been advocated as superior. But the image of a square is as much an "object" or a "figure" as the image of a face or a landscape; in fact "figure" in the very prefix used by geometers in naming A or B the abstractions with which they deal.¹⁹³

This is to suggest that, in its concreteness, abstract art qualified as an art object in its forms. In formalist terms, Barr offered a "dialectic of abstract painting and sculpture": it's the pact between object and viewer. He argued that the dialectic was based upon the assumption that "a work of art...is worth looking at primarily because it presents a composition or organization of color, line, light, and shade." As for the content of abstract art, Barr defined that in the negative, as abstraction-as-negation, as a lack of or a freedom from representational qualities. Artistic practice in the twentieth century seemed to be in concord with Barr's conclusion. He wrote generally on the circumstances of the early twentieth-century artist (with a possible allusion to Riegl's *Kunstwollen*):

By a common and powerful impulse they were driven to abandon the imitation of natural appearance... "Abstract" is the term most frequently

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

used to describe the more extreme effects of this impulse away from “nature.”¹⁹⁴

Barr argued that resemblance to nature was “at best superfluous and at worst distracting.”

Like Hans Arp, whom he quoted, Barr liked nature, but not its substitutes.¹⁹⁵

As for the future of abstract art? Barr concluded with another binary (one that did not necessarily exclude that of near- and of pure-abstraction): geometrical- and gestural-abstraction. If Mondrian’s composition of 1915 was an example of the former, an example of the latter was Joan Miró’s painting, also entitled *Composition* of 1933 (fig. 13). It was these kinds of biomorphic forms that were on the ascendant, in Barr’s analysis: “the shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba.”¹⁹⁶ A footnote at the very conclusion of Barr’s lengthy essay mentioned the Whitney exhibition of the previous year.¹⁹⁷ Barr noted that that exhibition was also conceived in a retrospective spirit, and notably, that it contained the work of younger men. Abstract art in America, one could infer from Barr’s footnote, would be practiced by the next, up-and-coming generation, those same painters who saw current examples of abstraction at galleries such as the Gallery of the Living Art and elsewhere.¹⁹⁸

Unlike the young practitioners mentioned by Barr, Stuart Davis was already an established abstractionist by the 1930s. In response to the rhetorical question he posed in

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11. For a similar reading of Barr’s phrasing, see: Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, 320.

¹⁹⁵ In his essay, Barr quoted Hans Arp statement, “I like nature, but not its substitutes.” See Arp, “Notes from a Diary,” *transition* 21 (1932). Also quoted by J.J. Sweeney, *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934): 30 and by Sweeney again in “Painting” in *Museum of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: George Grady Press, 1936): n.f.

¹⁹⁶ Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 19.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁹⁸ See, for example, “Five Contemporary American Concretionists: Biederman, Calder, Ferren, Morris, Shaw” held at the Paul Reinhardt Galleries in New York from 9 through 31 March, 1936. I believe this to be the exhibition to which Barr referred in his essay.

his brief essay of 1935—“What is abstract art?”—Davis argued in his own essay that amongst the inevitable answers “some basic concordance could doubtless be abstracted,” (in Barr’s sense of abstract, to draw out of or away from).¹⁹⁹ The responses he offered to his own question may be abstracted as such: that art was not about mimesis and that all attempts at mimesis were “doomed to failure.”²⁰⁰ Per contra, the abstract painter created parallel pictorial world. In taking up abstraction, painters ceased to ask questions about capturing a good likeness and such, Davis argued (he wrote on behalf of his fellow abstractionists and wrote in the plural). Rather, they asked themselves: “Does this painting which is a defined two dimensional surface convey to me a direct emotional or ideological stimulus?” Davis wrote in terms that would become more familiar to post-War critics: in practice, abstract artists concentrated on the autonomous reality of their canvas and material reality of their medium. In doing so, abstract painters achieved “a two dimensional clarity and logic.” (Or, in Barr’s terms, an abstraction in the sense of an object that had already fully occupied its abstract status.) This would, Davis concluded, automatically explain the geometric character of many abstract works of art.” A survey of the paintings included in the exhibition bore out Davis’s unscientific statistic that most abstract paintings were geometric in style, a few of which were reproduced in the thin catalogue. These were two works (figs. 14 and 15) that demonstrated mastery of a late Cubist-informed aesthetic: Max Weber’s *Bathers* (1913) and John Marin’s *Abstraction—Lower Manhattan* (1928); and an example of Precisionism (fig. 16) by Joseph Stella *American Landscape* (1932). An anomaly, in that the painter used organic forms, in the catalogue was Gorky’s *Composition Number One* (1927, fig. 17). In Barr’s analysis, the

¹⁹⁹ Davis, *Abstract Painting in America*, n.f.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

amoeba confronted the square. It is an example of extremes (if not an extreme example) for demonstration purposes. In Davis' show, the biomorphic is one amongst many forms. The organic metaphor is an apt one in this case, to return to Davis' suggestion that abstract art is "alive" —that is "changes, moves, grows." In the 1930s, as the above abstract paintings demonstrate, painters found the means to elide forms, moving between hard-line abstraction and biomorphic forms, as did Mondrian and Gorky, or, to phrase it differently, they moved from composition to composition.

A.E. Gallatin's catalogue of 1936 contained a number of essays by critics and curators who were especially well-connected to the European avant-garde: George L.K. Morris' "On America and a Living Art," James Johnson Sweeney's "Painting," and Jean Hélion's "The Evolution of Abstract Art as shown in the Museum of Living Art."²⁰¹ Each essayist offered an assessment of the formative dynamics each felt were at play. For example, Morris and Johnson both envisioned an abstract art independent of illusionism. Morris wrote an essay on the historical genesis of an American art (and the difficulties faced in creating such an art on par with the achievements of European painting). He located American abstraction as the result of a quest: "And there is no direction more tantalizing and more beset with impediments than this journey backward in search of significant form."²⁰² In an obvious reference to the work of Clive Bell, Morris saw art as becoming natural again through the pursuit of an historically-distilled [generated] pure

²⁰¹ Morris's essay was written in November 1936; Sweeney's essay in October 1933; Hélion's essay in 1933. NB: the catalogue contains no folios. All the following citations are from the first edition printed in December 1936.

²⁰² A reference to the term first used by Clive Bell (1881–1964) in his 1913 treatise, *Art*, to denote the essential sensory import of the work of art. See Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913).

form. (Morris' criticism of the AAA as published in *Partisan Review* and elsewhere will be discussed at greater length in a subsequent chapter of this dissertation.)

In his own essay, Sweeney saw no impediment to the painters of his time, those “plastic grammarians,” taking the next, logical step towards complete abstraction. In the process of stripping bare the art of painting “to the pelt,” illusionism has been (and should continue to be) the prime target of modern painters. Painting would, in the hands of the moderns, these “plastic grammarians,” come into its own—finally. By way of fellow feeling, Sweeney concludes with Hans Arp's famous phrase, “I like nature but not its substitutes.”²⁰³ Abstract painting, true abstract painting, apparently, would offer not a simulacrum but the thing itself. It is useful to note that both Sweeney and Morris understood pure abstraction, pure plasticity, as coming from some (art-historical) place—as having a point of origin. This is to suggest that they saw the abstract painter, despite surface appearances, as working in something other than a void. It's rather like one theory of the origins of the Earth's moon: where, through gravitational pull, some of the Earth's own matter dislodged from its surface to form the lunar body—formed, separate, and lifeless despite regular movement.

Of particular interest for the task of this dissertation is Héliion's essay where he deployed an organic dialectic to account for the change over time. Competing tendencies vied, he argued, to keep painting stable, vital, alive:

It is a kind of breathing phenomenon: one opens, one shuts. To keep painting from bursting in scrolls, the tendency of Ingres is necessary. To keep painting from shrinking into sterilized statuettes, the tendency of Delacroix is needed. This movement of opening and shutting takes the most complex aspects, follows the most different reasons, and always destroys something.

²⁰³ For the circulation of this quote in 1930s art criticism, see n. 195.

Hélion went on in his essay to write a general assessment of then-contemporary art: the Cubists, the Surrealists, Abstract Art. It's an essay written with the confidence that general typologies for any of the above-mentioned movements have been previously established in the reader's mind. It is significant that he paused before the work of the Uruguayan painter, Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), who, Hélion argued, occupied:

[A]n independent position. Rich in all that has been discovered since Cubism, he has made for himself an alphabet of natural forms, keys, fishes, boats, doors, people, condensed into signs that he builds together like walls. To the naturalistic description, he has substituted an enunciation of hieroglyphics freshly inscribed in a masterful checkerboard of color.²⁰⁴

Two paintings (and one construction) by Torres-García were included in the Gallatin Collection, though not reproduced in the catalogue itself. These are: *Composition* (1929) and *Head* (1930). The 1929 composition (fig. 18) had been previously exhibited in the first (and only) exhibition of *Cercle et Carré* in Paris in April of 1930.²⁰⁵ Torres-García had co-founded this group with the writer Michel Seuphor (1901–99) in 1929. Perhaps Hélion, friend and colleague to the painter, and himself one of the founders of *Art Concret* in 1930, admired the universal forms of the abstract self-expression in Torres-García's composition. An asymmetrical grid of lines falls across the surface of the painting; the grid-lines give way to, or merge with, these "alphabet forms," universals, but here deployed by Torres-García for his own purposes ("made for himself"). The form of a woman at left stands on legs that are also an in-set grid; curvilinear forms in the center suggesting a ship's prow (the means of his father's profession) break through the

²⁰⁴ For reference to the hieroglyphics of Torres-García as explicitly Pre-Columbian motifs, see Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 90. See also Torres-García's own essay, *Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana* (Montevideo, 1935).

²⁰⁵ Joaquín Torres-García (Providence: Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, 1970): 47

larger grid; several circles are marked with ‘V’ that suggest the face (of a clock). The painting was something “freshly inscribed” that maintained the Cubist grid (“rich in all that had been learned...a checkerboard”). However, the grid that he created is interfered with by another overall grid that he chose: the burlap support of the painting, which has a weave far more pronounced than that of traditional canvas. Torres-Garcia offered a painting, in its delicacy of line work, that insisted upon its status as an art object—a different kind of substitute for nature.

The encounter between the body of Héliou (writing as a critic in this particular case) and the body of work by Torres-Garcia in Gallatin’s gallery is emblematic of the kind of cross-cultural or trans-Atlantic experience that that gallery engendered. (A subsequent section of this chapter examines Morris’ role of intermediary between the American Abstract Artists and the *Plastique* group in Paris.) The 1936 Gallatin catalogue demonstrates the presences in New York of a particular discursive tendencies surrounding ideas of pure plastic art. The Neo-Plastic was called forth in the work of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), who had been publishing his ideas on the “new consciousness” of neo-plasticism since 1919.²⁰⁶ Over the course of the next twenty years, Mondrian wrote of a perceived changing consciousness: one moving away from natural things towards abstraction. This new consciousness was given form in the new plasticism: in straight lines and primary colors. He equated the new plasticism with pure painting, that is, it is a pictorial means. The new plasticism, he argued, was the expression of the universal within us, and was therefore, the representation of a duality: “through the

²⁰⁶ See Mondrian, “Dialogo ome de Nieuwe Beelding,” *De Stijl* (February and March, 1919); *Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe général de l’équivalence plastique* (Paris: Galerie de l’Effort Moderne, 1920); Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art,” in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art, 1937 and Other Essays, 1941–1943*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, 1945): 50–4.

reconstruction of the cosmic relations it is a direct expression of the universal; by its rhythm, by the material reality of its plastic form, it expresses the artist's individual subjectivity."²⁰⁷ The neo-plastic, he concluded, "unfolds before us a world of universal beauty without thereby renouncing the human element."²⁰⁸

Paris in the 1930s witnessed a number of configurations (and re-configurations) of the polemicist geometers in painting—those Neo-Plasticist painters traveling in circles around Mondrian. Torres-Garcia, Hélión, and Morris all had foundational roles or connections with some (or all) of the organization of the Paris-based Neo-Plasticists. *Cercle et Carré* was short-lived: Torres-Garcia split with Seuphor, who went on to found *Abstraction-Création* in February of 1931. This group, which lasted until 1936, reunited many of the *Cercle et Carré* artists, including Sophie Täuber-Arp (1889–1943). Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), however, refused to join this new group, and instead formed *Art Concret* with Hélión. After van Doesburg's sudden death in 1931, the group carried on until 1945 largely through the efforts of the Swiss artist, Max Bill (1908–1994).

When Barr stated his preference for the term "abstract" over that of "non-objective," it was not a case of mere semantic preference. One could argue that Barr's choice was a pointed refutation of the theories of the Baroness Hilla Rebay (1890–1967), artist, art advisor to the Guggenheim family, and first curator of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which was established in 1939, and renamed the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1959. The Guggenheim collection of non-objective painting was put on exhibition several times in the 1930s at venues outside of New York (until the 1939 exhibition): at the Guggenheim estate in Charleston, South Carolina and in Philadelphia.

²⁰⁷ Mondrian, "Dialoog ove de Nieuwe Beelding," in *De Stijl* (February and March, 1919).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

The Baroness had defined with precision her chosen term, the “non-objective,” in her own catalogue essay of 1936. “Non-Objective painting,” she wrote, “represents no object or subject known to us on earth.”²⁰⁹ As someone deeply engaged with Theosophy of Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), she ascribed spiritual or mystical properties to non-objective painting. A discursive chasm separates the play of the term non-objective from other terms in circulation in this time period—a chasm that was to be replicated in later discursive trends in scholarship.²¹⁰ The purpose of this dissertation is not to bridge this gap, but to mind it—by drawing attention to the discursive patterns that surrounded this term in the 1930s. In claiming to represent “non-objects,” critics of this iteration of the “non-objective” movement both friendly (such as Rebay) and those less so agreed mutually on the terms of these paintings.²¹¹ These works were seen as things out of this world, or not of this world. For example, several members of the American Abstract Artists group, which is discussed in a subsequent chapter, wrote a letter of protest to Art Front to object to Rebay’s ideas that abstract art had “no meaning” and represented

²⁰⁹ Hilla Rebay, “Definition of Non-Objective Painting,” in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-objective Paintings* (Charleston: Carolina Art Association, Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery, 1936): 12–13. See also by Rebay, “The Beauty of Non-Objectivity,” *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance, 1937): 4–13; “Value of Non-Objectivity,” *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (Charleston: Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery, 1938): 4–14; and “The Power of Spiritual Rhythm,” *Art of Tomorrow* (New York: Museum of Non-Objective Painting, 1939): 4–10.

²¹⁰ See for examples Jerome Ashmore, “Some Differences between Abstract and Non-Objective Painting,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 13:4 (June 1955): 486–95. In more recent scholarship, see the distinction held by Yve-Alain Bois between in the formal properties of Mondrian’s mature grids (those of 8x8 or 16x16 that he struck upon ca. 1922) and the assessment of Mondrian’s earlier interest in Theosophy (ca. 1909) in *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944*, exh. cat. (The Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1995). For a definitive assessment of Mondrian’s expressed interest in Theosophy, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 313–28 *et passim*.

²¹¹ “Arts: Non-Objects,” *Time*, (15 February, 1937). See also, “The Greeks Had No Word for It,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (21 August, 1937); and “Arts: Painting,” *Newsweek* (10 July 1937).

“nothing.”²¹² To these AAA painters, there was a world of difference between the abstract painter who “identifies himself with life” and the non-objective painter who is “not conscious of or contemptuous of the world about him.”²¹³

If the goal of non-objective painting was to transcend the known world and to render the invisible visible, many of the works in the Guggenheim collection took the form of a hard-edged, geometric abstraction.²¹⁴ In 1937, Guggenheim himself was photographed for *Time* in front of Rudolph Bauer’s *Tetraptychon* of 1930 (fig. 19).²¹⁵ In general terms, the *dislocation* of non-objective painting may have been symptomatic of the larger, formal dislocation of geometric abstraction—the kind which Barr identified ca. 1936. However, as the recent work of Maurice Tuchman and Rose Carol Washton-Long has demonstrated, the *discrediting* of non-objective painting as the painting of utopian or spiritual vision was in fact the consequence of politics. As Washton-Long has recently argued, the Expressionism and abstraction of Kandinsky, who was claimed by the non-objective painters such as Bauer and Rebay, was criticized by some European intellectuals on the far left for its “decadence, anarchism, mysticism, and bohemianism.”²¹⁶ Tuchman’s work has shown that the mystical or occultist beliefs

²¹² Byron Brown, *et al.*, “Letters,” *Art Front* 3:7 (October 1937), n.f.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ See the work of Sixten Ringbom for foundational articulations of this assumption: “Art in ‘The Epoch of the Great Spiritual’: Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 386–418; “Transcending the Visible: The Generation of Abstract Pioneers,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting: 1890–1985*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles and New York: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art with Abbeville Press, 1986): 131–53.

²¹⁵ See “Arts: Non-Objects,” *Time* (15 February, 1937).

²¹⁶ Rose Carol Washton-Long, “Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction: Kandinsky’s Art of the Future,” *Art Journal* 46:1 (Spring, 1987): 39. This was a special number dedicated to Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art. In Washton-Long’s essay, see also p. 44, n. 16 and 17, where she cites the examples of the Expressionism debate in *Das Wort* (1937–8) and Georg Lukács’ 1934 denouncement of Expressionism. For Expressionism debate in *Das Wort*, as cited by Washton-Long, see *Die Expressionismus debatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*, ed., Hans-Jürgen Schmitt (Frankfurt a.M., 1973) and Franz Schonauer, “Expressionismus und Fascismus: Eine Diskussion aus dem Jahre 1938,” in two

prevalent in the early decades of the 20th century became suspect with their later associations with fascism in Nazi Germany.²¹⁷ Perhaps most importantly in terms of the discrediting of the category of the Non-Objective, some Marxist analyses of fascism in the 1930s presented that doctrine *as* a kind of mysticism itself. In his book *Fascism and Big Business*, Daniel Guérin dedicated a chapter to the subject of fascistic mysticism. In this chapter, he argued that, as a doctrine, fascism offered its “troops...first, *mysticism*; and then *social demagogy*.”²¹⁸ How else could fascism be effective, Guérin concluded. To demonstrate his point, he cited a number of polemics and utterances by Hitler and by Benito Mussolini.²¹⁹ It was the latter who had earlier claimed that: “Nothing great can be accomplished except in a state of loving passion, of religious mysticism.”²²⁰ In the eyes of some socially-concerned critics, the connective tissue between fascism and mysticism and the realm of the non-objective was clear and present in its great threat to society.²²¹ Perhaps most famously, Meyer Schapiro had deeply-felt concerns about the role of abstract art in culture.

parts, *Literatur und Kritik*, 7 & 8 (October and November 1966): 44–54, 45–55. This debate will be discussed in a subsequent section of this dissertation.

²¹⁷ For a discussion of the origins of the Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy as indebted to a version of Theosophy, see Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” in the *Spiritual in Art*, 17–61, especially 18–19. See also, John Dewey’s later assessment of Hitler’s rise to power: “Hitler repeatedly stated that the cause of Germany’s weakness, the weakness which produced its defeat, was ‘spiritual’ (*geistige*) and that therefore its redemption must also first of all be spiritual.” See Dewey, “Hitler’s National Socialism,” in *German Philosophy and Politics*, rev. ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1942): 19.

²¹⁸ Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business*, intro., Dwight Macdonald, trans., Frances and Mason Merrill (New York: Pioneer Press, 1939): 54. Emphasis in the original. Originally published as *Fascisme et grand capital* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936). It was introduced to English-speaking readers in 1939 under the aegis of Macdonald, who was at that time still an editor at *Partisan Review*. As a similar example, in his 1939 story *School for Dictators*, Ignazio Silone subtitled one passage, “On Fascist mythology, its obscurities, its fetishes, and its idols, and on the modern technique of hypnotizing and subduing the masses.” For the initial publication of a passage from this story, see *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 20–42.

²¹⁹ Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business*, 54–70.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56. The Mussolini quote was spoken in a speech on 5 October, 1922.

²²¹ For an additional example, see Alfred Duras, “Abstrakt, abstrakter, abstraktesten,” *Das Wort* 6 (June 1938): 71–84, and 77–8, especially, for his consideration of mysticism.

IV. The (Material) Nature of Abstract Art

Abstract art had therefore the value of practical demonstration. In these new paintings the very processes of designing and inventing seemed to have been brought on to the canvas; the pure form once masked by an extraneous content was liberated and could now be directly perceived....These two aspects of abstract painting, the exclusion of natural forms and the unhistorical universalizing of the qualities of art, have a crucial importance for the general theory of art.

~ Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," 1937²²²

The year after he published his essay on the Vienna School, Schapiro published a lengthy consideration on abstraction in the *Marxist Quarterly* in 1937, entitled "The Nature of Abstract Art." The premise of this essay was a review of Barr's 1936 catalogue, however the essay ranged far beyond its stated premise. Schapiro made several damning charges against Barr's essay: that Barr cast abstraction as unhistorical phenomenon; that he used a language of reified "absolutes" in his categories of near- and pure-abstraction; and that, Barr's analysis lacked a motor to account for change. That artists simply grew fatigued with representational art and turned to abstraction is a facile understanding of art history—a mere "grandfather theory."²²³ It reduces the art of each generation to a reactionary resistance to that of the previous one. Rather, in Schapiro's analysis, stylistic divisions in art, as in literature, correspond to "the momentous divisions in the history of society."²²⁴

²²² Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," *The Marxist Quarterly* 1:1 (January–March, 1937): 83.

²²³ That artists grew fatigued of representational art and therefore leapt into abstraction, is an oversimplification of Barr's argument. In Barr's view, artists of earlier generations may have mastered the representation of nature, but they did not in his view, grow weary of it. Davis, who wrote as a painter justifying his abstract style, may have served Schapiro better as a rhetorical foil for this particular point, which Schapiro characterized as the taking up of a "vulgar nineteenth century criticism." See Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," 83.

²²⁴ Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," 77–78.

By way of example, Schapiro made a lengthy excursus into the radical art of an earlier time and place: French Impressionism. Early Impressionism, Schapiro argued, had a “moral aspect” that he demonstrated through a discussion of its historical specificity.²²⁵

Of early Impressionist painting, Schapiro argued that:

These urban idylls...also reflect in the very choice of subjects and in the new esthetic devices of the conception of art as solely a field of individual enjoyment, without reference to ideas and motives, and they presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of freedom for an enlightened bourgeois detached from the official beliefs of his class.²²⁶

Impressionist painting, therefore, coincided with a radical break in society: that of the emergence of the class-consciousness of the bourgeoisie. For Schapiro, Impressionist painting represented the coming to consciousness of the bourgeoisie and their awareness of individual freedom (and a concomitant sense of “helpless isolation in an anonymous indifferent mass” by “those imaginative members of the middle class who accepted the norms of freedom, but lacked the financial means to obtain them”).²²⁷ To extrapolate then, early examples of abstraction in the 1930s may have been understood by some critics to have had a “moral aspect.”²²⁸

The point of this detour through the *café* scenes, picnics, and boating outings, in Schapiro’s essay, is to discover the ‘moral aspect’ of then-contemporary abstraction, to recover abstraction from the pitfalls of a kind of formalism, into which Barr had fallen in

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81. Schapiro was not alone in this kind of rhetorical move. Milton Brown, like Schapiro, a self-identified Marxist and an art historian, though one who was inclined to be less sympathetic to abstraction, in 1939 published a radical critique of the paintings executed during the revolutions of 1848. See Milton Brown, “Relative vs. Absolute Criteria in Art,” *Dialectics* 9 (1938).

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

²²⁸ Perhaps the most well-known citation of this essay in recent scholarship was made by T.J. Clark in 1984. That the art of Manet and his followers had a “moral aspect,” as Schapiro had argued it, became the premise of Clark’s book. See *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 3–5.

his own essay, over and again. The dialectic of abstract art, for Schapiro, differed with Barr's art-as-social-pact. In Schapiro's argument, there was more to the nature of abstract work of art than (just) to be looked at. Contrary to Barr, Schapiro argued, the abstract artist rendered judgment on the world by his choices, what he chose to omit in his painting: "such and such aspects of experience are alien to art...he disqualifies them from art." A case in point between the two scholars is the art of the Italian Futurists. Barr characterizes Futurism on the whole as an example of near abstraction (that which still refers to the physical world, even if obliquely, ominously, in the case of the Futurists); Schapiro argues that neither Futurism nor mechanical abstraction can be explained as "a simple reflection of the existing machine."²²⁹ These styles, he argued, arise not because machines are the modern form of production, but because of the "values assigned to the human being and the machine in ideologies projected by the conflicting interests and situation in society." These situations differed from country to country. As Barr did not attend to the social circumstances of art and the artist, he could not explain why Futurism took hold in Italy in particular. Schapiro filled this gap with a material analysis of the situation in Italy. Schapiro concluded: "Whereas the mobility in Impressionism was a spectacle for relaxed enjoyment, in Futurism, it is urgent and violent, a precursor to war."²³⁰

Schapiro had doubts as to what other forms of abstraction might portend.²³¹ What Barr termed "biomorphic abstraction," Schapiro described as a "violent or nervous

²²⁹ Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art," 94.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²³¹ See a later essay by Schapiro, one more confident about abstract art as an *avant-garde* art form: "The Liberating Quality of *Avant-Garde* Art," *ArtNews* 56 (Summer 1956): 36–42. While Schapiro modified his view on the potential of abstraction as a new field of discovery for "form-construction and expression," he

calligraphy” or “amoeboid forms, a soft, low-grade matter pulsing in an empty space,” or a kind of nihilist neo-Romanticism inspired by the irrationality of the Surrealists.²³² The valuation of this irrationality was symptomatic of the continuing violent crisis in culture—the Surrealists who were birthed by the Dadaists, who had in turn, “issued” from the crisis of the Great War.²³³ The pessimistic and catastrophic imagery of the painters who were informed by the Surrealists did not bode well for an end to crisis. Just the opposite (and Schapiro was not wrong on this front). In general, Schapiro wrote of abstract painting that: “It bears within itself at almost every point the mark of the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture.”²³⁴ An abstract painting, to Schapiro, bore the markers that pointed to external, material conditions. He did not, as Barr did (or Davis) insisted less on the formal qualities of the abstract work in material terms. It’s a difference: it depends on what one means by ‘material’. While Schapiro may have ceded some ground of the autonomy of the work of art, he held the category of art as a distinct one within general culture. At least one writer questioned him on this distinction.



[T]he critical-evaluating focus which the artist directs upon his perceptions [is itself] derived from some social basis; but if the artist is important, the focus will be literally an imaginative choice among the several alternatives which the social base suggests.

maintained the opinion, held in 1937, that abstract artists had “freed themselves from the necessity of representation.” See Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” 37.

²³² Wallace Spencer Baldinger arrived at a conclusion in late 1937 similar to that of Schapiro. Baldinger drew a formal comparison between the abstract watercolors of Robert Jay Wolff and those abstract painters active during the Great War. “The resulting implications,” Baldinger concluded, “might well give us pause.” See Wallace Spencer Baldinger, “Formal Change in Recent American Painting,” *The Art Bulletin*, 19 (December 1937): 580-591. The citation above is on p. 591.

²³³ Schapiro, “The Nature of Abstract Art,” 98.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

~ Delmore Schwartz, “A Note on the Nature of Art,” 1937²³⁵

Far from being an inherent principle in art, the deliberate, individual criticism and evaluation of social facts, the distinction of social values of the artist from the values of the world he depicts, is a recently acquired function, and even in modern times does not appear in all the arts.

~ Meyer Schapiro, “A Note on the Nature of Art (A Reply to Delmore Schwartz),” 1937²³⁶



Barr did not respond to Schapiro’s essay (in print at least); Delmore Schwartz (1913–1966), the writer, did. Schwarz wondered in print if Schapiro would find the same social facts in any other cultural product: a pulp novel, for example. Didn’t the intentions of the artist count for something? Schwartz, coming from the left, faulted Schapiro for neglecting the expressive choices—the valuational choices— an individual painter or writer makes in creating his work. Schwartz’s brief, if tragic, career would be launched the next year with the publication of *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, a collection of short stories that would earn him a place amongst the writers of the *Partisan Review* circle. In what is a brief and generally measured response, Schwartz offered several canonical examples from literature where the protagonist critiques nature by offering up a critical mirror of sorts. None of the examples were more expressive of Schwarz’s point of view than his quotation of James Joyce’s celebrated paean to modernist artistic/self creation from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the

²³⁵ Delmore Schwartz, “A Note on the Nature of Art,” *The Marxist Quarterly*, 1:2 (April–June, 1937): 309.

²³⁶ Schapiro, “A Note on the Nature of Art (A Reply to Delmore Schwartz),” *The Marxist Quarterly* 1:2 (April–June, 1937): 311.

uncreated conscience of my race.”²³⁷ Schwartz concluded that the proper stance before the work of art was to behold it as a convergence: “mirror, virtue’s feature, criticism, the reality of experience and the uncreated conscience.”²³⁸ However, to grasp the importance of the work of art, and the pleasure yielded by the phenomenon, these criteria had to be held separately within discourse.

Schapiro agreed that the expressive critique was a part of the individual artist’s job description, but a newly-acquired one. It was a condition particular (or, specific) to modernity. Schapiro also did not want his argument caricatured by Schwartz: “Nor would I...agree that the comic strip and abstract painting have the same social origins, though their causes may intersect.”²³⁹ Schwartz had, in Schapiro’s estimation, fallen into the pitfalls of trying to avoid the pitfalls of formalism. We read Joyce, Schapiro argued, because of his “focus, i.e. a style or form, superior to the forms of others,” not necessarily for his critique of modern culture or for his values.²⁴⁰ If, he continued, we viewed art as little other than a critique of society, then precisely what is ignored is the professional consciousness of the artist: his awareness of his technique and the type/form of his art. This consciousness of artistic inheritance is at play in the work of art with the expressive choices of the artist, Schapiro concluded.

V. The Cézanne Effect, ca. 1939²⁴¹

²³⁷ Schwartz, “A Note on the Nature of Art,” 310.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ Schapiro, “A Note on the Nature of Art (A Reply to Delmore Schwartz),” 311.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁴¹ See Richard Shiff, “Mark, Motif, Materiality: The Cézanne Effect in the Twentieth Century,” in *Cézanne: Finished, Unfinished*, ed. Felix Baumann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000): 99–123.

Maurice Denis' 1939 essay, "L'aventure posthume de Cézanne," as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, would prove to be an essential source for critics of mid-century abstraction. In his essay, Denis considered the painter's technique: that which was proper to Cézanne and that of painters in general. Denis, a painter as well as a critic, was writing of very close things, as one of the points of his essay was to demonstrate the consequence of Cézanne's technique on painters working after him—his after-effect. Denis demonstrated the point via a comment made by, Paul Sérusier (1864–1927), a fellow painter in the *Nabis*. On the older painter's celebrated apples, Sérusier had said: "He is a true painter... Of a common painted apple, one says 'I'd like to eat it'. Of an apple by Cézanne, one says, 'It's beautiful. One wouldn't dare peel it; one would prefer to copy it.'"²⁴² This conception of Cézanne's art does well to explain the effect exercised by the painter's work on then-contemporary painting. This wasn't a new conception of art, just the latest iteration of it. As Denis went on to argue in his essay: "All painters, and especially the colorists, have translated nature into touches of color; Tintoretto, for example, used color schemes in certain still-lives identical to those of Cézanne."²⁴³ To translate nature into a system of colored marks on the surface of a canvas was a primordial necessity of the art of painting, he concluded.

Denis had been working with these ideas of painting-as-abstraction since his youth; his 1939 essay was not the first adumbration of them. An earlier essay, "Définition du

²⁴² Maurice Denis, "L'aventure posthume de Cézanne," *Prométhée* (July 1939): 194. In the original: "*Il est un peintre pur... D'une pomme d'un peintre vulgaire, on dit: j'en mangerais. D'une pomme de Cézanne, on dit: c'est beau. On n'oserait pas le peler, on voudrait la copier.*"

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 193. In the original: "*Tous les peintres, et surtout les coloristes, ont traduit la nature en taches de couleur; Tintoret par exemple, dont le chromatisme est dans certaines natures mortes identique à celui de Cézanne.*"

néo-traditionnisme,” written when the critic was only 20, began with this now-famous citation:

It is well to remember that a picture—before being a war-horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.²⁴⁴

For the purposes of the dissertation at hand, it is significant to note that Denis’ essay was re-published in English by a New York publisher in 1945, in a volume entitled *Artists on Art*, a survey of artists’ writings from the fourteenth through the twentieth centuries.²⁴⁵

In his 1939 essay, Denis wrote on the difference between geometric abstraction and that which he termed distorted abstractions (*déformations*). Barr, in his 1936 juxtaposition of Miró and Mondrian, had written of this difference as the square facing off with the amoeba. Denis, rather, wrote of an earlier version of the dilemma: the *déformations* of Cézanne compared to those of his fellow post-Impressionists, Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh. Referring to Cézanne, Denis wrote that: “The tentative strokes [*faux traits*] that he neglects to erase, in seeking the forms, have nothing of the systematic nor geometric.”²⁴⁶ By contrast, for the use of willed distortions, one would do well to look to the work of the others: “It is by way of Gauguin and Van Gogh that we

²⁴⁴ Maurice Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme,” in *Théories 1890–1910: Du Symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l’Occident, 1912): 1. This essay was initially published in Paris in *Art et Critique* (23 and 30 August, 1890) under the pen-name of Pierre-Louis. In the original: “Se rappeler qu’un tableau—avant d’être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote—est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées.”

²⁴⁵ See *Artists on Art: From the XIV to the XX Century*, eds. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945): 379–381. An editorial note on page 379 states that Denis wrote the essay at the request of Lugné-Poë, who in 1893, with Camille Mauclair and Édouard Vuillard, founded the famous *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre*.

²⁴⁶ Maurice Denis, “L’aventure posthume de Cézanne,” 194. In the original: “Les faux traits qu’il néglige d’effacer, en cherchant la forme, n’ont rien de systématique ou de géométrique.”

arrive at the willful deformations that are the origin of the abstract art of the Twentieth Century.”²⁴⁷

Later, in a 1960s talk on Pop art, Greenberg, made his own reference to Cézanne and his contemporaries.²⁴⁸ At first, as Greenberg argued, the opposition was between a naturalistic, or “deadpan art,” and a literary one—the now-familiar binary of an art of sensation versus an art of ideas.²⁴⁹ While, eventually, it was “flat, unrealistic painting that captured the notion of ‘purity,’” the formal issues were not so readily resolved in the work of the post-Impressionists, Symbolists, and, of course, the *Nabis*. The work of the latter two groups, while decidedly “literate,” was more emphatic in asserting its flatness, more decorative, and more abstract than the seemingly-naturalistic art of Cézanne. In turn, as Greenberg related in an anecdote, Cézanne dismissed the work of van Gogh and Gauguin, characterizing them to Emile Bernhard as “Chinese paintings.” The notion of pure painting, Greenberg continued, no matter how else construed:

...remained identified with the anti-literary, and this idea reigned supreme in avant-garde art during the first twenty years of this century: Both the Fauves and the Cubists and their offshoots simply took it for granted that serious and ambitious painting had to be anti-literary.

Critics like Denis located the pictorial process of designing and inventing on the surface of the canvas, and argued, indeed, that it had always been there. What was historical or specific, if one were to use Schapiro’s terms, is that this process was made manifest, self-evident, by modern painters. Denis’ emphasis on the painterly process and his focus on

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, In the original: *C’est de Gauguin et de Van Gogh que nous viennent les déformations volontaires qui sont à l’origine de l’art abstrait du XX^e siècle.*

²⁴⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Pop Art,” the Clement Greenberg Papers, The Getty Research Institute, Box 30 (Lectures, 1961-1979, n.d.). Lecture unpublished in his lifetime, though recently published in *ArtForum* 43 (October 2004): 51–55. All quotations from p. 51 of the *ArtForum* edition.

²⁴⁹ For a similar iteration of this idea, see Ralph M. Pearson, “The Failure of the Art Critics, III,” *Forum and Century* 44 (November–January, 1936): 54–59, especially his comments on the art criticism of Thomas Craven.

the medium of painting would later be worked out in the practice of later American art critics. Greenberg's later insistence on the resistance of the medium and the delimitation of the flat support is but one such example. However, as Greenberg's citation demonstrates, literary art did not necessarily equate with representational art, in the strict sense of the word.

In his 1936 catalogue essay, Barr made no claims for the reasons for the increasing prominence (or critical awareness) of biomorphic abstraction; he only observed that it seemed to be eclipsing geometric abstractions. In his critique of Barr's essay, Schapiro was right to note that Barr offered no causal factors for this shift, this movement. While Schapiro looked to external stressors on paintings to account for their changes, Barr, for one, looked to internal characteristics to account for shifts in appearance. However, the two critics seem to agree in the division between the two categories, the dualism of the types of painting. Barr's distinction between an abstract art of Pythagoras versus that of Plotinus, cited at the beginning of this chapter, suggests that he saw geometric abstraction as a literary art, an art of ideas—painted from a position rather than through a Plotinian process. It would seem that in the 1930s, biomorphic abstraction represented (to painters, to critics) the most direct continuation of pure painting (to borrow terms from Denis and Sérusier). Perhaps the analyses of Barr and Schapiro are closer in their understanding than appears on the surface. Greenberg, for his part, placed the dislocation of “the quasi-geometrical as the dominant mode in New York abstract art” slightly later in time, to ca. 1943.²⁵⁰ This was, Greenberg continued, another “instance of that cyclical alteration of painterly and non-painterly which has marked the evolution of Western art (at

²⁵⁰ Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” 25.

progressively shorter intervals after Manet) since the 16th century.”²⁵¹ Greenberg wasn’t alone in his assessment. In 1943, members of the FMPS announced in their exhibition statement that America was the recognized nexus for the art world. As such, they concluded: “it is time for us to accept cultural values on a truly global plane.”²⁵² The consequences of this statement are considered in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I have drawn out distinctions about abstract painting because critics of the time dwelled upon those terms, or ascribed characteristics to this category of painting, or defined and contained this category of painting. A curator, such as Barr, by choosing European and European-informed Cubist and abstract art, could make claims for this type of representation as a kind of *avant-garde*, but this would prove to be one set of valuational claims amongst several. At one point in his 1936 essay, Barr noted that he wrote at what he saw as an art-historical juncture: the geometric square facing off with the non-geometric amoeba; or, hard-edge abstraction facing off with a biomorphic form. What, in 1936, had been placed under the rubric of ‘non-geometrical abstraction’ (as defined in the negative) would continue to expand to other terms, other than the Surrealist-inspired biomorphisms, to include gestural mark-making systems as well. This is the subject of the following chapter: where gesture and expression will interfere with the square and the amoeba.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² See the announcement for the Third Annual Exhibition of the FMPS at the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., N 69/75. This exhibition was held at Wildenstein & Company and ran from 2–26 June, 1943.

Chapter IV:
The Appearance of a Break

I. Clichés and Abstractions in the 1930s, Revisited

Si le jury ne tient pas un peu rigueur à ces simplifications excessives, il se trouvera, avant deux ou trois ans, un peinture qui nous représentera le *Talus des Fortifications* vu d'en bas: un tableau à deux teintes; un ton vert, puis un ton gris ou bleu pour le ciel; et cela très-juste comme valeur et comme effet.

~ Ernest Chesneau, *L'Art et les artistes moderne en France et en Angleterre*, 1864²⁵³

When I was in Paris this spring, I saw a lot of Tscuplitski. I admire his work so tremendously. Of course, it's frightfully abstract now—frightfully abstract and frightfully intellectual....He'd given up the third dimension when I was there and was just thinking of giving up the second. Soon, he says, there'll be just the blank canvas. That's the logical conclusion. Complete abstraction.

~ Mary Bracegirdle to Gombauld in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*, 1922²⁵⁴

By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one.

~ Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International*, 1962²⁵⁵

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Art critics, amongst others, have been concerned for some time about painting being reduced, absurdly, to its common denominators: broad strokes of colored pigments applied to a support, or—in *extremis*—a blank canvas tacked upon a wall. The negation of painterly conventions in the 1930s seemed to be coming to an end or a dead end—as if

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<sup>253</sup> Ernest Chesneau, *L'Art et les artistes modernes en France et en Angleterre* (Paris: Didier, 1864): 195. Cited in Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study in the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984): 76–77.

<sup>254</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922): 115–116. This is a possible reference to the abstract work of Pavel Tchelitchew (1898–1957), which he abandoned in the early 1920s in favor of a more mystical, representational style.

<sup>255</sup> Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," 27–8.



the tips of the directional arrows of Barr's 1936 chart were co-terminus with the delimiting space-time edges of the chart itself. It seemed to other critics, academics, and painters (those who practiced abstraction, at least) that they were working in a wake, specifically that of late Cubism and of Surrealism.<sup>256</sup> The process of making a painting—the assembling of Denis' *taches* in a certain order—was becoming more apparent in the modernist painting, and nowhere more so than on the surface of, at least, some abstract paintings. How much farther could the conventions of painting be played with before the effect of a painting hinged entirely on its values for effect, as Chesneau feared? Or, before the material world was dispatched entirely from the surface of the canvas altogether, or a blank canvas hung on a gallery wall, unsuccessful yet acclaimed? As Greenberg noted in 1962, the threat of the blank canvas was—or, at least seemed to be—the ultimate, reduction of his theorizations on modernist (abstract) painting.

William Schack (1898–1988), the art and theatre critic, seized upon the importance of experience in his brief essays on abstraction.<sup>257</sup> In 1934, Schack wrote a two-part essay

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<sup>256</sup> See, for example: Peter Blume, "After Surrealism," *The New Republic* 80 (October 1934) and James Thrall Soby, *After Picasso* (Hartford: Edwin Valentine Mitchell; New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935); James Johnson Sweeney, "A Note on Abstract Painting," *The New Republic* (17 July, 1935): 280. On the passing of abstraction as a phase: Peter Blume, "Will Abstract Art Survive?" *The New Republic*, 98 (April 19, 1939) and W.S. Baldinger, "Formal Changes in Recent American Painting," *The Art Bulletin*, 19 (December 1937): 580–91; Walter Abell, "The Limits of Abstraction," *American Magazine of Art*, 28 (December 1935): 735–40. Theodore Sizer, "Can Abstract Art Live?" *Magazine of Art* 31:3 (March 1938): 148–49 *et passim*; and, even later, Clement Greenberg, "Review of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky," *The Nation* 152:16 (19 April, 1941): 481–2. For a review of Abell's volume, *Representation and Form: A Study of the Esthetic Values in Representational Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), see John Dewey, "Subject Matter in Art," *The New Republic* 90 (21 April, 1937): 335.

<sup>257</sup> In addition the citations at the beginning of this chapter, see also, Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* (New York, London: John Lane, 1915). Also cited in William Schack, "On Abstract Painting," *American Magazine of Art* 28 (September 1935): 470–5. See also by Schack, "On Abstract Sculpture," *American Magazine of Art* 28 (November 1935): 580–8. In addition to writing on Yiddish theatre in New York, Schack was a member of the American Artists Group, an association of American artists that sought to create "an authoritative parallel literature of contemporary American art." This series began with *The Handbook of the American Artists Group, Number One* (New York: American Artists Group, 1935). The series continued with John Sloan's *The Gist of Art: Principles and Practise [sic] Expounded in the Classroom and Studio* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939). The series also

for the *Magazine of Art*: “On Abstract Painting” and “On Abstract Sculpture.”<sup>258</sup>

Schack’s essay on painting was reassuring to the reader who might have been skeptical of this new type of American painting: he traced the lineage of established painters such as Georgia O’Keeffe and John Marin to the earlier landscapes of Cézanne (figs. 20–22).

These artists, who worked in an abstract mode, clearly retained an experiential relationship with the outside world and transmitted this through their art. By proxy, this art was both mimetic and, in Schack’s own tautological phrase, “a medium of exchange.”<sup>259</sup> Walter Abell (1897–1956), the Canadian art historian, responded to Schack by arguing that abstraction was passing into art history at that very moment—into its “*Gotterdammerung*.”<sup>260</sup> Far from the humor of the blank canvas, the abstractionist, Abell argued, could not escape representation: representation would always work its way back into the picture. This was because abstraction had failed in its mission to equal the art of representation, which had historically attained a higher “degree of richness and amplitude...in the creation of aesthetic form.”<sup>261</sup> It had failed to be a medium of exchange; abstraction, especially in its purest form, was “insignificant” in its form.<sup>262</sup> In the end, the “decorative” abstractions that Abell had seen were unnatural: if they

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included Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (1940), and Schack himself authored *And He Sat Among the Ashes: A Biography of Louis M. Eilshemius* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939).

<sup>258</sup> See, William Schack, “On Abstract Painting,” and “On Abstract Sculpture,” *The Magazine of Art* (September and November, 1934): 470–5 and 580–8, respectively.

<sup>259</sup> Schack, “On Abstract Painting,” 470.

<sup>260</sup> Walter Abell, “The Limits of Abstraction,” *Magazine of Art* 28 (December 1935): 735.

<sup>261</sup> This is an adumbration of the essential premise of Abell’s 1936 publication, *Representation and Form: A Study of the Aesthetic Values in Representational Art*, Intro., Arthur Pope (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936). See also, John Dewey, “Subject Matter in Art,” *The New Republic* 90 (21 April, 1937): 335. In this review, Dewey argued that Abell had essentially re-presented the concepts previously outlined by Alfred C. Barnes in *The Art in Painting* (Merion, Pa: The Barnes Foundation Press, 1925). For an essay written in the same vein as Abell’s, see Wolfgang Stechow, “Subject Matter and Form,” *Parnassus* 13:3 (March 1941):104–6, 122.

<sup>262</sup> Abell, “The Limits of Abstraction.” For Clive Bell’s notion of the “significant form,” see his 1913 volume, *Art* (Spottiswoode, England: The Ballantyne Press, 1913).

represented anything, it was “a forcing of the medium in a direction counter to its natural bent.”<sup>263</sup> (It would be some years before this kind of named, unnatural tendency would meet with approbation in public or in print.)

The brief exchange between Schack and Abell is exactly that, pieces in the patterning of the discourse, which is to suggest that not all utterances predominate equally. Two of the most predominant voices in the discourse on mid-twentieth century American painting would come to be, of course, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. The two critics recalled their experiences of the late 1930s in essays written from the later vantage points of 1957 and 1968, respectively. (This more substantive ‘exchange’ is discussed below.) Critics contested the historicization of the painterly production of the 1930s that was practiced in those later decades in terms that might seem familiar to current debates on the art and politics of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>264</sup>

Writing in the catalogue of the 1957 exhibition that would occasion Greenberg’s review of the same year, Edwin Denby recalled the vanguard (downtown) painter’s world of the 1930s. Denby evoked the context of painters in the 1930s—their social circumstances, quite literally, one might suggest, as Denby’s essay nominally on the emergence of the New York School takes the form of a recollection of the nascent days of his friendships with Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and Rudy Burkhardt. He wondered at the cliché about downtown painting during the depression years: “The accepted idea that everybody had doubts and imitated Picasso and talked politics.” These features, he continued, seemed neither remarkable to him in the 1930s nor at the moment

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<sup>263</sup> Abell, “The Limits of Abstraction,” 738.

<sup>264</sup> In addition to Rosenberg’s essay on the 1930s, see also, Sidney Geist’s 1956 essay where he argued that the then-current historical period had its origins in the 1930s with its social crises and public interest in the arts. See Geist, “Prelude: The 1930s,” *Arts* 30 (September 1956): 49–55.

of his writing in the 1950s. There are reasons for the accretion of clichés over time: Davis broke off his friendship with Gorky, as legend has it, because he, Gorky, “only wanted to play,” (or, paint).<sup>265</sup> That the cliché might be true or could remain true, one infers from Denby’s words, does not mean its terms should not be handled with care.

This chapter, in part, examines critical writing on abstract art and on culture in the 1930s, and how some American painters made the appearance of a break, transitioning—sometimes quite suddenly—from literary work towards different modes of abstraction by the late 1930s. The abstract works of Arshile Gorky (1904–1948) stand in sharp contrast to the Picasso-like portrait of himself and his mother (figs. 23 and 24). George L.K. Morris (1905–1975) broke from representing the figures of his youthful study with John Sloan (fig. 25); his mature work of geometric abstraction remained unphased by his engagement as an editor with *Partisan Review* from 1937 to 1943 (figs. 26 and 27).<sup>266</sup> Throughout the 1930s, de Kooning (1904–1997) shifted rapidly between abstraction and figuration—a pattern he would maintain throughout his career (figs. 28 and 29).<sup>267</sup> Both Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974) turned away from the Expressionist work done as early members of ‘The Ten’. By 1939, the mythical figure had largely replaced the literal one in the work of Rothko; in 1949, he would arrive at his iconic color panel paintings (figs. 30–32). In his words, this work was a

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<sup>265</sup> See, Stuart Davis, “Arshile Gorky in the 1930’s: A Personal Recollection,” *Magazine of Art* 44: 2 (February 1951): 58.

<sup>266</sup> Immediately following his undergraduate days at Yale, Morris edited *The Miscellany* (December 1929–March 1931) with fellow alumni, F.W. Dupee, G.T. Hellman, and Dwight Macdonald. Morris, Dupee, and Macdonald would later reconvene in New York City as editors at *Partisan Review*.

<sup>267</sup> See Richard Schiff, “De Kooning Controlling de Kooning,” in *Tracing the Figure* (Princeton: Princeton University Press with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2002): 152–67; and “Abstraction Not Abstraction,” *De Kooning: A Centennial Exhibition* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2004): 7–16.

“progression...toward clarity.”<sup>268</sup> Gottlieb abandoned the literal figure when he settled upon his pictographic work ca. 1940; in 1952, the pictographs would give way to his equally emblematic burst paintings (figs. 33–35). The biomorphic work of Jackson Pollock (1909–1956) gave way to his celebrated drip painting, a practice, tragically, he could not sustain (fig. 36). For some painters, the break was one of politics, not style: Stuart Davis (1892–1964) did not change his painterly practices after his break with the official Communist Party in 1941 (fig. 37 and 38).

The point here is to examine how critics (or, some painters writing as critics), negotiated shifts between different types of paintings in the 1930s. This section examines shorter works of criticism, practice pieces as well as position pieces, written with different degrees of success and acumen, by the more visible contributors to the discourse surrounding abstraction: Davis, Morris, Schapiro, and Jacob Kainen, amongst others. These critics contributed most visibly to the debates surrounding abstraction in the 1930s by writing for radical journals, most famously at *Partisan Review*, *Art Front* and elsewhere. It should also be noted that all of these critics wrote, or eventually wrote, from positions of dissent from the American branch of the Communist Party (CPUSA). As dissenters from the major form of political dissent, as it were, they found themselves writing for delimited audiences. Rarely, with the possible exception of Kainen’s contributions to *The Daily Worker*, were they in the position of writing for the broad audiences that Holger Cahill, for one, had sought to create for American art under the

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<sup>268</sup> Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, letter to Edwin Alden Jewell, “A New Platform and Other Matters: ‘Globalism’ Pops Into View,” *New York Times* (13 June 1943): Sec. 2, 9. For a collection of Rothko’s figurative work, see *Mark Rothko and the Lure of the Figure, 1933–1946*, exh. cat. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Art Gallery, 2001).

aegis of the FAP. More often, they found themselves writing for an audience that was elite in its self-selection.

Making the break comes to mean several things here: the re-ordering plastic forms, instincts, or conditions became a descriptor for painting, painterly practice, or a metonymic substitute for realms other than painting. Not satisfied with analyzing the world, more often than not, critics sought a kind of agency through their work by placing the aesthetic in proximity to or in a metonymy with the material world.<sup>269</sup> It is important to note that almost all critics writing in New York did so in an intellectual context outside of the academy, with the notable exception of Schapiro, who was then a young professor at Columbia University. Through the 1930s and long afterwards, Schapiro held a division of sorts between his scholarly pursuits and politically-informed criticism. His work on Medieval art appeared in scholarly journals, while his critical essays on modern art and political analyses (sometimes published under the pseudonym of John Quait) appeared in Marxist journals. The point was to get the word out (or, to “bring news” to “comrades” as Rosenberg wrote in his first poem published in *Partisan Review*).<sup>270</sup> The goal was not (or, not yet) to get tenure.



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<sup>269</sup> By way of example, Walter Benjamin made such a rhetorical move in a 1934 essay, with reference to the Surrealists: They reached their goal as intellectuals—that is to say, via the longest route possible. For the intellectual’s path to the radical critique of the social order is the longest, just as that of the proletariat is the shortest.” Walter Benjamin, “Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers,” *ZfS*. Paris and Frankfurt: Institut für Sozialforschung (Spring 1934): 78.

<sup>270</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The Front,” *Partisan Review* 2:6 (January–February 1935): 74. See also, Bertold Brecht’s 1933 statement, “You cannot just ‘write the truth’; you have to write it for and to somebody, who can do something with it....” Bertolt Brecht, “Kunst und Politik, 1933 bis 1938,” *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XVIII (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967): 230. Cited in Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977): 141.

Two exhibitions of the painting of the 1930s were held in New York City in 1957 and 1958.<sup>271</sup> Greenberg reviewed “The 30’s: Painting in New York,” which was a modest show by the Poindexter Gallery in 1957 to depict (abstract) painterly trends in the 1930s:

Looking back, I feel that the main question for many of the painters I knew was how much personal autonomy they could win within what began to look like the cramping limits of Late Cubist abstraction. And it was as if the answer has to wait upon the full assimilation of Paris. Not that Paris was expected to provide the entire answer, but that New York had to catch up with her and collaborate in delivering it.<sup>272</sup>

Rosenberg surveyed “The 1930’s: Painting and Sculpture in America,” which was a larger and putatively more comprehensive exhibition held at the Whitney in the autumn of 1968:

The idea of Beauty, in capital letters, played as important a role in the art of the thirties as the idea of Revolution; painting today is separated from that of the earlier period by what happened to both these ideas....The Whitney interpretation is equivalent to describing Czarist Russia in terms of Diaghliev ballet and the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>273</sup>

The respective reviews are archetypal of the individual critics in a sense: Greenberg directed his comments towards the formal and material issues of the paintings at Poindexter show, while Rosenberg focused on the social situation as constructed at the Whitney. As his epigraph demonstrates, he put forth an acute review of what he saw as an anodyne account of a decade that had coincided with a “genuine historical epoch.” One way to understand their differences is to refer back to the differences in individual shows themselves: whereas the Poindexter show was a small exhibition that privileged a kind of

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<sup>271</sup> “The 30’s: New York Painting” was held at the Poindexter from 4 June through 29 June, 1956; “The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America” was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art from October 15 through 1 December, 1968.

<sup>272</sup> Greenberg, “New York Painting Only Yesterday,” *Art News* (Summer 1957): 58.

<sup>273</sup> Rosenberg, “The Art World: The Thirties,” *The New Yorker* (30 November, 1968): 206. Rosenberg also considered the issues of Beauty and Revolution in his 1942 contribution to *IVV*. See Rosenberg, “Life and Death of the Amorous Umbrella,” *IVV* 1 (April 1942): 12–3.

painting that emerged as the vanguard in later years, the Whitney shows made claims for a kind of historical accuracy. As such (Rosenberg felt) it should have had a more representative selection of works. This is a central dilemma that will recur in the criticism considered in the dissertation at hand in terms of the critical understanding of the vanguard.

In recalling the downtown scene of his memory, Greenberg's essay makes it clear within its opening sentences that easy descriptors for the 1930s were and remain problematic. He evoked the situation in which most painters in East 8<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City found themselves in the late 1930s: living in poverty and professional anonymity save for the high regard of a select few. He described this vicinity as the place where the "WPA Art Project and the Hoffman school overlapped," and where the big event was the annual exhibition of the AAA.<sup>274</sup> Yet, none of the painters he admired (Gorky, de Kooning, John Graham, and Hans Hofmann) figured prominently in the WPA; of the four, only Hofmann was attached to his school; and Greenberg argued that most abstract painters who attended the AAA shows "learned at least what they did *not* want to do."<sup>275</sup> While many of the painters read the art magazines, it was mostly out of "a superstitious regard for print;" however, the black and white reproductions in *Cahiers d'Art* may have allowed the New York painters to develop an independent sense of color.<sup>276</sup> After all, Hofmann had a better ability to teach Matisse's color than Matisse himself. Rather, Greenberg continued, "abstract art was the main issue," among the painters he knew; "radical politics was on most people's minds but for them Social

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<sup>274</sup> Greenberg, "New York Painting Only Yesterday," 58.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.



Realism was as dead as the American Scene.”<sup>277</sup> The point, which has since become rendered as ‘Greenbergian’, was for painters to innovate within strictures of late Cubism so as to transcend the “provincialism that had been American art’s historic fate.”<sup>278</sup> As an example of this provincialism—a “sparkling” one—Greenberg offered Davis’ *Summer Landscape* of 1930 (fig. 38) as a minor canvas of the highest order of this kind of provincialism “working with taste and personal sensibility inside an area long staked out by Paris.”<sup>279</sup> Sophisticated examples of American painting—those that had fully assimilated the lessons of French Cubism—were to be found in the work of Ad Reinhardt, Franz Kline, and Lee Krasner (*Untitled*, 1938, fig. 39), amongst others. These works, however, in their cloisonné effect, represented to Greenberg the close of something, “not the beginning.”<sup>280</sup> He identified the work of Gorky (*Xhorkom*, 1936, fig. 40), de Kooning (*Untitled*, 1938, fig. 41), Hofmann (*Atelier Table with White Vase*, 1938, fig. 42), and that of Arthur Beecher Carles (*Untitled*, 1935, fig. 43) as all making moves beyond (or, through) exactly this kind of provincialism in that these painters did not resort readily to known visual idiom on the surface of their canvases. The Carles work remains notable with Greenberg’s rhetoric: he declared it comparable to the de Kooning in that “its originality, despite the evident influence of Matisse, is integral.” This painting was, he continued, a “prophetic” work in its “inspired openness of design and color,”

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.* In his 1945 catalogue essay for the Davis retrospective at MoMA, James Johnson Sweeney argued (positively) that *Summer Landscape*, in its subject matter, rather than form, was an “adaptation of the idiom of *Place Pasedeloup* [1928] to a Massachusetts seaport town.” See, James Johnson Sweeney, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945): 27. Davis most likely would have agreed, but not on nationalistic terms: “I want to paint and do paint particular aspects of this country which interest me. But I use, as a great many others do, some of the methods of modern French painting which I consider to have universal validity.” Davis, as quoted in H.H. Arnason, *Stuart Davis* (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1967): 42.

<sup>280</sup> Greenberg, “New York Painting Only Yesterday,” 86.

unique to Carles, that anticipates the manner in which “abstract painting was to rid itself of the Cubist *horror vacui* in the next decade.”<sup>281</sup> Greenberg also credited the pervasive influence of Matisse with two attributes that would become hallmarks of the new American painting: the painted surface of the canvas as something “breathing and open” and the “*big*” picture.<sup>282</sup> Greenberg specifically made reference to Matisse’s *Bathers by a River* of 1916 (fig. 44), which, in the late 1930s, hung in the lobby of the Valentine Gallery at 16 East 57<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. Greenberg concluded famously, “international art, which is coterminous with major art, is beginning today to acquire an American coloration.”<sup>283</sup>

Rosenberg argued that the curators at the Whitney had missed the social-ness of 1930s painting entirely. What one had to grasp, Rosenberg argued, was that “[i]n the thirties, the avant-garde of art gave way, step by step, to the political avant-garde.”<sup>284</sup> The key words, he continued, were “discipline...responsibility...intellectual conscience” — each a virtue with a handicap, he concluded. “Art felt obliged to make its purposes clear and its images publicly significant,” which in turn, could have a “stultifying” effect on painterly practice. The “common denominator” of painting in the 1930s, if one was to be

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<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 86. Carles (9 March 1882–18 June 1952) was an instructor at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for most of his career, and had studied with Matisse early in his training. In the revised version of this essay, Greenberg added another important phrase on the liberating effects of “the example and procedures” of Miró: “contours still had to be faired and to be closely adjusted to the frame, but at least they no longer had to be wedged in place.” See Greenberg, “The Late ’Thirties in New York,” *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 233. It was also in this revised version that Greenberg inserted the following heuristic challenge (more frequently cited than the addition above): “(Though that is not all, by far, that there was to politics in art in those years; some day it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism’, which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism’, turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.)” See also Greenberg’s later, extended essay, *Joan Miró* (New York: Arno Press, 1969): 37–8.

<sup>282</sup> Greenberg, “New York Painting Only Yesterday,” 85. Emphasis in the original. See also, Greenberg, “Influences of Matisse,” exh. cat., 2 November–1 December, 1973 (New York: Acquavella Galleries, 1973): n.f., where he makes reference to this work as hanging in the lobby of a 57<sup>th</sup> Street gallery.

<sup>283</sup> Greenberg, “New York Painting Only Yesterday,” 86.

<sup>284</sup> Rosenberg, “The Art World: The Thirties,” 203.

found, was a “backward-looking eclecticism.” Here, he concurred with Greenberg: “even the “most advanced works of Abstraction and Surrealism were based on memories of the avant-garde” from earlier in the century. In terms of making great art for the ages, Rosenberg argued that landscape and Realist painters, who were in the majority in the 1930s, “naturalized again and again” the narrative art of “El Greco, Bosch, Brueghel, Velázquez, Goya, Degas, Picasso....” A tiny minority of painters continued to work in the “advanced styles of Cubism, Surrealism, and Neo-Plasticism” (and even the “non-objective” painters felt obliged to argue their work in terms of a social conscience). The Raphael Soyer work barely did justice to the artist’s “ubiquitousness” during the decade; however, Mark Tobey’s linear abstractions earned their place in the exhibition (fig. 45).

Why, Rosenberg wondered, in a show that made claims for being historically accurate, did the curators at the Whitney “swell the volume” of 1930s abstraction (with the work of de Kooning, Gorky, Hofmann, and Pollock—all painters of whose work he approved) and reduce the landscape and Realist painters to “a sampling of the most unavoidable names” (Benton, Burchfield, Curry, Evergood, Gropper, Levine, Shahn, Marsh)?<sup>285</sup> By way of a partial answer, Rosenberg thought the show offered a packaged view of the decade designed to appeal to then-current taste (and collectors). Furthermore, if the curators sought to knock down the “straw man of a conception” that the art of the 1930s was ““monolithic”” in its ““social conscious’,” citing the catalogue, it had missed that objective, too: “The idea of Beauty” was as important as “the idea of Revolution.” Painterly practice in 1968 was separated from the 1930s in what had happened to both

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<sup>285</sup> Rosenberg decried the omission of painters, who “for better or worse” were “fused into the period...Alexander Brook, Cameron Booth, Francis Criss, Isabel Bishop, Henry Schnakenberg, Maurice Sterne, Louis Eilshemius, Leon Kroll, Eugene Speicher, Boardman Robinson, Karl Zerbe, Anton Refregier.” See Rosenberg, “The Art World: The Thirties,” 205–6.

concepts in the interim years. Rosenberg concluded the meaning of art of the 1930s was in “the reality and pertinence” of the problems they presented—“above all the, the problem of the relation of advanced art modes and an advanced public consciousness of the social situation.”<sup>286</sup>

Despite their well-known antipathy for each other’s work, the judgments of the two critics (eleven years apart) found concord in the work of two painters: that of de Kooning and Davis. Greenberg’s understanding of innovative abstraction found that of Rosenberg’s painterly discipline in de Kooning’s work of the 1930s (see figs. 41 and 46); both critics felt the work of Davis was the perfection of an American regionalism (and, as such, its ambition was delimited). Davis, Rosenberg argued, arrived at his style in the 1920s and maintained it throughout his career; his radicalization was “entirely on the political side.”<sup>287</sup> Davis’ work was a kind of “vanguardism” that was “a conservative adaptation of the School of Paris to an ordered picturing of the American scene.”<sup>288</sup> As noted above, Greenberg felt that the originality of the 1938 de Kooning was integral; Rosenberg understood the 1930s de Koonings as possessing another kind of integrity (see fig. 46). The paintings were “in their sparkling tightness, Renaissance color, and polished surfaces, products of the ascetic discipline that in the thirties served as a personal code and a social ideal.”<sup>289</sup> De Kooning’s paintings had more to do with the era of their making, Rosenberg concluded, than as harbingers of later “experiments in self-liberation.”<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Rosenberg, “The Art World: The Thirties,” 210.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

The two “sparkling” works of 1930 and 1931, Davis’ *Summer Landscape* and de Kooning’s *Untitled* respectively (see figs. 38 and 46) are comparable in their compositions. Each relies on a vertical tripartite division of the canvas surface. In *Summer Landscape*, Davis has divided the canvas into three panels. The central scene of a seaside village is set between houses, the panel at left, and docked boats and a lone tugboat, at right. Davis’ work is a sort of picturesque framing of a seascape done in a 1930s idiom: a classical use of staffage, at left, is balanced, at right, with its technological substitute, the electric lamppost. Playful abstracted forms of facades, fences, and hills vibrate off-angle across the canvas in primary red, aqua blue and ochre. The composition is heavily reliant upon black outlining. De Kooning’s untitled 1931 work is divided into three vertical bands as well. The narrow band at left and the wider band at right are each separated from the central panel by a thin line, almost ‘zip’ like in their quality and function. A trapezoid hovers over an amorphous circle at bottom left; at right, four white ovals hover in front of an abstracted ‘figure’ that has an extended neck, podium-like in its self-presentation. The panels themselves are, to borrow from Rosenberg, tightly painted, each in a different tone. To be literal about it, that is to borrow from Greenberg: both works could be seen to rely upon the 1916 Matisse in that they both juxtapose abstracted forms in the foreground onto radically-simplified backgrounds that are orientated vertically. As Margaret Werth notes, the 1916 Matisse marked a significant shift from the artist’s earlier representations of idylls in that he “dispense[d] with the horizontal orientation of the landscape background.”<sup>291</sup> This effectively “splits the canvas into strips

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<sup>291</sup> Margaret Werth, *The Joy of Life: The Idyllic in French Art, circa 1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2002): 233–4. See also, Werth’s reference on p. 301, n. 16, to John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: MoMA, 1992): 69.

that fragment it vertically into accordion folds, creating a shallow, disorienting space,” Werth concludes.<sup>292</sup> It is the de Kooning, however, that capitalizes on this strangeness, compared to the Davis, which is reassuring in its disorientation.

If both the 1930 Davis and the 1931 de Kooning were “sparkling” in the eyes of Rosenberg and Greenberg, it was the however de Kooning that had (future) potential. Greenberg had, as noted above, identified de Kooning’s *Untitled* from 1938 as the “star” of the 1957 exhibition (see fig. 41). The later work, while similar in style to the 1931 abstraction, relies more heavily (especially along the bottom register) on the use of a fluid abstraction, one that shifts between (proper) form and (proper) figuration, the kind seen, for example, in the artist’s *Pink Angels* of 1945 (fig. 47). If the contemporary tendency within the discourse of art history is to think of Greenberg as having been concerned with formal appearances and Rosenberg with the actions of the individual painters, then these two de Koonings perform a kind of appearance specific to the 1930s, in the critical constructions of these critics.<sup>293</sup> De Kooning’s untitled works from the 1930s, in their production of disciplined form had found a work-around the strictures of late School of Paris. These de Koonings would not have been available for public viewing in the decade of their making, both critics would have only know about them privately in the 1930s, as de Kooning did not exhibit publicly in New York until 1942; his first one-person exhibition was not until 1948.<sup>294</sup> (Gorky, however, exhibited in New York as early as 1938; his first solo show at Julien Levy was in 1945.) For discourse on abstraction in the public realm (on de Kooning, Gorky and other abstract painters), it is necessary to turn

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> See Richard Schiff, “Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism,” 94–123.

<sup>294</sup> Rosenberg, *Willem de Kooning*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1974): 284.

elsewhere: to the self-proclaimed vanguard publications of the 1930s and to the critical reception of the abstract murals commissioned under the auspices of the WPA.

## II. Making and Breaking in the 1930s: Collective Bodies, Action, Negation

At least three painters accounted for the shifts in their work (or that of others) as the result of profound encounters in the 1930s. The following epigraphs were written, respectively, by William de Kooning, Jacob Kainen, and John Graham (before he purportedly renounced Modernism altogether (ca. 1944):

When, about fifteen years ago, I walked into Arshile's studio for the first time, the atmosphere was so beautiful that I got a little dizzy and when I came to, I was bright enough to take the hint immediately. If the bookkeepers think it necessary continuously to make sure of where things and people come from, well then, I come from 36 Union Square. It is incredible to me that other people live there now. I am glad that it is about impossible to get away from his powerful influence. As long as I keep it with myself I'll be doing all right. Sweet Arshile, bless your dear heart.<sup>295</sup>

Bookkeeping and story-telling methods may excite the conscious mind for a moment, but they leave no germ to grow....Those who think that abstract art is just a passing phase are mistaken. Rivers do not flow backwards. Every progressive movement now and then retraces its steps in apparent renunciation of original postulates, only to make later a stronger thrust forward.<sup>296</sup>

It does not require a prophetic eye to discern subterranean stirring beneath the dead level of American art. These stirrings have been going on for a long time, evidencing the secrecy and defiance of some artistic underworld. Several recent exhibitions in New York, however, have brought these plastic attitudes to the surface, this time in a broader manner and with more specifically American implications.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Willem de Kooning, Editor's Letters, *ArtNews* 47:9 (January 1949): 6.

<sup>296</sup> John D. Graham, "Eight Modes of Modern Painting: A College Art Association Exhibition, Julien Levy Gallery," *Art Front* 1:2 (January 1935): 7.

<sup>297</sup> Jacob Kainen, "Our Expressionists," *Art Front* 3:1 (February 1937): 15.

While this period remains understood as the high point of collectivist action by artists, the Romantic notion of the artist working alone in his or her studio remained a reality throughout the 1930s, as evidenced by de Kooning's tribute to Gorky. Parts of the radical, organized left laid claim to abstraction (including its 'Expressionist' variant) as the advanced art of its day. Graham, saw revolutionary art—that is, abstract art—as being turned back upon itself, in something of an incidental eddy in an otherwise forward-moving river, to borrow from his own metaphors. He arrived at this observation after viewing “Eight Modes of Painting” at the Julian Levy Gallery, a show that encompassed the major movements of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the Surrealists.<sup>298</sup> In his review, Graham made the rare claim for Surrealism as a kind of abstraction.<sup>299</sup>

Surrealism, Graham concluded, was, as with all abstract art, revolutionary in its “transposition”: by insisting upon the “irreality of the material world and the reality of the immaterial world.”<sup>300</sup> This method of painting was efficacious, more so than narrative painting, in that it could call forth a revolutionary consciousness in the beholder. The play of the two for Graham was not no much geometric/biomorphic (Barr) or literate/painterly (later, Greenberg), so much as mind/material.

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<sup>298</sup> “Eight Modes of Painting” was held at the Julien Levy Gallery, under the auspices of the College Art Association, from 22 October to 2 November, 1934. The show was prepared by Agnes Rindge and included work by: Monet, Renoir, Matisse, Rousseau, Braque, Picasso, Léger, Dix, Kandinsky, Nolde, Hiler, Sheeler, Dali, Ernst, Klee, Miró, Eilshemius, Lucrat, Berman, etc. See, Levy, *Memoirs of a Gallery*, 300.

<sup>299</sup> At rare moments, Surrealism itself was claimed by the organized left as a variant within the larger category of abstraction. See, Charmion von Wiegand, “The Surrealists,” *Art Front* 2:12 (January 1937):14; or, more famously, by John Graham elsewhere in “Eight Modes of Modern Painting,” *Art Front* 1:2 (January, 1935): 6–7. More typical was Stuart Davis' condemnation of the work of Salvador Dali. See “Paintings by Salvador Dali,” *Art Front* (January 1935): 6; “Surrealist Revolution Counter-Clockwise,” *Art Front* (February 1935): 3; and Clarence Weinstock, “A Letter on Salvador Dali,” *Art Front* (February 1935): 8. See also Andrew Hemingway, *Artists in the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 42 *et passim*.

<sup>300</sup> John D. Graham, “Eight Modes of Modern Painting,” *Art Front* (January 1935): 7. Graham's review appeared in the same issue in which the Artists' Union called for Federal Arts Bill that would provide support and employment for artists.



Artists themselves organized into political bodies: union, a congress, a federation, and an association, the internecine qualities of which remain striking. Each group organized artists for a common purpose, and the names each grouping chose had different associations in terms of organization, the relationship of the individual to the collective (or, the part to the whole) and of the collective to the outside world (or, to power). They did not, by way of contrast, form themselves into congregations, but often incorporated for tax purposes. At the same time, this decade is also understood as the beginning of the end of, or the discrediting of, collectivist action taken by artists and intellectuals.<sup>301</sup> In the face of Moscow Trials of 1936, Trotsky's murder in 1940, and the revelation of CPUSA manipulations of the American Artists' Congress, it would be naïve to argue otherwise: *Art Front* did indeed cease publication in 1937. At the very least, Edmund Wilson could argue that, as of 1952, "Marxism was in relative eclipse," and that an era in its history had, for now, come to an end.<sup>302</sup> However, it's important to note that some sort of collectivist activity by artists lasted well into the 1940s as evidenced by the artist-run periodicals (*Dyn*, *VVV*, *Possibilities*, which are the subject of chapter five) and the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, founded in 1940 in revolt from the American Artists' Congress, has never officially disbanded.<sup>303</sup>

The Artists' Union had its start as the Unemployed Artists Group at the John Reed Club in 1933. It organized artists into a kind of militant trade union with the hope of

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<sup>301</sup> For two views of this period, see Serge Guilbaut, "New York, 1935–1941: The De-Marxization of the Intelligentsia" in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 17–47; and Nancy Jachec, "The Discrediting of Collectivist Ideology" in *The Philosophy and Politics of the Abstract Expressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 17–61.

<sup>302</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Marxism at the End of the Thirties," in *Shores of Light* (New York: Random House, 1952): 732.

<sup>303</sup> See "17 Members Bolt Artists' Congress," *New York Times*, (17 April, 1940): 25.

promoting government sponsorship of the arts.<sup>304</sup> The Abstract Artists Association, the nominally unaffiliated organization of geometric abstract painters, had its start in 1936 and shared a number of members with the original Unemployed Artists Group. The AAA has never officially disbanded. The Artists' Union was of central importance in getting out the initial call in November of 1935 for an American Artists' Congress.<sup>305</sup> The first American Artists' Congress against War and Fascism took place in New York in February 1936. The American Artists' Congress was largely a function of the Popular Front strategy, and it and was effectively defunct by 1943.

The artist organizations of the 1930s provided contexts, critical and practical, in which artists advocated for themselves and others in print. During the 1930s, reviews of the arts were often delimited to poetry and literature in radical journals. An early exception, often cited, is the work of George L.K. Morris, who published his regular art column in *Partisan Review*. Additionally, he contributed to the American Abstract Artists yearbooks along with his fellow painters. Another, less frequently cited, is the work of Jacob Kainen (1909–2000), who wrote a regular column for *The Daily Worker*, the CPUSA daily, from June 1934 through September 1938 and was a regular contributor to *Art Front*, the official publication of the Artists' Union, which Stuart Davis edited. For a brief time in 1934, the Artists' Union also counted Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning in its membership.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> See Gerald M. Monroe, "Artist As Militant: Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14: 1 (1974): 7–11.

<sup>305</sup> See "A Call for an American Artists' Congress," *Art Front* 1:7 (November 1935): 6. The call for the AAC was simultaneously published in *The New Masses* (October 1935): This was a special edition dedicated to radical art.

<sup>306</sup> Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Knopf, 2004): 112–3.

Federal patronage of the arts provided yet another context in which painters could work and support themselves. This took form in four different programs: the Public Works of Art Project (1933–1934), the Treasury Section of the Fine Arts (1934–1943), the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935–1943), and, most famously, the Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project (1935–1943). Two general statements may be maintained about the consequences of the WPA in the 1930s: The WPA provided a context in which artists could work collectively to support themselves during the Great Depression. The Federal Art Project, one of the cultural patronage programs under the New Deal umbrella of the Works Projects Administration (later the Works Progress Administration) employed artists throughout the Great Depression. From 1935 to the termination of the FAP in 1943, 3,600 artists had participated in the program.<sup>307</sup> Collectively, the artists created 16,000 works of art in over 1,000 cities.<sup>308</sup> Many of the younger artists employed would go on to be the celebrated abstract painters of the post-War years. In addition to Krasner, fellow FAP participants included Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Phil Guston, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko. (Barnett Newman did not join, an act he later thought of as a possible “tactical” error.<sup>309</sup>) The WPA also succeeded in fostering a community of artists in New York City. For example, Lee Krasner and Harold Rosenberg cemented what would be a lifelong-friendship while assigned to Max Spivak as studio assistants in the WPA in 1935.<sup>310</sup> Cahill’s representative showing of a year’s worth of work by the FAP artists was

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<sup>307</sup> Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972): 53.

<sup>308</sup> See Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts, in *Art for the Millions*, 33–44.

<sup>309</sup> Richard Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” in BNCR: 23.

<sup>310</sup> Robert Hobbs, *Lee Krasner*, exh. cat., intro. B.H. Friedman (New York: Independent Curators International with Harry N. Abrams, 1999): 206. The two had probably met the year before in Greenwich Village.

suggestive of the vast scale and scope of the New Deal arts program, which lasted in various forms for a full decade before being disbanded during World War II.



The Popular Front functioned as a strategy more so than an organization: one that made use of different organizations and gained the cooperation of various individuals and groups. The Popular Front was first called for at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in August, 1935. The result was an international political alliance of Communist, radical, and Socialist parties, which gained power in France (1936–38), Spain (1936), and Chile (1938–42), although in Europe it was largely ineffective after 1938. The Popular Front was, according to one contemporary historian, “Stalinism’s reaction against its own ultra-left follies through which it had smoothed Hitler’s road to power.”<sup>311</sup> While Deutscher wrote of his disaffection with the Communist Party and its official strategy from the vantage point of the 1970s, he probably would have written much the same in the 1930s, when he was formally expelled from the CP. The point here is to show the path by which a number of American leftists became disaffected—rapidly—with the CPUSA between the years of 1935 and 1940. Like Deutscher, they felt that the Popular Front strategy had failed in the fight against fascism: the Russo-German Pact (23 August, 1939) and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Finland (30 November, 1939–March 1940) had so demonstrated. And, like Deutscher, many never entirely gave up the idea of radical social change, they would seek it through other means.

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<sup>311</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism in Our Time* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ramparts Press, 1972): 291.

The first American Artists Congress (AAC) was held at Town Hall and the New School for Social Research on 14, 15, and 16 February, 1936, at which Meyer Schapiro delivered his celebrated lecture, “The Social Bases of Art.” John Dewey was also invited to speak at the AAC, but apparently declined to speak.<sup>312</sup> According to the Congress report, it was attended by over 2000 people, and included a delegation from the Mexican League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers. The opening address was delivered by Lewis Mumford, then chairman of the American Writers’ League, which had been organized in April 1935. Among the initiators were George Ault, Peter Blume, Stuart Davis, William Gropper, Louis Lozowick, Moses Soyer, Niles Spencer and Harry Sternberg. At its height in 1939, it had a membership of over 900 artists.<sup>313</sup> The main concern of the AAC, as an advocacy group, was the welfare of artists in the depressed economic conditions of the 1930s; as an agitating organization, they sought to counter the effects of fascism in its censorship of the arts and its deployment of art as propaganda. To help in the first cause, the AAC endorsed the Works Progress Administration’s FAP, lobbied for permanent governmental sponsorship of the arts and for wage increases for the artists; for the second, it held numerous shows, mainly of proletarian art, but nominally promoted art done in other styles as well.<sup>314</sup> For example, in 1936, the AAC announced two symposia to be held at MoMA, both in conjunction with Alfred Barr’s major exhibitions of 1936–37, which were discussed in the previous chapter. A

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<sup>312</sup> His name was listed as an invited speaker in a preliminary announcement for the AAC, along with Schapiro, but if he did deliver a speech, it was not included in subsequent publications. For the list of invited speakers, see *Art Front* 1:4 (April 1935): 1, For published collection of the proceedings, see *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress*, intro. Matthew Baigell, Julia Williams, (New Brunswick: New Jersey, 1986).

<sup>313</sup> Introduction to *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress*, 4.

<sup>314</sup> For an extensive collection of AAC exhibition announcements in the New York press, see Public Information Scrapbook, I.105, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. See also, Hemingway, “Fictional Unities; ‘Antifascism’ and ‘Antifascist Art in 30s America,’” 107–17.

symposium on abstract art was scheduled to be held on 10 April, 1936 with Davis, Schapiro, John Sloan, Marsden Hartley, Carl Holty and others scheduled to speak.<sup>315</sup> Another symposium, “Fantastic•Dada•Surrealism,” was to be held on 13 January, 1937, with Schapiro, Walter Quirt, Salvador Dali, Jerome Klein, and Richard Huelsenbeck announced as speakers.<sup>316</sup> If the symposium took place, it neither left archival traces at MoMA (or in secondary literature).<sup>317</sup> This remains an unanswered question in the historiography of the AAC.

Davis remained one of the most ardent defenders of the Congress until 1940 and served as the national executive secretary.<sup>318</sup> In his practice of abstraction, Davis remained in the relative minority. As George L.K. Morris noted in his review of the third annual exhibition of the AAC in 1939, “political earnestness had obviously thrown its weight in the opposite direction...of an esthetic impulse.”<sup>319</sup> To Morris, their critical tendencies towards society had overtaken their critical tendencies towards their own painterly practice. While some of the works had a “refreshing directness,” they were mostly “social satires” or “illustrative.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> See document no. 42705 in Early Museum History: Administrative Records, II.1a held at Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.* See also, bound press release no. 1737-1, The Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>317</sup> For example, Dr. Lillian Milgram’s comprehensive bibliography of her late husband’s writing makes no mention of his speaking at either symposia, but does note his initial speech at the AAC. See *Meyer Schapiro: The Bibliography*, ed. Lillian Milgram Schapiro (New York: George Braziller, 1995). No record of the symposia is archived with the Schapiro papers at the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University, nor are they mentioned by any of the scholars who contributed to the special edition of *The Oxford Art Journal* devoted to Schapiro. See *The Oxford Art Journal* 17:1 (1991).

<sup>318</sup> See, for example, Davis’ speech, “Why an Artists’ Congress?” which was delivered at the AAC in 1936 and reprinted in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress*, 3–6; and “Stuart Davis Explains his Resignation from the Artists’ Congress,” *New York Times* (14 April, 1940), Sec. 9, 9.

<sup>319</sup> George L.K. Morris, “Art Chronicle: American Artists Congress: Third Annual Exhibition, New York,” *Partisan Review* 6:3 (Spring 1939): 62.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 62–3.

Membership of the AAC declined sharply in 1940, when a number of members, concerned at the apparent support by the Communist-orientated organization for the Soviet attack on Finland, seceded to form the politically-independent FMPS.<sup>321</sup> As Andrew Hemingway argues, “The CPUSA’s manipulation of supposedly independent bodies such as the American Artists’ Congress and the League of American Writers...was crucial in actually dividing the left, and bringing about the disaffection of individuals such as Stuart Davis and Meyer Schapiro.”<sup>322</sup> Such manipulation came to be seen as a symbol of Stalinist corruption.<sup>323</sup> By 1942, the Congress was defunct.

Before its implosion, two famous utterances were made at the first and second congresses: Meyer Schapiro delivered his speech, “The Social Bases of Art” in 1936 and Picasso’s “Message to American Artists” was delivered by proxy at the 1937 congress.<sup>324</sup> Schapiro’s talk did not reject abstraction *per se*: it cast doubt on the claims of Surrealism as the advanced (engaged) art of its day. Rather than the disruptive, demotic art of the avant-garde, Schapiro saw it as narcissistic and expressive—in the sense that the tortured pain evidenced in their work was perhaps more the product of an indulgent self-absorption. An artist who fulfilled Schapiro’s criteria for the genuinely engaged artist was Picasso, whose “Message to American Artists” was delivered by proxy to the second AAC in 1937:

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<sup>321</sup> See also, Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 110.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> See *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress*, 29–33.

<sup>324</sup> Schapiro’s address was published in the *Proceedings of the AAC* 1 (1936): 31–37; and then in Lima, Peru as “Bases Sociales de Arte,” in *Palabra* 1:2 (October 1936): 4–6; in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, ed., David Schapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973): 118–27; and in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress*, 31–7. The publication of Schapiro’s essay in a Peruvian journal may have been facilitated by his contact at the first congress with Julia Codecido, the delegate for artists and writers from Lima, Peru. See the program of the first congress in the subject file of the American Artists Congress, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

It is my wish at this time to remind you that I have always believed and still believe, that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at stake. No one can deny that this epic people's struggle for democracy will have enormous consequences for the vitality of Spanish art. And this will be one of the greatest conquests of the Spanish people.<sup>325</sup>

The AAC was to play a central role in bringing Picasso's *Guernica* to America in 1939 to aid in wartime relief to the Spanish. The painting (fig. 48) registers the brutality of the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica on 26 April, 1937 by the German Luftwaffe at the behest of Francisco Franco, leader of the Spanish fascists. This was the first aerial bombardment of civilians, citizens in wartime, in modern warfare and left over 1600 people dead. Initially, Picasso had been asked by the Republican government to produce a mural for the Spanish Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle, which was scheduled to open in June 1937 in Paris. His rage at the bombardment provoked him, as is famously known, to produce this work instead. (In this sense, the suffering registered by Picasso—that of the Basque people and his own—was, to use Schapiro's terms, not self-indulgent in its genuine expressiveness.) Once in New York, *Guernica* was for a time exhibited at the Valentine Gallery.<sup>326</sup> (The same gallery where Matisse's *Bathers* of 1916 was to be found in the lobby.)

In Picasso's pictorial eulogy, the modern lines of the Luftwaffe planes were replaced by the assaulting glare of the overhead electric light bulb (or, *bomba*, in one variant of the word in Spanish); the mangled figures here scream out in their post-Cubist deformations.

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<sup>325</sup> Pablo Picasso, from his "Message to American Artists," transcribed at the proceedings of the first AAC. See page two of the AAC proceedings, dated 27 December, 1937, in the subject file of the American Artists Congress, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

<sup>326</sup> *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, 27–8. See also, the cover of Artists' Congress News (May 1939), reprinted in Monroe, "The American Artists Congress and the Invasion of Finland," 19.



These are only but two possible transpositions on Picasso's part. (The scholarship on this work is legion.)<sup>327</sup> Picasso was right in some of his predictions made at the AAC:

*Guernica* has come to stand as an iconic work of great art amidst the brutality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>328</sup> Picasso was also right in that the Spanish Civil War was an epic struggle, but the eventual loss of the Republicans represented a tragic turning point in the spread of fascism in Europe. Instead of the painting returning to Spain victoriously after its tour in the US and Europe, the painting remained at MoMA, at the artist's request, until 1981.

For many on the organized left in America, the defeat of the Spanish Republicans represented not just a defeat by fascism: it also amounted to a referendum on the strategy of the Popular Front. Subsequent revelations of CPUSA manipulations of the AAC and the later Soviet invasion of Finland, prompted a body of critics and artists, lead by Schapiro, to break away from the AAC in April 1940.<sup>329</sup> Specifically, Schapiro sought to force a vote on the issue of the Finnish Relief Committee, which the AAC leadership sought to block in the hopes of maintaining a fictional unity. The vote left Schapiro and thirteen others in the minority, who then promptly voted with their feet.<sup>330</sup> The Federation

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<sup>327</sup> See, for example, the bibliography compiled on this work in the *Grove Dictionary of Art* (2006): Rudolph Arnheim, *Picasso's 'Guernica': The Genesis of a Painting* (London, 1962); Anthony Blunt, *Picasso's 'Guernica'* (London, 1969); H. B. Chipp, "Guernica: Love, War and the Bullfight," *Art Journal* 33 (1973-4): 100-15; E. Fisch, *Picasso: 'Guernica'* (Freiburg, 1983); W. Hofmann, "Picasso's *Guernica* in its Historical Context," *Artibus & Historia* 7 (1983): 141-69; P. Tuchman, "Guernica and *Guernica*," *Artforum* 21:8 (1983): 44-51; J. Held, "How Do the Political Effects of Pictures Come About? The Case of Picasso's *Guernica*," *Oxford Art Journal* 11:1 (1988): 33-9. In commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of the Basque town, Dr. Andrea Giunta, of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, held a symposium at the University of Texas at Austin on 21 April, 2007.

<sup>328</sup> See, for example, Clement Greenberg's assessment that "[T]he explicit comment on a historical event offered by Picasso's *Guernica* does not make it necessarily a better work than an utterly 'non-objective' painting by Mondrian that says nothing explicitly about anything." Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational, So Forth," 134.

<sup>329</sup> See Gerald M. Monroe, "The American Artists Congress and the Invasion of Finland," 14-20; Andrew Hemingway, "Fictional Unities: 'Antifascism' and 'Antifascist Art' in 30s America," 107-17.

<sup>330</sup> According to the hand-written minutes of the first meeting, the original members, in addition to Schapiro, included: Renée Lahim, Mark Datz, Dorothy Eisner, Paula Eliasoph, Manfred Schwartz, Adolf

of Modern Painters and Sculptors (FMPS) was dedicated to modernism (that is, abstract art) and to the promotion of the art of its members.<sup>331</sup> It was also dedicated to the eradication of artistic nationalism (whether it was American Regionalism or Soviet Realism—the art of the national road to socialism). It was also nominally unaffiliated, but initially comprised Trotskyists. For example, Schapiro signed several protest letters concerning the CPUSA manipulations of independent artist groups, all written in the name of the League of Cultural Freedom and Socialism, which had been organized by Dwight Macdonald. All of the petitions and letters of protest appeared in *Partisan Review*.<sup>332</sup> Eventually, a couple of painters who would come to be associated with Abstract Expressionism were founding members of this group: Gottlieb and Rothko headed the Cultural Committee of the FMPS. Eventually, Stuart Davis joined after his own disenchantment with the CPUSA; George L.K. Morris also joined by 1946, not too long after his own departure from *Partisan Review*. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, the FMPS opened its 1947 show to non-members and thereby created an exhibition that spanned contemporary abstract practice.

The American Abstract Artists (AAA), which was founded in late 1936, four years prior to the FMPS, perhaps did the most of any of the artists groups to promote geometric

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Gottlieb, Morris Davidson, Anita Weschler, O. Ozenfant, T. Trajan, Milton Avery, Hans Foy and, slightly later, Nathaniel Pousette-Dart. See the subject file for the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors at the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., N69/75 (frame 398). See also, Garnett McCoy, “The Rise and Fall of the American Artists’ Congress,” *Prospects* 13 (1988): 325–40. McCoy’s essay was brought to my attention by reading Patricia Hills, “1936: Meyer Schapiro, Art Front, and the Popular Front,” *Oxford Art Journal* 17:1 (1994): 30–41. See p. 41, n. 76.

<sup>331</sup> See the subject files of the FMPS at the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., N 69/75 (frames 434–471) for facsimiles of their annual membership exhibitions. Information on the current activities for the FMPS can be found on the Internet at: [www.fedart.org/](http://www.fedart.org/)

<sup>332</sup> See “War is the Issue!” *Partisan Review* 6:5 (Fall 1939): 125–7. See also, the subject files of the FMPS at the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., N 69/75.

abstract art in the U.S.<sup>333</sup> The group was at its most active between the years of 1936 to 1942. It sought to promote the work of its members through its annual exhibitions, and thereby “present in a dignified and competent way all the significant ‘abstract’ work done in America.”<sup>334</sup> While the painters of a hard-edged geometric abstraction came to dominate the group eventually, there was, in its early years, a stylistic range within the group. Post-Cubistic biomorphic forms shared exhibition space with the geometric plastic forms of strong colorations, akin to those of the *Cercle et Carré* and *Abstraction–Création* groups in Europe. Most members, at one point or another, studied with Hans Hofmann, who had settled in the U.S. as of 1932. This pedigree showed in their color palettes. Initial members included: Burgoyne Diller, Balcomb Greene (who was the first chairman of the AAA), Gertrude Greene, Harry Holtzman (who was also the Assistant Director of the FAP), Ibram Lassaw, and George McNeil. By 1937, the circle had expanded to include, amongst others: Josef Albers, Ilya Bolotowsky, Albert E. Gallatin, Arshile Gorky, Carl Holty, Paul Kelpé, Willem De Kooning, Alice Trumbull Mason, George L.K. Morris, and Ad Reinhardt. Gorky’s membership lasted but a few months, and that of de Kooning’s not much longer. Gorky left the November 1936 AAA meeting, with the famous slammed door, after an argument over the direction on the group (Gorky felt the membership was not yet ready to exhibit, and he felt that he should be the one to

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<sup>333</sup> The AAA was founded in November of 1936; formal meetings began in 1937, hence, the use of both years by scholars as the starting year for the organization. See Susan C. Larsen, “The American Abstract Artist Group: A Documentary History, 1936–1941,” 2–7. Dr. Larsen’s unpublished dissertation remains the foundational account of the ambitions, activities, and consequences of the AAA. See, Larsen, “The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of its Impact upon American Art” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1974).

<sup>334</sup> General Prospectus of the American Abstract Artists, 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. microfilm NY59-11, frame no. 00184.

lead group critiques).<sup>335</sup> Like the FMPS, the AAA positioned itself on the vanguard in relation to the Social Realist artists of the AAC. When it felt it necessary, the membership protested their exclusion from exhibition venues like MoMA. In 1940, the AAA picketed the museum and distributed a cutting cartoon by Reinhardt to passers-by, one of who was a member of the museum staff. Ironically, the protest poster was the first AAA work ever acquired by MoMA (see fig. 9).<sup>336</sup>

Despite the word American in its name, the AAA made claims to an international outlook and style.<sup>337</sup> Through members like Morris and Gallatin, the AAA had close connections to the European abstractionists to whom their own work was often disparagingly (or, dismissively) compared: Jean Hélion, Fernand Léger, and Amédée Ozenfant. Through their yearbooks and other publications, the AAA published examples of European discourse on abstraction in New York. Occasionally, though, the exchange went the other way. Gallatin and Morris collaborated with Sophie Täuber-Arp to publish *Plastique* (1937–1939) in Paris. Morris’ “On the Abstract Tradition” was re-printed in *Plastique*, published both in Paris and New York.<sup>338</sup> Morris’s membership in the group also offers one of clearest crossovers between art and politics in the 1930s—or the seeming contradiction of the unaffiliated artists. George L.K. Morris, while a practicing member of the AAA, was an editor and the main financial backer of *Partisan Review*

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<sup>335</sup> Larsen, “The American Abstract Artist Group: A Documentary History, 1936–1941,” 2. See also, Robert Knott, “Defenders of Abstraction,” in *American Abstract Art of the 1930s and 1940s* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University; New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998): 14, 24, n. 7.

<sup>336</sup> A reproduction of the flyer is held in the American Abstract Artist papers held at the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. [N69/137]. See George L. K. Morris, “The Museum of Modern Art (as surveyed from the Avant-Garde),” *Partisan Review* 7:3 (1940): 200–203. Morris’s criticism provoked a letter from MoMA. See the exchange between George L. K. Morris and Philip K. Goodwin, a Trustee at MoMA, in the Letters pages of *Partisan Review* 7:4 (1940): 326–8.

<sup>337</sup> For a contrary assessment, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 29–30.

<sup>338</sup> See George L. K. Morris, “On the Abstract Tradition,” *Plastique* 1 (Spring 1937): 13–4.

from 1937 (after the re-organization of the journal) through 1943. Morris represents a particular historical character, the kind from which Greenberg drew his analogies in 1939: Morris was an émigré to Bohemia (even if he and the painter Suzie Freylinghuysen, as a married couple, maintained their home on Park Avenue in Manhattan), and, for a time, sustained *Partisan Review* through an umbilical cord of gold.

### III. Expression and Expressionism

If Expressionism at the moment behaves in an ungainly, violent manner, its excuse lies in the prevailing conditions it finds....People little know how near the truth they are when they jeer at these pictures and say that they might be painted by savages. The bourgeois rule as turned us into savages.

~ Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus*, 1916<sup>339</sup>

Socially, the young Expressionists belonged to the petit bourgeoisie as did the Impressionists from which they sprang. They reached beyond their own class only in their dreams...They sought to shatter the foundations of the old world but could not break even the shackles of their own class.

~ Charmion von Wiegand, "Expressionism and Social Change," *Art Front*, 1936<sup>340</sup>

The subject matter which interests these artists may be, with individual exceptions, divided into three main groups—an interest in the purely aesthetic activity...an interest in the proletariat and its problems...and a third interest in the general expression of futility, abandonment and the insecurity of modern life.

~ Herbert Lawrence, "The Ten," *Art Front*, 1936<sup>341</sup>

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³³⁹ Cited by Kainen, "Our Expressionists," 15. See Hermann Bahr, *Expressionism*, trans. R.T. Gribble (London: Frank Henderson, 1925): 87. The passage continues "...we ourselves have to become barbarians to save the future of humanity from mankind as it is now."

³⁴⁰ Charmion von Wiegand, "Expressionism and Social Change," *Art Front* 2:10 (November 1936): 11.

³⁴¹ Herbert Lawrence, "The Ten," *Art Front* 2:3 (February 1936): 12.

In the 1930s, Expressionism and its concomitants (e.g., doubt, decadence, decline) was a persistent issue for art critics and social theorists. Expressionism, as a tendency, was re-considered from a range of viewpoints. In limited cases, the tendency was rehabilitated from the depths of nihilism. As discussed in the previous chapter, Schapiro was deeply dismayed as to what the renewed expressionist tendencies in abstraction might portend for culture, which he voiced in his 1937 essay, *The Nature of Abstract Art*. In the late 1930s, several critics took up the issue of Expressionism in their criticism as it appeared in *Art Front* and other left-wing publications. Herbert Lawrence, Charmion de Wiegand, and Jacob Kainen, amongst others, all reconsidered the play of Expressionism in art in their reviews, all of which were prompted by exhibitions of The Ten.³⁴² In 1938, a set of German-speaking intellectuals took up the issue of *Expressionismus* in *Das Wort*, the German-language émigré journal edited (in name) by Bertolt Brecht. While the larger scope of the Expressionism debate is beyond that of this dissertation, it is useful to consider some of the issues in select essays—in the midst of the larger discussion on Expressionism, Alfred Durus, published an essay on abstraction.³⁴³ This debate, in particular, and the journal in general, were known to critics in America: Schapiro made reference to the debate in one of his many letters to Theodor Adorno, who was newly relocated to the US; Greenberg noted in his final interview that he had read the journal in

³⁴² Andrew Hemingway argues that this attempt to articulate “the bases for an American Expressionism” is the most interesting development in the evaluation of contemporary art in *Art Front*. He also argues that the pages of *Art Front* comprised a greater diversity of opinions—far more so than *The New Masses*—because it was an artist-run periodical and was nominally unaffiliated. See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 41, 114, *et passim*.

³⁴³ For the Expressionism debate in *Das Wort*, see *Die Expressionismus debatte: Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*, ed., Hans-Jürgen Schmitt (Frankfurt a.M., 1973) and Franz Schonauer, “Expressionismus und Fascismus: Eine Diskussion aus dem Jahre 1938,” in two parts, *Literatur und Kritik* 7 & 8 (October and November 1966): 44–54, 45–55.

his earlier days and might gotten “wisps” of this debate.³⁴⁴ As such, this *Expressionismus* episode from *Das Wort* represents an eruption of German intellectualism in US discourse.

Von Wiegand (1898–1983) was primarily an artist, who, upon coming into direct contact with Mondrian in 1941, moved towards greater abstraction in her work (see, for example, her *Environment* No. 2, 1946, fig. 49).³⁴⁵ Earlier, she had spent several years working as a journalist in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, prior to her marriage to Joseph Freeman, one of the founding editors of *The New Masses* (1925–1948). She joined the editorial board of *Art Front* in 1937 and would later exhibit with the AAA from 1948 through the 1960s.³⁴⁶ Von Wiegand, who came from an affluent German-émigré family, was familiar with the German-émigré community in New York. Because of this, Andrew Hemingway argues, she was the best suited amongst left-wing critics to address the issue of Expressionism.³⁴⁷ Kainen, as a print-maker, worked for the Graphic Arts Division of the WPA from 1935 to 1942. He was a frequent contributor to *Art Front*, and also had a regular column in the *Daily Worker*, the official daily of CPUSA, from June 1934 to September 1938. In his earliest works of criticism, he wrote strongly in support of Social

³⁴⁴ For a reference to this debate by Meyer Schapiro in a 1938 exchange with Theodor Adorno, see *Theodor Adorno & Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999): 272, n. 6. See also, Saul Ostrow, “Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview,” *World Art* (November 1994): 24–32. See the Greenberg Papers at the Getty Research Institute, Box 37, folder 17, for an unedited version of this same interview. As for Greenberg’s wisps, see Paul Hart’s essay on Greenberg, in which he makes that point that Greenberg was unique amongst the *Partisan Review* circle because of his fluency in German. See Paul Hart, “The Essential Legacy of Clement Greenberg from the Era of Stalin and Hitler,” *Oxford Art Journal* 11: 1 (1988): 83. See also, Georg Lukács, “Propaganda or Partisanship?” *Partisan Review* 1:2 (April–May 1934): 36–46.

³⁴⁵ See Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930–1945* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989): 176–8.

³⁴⁶ Von Wiegand’s “The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art” appeared in AAA publication, *The World of Abstract Art* (New York: Wittenborn, 1957).

³⁴⁷ See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 115.

Realism.³⁴⁸ He did not, as a critic, characterize Social Realist art with disinterest for the disinherited, nor as “poor art for poor people” as Gorky derided it (as legend would have it).³⁴⁹ Rather, he saw it as efficacious art actively engaged with the times in its figuring of the struggles of working people. Kainen endorsed some forms of modernist practice with regard to abstraction, and this attitude was most clearly articulated in his reviews of The Ten. As it were, the group actually comprised nine artists: Mark Rothko (still then, Marcus Rothkowitz), Adolph Gottlieb, Ben Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Louis Harris, Jacob Kufeld, Louis Schanker, Joe Solman, Nahum Tschachbasov, and later Lee Gatch.³⁵⁰

In his own review of the exhibition of The Ten at the Montross Gallery, Lawrence found this group notable because of their attempts to synthesize artistic traditions with “contemporary, realistic, social needs.”³⁵¹ Lawrence identified three themes as demonstrative of their collective interests: “aesthetic activity,” (e.g. Bolotowsky); “the proletariat and its problems,” (e.g., Rothkowitz or Ben-Zion); and “the general expression of futility, abandonment, and the general insecurity of modern life.”³⁵² It was with this last theme that Gottlieb, for one, achieved a kind of “lyrical” synthesis with his work, *Conference*. The resolution, however, was only momentary and, at best “entertaining”:

³⁴⁸ For an example, see Jacob Kainen, “Revolutionary Art at the John Reed Club,” *Art Front* 1:2 (January 1935): 6–7.

³⁴⁹ Irving Sandler noted that in his interview with Rosalind Browne on 29 January, 1968, she recalled that Gorky made this statement at an Artists’ Congress meeting in the spring of 1936. See Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 10, n. 12.

³⁵⁰ In a 1987 interview, Joe Solman recalled that the group chose its name because it “sounded good” and that they were hopeful of finding a tenth participant. See Isabelle Dervaux, “The Ten: An Avant-Garde Group in the 1930s,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 31: 2 (1991): 20, n. 1. According to Jacob Kainen, John D. Graham once exhibited with the group as a tenth, guest member at the Georgette Passedoit Gallery in New York in May, 1938. See Kainen, “Remembering John Graham,” *Arts Magazine* 61: 3 (November 1986): 31, n. 5.

³⁵¹ Herbert Lawrence, “The Ten,” *Art Front* 2:3 (February 1936): 12. In the course of research, I have been unable to locate additional biographical material on Herbert Lawrence. This exhibition was held at the Montross Gallery from 16 December, 1935 through 4 January, 1936.

³⁵² Lawrence, “The Ten,” 12.

the works lacked profundity, Lawrence concluded, and offered only description when they should have offered real insight or solution.

Lawrence's assessment of the aesthetic array was echoed in an anonymous entry in the *Art Digest*: "What the group has in common is sensed rather than stated: a glum search for today's Beauty."³⁵³ Beauty, in its modern form, could also be re-discovered in the art of pre-historic Europe. As it would happen, the 1936–37 exhibit of the Ten coincided with the exhibition of "Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa at the Museum of Modern Art."³⁵⁴ Reviews of the two shows appeared side by side in a number of dailies, and the visual parallels were not lost upon the reviewers.³⁵⁵ For example, Jerome Klein asked readers of the *New York Post* to ponder which work was more modern: a study of musicians by Louis Schanker or rock paintings from modern-day Libya (fig. 50).³⁵⁶ Primitivist tendencies in the work of this generation of painters—and metaphors in its criticism—were already being employed as early as 1937.

From the reviews of the 1936–37 exhibition of the Ten, the star of show seemed to be Lee Gatch's *Pennsylvania Barn* (fig. 51). Klein felt the work "reduced Pennsylvania barns to a fine fabric of floating color;" Kainen felt that his work was possessed of "a strange magic and distinction which reflect his joy in handling pigment;" and von Wiegand felt the work recalled "in color and design...some of the style of the patterns of

³⁵³ "'The Ten' at Passedoit's," *Art Digest* 11:15 (1 May, 1937): 23. This exhibition was held at the Georgette Passedoit Gallery from 26 April through 8 May, 1937.

³⁵⁴ This exhibition comprised material from the archives of the Research Institute for the Morphology of Civilization, Frankfurt-am-Main. It was curated by Professor Leo Frobenius, of the Research Institute, and Douglas C. Fox. A catalogue accompanied the exhibition with a preface by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. See, *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937).

³⁵⁵ See, for example, Emily Genauer, "Skill and Charm Feature Many New Displays of Paining" and "Prehistoric Rock Pictures at the Modern Museum: Ageless in Beauty," *New York World Telegram* (1 May, 1937): 10A; Charmion von Wiegand, "The Fine Arts," *The New Masses* 23 (18 May, 1937): 32–3.

³⁵⁶ Jerome Klein, "Art Comment: What Do You Call Modern?" *New York Post* (1 May, 1937): 26.

the ‘levant style’ paintings in the exhibition of the of prehistoric artists at the Museum of Modern Art.”³⁵⁷ The two latter critics also applauded Joe Solman’s *Gas Station* (fig. 52) for his “painter’s painter” juxtaposition of “flat black and a sort of antique white with a fine regard for texture” (Kainen); and his “sensitive handling of pattern” (von Wiegand). With regard to texture, Kainen could also have been referring to that of the canvas, which is co-terminus with the plane of the background (the bright oranges, which break up the surface pattern of the work, also caught Kainen’s eye).³⁵⁸ It speaks volumes about the integrity of the judgments of Kainen and von Wiegand that they maintained their orientation towards painting and formal problems when publishing in *The Daily Worker* and *The New Masses*. This also suggests a greater acceptance by the official left, at least within the limited context of the official party publications, of modernist aesthetics than is usually thought. By way of comparison, Kainen felt that the Rothkowitz work, *Family[Trinity]* (fig. 53), was “mussy and mystical”; von Wiegand passed over the “broadly composed” work in favor of others.³⁵⁹ This suggests that that the Rothkowitz, in its diffuse handling of paint, lacked the rigor or the “ascetic discipline,” to use Rosenberg’s later words (as discussed above), of the work of Solman or Gatch.

In their other essays on Expressionism in *Art Front*, von Wiegand and Kainen shared the concerns of Schapiro and Lawrence. These longer essays were dialectical in the sense that they took on Expressionism as a socio-historical object of study (this as opposed

³⁵⁷ Kainen, “Art: The Ten,” *The Daily Worker*, (6 May, 1937): 7; Klein, “Art Comment: What Do You Call Modern?”; von Wiegand, “The Fine Arts,” 33.

³⁵⁸ Kainen, “Art: The Ten,” 7; Klein simply dismissed *Gas Station* as “characteristic.”

³⁵⁹ von Wiegand, “The Fine Arts,” 33.

their dialectical criticism on “judgment and the events within the work of art itself.”)³⁶⁰ They also gave value to it precisely because of the *potential* efficaciousness of the violence of its forms. Expressionism could, at the very least, Kainen argued, offer a bridge “from individual rejection of the *status quo* to social rejection.”³⁶¹ Indeed. In an un-signed 1938 gallery leaflet, The Ten argued on their own behalf that they sought to break out of the inherited confines of provincialism and regionalism.³⁶² They argued that the judging of art by “non-aesthetic standards—geographical, ethnical, moral, or narrative” was overly limited.³⁶³ That is, by rejecting the current order of things in the art world, they sought to repudiate “the equivalence of American painting and literal painting.”³⁶⁴ They sought to make paintings, good ones (without any other qualifiers). While this was their concerted purpose, they were not unified (as were the AAA) on stylistic grounds. The field for non-literal painting, in 1938, was wide open.

In her essay, von Wiegand rightly located the debate over ‘expressionism’ between objective and subjective painting as an old one.³⁶⁵ Von Wiegand’s essay is a theorizing of the phenomenon of Expressionism. Von Wiegand argued that Expressionism arises (and

³⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Critic,” in WBSW, Vol. II, 549. This remained unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime. See WBGS, Vol. VI, with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem; eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1972): 171–2.

³⁶¹ Jacob Kainen, “Our Expressionists” *Art Front* 3:1 (February 1937): 14. Kainen’s guarded admiration for the potentially humanistic aspects of Expressionism were echoed much later by Emily Genauer, art critic for the *Christian Science Monitor* and, later, the *New York Herald Tribune*, in her sympathetic review of “Expressionism in American Painting,” held at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY from 10 May to 29 June, 1952. See, Genauer, “Art and Artists: A Thoughtful Buffalo Show Redefines Expressionism as a Healthy Art Force,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 May, 1952. By contrast, Harold Rosenberg argued in 1939 that: The social changes that forced the art of Europe in the direction of expressionism were ignored in the name of the higher tempo of art.” See Rosenberg, “Myth and History,” *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1939): 38.

³⁶² The Ten, Gallery leaflet (New York: Mercury Gallery, 1938), n.f. It is generally agreed that Rothkowitz was the co-author of this leaflet with Bernard Braddon and Sidney Schectman. See, *Mark Rothko: Writing on Art*, ed. and intro., Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 16–17.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Charmion von Wiegand, “Expressionism and Social Change,” *Art Front* 2:10 (November 1936): 10–3.

returns) when the artist repudiates “the principles upon which society is built,” and turns to his or her own conscience for guidance. This rebellion “without program” is only possible at moments when modern society has ceased to function for the vast majority of its citizens—it signifies a disturbance over something, anything. Expressionism, to von Wiegand and others, was necessarily bound up with time and place. This is why, she argued, the delicate, often erotic, paintings of Jules Pascin (1885–1930), while important, had not provoked a movement when the painter had lived in America from 1914 through 1920: America still functioned reasonably well for the majority. Rather, it was the German variant of Expressionism that was now taking root in the America of the Great Depression, and it was to this modern America that so many German émigré painters had fled. Unlike Schapiro, who saw Expressionistic tendencies generally as symptomatic of nihilism or general social decay, von Wiegand argued that Expressionism had no essential political orientation. As a defiant tendency, it could lead towards fascism or towards Communism. It was, like Nature itself, both generative and devastating: Its “destructive” activity had the effect of “clearing the ground for future building.”³⁶⁶ Or, as a movement, one that usually suffused “old forms” with the “brilliant colors of sunset,” Expressionism could easily become formulaic, a *cliché* of its former self. Von Wiegand offered one cautionary tale for American artists on the scene:

The life of former *Die Brücke* painter Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976). The former rebel, trapped in an oppressive culture, had served on the Eastern front during the Great War.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁶⁷ Von Wiegand does not mention that Karl Schmidt-Rottluff was expelled from the Preussische Akademie der Künste in 1930 and declared a degenerate artist by the Nazis in 1937. This fact may not have been available to her.

For the moment, in America, the situation was in flux, the consequences not yet fully known. Would the transplanted tendency fully take? In addition to the members of The Ten, von Wiegand identified the work of older Expressionists, Helen West Heller and David Burliuk, as providing a contemporary bridge to the latest generation. Specifically, John Vavak's *Whirling Dust Storm*, shown in the New Horizons in American Art, demonstrated how a "contemporary American subject may be realized in Expressionist form."³⁶⁸

Kainen wrote "Our Expressionists," a review of the then-current gallery scene in the wake of von Wiegand's more theoretical piece. He, too, wrote of American subjects realizing Expressionist forms. If Kainen advocated for "Our" expressionists, it was obviously the German Expressionists who represented the 'them' or 'their' implicit in his rhetorical divide. Like abstraction, Kainen argued, Expressionism had a hard row to hoe in America as it was not an "indigenous" tendency.³⁶⁹ In its efforts for acceptance, it encountered the nativist tendencies of Regionalism or realism. However, the economic "shattering" economic crisis of the 1930s had left America primed for the "revolutionary consciousness" of Expressionism.³⁷⁰ Joe Solman, who had taken up the theme of New York City, with "all of its accidental structural effects and social chaos," was the most consistent artist of the group. His *Venus of 23rd Street* (fig. 54), for example, demonstrated the confluences in Solman's work: the use of "flat vigorous color areas," and "emotional linear emphasis."³⁷¹ In this case, in Kainen's opinion, the lasting effect of

³⁶⁸ Charmion von Wiegand, "Expressionism and Social Change," 13.

³⁶⁹ Jacob Kainen, "Our Expressionists," 14.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the work was promising: it showed the supplanting of outmoded forms with a new revolutionary plasticity.

The attention paid to Expressionism in *Art Front* parallels, on a delimited scale, the debate on Expressionism that took place in the pages of *Das Wort* in 1938. The German-language journal itself was the result of the Popular Front strategy adopted by the Comintern in 1935, and despite the tepid quality that that lineage might suggest, the essays published in it were generally lively and rigorous.³⁷² In 1935, the International Writers Congress for the Defense of Culture made the decision to create a journal, to be published in Moscow, for German intellectuals in exile as a forum for anti-fascist writing. The end result was *Das Wort*, the triumvirate editorship of which spanned the left-political spectrum. Bertolt Brecht was a famously independent Marxist, Willi Bredel, a member of the KPD, and Lion Feuchtwanger was a pro-Soviet liberal; however, due to the erratic presence of the three editors in Moscow, the editorship was effectively managed by the journalist Fritz Erpenbeck, who was close in his thinking to Georg Lukács.³⁷³

In the June, 1938 issue of *Das Wort*, Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch took stock of the debate on Expressionism, and each used his essay to offer an opinion contrary to the beliefs of the other. The results were Bloch's "Diskussionen über Expressionismus" and

³⁷² Despite his doubts about the new journal (it would only promote "leftist belles-lettres," he feared), Walter Benjamin published the essay, "Pariser Brief: André Gide und sein neuer Gegner," in it. See *Das Wort* 5 (November 1936): 86–95. Benjamin's one-time publication in *Das Wort* was used as a pretext to take away his German citizenship in 1939. See *For Walter Benjamin: Documentation, Essays, and a Sketch*, eds. Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann, trans., Timothy Nevill (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1993): 228.

³⁷³ *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and trans., Ronald Taylor, Afterword by Fredric Jameson (London: Verso Books, 1977): 10–1. The series of prefatory texts in this volume were authored collectively by Perry Anderson, Rodney Livingstone, and Francis Mulhern.

Lukács' "Es geht um den Realismus."³⁷⁴ As the author-translators of the volume *Aesthetics and Politics* have noted about the culture of the 1930s in general, "the epoch affords no comfort to facile retrospective alignments, in either aesthetics or politics."³⁷⁵ This statement may be extended to this exchange between these contemporaries in particular. By an additional extension, the exchange between Bloch and Lukács as a debate on the precepts of modernism itself, as Expressionism was, arguably, the first modernist art movement in Germany. At issue for the writers were genuine expression/solecism, a genuine reflection of the chaos of the times/nihilism, latent humanism/elitism. Lukács' attack on Expressionism had begun in 1934, and it was to this earlier essay that Bloch addressed himself in 1938.³⁷⁶ Bloch defended Expressionism on the grounds that it represented an artistic response to the crises of the era. While it represented a kind of vanguard—one only possible at the historical moment of the disintegration of the ruling class, its practitioners demonstrated a genuine interest in the traditional forms of art. Lastly, he argued for the humanism of Expressionism, the genuine/disruptive expression of the self, at a time when the radical consciousness of working people was still unformed. It was the fascists—and he called forth Hitler by name—who had changed the general view of Antiquity (cultural inheritance) and demonstrated that true indicator of any great art was its proximity to the people; he also showed himself to well aware of the dangers of "*kitsch*."³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ See Ernst Bloch, "Diskussionen über Expressionismus," *Das Wort* 6 (June 1938): 103–112; and Georg Lukács, "Es geht um den Realismus," *Das Wort* 6 (June 1938) 112–39.

³⁷⁵ *Aesthetics and Politics*, 15. See n. 373.

³⁷⁶ See Georg Lukács, "Grösse und Verfall" des Expressionismus," *International Literatur* 1 (1934); English translation in *Georg Lukács: Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980): 77–113.

³⁷⁷ Bloch, "Diskussionen über Expressionismus," 111. In the original: "Volkstümlich im schlechten Sinn ist freilich auch der Kitsch...."

At this point, the reader may well believe that he detects a contradiction in our argument: surely immediacy and abstraction are mutually *exclusive*? However, one of the greatest achievements of the dialectical method — already found in Hegel—was its discovery and demonstration that immediacy and abstraction are closely akin, and, more particularly, *that thought which begins in immediacy can only lead to abstraction.*³⁷⁸

While Bloch's essay may not have fully succeeded in refuting Lukács position, one that was generally popular at the time of their writing, he did succeed in pointing to the “notorious blind spot of Lukácsian criticism:” the work of art itself.³⁷⁹ In Bloch's analysis, no work of art is “replaceable by another, by virtue of its ideological exchange value.”³⁸⁰ The lack of easy answers had been and would be again an issue in the careers of each author. While Bloch's defense of Expressionism may sit more readily to modernist readers in the face of Lukács' officious Popular Frontism, it was Bloch who had readily provided affidavits for the infamous Moscow trials. However, it was Lukács, as is famously known, who, in 1930, had been forced to recant the ‘messianic’ utopianism of his celebrated 1923 work, *History and Class Consciousness* by bureaucrats in Stalin's administration.³⁸¹

Expressionism seemed to take root in America in the 1930s. Art critics such as Kainen and von Wiegand had done much to create discourse around the Expressionist

³⁷⁸ For translation sources, see *Aesthetics and Politics*, 38. Emphasis in the original. The quote initially appears in Bloch, “Diskussionen über Expressionismus,” 120, as follows: “Es gibt vielleicht Leser, die jetzt meinen, daß in unseren Darlegungen ein Widerspruch vorliege: es scheint, als ob Unmittelbarkeit und Abstraktion einander vollständig *ausschließen*. Es ist aber eine der größten gedanklichen Errungenschaften der dialektischen Methode—schon bei Hegel—daß sie die innere Zusammengehörigkeit von Unmittelbarkeit und Abstraktion aufgedeckt und nachgewiesen hat, daß *auf dem Boden der Unmittelbarkeit nur ein abstraktes Denken zustande kommen kann.*”

³⁷⁹ *Aesthetics and Politics*, 14.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ Utopianism, as a kind of belief, would resurface in later episodes of Lukács' writing on aesthetics. See, for example, “Art as Self-consciousness in Man's Development,” from *Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik* (Luchterhand: Neuwied u. Berlin, 1967). Reprinted in *Marxism & Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism*, eds. Berel Lang and Forest Williams (David McKay Company: New York, 1972): 228–39.

tendencies of the Ten in particular. Clearly there was an awareness by critics in New York of the sophisticated terms of the *Expressionismus* debate in Europe. John D. Graham, for one, remained skeptical of this new movement, though. In 1937 he published *Systems and Dialectic of Art*, which was his self-described, two-part attempt to provide a systematic terminology for art and to classify art meaningfully (according to “social-economic periods” and “space-consciousness”—not by the dictates of time and place); and to provide the “methods of logical argumentation in the domain in art.”³⁸² In one of his enumerated aphorisms, he described the difference between genius and insanity:

[F]undamentally there is a basic difference: genius is order supreme (frequently, a chaotic order) while insanity is supreme disorder. *Insanity is an excessive preoccupation with details to the detriment of the whole.* Genius is the exact opposite. ...Being an exception genius is not normality. Literally the insane person is one whose conscious mind has been engulfed by his unconscious. Genius is one whose conscious mind works with his unconscious.³⁸³

In 1936, Graham and Jacob Kainen had a conversation on the subject of Expressionism. Kainen recalled that Graham admired artists like Vincent van Gogh, Emil Nolde, and Chaim Soutine (1893–1943), painters who were “highly compulsive,” but he felt that rational artists would rapidly go insane if they pursued this kind of painting for too long.³⁸⁴ It was, Graham concluded in his tutorial of Kainen, “like getting ready to scream every time one approached the easel.”³⁸⁵ How then could a painter sustain his or her

³⁸² Graham, Preface to *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studio, 1937): 7.

³⁸³ See no. 67: “What is the relationship of genius to insanity?” in Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*, 65–6. Emphasis in the original.

³⁸⁴ Kainen, “Remembering John Graham,” 27.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

expressive self as had, for example, Matisse, who was “after, above all...expression”?³⁸⁶

One possible route was to turn to the pictorial means, as had Matisse, famously.

IV. Praxis and Technique

The murals designed for public buildings by artists of the Public Works Division seem to meet with official approval in inverse order to their social and artistic worth....Seemingly, the primrose path to official favor lies through lifting the art and the hypocritical moral lessons of the cheap magazines, or better, school text books, and translating them into art for walls.

~ *Art Front*, editorial, July 1935³⁸⁷

In these times, it is of sociological importance that everything should stand on its own merit, always keeping its individuality. I much prefer that a mural fall out of the wall than harmonize with it.

~ Arshile Gorky, “My Murals for the Newark Airport: An Interpretation,” ca. 1936³⁸⁸

The question is, can you detach the quality of the work from its technique? I am inclined to say: No. ... If somebody paints a mural painting on canvas in oil paint (in the case of Gorky) he is either revolutionary, an amateur, or one who is prevented from *vice-majeur* to do what he thinks is right to do. ... It seems that it is this last group of factors were the ones which decided Gorky in his choice of detached canvas and oil paint for this wall decoration at Newark Airport.

~ Frederick T. Kiesler, “Murals without Walls: Relating to Gorky’s Newark Project,” *Art Front*, 1936³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ Henri Matisse, “Notes d’un peintre,” *La Grande Revue* (Paris), (25 December, 1908): 733. In the original: “*Ce que je poursuis par-dessus tout, c’est l’expression.*”

³⁸⁷ “Morals in Murals,” *Art Front* 1:6 (July 1935): 1.

³⁸⁸ A shorter version of Gorky’s essay was re-published in *Murals without Walls: Arshile Gorky’s Murals Rediscovered*, Ruth Bowman, ed. and guest curator, (Newark: Newark Museum, 1978): 13. All citations in this dissertation refer to this version of the artist’s statement.

³⁸⁹ Frederick T. Kiesler, “Murals without Walls: Relating to Gorky’s Newark Project,” *Art Front* (December 1936): 10–11. See also, Frederick Kiesler, “Some Testimonial Drawings of Dream-Images,” *VVV* 1 (June 1942): 27–32; “Design-Correlation,” *VVV* 2/3 (March 1943): 76–80; illustrations in *VVV* 4 (February 1944): 60–1. In addition to numerous publications on theatrical design, he also contributed to the Marcel Duchamp number of *View* 5:1 (March 1945). On Kiesler’s designs for the Art of This Century gallery, see Clement Greenberg, “Review of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection,” *The Nation* 156:5 (30 January, 1943): 177. On Kiesler’s relationship to Duchamp, see Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science ad Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 185–6,

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As these epigraphs demonstrate, artists and critics were discontented, if not outright dissatisfied, with the practice of mural-making in the 1930s. (Others, like Schapiro, Kiesler, or Gorky remained unsatisfied, but hoped to be sated in the future.) The writer(s) of the *Art Front* editorial went on to express the position that some of the recent Social Realist murals offered easy lessons derived from popular glossies. Naming no names, this form of Social Realism handed back the working classes their own *kitsch*, reworked. In a 1937 essay, Schapiro did name names: he cast the work of Thomas Hart Benton, in particular, and Popular Front aesthetics, in general, as a kind of opportunistic populism sustained by “scholasticism in overalls.”<sup>390</sup> In its current state, public mural making had little, if any, revolutionary potential as a form of praxis.

In the autumn of 1936, Schapiro further addressed the problem of public art and the crisis of the 1930s.<sup>391</sup> Government patronage of the arts and work programs for artists, such as the FAP and WPA, represented a real achievement, however it was not an end in itself. (By way of comparison, Schapiro offered the case of Italian artists who found themselves dependent upon a “brutal fascist regime.”<sup>392</sup>) Nor were government programs permanent: whereas trade worker wished to return to permanent, full employment, the programs for artists were emergency stop-gap measures. Nor was it enough to bring before the so-called masses the art of the upper classes (though, that had to happen, too,

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203, 214–5, 217, p. 237 n.9, 299 n. 197, and 306 n. 3. For the Fourth Dimension aspects of Kiesler’s early theatrical work, see Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*, 345, n. 9.

<sup>390</sup> Schapiro, “Populist Realism,” *Partisan Review* 4 (January 1937): 57.

<sup>391</sup> See, Schapiro, “Public Use of Art,” *Art Front* 2:10 (November 1936): 4–6. The following month, Clarence Weinstock published a defense of public art programs in general and the Artists’ Union “Public Use of Art Committee” in particular, in what amounted to a refutation of Schapiro’s analysis. See, Weinstock, “Public Art in Practice,” *Art Front* 2:11 (December 1936): 8–10.

<sup>392</sup> Schapiro, “Public Use of Art,” 6.

he argued). The masses part of the public already had an art: comics, magazines, etc. The artist, inclined to be supportive of the struggles of working people, had to recognize this (on an intellectual level if not an aesthetic one). Even if the fine arts, a category in which Schapiro included abstraction, were made available to every region and stratum of the nation, most people lacked the cultivation and leisure time to appreciate it. The category of art was something that would be perceived as a mere luxury object by people desirous of a better social class, so long as the bourgeois order of things remained undisturbed. Public art, real art for everyone, had yet to be achieved and artists needed to look beyond their current “wretched state of culture” to achieve it.<sup>393</sup> The answers were not to be found in the present order of things.

Murals made in the style of abstraction did not always fare better than their Social Realist counterparts in the eyes of critics who were of a mind to be dismissive. In an unpublished essay from 1938, Stuart Davis cited two examples of early, large-scale abstraction not exclusively for their intrinsic formal properties, but for the instructive value of those formal properties (their usefulness as a medium of exchange). With reference to the plastic forms of the abstract work of Gorky and de Kooning made during their tenure as WPA artists, Stuart concluded that, “A vast education in art is being made available to the American people.”<sup>394</sup> The abstract murals they and others produced under the aegis of the WPA received critical attention from the organized left and elsewhere. Some critics scoffed at Gorky’s WPA murals, *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations*, as comical equivalents to the purported poetry of Gertrude

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<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> See Stuart Davis, “Federal Art Project and the Social Education of the Artist,” (1938) in *Stuart Davis: A Documentary Monograph*, ed. Diane Kelder (New York: Praeger, 1971): 165.

Stein (fig. 55).<sup>395</sup> In his own essay, Frederick T. Kiesler suggested that the style of the murals, a kind of parable of Cubism, might have confounded some viewers. However, he thought the trickier problem was that of Gorky's technique: Kiesler examined Gorky's positioning of the easel painting to that of the modern mural.

About the same time that Gorky and de Kooning walked out of the AAA meetings, both were engaged in projects for the WPA/FAP programs: Gorky was employed by the WPA programs from late 1935 to mid-1941; de Kooning, from October of 1935 through July of 1937, when he necessarily had to resign due to his 'alien' status.<sup>396</sup> Some of these murals now exist only in memory or in photographs. The purpose of this passage is to put into play the criticism of left-wing critics on these very public (social) examples of abstraction: works of abstraction in the 1930s that were not confined to the artist's studio, or to the relatively exclusive precincts of the museum or gallery walls.<sup>397</sup> Gorky's series of 10 panels, which totaled 1530 square feet, was formerly located in the second floor foyer of the Administration Building at the former Newark Airport. One panel, a scale model of the installation, and one complete panel from the series were included in Cahill's 1936 exhibition at MoMA. (Despite being mostly lost, Gorky's series has been partly recovered through documentary photographs, which are compiled in *Murals without Walls*.<sup>398</sup>) A second example, also lost, was de Kooning's murals for the Williamsburg Housing Projects in Brooklyn, New York (fig. 56).

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<sup>395</sup> The three journalistic clippings are: Gerard Sullivan, "Mr. Gorky's Murals the Airport They Puzzle" (with photo inset), *The Newark Ledger* (10 June, 1937); "American Art: WPA Show Opens at Museum," *The Newark Ledger*, (8 November, 1936). These are reproduced in *Murals without Walls*, 39.

<sup>396</sup> See *Art for the Millions*, Appendix A, 278.

<sup>397</sup> See Cahill, Introduction to *New Horizons in American Art*, 32–33.

<sup>398</sup> The title of this volume was taken from Frederick T. Kiesler's review of the same title in *Art Front*, December, 1936. See n. 404 below. Ruth Bowman researched the history of the murals and the rescue of the extant panels. The volume is an essential compilation of documentary photographs, essays, and

In the case of the Newark murals, the artist himself contributed to the critical discourse of the work, if posthumously. Gorky's 1937 essay, "My Murals for the Newark Airport: An Interpretation," was intended to explain his abstractions to the public, which, at one moment, included then New York City mayor, Fiorello H. LaGuardia (fig. 57). The essay was initially intended for publication in a volume called *Art for the Millions*, though this was not published until decades later.<sup>399</sup> Gorky began his essay with a discussion of the "elevated object."<sup>400</sup> His first encounter with such an object came in his childhood (an onion, suspended from a wooden cross, with seven feathers stuck into its top most layer—this was, in his Armenian childhood, a substitute for a calendar or timekeeper). A "plastic operation" on the object is imperative, were it to be of "our Time." Otherwise, the object would fall back onto the photographic image (the "weakness of the Old Masters"). And so, for example, using "morphic forms" he dissected the airplane into its "constituent parts" in *Activities on the Field* (fig. 58).<sup>401</sup> These kinds of plastic operations on the part of the artist could open up "new vistas of understanding" for people with little access to art (school children, workers, hospital patients).<sup>402</sup> The potential was not because the artist represented a kind of sociology of

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interviews. For a definitive account of the rediscovery of the murals, see Ruth Bowman, "Arshile Gorky's Murals Rediscovered," in *Murals without Walls*, 34–45. The extant pieces of the series and the photographs were exhibited together in an exhibition of the same name at the Newark Museum. The exhibition was held from 15 November, 1978 through 11 March, 1979; the exhibition went on tour from July 1979 through December 1980 under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts. My thanks to Andrew F.

Hemingway for bringing this volume to my attention.

<sup>399</sup> See *Art for the Millions*, ed. and intro., Francis V. O'Connor (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973): 72–3. Several versions of Gorky's "My Murals for the Newark Airport: An Interpretation" exist: a four-page essay, and an edited two-page version of the same, a holograph copy discovered by Francis V. O'Connor, ca. 1978, and yet another in the Archives at the Whitney Museum of Art. For a pointed assessment of the use and abuse of these different versions, see Francis V. O'Connor, "A Note on the Texts of Gorky's Essay for *Art for the Millions*," in *Murals without Walls*, 16.

<sup>400</sup> Gorky, "My Murals for the Newark Airport: An Interpretation," in *Murals without Walls*, 13.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

suffering or of human progress, but because he had fulfilled his obligations as an artist. Borrowing from Rimbaud, he concluded: “The poet should define the quantity of the unknown which awakes in his time... The enormous becoming the normal, when absorbed by everyone, would really be a multiplication of progress.”<sup>403</sup>

In the opening passages of his own essay on Gorky’s murals, Kiesler offered an evocative description of the sensation of running one’s hand over the surface of a proper fresco and that of an oil painting: “If your hand glides over the mural painting, you do not feel it, but the roughness of the wall itself; your skin gliding over and oil painting feels of the bulk of paint and stroke.”<sup>404</sup> Most painters in the WPA, he concluded, were not true mural painters, or those whose work “interbinds” with the building structure while it is swallowed by it.<sup>405</sup> Rather, they produced “easel paintings muralized by pasting a painted canvas on the wall.”<sup>406</sup> Who controlled the will of the hand that made the final finish: the artist, or did the artist bend his will to a larger force, (art) history, of the “vice majeur” of committee, or the so-called masses, those whom the committee purportedly represented? The contact point throughout this, in Kiesler’s analysis, was that of the tip of the brush to the support. Ultimately, Kiesler came down on the side of the artist in all of this, Gorky, in this case. The implicit assumption in Kiesler’s analysis is that the mural (proper), once completed, assumed a decorative function once it was subsumed to its architectural

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<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14–5.

<sup>404</sup> Kiesler, “Murals without Walls,” *Art Front* (December 1936): 10.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.* For a discussion on the “mural effect” in twentieth-century art, see Romy Golan, “From Monument to Muralnomad: The Mural in Modern European Architecture,” in *Architecture and the Pictorial Arts from Romanticism to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karen Koehler (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002): 186–208. The installation of painted canvases *in lieu* of painted murals pre-dates the work of the WPA artists. For example, Edwin Howland Blashfield (1848–1936), the “Dean” of American murals, made almost-exclusive use of this technique in his work. My thanks to Ann Samuel, doctoral candidate at the University of Delaware, for bringing this aspect of Blashfield’s technique to my attention.

setting. Moveable works in oil on canvas, because of the technique of the artists, had the desirable potential to retain some kind of discordant autonomy, as the artist had claimed in his own words.<sup>407</sup> Gorky overcame the limits imposed upon his larger practice “valiantly,” Kiesler concluded. In the end, was it an abstract mural? Not expressly, and the artist probably would have agreed in that he was being more literate than painterly in his analysis of aviation motifs. This is apparent if the comparison is made between *Activities on the Field or Mechanics of Flying* (fig. 59) and *Xhorkom* (see fig. 40), which captured Greenberg’s attention in 1957. His abstract forms in the Newark series are done in a far more concrete style with a demonstrative resemblance to aviation mechanics than the fluid biomorphic forms of *Xhorkom*. The same kind of distinction can be made between de Kooning’s relatively conservative study for the Williamsburg Housing Projects (see fig. 56) and the untitled painting of 1931 (see fig. 46), which caught Rosenberg’s attention in 1968. While the study, no doubt, possesses the kind of strangeness that Davis, Kiesler or Schapiro thought could raise the public conscious if, at the same time, make the committees wary, the figure/ground relationship he constructed in that study is far more stable and conventional than that in the untitled work of 1931. In the 1931 work, for example, the four ovals at the lower right superimpose the over the rectilinear ‘figure’, but the apparent lack of color in the ovals interferes with the tenuous spatial relationship, as does the tangential relationship of the left-most oval to the vertical

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<sup>407</sup> These words by Kiesler, who was a close associate of Peggy Guggenheim, in some ways presage those of Jackson Pollock in his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947: “I intend to paint large moveable pictures which will function between the easel and the mural...” The application was ultimately rejected. For a partial transcription, see *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, Vol. IV, Francis V. O’Connor and John Thaw, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978): 238.



purple line. The orange parallelograms that recede into the purple vista are foiled by the orange oval beneath, which punctuates the flatness of the purple ground.<sup>408</sup>

## V. The Appearance of a Style

If the historical process is forcing the artist to relinquish his individualistic isolation and come into the arena of life problems, it may be the abstract artist who is best equipped to give vital artistic expression to such problems as he has already learned to abandon the ivory tower in his objective approach to his materials.

~ Stuart Davis, “A Medium of 2 Dimensions,” *Art Front*, 1935<sup>409</sup>

Most of the artists go whole hog with rarely a glimmer of the crass material world coming through to break contact with the infinite.

~ Jacob Kainen, *The Daily Worker*, 1938

Their works are reticent, for their expressive ends have purposefully been carried no farther than the simplified fabric will allow. Yet through such limited means they have destroyed the old conception of the ‘picture’; each has substituted a *thing*—an object that is at rest completely—and thus some day can a way be cleared for a new reality.

~ George L. K. Morris, “American Abstract Artists,” 1939<sup>410</sup>



If this dissertation had a different organizing principle, it might explore left-leaning art and examine figurative works of Social Realism from the 1930s, the “main category of left practice” as Andrew Hemingway has characterized it. Indeed, there is a long

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<sup>408</sup> Correspondence with Richard Shiff on 13 November, 2006 drew my attention to the peculiarities of this work.

<sup>409</sup> “A Medium of 2 Dimensions” was written by Davis in reply to Clarence Weinstock’s doubts about abstract painting. The above citation, as Davis noted in his essay, was initially intended for his Whitney catalogue essay of 1935, but was edited out due to page constraints. See, Stuart Davis, “A Medium of 2 Dimensions,” *Art Front* 1:5 (May 1935): 6. See also, Byron Browne, *et al*, Letters, *Art Front* 3:7 (October 1937): 20–1.

<sup>410</sup> George L. K. Morris, “Art Chronicle: American Abstract Artists: Third Annual Exhibition, New York,” *Partisan Review* 6:3 (Spring 1939): 64. Emphasis in the original.

tradition of art historians sympathetic to Marxism who have given considerable attention to the radical figurative art of previous generations.<sup>411</sup> For example, in his publications with the Critics Group, Milton Brown wrote on the practice of the revolutionary art and artists of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848; Schapiro, as discussed in a previous chapter, wrote on the French Impressionists.<sup>412</sup> Realism, as embodied by figurative painting, was not the exclusive domain of the expressly engaged artist, though. As Fernand Léger's essay on his own practice demonstrated: his art, and that of his associates, was realistic in its essence.<sup>413</sup> And, as the work of Stuart Davis demonstrated, modernist abstraction was not alien to left practice in the 1930s (even if it was considered conservative in art-historical terms by some critics). In this section, I argue that left practice also included some forms of abstract painting. This is to suggest something more antagonistic than the watered-down pluralism suggested by the fictional consensus of the Popular Front exhibitions, as rightly argued by Hemingway.<sup>414</sup> For example, at an A.C.A. Gallery symposium on "Social Painting and the Modern Tradition" in 1939, Jacob Kainen recalled that John Graham denounced proletarian art as being neither "proletarian" nor "art."<sup>415</sup> True revolutionary painting involved images drastically treated or abstracted from nature. This was, rather, "art in action."<sup>416</sup> In this section, I let play out the critical

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<sup>411</sup> For a recent compilation of essays, see: *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, ed. Andrew Hemingway (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

<sup>412</sup> For Brown's work, see "The Marxist Approach to Art," *Dialectics* 2 (1937): 23–32 and *Painting of the French Revolution*, (New York: The Critics Group, 1938).

<sup>413</sup> See, Léger, "The New Realism Goes On," *Art Front* 3:1 (February 1937), n.f.

<sup>414</sup> See Andrew Hemingway, "Fictional Unities: 'Antifascism' and 'Antifascist Art' in 30s America," 107–117. Conversations with Andrew Hemingway over the course of the summer of 2005 while in residence at the Terra Foundation Museum of American Art in Giverny, France greatly clarified my thinking about these issues.

<sup>415</sup> The symposium took place in February 1939, in conjunction with the exhibition of the New York Group, 5–18 February, 1939. See Kainen, "Remembering John Graham," 29.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

divides in between left-wing critics and their responses to abstraction: the reviews of Jacob Kainen and George L. K. Morris figure most prominently. Nuance has eluded much of the historical assessments of the 1930s. An individual critic, such as Stuart Davis, was difficult to place precisely for his double negations.

What if these abstract shapes, seen as such, were truly revolutionary. What if Denis' *taches*, blown up to macroscopic proportions, represented the most radical of all painting styles? This is the premise of the work of the American Abstract Artists group, as expressed in their yearbook of 1938.<sup>417</sup> Their first yearbook was a compilation of self-assertive essays bound in a cover of "Neoplastic typographical design" (fig. 60).<sup>418</sup> The enemy they perceived, articulated by Charles G. Shaw in his essay, "A Word to the Objector," approached on two fronts: the conservative art establishment that was resistant to modernism in general, and the vanguard that was resistant to their practice of abstraction in particular.<sup>419</sup> Critics of the AAA commonly felt that their art represented nothing, was "cold-blooded" or seemed to be "more like a game than painting."<sup>420</sup> What those critics seemed to be missing, Shaw argued, was the essential formalism of their work that appealed, in the highest, to "one's *aesthetic emotion* alone."<sup>421</sup> Their work was neither literary nor realistic, but then again, nor was it sentimental, pretty, anecdotal, or melodramatic, he concluded. (While there was no prescription for its members to practice hard-edged or geometric abstraction, most members were working in this style by the end of the 1930s. As earlier work of the individual members demonstrates, there

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<sup>417</sup> The AAA would publish yearbooks in 1939 and 1946.

<sup>418</sup> Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History, 1936–1941," 4.

<sup>419</sup> Charles G. Shaw, "A Word to the Objector," *American Abstract Artists: 1938*, (New York: AAA, 1938): 9–11.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Emphasis in the original.

was a greater diversity of style in the very early years of the group.<sup>422</sup>) Shaw's idealist (or, utopic) notions about abstraction were echoed by his fellow painters in their individual essays: those who were moved solely by "plastic experience" (Robert Jay Wolff); or, motivated by the "fuller employment of these [plastic] means which build a new imaginative world" (Alice Mason); or, the abstract painter as one who "anticipates the time when every man will be better able to enjoy the fruits of culture and the progress of human thought" (Rosalind Bengelsdorf).<sup>423</sup>

In his own essay for this yearbook, "The Quest for an Abstract Tradition," George L.K. Morris argued that his fellow American abstract painters was any sort of historical continuity for their practice: "the roots had not yet sunk to a depth essential for a full-bodied tradition."<sup>424</sup> (Edward Alden Jewell, for one, agreed. The work of the AAA was akin to a hothouse flower and just as pretty: it existed only in a "sealed chamber" where the air was "extremely rarefied."<sup>425</sup>) In what was, by 1938, a familiar refrain amongst many critics, Morris argued that previous means of plastic expression were exhausted. The problem was repetition compulsion: the exploitation of "American local color...geographical or illusory;" the "tedious rehearsals" of the Surrealists who only sought to shock the bourgeoisie; and the technical innovations of Matisse and Rouault, by name, were now well-worn replications.<sup>426</sup> In this "maze of vulgarity and grotesqueries,"

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<sup>422</sup> Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of its Impact upon American Art," 430.

<sup>423</sup> Robert Jay Wolff, "Toward a Direct Vision," in *American Abstract Artists: 1938*, 15; Alice Mason, "Concerning Plastic Significance," in *American Abstract Artists: 1938*, 20; "The New Realism," in *American Abstract Artists: 1938*, 22.

<sup>424</sup> Morris, "The Quest for an Abstract Tradition," in *American Abstract Artists: 1938*, 14.

<sup>425</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, "American Abstractionists," *The New York Times* (11 April, 1937): Sec. 10, 10.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

the time was ripe for a “complete beginning,” Morris concluded.<sup>427</sup> And, this new beginning would be international in its style and outlook. Through his friendship with Albert Gallatin and his studies abroad at the *Académie Moderne* in Paris in 1929 and 1930, Morris had extensive contacts with European abstract and Neo-Plastic artists.<sup>428</sup> His essays in *Partisan Review* mostly focused on the work of this European vanguard.<sup>429</sup> Between the years 1937 and 1939, Morris collaborated with Sophie Täuber-Arp on the publication of *Plastique*, which came out both in Paris and New York. The publication became a site for multi-lingual, trans-Atlantic discursive exchange: the final edition contained essays by Morris and Gallatin, Eugen Jolas, the former editor of *transition*, as well AAA members Balcomb Greene and Charles G. Shaw.<sup>430</sup> Publication ceased just prior to when Täuber-Arp and her husband were forced to flee from Paris in 1940; this was followed by the untimely death of Täuber-Arp in Zurich in 1943.

The AAA members espoused a desire to reorder the material world via a metonymic reordering of their plastic instincts. The critical response to the work of the AAA, however, was often less than enthusiastic: their work, it seemed, failed to keep pace with their ambitions. While Morris may have argued in 1938 that quality, the essential aspect of art, could never be “counterfeited,” it was the perceived lack of quality that would, in

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<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. For Morris’ sharp retort to Magical Realist painters, such as Peter Blume, see “Some Personal Letters to American Artists Recently Exhibiting in New York,” *Partisan Review* 4:4 (March 1938): 36–41.

<sup>428</sup> While there, Morris studied with Léger and Amédée Ozenfant. Susan C. Larsen, “The Quest for an American Abstract Tradition, 1927–1944,” 17.

<sup>429</sup> See for example, “Miro and the Spanish Civil War,” *Partisan Review* 4:2 (January 1937): 32–3; “Hans Arp,” *Partisan Review* 5:2 (January 1938): 32 *et passim*; “Art Versus Method,” *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1939): 78–79; “Recent Tendencies in Europe,” *Partisan Review* 6:3 (Spring 1939): 31–33; “Picasso: 4000 Years of His Art,” *Partisan Review* 7:1 (January–February 1940): 50–53.

<sup>430</sup> For example, Morris’ 1938 AAA Yearbook essay was reprinted as, “À la recherche d’une Tradition de l’Art Abstrait,” *Plastique* 3 (Spring 1938), n.f.

1940, lead the curators at MoMA to reject their work.<sup>431</sup> Writing on behalf of the museum trustees in response to a 1940 essay by Morris, Philip L. Goodwin averred that the museum would continue to exhibit “some of the better abstract work...as in the past.”<sup>432</sup> This would never include a group show of the AAA membership.<sup>433</sup>

Both von Wiegand and Kainen reviewed the AAA exhibits of the 1930s, and, as with their cautious acceptance of Expressionist tendencies (as discussed above), they were open to modernist abstraction. In their reviews, both addressed the paintings as phenomenological objects, and this distinguishes their essays from others in publications of the organized left.<sup>434</sup> However, their opinions diverged. Von Wiegand wrote optimistically about the stylistic advances she saw in their well-attended 1937 exhibit at the Squibb Galleries.<sup>435</sup> She drew a comparison of high praise: “Whether they speak in the fluent idiom of Picasso or the vivid colors of the Expressionists, these painters are seriously concerned with the aesthetic problems of painting.”<sup>436</sup> By “abstract surrealism,” von Wiegand (who was more sympathetic to Surrealism than her fellow travelers) meant the abstractions of Miro, whose work had escaped claims of ‘vulgarity’ or ‘literariness’.

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<sup>431</sup> Morris, “The Quest for an Abstract Tradition,” in *American Abstract Artists: 1938*, 14.

<sup>432</sup> Goodwin’s letter was written in response to Morris, “The Museum of Modern Art (as surveyed from the Avant-Garde),” *Partisan Review* 7:3 (May–June 1940): 200–3. See Philip L. Goodwin, “Letters,” *Partisan Review* 7:4 (July–August 1940): 327. Morris’ reply to the letter was published in this same number. See pp. 327–8.

<sup>433</sup> The AAA never held an exhibition at MoMA, though, on 16 March, 1954, they presented a forum there on the subject of abstract art around the world. Members of the panel included: Josef Albers, Alfred H. Barr, Franz Kline, George L.K. Morris, and Aline Saarinen. The tape recording and typescript are held at the Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See MoMA archive nos. C0041 and 2 A2 A63t, respectively.

<sup>434</sup> More typical were negative reviews, such as those by O. Frank, “New Forces in American Art,” *The New Masses* 28:3 (12 July, 1938): 23–4 or Grace Clements, “New Content—New Form,” *Art Front* 2:4 (March 1936): 8–9.

<sup>435</sup> The inaugural exhibition of the AAA was held at the Squibb Galleries from 3–17 April, 1937.

<sup>436</sup> Charmion von Wiegand, “Fine Arts,” *The New Masses* (20 April, 1937): n.f.

Kainen, in his review of the same exhibition, wished (with irony) for more of “a glimmer of the external world” to intrude itself in their work.<sup>437</sup>

When Kainen argued in his 1938 review that the AAA artists “go whole hog with rarely a glimmer of the crass material world coming through to break contact with the infinite,” he was suggesting in no uncertain terms that those painters were being non-objective in the same mien as the artists around the Baroness Hilla Rebay.<sup>438</sup> The work, he argued, while technically capable (and improved from the exhibition of the previous year), offered “little new material” from the standpoint of “creating new insights into modern life.” Furthermore, Kainen continued, the work itself failed to attain the modernity that the artists sought. With some exceptions, the artists seemed to be caught in their own cliché of the “total” modern form. He singled out Morris’ *Composition No. 17* (fig. 61) for being overly technical: a kind of “cold-bloodedness” that reduced the art of Cézanne, Seurat, Matisse, and Rouault to issues of style only. The attitudes that each of those painters held towards nature and society were not transmitted in Morris’ work, even if he might have grasped their technics. It was abstraction as pure form that ended the dialectic of painterly technique. It’s also, very possibly, a reaction to artists like Bolotowsky, who seemed to have purged the figure (and subjects and mimetic subject matter along with it) from the time that he was a member of The Ten, (see, for example, his *Sweatshop*, fig. 62). In a later essay, Kainen recalled an encounter that took place between Bolotowsky, Graham and himself in the 1930s. Bolotowsky invited the other two into his studio one day when they making their way up the stairs to Gorky’s studio a

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<sup>437</sup> Kainen, “American Abstract Artists,” *Art Front* 3:3–4 (May 1937): 24–5.

<sup>438</sup> Kainen, “Abstract Art Exhibit Barely Comprehensible,” *The Daily Worker* (25 February, 1938): 7. This exhibition of the AAA was held at the American Fine Arts Galleries in New York from February 14–28, 1938.

few flights up. Bolotowsky bemusedly recounted for them that the custodian of the building had seen one of his paintings in passing—red and black geometric shapes on a white ground, as Kainen recalled. Faced with this work, the custodian reportedly said, “I see you’re a medical student.” After they had excused themselves, Kainen recalled that Graham concurred with the custodian: “The paintings have a clinical look. They’re sterilized.”<sup>439</sup> Bolotowsky might have agreed: in an interview late in life, Bolotowsky said, with high irony, that he and Balcomb Greene were either good pure abstractionists or bad ones: “we had no empathy at all.”<sup>440</sup>

Kainen’s distaste for non-objective painting echoed the concerns of another left-wing writer: Bertolt Brecht. While Brecht’s critique of European, non-objective painting may be beyond the scope of a dissertation on American abstraction, the attitude and concern that he recorded in his notebook in the 1930s is not:

I see that you have removed the motifs from your paintings. No recognizable objects appear there anymore. You reproduce the sweeping curve of the chair—not the chair; the red of the sky, the burning house.... I wonder about it, and especially because you say that you are Communists, going out to reconstruct a world that is not habitable. If you were not Communists but subject spirits of the ruling classes, I would not wonder about your painting.... You would do better to show in your paintings how man in our times has been a wolf to other men, and to say then: “This will not be bought in our time.” Because only the wolves have money to buy paintings in our times. But it will not always be this way; and our paintings will contribute to seeing that it will not be.<sup>441</sup>

Even earlier, Samuel M. Kootz, the American gallerist, had worried about the issue of technique as an end in itself in his 1930 catalogue, *Modern American Painters*. (Though,

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<sup>439</sup> Kainen, “Remembering John Graham,” 27.

<sup>440</sup> Susan C. Larsen, “Going Abstract in the ’30s: An Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky,” 72.

<sup>441</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “On Non-Objective Painting,” unpublished entry from Brecht’s notebooks, ca. 1935–39, in *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*; reprinted in *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism*, eds. Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (New York: David McKay Company, 1972): 423–425.



as he himself stated, he was primarily concerned with the technique of the French artist because France was then still the unsurpassed “breeding ground for all modern movements in painting.”<sup>442</sup>) Kootz laid his concerns at the feet of the hard-edge abstractionists and their “fatuity” in allowing for the “domination of technique” over experience and expression.<sup>443</sup> Since these painters “had nothing to say in these geometric forms, they have chose to believe that these forms are what they have to say.”<sup>444</sup> As with Graham, Kootz’s objections were not with geometric art *per se*—that style was simply the most demonstrative example of the problem. It was, rather, that these painters had lost the lesson of the work of Cézanne: “stringent geometry...was but a means of acquiring control of one’s craft [so] better to express individual inspirations.”<sup>445</sup>

Left-wing critics were certainly open the practice of abstract painting: in the case of Kainen and von Wiegand, they were, at times, practitioners themselves. While von Wiegand was cautiously optimistic about the work of the AAA, Kainen was troubled by the purity of their work (the quest for an abstract equivalent of 0).<sup>446</sup> It was as if the structural rigor of late Cubism had ossified into a kind of Mannerism. For Kainen, the AAA paintings were the results of deploying abstraction as a conceptual category. Painters, such as Graham, Gorky, and de Kooning were indeed dissatisfied with the formal impasse of late Cubism and sought ways out of this odd dead-end or cul-de-sac of abstraction. As Graham

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<sup>442</sup> Samuel M. Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York: Brewer & Warren, Inc., 1930): 7.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.* See also, John D. Graham, “96. What is the real influence of Cézanne on modern painting? And of Picasso?” in *System and Dialectics of Art*, 93–7.

<sup>446</sup> The idea that painting could come from nothing is one that de Kooning would term typically American: It’s “painting made out of John Brown’s body.” See, Willem de Kooning, “Is Today’s Artist with or Against the Past?” *Art News* 57 (Summer 1958): 27. This was an interview with Thomas Hess conducted in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

argued in his 1937 *System and Dialectics of Art*, “abstract painting” (as distinct from “painting”) was “*an argument drawn to a conclusion.*”<sup>447</sup>

However, the conversation over the end of abstract art continued. Indeed, in 1940, Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) declared the death of abstract painting, recalling his earlier conclusion in *The Caliph’s Design*: that it was a “(fantastic) branch of architecture,” which was now obsolescent as architecture had become sufficiently “reinvigorated.”<sup>448</sup> As the editors of *The New Republic* noted in the subsequent issue, the “mad-letters” prompted over the “April Fool” number were lengthy and lively.<sup>449</sup> Respondents included AAA members Morris and Reinhardt as well as Weldon Kees (1914–1955?). Reinhardt predicted that abstract art would “yet have its day.”<sup>450</sup> Lewis doubted this. In his own response, printed with the “mad-letters,” he argued that the artist, were he to survive, must:

[C]ome to terms with the people at large, and no longer accept the role of purveyor of sensation, or of a highbrow clown, to a handful of socialites: for in no great capital are there more than a dew dozen people, with the means necessary to set up as private patrons, who even pretend to care for pictures.<sup>451</sup>

## VI. Negative Dialectic: Reverting to Ingres at the End of the 1930s

To be true to one’s time is an automatic thing. You do not have to try it.  
Ingres was true to his time in spite that he followed Raffael.

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<sup>447</sup> John D. Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*, 24. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>448</sup> Wyndham Lewis, “The End of Abstract Art,” *The New Republic* 102 (April 1940): 439. See also, Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where Is Your Vortex?* (London: The Egoist, Ltd. with the Pelican Press, 1919).

<sup>449</sup> “Abstract Art Turns Over,” *The New Republic* 102 (May 1940): 674.

<sup>450</sup> Ad Reinhardt, Letters, *The New Republic* 102 (May 1940): 674.

<sup>451</sup> Wyndham Lewis, Letters, *The New Republic* 102 (May 1940): 675.

~ John Graham, notebook entry, ca. 1936<sup>452</sup>

Gorky was waving an Ingres reproduction around at the opening of the first American Abstract Artists annual exhibition and proclaiming that the French master was more ‘abstract’ than all the work in the exhibition.

~ Recollection by Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, ca. 1940<sup>453</sup>

I used to make imaginary portraits from Ingres and the LeNains (I never did copies; I don’t think I’d be able to).

~ Willem de Kooning, “Is Today’s Artist With or Against the Past?” *ArtNews*, 1958<sup>454</sup>



The interest in mastering line was not delimited to the hard-edge or geometric painters in the 1930s, as these epigraphs demonstrate. What these epigraphs share, in their respective references to Ingres, is an assertion of a technical proficiency for abstract painting. Both looked to the lines of the Classical painters of the past in an effort to be conditioned by that same self-mastering line.<sup>455</sup> Like Gorky, de Kooning rejected the calculations of his colleagues in the AAA; the two also turned away from the highly competent (geometric) abstractions in their own work for the WPA. Both rejected primitivist strategies of the Expressionists. What then did it mean to Gorky for a painting

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<sup>452</sup> John D. Graham, Notebooks, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. Cited by Melvin Lader, “Graham, Gorky, de Kooning, and the ‘Ingres’ Revival in America,” *Arts Magazine* 52:7 (March 1978): 99, n. 57.

<sup>453</sup> See also, the unpublished 15-page autobiography (written ca. 1940) held in the Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. See also, Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930–1945* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989): 46, n. 3.

<sup>454</sup> Willem de Kooning, “Is Today’s Artist With or Against the Past?” 27.

<sup>455</sup> On de Kooning’s innovations with line, see Richard Shiff, “‘With Eyes Shut’: De Kooning’s Twist,” *Master Drawings* 40: 1 (Spring 2002): 73–88. For Gorky’s relationship to line in his drawings, see Janie C. Lee, “Arshile Gorky: The Power of Drawing,” and Melvin P. Lader, “What the Drawings Reveal: Some Observations on Arshile Gorky’s Working Method,” in eds. Lee and Lader, *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective of Drawings* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 2004): 15–83.

by Ingres to be “more abstract” than one by an AAA member? Earlier, Roger Fry suggested that Ingres’ methods bore the mark of a different kind of primitivism with his interest in “mediæval illuminated manuscripts” and his formal tendency towards “positive, flat even assertiveness which takes but little note of accident.”<sup>456</sup> In 1960, Greenberg argued that Ingres had “executed portraits that were among the flattest, least sculptural paintings done in the West by a sophisticated artist since the 14<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>457</sup> Susan C. Larsen, even later, suggested that Gorky felt that abstraction and sensuality “need not be mutually exclusive in a work of art.”<sup>458</sup> To get to the matter at hand, it’s useful to insert experience in between the terms abstraction and sensuality. (Otherwise, the abstraction could be delimited to a representation of sensuality, not an understanding of it.) This is how Kainen, for another, understood Gorky’s technique, specifically in relation to Gorky’s *The Artist and His Mother* (see fig. 24), which Kainen had seen, in process, at the artist’s studio.<sup>459</sup> In a later interview, Kainen recalled that, “Just before painting when the pigment was just about dry, [Gorky would] scrape it with a razor blade, because he wanted to get very smooth, smooth gloss, on that smooth surface but he still wanted a painterly quality.”<sup>460</sup> The resulting “clarity” was Ingres-like, Kainen recalled, but the pigment was “more dense.”<sup>461</sup> Gorky, in his youth, made a habit of studying and copying Ingres and other Old Masters. As Rosenberg would later write of

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<sup>456</sup> Roger Fry, “Plastic Colour,” in *Transformations* (New York: Brentano’s, 1926): 217.

<sup>457</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 105.

<sup>458</sup> Susan C. Larsen, “The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History, 1936–1941,” 3.

<sup>459</sup> Kainen made it clear that he saw the version of this painting that is now in the collection of the Whitney Museum. Interview with Jacob Kainen, conducted by Avis Berman at the artist’s studio in Washington, D.C. on 10 August and 22 September, 1982. The transcript held in the Jacob Kainen Papers, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution* (microfilm reel no. 4937). My thanks to Avis Berman for bringing her interview to my attention. For Gorky’s draftsmanship on the preparatory drawings for this work, see Lader, “What the Drawings Reveal: Some Observations on Arshile Gorky’s Working Method,” 21–23.

<sup>460</sup> Interview with Jacob Kainen, conducted by Avis Berman.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*

Gorky's habit: "imitation was a learning to be, as well as a learning to do."<sup>462</sup> In terms of mastering self-invention by modern painters, Richard Schiff has stated the aim of modernism: "as the attempt—perhaps doomed—to fuse iconic appearance to indexical appearance."<sup>463</sup>

Gorky's obsessive attention to the work of Ingres is not unique within the history of art—generations of painters have rediscovered his work for themselves.<sup>464</sup> The French master purportedly admonished a twenty-year-old Edgar De Gas (1835–1917) to: "Draw lines, young man, many lines; from memory or from nature, it is this way that you will become a good artist."<sup>465</sup> A young Alfred Barr noted in his graduate journals (ca. 1925) that the Cubist phase of art was complete, and that artists were then turning to Ingres, but an Ingres "simplified and continuous in contour, based on...profound knowledge."<sup>466</sup> Kainen also made a practice of copying over the works of Old Master paintings, but in black and white—like the monochromatic under painting of academically-trained painters. He did so "just to study the composition."<sup>467</sup> He also recalled that Clive Bell's

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<sup>462</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *Arshile Gorky: The Man, the Time, the Idea* (New York, Horizon Press, 1962): 50. On Gorky's self-invention, see Donald Kuspit, "Arshile Gorky: Images in Support of the Invented Self," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, 48–63.

<sup>463</sup> Richard Schiff, "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, 103.

<sup>464</sup> For a general history of line in nineteenth-century French painting, see *The Essence of Line: French Drawings from Ingres to Degas*, with essays by Jay McKean Fisher, et al. (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art; Walters Art Museum; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). See also, Greenberg's tribute to line of Paul Klee in "Art Chronicle: On Paul Klee (1870–1940)," *Partisan Review*, 8:3 (May-June, 1941): 224–229; Greenberg, "The Necessity of the Old Masters," *Partisan Review* 15:7 (July 1948): 812–5; Greenberg, "The Venetian Line," *Partisan Review* 17:4 (April 1950): 360–4.

<sup>465</sup> One account of this meeting has De Gas presented to Ingres by Édouard Valpinçon in 1855. The junior artist gave two accounts of this meeting to Paul Valéry. The quotation above is taken from Valéry, *Degas, Danse, Dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938): 59–62. See John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, (New York: MoMA, 1974): 16, 35, n. 5.

<sup>466</sup> Alfred H. Barr papers, file no. B2725 H36 1982, Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Also cited in Susan Noyes Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The *Cubism and Abstract Art* Exhibition of 1936," 287, 293, n. 12.

<sup>467</sup> Interview with Jacob Kainen, conducted by Avis Berman. See also, Clive Bell, *Landmarks in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927).

*Landmarks in Nineteenth-Century Painting* was his favorite book on artists.<sup>468</sup> By another account, Walter Pach (1883–1958) was the author of Gorky’s favorite book on Ingres.<sup>469</sup> In 1939, Gorky had occasion to participate in a panel discussion with the author in front of *Guernica*, which was now safely installed at the Valentine Gallery. Dorothy Tanning (b. 1910), who was in the audience that evening, recalled that Gorky would “point out a strategic line, and follow it into battle as it clashed on the far side of the picture with spiky chaos.”<sup>470</sup> While Gorky’s most innovative exploitations of his media would come in the 1940s, his engagement with strategic/chaotic line began in the 1930s.

Another recollection, this one by Jacob Kainen from March of 1940, is instructive here on attitudes towards abstraction and about the practice of abstraction. Kainen recalled attending the exhibition at the Durlacher Gallery with Gorky and Graham, where they saw a small show of the work of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), including *The Triumph of Bacchus* of 1636–6 (fig. 63).<sup>471</sup> Kainen recalled that, while at the gallery, the Gorky noted strong diagonals that converged at the uplifted arm of the brazier, and that the white of the horse’s rump and the leopard skin held the painting together at the center. Graham noted that the thrusts and counter thrusts of the composition, but that the effect was static “so you can contemplate the formal order.”<sup>472</sup> Four years later, after what Kainen termed a period of “percolation,” Graham painted *Poussin m’instruit* (fig. 64).

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<sup>468</sup> Interview with Jacob Kainen, conducted by Avis Berman.

<sup>469</sup> Walter Pach, *Ingres* (New York: Harper, 1939). See Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003): 308

<sup>470</sup> Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work*, 308.

<sup>471</sup> Doubts over the authenticity of this work by Poussin were shed after its exhibition in Edinburgh in 1981. See Christopher Wright, *Poussin, Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Harlequin Books, Ltd., 1985):178. See also, Lader, “What the Drawings Reveal: Some Observations on Arshile Gorky’s Working Method,” 48.

<sup>472</sup> Kainen, “Remembering John Graham,” 29.

By way of comparison to the 1940 outing of Gorky, Graham, and Kainen, in 1941 George L.K. Morris offered another account of how abstraction worked. In his capacity of art critic for *Partisan Review*, Morris offered an account of the processes of abstraction, in “On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting,” complete with diagrams (fig. 65).<sup>473</sup> It’s a highly competent assessment of the current state of abstraction. Morris concluded his argument with a demonstration: a comparison between *Peace and Plenty*, a landscape by George Inness (1825–94) and his own *Composition No. 2*, which for the purposes of his essay, he temporarily re-named *Composition No. 2 Peace and Plenty* (fig. 66). The difference between distillation and percolation could not have been clearer to critics in the 1930s who were inclined to make qualitative judgments in favor of creative foment. Some artists and critics opted out of modernism, though: after 1944, the tension Graham constructed in his *System and Dialectics of Art* between revolution and tradition (indeed, between that of materialism and spiritualism) shifted towards the latter in both cases.<sup>474</sup> For his part, Kainen and his family left New York for Washington, D.C. in May of 1942, when he took up a curatorial position in the Graphic Arts Division of the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> George L.K. Morris, “On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting,” *Partisan Review* 8:5 (September–October 1941): 403–17. Perhaps Morris was inspired by the kind of diagrams that accompanied Mondrian’s 1938 essay, “The Necessity for a New Teaching in Art, Architecture, and Industry.” While this essay remained unpublished in Mondrian’s lifetime, Morris could have seen drafts of it during Mondrian’s time in New York. This essay is reproduced in full in Piet Mondrian, *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, eds. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993): 310–7.

<sup>474</sup> For a discussion of Graham’s interest in the mystical and the spiritual (e.g., alchemy, Theosophy, the Cabala, astrology, etc.) see, Marcia Epstein Allentuck, Introduction, *John Graham’s System and Dialectics of Art* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971): 39–44, *et passim*.

<sup>475</sup> On the FBI surveillance of Kainen in the post-War years, see the interview with Jacob Kainen, conducted by Avis Berman.

Still for others, the divide was not between Old Masters and new beginnings. In a 1958 interview with Thomas Hess that took place in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Willem de Kooning suggested that modern “artists keep influencing old masters.”<sup>476</sup> Indeed, the figure ground relationship of the Poussin also merits a retrospective comparison with de Kooning’s untitled work from 1931 (see fig. 46). In the Poussin, the ‘ground’ of earthen tones (the sinuous figures, ropes and chariots all) is punctuated in three areas by vibrant, primary color: the red of the cape on Bacchus, at left, and in the middle, the yellow of the leopard skin, and the blue of the toga of Bacchante; and in a fourth by the white rump of the horse that caught Gorky’s eye.



The dissident artist, if he understands the extremity of the age and voices what it tries to stifle, will thus be saved from its sterility and delivered from its corruption. Instead of deceiving himself and others by playing with bureaucratized visions of the shining cities of the future or else by turning his art into a shrine for things that are dead and gone, he would be faithful to the metamorphosis of the present. And every metamorphosis, it has been said, “is partly a swan song and partly a prelude to a great new poem.”

~ Philip Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” *Partisan Review*, 1939<sup>477</sup>



Throughout the 1930s, the future potential of abstract art, as practiced in New York, remained in doubt for some critics. It would be another decade before Clement Greenberg would offer the “impression” in 1948 that if advanced art (that was, for the moment, abstract painting) was to have any sort of future, that future was dependent upon what

<sup>476</sup> Willem de Kooning, “Is Today’s Artist with or Against the Past?” 27.

<sup>477</sup> Philip Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” *Partisan Review* 6:4 (Summer 1939): 15. The citation is probably an oblique reference to Wallace Stevens’s poem, *Academic Discourse in Havana*. See *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997): 115–7.



was done in New York.<sup>478</sup> Those painters—the good ones—who Greenberg would later identified were the ones who had the “courage to reject and to continue rejecting.”<sup>479</sup> This was what Greenberg understood as the challenge posed by painterly technique, or, the “‘destructiveness’” that was a “positive and creative factor,” not as the elimination of representation in painting, *per se*.<sup>480</sup> Also in 1948, Ronald Ossory Dunlop (1894–1973), the Irish painter and some-time Bloomsbury affiliate, would arrive at a definition of Abstract Painting, in his slim volume, *Understanding Pictures*: “The pure abstract picture in which all representation of objects, all extraneous subject-matter, was finally eliminated and the canvas contained only shapes, spaces, colours.”<sup>481</sup> Abstractionists, who painted in a style in which the finality of its forms was pre-determined, brought their painting to a kind of conclusion by the late 1930s. In the eyes of a range of critics, this painting (abstract painting as a conceptual category) arrived at a dead-end of sorts.

The break that many artists appeared to make in the late 1930s comes to be multivalent then. It was not delimited to breaking away from literal figurative representation and moving towards abstraction. The shift or split was also between that of painting, the kind that represented itself, and the category of abstract painting, the kind that represented the ‘pure’. The conscious privileging of painterly abstraction over ‘abstract painting’ begins with the qualitative judgments of critics in New York by the 1930s, well before 1948 when market forces held a place for the new American painting,

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<sup>478</sup> Greenberg, “The Situation at the Moment,” *Partisan Review* 15:1 (January 1948): 82.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>481</sup> Dunlop, *Understanding Pictures: From Primitive Art to Surrealism* (New York: Pitman, 1948): 42.

as Guilbaut has argued.<sup>482</sup> It was the former type of painting that seemed to have future potential to critics in the 1930s, and later to critics like Greenberg and Rosenberg. It was painting that could work its way through the strictures of late Cubism and offer a retort to the over-sized easel picture or the *a priori* conclusions of abstraction. It was painting that had something to say (even if by means that seemed, for a time, destructive, counter-intuitive or unnatural). Rosenberg, though, was wary. Writing on politics in 1944, he noted that “‘Here we go’” had somehow become identical with “‘After all—why not?’ and political action into sexual experience.”<sup>483</sup> Not every negation was smart, necessary, or productive. Some would turn out to be just plain silly.

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<sup>482</sup> See Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 178–9. On this point, see Deidre Robson, “The Market for Abstract Expressionism: The Lag Time Between Critical and Commercial Acceptance,” *The Archives of American Art Journal* 25:3 (1985):18–23. My thanks to Andrew Hemingway for bringing this essay to my attention.

<sup>483</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The Case of the Baffled Radical,” *Partisan Review* 11:1 (Winter 1944): 100–3. This was a review of Arthur Koestler, *Arrival and Departure* (New York: Macmillan, 1944).

Chapter V:  
Myth and History, ca. 1940

## I. Marxism at the End of the 1930s

The arts which today have the greatest vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders and exploits of bandits.

~ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934<sup>484</sup>

I did not, as Schwartz says, try to find a social fact for every pictorial element. Nor would I...agree that the comic strip and the abstract painting have the same social origins, though their causes may intersect.

~ Meyer Schapiro, "A Note on the Nature of Art (A Reply to Delmore Schwartz)," *Marxist Quarterly*, 1937<sup>485</sup>

A system has been created for the mechanical drawing of analogies. The symbolism of "pure poetry" has long been outdistanced; the new [analogical] technique expands and contracts to embrace the vastest abstractions and the most trivial-sounding commonplaces; it applies equally to *Time*, newspaper advertisements, love, horse-breeding, or international politics.

~ Harold Rosenberg, "Myth and History," *Partisan Review*, 1939<sup>486</sup>

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, the connection seems to end. A poem by Eliot and a poem by Eddie Guest—what perspective on culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other?

~ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, 1939<sup>487</sup>

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⁴⁸⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1980, 1934): 5–6. In the Preface to his book, Dewey thanked Meyer Schapiro for reviewing chapters of his manuscript. The role of the art object within modern culture was clearly a shared concern.

⁴⁸⁵ Schapiro, "A Note on the Nature of Art (A Reply to Delmore Schwartz)," 311.

⁴⁸⁶ Rosenberg, "Myth and History," *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1939): 24. As an example of this new, highly-problematic technique, Rosenberg refers the reader to the "stilted" work of Thurman Arnold. See *The Folklore of Capitalism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937).

⁴⁸⁷ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6:5 (Autumn 1939): 34.

The juxtaposition of the rarefied with the commonplace was a frequent device used by philosophers, historians, and critics in the 1930s, as these epigraphs demonstrate. In their respective essays, these writers pointed to the problems or consequences of disassociating the work of art from common, or shared, experience (Dewey); of binding the work of art to the workings of the economic base (Schapiro); the problems of rendering aesthetic all aspects of culture (Rosenberg); or, the possibilities of placing the autonomous art object in dialogue with the common culture (Greenberg). This section examines efforts made by writers on art to develop an art criticism appropriate or adequate to the modern art object. An absence in Marx's writing, as has been often noted by scholars, is the art object (or, it has been very well hidden).⁴⁸⁸ Critics looking to take up the mantle of a Marxian interpretation of art found themselves often holding only a cloth coat.⁴⁸⁹ And so, this lacuna brought forth some very interesting writing in the 1930s as critics, more often than not, had to work it out for themselves. Generally, this section examines attempts by other left-wing critics working in New York to reconcile (or dispute) the aesthetic with the material, autonomy in art and the (historical) dialectic. For some critics, abstraction represented a revolution within artistic tradition—the next, logical step in the evolution of modernist art; or, abstraction literally represented the momentary suppression of the signs and symbols of the old order; and still for others,

⁴⁸⁸ See, for example, Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) and Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁴⁸⁹ For example, William Phillips argues in his 1937 review of George Plekhanov's pamphlet *Art and Society*, which had been published by the Critics Group that same year, that there was a lack of a Marxian critical tradition in regards to the art object. Plekhanov's essay, Phillips concluded, was a problematic attempt at such an approach. See, Phillips, "Art and Society," *Art Front* (February 1937): 23–4. In 1938, the Critics Group also published Mikhail Lifshitz's *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, which was translated from the Russian by Ralph B. Winn and edited by Angel Flores. For an additional publication by the Critics Group in this vein, see Milton Brown, "The Marxist Approach to Art," *2 Dialectics* (1937): 23–31.

abstract art was the cultural vanguard that represented a site of resistance within modern commodity culture.

The decade of the 1930s witnessed the well-documented split between Trotskyists and Stalinists, circa 1936, in Europe, America, and elsewhere; the Moscow Trials of 1936–38 at which Leon Trotsky and other leading members of the original Bolshevik party were purged; the rise and demise of the first Popular Front (1935–ca. 1939); and the final defeat of the Loyalists and the supporting international brigades in Spain by the Fascists (April 1939). Secondary art-historical literature that gives consideration to the political climate of 1930s mostly attends to the rift between Trotskyists and Stalinists (and with good reason).⁴⁹⁰ This chapter attends to the formalism and formulations of Leon Trotsky. As one of the major “historical actors” of his age, to borrow again from Wilson’s vocabulary, and as one of the “subjects of history” who truly suffered, to borrow from those of Max Horkheimer, he was seen by some intellectuals as the paradigmatic man of art and action in his lifetime. In the 1930s, Trotsky made several contributions to *Partisan Review* on art and politics including a manifesto on free, revolutionary art co-authored with André Bréton and Diego Rivera.⁴⁹¹ Reports of the Moscow Trials and the infamous purges had a galvanizing effect on the imaginations of politically-minded New York intellectuals. Most prominent amongst them was John Dewey, who, in 1934, had written *Art as Experience*, a Pragmatist articulation of art.⁴⁹² In September 1937, Dewey famously chaired the Preliminary Commission of Inquiry into

⁴⁹⁰ The CPUSA purged a number of members believed to be Trotskyists, including Max Schachtman, in 1928. Until 1934, the Trotskyist Cannon group saw itself as a faction within the CPUSA, before finally splitting from the party altogether.

⁴⁹¹ For reasons that are discussed below, Trotsky’s name was initially omitted from authorship credit.

⁴⁹² See also, Philip Rahv, “Trials of the Mind,” *Partisan Review* 4:5 (April 1938): 3–11.

the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials. The assembled commission traveled to Coyoacán, Mexico, where Trotsky was then living in exile with his family through the aegis of Rivera.⁴⁹³ In its report, published in the same year, the commission found Moscow Trials to be “frame-ups” and Trotsky and his son, Leon Sedov, who died under suspicious circumstances on 16 February, 1938, “not guilty!”⁴⁹⁴ In 1938, Dewey and Trotsky went on to collaborate, if at cross purposes, on *Their Morals and Ours*, a study on differences in Marxist and liberal values. Despite all efforts, Trotsky was attacked in his study on 20 August, 1940 by Ramón Mercader, a Stalinist agent, who used an ice pick for his attack. Trotsky died the next day.

In this chapter, I argue that Marxism was at play in New York during these years in another form—that of the Frankfurt School. The Expressionism controversy in *Das Wort* remains an instructive example of German-language criticism intruding in the left-wing critical discourse of the US: Lukács derided the historical possibility of an avant-garde; Bloch was well aware of the dangers posed by *kitsch*. During the 1930s, the Frankfurt School writers disseminated their ideas on art and mass culture through the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (as well through the émigré journal, *Das Wort*). Hitler’s rise to power in Germany forced a migration of the Institut’s membership: Max Horkheimer, the Director, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Friedrich Pollock emigrated in 1934; Theodor

⁴⁹³ The committee comprised the following individuals, in addition to John Dewey: John R. Chamberlain, author and journalist, Alfred Rosmer, author and labor journalist, Edward Alsworth Ross, author and sociologist and historian of the Russian Revolution, Otto Ruehle, biographer of Karl Marx, Benjamin Stolberg, author and labor journalist, Wendelin Thomas, leader of the Wilhelmshaven revolt, 7 November, 1918, independent socialist and former editor, Carlo Tresca, Anarcho-Syndicalist and a leader of the Paterson strike in 1913, Francisco Zamora, author and former Mexican unionist, and Suzanne La Follette, author and former editor of *The Freeman* and *The New Freeman*. John F. Finerty, then counsel to Tom Mooney and former counsel to Sacco and Vanzetti, acted as counsel to the Commission.

⁴⁹⁴ *The Case of Leon Trotsky; Report of Hearings on the Charges Made against him in the Moscow Trials, by the Preliminary Commission of Inquiry, John Dewey, Chairman, Carleton Beals (resigned) Otto Ruehle, Benjamin Stolberg, Suzanne La Follette, Secretary* (New York: Harper, 1937): xv.

Adorno in 1938. As mentioned in the prolegomenon, the Institut was able to continue publishing *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* in New York until 1941, thought its temporary association with Columbia University. Specifically, this section examines the consequences of the critical theory of the Frankfurt Institut for American critics, especially for Schapiro and a young Greenberg.

In their work, the Frankfurt School theorists approached the problem of the aesthetic realm (which was not necessarily co-terminus with the history of the fine arts for these writers). Rather, the avant-garde work of art succeeded if it sensitized its beholder in the deadening context of a commodity-based culture. In his essays from the 1930s, for example, Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institut, made charges against idealist thinkers (or idealist aspects of some materialists): namely G.W.F. Hegel, William Dilthey, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Henri Bergson, in that they over-emphasized the idea of an autonomous individual at the expense of action in culture. “After Marx,” he wrote, “we are forbidden any such [idealist] consolation about the world.”⁴⁹⁵ However, vulgar materialism or positivist hypostatization of concepts or categories in culture concerned him even more: this was the philosophy of the acceptance of the existing order and the ceding of individual agency. For example, in his first essay published in *Gründbergs Archiv* in 1930, Horkheimer attacked Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*. By interpreting Marxism as but one ideology amongst many, Horkheimer argued that Mannheim, (who was certainly of the left and a colleague), had

⁴⁹⁵ Max Horkheimer, “Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?” *Gründbergs Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* 15 (1930). Reprinted in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings of Max Horkheimer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993): 139.

made all existence relative and meaningless by naming it an extreme false consciousness:

This was an outrageous proposition to the “acting and suffering subjects of history.”⁴⁹⁶



Marx had once—in a first draft for the “Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy”—made some attempt to explore the difficulties in the connection between art and economic conditions. The periods of the highest development of art do not coincide, he says, with the highest developments in society. Great art—the Greek epic, for example—is not even necessarily the product of a high period of artistic development. In any given instance it is possible to see why a particular art should have flourished at a particular moment.... The difficulty lay only in discovering the general laws of the connection between artistic and social development. One would say that Marx found a great deal of difficulty in explaining the above specific case and that his explanation was far from satisfactory.

~ Edmund Wilson, “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic,”
Partisan Review, 1938⁴⁹⁷

In the real world? Is it proper now to speak of the real world, which the work of art is intended to reflect or represent? Is not the work of art itself an element of this real world, in fact a very superior element? What is the literary intervention into this process of exchange between the formal and the unique but the final human act of understanding, the synthetic image that knits together the physical and the unreal, and thereby, becomes itself the only total reality.

~ Harold Rosenberg, “Myth and History,” *Partisan Review*,
1939⁴⁹⁸

It is among the hopeful signs in the midst of the decay of our present society that we—some of us—have been unwilling to accept this last phase for our culture. In seeking to go beyond Alexandrianism, a part of Western bourgeois society has produced something unheard of heretofore:—avant-garde culture. A superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism—made this possible.

~ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review*, 1939⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁹⁷ Edmund Wilson, “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic,” *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 70.

⁴⁹⁸ Rosenberg, “Myth and History,” *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1939): 24.

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Greenberg's 1939 essay remains a seminal text in the critical history of modernist art, and it continues to be singled out and subjected to critical scrutiny.<sup>500</sup> However, it was, in the initial circumstances of its publication, part of a larger debate at *Partisan Review* on how history (or its myth) worked in culture generally, and the status of the work of art in contemporary culture, specifically.<sup>501</sup> Participants included American writers who were more established at that point in time than the young Greenberg, who, with his autumn 1939 essay, was committing his words to print for only the second time.<sup>502</sup> In the autumn of 1938, Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) and William Phillips (1907–2002), one of the co-founders of *Partisan Review*, had a heated exchange over the theory of the Marxist dialectic.<sup>503</sup> In the winter 1939 edition, Harold Rosenberg published “Myth and History,” which was his intervention into the 1938 debate between William Troy (1903–1961), the literary critic, and James Burnham (1905–1987), future author of *The Managerial*

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<sup>499</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6:5 (Autumn 1939): 35.

<sup>500</sup> See, for example, the exchange between Timothy J. Clark and Michael Fried: Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (September 1982): 139–56; Fried, “How Modernism Works: A Response to T.J. Clark,” *Critical Inquiry*, 9:1 (September 1982): 217–94; and Clark, “Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried,” in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983): 239–48.

<sup>501</sup> John O’Brian has argued that the one of the impetuses for Greenberg’s essay was an essay on Soviet cinema written by Dwight Macdonald. See, Macdonald, “Soviet Society and Its Society,” *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1939): 80–95. For a later essay on his ideas on popular culture, see Macdonald, “A Theory of Popular Culture,” *Politics* 1:1 (February 1944): 20–3.

<sup>502</sup> Greenberg’s review of Bertolt Brecht’s *A Penny for the Poor* had appeared in the Winter 1939 volume of *Partisan Review*. For an incisive analysis of the literary avant-garde (of lack thereof), see Philip Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” *Partisan Review* 6:4 (Summer 1939): 3–15.

<sup>503</sup> See, Edmund Wilson, “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic,” *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 66–81; William Phillips, “The Devil Theory of the Dialectic: A Reply to Edmund Wilson,” *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 82–90. See also, Victor Serge, “Marxism in Our Times,” *Partisan Review* 5:3 (August–September 1938): 26–32, which Serge contributed from Paris, his home in exile.

*Revolution* of 1941, on the figure of Thomas Mann (1875–1955), who was at that time touring the U.S. lecturing on “The Coming Victory of Democracy.”<sup>504</sup>

The dialectic, as the primary interpretive instrument of Marxism, had been distorted or mythologized, according to Wilson. Rather than the inspiring idea “that the human spirit will be able to master its animal nature through reason,” Marx and Engels had managed to make a good number of people believe something of the opposite: “that mankind was hopelessly the victim of its appetites.”<sup>505</sup> A scholar of Hegel might have nipped at Wilson for his perpetuation of the “Hegel Myth,” in his own use of the triad of thesis/anti-thesis/synthesis to explain Hegel’s theories.<sup>506</sup> This is to suggest that the elitist positions often assumed by *Partisan Review* writers, such as someone of Wilson’s seriousness and erudition, were not always scholarly ones. While this mystification of the dialectic was convenient to the appalling condition of prevailing politics, Wilson argued, the obfuscation had its origins with Marx himself. Marx had made the Dialectic “a religious myth, disencumbered of divine personality, and tied up with the history of mankind.”<sup>507</sup> Wilson accused Marx of identifying “his own will with the antithesis of the dialectical process,” (e.g., Marx’s famous conclusion to *Theses on Feuerbach*, that: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world. Our business is to change it.”), and for

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<sup>504</sup> For the Troy-Burnham debate, see: William Troy, “Thomas Mann: Myth and Reason, Part I” *Partisan Review* 5:1 (June 1938): 24–32, and Part II, *Partisan Review* 5:2 (July 1938): 51–64; James Burnham, “William Troy’s Myths,” *Partisan Review* 5:3 (August–September, 1938): 65–8; Troy, “A Further Note on Myth,” *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 95–100. See also, Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1934–1945* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986): 153–61.

<sup>505</sup> Wilson, “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic,” 68.

<sup>506</sup> According to Gustav E. Mueller, the only occurrence of the “triplicity” is in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of the Mind*. In his *Preface*, Hegel referred to this triad as a “lifeless schema” (*geistloses Schema*) specifically in relation to the work of Kant. See Gustav E. Mueller, “The Hegel Legend of ‘Thesis–Antithesis–Synthesis’,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (June 1958): 411–2.

<sup>507</sup> Wilson, “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic,” 77.

projecting himself into the role of the martyred writer. This pseudo-religiosity had obscured the essential posit of Marxism: the struggle for real, universal freedom. Wilson argued that the “departments” of the superstructure, e.g., law, politics, philosophy, etc. (could one extrapolate the realm of art here?) struggled to make themselves free from their tethers to economic interests.<sup>508</sup> That is, to become professional and independent groups—to appear natural. In a forceful concluding statement of the universality of Marxism, Wilson resorted again to the writings of Marx: “If we have committed ourselves to fight for the interests of the proletariat, it is because we are really trying to work for the interests of humanity as a whole.”<sup>509</sup> Humanity, like its disciplines, would have to deliver itself and not await the deliverance in a history powered by the dialectic.

Phillips, in his response, welcomed Wilson’s “irreverent and civilized” reminder of the essential humanist precepts of classical Marxism to those who would “mummify Marxism into a system of eternal truths.”<sup>510</sup> Wilson’s “difficulties,” as Phillips referred to them throughout his essay, began with his convenient ahistorical analysis of the Dialectic, one in which the historical, revolutionary Marx was lost to a messianic fiction and the historical dialectic was subsumed to a “*Naturdialectic*.”<sup>511</sup> Phillips concluded his refutation by arguing that critics like Wilson appeared “indifferent to the conservative implications” of their position (e.g., that this messianic German will could potentially

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<sup>508</sup> This metaphor of a tether or attachment seemed to be a rhetorical work around to over-determined base-superstructure relationships with this generation of critics. Cf. Greenberg’s use of the “umbilical cord of gold” in “*Avant-Garde and Kitsch*,” which is discussed below.

<sup>509</sup> Wilson, “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic,” 81.

<sup>510</sup> Phillips, “The Devil Theory of the Dialectic: A Reply to Edmund Wilson,” 82.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

claim both the Sparticists and the National Socialists as its offspring).<sup>512</sup> And, finally, what analytic tool would Wilson offer in place of the Dialectic?

In his own essay from early 1939, “Myth and History,” Harold Rosenberg pointed to the dangers of “the analogical technique” (citing Oswald Spengler’s phrase from his 1926–28 *The Decline of the West*) especially the kind Thomas Mann made use of in his fiction.<sup>513</sup> Rosenberg by-passed much of the exchange between Burnham and Troy and directed his intense criticisms at Mann directly. What were the consequences for culture and its inhabitants if technique of analogies (the “logic of correspondences”) were to replace science? (In Rosenberg’s case, as with many members of his generation, science can be read as a metonymy for Marxism—that which held out the possibility of real understanding and change). Or, when a culture adopts the “values of Art,” or embarks on a “conservative revolution” as a last act of preservation?<sup>514</sup> Rosenberg argued—with an effective construction of commonplaces with uncommon ideas—that there were any number of manifestations of the oppositional conflict between science and the irrational, the known and the living, manifested in culture. In painting, he argued, this conflict has developed “esthetic content as a more or less organized symbolism of the Monumental and the Organic—e.g., statues, machines, geometric abstraction, contrasted with sex, dreams, biomorphic shapes.”<sup>515</sup> If the dubious achievement of Mann’s work, Rosenberg argued, was the “converting of all happenings into a special kind of fable” through the technique of analogy, then that made for serious consequences. In the schematization of his fable-making, the individual creative act was lost; if the resolution of the dialectic

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<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>513</sup> Initially published as *Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich, 1922–23).

<sup>514</sup> Rosenberg, “Myth and History,” *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1939): 20–21.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

were mis-directed into an absolute synthesis in the work of art (and nothing else), then where was the possibility for forward motion or real change? Mann, Rosenberg concluded, in his novels cast the current conditions of struggling, alienated humanity as “eternal”—as an ancient Passion play.<sup>516</sup> And, is this what the so-called conservative revolution wished to preserve? (It would be like condemning someone to the permanent role as a peasant in a Knut Hamsun novel.)

Indeed, Mann was taking his beliefs to the crowd: the American audiences, Rosenberg speculated, with their “cherished illusion” of “limitless freedom of the individual to create values and to live by them,” were no doubt receptive to Mann.<sup>517</sup> Not that that myth was inappropriate, but Mann (and, by proxy, his audience) failed to see the means of scaling the obstacles facing humanity. This was not an idle question for Rosenberg, who argued that Mann was predicting the end of the war through a dangerous “revival of Christianity and individual metaphysics,” and that the socialist order would be attained without the aid, and “even in conflict with Marxism and the materialist analysis of history.”<sup>518</sup> The materialist analysis of history—with an eye towards changing its future course—is a long-standing concern within Rosenberg’s writing. It’s important to note that in his celebrated 1952 essay, “The American Action Painting,” Rosenberg understands the field of operation of the painter as a very real one—not as an analogy but rather as a metonymy for the real world. No small semantic difference.

It is within the discursive context that Greenberg’s essay is best understood as a contribution and continuation of that context. In this essay, which was only Greenberg’s

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<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

second contribution to *Partisan Review*, the critic offered a mostly theoretical essay on the function of the avant-garde and of *kitsch* in modern culture. It is, as Serge Guilbaut has rightly argued, an “‘elitist’” position in terms of the balance between art and politics in his celebrated 1939 essay.<sup>519</sup> If the counterpart to the avant-garde had usually been that of the rear-guard, Greenberg interjected a third term into the English-language discourse: that of *kitsch*.<sup>520</sup> In this celebrated essay, Greenberg proposed some historical definitions: that the distinction between avant-garde and *kitsch* was (is) not one of aesthetics; that, in the midst of a decaying culture (one of Alexandrianism or academicism), Western bourgeois society, the beneficiary of the industrial revolution, produced something new: “avant-garde culture”; that it was to the aristocracy that the avant-garde belonged, tied to the ruling class by “an umbilical cord of gold.” This is not a casual metaphor on Greenberg’s part. The connection was mutual and sustaining for a certain time: immigrants to bohemian New York were just as likely to come from Europe, as they were the bourgeoisie of New York. Living culture, Greenberg argued, depended upon the health of that elite culture (and conversely, when it is abandoned or threatened, so too is its culture).

Abstract art had its genesis in modernist artists turning away from “common experience” and turning towards the medium of their own craft: that is, the “imitation of

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<sup>519</sup> See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 36, 214, n. 79. As Guilbaut noted, and as was discussed in the previous chapter, this seemingly-elitist position had been mapped out by American artist groups, such as the Ten and the AAA, who were in contact with their European counterparts, such as *Abstraction-Création*, as early as 1936. See also, Paul Hart, “The Essential Legacy of Clement Greenberg from the Era of Stalin and Hitler,” 76–87.

<sup>520</sup> See also, Sheldon Cheney, “Art in the United States, 1938,” in which he addressed similar concerns to Greenberg: recidivism in art, ‘high’ culture and ‘mass culture’, patronage in the arts (both private and governmental, e.g., the WPA). Published in, *America Now: An Inquiry into Civilization in the United States*, Harold E. Stearns, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938): 82–103. For an assessment of the changes over time in Cheney’s approach to art, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 231–4.

imitating.”<sup>521</sup> The excitement in the work of “Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne” appears to be from their ability “to derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in.”<sup>522</sup> Through the process of imitating imitation, content is dissolved, Greenberg concluded. On this point the critic credited to his former teacher, Hans Hofmann (perhaps de Kooning would have complained that he, Greenberg, was writing as a “bookkeeper” critic). By way of contrast, Hofmann had argued that the Surrealists, as the other advanced art of the day, demonstrated a “reactionary tendency” in their attempt to “restore” outside content matter to their art. An artist like Dali, Greenberg continued, was to contrive the representation of the activities of his sub-conscious, not “the processes of his medium.”<sup>523</sup> The former is feigned, the latter sincere. The avant-garde specialized in itself—its best were “artists’ artists;” by extension, then, the work asks for the (real) time of its audience.<sup>524</sup>

If avant-garde art imitated the processes of high art, *kitsch* imitated only its effect; *kitsch* offered a vicarious experience, and “demands nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time”; and, when *kitsch* masqueraded as art, a debased culture resulted. In Greenberg’s assessment, *kitsch* offered easy comfort in a commodity-based culture. As a commodity from its inception, *kitsch* is destined for consumption (as opposed to the avant-garde work of art that becomes an item for the market only at the end). *Kitsch* was formulaic, faked; it offered a pre-digested experience of culture. It posed no challenge, and so posed no threat to the individual viewer. Finally, perhaps the most

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<sup>521</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and *Kitsch*,” 35–6.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, n. 2. Also see, Richard Shiff, “Criticism at Odds with Its Art: Prophecy, Projection, Doubt, Paranoia,” *Common Knowledge* 9:3 (2003): 434–62.

<sup>524</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and *Kitsch*,” 38.



ambitious proposal in “Avant-Garde and *Kitsch*” was that both an avant-garde and *kitsch* were necessary in contemporary culture. How else was a vigorous, ambitious, avant-garde to survive unless it could work off of (and out of) *kitsch*? *Kitsch* needed the avant-garde as a source for its production. An ever-changing, innovating avant-garde (one that maintained tradition) was necessary as a defense against the debilitating effects of *kitsch*. Greenberg’s formulation was a conservative revolution of a different sort. *Kitsch*, as a cultural product, posed (and poses) particular political problems, as numerous critics have noted after the initial publication of the essay.<sup>525</sup> One these commentators included Greenberg himself, who re-visited this essay while sitting for what would be his final interview. “I made *kitsch* the enemy when the enemy was really the middlebrow.”<sup>526</sup>

Initially, in 1939, like Wilson, Greenberg placed a certain faith in the possibility of a vanguard that would fulfill the Humanist promises of Marxist texts; like Rosenberg, Greenberg saw the dangers posed by a cliché of “*l’art pur*”—a vanguard with no corrective *kitsch*. In 1939, vigilance against *kitsch* took on weighty political tones for some. To the editors and writers at *Partisan Review*, it represented the culture of Fascism.<sup>527</sup> The figure of Leon Trotsky, in his words and deeds (if the two are to be separated) represented to some the best hope for critical resistance against Fascism and the political *kitsch* of the Popular Front.

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<sup>525</sup> As Thierry de Duve has stated the problem, “[E]very *kitsch* object, even at the benign scale of the garden dwarf, proclaims: *fiat ars, pereat mundus*.” See de Duve, *Clement Greenberg, Between the Lines* (Paris: Editions Dis-Voir, 1996): 48.

<sup>526</sup> Clement Greenberg, in “The Last Interview,” in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, Robert C. Morgan, ed. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003): 233. Initially published as Saul Ostrow, “Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview,” *World Art* (November 1994): 24–32.

<sup>527</sup> “Otherwise, how could the SS have enjoyed playing Brahms in the Camps?” de Duve, *Clement Greenberg, Between the Lines*, 48.

## II. Leon Trotsky's Formulations/Formalism

Art, don't you see, means prophecy. Works of art are embodiments of presentiments; therefore, pre-revolutionary art is the real art of the Revolution.

~ Leon Trotsky, "Neo-Classicism," 1923<sup>528</sup>

It has always been one of the most essential functions of art to engender a demand for which the hour of full satisfaction is yet to come. The history of every art form has critical moments of striving toward effects that can only be freely realized with a changed technical standard, that is, in the context of a new art form. The excesses and crudeness associated with art in this type of situation . . . emerge from the richest historical concentration of forces.

~ Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," 1936<sup>529</sup>

Semblance is a promise of non-semblance.

~ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 1966<sup>530</sup>

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If it is the job description of the professional artist to figure the work of art, then the task of the critic has usually been to re-state this job description, time and again.

Trotsky's assertions about the autonomous work of art partook of a recurring idea within Marxist criticism. Writing from the vantage point of a sympathetic academic in 1952, Donald Drew Egbert arrived at a construction that would bear a rhetorical resemblance (at least to his close readers) to a future heuristic challenge made by Greenberg in 1961.

In his study, Egbert argued that:

Trotsky was accused of the deadly sin of "formalism." He was accused, in short, of encouraging art that is abstract, or that is mechanical or experimental for its own sake, art in which the form or the technique is

⁵²⁸ Leon Trotsky, "Neo-Classicism," in *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957): 110. By Neo-Classicism, Trotsky was referring to the emerging International Style in architecture.

⁵²⁹ Benjamin's celebrated essay was initially published in *ZfS* 5:1 (1936); translation by Richard Shiff in "Criticism at Odds with Its Art: Prophecy, Projection, Doubt, Paranoia," 434.

⁵³⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt-a.-M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966): 405.

itself the end rather than a vehicle by which suitable socialist subject matter is given a socialist content. The Stalinists therefore increasingly maintained that Trotsky and his followers, in separating form in art from social content, were divorcing theory from practice and thus had become ‘idealists’ who, in believing that mind, ideas, can exist without matter, were *ipso facto* not true Marxian realists.⁵³¹

At its most basic definition, Trotsky put forth a vision of Marxism that was not vulgar. If one accepts the dualism of idealism/materialism, then Trotsky’s analysis regarding the work of art insisted upon the idealist roots of Marxism in its materialist analysis of modern culture. Trotsky argued for the proposition of the necessity of the autonomous work of art (one that would stand apart from political ideologies) and the avant-garde (in the course of human history, no idea of consequence had begun as a mass idea). (Even the fascists, whose etymological roots lie in the group—ad. It. *fascismo*, f. *fascio* bundle, group—were in need of a so-called great leader to mobilize.)

The root of the question, Trotsky argued in 1926, was a matter of technique:

And here, first and foremost, we have to ask ourselves regarding technique: is it *only* an instrument of class oppression? It is enough to put such a question for it to be answered at once: no, technique is a fundamental conquest of mankind; although it has also served, up to the present, as an instrument of exploitation, yet it is at the same time the fundamental condition for the emancipation of the exploited. The machine strangles the wage slave in its grip. But he can free himself only through the machine. Therein is the root of the entire question.⁵³²

⁵³¹ Donald Drew Egbert, *Socialism and American Art: In the Light of European Utopianism, Marxism, and Anarchism* (Princeton University Press, 1952, 1967): 64–5. As discussed in the previous chapter, Greenberg inserted the following parenthetical into the revised version of “New York Painting Only Yesterday,” which was published as “The Late ’Thirties in New York”: “(Though that is not all, by far, that there was to politics in art in those years; some day it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism’, which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism’, turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.)” See *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 230.

⁵³² Leon Trotsky, “Technique and Culture,” in *Culture and Socialism*, 1926. Initially published in *Krasnaya Nov 6* (1926); and re-published in New York in *Novy Mir* 1 (1927). Reprinted in *Leon Trotsky on Art and Literature*, ed. and intro., Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970): 85.

To cede technique to the dominion of the dominant ideology or the ruling class would be to enter an historical dead-end, one with no possibility for agency or change. Technique, then, is meaningful when employed by people—that is its tautological definition. In this regard, as a term, a function, it potentially transcends the age-old divide of idealism/materialism. Without artists and their productive engagement with their materials, there would be no works of art; only barbarism. Trotsky's accusers were not always accurate: while Trotsky could be tagged as a 'formalist', his judgments did not always lead him towards vanguard works of abstraction. (A possible inconvenience for his later admirers.) Rather, he held up the figurative fresco cycles of Diego Rivera as the maker of true revolutionary art:

In the field of painting, the October revolution has found her greatest interpreter not in the USSR but in far away Mexico, not among the official "friends," but in the person of a so-called "enemy of the people" whom the Fourth International is proud to number in its ranks....Do you wish to know what revolutionary art is like? Look at the frescoes of Rivera.⁵³³

Vandals of Rivera's frescoes, "catholics [*sic*] and other reactionaries...and, of course, Stalinists" only gave "even greater life" to his frescoes, which were "a living part of the class struggle" and at the same time "a masterpiece!"⁵³⁴

Trotsky's critical model necessarily required an enemy. This is perhaps appropriate to the former leader of the Red Army and future founder of the Fourth International in 1938, in whose path so many adversaries had crossed. In Trotsky's lifetime, the advance guard would find itself set upon violently both by the old order and by internecine fighting. Eventually, Trotsky found himself in the position of the exiled dissenter from the Stalinist order after being expelled from the party in 1927 (along with Grigory Zinoviev, who was

⁵³³ Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics," *Partisan Review* 5:3 (August-September 1938): 7.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

executed in 1936), expelled from the USSR in 1929, and purged *in absentia* in 1936. In his extensive expatriate writing, he stuck to his Left-Opposition guns, which famously include: *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930); *The Defense of Terrorism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (revised in 1935 from the 1922 publication); *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is It Going?* (1937); and *Their Morals and Ours* (1938), a collaboration with John Dewey.

In an essay on ‘anti-fascism’ and ‘anti-fascist’ art in the 1930s, Andrew Hemingway argued that too much has been made of “the influence of Trotskyism in the culture of the late thirties” in that some scholars have “made Trotskyism seem almost the precondition for modernist practice on the left in the late thirties.”⁵³⁵ Hemingway’s objections are twofold: to delimit modernist art history in the 1930s to that of Trotskyist circles is to render an incomplete topography of left-wing discourse. For example, the most well-known abstract painter in the US at that time was, technically, a Stalinist (Stuart Davis did not resign officially from the CPUSA until 1940). Secondly, to presuppose the essential importance of Trotsky would be to flatten (or, naturalize) a period of history in which many of its participants actively understood their times dialectically. It would be (to borrow from one of Benjamin’s other famous formulations), to fail to rub history against the grain. In this critical line of analysis, Hemingway has also criticized histories of the Popular Front, the body against which Trotskyists took their oppositional stance. Hemingway has characterized the histories of the 1930s as presenting fictional unities of

⁵³⁵ Andrew Hemingway, “Fictional Unities: ‘Antifascism’ and ‘Antifascist Art’ in 30s America,” 116, n. 18.

this fictional unity. Whatever unity the Popular Front achieved with liberal intellectuals was done so at the cost of ultimately alienating many leftists.⁵³⁶

One such alienated leftist was Sidney Hook, philosopher, socialist, critic, and former student of John Dewey. In a 1939 critique of the strategy of the Popular Front, he argued forcefully that the devaluation of political labels in recent times had not meant the articulation of re-evaluated ideas.⁵³⁷ Rather, the Popular Front strategy had meant a rightward swing in the political alliance which would, out of necessity for the feigned unity of the alliance, have to adopt the policies of the pro-capitalist parties. It was “an invitation to disaster.”⁵³⁸ For many in Spain, the Popular Front strategy had meant a literal dead end. The means of defeating fascism and re-engineering society, goals to which Hook was actively sympathetic, were vital to the achievement of those goals. The Popular Front, in its denial of critical difference, and the Moscow Trials, in which coercion and torture had been used to obtain false confessions, had betrayed the ends by corrupting the means, he concluded.

Hook’s review appeared in *Partisan Review*. The journal was founded in 1934 as a literary outlet for members of the John Reed Clubs; it split from the official Communist Party in 1936 and, after an abortive one-year collaboration with Jack Conroy’s *Anvil*, it re-emerged as independent and nominally Trotskyist in 1937.⁵³⁹ However, the hagiography of *Partisan Review* as the independent voice of Trotskyism in the US is

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵³⁷ Sidney Hook, “The Anatomy of the Popular Front,” *Partisan Review* 6:6 (Spring 1939): 29–45. Hook’s essay took as its starting point Max Lerner’s *It’s Later Than You Think: The Need for a Militant Democracy* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).

⁵³⁸ Hook, “The Anatomy of the Popular Front,” 33.

⁵³⁹ See “This Quarter,” *Partisan Review* 4:1 (Winter 1937): 3–4. Mike Gold, the editor of *The New Masses*, attacked the so-called defectors in 1936, calling them “Phi Beta Kappa Trotskyites” whose victories were all “on paper” and who erected “monuments of sterile theory.” See, Gold, “Migratory Intellectuals,” *The New Masses* 21 (15 December 1936): 27.

tempered by the fact that the man himself thought they had nothing to say. Trotsky wrote as much to Dwight Macdonald in a 1938 letter, here cited at length:

It is my general impression that the editors of *Partisan Review* are capable, educated and intelligent people but they have nothing to say. They seek themes which are incapable of hurting anyone but which likewise are incapable of giving anybody a thing. I have never seen or heard of a group with such a mood gaining success, i.e., winning influence and leaving some sort of trace in the history of thought.

Note that I am not at all touching upon the content of your ideas (perhaps because I cannot discern them in your magazine). ‘Independence’ and ‘freedom’ are two empty notions. But I am ready to grant that ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ as you understand them represent some kind of actual cultural value. Excellent! But then it is necessary to defend them with the sword, or at least whip, in hand. Every new artistic or literary tendency (naturalism, symbolism, futurism, cubism, expressionism, and so forth and so on) has begun with a ‘scandal’, breaking the old respected crockery, bruising many established authorities. This flowed not at all solely from publicity seeking (though there was no lack of this). No, these people—artists, as well as literary critics—had something to say. They had friends, they had enemies, they fought, and through this they demonstrated their right to exist.⁵⁴⁰

The editors at *Partisan Review* did try to have something to say. (No one doubted their sincerity until well into the future.⁵⁴¹) The editors at *Partisan Review* maintained their roles as dissenters from the official party line of dissent. They did so, in part, by publishing essays by Trotsky: these include his essay, *Art and Politics*, and several letters.⁵⁴² These were contributed to the journal after the Dewey Commission had formally cleared Trotsky of all charges made against him by Stalin.

⁵⁴⁰ Leon Trotsky, from a letter to Dwight Macdonald. Written on 20 January, 1938 (from Coyoacán, Mexico). First published in *Fourth International* (March–April 1950).

⁵⁴¹ For references to the financial backing of *Partisan Review* by Henry Luce, publisher of *Time*, in the amount of \$10,000, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press): 162–163, 335, *et passim*.

⁵⁴² See, Trotsky, “Art and Politics,” *Partisan Review* 5:3 (August–September 1938): 3–10; André Breton and Diego Rivera, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 49–52; and Leon Trotsky to André Breton, “Letters,” *Partisan Review* 6:2 (Winter 1938): 126–7. Trotsky co-wrote the Manifesto, but requested at the time that his name be left off the credit line).

What I do wish to argue quite seriously is that Greenberg can be taken at his word in his 1961 heuristic challenge. To do otherwise would be to ride roughshod over the subtleties in his parenthetical statement of 1961, in which he wrote:

Though that is not all, by far, that there was to politics in art in those years; some day it will have to be told how “anti-Stalinism,” which started out more or less as “Trotskyism,” turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.⁵⁴³

Through the use of scare quotes around anti-Stalinism and Trotskyism, Greenberg acknowledged the status of his fellow editors at *Partisan Review* as critics and intellectuals, not as insurrectionists. To return to his final interview from 1994, he recalled that the consensus at the editorial board was that no one was reading them. (Which is to suggest the inverse corollary to Trotsky’s initial proposition: no successful storming of the gates has ever been made up of a mass of vanguard editorial board members.⁵⁴⁴)

The Dewey commission and its proceedings form an instance of the connective tissue between the 1930s move from ‘anti-Stalinism’ to ‘Trotskyism’ to art for art’s sake (as a kind of metonymy by contiguity). By the autumn of 1939, the organized left in the US (along with everyone else) had witnessed: the partition of Poland, the entry of UK and France into the war, the Russo-German Pact and the Soviet attack on Finland. With the figure of Dewey, Liberalism inherited the mantle of dissenting political integrity if, as Serge Guilbaut, rightly argues, in non-revolutionary form.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴³ Greenberg, “The Late ’Thirties in New York,” *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 230.

⁵⁴⁴ See also, John D. Graham, “39. What is the difference between the people of action and the people of reflection?” in *System and Dialectics of Art*, 42–3.

⁵⁴⁵ See Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 38–39. These pages include a brief discussion of The League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism, which represented the revolutionary (if

III. John Dewey in Mexico and on Art

The philosophy of John Dewey represents a distinctive contribution to the thought of the modern age. He has carried to completion a movement of ideas which marks the final break with the ancient and medieval outlook upon the world. In his doctrines the experimental temper comes to self-consciousness. A new way of life is proposed to realize the ideal promise of our vast material culture. Organized intelligence is to take the place of myth and dogma in improving the common lot and enriching individual experience.

~ Sidney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait*, 1939⁵⁴⁶

I completely agree with your idea about the necessity of giving a Marxist criticism of Dewey's philosophy and I believe it is your direct duty to do this job.

~ Trotsky, Letter to J. Gerland, August, 1940⁵⁴⁷

Art, as Dewey suggests, is perhaps the chief example of experience where it is pure, in the sense of being realized without distraction or distortion, where it is in any complete and direct sense experience at all. Art is what experience in a humanly successful life, in a genuinely free society, would always be.

~ Irwin Edman, "Dewey and Art," 1950⁵⁴⁸

Actually, both Dewey and Hook, at least partly, were classic liberals in the thirties, especially in their social democratic leanings. Hook was just emerging from his Marxist phase, and that was evident in his strong interest in progressive reform, and in his concern with the democratization of art. Dewey's essential and classic liberalism was also expressed in his espousal of social reform.

~ William Phillips, "John Dewey Then and Now," *Partisan Review*, 1996⁵⁴⁹

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ineffective) branch of anti-Stalinism, founded by Dwight MacDonald. As Guilbaut notes, the Committee for Cultural Freedom, led by John Dewey and Sidney Hooks, formed in the summer of 1939.

<sup>546</sup> Sidney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: The John Day Company, 1939): 3.

<sup>547</sup> Letter to J. Gerland, published in *Fourth International* 1:5 (October 1940): 127. 'J. Gerland' was the pen name of Jean van Heijenoort (1912–86), who was a mathematician and former aide to Trotsky.

<sup>548</sup> Irwin Edman, "Dewey and Art," in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, ed., Sidney Hook (New York: The Dial Press, 1950): 55. Edman was Chair of Department of Philosophy at Columbia University, where Dewey had been Hook's dissertation advisor.

<sup>549</sup> William Phillips, "John Dewey Then and Now," *Partisan Review* 63:1 (1996): 9. This was written on the occasion of the re-issue of Hook's *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait*.

John Dewey's stature as a philosopher, scholar and educator was such that his work provoked a wide-range of responses, laudatory and critical. The immediate concern of this passage is, first, to come to grips with Dewey's role as the Chair of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials, and, second, to account for the consequences that Dewey and Trotsky had for each other in their understanding of the work of art. John Dewey was a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University in the 1930s. As Jay Martin argues in his recent biography of the philosopher, he was the ideal candidate: previously, he had been asked to run on the Socialist Party ticket for the governorship of New York, yet he was quoted by the liberal *New York Times*, and friends with enlightened capitalists, such as A.C. Barnes.<sup>550</sup> As Martin also argues, Dewey had demonstrated his openness to the Soviet experiment, at least in its early years, through his published reports of his fact-finding mission there in 1928. However, by 1937, *The New Republic*, which had previously published his essays on the nascent Soviet Union, was now, Dewey suspected, an apologist venue for the Stalinists.<sup>551</sup> Indeed, Dewey became the subject of criticism in a number of essays by CPUSA-affiliated writers to whom Dewey's work was suspect.<sup>552</sup> To others, Dewey's work possessed a personal integrity that, in the light of his chairing of the commission, drew comparisons with the epic dissent of Émile Zola during the

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<sup>550</sup> Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 409. See also, Stewart Buettner, "John Dewey and the Visual Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33:4 (Summer 1975): 383–91.

<sup>551</sup> See, for example, an editorial most likely authored by Malcolm Cowley, "The Trial of the Trotskyites in Russia," *The New Republic* (2 September, 1936): 88–9.

<sup>552</sup> See Frank Meyer, "Reactionary Philosophy of Dewey and his School," *Daily Worker* (16 October, 1939), and Philip Carter, "Pitfalls of Pragmatic Logic," *The Communist* 18:2 (February 1939): 163–9. Both cited by Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 310, n. 34. See also, Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 38–9.

Dreyfus Affair.<sup>553</sup> James T. Farrell drew that comparison in 1950 when recalling his trip to Mexico with Dewey in 1937. Farrell's own career followed the now-familiar path of that of 1930s radical to post-War liberal. He had been regular contributor to *Partisan Review* in the 1930s, and by 1950, he wrote as an ardent liberal.

The full extent of the charges made against Trotsky and the full proceedings of the Moscow Trials are beyond the scope of this dissertation (as is a history of the pre-Revolutionary Menshevik/Bolshevik split and the subsequent rise of the Soviet bureaucracy). In summary, Trotsky had been accused of promoting counter-revolutionary activity (terror) and plotting to assassinate Stalin. The role of the Commission was premised upon the idea that, "the conduct of the Moscow Trials was such as to convince any unprejudiced person that no effort was made to ascertain the truth," and that the 'confessions' contained "such inherent improbabilities as to convince the Commission that they do not represent the truth, irrespective of any means used to obtain them."<sup>554</sup> The proceedings, which were held at the fortified Kahlo-Rivera house in Coyoacán, concluded after eight days of testimony. Upon the return of the Commission to New York, they published their highly publicized verdict of "Not Guilty!" In the wake of the hearings, Trotsky made some of his most direct statements on the work of art. These statements demonstrate shared concerns with Dewey's own work on art and experience. Their collaboration, if it can be called that, came to an end with the publication of *Their Morals and Ours*, also in 1938.

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<sup>553</sup> See James T. Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," in Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait*, 376.

<sup>554</sup> *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, xiii.

In his 1934 *Art as Experience*, John Dewey argued that abstraction was to be found “in every work of art.”<sup>555</sup> He appeared to be in the relative minority in his greeting of abstraction with equanimity. Dewey argued that the degree of abstraction could be modified through the selective practices of the individual artist. Whereas scientists abstracted for the sake of clarity, artists did so for the sake of expressiveness: “The artist’s own being and experience determine *what* shall be expressed and therefore the nature and extent of the abstraction that occurs,” he concluded.<sup>556</sup> Consider two citations by each author, the first from *Art as Experience*; the second from Trotsky’s 1938 “Art and Politics”:

The existence of art...is proof that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and that he does so in accord with the structure of his organism—brain, sense-organs, and muscular system. Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and redispotion. Thus it varies the arts in ways without end. But its intervention also leads in time to the *idea* of art as a conscious idea—the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity.<sup>557</sup>

Generally speaking, art is an expression of man’s need for an harmonious and complete life, that is to say, his need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him.<sup>558</sup>

One could argue that the experience of the work of art (of making or of seeing), for both of these authors, held the promise of un-alienation—an end to being “deprived” (Trotsky) or the beginning of a process of “restoring” (Dewey). Dewey’s re-statement of Pragmatist belief in the 1930s offered another model for critics of art: if not the Marxian or historical

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<sup>555</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1980, 1934): 95. See also the discussion of the work of Maurice Denis in the previous chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>556</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 95. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>558</sup> Trotsky, “Art and Politics,” 3.

dialectic, then a dialectic of another kind, one between the artist, his materials, and the viewer/participant. What has been termed as Dewey's instrumentalism with regard to the making and experiencing the work of art became a technique for testing, developing, verifying one's senses. The encounter, then, was mutual between live creatures. In 1938, when Trotsky wrote that the attacks had left "cuts and gashes" in Rivera's frescoes, this represented a Pragmatist rupture into his Marxist thinking.<sup>559</sup> Both agreed upon the central importance of the work of art in culture. The mutuality that Trotsky and Dewey achieved ended in 1938 over their contributions to *Their Morals and Ours*.<sup>560</sup> The divisive issue was, as it had been for Hook, a vital question of means and ends, morality in relation to political action (or, the consequences of those actions). Trotsky did not have time to write the rejoinder he had hoped and was dead by August of 1940. If Greenberg was right, and that was not all there was to politics in those days, it's ca. 1940–1941 that the turn to art for art's sake takes place, with critics, such as Greenberg, encountering on the advanced/dissenting work of art as an indicator of the *potential* health of a culture. This chapter concludes with an analysis of yet another source of dialectical thinking available to critics in New York: that of the Frankfurt School and their ideas on the autonomous work and its life during wartime.

#### IV. The Frankfurt School in the U.S. and Elsewhere

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<sup>559</sup> "These cuts and gashes give even greater life to the frescoes. You have before you, not simply a "painting," an object of passive esthetic contemplation, but a living part of the class struggle. And it is at the same time a masterpiece!" See Trotsky, "Art and Politics," 8.

<sup>560</sup> Trotsky's *Their Moral and Ours* was initially published in the *New Internationalist* in February of 1938; Dewey's reply was published in the same journal in August of 1938. Trotsky's essay was also published in pamphlet form in 1939 in Coyoacán. See Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours* (Coyoacán, Mexico: Pioneer Publishers, 1939).

Emigration is the best school of dialectics. Refugees are the keenest dialecticians. They are refugees as a result of changes and their sole object of study is change. They are able to deduce the greatest events from the smallest hints—that is, if they have intelligence. When their opponents are winning, they calculate how much their victory has cost them; and they have the sharpest eyes for contradictions. Long live dialectics!

~ Ziffel to Kalle in Bertolt Brecht's *Flüchtlingsgespräche*,  
ca. 1940<sup>561</sup>

I share your happiness that we have Benjamin's history theses. They will keep us busy for some time to come, and he will still be with us.

~ Max Horkheimer in a letter to Theodor Adorno, 1941<sup>562</sup>



The 1941 exchange between Theodor Adorno (in New York) and Max Horkheimer (newly re-located to the West Coast), gestures towards a number of concerns of and about the Frankfurt School writers: that they produced, collectively and individually, a number of critical works of great historical understanding and urgency; that these works were prescient; and, in Benjamin's case particularly, that his contributions to the discourse would remain even after the author had perished. And, finally, the circumstances of the letter—one colleague writing from California to another in New York on the inauspicious death of one of their own in Europe—suggests that the standing of the Institut für Sozialforschung as a formal Institut was so in the loosest possible sense of the word. In his exhaustive study of the Institut, Rolf Wiggershaus makes another valuable point that none of the main writers of the Institut came to their radical thinking through party affiliation or direct political action. Their collective interest in Marxism

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<sup>561</sup> Ziffel to Kalle in "Dänemark oder der Humor über die hegelsche Dialektik," in Bertolt Brecht, *Flüchtlingsgespräche* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965): 112.

<sup>562</sup> Horkheimer to Adorno, Pacific Palisades, 21 June, 1941. Cited in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press with MIT, 1994): 311.

was a rationalist one: Marxist methods allowed for the potential resolution of contradictions in culture that were the root of societal problems. It was not, however, an ‘academic’ interest. The Institut members offered their critique of authority and domination while much of Europe was under the fascists. Between the years 1933 and 1947, most Institut members necessarily had had to offer their critiques from the U.S., as Brecht’s incisive if marginal dialecticians. In this section, I argue that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School writers was one of the sources for the New York Intellectuals. While the Frankfurt School members necessarily kept a low profile while working in the States, they made lasting connections with New York critics and writers, especially with Schapiro and with Greenberg. For example, in 1962, Adorno responded to Mamie English, an editor, declining to oversee a possible English-language edition of the collected works of Walter Benjamin; he recommended Greenberg instead. In his letter, Adorno wrote:

I know Clement Greenberg very well from my American time and I think exceedingly high of him. His opinion on Benjamin, without any doubt, will not only agree with my own but will also carry great objective insight. I am sure he already called your attention to the most essential points.<sup>563</sup>

In his final interview, given in 1994, Greenberg recalled his shared concerns with Adorno. (In this same interview, he also complained that Benjamin had a tendency to make things too complicated.<sup>564</sup>) In this interview, he said that he and Adorno “saw eye to eye on a lot”...though he [Adorno] had nothing to do with the visual arts, really.”<sup>565</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> See Greenberg Correspondence, the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. No. N69/72.

<sup>564</sup> See the unedited transcript of the Paul Ostrow interview held in the Clement Greenberg Papers at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Box 37, Folder 17.

<sup>565</sup> *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, Robert C. Morgan, ed. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003): 235–6. Initially published as “Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview,” *World Art* (November 1994): 24–32.

When Greenberg was an editor at *Commentary* (from 1945 through 1957), Adorno worked with the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in the mid-1940s.<sup>566</sup> The Committee and its publication shared space and causes, as Greenberg noted in the interview. If Adorno offered critical models, his essays offered few moments of formal consideration of the thing itself, at least in regard to the work of art. (Music was Adorno's proper study.) Greenberg's essays, which recorded a critic's judgments made on the spot, did. Indeed, here is the binding difference, as expressed by Adorno in a 1963 lecture.

The concept of technique in the culture industry is only in name identical with technique in works of art. In the latter, technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic. In contrast, the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object. The culture industry finds ideological support precisely insofar as it carefully shields itself from the full potential of the technique contained in its products.<sup>567</sup>

If one of the topos of American modernist art history is that, over time, Greenberg shifted his frame of vision to include the art object (only) at the expense of culture at large (or, he shifted seemingly from left to right), then another trope to consider is that of the historical agent. The masses could be unpredictable: passive, active, or reactionary (and here, both Adorno and Trotsky would agree with him—the crowds might even be conditioned to laugh at their own victimization, Adorno would later argue). If “Kant confirmed his experiences,” as Greenberg stated in that final interview, his writing

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<sup>566</sup> In 1944, Horkheimer was appointed director of the newly-created Department of Scientific Research. In this capacity, he oversaw the series Studies in Prejudice, which included *The Authoritarian Personality*, with Adorno as the Institut's main collaborator on the project. See Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984): 39; and Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986): 39.

<sup>567</sup> Adorno, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered,” trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, *New German Critique*, 6 (1975), p. 14. Reprinted in Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. and intro. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1992): 86–7.



confirmed his own autonomy as a critic, which he argued in that same interview.<sup>568</sup>

Which is to suggest, Greenberg wrote of the autonomous art object as a self-reflexive model—one with which he himself could live for the long haul. The passages included below on the subject of the Frankfurt School conclude with a consideration of the work of Adorno and Benjamin and their analyses of the potential held by the autonomous work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction—perhaps an object more reliable in its unpredictable dissent to the prevailing order.

Perhaps the term most frequently associated with the Frankfurt School writers is critical theory. The critical theory developed by the Institut members to analyze culture was distinct from other Marxist methods. It was dialectical, for the most part, in its understanding of history. However, Horkheimer frequently engaged with the intellectual traditions of philosophy and the problems posed by contemporary thinkers in their understanding of ideology or idealism.<sup>569</sup> Adorno and Benjamin both took as their starting points the phenomena of the everyday, e.g. Adorno's studies of jazz or Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. In their case, it's a metonymic understanding of society whereby the so-called ephemera of culture gestures towards larger issues. Rather than dismissing the life of the mind or the noisy bric-a-brac of modernity as mere false consciousness, the Institut writers took both these as their subject matter for their urgent critique of culture. The rise of fascism was of paramount importance. As such, they wrote on issues in popular culture, art and literature, philosophy, economics, political economy, and psychology.

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<sup>568</sup> Ostrow, "Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview," in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, 238.

<sup>569</sup> For examples, see Max Horkheimer, "Ein neuer Ideologiebegriff?" *Gründbergs Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* 15 (1930) and "Zum Rationalismustreit in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie," *ZfS* III (1934). Both reprinted in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 129-149 and 217-264, respectively.

The official journals of the Institut were the main medium for their essays: *Gründbergs Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* (1923-1930), the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1932-1938), and *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (1939-1941). After the end of World War II, the writing of Institut members appeared in monograph form or in American journals such as *Commentary* and *Kenyon Review*. One way to characterize the Institut writing from this later time is as a series of analyses on the use of Reason in society and the remains of the Enlightenment in mass culture.

Autonomous art, as the Frankfurt School authors collectively understood it, was one possible site of resistance to capital and fascism. Specifically, these passages consider their writing during the war years and post-War periods. In their writing, the Institut members gave extensive consideration to the problems of commodity-based mass culture and the role of the artist or writer: those who produced difficult, advanced art, and those who betrayed their responsibilities to culture by producing *kitsch*. While the Institut members collaborated with each other intensively on these essays, it should be noted that most of the membership was in orbit around Horkheimer in his capacity of Director of the Institut. Before considering their ideas on art, autonomy, and mass culture, it would be useful to consider briefly Horkheimer's construction of critical theory from his 1930s essays. His work provided a kind of critical armature to and around which the membership responded.

One of Horkheimer's most important essays, "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie," appeared in the *Zeitschrift* in 1937. Citing Edmund Husserl, Horkheimer argued that theory, in the fullest sense, is "a systematically linked set of propositions, taking the

form of a systematically unified deduction.”<sup>570</sup> Furthermore, “if experience and theory contradict each other, one of the two must be reexamined.”<sup>571</sup> Critical theory, then, examines the contradictions glossed over in culture. He outlined the (negative) space in which critical theory continually operated: “this negative formulation, if we wish to express it abstractly, is the materialist content of the idealist concept of reason.”<sup>572</sup> However, theory had been “absolutized” and “reified” in a number of contemporary schools of materialist and idealist thought.<sup>573</sup> What was needed, Horkheimer argued, was “a radical reconsideration, not of the scientist alone, but of the knowing individual as such.”<sup>574</sup> In the bourgeois mode “the activity of society is blind and concrete, that of the individual abstract and conscious.”<sup>575</sup> Critical theory takes a dissenting, dialectical, position:

Critical thinking is neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, his conflicts with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.<sup>576</sup>

Critical theory, as practiced by the Frankfurt School writers, is also a radical consideration of the agent, or agents, in culture.

However, Horkheimer wrote in that same essay that “it is possible for the consciousness of every social stratum today to be limited and corrupted by ideology,

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<sup>570</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Formale und transzendente Logik* (Halle, 1929), p. 89. Cited in Horkheimer, “Traditionelle und kritische Theorie,” *ZfS* 6 (1937). Reprinted in *Critical Theory* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972): 190.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

however much, for its circumstances, it may be bent on truth.”<sup>577</sup> Possible and very real. Horkheimer himself had fled Nazi Germany in 1933. That nothing is inevitable is a possibility opened up by a dialectically materialist understanding of history; that is also its consequence. The working class was just as capable of perpetuating its own destruction as it was of exerting its own agency. Therefore, it was the job of the critical theoretician to “reduce the tension between his own insight and oppressed humanity in whose service he thinks.”<sup>578</sup> Here, Horkheimer set upon a distinction that would be echoed in the work of his colleagues: the intellectual (and, by extension, the critic, the writer) and the working class had different (if reciprocal) tasks in the struggle for this better order of things. However, with perhaps the great exception of Benjamin, Horkheimer and his colleagues broke with paradigmatic Marxist thought by placing no objective faith in the working class. An exchange of essays between Benjamin and Adorno, published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1930s, demonstrates these points. To borrow from one of Benjamin’s most famous formulations, the most difficult and most important tasks would not be tackled by the mobilized masses alone. In the 1930s, it would do so through film or autonomous art. If Greenberg, whose formulations continue to be at play in the critical discourse on art in the U.S. and elsewhere, saw eye to eye with Adorno, at least on the subject of Benjamin, it is useful to consider briefly some of the important propositions by Benjamin and Adorno.



Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such [new] tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses. Today it does so in the film.

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<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*

~ Benjamin, “L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée,” 1936<sup>579</sup>

The consciousness of the mass of listeners is adequate to fetishized music. It listens according to formula, and indeed debasement itself would not be possible if resistance ensued, if the listeners still had the capacity to make demands beyond the limits of what was supplied.

~ Adorno, “Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” 1938<sup>580</sup>



Benjamin’s celebrated essay on the work of art and mechanical reproduction first appeared in the *Zeitschrift* in 1936 as “L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée.” It remains a prescient study of the newness of mechanical reproduction and its political consequences for mass culture. While reproduction is age old, photography represented its modern, mechanical form on a mass scale. Through mechanical reproduction, the work of art was liberated from its cultic origins in a process of technological secularization. In his essay, Benjamin offered his ideas, with urgency, on the status of the work of art in the wake of mechanical reproduction, the revolutionary potential of film, the consequences film for the newly-formed masses, and the consequences of those same masses.

Perhaps the term most closely associated with Benjamin (the historical critic) is that of aura. Or, as he himself defined it, in the case of the natural object: “the unique

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<sup>579</sup> Benjamin, “L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée,” *ZfS* 5 (1936). Reprinted as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 240.

<sup>580</sup> Adorno, “Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” *ZfS* 7 (1938). Reprinted in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1998): 285.

phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.”<sup>581</sup> It is this singular quality that withers away from the unique object in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Characteristic of Benjamin’s thinking, this is a potentially positive occurrence at the same time that it gives cause for concern. The withering away of aura from the work of art releases it from “its parasitical dependence on ritual.”<sup>582</sup> In the age of mechanical reproduction, the viewer has the opportunity to reposition him or herself to the newly-liberated work of art. Photographic reproduction could represent objects or phenomenon that had heretofore been beyond human vision and the work of art now could now meet the beholder (the masses) “halfway.”<sup>583</sup> What the mechanical reproduction of the work of art could not reproduce is “its presence in time and space, its unique existence in at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>584</sup> When the historical testimony of the object is challenged by mechanical reproduction, “what is really jeopardized...is the authority of the object.”<sup>585</sup>

Benjamin saw this jeopardized authority, this liquidation of history, as opening up possibilities for the mass movements. However, this rupture was one of potential (not a guarantee): in the place of the traditional cult value of the work of art, there also arose the “phony spell” of the commodity or the film star.<sup>586</sup> Of even more extreme danger was the fascistic attempt to re-introduce aura through the cult of the Führer. If the aestheticized politics of the National Socialists forcibly ‘encouraged’ the masses into submissive positions of viewing, politicized art responded by encouraging them to assume a more

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<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

democratic attunement. Film, as a “process of pictorial production... accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech,” was the potential medium for this resistance.<sup>587</sup> The film-viewing “public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.”<sup>588</sup> As Benjamin argued, film would tackle the most difficult tasks of the day in mobilizing the distracted masses.

Adorno’s rebuttal to Benjamin came in the form of “Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” that appeared in the *Zeitschrift* in 1938.<sup>589</sup> At issue were concerns about the autonomy of art, the commodification of culture, and the psychological structures of the mass audience. While Benjamin had written with surprising optimism of the possibilities of film as an inherently revolutionary mass medium, Adorno put no such faith in the liberating potential of that popular art, one that he understood to be irrational and reified. Nor did he place any faith in the agency of the masses who have been “forcibly retarded” by commodity culture.<sup>590</sup> Rather, Adorno established two counter-propositions in his essay: the fetishization of music and regression in listening. He understood art, in general, and music, in particular, as being divided into irreconcilable high and light spheres. One could objectify serious music as the flight from the banal, or, one could gloss over the divide between the two and make a “continuum...leading safely from commercial jazz and hit songs to cultural

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<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>589</sup> According to Wiggershaus, Adorno objected that Benjamin was too engaged in myth. Therefore, his formulations were not dialectically transcendent enough. Adorno thought that Benjamin underestimated the technological rationality of autonomous art and the destruction of its own aura, and underestimated as well the irrationality of popular art and the reflexive character of the masses. Finally, that he understood a series of facts as unrelated to the philosophy of history as collective subjective phenomena came dangerously close to Jungian psychologization. See Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 210–211 for an exchange of letters between Benjamin and Adorno on their essays.

<sup>590</sup> Adorno, “Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” 286.

commodities.”<sup>591</sup> Both were unsatisfying: “Cultural barbarism is no better than cultural dishonesty.”<sup>592</sup> Between these spheres, “there is no room...for the individual...The liquidation of the individual is the real signature of the new musical situation.”<sup>593</sup> Culture had become dominated by commodities to the point that listeners themselves were reified: listeners were more concerned with actively “looking good” than with any kind of genuine experience, musical or otherwise.<sup>594</sup> This kind of “radical reification produces its own pretense of immediacy and intimacy.”<sup>595</sup> And, pretense of individuality, one might add. The syncopations of jazz, for Adorno, epitomized this limitation in culture: it was a series of variations on the familiar rendered only momentarily unfamiliar. As opposed to the potential of the Benjaminian distracted viewer, Adorno saw a culture of de-concentrated listeners caught in cycles of remembering and forgetting. These are the actively retarded, regressive listeners. While this might suggest a stupefied culture, Adorno argued that “regressive listeners are in fact destructive.”<sup>596</sup> It would require only the right circumstances of history for “bigots” of the older order and these youth to align “in a united front.”<sup>597</sup> This was precisely the circumstances of Nazi Germany and elsewhere. Adorno held out a slim possibility of change in real dissonance—unpleasure—as encountered, genuinely, in the work of Arnold Schönberg or Anton Webern. The most difficult tasks of the day would not be tackled through film, according to Adorno, but rather through autonomous, dissonant music.

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<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-6.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*



While Benjamin and Adorno may have been in disagreement as to the medium of resistance against fascism, they were in accordance as to the role of dissonance, or shock, in art. Adorno found hope in the dissonance of some composers of his day. For Benjamin's part, there was something shocking in the loss of aura. The pre-modern work of art was not experienced auratically: aura could only be experienced upon its loss. The significance of Benjamin's essay lies in its foreseeing, after the fact, this inadvertent and unforeseen effect of a technological process and its consequences for human behavior.<sup>598</sup> In an earlier essay from 1934, Benjamin had considered contemporary writers who had rendered the shock of modern life conscience in their art. However, these were different kinds of shocks than the ones derived from technological changes, they were staged shocks by writers and artists.

In this 1934 essay, "Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers," also published in the *Zeitschrift*, Benjamin made claims for the potential of "dangerous" literature—as rare a find as it may have then been in the climate of pre-War Europe.<sup>599</sup> To make his point, Benjamin called upon a writer from a past era: "If Zola was able to portray the France of the 1860s, this was because he rejected it."<sup>600</sup> Contemporary writers were unable to portray modern society, because they were inclined "to accept it at its face value."<sup>601</sup> That is to suggest that professional novelists had abdicated from their responsibilities as writers: "the exceptions—Proust and

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<sup>598</sup> Correspondence with Richard Shiff of the University of Texas at Austin on 29 March, 2001 clarified my thinking on this issue.

<sup>599</sup> Benjamin, "Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers," 763.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, 752.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

Gide above all—confirm the rule.”<sup>602</sup> It was André Gide, Benjamin argued, who had “drawn our attention to the gulf between our desires and our dignity...He has awakened the intellectual conscience of half the people we call ‘the younger generation’.”<sup>603</sup> Unlike Filippo Marinetti and his ilk, Gide, as an advanced writer, had made common cause with the Communists. Another exceptional example were the Surrealists. Benjamin wrote that this group achieved their goal as intellectuals, “that is to say, via the longest route possible. For the intellectual’s path to the radical critique of the social order is the longest, just as that of the proletariat is the shortest.”<sup>604</sup> As Horkheimer had argued in 1930, the intellectual and the proletariat had different, if reciprocal, job descriptions.

The role of shock had a great value for both Adorno and Benjamin: it clamored against the forward march of commodification and fascism. People genuinely engaged with advanced art should pose problems for fascistic movements that would demand blind obeisance and obedience. In Benjamin’s case, the intellectual and the artist made conscious the world-historical task of the working class. However, as Benjamin had argued in that essay, the exceptions of Gide and Proust proved the rule that writers of their day were more inclined to produce literature that accepted the prevailing order. Benjamin had begun his 1934 essay with a citation from Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Le poète assassiné* of 1914 that contained an apocryphal editorial from a German chemist living in Australia: “Poets have to go. Lycurgus drove them out of the republic; they should be driven from the face of the earth [...] There will no longer be any

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<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*, 755.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, 758.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 763.

poetry...writers will be exterminated.”<sup>605</sup> While Benjamin noted that these words are not unmarked for the passing of twenty years, what seemed like an “exuberant improvisation” on Apollinaire’s part has come to pass. “The process of selection that has since taken place at the hands of the ruling classes,” he contended, “has assumed forms that are scarcely less inexorable than the process Apollinaire described.”<sup>606</sup> If the world-historical task of intellectuals has been to be the guardians of values of freedom, justice, and *humanitas*, writers like Maurice Barrès, Charles Maurras, Arthur Conan-Doyle, and Oswald Spengler had begun to betray those values. Benjamin wrote that “not even Machiavelli tried to embellish [the maxims of *realpolitik* ] with the pathos of ethical precepts.”<sup>607</sup> Here, Benjamin identified the type of artist appropriate to fascism: the bourgeois nihilist—someone who rejected notions of reality and whose amoral life (or death) was bereft of meaning.

#### Post-Script: 1940

Incidentally, I have learned a good deal from reading Trotsky’s book *La Révolution trahie*, and despite your aversion against getting involved in the whole matter, I think you should take a look at it sometime.

~ Theodor Adorno, in a letter to Walter Benjamin, 4 March, 1938.<sup>608</sup>

It is first of all necessary to affirm that the attempted assassination could only be instigated by the Kremlin; by Stalin through the agency of the GPU [secret police] abroad. During the last few years, Stalin has shot hundreds of real or supposed friends of mine. He actually exterminated my entire family, except me, my wife and one of my grandchildren....All the

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<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, 745.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*, 748.

<sup>608</sup> Reprinted in *Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999): 252.

theatrical Moscow trials during 1936–37 had as their aim to get me into the hands of the GPU.

~ Leon Trotsky, Letter to the Attorney General of Mexico,  
1 June, 1940<sup>609</sup>

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.

~ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,”  
1940<sup>610</sup>

My questions to the first two questions are no. I wish I could say yes. There ought to be a verifiable dialectic process; I wonder if it was this ought that more than anything else moved Trotsky to defend Dialectical Materialism—at any rate he was moved by much more than Marxist piety.

~ Clement Greenberg, Response to “An Inquiry on  
Dialectical Materialism,” *Dyn*, 1942<sup>611</sup>

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Brecht survived; Trotsky and Benjamin did not. When Trotsky died, he was an internationally-known figure who had previously appeared on the cover of *Time*; Benjamin’s fate was posthumous fame.⁶¹² These two, amongst others, fulfilled Wilson’s prophecy of paradigmatic martyred writers in the 20th century. As is famously known

⁶⁰⁹ First published in *Fourth International* 1:5 (October 1940): 138–39.

⁶¹⁰ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, 256.

⁶¹¹ Clement Greenberg’s response included in Wolfgang Paalen, “Inquiry into Dialectic Materialism,” *Dyn*, 2 (July–August 1942): 50. The first two questions posed were: “Is Dialectic Materialism the science of a verifiable ‘dialectic’ process?” and “Is the ‘dialectic method’ a scientific method of investigation?” In his extended answer, Greenberg said that the third question, “Hegel in his logic established a series of laws...”, was not a valid one. The other respondents were: Bertrand Russell, Sidney Hook, Albert Einstein, William Heard Kilpatrick, George W. Hartmann, Pierre Mabilie, Dwight Macdonald, Philip Rahv, Goodwin Watson, John L. Childs, Meyer Schapiro, Parker Tyler, Morton G. White, and Charles Givors. The following intellectuals were sent the questionnaire, but declined to participate: Lionel Abel, George Baker, André Breton, Nicolas Calas, James T. Farrell, Sidney Hook, Robert Motherwell, Guenter Reimann, Harold Rosenberg, Bertrand Russell, and Harold Rugg. Furthermore, Paalen noted that he had not asked John Dewey, Max Eastman, or Joseph Ratner to contribute “because their published criticisms of Hegelian metaphysics are already well known.” Paalen, “Inquiry into Dialectic Materialism,” 49.

⁶¹² Trotsky appeared on the cover of *Time* on 18 May, 1925, 21 November, 1927, and 25 January, 1937; for a consideration of Benjamin’s posthumous fame, see Hannah Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro, Hannah Arendt, trans., Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 1–55.

now, Trotsky was attacked in his study on 20 August, 1940 and died the next day; Benjamin took his own life on 26 September, 1940 at the Spanish border town of Port Bou when it became clear that safe-passage to Spain was impossible on that day.⁶¹³ Benjamin, like Baudelaire, was to find an audience for his work in the future.

Trotsky's models necessarily required a vanguard and an enemy. Trotsky was the only Marxist critic, according to Philip Rahv, who developed his literary analyses around the concept of the "special role and changing status of the intelligentsia."⁶¹⁴ Like Greenberg's positing of the avant-garde work of art, the vanguard would find itself beset upon by the old guard. This was to be expected. Benjamin, in some ways, anticipated this obstacle by bringing along enough morphine to cut short his journey should that be necessary. Here lies the risk associated with the dialectical method (as distinct from a fixed system of antipodes): the revolution, the avant-garde, could find itself betrayed by its fellow travelers. Such was the case with Trotsky. Or, even worse, the so-called science of history could be used to justify the actions of the 20th century dictators. This was the conclusion Barnett Newman drew in some private notes:

The more we study the forces that have been motivating Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito, the more it becomes plain that they live and act by pseudo-science, racism, intrinsic destiny, the progress of mankind—and most false of all—the 'science' of history with its [Hegelian] synthesis.⁶¹⁵

The task of the self-stated revolutionary, such as Trotsky, was to recover dialectical techniques from the forces of militarism and fascism in the 1930s. Nevertheless, as

⁶¹³ For accounts of Benjamin's last days, see Lisa Fittko, *Escape through the Pyrenees*, trans. David Koblick (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1991) and essays by Hans Sahl and Lisa Fittko in *Für Walter Benjamin*, eds., Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann (Bonn: AsKI, 1993).

⁶¹⁴ Philip Rahv, "Twilight of the Thirties," 11.

⁶¹⁵ Barnett Newman, undated MS, ca. 1944, held in the Barnett Newman Foundation Archive. Cited by Richard Shiff, in "To Create Oneself," 98, n. 175.

Newman's formulation indicates, those motivated by a predictable theory of history—and most dangerously—those who motivate the crowds with such a theory—could wind up slaughtering each other over whose prediction of the future should win out. That is, indeed, a large part of the history of the previous century.

Dwight MacDonald in his fulsome tribute to Trotsky, implored his readers:

“[I]magine Stalin or Hitler in exile.... Would they exercise any influence on the consciousness of our times?” Or, “would, most brutal test, anyone read their books?”⁶¹⁶

And yet, the last years of his life proved to be a failure in many ways, Macdonald concluded. Despite the “penetration” of his analysis of circumstances in the post-Revolutionary, post-Lenin Soviet Union, Trotsky was not able to win over the party or the working people to his permanent revolution, nor was he able, despite his insightful clarity, to prevent the circumstances that lead to his own murder.⁶¹⁷ As long as he was alive, there would be “a center of Marxist consciousness in the world.”⁶¹⁸ What Trotsky had left behind, James T. Farrell argued in his own posthumous tribute, was a body of writing, one that was “fertile, suggestive, illuminating.”⁶¹⁹ If this generation of critics became Trotskyists for any length of time, it was through their own actions as authors that they sought to maintain the consciousness that had been snuffed out in Mexico in 1940. The shock of his murder prompted Greenberg, for one, to write an (unpublished) tribute in which he wrote that the start of a new era of crisis began on the day of

⁶¹⁶ Dwight MacDonald, “Trotsky is Dead: An Attempt at an Appreciation,” *Partisan Review* 7:5 (September-October 1940): 341.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁶¹⁹ James T. Farrell, “The Cultural Front: Leon Trotsky,” *Partisan Review* 7:5 (September-October 1940): 388.

Trotsky's death, not on the earlier date of 1 September, 1939, when the Nazis had invaded Poland.⁶²⁰ Rosenberg, in his now-famous comment on 1940, wrote that:

For a decade, the whole of civilization has been sinking down, lowering Paris steadily towards the soil of France. Until its restoration as the capital of a nation was completed by the tanks of the Germans.⁶²¹

⁶²⁰ For published tributes to Trotsky by the *Partisan Review* circle, see *Partisan Review* 7:5–6 (1940). See also, Philip Rahv, "Twilight of the Thirties," *Partisan Review*, 6:4 (Summer 1939): 15. For Greenberg's unpublished tribute to Trotsky, see his collected papers at the Getty Research Institute, Manuscripts 1920s–90s, box 23.

⁶²¹ Harold Rosenberg, "On the Fall of Paris," *Partisan Review* 7:6 (November–December 1940): 448. For Greenberg's thoughts about this essay (it was "badly and dishonestly written & yet was good"), see Clement Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928–1943: The Making of an American Intellectual*, ed. Janice van Horne (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000): 231.

Chapter VI:
Myth and Art History in the 1940s

I. The War and the Intellectuals (ca. 1917 and 1939)

Twenty-two years ago, *The Seven Arts* printed Randolph Bourne's article, "The War and the Intellectuals." "To those of us who still retain an irreconcilable animus against war," Bourne wrote in 1917, "it has been a bitter experience to see the unanimity with which American intellectuals have thrown their support to the use of war-technique in the crisis in which America found herself. Socialists, college professors, publicists, new-republicans, practitioners of literature, have view with each other in confirming with their intellectual faith the collapse of neutrality and the riveting of the war-mind on a hundred million more of the world's people. And the intellectuals are not content with confirming our belligerent posture. They are now complacently asserting that it was they who effectively willed it, against the hesitation and dim perceptions of the American democratic masses. A war made deliberately by the intellectuals!... A war free from any taint of self-seeking, a war that will secure the triumph of democracy and internationalize the world!

~ "This Quarter," *Partisan Review*, Spring 1939⁶²²

Thus the Paris Modern, resting on the deeply felt assumption that history could be entirely controlled by the mind, produced a no-time, and the Paris 'International' a no-place. And this is as far as mankind has gone towards freeing itself from the past.

~ Harold Rosenberg, "On the Fall of Paris," *Partisan Review*, 1940⁶²³

* My position here, I admit, is a difficult one and open to serious misunderstanding, but no matter: as Trotsky said, "If we theoretically admit war [involving the Soviet Union] without revolution, then the defeat of the Soviet Union is inevitable." If we admit this present war without revolution, the defeat of humanity is inevitable.

⁶²² "The Quarter," *Partisan Review* 6:3 (Spring 1939): 3. For the initial publication of Bourne's editorial, see "The War and the Intellectuals," *The Seven Arts* 2 (June 1917): 133-46. The passage edited out in the *Partisan Review* version (indicated by the ellipsis, above) reads as: "A calm moral verdict, arrived at after a penetrating study of inexorable facts! Sluggish masses, too remote from the world-conflict to be stirred, too lacking in intellect to perceive their danger! An alert intellectual class, saving the people in spite of themselves, biding their time with Fabian strategy until the nation could be moved into war without serious resistance! An intellectual class, gently guiding a nation through sheer force of ideas into what the other nations entered only through predatory craft or popular hysteria or militarist madness!" See also, Clement Greenberg, "War and the Intellectual: Review of War Diary by Jean Malaquais," *Partisan Review* 11:2 (Spring 1944): 207-10.

⁶²³ Harold Rosenberg, "On the Fall of Paris," *Partisan Review* 7:6 (October-November 1940): 443.

~ Clement Greenberg, in a solo-authored footnote to “10 Propositions on the War,” *Partisan Review*, 1941⁶²⁴

I am not suggesting that Greenberg and Macdonald and their political friends should rush to join the war-party. Doubtless, they have other things to do. In a sense this war, even if it accomplishes the destruction of fascism, is not yet *our* war. But this fact in itself does not permit us to take for granted that the salvation of mankind has been entrusted to us and that we alone know how to achieve it.

~ Philip Rahv, “10 Propositions and 8 Errors,” *Partisan Review*, 1941⁶²⁵

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The start of World War II in Europe, and the possibly entry of the U.S. into the fighting became the all-consuming question for American intellectuals at the start of the decade. As these epigraphs demonstrate, contributors to *Partisan Review* were severely divided on the character of this new war and the appropriate response to it.<sup>626</sup> Artists and the intelligentsia were mostly homeless, Rosenberg argued, once Paris was returned to its place an occupied, national capital. Greenberg and Macdonald were naïve in their response to the war, Rahv concluded, and they had failed to learn from history. “Despite the shattering surprises of the last two years,” Rahv countered, the authors were “still sure that they had all the answers.”<sup>627</sup> But those answers were the “same old orthodox recommendations.”<sup>628</sup> Elsewhere in his editorial, which was published just days before the air raid by the Japanese military on Pearl Harbor on 7 December, 1941, Rahv stated that the offensive forces of the U.S. military would “astound” the world once it entered

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<sup>624</sup> Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald, “10 Propositions on the War,” *Partisan Review* 8:4 (July–August 1941): 275. Apparently because this essay was the product of a collaborative effort, it was omitted from CGCEC.

<sup>625</sup> Philip Rahv, “10 Propositions and 8 Errors,” *Partisan Review* 8:6 (November–December 1941): 506. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>626</sup> For a discussion of the divided editorial board, see Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986): 186–7.

<sup>627</sup> Philip Rahv, “10 Propositions and 8 Errors,” 499.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*

the war, and, ultimately, the defeat of fascism would lead to a re-organized working class.<sup>629</sup> The re-organization never quite happened as Rahv imagined it, and the full force of his statement on U.S. military might would not be felt until 6 August, 1945 in Hiroshima, and 9 August in Nagasaki, when a new era in the shocking technics of terror began.

A later editorial in *Partisan Review* outlined the new position of the editorial board: dissent from one another, which eventually precipitated a changing of the guard at the journal.<sup>630</sup> By the end of 1942, Greenberg resigned as an editor; late in 1943, Morris also withdrew from the editorial board and turned towards his work as an AAA member, to the exclusion of most other activities; in 1944, Macdonald left to found *Politics*. (In what would be his final interview, Greenberg said he later regretted the position that he and Macdonald took in 1941.<sup>631</sup>) Rosenberg, who was never a member of the editorial board, contributed only three essays to the journal during this time.<sup>632</sup> He would, of course, go on to publish some of his most celebrated essays later in the decade at *Commentary* and *The Kenyon Review*.<sup>633</sup> Schapiro, who was, by this time, fully engaged in his academic career at Columbia, contributed select essays to *Partisan Review* and other left-wing

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<sup>629</sup> Philip Rahv, "10 Propositions and 8 Errors," 503.

<sup>630</sup> See "Statement," *Partisan Review* 9:1 (January–February 1942): 2. This was signed by Greenberg, Macdonald, Morris, Phillips, and Rahv.

<sup>631</sup> See Saul Ostrow, "Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview," in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, 236–7.

<sup>632</sup> In addition to "The Fall of Paris," Rosenberg contributed "On the Profession of Poetry," *Partisan Review* 9:5 (September–October 1942): 392–13; and "Notes on Fascism and Bohemia," *Partisan Review* 11:2 (Spring 1944): 177–182. Greenberg gave a sharp retort to Rosenberg's ideas on poetry in his own essay, published in the next issue. See, Greenberg, "Poets, English and American," *Partisan Review* 9:6 (November–December 1942): 532–7.

<sup>633</sup> See, for example, Harold Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds," *Commentary* 6:3 (September 1948): 244–52; "The Resurrected Romans," *The Kenyon Review* 10:4 (Autumn 1948): 602–20; and "The Pathos of the Proletariat," *The Kenyon Review* 11:4 (Autumn 1949): 595–29.

journals during this time.<sup>634</sup> The exodus left Phillips and Rahv as the main intellectual framers of the journal during the war-time years.<sup>635</sup>

Greenberg becomes one of the most visible art critics during this time: he wrote reviews mainly for *The Nation* in his position as art critic, and he also contributed longer essays to *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and elsewhere. Other critical voices who had been heard regularly on the subject of modern art became, by choice, less audible: in 1942, Kainen left New York for Washington, D.C. and von Wiegand turned to her painterly practice almost full time by 1944. However, von Wiegand also turned towards the task of translation: most famously, the essays of Mondrian.<sup>636</sup> Greenberg's writing was at play with that of others at this time, not just with other critics, but also with artists writing as critics. Most notably, these included: Stuart Davis, Barnett Newman, who was, in the 1940s, perhaps more visible as a writer than as a painter, and Robert Motherwell, who was formerly a graduate student of Schapiro. Critics and artist-critics registered their observations on the figuring imagination in a number of now-celebrated artist-run publications: *Dyn* (1942–4), which was published in Coyoacán, Mexico by Wolfgang Paalen (1905/07 [?]-1959), the self-taught artist, publisher and critic; *Possibilities* (1947–

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<sup>634</sup> For an exhaustive bibliography of the life work of Meyer Schapiro, see *Meyer Schapiro: The Bibliography*, ed. Dr. Lillian Milgram Schapiro (New York: George Braziler, 1995). For Schapiro's heated exchange on Socialism with Sidney Hook, which Schapiro published under the pseudonym of David Merian, see, "Socialism and the Failure of Nerve: An Exchange," *Partisan Review* 10:3 (May–June 1943): 248–62. For the extended debate, see the series of essays published in *The New Failure of Nerve*, Parts I & II, *Partisan Review* 10:1/2 (January–February, March–April, 1943).

<sup>635</sup> See, for example, William Phillips, "The Intellectual's Tradition," *Partisan Review* 8:6 (November–December 1941): 481–90.

<sup>636</sup> See, Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1945). In a review of the same year, Clement Greenberg noted that von Wiegand, who essentially set "Toward the True Vision of Reality" to text, was not acknowledged. See, "Review of the Exhibitions of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Pollock; of the Annual Exhibition of the American Abstract Artists; and of the Exhibition of European Artists in America," *The Nation* (7 April, 1945): 397. The third edition of the *Documents of Modern Art* volume (1951) included an acknowledgment of von Wiegand's translations. For von Wiegand's account of meeting and working with Mondrian, see von Wiegand, "A Memoir," *Art Yearbook* 4 (1961): 57–66.

8), which was a one-issue collaboration of Rosenberg, Newman, and Motherwell; and *Tiger's Eye* (1947–9), an interdisciplinary arts magazine published by Ruth and John Stephan.

In addition to the *émigré* painters who were making their way to New York, the city became a haven to European intellectuals. Between the years of 1934 and 1938, the Institut für Sozialforschung membership necessarily fled Europe after the German police closed the Institut and seized its contents (including the *Gründbergs Archiv*) on 13 March, 1933. Eventually, with the tragic exception of Benjamin, all would settle in New York, where the Institute re-opened at Columbia University as the Institute for Social Research and published the *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (hereafter, *SPSS*). In 1940, the first *Liste Otto* is published in Paris, naming works that were to be recalled by the publishers or forbidden by the German authorities.<sup>637</sup> The list targeted *émigré*, Marxist, and Jewish writers and included the *ZfS*.<sup>638</sup> By 1941, Horkheimer, Adorno, Friedrich Pollock, and Herbert Marcuse had re-settled on the West Coast. The membership continued their critique of the terrible events that were unfolding in Europe, while at the same time, almost all went to work for the U.S. government in support of the war effort. Marcuse returned east to work for the Office of War, while others held posts at the OSS. Horkheimer and Adorno were the exceptions here.<sup>639</sup> A few important shifts that took place in the writing of the Institut membership during their American days should be noted. One is that direct references to Marxism were mostly replaced with

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<sup>637</sup> “Liste Otto,” or, *Ouvrages retirés de la vente par les éditeurs ou interdits par les autorités allemandes*, which was issued in Paris by the Syndicat des éditeurs (following the Convention sur la censure des livres) as a supplement to the *Bibliographie de la France*, nos. 25/40, (June 28–October 4, 1940).

<sup>638</sup> The *ZfS* was one of many publications banned under the title of “Presses Universitaires (Alcan, Leroux, Rieder)” in the *Liste Otto*, n.f.

<sup>639</sup> See Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 299–301 for a listing of the employment of the Institut membership by the U.S. government.

citations of respectable American thinkers, such as Henry James or John Dewey. The status (and safety) of the membership as resident aliens in the U.S. could have been jeopardized had they been too strident in expressing their dialectical materialism. Another is that their tone took a turn for the optimistic. Perhaps in keeping with their efforts on the Allied home front, they did not wish to suggest in their rhetoric that fascism might actually triumph.<sup>640</sup> Finally, the subject matter of their essays was often provoked by examples of American discourse, such as those by Thorstein Veblen. The 1941 volume of *Studies in Philosophy and the Social Science* contained a number of essays in which the Frankfurt School writers considered the problems of autonomous art and its relationship to mass culture and mass culture in its extreme form: that of fascism.

This chapter traces the criticism of these critics as they understood the figuring imagination of the artist and art objects in the context of the crisis years of the Second World War. Stated differently, this chapter traces the choices made by artists during this time, and how these choices (artistic, ethical) were understood by critics and by artists writing as critics during these years. For example, the differences between the realms of Apollo and of Dionysius that Alfred Barr had sketched out as a formal divide in 1936 took on a moral force in the work (both painted and written) of Barnett Newman and others in the 1940s.<sup>641</sup> (The consequences of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* for Newman's generation of fellow painters is considered below.) Paalen was someone generally sympathetic to Newman's ideas. In his own writing, Paalen considered the intensely-problematic pursuit of Beauty in the modern in 1944:

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<sup>640</sup> Discussion with Professor Peter Jelavich at the University of Texas at Austin on 17 April, 2001 clarified my thinking on this point.

<sup>641</sup> See Richard Shiff, "To Create Oneself," in BNCR: 17.

For Stendahl, Beauty was still “a promise of happiness,” but already Baudelaire could not think of “a type of beauty that did not include misfortune.” For Rilke, beauty became the “beginning of the terrible” and for Breton it can no longer be but “convulsive.”<sup>642</sup>

Robert Motherwell, also writing in 1944, began his essay, “The Painter’s Object,” with a citation from Baudelaire: “The study of the beautiful is a duel in which the artist cries out in terror before he is vanquished.”<sup>643</sup> Even later, in 1969, Adorno would conclude that art was “the ever broken promise of happiness.”<sup>644</sup>

To artists and critics who lived through the War and through the post-War years with the knowledge of the European Holocaust, the broken promise might have been the limits of art within contemporary culture. For other critics modern art could be a weapon of sorts: a pronouncement published in *Dyn* declared modern art, because of its “vital stimulus to the imagination,” to be “an invaluable weapon in the struggle for freedom.”<sup>645</sup> Others thought, modern art was in need of defense: Stuart Davis, in 1941, saw the main threat to “genuine art” as coming not only from its “outright suppression” under European dictatorships, but also from “defeatism,” those elements (e.g., demands for propaganda, home-grown censorship, “ballyhoo for Americanism in art,” etc.) that would deny the “independent social role of art.”<sup>646</sup> Still others believed that artists could create a society for which it was worth fighting. In an essay included in his 1943 *New Frontiers in American Painting*, the gallerist Samuel M. Kootz looked to artists for future guidance in the post-war world, predicting that the “war itself is not as great a revolution as the

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<sup>642</sup> Wolfgang Paalen, “The Meaning of Cubism Today,” *Dyn* 6 (1944): 4.

<sup>643</sup> Robert Motherwell, “The Painter’s Object,” *Partisan Review* 11:1 (Winter 1944): 93.

<sup>644</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Madison: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 136.

<sup>645</sup> *Dyn* 1 (April-May 1942): n.f.

<sup>646</sup> Stuart Davis, “Abstract Art in the American Scene,” *Parnassus* 13:3 (March 1941): 102.

aftermath promises to be.”<sup>647</sup>

The aftermath of the war was not as Kootz predicted (even if he wrote in optimistic hyperbole appropriate to the darkened days of 1943), or the revolution would be, possibly, de-limited to the realm of art. In his 1943 review of the Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Art at the Whitney and of Artists for Victory at the Metropolitan, Greenberg wrote that these shows demonstrated “how competently and yet how badly most of our accepted artists paint, draw, and carve.”<sup>648</sup> (Kootz agreed: he called the show at the Metropolitan a “hippopotamus.”<sup>649</sup>) Contemporary American art was no so “un-enterprising” as these two shows made out, the critic concluded. (Indeed. Subsequent passages in this chapter attend to the enterprising consequences of the work and teachings, material and metaphysical, of Piet Mondrian and of Hans Hofmann for artists working in New York during these years.) The exclusion of modernist jurors at the Metropolitan show galvanized a number of men (and women) of culture into action. The exhibition of American Modern Artists was hung in protest at the Riverside Museum, which included members of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, including Adolph Gottlieb, then vice president of the FMPS.<sup>650</sup> Though he did not contribute work to the show, Newman wrote the catalogue essay and dispatched a number of press releases and letters on behalf of the organizers. In the catalogue essay, Newman (like Davis) wrote on the social role of the work of modern art: “We, who dedicated our lives to art—to modern art—to modern art in America...we mean to make manifest by our

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<sup>647</sup> Samuel M. Kootz, “War of Ideas,” in *New Horizons in American Painting* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1943): 3.

<sup>648</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 156:1 (2 January, 1943): 32.

<sup>649</sup> Kootz, “War of Ideas,” vii.

<sup>650</sup> The exhibition ran from 17 January through 27 February, 1943. See BNSWI, 29.



work, in our studios and our galleries, the requirements for a culture in a new America.”<sup>651</sup>

This chapter concludes with modern invocations of Kant, and passages on the subject of Taste and Judgment, in which I draw parallels (and differences) between the category of the autonomous work of art as dissent and as resistance to mass culture.

## II. Fictile Myths<sup>652</sup>

I painted quite a large painting for Miss Guggenheim’s house during the summer. 8 feet by 20 feet, it was grand fun.

~ Jackson Pollock, in a letter to his brother, 1944<sup>653</sup>

The Philoctetes story, which has so established itself among us as explaining the source of the artist’s power, is not really an explanatory myth at all; it is a moral myth having reference to our proper behavior in the circumstances of the universal accident. In its juxtaposition of the wound and the bow, it tells us that we must be aware that weakness does not preclude strength nor strength weakness. It is therefore not irrelevant to the artist, but when we use it we will do well to keep in mind the other myths of the arts, recalling that [Apollo] was given the lyre by its inventor, the baby Hermes—that miraculous infant who, the day he was born, left his cradle to do mischief: and the first thing he met with was a tortoise, which he greeted politely before scooping it from its shell, and, thought and deed being one with him, he contrived the instrument to which he sang “the glorious tale of his own begetting.” These were gods, and very early ones, but their myths tell us something about the nature and source of art even in our grim, late human present.

~ Lionel Trilling, “Art and Neurosis,” from *The Liberal Imagination*, 1947<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>651</sup> BNSWI, 30.

<sup>652</sup> The peculiarity of Barnett Newman’s use of this word was made apparent to me through reading Richard Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 27, 99, 181n.

<sup>653</sup> Jackson Pollock to his brother Frank, 15 January, 1944. Cited in Kirk Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” in *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998): 81, n. 81.

<sup>654</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Art and Neurosis,” in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 1950, 1953): 175. This essay was initially published as “Art and Neurosis,” *Partisan Review* 12:1 (Winter 1945): 41–8. A subsequent version was published in *The New Leader* (13 December, 1947). My attention was drawn to

What is the *raison d'être*, what is the explanation of the seemingly insane drive of man to be a painter and poet if it is not an act of defiance against man's fall and an assertion that he return to the Adam of the Garden of Eden? For the artists are the first men.

~ Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," *Tiger's Eye*, 1947<sup>655</sup>

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The New York art scene of the early 1940s has been referred to as the time of the "Myth Makers," usually meaning those artists, usually Pollock, Newman, Gottlieb, and Rothko, who incorporated mythological figures in their work.⁶⁵⁶ None of these artists fitted neatly into this category, nor had exclusive claim to the realm. New myths were transmuted for old: many of these artists made myths of the Everyman (to use the vernacular of the time).⁶⁵⁷ In his Pictographs of the 1940s, Gottlieb perhaps demonstrated most emphatically, by the use of meaning-laden symbols, his interest in the ideas of Carl Jung (1875–1961) and his concept of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Pollock, it has been argued, took a Freudian path in his work in the early 1940s, a direction in which he made use of the work made by the Surrealists. This generation of artists was not interested exclusively in the mythic Greco-Roman past and its descendants, though: their respective searches lead them to cultures outside of the West. As W. Jackson Rushing has argued, when, in 1941, MoMA held its landmark exhibition, *Indian Art of the United States*, the idea of First Nation cultures as "a spiritual and aesthetic resource" was a

this particular essay in this collection after reading Richard Shiff's essay, "Criticism at Odds with Its Art: Prophecy, Projection, Doubt, Paranoia."

⁶⁵⁵ Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," *Tiger's Eye* 1:1 (October 1947): 60.

⁶⁵⁶ For use of term "Myth Maker," see Mark Rothko, Introduction to *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., *Art of This Century*, 1946. For two recent examples of the term "Myth-Makers," see Irving Sandler, "The Myth-Makers," in *The Triumph of American Painting*, 62–71; and Michael Leja, "The Myth-Makers & The Primitive: Gottlieb, Newman, Rothko & Still," in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 49–120.

⁶⁵⁷ See Newman's reference to Gorky's tragic suicide in 1948 as "his private Passion." Newman, "Arshile Gorky: Poet and Immolator," in *BNSWI*, 112.

commonplace in the minds of viewers sympathetic to modern art.⁶⁵⁸ Paalen had a life-long interest in the art of the First Nation peoples of the Pacific Northwest, which was demonstrated by a special issue of *Dyn* devoted to the subject in 1943.⁶⁵⁹ In 1946, Newman organized the *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* exhibition at the newly-relocated Betty Parsons Gallery.⁶⁶⁰

Myths of self-making were equally at play (what Rosenberg would later term “private” myths of “future self-recognition.”⁶⁶¹) Hofmann, for one, well understood the risks associated with the engendering of modern pictorial life: one could create something that would not be understood, readily grasped, or even experienced as art. “It makes people furious when you speak your own language,” he concluded in his 1941 address to the AAA.⁶⁶² Two years later, Pollock created in one day, *ex nihilo*, his mural for Peggy Guggenheim, an act that has become the stuff of art-historical legend (fig. 67). This chapter also attends to the myth of New York in the 1940s: the last available spot for possible return of a ‘no-time’ ‘no-place’ that had been lost with the Fall of Paris. Through historical happenstance, this was where artists, such as Newman, could, once again, be Adamite artists; or where critics, such as Rosenberg, might witness their actions. In some cases, what was made was the kind of modern painting that Paalen argued grimly, expressed to us “what one may call the Golem complex of our civilization.”⁶⁶³

⁶⁵⁸ Rushing, W. Jackson, “Ritual and Myth: Native American Culture and Abstract Expressionism,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Press in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986): 273.

⁶⁵⁹ See the Amerindian number of *Dyn* 1:4–5 (December 1943).

⁶⁶⁰ This exhibition ran from 30 September through 19 October, 1946.

⁶⁶¹ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *ArtNews* 51 (December 1952): 48.

⁶⁶² Goodman, *Hans Hofmann*, 167. For a similar attitude expressed close in time and place to Hofmann, see Samuel M. Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, 47–9, *et passim*.

⁶⁶³ Paalen, “Farewell au Surrealisme,” 26. In a footnote to this statement, Paalen wrote: “The popular equivalent is in the innumerable versions of the Frankenstein theme, the scientific homunculi.”

In 1933, Newman ran in the mayoral race in New York City (fig. 68).⁶⁶⁴ Anne Temkin, for one, has characterized this run as “the stuff of legend...variously exaggerated into a viable candidacy against Fiorello H. LaGuardia or dismissed as a Dadaist prank.”⁶⁶⁵ Newman’s act of 1933 can be compared, in the category of art-historical legends, to Pollock’s 1941 creation as action in a different (Rosenbergian) arena. Newman, the candidate, made manifest his beliefs in an essay, “On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture.”⁶⁶⁶ In 1968, he commented retrospectively on the circumstances of the politics of the 1930s: “The din against libertarian ideas that came from shouting dogmatists, Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist, and Trotskyite alike, was so shrill it built an intellectual prison that locked one in tight.”⁶⁶⁷ His comments were well timed; he said so himself. In 1968, he could see a new set of intellectual prisons being built: by Marcusians, Maoists, and the followers of Che, etc. Repeated encounters with ideologues re-confirmed his convictions: throughout his career, in print and in paint, he sought to be an “untrammelled person.”⁶⁶⁸ Newman sought to handle chaos through creative acts, as had Kropotkin (this as opposed to being handled roughly by chaos).⁶⁶⁹ Newman possessed

⁶⁶⁴ See A.J. Liebling, “Two Aesthetes Offer Selves as Candidates to Provide Own Ticket for Intellectuals,” *New York World-Telegram* (4 November, 1933).

⁶⁶⁵ Ann Temkin, “Barnett Newman on Exhibition,” in *Barnett Newman*, Ann Temkin, ed. with essays by Temkin and Richard Shiff (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Museum of Art with Yale University Press, 2002): 22.

⁶⁶⁶ This essay is reprinted in BNSWI, 4–8.

⁶⁶⁷ Barnett Newman, “Foreword: The True Revolution is Anarchist!” in Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Horizon Press, 1968): ix.

⁶⁶⁸ This is Newman’s admiring description of Kropotkin, in “Foreword: The True Revolution is Anarchist!” xi.

⁶⁶⁹ See Newman, “The Plasmic Image,” in BNSWI, 138–155. As Richard Shiff has noted, this essay, composed in the spring of 1945, was “a catchall statement of his concerns at the time; he never completed it.” See Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 27.

a life-long distrust of fixed systems of being, meaning and representation and evinced his anarchist tendencies through his work (of all kind).⁶⁷⁰

In 1943, Newman once again took up the defense of his fellow painters. As is well known, Edwin Alden Jewell, the art critic for the New York Times, reviewed the exhibition of the FMPS and singled out the pictures by two members, Rothko and Gottlieb, as particularly baffling.⁶⁷¹ “You’ll have to make of Marcus Rothko’s *The Syrian Bull* what you can,” Jewell wrote, “nor is this department prepared to shed the slightest enlightenment when it comes to Adolph Gottlieb’s *Rape of Persephone*.”⁶⁷² (See figs. 31 and 69). (Not every critic was skeptical of the Rothkos, though: writing in *Art Digest*, Maude Riley, wrote that “one is inclined to sympathize with than blame its failures.”⁶⁷³) The works are strange, but it wasn’t the immediate references to myth that puzzled Jewell. It was, rather, the gross distortions in both works by which Jewell coyly claimed to be bewildered. Newman helped Rothko and Gottlieb craft a response, which ran in the paper a week later.⁶⁷⁴ Was it necessary to have to explain that the Gottlieb painting is “a poetic expression of the essence of myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its

⁶⁷⁰ See, for example, Richard Shiff’s discussion of Newman’s attitudes towards the “pseudo-science” of the Hegelian dialectic. See Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 26, 98, n. 175. The manuscript from the Barnett Newman Foundation Archive dates to ca. 1944. This is two years after Wolfgang Paalen published his inquiry into dialectical materialism (as discussed in chapter four). While Newman was not one of the invited respondents, perhaps the article prompted him to formulate his thoughts in writing. See Wolfgang Paalen, “Inquiry into Dialectic Materialism,” *Dyn* 2 (July–August 1942): 49–54.

⁶⁷¹ See Edwin Alden Jewell, “Modern Painters Open Show Today,” *The New York Times* (2 June, 1943): 28. The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors: Third Annual Exhibition was held at Wildenstein & Co., Inc., New York from 3–26 June, 1943.

⁶⁷² Edwin Alden Jewell, “Modern Painters Open Show Today,” 28.

⁶⁷³ Maude Riley, “The Mythical Rothko and His Myths,” *Art Digest* (15 January, 1943): 15.

⁶⁷⁴ See Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, letter to Edwin Alden Jewell, “A New Platform and Other Matters: ‘Globalism’ Pops Into View,” *New York Times* Sec. 2 (13 June 1943): 9. For a comparison of the drafts of the letter to the published version, see Bonnie Clearwater, “Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko’s and Gottlieb’s Letters to *The New York Times*,” *Archives of American Art Journal*, 24:1 (1984): 23–5.

earth with all of its brutal implications”⁶⁷⁵ Or, that the Rothko painting was “a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions”⁶⁷⁶ They asserted the “self-evident” reality of their canvases and the reasserted tactile reality of the picture plane: flat forms “destroy illusion and reveal truth.”⁶⁷⁷ Nor was it about being an academic and painting whatever subject, but painting it well. As the artists famously concluded: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is timeless and tragic.”⁶⁷⁸

These paintings have not suffered from a lack of critical attention since their initial testing in 1943. Perhaps Gottlieb’s rendering is more readily emblematic of the myth of Persephone, Demeter’s daughter whose knowledge of the Underworld came in the form of the sweet juice of pomegranate seeds.⁶⁷⁹ Neither painting is a literal representation of a given myth nor the result of a “specific program,” as Lucinda Barnes has rightly argued in her essay on these paintings.⁶⁸⁰ The Rothko work is especially peculiar and has provoked several scholars to account for this strangeness. Lee Seldes uncovered an illustration made by Rothko in 1928 for a graphic Bible written by Rabbi Lewis Brown (fig. 70).⁶⁸¹ This illustration and the painting share the image of the 9th-century *Winged Bull* from Assyria (fig. 71). In a tour-de-force analysis, James E. Breslin has argued that

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.* This is a possible reference to Aaron and the golden calf from *Exodus*, 32:1–35.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁹ For a well-told composite version of the Persephone myth, see Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942): 112–3.

⁶⁸⁰ Lucinda Barnes, “A Proclamation of Moment: Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman and the Letter to the New York Times” in the *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 47:1 (1993): 2–13.

⁶⁸¹ See, Rabbi Lewis Browne, *The Graphic Bible: From Genesis to Revelation in Animated Maps & Charts*, (New York, 1928). See also, Lee Seldes *The Legacy of Mark Rothko* (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1978, 1996), p. 15. This subject was also attended to by James E.B. Breslin in “The Trials of Mark Rothko,” *Representations* 16 (Autumn 1986): 1–41; and more recently by David Anfam, “A Note on Rothko’s The Syrian Bull,” *Burlington Magazine* 139:1134 (September 1997): 629–31.

this painting is Rothko's interpretation of the Persian myth of Mithra: By slaying a bull, the god Mithra is able to create the world.⁶⁸² Ancient representations of the myth show the god in a multi-colored cape plunging a dagger into its shoulder.⁶⁸³ Michael Leja has suggested that viewers might "glimpse something of tragedy" but that the surrealist aspect of the work upstages this: we are, he argues, looking at a surrealist personage or biomorph "posing in a landscape."⁶⁸⁴

The bull is strange, indeed: the hooves are flame-like and comically dainty for such a hulking figure with pretensions to tragedy; the regularly-patterned plumage is interrupted on the right by another kind of distorted white plumes. Yet another episode from Greek myth was a possible source for the Rothko painting. At least two ancient writers make reference to the myth of the brazen bull of Phalaris.⁶⁸⁵ Perilaus, a well-regarded bronze caster presented the bull to Phalaris, the tyrant of Agrigento. Phalaris was thought to have used the bull to punish individuals by placing them inside the bull and lighting a fire beneath its feet. The punished would then roast to death; their screams were to be heard through the pipes fitted into the nostrils of the bull—"so that the augmented cruelty of their shrieks came to mean something entirely different to him."⁶⁸⁶ The first victim was Perilaus himself. (It's a macabre corollary to Newman's 1947 statement that the first men art artists; they are also the first into the crucible.)

⁶⁸² See James E. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 186–91.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, 187–8.

⁶⁸⁴ Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 78.

⁶⁸⁵ For two differing accounts, see Cicero, *Verrine Orations*, 4.73; and Diodorus of Sicily, *World History* 9.19.1.

⁶⁸⁶ Søren Kirkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 255, 505, n. 138.

The Syrian Bull was painted shortly after Rothko had taken a hiatus from painting, ca. 1940. In an unpublished autobiographical statement from 1945, Rothko wrote that he had earlier “stopped painting and spent a nearly a year developing both in writing and in studies my ideas concerning the myth and anecdote which are the basis of my present work.”⁶⁸⁷ Rothko, the painter who sought to represent the timeless and tragic in his mid-century paintings of myth, was also a reader of Aeschylus and Kierkegaard; he would also draft an essay, ca. 1951, in response to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*.⁶⁸⁸ In his studies, he may have come across the myth of the brazen bull in a few sources: one arcane, another less so.

The longest purported passage from *Prometheus Unbound*, the lost tragedy of Aeschylus, is to be found in Cicero’s *Tusculans*. In the second Tusculan disputation, very near the Aeschylus fragment, Cicero examines views held by a number of philosophers on the thesis that “pain is the greatest of evils.”⁶⁸⁹ In the disputation, Epicurius is quoted as arguing that someone disciplined in his methods “would even fry in the Bull of

⁶⁸⁷ This statement is held in the archives of the Mark Rothko Foundation. For an extended transcription of this statement, see David Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 63, n. 15. This auto-biographical statement has also recently been re-published in *Mark Rothko: Writings on Art*, ed. and intro, Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006): 42.

⁶⁸⁸ See also Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983): 42–5 *et passim*; Christopher Rothko, Introduction to *Mark Rothko, The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004): xxiii *et passim*; and Ashton, “Rothko’s Frame of Mind,” in *Seeing Rothko*, eds. Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2005): 15–6. Charles Harrison has recently suggested that Rothko read Gilbert Murray’s *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy* shortly after its publication in 1940. See Harrison, “Scenes and Details,” in *Seeing Rothko*, 184, 197, n. 6. For the volume by Murray (1866–1957), see *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940). For a copy of the Rothko’s draft on Nietzsche, see the James E.B. Breslin papers held at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (“Notes and Writing Fragments” in Box 17, Folder 19).

⁶⁸⁹ See Cicero, *Tusculans* (2:10:23–25) and C. John Hernington, “Aeschylus, *Prometheus Unbound*, Fr. 193 (*Titanum suboles...*),” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 92 (1961), p. 242.

Phalaris with exclamations of pleasure.”⁶⁹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) made direct reference to the bull of Phalaris in the opening passage of *Either/Or*, which was published in 1843. The short-lived philosopher drew a parallel between the victims of the brazen bull and the unhappiness of the poet “who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music.”⁶⁹¹ As for the crowd (the audience), they say:

“Sing again soon”—in other words, may new suffering torture your soul, and may your lips continue to be formed as before, because your screams would only alarm us, but the music is charming. And the reviewers step up and say, “*That is right; so it must be according to the rules of aesthetics.*”⁶⁹²

To Rothko, the artist, the near-sadistic necessity of having to transform one’s pain into something charming so as to be understood may have seemed a particularly apt, tragic, personal myth. (Kierkegaard’s oblique reference to the mouth of Laocoön is discussed at the conclusion of this chapter.) That Rothko immersed himself in classical myth and modern philosophy during the late 1930s and early 1940s seems clear, yet I can offer no proof that he read these exact citations, however plausible. If this work does borrow from the Bull of Phalaris, the suffering is there, it’s just hidden from sight, transmuted into something other by the artist. That’s why we, like Jewell, can’t see it.

In a 1960 interview, Gottlieb recalled that he had, along with Rothko, embarked on the mythological series, not in an end in itself, but rather with the hope that “some new

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987): 20.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original. Also, the Russian-Jewish existentialist, Lev Shestov (born, Lev Isaakovich Schwarzmann, 1866–1938) dedicated part of his *Athens and Jerusalem* to Kierkegaard. See Shestov, “In the Bull of Phalaris: Knowledge and Freedom,” in *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. and intro., Bernard Martin (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1966): 155–266.

approach to painting, a technical approach, might also develop.”⁶⁹³ Newman returned to the engendering act of painting ca. 1944.⁶⁹⁴ While Nietzsche’s work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was a mediating text on Greek myths for Rothko and others, Newman tended to bypass Freud and explanatory psychoanalytic systems and go directly to the originary myths, as Richard Shiff has argued.⁶⁹⁵ Annalee Newman, the artist’s widow, stated that her late husband “did not need Nietzsche to learn about Greece or the Greeks. He had many diverse sources of information and formed his own theories.”⁶⁹⁶ In an unpublished essay from 1948, Newman staged a collision between Freudian and Surrealist, and even Nietzschean systems. He distinguished his own theory of Greek tragedy from then-prevailing notions:

This is also different from the psychological notion of tragedy that the surrealists tried to achieve for modern man. The surrealists hoped to produce with Greek force the despair they felt. But it was not a despair of the individual act but a despair felt at the world and at life. They thereby reduced Greek tragedy...into an abstract formulation.⁶⁹⁷

Abstract formulations were inadequate to the tragic conditions of post-War life in which one lived with the full knowledge of the terror of the War years. With the new sense of fate, Newman asked if the modern artist should follow in the steps of the Greek sculptor (and, thereby, make the same mistakes) and “play with an art of overrefinement, and art of quality, of sensibility, or beauty?”⁶⁹⁸ He proffered another path: “Let us rather, like the

⁶⁹³ “Adolph Gottlieb (1960),” in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001): 31.

⁶⁹⁴ See Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 50.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁹⁶ See “An Exchange: Annalee Newman and W. Jackson Rushing,” *Art Journal* 48:3 (Autumn 1989): 268.

⁶⁹⁷ Newman, “A New Sense of Fate,” BNSWI, 169. This was initially written for the third issue of *Tiger’s Eye* (March 1948).

⁶⁹⁸ Newman, “A New Sense of Fate,” BNSWI, 169.

Greek writers, tear the tragedy to shreds.”⁶⁹⁹ While Newman’s article was not published in his lifetime, his painting of 1946, *Genesis—The Break* (fig. 72) was exhibited in 1947 and reproduced in a 1949 issue of *Tiger’s Eye*.⁷⁰⁰ The ‘shredding’ in the painting is evident, as is the hovering orb at right against the light blue ground (“an earth without form, and void”⁷⁰¹). The title of the work suggests simultaneously ancient (prelapsarian) origins and a new beginning (not a ‘clean’ break).⁷⁰² Much of the painting of the 1940s fell into predictable categories of the bio-morph, the squiggle, or the grid. Or, not that. The following passages attend to dissatisfied painters who, like Newman, sought something else in their painting.

III. Interpolating Mondrian (ca. 1944)

Through the composition and other plastic factors, it is possible for a naturalistic work of art to have a more universal expression than a work of Abstract art which is lacking the proper use of these factors.

~ Piet Mondrian, “Abstract Art,” 1941⁷⁰³

I have not yet seen it pointed out that this liberation of form and color is closely linked with all the other liberations one hears about. I think it ought, perhaps, to come into one our lists of war-aims....The power, for instance, to create space (not ‘literary’ space but actual space) is surely invaluable.

~ Ben Nicholson, “Notes on Abstract Art,” 1941⁷⁰⁴

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁰ *Genesis—The Break* was exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1947 (gallery records incomplete). See BNCR: 152–3. It was reproduced in a 1949 edition of *Tiger’s Eye* under the title *The Break*, upside down, without the inscription, and dated 1948. See *Tiger’s Eye* 9 (15 October, 1949): 59. Newman added the inscription in 1959 to correct “the title, orientation, and date.”

⁷⁰¹ *Genesis*, 1:2.

⁷⁰² Richard Shiff has argued that this work demonstrates Newman’s co-ordination of his studio work and of his beliefs. See, Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 59.

⁷⁰³ Piet Mondrian, “Abstract Art,” in *Art of This Century* (New York: Arno Series of Contemporary Art, No. 18, 1942): 32.

⁷⁰⁴ Ben Nicholson, “Notes on Abstract Art,” in *Art of This Century*, 143. Nicholson’s essay was initially published in *Horizon* in October 1941. Nicholson (1894–1982) met Mondrian in 1934, the same year in which he and fellow artist Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) were married.

“The study of the beautiful is a duel in which the artist cries out in terror before he is vanquished.”

~ Charles Baudelaire, as quoted by Robert Motherwell in
“Painter’s Object,” *Partisan Review*, 1944⁷⁰⁵

Even the most abstract art does not arise from an inner source alone. As is all art, its origin is in *the reciprocal action of the individual and environment and it is inconceivable without feeling.*

~ Mondrian, “Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life,” 1941,
1945⁷⁰⁶

The hope shining from Piet Mondrian’s white canvases with their criss-crossed bands of black has little to do with his platonizing theories except in so far as they express an almost naïve faith in the future.

~ Clement Greenberg, *The Nation*, 1945⁷⁰⁷



As of 1937, Mondrian’s work was designated *entartete Kunst* by the Nazis.⁷⁰⁸

Mondrian arrived in New York, via London (to which he had fled from Paris in 1938), in October of 1940 and died there on 1 February, 1944. His work had been seen previously in New York at Gallatin’s Gallery of Living Art and in the Abstract and Cubist Art exhibition at MoMA in 1936. Harry Holtzman (1912–1987), an AAA member, was instrumental in his moving to New York and in securing the Dutch painter studio space there. Mondrian was welcomed in New York by art world members and especially by

⁷⁰⁵ Robert Motherwell, “The Painter’s Object,” *Partisan Review* 11:1 (Winter 1944): 93. The quotation is taken from the prose of Charles Baudelaire, *Le Confiteur de l’artiste*, which was included in his 1862 *Le spleen de Paris*: “L’étude du beau est un duel où l’artiste crie de frayeur avant d’être vaincu.” See Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. I, ed. Charles Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–6): 279.

⁷⁰⁶ Piet Mondrian, “Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life,” in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art, 1937 and Other Essays, 1941–1943*, 43. This collection was published in *The Documents of Modern Art* series (Robert Motherwell, director), and it was the initial publication of this 1941 essay by Mondrian. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁰⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 156:14 (7 April, 1945): 396.

⁷⁰⁸ Stephanie Barron, et al. *‘Degenerate Art’: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams with the Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1991): 13, 61, 68.

AAA members as a mentor figure—one who had pioneered in Europe the kind of abstraction that they themselves wanted to be understood as practicing in New York. In an essay that gave an overview of Mondrian’s career, von Wiegand described his new, New York work as opening “a road of infinite possibilities of experiment for the future.”⁷⁰⁹ Yet, it was Mondrian’s work that prompted Newman to distinguish between “abstract art” and art of the “abstract form.”⁷¹⁰

In a November 1944 review of “Art in Progress,” a survey held during earlier that year at MoMA in celebration of its fifteenth anniversary, Newman decried the “pure abstractionists” who were “typified by Mondrian” whose work “denies the world around us completely and insists on a purist world of pure form and color.”⁷¹¹ Newman would maintain these distinctions for the rest of his life. In a 1965 interview with David Sylvester, the artist described Mondrian’s work as the “illustration of a scientific attitude toward life,” which could be summarized in the catchphrase: “‘Let’s get down to fundamentals.’”⁷¹² The ‘fundamentals’ then become “arbitrary and dogmatic.”⁷¹³ Newman read Mondrian’s work (which, like his own, took the form of paint and print) against the

⁷⁰⁹ Charmion von Wiegand, “The Meaning of Mondrian,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2:8. (Autumn, 1943): 70.

⁷¹⁰ See Newman, “The Plasmic Image,” 155. See also, Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 34–5.

⁷¹¹ Barnett Newman, “On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation,” in BNSWI, 69. The essay was initially published in the November 1944 number of *La Revista Belga*, the New York based Belgian publication of the Offices of Latin America. Newman’s comments are most likely in response to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. “Art in Progress” was held at MoMA from 24 May through 15 October, 1944 (exhibition no. 258a). See the MoMA Archives, Public Information Records, microfilm no. 16/2.

⁷¹² Barnett Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” in BNSWI, 256. The interview was initially broadcast over the BBC on 17 November, 1965 and printed in *The Listener*, 10 August, 1972. For additional comments Newman made to Sylvester on Mondrian, see BNSWI, 254.

⁷¹³ Barnett Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” in BNSWI, 256.

grain.⁷¹⁴ This was in stark contrast to the critical reception—especially the posthumous tributes—that the work of the European master received.

Mondrian's arrival in New York provoked a renewed interest in his writings, many of which were published in English at mid-decade. (Newman acknowledged that Mondrian's example "as artist and man" had "created respect for the steadfastness to principle these artists have maintained."⁷¹⁵) Mondrian maintained a reciprocating tension in his written work on art: between the 'material' (plastic) and the 'spiritual' (consciousness). (It's an inconvenience for his later chroniclers who might have wished that he had gone one way or the other.) From 1919 onwards, he insisted in his written work that a new consciousness and a new plasticism were engendered in the collision of these two realms. This collision was accomplished through the continued work/expanding consciousness of the artist. In his 1919 essay, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," Mondrian argued that:

[T]hrough the reconstruction of the cosmic relations [pure painting] is a direct expression of the universal; by its rhythm, by the material reality of its plastic form, it expresses the artist's individual subjectivity.⁷¹⁶

Not too long after this statement, Mondrian struck upon his 'mature' grids, a pattern he would hold until the last years of his career. These are the utopian, shining white

⁷¹⁴ For a discussion of Newman's reading of Mondrian, see Shiff, "To Create Oneself," 25–6.

⁷¹⁵ Barnett Newman, "Plasmic Image," in BNSWI, 155.

⁷¹⁶ Piet Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality" was initially published as "de nieuwe in de schilderkunst" in *De Stijl* (Amsterdam) 1 (1919). An English translation was announced as early as 1945, but an English translation by way of Michel Seuphor did not appear until 1956. See Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1956). A subsequent translation, from which the above citation is taken, was published Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Sourcebook of Critics and Artists* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1968): 321.

canvases that, to borrow from Nicholson, create “actual space.”⁷¹⁷ When, in 1965, Newman dismissed Mondrian’s art as a “non-tragic” one, Mondrian would have agreed.⁷¹⁸ Mondrian had said so himself in 1921. (However, the ‘non-tragic’ had its origins in the tragic.) In his 1920–1 essay, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence,” Mondrian wrote that:

The disequilibrium between individual and universal creates the *tragic* and is expressed as *tragic plastic*.... The tragic in life leads to artistic creation: *art*, because it is abstract and in opposition to the natural concrete, can anticipate the gradual disappearance of the tragic. The more the tragic diminishes, the more art gains in purity.⁷¹⁹

Mondrian re-stated this position in “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art,” an essay that was initially published in 1937 and republished in New York in 1945.⁷²⁰ Mondrian’s essay, “A New Realism,” was initially commissioned for the AAA and was published in their 1946 yearbook. It was the last one the group would produce.⁷²¹

Just before Mondrian’s death, both Motherwell and Greenberg turned their attention to Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (fig. 73). Both responded in terms generally more favorable than Newman would later in 1944. Greenberg judged the work to be both “a radical step forward in the Mondrian’s evolution” and “a failure worthy only of a great artist.”⁷²² Motherwell, whose essay was published a few months after that of

⁷¹⁷ See also, von Wiegand’s assessment that Mondrian had “carried out the Cubist revolution to its final conclusion: the *total abolition of the form*, not only as pictorial representation but as abstraction.” Von Wiegand, “The Meaning of Mondrian,” 67.

⁷¹⁸ See Barnett Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” in BNSWI, 257. Sylvester offered the phrase and Newman concurred.

⁷¹⁹ Piet Mondrian, *Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe general de l’équivalence plastique*, (Paris: Galerie de l’Effort Moderne, 1921): n.f.

⁷²⁰ See Piet Mondrian, “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art,” in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art, 1937 and Other Essays, 1941–1943*, 50–4.

⁷²¹ See, Mondrian, “A New Realism,” in *American Abstract Artists: 1946* (New York: AAA, 1946): 225–35.

⁷²² Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 157:15 (9 October, 1943): 416.

Greenberg, concluded that *Broadway Boogie Woogie* represented a marked shift on the part of the artist from “purification” to “expressiveness.”⁷²³ Indeed, it’s almost sedate in comparison to *Victory Boogie Woogie* of 1943–4, which was also reproduced in the posthumous collection of his essays, (fig. 74). This work is believed to have been “unfinished” at the time of the artist’s death.⁷²⁴ Motherwell noted that this work was, at times, considered a failure and that Mondrian had removed the black bands from his New York paintings. Both of these observations seem to be in response to Greenberg’s earlier review. It was in that review that Greenberg remembered seeing “slightly impure” colors in the work; he also noted that the “hitherto immutable elements of Mondrian’s space composition have begun to break up.”⁷²⁵ In a correction published the following week in *The Nation*, Greenberg noted that Mondrian had in fact not used impure color, but grays. However, he felt that this “after-effect legitimately belongs to one’s first sight of the painting.”⁷²⁶ Indeed, the black bands in earlier works by Mondrian had kept this kind of after-glow in optical check. The work improved on second viewing; over time, Greenberg concluded, the work might seem entirely successful.

In her recent study on Greenberg, Caroline Jones has argued that the critic’s ignorance of Mondrian’s “highly spiritualized theories of abstraction [that] demanded the use of absolutely pure primary hues” caused Greenberg to mis-perceive (“infamously”)

⁷²³ Robert Motherwell, “Painter’s Object,” *Partisan Review* 11:1 (Winter 1944): 95. See also, Motherwell, “The Modern Painter’s World,” *Dyn* 6 (August 1944): 9–14. For an interpretation of the aphoristic essays of a young Motherwell representing a shift from the collective to the individual, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 79–81.

⁷²⁴ J.J. Sweeney, “Piet Mondrian,” 12.

⁷²⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 157:15 (9 October, 1943): 416.

⁷²⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 157:16 (16 October, 1943): 455.

Broadway Boogie Woogie.⁷²⁷ However much the formalist, it seems unlikely that Greenberg would have been entirely oblivious to Mondrian's theosophic tendencies during the earliest years of his career (ca. 1906–19). In an unfavorable review of a Kandinsky show at the Nierendorf Gallery in 1941, Greenberg wrote that he did not “hold theories to be responsible for the decline in Kandinsky's art; Mondrian has produced very good painting in terms of pure geometry, and Mondrian has theories.”⁷²⁸ (Theories that were derived from praxis, as von Wiegand recalled the painter saying during a visit to his studio.⁷²⁹) In his posthumous tribute to the artist, Greenberg drew parallels between Mondrian's idealism and that of Marx.⁷³⁰ His intention was certainly not to claim the painter as a Marxist.⁷³¹ Rather, Greenberg's essay throws into high relief the utopian nature of Mondrian's ideas, which stood in stark contrast to prevailing materialist constructs at the time. It's a long-standing binary in left-wing discourse.⁷³²

That Greenberg wouldn't countenance (or, stomach) direct references to Theosophy in his own criticism seems more likely. (As discussed in chapter three, a discrediting of

⁷²⁷ This mis-perception “forced” Greenberg to print a “humble-pie” correction in the following issue of *The Nation*. See Jones, *By Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005): 212–3. Given Greenberg's proximity to people (e.g. A.E. Gallatin, George L.K. Morris) who were knowledgeable about aspects of Mondrian's earlier career, it seems unlikely that Greenberg would have been in a state of complete unawares. Even with such knowledge, could Greenberg's optical imprint of the painting have been other?

⁷²⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky,” *The Nation* 152:16 (19 April, 1941): 481–2. For further comments on Kandinsky (a “great painter” whose work, nevertheless, is a “dangerous” example to “younger painters”), see Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 160:2 (13 January, 1945): 53.

⁷²⁹ “You should know that all my paintings were done first and the theory was derived from them.” Mondrian as quoted by Charmion von Wiegand in “A Memoir,” 65.

⁷³⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 160:16 (21 April, 1945): 469. Mondrian's art, Greenberg concluded, was “guided by an ideal, as all human action in or out of art should be.”

⁷³¹ Compare Greenberg's comments to Charles Arnault's 1945 comment that a “Picasso, Mondrian, and Siqueros...contain more Marxism than can be found in whole paragraphs of, say, any one of the studies on painting issued by the Critics Group some years back.” Charles Arnault, “Painting and Dialectics,” *The New Masses* (14 August, 1945): 28.

⁷³² See Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (London: S. Sonnenschein; New York: C. Scribner, 1892).

spiritualist tendencies has taken place within left-wing, oppositional discourse in the 1930s.) However, Mondrian had stopped making references to Theosophy in his own essays. As early as 1919, the term Neo-Plasticism had become a kind of code for, amongst other things, Theosophy. None of the essays that were published in New York at mid-decade made direct reference to the theosophic tendencies of the young painter.⁷³³

Mondrian's later paintings (and theories) are not not about Theosophy (to use a Newmanesque construction); but they are not only about Theosophy. Mondrian was subject to his own theories as he himself evolved over time. He responded to his new environment.

As von Wiegand recalled when she saw both *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, not only were his touches more emphatic, but his primary colors were even more "brilliant."⁷³⁴ As von Wiegand also noted, while in New York, Mondrian had the benefit of colored tape. This allowed him to test out compositions (place, remove, shift at will). And so, "under *Victory Boogie Woogie*," von Wiegand wrote, "lie buried six or seven different solutions, each of which might have been a complete picture."⁷³⁵ Her use of word under to describe the stratigraphy of the work throws into question whether or not she knew or believed the work to be unfinished. As the off-white squares in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* demonstrate, Mondrian, later in his career, liked "a little

⁷³³ *Toward a True Vision of Reality* was published as a pamphlet by the Valentine Gallery in conjunction with Mondrian's exhibition there in 1942; *Abstract Art* (as cited above) was published as a preface to *Art of this Century*, also in 1942; Kootz also published a lengthy passage from Mondrian's "Pure Plastic Art" in his *New Frontiers in American Painting* in 1943. See Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Art*, pp. 50–1. Granted, Greenberg was absent from the city due to his military service from February through September 1943. See "Chronology to 1949" in CGCEC, Vol. I, 255.

⁷³⁴ Charmion von Wiegand in "A Memoir," 58.

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

dirt.”⁷³⁶ The “*feeling*” that Mondrian insisted upon in art was not limited to the touch of the painter, but also encompassed the touch of the painting upon the retina of the viewer (Greenberg included).⁷³⁷

Abstraction that resembled that of Mondrian did not always fair as well in its critical reception, as discussed in chapter three. Perhaps because it lacked this “*feeling*” or “empathy,” as Balcomb Greene once suggested.⁷³⁸ Even those relatively sympathetic to American “abstractors” had their doubts.⁷³⁹ In a 1943 essay written in a tone of high irony and full of left-handed compliments, Lincoln Kirstein described painters, such as his friend, George L.K. Morris, as sincere but essentially “cerebretonic,” that is “not necessarily intellectual, but their imagination is stimulated by brain energy which is often as automatic and unimaginative as healthy.”⁷⁴⁰ In short, Kirstein thought that they were poorly-wired painters. Greenberg was rarely so cruel in his numerous reviews of the AAA painters. His reviews noted the (qualified) future promise that he sometimes found in the exhibited works, even when the works failed. Such was the case with Albert Swindon (1901–61), who showed “as much promise in his single unsuccessful painting as the other in their successful ones,” (fig. 75.).⁷⁴¹ “Upon this future a lot depends,” he suggested in his 1942 review of the Sixth Annual AAA exhibition.⁷⁴²

⁷³⁶ Piet Mondrian, quoted by Max Ernst, statement in “Eleven Europeans in America,” *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 13:4–5 (1946):18. Cited in Richard Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 25, 98, 165 n.

⁷³⁷ For an analysis of the optical ‘touch’ of abstract painting, see Meyer Schapiro, “On the Humanity of Abstract Painting,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters* 10 (1960): 316–23; and “Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting,” in *Selected Papers, II: Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).

⁷³⁸ Susan C. Larsen, “Going Abstract in the ’30s: An Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky,” 72.

⁷³⁹ Lincoln Kirstein, “Life of Death for Abstract Art? Con: A Mild Case of Cerebrosis,” *The Magazine of Art* 36 (March 1943): 119.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴¹ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 154:18 (2 May, 1942): 525.

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*

One name in particular stands out in Greenberg's subsequent reviews of the AAA: Fannie Hillsmith (1911–07). In his 1944 review of abstract and surrealist artists at Art of This Century, Greenberg singled out Hillsmith's *Imprisoned* (fig. 76) as "perhaps the best thing in the show."⁷⁴³ Elsewhere in his review, Greenberg noted the "absence of strength" in the Motherwell and the "inflated" quality of the Pollock. Despite this, the critic argued, the work deserved attention—even though they lacked "*pressure*."⁷⁴⁴ Perhaps it was the signs of pressure that Greenberg sensed in the Hillsmith. In a 1947 review, Greenberg applauded her ability to "grasp the identity of a picture most instinctively."⁷⁴⁵ As Hillsmith described her practice: "I try to combine the structural with the intimate."⁷⁴⁶ By implication, her work was not 'felicitous' in Greenberg's terms, or at least it aimed to be other than. 'Felicitousness' was a word he had leveled at the work of AAA member Alexander Calder and at Stuart Davis. Their work showed the "tasteful adaptation and...the felicity permitted by the un-obsessed mind."⁷⁴⁷ Greenberg, for one, was making qualitative judgments for art that was pressured, obsessed... serious (usually).

Greenberg also reviewed the painters of the Jane Street Co-op, which was an artist-run collective that was active from 1943 through 1949. The membership of the co-op tended towards abstraction, especially so after 1944. It was founded by Ken Ervin, Josiah Lancaster, Janet Marren, Howard Mitcham, and Hyde Solomon.⁷⁴⁸ As Greenberg noted

⁷⁴³ Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 158:22 (27 May, 1944): 634.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁴⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 164:18 (3 May, 1947): 525. Greenberg also included the work of Maurice Golubov (1905–1987) with that of Hillsmith.

⁷⁴⁶ Fannie Hillsmith, statement in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944): 100.

⁷⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 161:20 (17 November, 1945): 533.

⁷⁴⁸ The gallery initially opened at 35 Jane Street; it relocated to 41 Perry Street in March of 1948. In September of that year, it moved uptown to 760 Madison Avenue. For two recent histories of the group, see Jennifer Semet, "The Jane Street Group: Reconciling Abstraction and Figuration," and Irving Sandler, "The

in a 1949 review, the Jane Street Group was one of the galleries that was attempting to fill the gap left by the closing of the Kootz Gallery at the end of the 1947–1948 season, although it did not last much longer itself.⁷⁴⁹ The membership changed over the course of six years, but active members included: Leland Bell, Nell Blaine, a former student at Hofmann’s school, Frances Eckstein, Larry Rivers, and Judith Rothschild, also a former Hofmann student and a member of the AAA.

The figure re-asserted itself in the work of a number of painters after the war. The painters themselves largely attributed this shift to the presence of Jean Hélion, who was in the U.S. as of 1942, and in New York from 1944 to 1946. (Bell was the superintendent of the apartment building where he lived with Pegeen Guggenheim.) In 1943, *They Shall Not Have Me*, Hélion’s harrowing account of his experiences as a prisoner of war, was published; his work was also exhibited at Guggenheim’s gallery that year.⁷⁵⁰ Blaine recalled that Hélion’s return to figuration had a deep impact on the group. To them, it represented “a deep, soul-searching change.”⁷⁵¹ (Hélion’s choices were pressured, serious.⁷⁵²) That this shift occurred just as abstraction was on the ascendant was perhaps inconvenient. Blaine said that she “always had the instinct not to be fashionable.”⁷⁵³ It may seem especially ironic that, in a later review, Greenberg singled out the work of Larry Rivers (not a painter known for being either serious or pressured). The “plenitude

Jane Street Gallery,” in *The Jane Street Gallery: Celebrating New York’s First Artist Cooperative*, exh. cat. (New York: Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 2003): 3–13.

⁷⁴⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 168:24 (11 June, 1949): 669–70.

⁷⁵⁰ See, Jean Hélion, *They Shall Not Have Me (Ils ne m’auront pas): The Capture, Forced Labor, and Escape of a French Prisoner of War* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1943).

⁷⁵¹ From an interview with Anne Skillion, quoted in Jennifer Semet, “The Jane Street Group: Reconciling Abstraction and Figuration,” 10, 12, n. 29.

⁷⁵² That Hélion may have had a more ambivalent attitude towards the abstraction/figuration debate, as demonstrated by his 1946 work, *À Rebours* (fig. 77) isn’t the immediate point to be taken.

⁷⁵³ Martia Sawin, *Nell Blaine: Her Art and Life* (New York: Hudson Hill Press, 1998): 34–5.

and sensuousness” of his *Studio Interior* had knocked out Greenberg’s eye (fig. 78).⁷⁵⁴

The work was also representational. This had never disappeared from mid-century painting (even if immediate references to the figure became rare). ‘Figuration’ returned/persisted in the work of a number of painters, but it was a figuration informed (made problematic) by the lessons of abstract form.

IV. Digesting Hofmann (ca. 1944)

I owe this formulation to a remark made by Hans Hofmann, the art-teacher, in one of his lectures. For the point of view of this formulation surrealism is plastic art is a reactionary tendency which is attempting to restore ‘outside’ subject matter. The chief concern of a painter like Dali is to represent the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium.

~ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review*, 1939⁷⁵⁵

In every great epoch in painting there is always an indivisible relation between color and form. *This correlation between color and form is the plastic basis of painting....* The mutual dependency of form and color has a Life of *its own*—it is *pictorial Life....* Abstract art, in my opinion, is the return to a professional consciousness—a consciousness which controls the emotional accumulations in the process of creation.

~ Hans Hofmann, spoken at a symposium at the American Abstract Artists exhibition, 1941⁷⁵⁶

“Primitive” painting belongs to the Industrial Age. It emerged toward the close of the eighteenth century and defined itself as independent of tradition, whether that of sophisticated art or that of folk art.

~ Clement Greenberg, “Primitive Painting,” *The Nation*, 1942⁷⁵⁷

⁷⁵⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 168:16 (16 April, 1949): 453–4.

⁷⁵⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6:5 (Autumn 1939): 49, n. 2.

⁷⁵⁶ Hans Hofmann, address delivered on 16 February, 1941 at a symposium held in conjunction with the AAA exhibition held at the Riverside Museum, New York. Text re-printed in, Cynthia Goodman, *Hans Hofmann*, with essays by Goodman, Irving Sandler, and Clement Greenberg, (Munich: Prestel-Verlag with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990): 165–7. Emphasis in the original.

Hofmann's reaction was—one of the questions he asked Jackson was, do you work from nature? There were no still lifes around or models around and Jackson's answer was, "I *am* nature." And Hofmann's reply was, "Ah, but if you work by heart, you will repeat yourself." To which Jackson did not reply at all.

~ An exchange between Jackson Pollock and Hans Hofmann in 1942, as recalled by Lee Krasner in 1964⁷⁵⁸

Her work is extraordinarily free from imitativeness and from self-consciousness and pretense.

~ John Dewey, Foreword written on the occasion of Janet Sobel's first solo exhibition, 1944

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Under the aegis of Peggy Guggenheim, many of the Surrealists arrived in New York between the years of 1940 to 1942. As is well known, she herself returned to the U.S. in 1941 and was married to Max Ernst (1891–1976) later that year. In October of 1942, Guggenheim opened the now-legendary gallery, Art of This Century, the Surrealist interior of which was designed by Frederick T. Kiesler. That same month, the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition was held at the Reid Mansion in New York City.<sup>759</sup> Duchamp's contribution famously filled the exhibition space with web-like string.

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<sup>757</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Primitive Painting," *The Nation* 155:15 (10 October, 1942): 351–2. Greenberg claimed as his source an essay by Nicola Michailow, in "a very important, almost epochal article," in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 5/6 (1935).

<sup>758</sup> The oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lee Krasner on 2 November, 1964, 14 December, 1967, and 11 April, 1968. The interviews were conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This particular citation comes from their 1964 interview. See: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/krasne64.htm>. In a 1967 interview, Krasner remembered Pollock's reply differently. "Hofmann, being a teacher, spent all the time talking about art. Finally, Pollock couldn't stand it any longer and said, 'Your theories don't interest me. Put up or shut up! Let's see your work.'" See, "Who was Jackson Pollock? Interviews by Francine du Plessix and Cleve Gray," *Art in America* (May–June, 1967): 50. This later, pithier version of the exchange has entered the discourse. See, for instance, B.H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995, 1972): 65.

<sup>759</sup> The Reid Mansion was located at 451 Madison Avenue; the exhibition ran from 14 October through 7 November, 1942. Artists in the exhibition included: Hans Arp, William Baziotes, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Robert Motherwell, and Pablo Picasso.

Earlier, in 1940, the American writers Charles Henri Ford (1913–2002) and Parker Tyler (1904–1974) had begun publishing *View* (1940–47), a journal dedicated to avant-garde and Surrealist literature and art. The Surrealists had not had such levels of exposure in New York since the landmark exhibitions of the 1930s: “Surréalisme” held at Julien Levy, and “Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism,” Barr’s exhibit of 1936–37.<sup>760</sup> By 1944, Sidney Janis could write that, Sidney Janis argued in 1944 that the Surrealists had made “an ordered, scientific attempt to release the creative impulse, mainly through its adaptation of psychological techniques and especially through a system of tapping the resources of the unconscious.”<sup>761</sup> And, yet, at Greenberg’s epigraph demonstrates, some critics and painters began to distance themselves from Surrealism exactly during these years.

On the surface, it would seem that the myth makers (as discussed above) would have a natural affinity with the Surrealists in America. André Breton, who had relocated to New York as of 1941, was quoted in *View* in 1942 as saying: “I cannot grant you that mythology is only the recital of the acts of the dead.... Have we not known for a long time that the riddle of the sphinx says much more than it seems to say?”<sup>762</sup>

The Surrealists, with their espousal of irrationality and automatism, should have been seen as the real Primitives of the day (the genuine dissenters), and yet the

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<sup>760</sup> *Surréalisme* was held at the Julien Levy Gallery, 603 Madison Avenue, from 9 through 29 January, 1932

<sup>761</sup> Sidney Janis, *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944): 2. Richard Shiff initially drew my attention to his citation of Janis in this essay. Greenberg was also displeased with the exhibition, on the whole. In his review, he argued that “almost the sole merit” of the show was that “it prints the names and reproduces among other things, the paintings of several advanced artists whose work deserves to be better known.” See Greenberg, “Pictures and Prattle,” *The Nation* 162:4 (26 January, 1946): 378. For an earlier essay by Greenberg on the Surrealists in general, see his two-part essay, “The Surrealist Painters,” *The Nation* 159:7–8 (12 and 19 August, 1944): 192–3, 219–20.

<sup>762</sup> André Breton, “The Legendary Life of Max Ernst, Preceded by a Brief Discussion of the Need for a New Myth,” *View* 1 (April 1942): 5. Also cited in Judith E. Bernstock, “Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Art: An Overview of a Humanistic Approach,” *Artibus et Historiae* 14:27 (1993): 180, n. 24.



legitimacy of their claim was being questioned by the early 1940s, even from one of their own. In a brief 1942 essay that bade farewell to Surrealism, Paalen concluded that the greatest lesson that he took from the movement was the knowledge that “imagination” was the most precious of human faculties.<sup>763</sup>

In 1945, Newman argued that the dream state of the Surrealists was inadequate in this new era of normalized Terror—in the wake of the Holocaust and the Bomb.<sup>764</sup> The next year, Newman again aired his feelings about the paucity of the movement:

This realistic insistence, this attempt to make the unreal more real by an overemphasis on illusion, ultimately fails to penetrate beyond illusion; for having reached the point where we see the illusion, we must come to the conclusion that it must have been an illusion for the artists themselves, that they practiced the illusion because they did not themselves feel the magic.<sup>765</sup>

Newman was not alone in his feelings. Von Wiegand complained that, while the Surrealists had “restored the object in painting” and had freed it from “the logic of the old system,” the Surrealists had “added little or nothing to the plastic structure of painting.”<sup>766</sup>

In March of 1944, Hofmann had his first one-person show in New York at Guggenheim’s Art of This Century.<sup>767</sup> It was the first substantial public viewing of the work of a painter who had been more visible as a teacher and mentor to the generation of

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<sup>763</sup> See Paalen, “Farewell au Surrealisme,” *Dyn* 1:1 (April 1942): 26.

<sup>764</sup> See Newman’s 1945 essay, “Surrealism and the War,” in BNSWI: 94–6; John Hersey, “Reporter at Large: Hiroshima,” *The New Yorker* (31 August, 1946): 14–68.

<sup>765</sup> Newman, “Art of the South Seas,” in BNSWI, 101. This essay was published in Spanish as “Las formas artisticas del Pacifico” in *Ambos Mundos* in June 1946. Its first publication in English was in *Studio International* 179: 919 (February 1970): 70–1.

<sup>766</sup> Von Wiegand, “The Meaning of Mondrian,” 69.

<sup>767</sup> The show ran from 7 to 31 March, 1944.

painters (and critics) who had come of age by mid-century.<sup>768</sup> At the behest of Lee Krasner, Greenberg attended Hofmann's lectures from 1938 to 1939. The critic had much to learn about painting, she felt.<sup>769</sup> While Pollock may have rejected Hofmann in 1942, Greenberg proved to be a keen student. Greenberg's class notes, carefully typed, illustrated, organized, and kept for the duration of his life, catalogue Hofmann's ideas on the workings of modern paintings—the painter's famous "Push-Pull."<sup>770</sup> As the above epigram demonstrates, Hofmann had long espoused the belief that abstract art was the "return to a professional consciousness" on the part of the artist. The automatism of the Surrealists would not have satisfied him; however, this is not to be confused with a recall to the known order.

Hofmann's first solo exhibition came at a time of growing visibility for American painters (or, painters working in New York). In 1942, John Graham curated "French and American Painters" at the McMillen Gallery that included the work of de Kooning and others along with European Cubists and Fauves (fig. 79). The following year, Pollock had his first one-person show at Art of This Century, at which *The She Wolf* was exhibited (fig. 80). As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, this was the first Pollock acquired by MoMA. In his review, Greenberg felt that the painter was "zigzagging between the intensity of the easel picture and the blandness of the mural."<sup>771</sup> In 1945, the

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<sup>768</sup> It was at the instigation of a former student, Lee Krasner, and her partner, Jackson Pollock. (Pollock and Krasner did not marry until 25 October, 1944 at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. Compare Hofmann's expressed role as teacher to that of the "not-teacher" of Barnett Newman. See, Shiff, "To Create Oneself," 33.

<sup>769</sup> See Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997): 50.

<sup>770</sup> See the collected papers of Clement Greenberg at the Getty Research Institute, Box 26.

<sup>771</sup> Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation* 157:22 (27 November, 1943): 621.

work of Krasner and Pollock would be shown together for the first time in Howard Putzel's curatorial effort at Gallery 67, "A Problem for the Critics."<sup>772</sup>

Hoffman famously warned Pollock in 1942 that he would repeat himself if he didn't have the stimulus of nature, or of his medium. When Hofmann's *Painting* (fig. 81) was included in the 1944 Janis catalogue, it was accompanied by the following statement from the artist (here excerpted): "I paint from Nature. Nature stimulates in me the imaginative faculty to feel the potentialities of expression which serve to create pictorial life—a quality detached from nature to make possible, 'a pictorial reality'."<sup>773</sup> Resistance and stimulation, the artist insisted, were necessary to engender the pictorial thing. By way of contrast, a number of now-well-known statements by or on the artist were coming into circulation that described the artist as Nature itself. In the catalogue essay for Pollock's 1943 show with Guggenheim, Sweeney quoted Georges Sand and termed Pollock's talent as "volcanic."<sup>774</sup> In both a 1944 interview and his 1947 statement in *Possibilities*, Pollock made reference to his admiration for the artistic techniques of Native American cultures. In both statements, he acknowledged the necessity of technique, but privileged being with, or in, the painting.<sup>775</sup>

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<sup>772</sup> For a contemporary exhibition of the two artists' work, see the exhibition catalogue by Barbara Rose, Betsy Wittenborn Miller, *Dialogue* (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2005). The exhibition was held from 8 December, 2005–28 January, 2006.

<sup>773</sup> Hans Hofmann, as quoted in Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art*, 79.

<sup>774</sup> Quoting Sands, Sweeney wrote that "Talent, will, genius are natural phenomenon, like the lake, the volcano, the mountain, the wind, the star, the cloud." James Johnson Sweeney, "Jackson Pollock," exhibition catalogue from *Art of This Century*, 1943, n.f. Sweeney used these metaphors in an earlier essay of the same year. See, Sweeney, "Five American Painters," *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1944): 77, 122–4.

<sup>775</sup> See respectively, "Jackson Pollock," *Arts & Architecture* (Los Angeles) 61:2 (February 1944): 14, and Pollock, "My Painting," *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947–48): 78–83. See also, See John D. Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art* (April 1937): 236–9, 260. For a discussion of the deep impression that Graham's essay purportedly had upon Jackson Pollock, see Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 94–95, 175–6, 346, n. 147.

Despite having radically different approaches to their painterly practice, both painters struck upon a find in the mid-1940s: the drip, which Pollock later pushed to the limits in his all-over paintings (figs. 82 and 36). Janet Sobel, the self-taught artist, made a similar discovery as early as 1944 (fig. 83). Her work, so free from artifice, garnered admiration from John Dewey, Sidney Janis and Greenberg, who in turn, showed it to Pollock.<sup>776</sup> The point here is not to argue who made the find first; rather, the argument is that by 1944, and certainly no later than 1946, the drip came to signify a radical new means of picture making, one that was authentic—true to the individual, expressive of something that had percolated up from the depths. This new ‘primitivist’ abstraction displaced Surrealist automatism, the kind that was practiced by Max Ernst contemporaneously. The drip was a kind of equal-opportunity mark, one that could be achieved, sincerely, by an artist with Hofmann’s extensive training or by Sobel, who lacked formal training altogether. Or, even by Pollock, who was perhaps somewhere in between. Over time, though, drip, this mark, became proper to Jackson Pollock. The following passages attend to the making of a new Laocoön, a new model, for modern times.

## V. A Laocoön for Modern Times

Be it truth or fable that Love made the first attempt in the imitative arts, thus much is certain: that she never tired of guiding the hand of the great masters of antiquity. For although painting, as the art which reproduces objects upon flat surfaces, in now practised in the broadest sense of that definition, yet the wise Greek set much narrower bounds to it.

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<sup>776</sup> Sobel’s work came to be more widely known through the efforts of Sobel’s son, Sol, who sent letters on her behalf to Dewey, Janis, and Ernst. In her excellent essay on the artist, Gail Levin argues that, “For Dewey, the philosopher of self-realization, Sobel, the self-taught artist, may have represented someone who had become the master of her own destiny.” See Levin, “Janet Sobel: Primitivist, Surrealist, and Abstract Expressionist,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 26:1 (Spring-Summer, 2005): 12. In addition to Dewey’s 1944 introduction, Sidney Janis wrote the introduction to her 1946 show at Art of This Century, which ran from 2–19 January. For the impression that Sobel’s work made on Pollock, see Greenberg, “American-Type Painting,” *Art & Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961): 218.

~ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon*, 1766<sup>777</sup>

It is the goal of art that interests [Lessing] rather than any pleasant vagabondage of fancy or sensibility on the way thither. He will have no expression for the mere sake of expression, no color for the pure delight of color. If the path is beautiful, says Anatole France, let us not ask where it is leading us. Lessing would not have even understood such a use of the word beautiful.

~ Irving Babbitt, *The New Laocoon*, 1910<sup>778</sup>

It suffices to say that there is nothing in the nature of abstract art which compels it to be so. The imperative comes from history, from the age in conjunction with a particular moment reached in a particular tradition of art. This conjunction holds the artist in a vise from which at the present moment he can escape only by surrendering his ambition and returning to a stale past.... We can only dispose of abstract art by assimilating it, by fighting our way through it. Where to? I do not know. Yet it seems to me that the wish to return to the imitation of nature in art has been given no more justification than the desire of certain partisans of abstract art to legislate it into permanency.

~ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 1940<sup>779</sup>

I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real modernist.... But the making of pictures means, among other things, the deliberate creating or choosing of a flat surface, and the deliberate circumscribing and limiting of it. This deliberateness is precisely what Modernist painting harps on: the fact, that is, that the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions.

~ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook*, 1961<sup>780</sup>



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<sup>777</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Noonday Press, 1969): 8.

<sup>778</sup> Irving Babbitt, *The New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 46. Anatole France was the pseudonym of Jacques Anatole Thibault (1844–1924), the novelist and literary critic, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921.

<sup>779</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7:4 (July–August, 1940): 310.

<sup>780</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 102–8. This was the second printed version of a text that was initially delivered as a *Forum Lecture* and printed as one pamphlet in a larger series published by Voice of America (Washington, D.C. Voice of America, 1960).

That the body of the artist is subjected to conditions and restrictions has been a long-standing theorization in the history of art. These restrictions take the form of artistic tradition, history, or at the conjunction of those forces, which is the particularly painful position in which Greenberg located the modern artist. Lessing (1729-1781) was the only one of these three authors who could, in good conscience, write with certainty on the nature and style of the art that was the subject of his study. He famously declared that it was the Greek drive towards Beauty that impelled the sculptors of the Laocoön to give a restrained shape to his lips, unlike their fellow poets, in whose words he wailed in pain (fig. 84). When Kierkegaard wrote of the suppression of suffering that allowed the lips of the poet to be formed so as to make beautiful utterances, that was but one of many complicated understandings of Beauty that would be made by 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers.<sup>781</sup> Babbitt (1865–1933) and Greenberg, as modern Moderns, were in the painfully aware position of being unable to predict the future with certitude. Or, even, to say how a painting might turn out in the end. In his own Laocoön, Greenberg recorded what he saw as a new, historically-derived specialization in the arts that was necessarily accompanied with a surrender:

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of the medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to "hole through" it for realistic perspectival space. In making this surrender, painting not only got rid of imitation—and with it, 'literature'—but also of realistic imitation's corollary confusion between painting and sculpture.<sup>782</sup>

This medium-specific specialization was not a universally-accepted notion in the art world. Compare Greenberg's statement to an aphorism written by Wallace Stevens:

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<sup>781</sup> See n. 691.

<sup>782</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 307.

To a large extent, the problems of poets are the problems of painters, and poets must often turn to the literature of painting for a discussion of their own problems.

The aphorism was published in *View*, the avant-garde and Surrealist journal, in 1940 with 21 others under the title, *Materia Poetica*.<sup>783</sup> In a later essay, Babbitt would associate the “revery” of the stream of consciousness of the Surrealists with his notions of confusion.<sup>784</sup>

The rhetorical construction, on Greenberg’s part, of moving towards a newer Laocoön suggests a dialectical understanding of the paradigm: one that was valid and would be superseded by another, the nature of scope of which was undetermined.<sup>785</sup> However, this did not allow Greenberg to fall into comfortable relativities. In a 1945 review of Gorky’s first one-person show at Julien Levy, Greenberg argued that Gorky had renounced some of his “ambition” and had “taken the easy way out” and, at moments, resorted to “charm” and “biomorphs.”<sup>786</sup> *They Will Take My Island* (fig. 85) is a work of its time, though: the “black looping lines and transparent washes on a white ground” indicated “a partial return to serious painting.”<sup>787</sup>

Greenberg was not alone in the early 1940s in making references to German Enlightenment philosophy in his criticism. Greenberg’s first direct reference to Kant was

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<sup>783</sup> Stevens submitted 39 aphorisms *in toto* arranged in a specific order and with Roman numerals: 22 were published in *View* (September 1940), n.f. following the typescript prepared by Stevens; the remaining 17 were published in *View* (October 1942), n.f. re-sequenced and without numeration. The complete version of *Materia Poetica* that follows Steven’s typescript is re-printed in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997): 916–9.

<sup>784</sup> See Babbitt, “Julien Benda,” in *Being Creative* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1932): 190.

<sup>785</sup> By way of contrast, see George L.K. Morris, “Relations in Painting and Sculpture,” *Partisan Review* 10:1 (January-February 1943): 63–71. This is his response to the problem of ‘confusion’ in the arts that tends towards the “legislate [abstract art] into permanency” attitude.

<sup>786</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 160:12 (24 March, 1945): 342–3.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1941: “As Kant says, you only find what you look for.”<sup>788</sup> (The context for this citation is discussed below.) In 1943, in conjunction with their exhibition of that year (the same one that contained *The Syrian Bull* and *The Rape of Persephone*), the FMPS issued a collective statement that made reference to the German philosopher as well: “As Kant once wrote, ‘The purpose of existence is the development of consciousness.’”<sup>789</sup> These are direct, quick condensations of Kant’s ideas (the strike of the typebars against the paper is practically audible.) They were cited in efforts to get some kind of other work done or point made: art shown, criticism published, etc. In the case of the FMPS, the membership was affirming its internationalist outlook (and membership) and the Humanist of its art in the face of menacing war-time nationalism, which had caused so many European artists to flee to New York.<sup>790</sup> In a hubristic, prescient statement, they wrote that: “[T]he responsibility either to salvage and develop, or frustrate Western creative capacity...may be largely ours for a good part of the century to come.”<sup>791</sup>

A scholarly treatment of Kant’s work had appeared the previous year. A slim volume of lectures delivered by John Dewey on German philosophy was re-published in 1942.<sup>792</sup> Dewey sought “to account for Germany’s political behavior in terms of German academic philosophy,” in the early years of the First World War, and again in the Second

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<sup>788</sup> Greenberg, “The Renaissance of the Little Magazine,” *Partisan Review* 8:1 (January-February, 1941): 75–6.

<sup>789</sup> Statement written on the occasion of the Third Annual Exhibition of the Modern Painters and Sculptors, Wildenstein & Co., 2 June–26 June, 1943. Held in the Papers of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. For passing reference to this use of Kant, see Ashton, *The New York School*, 126.

<sup>790</sup> For a discussion of the ‘globalism’ of the FMPS, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 72–9.

<sup>791</sup> Statement written on the occasion of the Third Annual Exhibition of the Modern Painters and Sculptors, Wildenstein & Co., 2 June–26 June, 1943. Held in the Papers of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

<sup>792</sup> See John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1942); the volume was initially published as, Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1915). The philosopher had delivered three lectures in February 1915 at the University of North Carolina.



World War.<sup>793</sup> The timing was significant. As Dewey argued, the modifications (perversions) of classical philosophy were connected:

[W]ith the fact that actual conditions in Germany had altered so much that Hitler had to reach a stratum of the population, if he was to come to power, which would have remained cold to the ideological approach of Germany's classic philosophy.<sup>794</sup>

Dewey discussed a number of German philosophers in his text, including Nietzsche and the then-current fashion of resorting to his work “for explanation of what seems to them otherwise inexplicable.”<sup>795</sup>

It was, however, with Kant with whom he began and ended. In terms of understanding the character of modern German civilization, the chief marker was the “combination of self-conscious idealism with unsurpassed technical efficiency.”<sup>796</sup> Were this not “a realization in fact of what is found in Kant,” Dewey declared that he would be “at a loss for a name by which to characterize it.”<sup>797</sup> The acceptance of the Kantian dualism (discussed below) freed humanity “at a single stroke from superstition, sentimentalism, and moral and theological romanticism” at the same time that it provided the authorization and stimulation to “the detailed efforts of man to wrest from nature her secrets of causal law.”<sup>798</sup> Deep in the deep in the 18<sup>th</sup> century lied the 20<sup>th</sup>-century origins for the unprecedented mobilization of resources and the drive towards an ever larger, more efficient military in Germany—not that Kant could have predicted the current situation, nor approved of it. This was certainly not what the great philosopher had

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<sup>793</sup> A.J. Ayer, “The Legacy of Kant,” *The Nation* 155: 26 (26 December, 1942): 722. This review appeared in the same number as Greenberg’s review of a joint exhibition of Joseph Cornell and Laurence Vail. See, Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 155:26 (26 December, 1942): 727.

<sup>794</sup> John Dewey, “Foreword to Revised Edition,” in *German Philosophy and Politics*, 5.

<sup>795</sup> Dewey, “The Two Worlds,” in *German Philosophy and Politics*, 69.

<sup>796</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>797</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>798</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

intended. The current situation in Germany was a perversion of Enlightenment thought: “One can hardly use the word ‘philosophy’ in connection with Hitler’s outgivings without putting quotation marks around it.”<sup>799</sup> Elsewhere in his narrative, he argued that: “Time heals physical ravages, but it may only accentuate the evils of an intellectual catastrophe—for by no less name can we call a systematic intellectual error.”<sup>800</sup> The traits that benefit “thinking effectiveness for the good give it also potency for harm.”<sup>801</sup> Ideas, being abstract, lingual, can operate “in remote climes and alien situations.”<sup>802</sup>

However, as Dewey argued, Kant, the Enlightenment figure, also break with the Enlightenment in his suggestion that humanity was not essentially good, rather that morality was “a ceaseless battle to transform all the natural desires of man into willing servants of law and the purpose of reason.”<sup>803</sup> It can be extrapolated from Dewey’s argument that the perversion of Enlightenment thought in Germany in the 1930s and after was to reverse—brutally—the primacy of the Kantian realms: from the inner (free) to the outer (‘natural’), so that humanity was, once again, facing terror. This “totally new situation,” Dewey argued, gave:

[T]he democratic way of life a significance it never had before. Peoples committed to this way of life now have to demonstrate that this method of attaining social unity...is as superior to the Hitlerian method of violent suppression as the better elements of human nature are superior to the baser elements which Hitler first appealed to and then organized with true German thoroughness.<sup>804</sup>

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<sup>799</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>801</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>803</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. See Dewey’s discussion of the subtle, all-important differences between the German concept of ‘*Zivilisation*’ (the “by-product of the needs engendered when people live close together”) and ‘*Kultur*’ (“the fruit of man’s natural motives which have been transformed by the inner spirit” that “involves the slow toil of education of Inner Life” and a “conquest of the community won through devotion to ‘duty’.”).

<sup>804</sup> Dewey, “Foreword to Revised Edition,” in *German Philosophy and Politics*, 6.

At this juncture in his analysis, Dewey marked the subtle, all-important difference between the German concept of *Zivilisation*, the “by-product of the needs engendered when people live close together,” and *Kultur*, “the fruit of man’s natural motives which have been transformed by the inner spirit” that “involves the slow toil of education of Inner Life” and a “conquest of the community won through devotion to ‘duty’.”<sup>805</sup> The perversion of philosophy that Dewey saw in 1942 was the liquidation of *Kultur* into *Zivilisation*. (This distinction between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* will appear again in T.S. Eliot’s exchange with the editors in the pages of *Partisan Review* in 1944.)

As culture (in Germany and elsewhere) became increasingly “indifferent and insusceptible to the impact of critical thought,” Herbert Marcuse argued in 1941, the role of the critic became all the more vital.<sup>806</sup> This presumes that the critic has not lost sight of his or her “world-historical task.” This other kind of confusion also drew Babbitt’s concern in the 1930s, and that of Walter Benjamin. Both Babbitt and Benjamin turned to the work of Julien Benda (1867–1956), whose *La Trahison des Clercs* had been published in 1927, and which was available in English as of 1928.<sup>807</sup> In 1932, Babbitt wrote admiringly of Benda’s sharp critique of the duplicity of the intellectuals in shirking their responsibilities; when Benjamin wrote his critique in 1934, the situation was all the more dire:

According to Benda, ever since intellectuals came into being, their world-historical task has been to teach the universal, abstract values of mankind:

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<sup>805</sup> Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, 94–6.

<sup>806</sup> Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 429. (Hereafter, SPSS.)

<sup>807</sup> See Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: W. Morrow & Company, 1928). Benda would go on to edit *The Living Thoughts of Kant* in 1940, which served as a general introduction to the English-language readers. His introduction emphasized the Humanism of Kant’s philosophy. See, Benda, “Presenting Kant,” in *The Living Thoughts of Kant*, ed. Alfred O. Mendel (New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1940): 1–38

freedom, justice, and humanity. But now, with [Charles] Maurras and [Maurice] Barrès...and [Oswald] Spengler, they have begin to betray those values, whose guardians they have been for centuries....The bitter necessities of reality, the maxims of *Realpolitik*, were defended by the *clerics* in earlier times, but not even Machiavelli tried to embellish them with the pathos of ethical precepts.<sup>808</sup>

Still later, in 1953, Rosenberg would call to account the “confusions inherent in the concept of revolutionary art.” So long as the conditions that created the confusion persisted, it would be an impossible task to undo the confusion. What was more important was to “expose that there is a confusion, especially now that the adulteration of art with politics (and of politics with art) has ceased to be innocent.”<sup>809</sup> To Benda, Benjamin, and Dewey, too, the adulteration had never been innocent in modern times.



In resorting to the aesthetic category, Greenberg understood ambitious painting as a form of dissent from the prevailing order of things. In a 1944 review, he wrote in support of the FMPS membership, which included “a good many of the most advanced and important artists in this country.”<sup>810</sup> The membership had recently criticized MoMA for its recent conservative exhibition choices.<sup>811</sup> Greenberg concurred, and he was concerned that the ruling class had yanked hard on its proverbial umbilical cord of gold:

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<sup>808</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Present Social Situation of the French Writer,” in WBSW, Vol. I, 748. See also, Clement Greenberg, “Books,” *Politics* (February 1944): 27. In this review of Albert Guéard’s book, *Napoleon III: An Interpretation* (Harvard University Press), Greenberg takes the author to task for the “rehabilitation job” that was part of the “ransacking of the past now going on among sedentary people who look for some scheme to insure the future against class warfare.”

<sup>809</sup> Rosenberg, “Revolution and the Idea of Beauty” *Encounter* 1:3 (December 1953): 65–8. Revised and re-published in “Revolution and the Concept of Beauty,” *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960, 1994).

<sup>810</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 158:7 (12 February, 1944): 195.

<sup>811</sup> *Romantic Painting in America* (exhibition number 246) was held from 17 November, 6 February, 1944; see the MoMA Archives, Public Information Records, C/E 1944–45. *Americans 1943: Realists and Magic Realists*, (exhibition number 217), was held from 10 February 10–21 March 21, 1943. See the MoMA Archives, Public Information Records, microfilm no. 2/427.

“Give us the romantic, the realistic, the descriptive, and the immediately erotic, and the chic. It fits us better, mirrors us better, and moves us quicker. Since we pay for art, we have a right to the kind we want.”<sup>812</sup>

When asked, late in life, if his insistence on the autonomy of art was “a political stance” or “a form of resistance to bourgeois cultural dominance,” Greenberg’s response was succinct: “That’s shit...” “The truth in it,” he continued, “is that modernism and the avant-garde were traditionally a form of dissent. That’s the way it looks to me.”<sup>813</sup>

## VI. (Immanent) Judgment

If, now, if in this comparison, imagination (as the faculty of intuitions *a priori*) is undesignedly brought into accord with understanding, (as the faculty of concepts) by means of a given representation, and a feeling of pleasure is thereby aroused, then the object must be regarded as final for the reflective judgment. A judgement of this kind is an aesthetic judgement upon the finality of the Object, which does not depend upon any present concept of the object, and does not provide one. When the form of an object (as opposed to the matter or its representation, as sensation) is, in the mere act of reflecting upon it, without regard to any concept to be obtained from it, estimated as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an Object, then this pleasure is also judged to be combined necessarily with the representation of it, and so not merely for the Subject apprehending this form, but for all in general who pass judgment. The object is then called beautiful; and the faculty of judging by means of such a pleasure (and so also with universal validity) is called taste.

~ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 1790<sup>814</sup>

It is at this point, where the beautiful and the honorific meet and blend that a discrimination between serviceability and wastefulness is most difficult in any concrete case. It frequently happens that an article which serves the honorific purpose of conspicuous waste is at the same time a beautiful object; at the same application of labour to which it owes its

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<sup>812</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 158:7 (12 February, 1944): 196. See also, Greenberg’s review of Georgia O’Keeffe in 1946: “Art,” *The Nation* 162:24 (15 June, 1946): 727–8.

<sup>813</sup> See Saul Ostrow, “Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview,” in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, 237.

<sup>814</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, ed., trans., and intro. by James Creed Meredith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952): 30–1.

utility for the former purpose may, and often does, go to give beauty of form and colour to the article.

~ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899<sup>815</sup>

[Veblen] explains culture through trash, not vice versa.

~ Theodor Adorno, "Veblen's Attack on Culture," 1941<sup>816</sup>

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A.G. Baumgarten conceived the term 'aesthetics' (from the Gk. *aisthesis*) in 1735 "to designate a projected discipline which was to do for sensate, or 'confused' knowledge what logic did for rational, or demonstrative, knowledge."⁸¹⁷ Writing after Baumgarten in 1790, Immanuel Kant negotiated the human encounter of, or with, the sensate necessarily differently. In Kant's rhetoric, an apparent lacuna exists between the constitutive realms of Freedom and of Nature (or, of brute force). He understood the conditions for the possibility of Nature to be those of space (external) and of Time (internal). On the side of Freedom is the supersensible thing-in-itself (*das ding-in-sich*), which is not spacio-temporal. If Baumgarten's work did for the sensate what logos did for reason, then Kant's rendering of the sensate, in turn, did no violence to Newtonian science. Instead, it gave a proper realm to the perceptible that did not impose itself upon the mechanics of the universe.⁸¹⁸ Kant gave a place (a value) to the perceiving Subject. He did not make that experience determining, or equate it with an empirical judgment. Rather, he made it one of *æsthetics*.

⁸¹⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1899, 1998): 128–9.

⁸¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Veblen's Attack on Culture," *SPSS* 9 (1941): 394.

⁸¹⁷ Jeffrey Barnouw, "The Beginnings of 'Æsthetics' and the Leibnizian Conception of Sensation," in *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 52.

⁸¹⁸ Discussion with Professor Jeffrey Barnouw at the University of Texas at Austin on 18 November, 1999 greatly clarified my thinking about this.

The move towards the beautiful, within Kant, is towards a concord between the faculties and the world—an experience of the adequacy of those faculties—where we are correlative to nature (if not part of it).⁸¹⁹ The structure of the judgment of the beautiful, for Kant, affirms the universality of mankind. The judgment of the universal is not by means of an accretion (or, the momentum) of particulars, rather, it is the universal *within* the Subject responding to a particular sensation. Judgment, then, mediates between the faculties of Cognition, or Understanding, and of the Will, or Reason: it is not in itself constitutive.

Kant made the following distinction within the category of the beautiful: “The beauty of nature is a *beautiful thing*; beauty of art is a *beautiful representation* of a thing.”⁸²⁰ The response to the content of a work of art is not cognitive, and, therefore, remains unexpressed. Alternately, he posited the sublime as such: “It is an object (of nature) the *representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas*.”⁸²¹ An experience of the sublime, is necessarily the experience of the inadequacy of one’s faculties, between the Self and Nature. If the beautiful, for Kant, is *transcendental*, then the sublime is *transcendent*. For Kant, the sublime rounded out the æsthetic judgment, along with taste and beauty.

The categories of autonomous art and uniquely-actuated individuals as conceived by Kant, Horkheimer argued much later in 1941, were under attack by the societal violence of modern times. In “Art and Mass Culture,” he ventured into mass culture via the philosophical works of Kant and the American pragmatists. Autonomous art, as the last

⁸¹⁹ Jeffrey Barnouw, “The Beginnings of ‘Æsthetics’ and the Leibnizian Conception of Sensation,” 30.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid.*, 172. Emphasis in the original.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, 119. Emphasis in the original.

preserve of the promise of utopia previously found in religion, today “survives only in those works which uncompromisingly express the gulf between the monadic individual and his barbarous surrounding—prose like James Joyce’s and paintings like Picasso’s *Guernica*.”⁸²² Horkheimer would have seen *Guernica* in New York City, safely installed at the Museum of Modern Art as of 1939—far from the brutality that had incited its creation (see fig. 48):

On giving downtrodden humans a shocking awareness of their own despair, the work of art professes a freedom which makes them foam at the mouth. The generation that allowed Hitler to become great takes its adequate pleasure in the convulsions which the animated cartoon imposes upon its helpless characters, not in Picasso, who offers no recreation and cannot be ‘enjoyed’ anyhow.⁸²³

In his art, Picasso had rendered the violence (or, shock) of modern life visible (or, conscious) through artistic *disfiguration* (not through propaganda). He produced works that were challenging in that they demanded that the viewer give him or herself over to them. It presupposes a ‘self’ to give.⁸²⁴ In Picasso’s case, it is not just a question of form or content, but one of technique as well. Horkheimer here saw the ambitious work of art as providing no solace or easy comfort in its presentation.

However, by the criteria of American art historian Mortimer J. Adler, whose book *Art & Prudence* occasioned Horkheimer’s essay, the greatest artist of the day was neither Joyce nor Picasso, but Walt Disney. Disney, who would later be a cooperative witness for the McCarthy hearings, was deemed so because he reached “perfection in his field that surpasses our best critical capacity to analyze and at the same time please[d] children and

⁸²² Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” SPSS 9 (1941): 294.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸²⁴ Discussion with Professor Peter Jelavich at the University of Texas at Austin on 17 April, 2001 clarified my thinking on the difference between the techniques of these two artists.

simple folk.”⁸²⁵ What Adler championed in Disney’s popularity, Horkheimer understood as a dangerous acculturation of the masses to their own subjugation and destruction.

While this may be a case of Horkheimer conflating pragmatism with positivism, he rightly concluded that “error has no less often united men than truth... Truth can make no pacts with ‘prevailing customs’. In the era of witch hunts, opposition to the public spirit would have been moral.”⁸²⁶ Modifying the Kantian question, he asked how anything new could be done or thought if everything was mere adaptation? He concluded with the passage from Dewey, who argued that, “indifference to response of the immediate audience is a necessary trait of all artists that have something new to say.”⁸²⁷

Autonomous art, in its dissonance, was then the keeper of the truth in the face of mass culture, even if in its own time it is not understood, or appears to be speaking in tongues:

One day we may learn that in the depths of their hearts, the masses, even in fascist countries, secretly knew the truth and disbelieved the lie, like katatonic patients who make known only at the end of their trance that nothing has escaped them. Therefore it may not be entirely senseless to continue speaking a language that is not easily understood.⁸²⁸

VII: Zig Zag

When contemplating an object, a connoisseur immediately and simultaneously gets a sense of touch, taste, smell, etc., of the object, on other works the individual history of this object records itself in the individual reaction and sensation of all human organs. Highest taste oscillates somewhere between the naïve clumsiness of the child and the utter wisdom of the most accomplished technique.

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, 298-299.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, 304. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York, 1934): 104.

⁸²⁸ Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” 304.

~ John D. Graham, John D. Graham, “What is good taste?” in *System and Dialectics of Art*, 1937⁸²⁹

In order to act as an agent and stir up good writing, there must be some kind of positive notion, some working hypothesis, a bias in a particular direction, even a prejudice, as to what this good writing of the future will be like. As Kant says, you only find what you look for. I don’t mean by this that it is necessary to be dogmatic and to have fixed ideas against which everything is to be measured. I mean simply that more thinking and inquiring should be done about the problem.

~ Clement Greenberg, *Partisan Review*, 1941⁸³⁰

There was a special sense of triumph when Greenberg trotted out the reference to Kant; for one thing, the reference was a little arcane, and there was a special cachet in citing a philosopher who did not fall anywhere within the Marxist canon. But sometimes the reference did sound rather sententious coming from Greenberg’s lips, and Delmore [Schwartz] would growl, “Clem is always putting on the dog—intellectually speaking.” And then he turned to rebuke me at my silence: “Listen, you know Clem doesn’t know what he’s talking about when he mentions Kant. Why don’t you show him up?”

~ William Barrett, *The Truants*, 1982⁸³¹

I felt my experience confirmed Kant.

~ Clement Greenberg, 1994⁸³²

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In 1938, William Phillips argued that “the value of Kant’s system, for example, is hardly a live issue outside of the classroom; whereas Marxism is debated in the streets,

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<sup>829</sup> John D. Graham, “43. What is good taste?” in *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937): 48–9.

<sup>830</sup> Greenberg, “The Renaissance of the Little Magazine,” *Partisan Review* 8:1 (January-February, 1941): 75–6. This is Greenberg’s first explicit, published reference to Kant. See also, Bertold Brecht’s 1933 statement, “You cannot just ‘write the truth’; you have to write it for and to somebody, who can do something with it....” Cited in Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977): 141. Perhaps more immediate to Greenberg’s point was Baudelaire’s famous statement made in his review of the Salon of 1846: “To be just, that is to say, to justify its existence, criticism should be partisan, passionate, and political, that is to say written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons.” See Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846,” in *The Mirror of Art*, ed. trans., notes, illus., Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1955): 44.

<sup>831</sup> William Barnett, *The Truants: Adventures Amongst the Intellectuals* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982): 138.

<sup>832</sup> Saul Ostrow, “Clement Greenberg: The Last Interview,” in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, 237.

gaining new supporters when the working class is flushed with victories, and losing them after defeats.”<sup>833</sup> Were Phillips’ distinction ever true, it did not hold for long. In 1941, Greenberg ‘trotted out’ his first direct reference to Kant. In his essay, “The Renaissance of the Little Magazine,” Greenberg argued that the re-birth of the Little Magazine had much to do with the collapse of the intellectual authority of Stalinism as the presence of transplanted Europeans who had come with the “realization” that the U.S. was the “only important place left where it is still possible to pursue culture without the too immediate interference of events.”<sup>834</sup> Writers in New York were “on the spot,” he concluded. However, the results were not always good. Greenberg referred to the contents of the newly-published *Experimental Review* as “*Schwärmerei*, fake surrealism, *transition* bunk, which a psychiatrist would return to his patient for revision.”<sup>835</sup>

Eugen Jolas, the former editor of *transition*, the Paris-based *avant-garde* Little Magazine that ran from 1928 through 1938, objected. By 1941, Jolas was one of the European transplants working on the spot as contributor and translator at *Partisan Review*, objected to Greenberg’s “cheap” dismissal of a publication “that for ten years presented practically all the modern movements that are now the fashion here—expressionism, dadaism, abstractionism, Stein, Joyce, etc....” and—perhaps for acutely for the present situation—the work of Kafka, who rendered in his stories an “alien mood of paroxysm, guilt [and] *weltangst*, which we all feel now.”<sup>836</sup> Jolas’ assertion of his hard-won modernist credentials fell upon deaf ears at *Partisan Review*. In an earlier

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<sup>833</sup> William Phillips, “The Devil Theory of the Dialectic: A Reply to Edmund Wilson,” *Partisan Review* 6:1 (Fall 1938): 90.

<sup>834</sup> See also, William Petersen, “What Has Become of Them? A Check-List of European Artists, Writers and Musicians,” *Partisan Review* 8:1 (January-February 1941): 59–62.

<sup>835</sup> Greenberg, “The Renaissance of the Little Magazine,” *Partisan Review* 8:1 (January-February, 1941): 73.

<sup>836</sup> See Jolas, “Letters,” *Partisan Review*, 8:3, (May-June 1941): 254.

review of the last edition of *transition*, Dwight MacDonald argued that the “decay” of *transition* was as much a symptom of “the decay of bourgeois culture” as it was also a comment on the impossibility of maintaining the “above-the-battle attitude in a period of great social tension,” such had been practiced at *transition* in their “metaphysical” critique of capitalism.<sup>837</sup> To Macdonald, Jolas’ outlook was not political enough, not engaged enough; to Greenberg, it was not critical enough.

An early attack on Greenberg’s art criticism came from Nicolas Calas (1907–1989), the Surrealist poet and art critic. In a lengthy letter published in *View* in 1940, Calas leveled a number of attacks against *Partisan Review* generally and Greenberg personally:

I well understand that *Partisan Review* is forced to back abstract art—it is in fact the only consistent point in its policy but it is a pity that the editors cannot do it in a more straightforward way. Perhaps then it would not be Mr. Greenberg who would write articles on abstract art, because otherwise how are we to explain that this critic paints pictures that are the exact opposite of what abstract painting should be? ... [C]an *Partisan Review* be considered anything but a bureaucratically directed paper? Does not its policy that zigzags from Trotsky to T.S. Eliot follow a broken cultural line?

...

May I suggest...that *Partisan Review*...[turn] into a monthly supplement of the *Commonwealth*, where no doubt its jesuit [*sic*] methods would be appreciated by T.S. Eliot? Mr. Greenberg’s non-abstract paintings, although not good enough to interest the New Laocoon, could then be miraculously transformed into works of art through holy blessing.<sup>838</sup>

Elsewhere in the letter, Calas criticized Greenberg for not knowing about the theories of Élie Faure. Greenberg may not have known Faure’s theories intimately in 1940, but he

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<sup>837</sup> See, Dwight MacDonald, “Exit *Transition*,” *Partisan Review* 5:3 (August-September 1938): 74–75. For Jolas’ account of transition, see Eugen Jolas, “Ten Years Transition,” *Plastique* 3 (Spring 1938), n.f.

<sup>838</sup> Nicolas Calas, “View Listens,” *View* 1:2 (October 1940):1, 5. As Michael Leja has noted, T.J. Clark’s description of Greenberg’s purported “Eliotic Trotskyism” was anticipated by Calas. See Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 223, 360 n.52. For Clark’s coinage of the phrase, see Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” reprinted in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985): 54. Calas wrote a hostile review of Greenberg’s 1961 “Modernist Painting” essay. See Calas, “The Enterprise of Criticism,” in *Art in the Age of Risk* (New York: Dutton, 1968): 139–42. This essay had initially been published in *Arts Magazine* (September-October 1967).

did by 1945. The “exalted prattle” that was showing up in English-language art criticism since the arrival of the Surrealists in New York had been seen previously in French art writing “since Faure.”<sup>839</sup>

While Greenberg may never have sent one of his pictures to Eliot for benediction, he had several encounters with the poet in print.<sup>840</sup> In his 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg made reference to his debt to Eliot in his own understanding of *kitsch*. “Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*,” he argued.<sup>841</sup> The result, in Repin’s case, was that the “‘reflected’ effect [was] already included in the picture, ready for the spectator’s unreflective enjoyment.”<sup>842</sup> Greenberg continued:

T.S. Eliot said something to the same effect for the shortcomings of English Romantic poetry. Indeed, the Romantics can be considered the original sinners whose guilt kitsch inherited. They showed kitsch how. What does Keats write about mainly, if not the effect of poetry upon himself?<sup>843</sup>

By 1944, Greenberg, for one, found Eliot’s ideas less useful. Eliot contributed “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture,” to which a number of critics associated with *Partisan Review* later that year.<sup>844</sup>

Eliot used a similar construction in the title of his essay to the one Greenberg had employed in 1940. Despite the presence of the word Towards, Eliot advocated for a very

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<sup>839</sup> “Pictures and Prattle,” *The Nation* 162:4 (26 January, 1946): 378.

<sup>840</sup> Greenberg did, however, refer to *View* as being “good for gossip,” but “putrescent” for publishing a letter from reader who gave a literary description of the masses of war refugees making their way through France. See Greenberg, “The Renaissance of the Little Magazine,” 72.

<sup>841</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6:5 (Autumn 1939): 44. In the revised version of this essay, Greenberg noted, “much to my dismay,” that he had mis-attributed the work he had had in mind in 1939 to Repin. “That showed my provincialism with regard to Russian art in the nineteenth century,” he concluded. See Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture*, 21.

<sup>842</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>843</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, n. 4.

<sup>844</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture,” *Partisan Review* 11:2 (Spring 1944): 145–57. Eliot’s essay had been published initially in *The New English Weekly* (January–February 1943).

different idea of culture. In Eliot's rhetoric, "culture" is impossible without "a culture," (or, what Dewey had distinguished as *Zivilisation*).<sup>845</sup> That Eliot saw "the schematic structure of the Culture...as fixed," put the poet in basic agreement, Greenberg argued, "more or less," with Spengler.<sup>846</sup> In a time of declining culture, such as the one in which Eliot found himself, the artist "at best" makes "the best he can of a disintegrated state," or he is "a victim of it." If, under these circumstances, the artist exaggerated "the importance of his art," it is in reaction to a world that is "indifferent, scornful, amused or frightened."<sup>847</sup> As the problems afflicting culture were not solely political, a proper solution would have to be more than political. At this juncture in his argument, Eliot, who had converted to Anglicanism in 1927, made his most controversial claim: "The cultural problem...is inseparable from the religious problem."<sup>848</sup>

This claim met with different degrees of skepticism from the respondents, who were: I.A. Richards, R.P. Blackmur, Greenberg, and Phillips.<sup>849</sup> Richards, a life-long friend of the poet, offered the kindest critique, with which he was in "reluctant agreement," and

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<sup>845</sup> Eliot, "Notes Towards a Definition of Culture," 145.

<sup>846</sup> Greenberg, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion," 305.

<sup>847</sup> Eliot, "Notes Towards a Definition of Culture," 145.

<sup>848</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151. Eliot maintained this distinction, even in his analysis of post-War Europe. See, Eliot, Preface to Helena Sikorska, *Dark Side of the Moon* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947): vii–xi. In the substantially revised version of his response, Greenberg criticized Eliot for confusing civilization and culture, which suggests that he may have read Dewey's 1942 essays on Kant. See, Greenberg, "The Plight of Culture," in *Art and Culture*, 22–33.

<sup>849</sup> Richard Palmer Blackmur (1904–1965) was a literary critic and poet. He was one of the editors and contributors to *Hound & Horn* (1928–34), which was started by Lincoln Kirstein and Varian Fry, both of whom were undergraduates at Harvard. Blackmur was self-taught and never, technically, enrolled at Harvard. In 1940, he moved to Princeton University, where he taught creative writing and English literature until his death. He also founded the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton. Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893–1979) began his teaching career at Cambridge University and concluded it at Harvard with extended tours of China. He had published, with C.K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning* in 1923. Richards' correspondence with Eliot on 'belief' dates back to 1926. Along with George Marshall and Robert Oppenheimer, he and Eliot were awarded honorary degrees at Harvard in 1947.

limited his comments to the implications for education.<sup>850</sup> Blackmur reoriented Eliot's comments with a "secular conversion" and reassembled them: "A common faith and order make up the body of beliefs which gives cultures significance."<sup>851</sup> Due to the homogenizing effects of pop culture, there would soon be "little diversity of cultures for Mr. Eliot's common religious faith to unify," Greenberg warned.<sup>852</sup> "Tin Pan Alley, the Luce publications (with editions in all languages), Coca-Cola...class interests, and a common boss...are all quite compatibly, incidentally, with religion, but not at all with socialism," he concluded.<sup>853</sup> Phillips, perhaps, leveled the most serious charges: "One can no more imagine *Finnegans Wake*, say, or abstract art, in a socialist world than in the medieval one."<sup>854</sup> Eliot's mistake was to assume that Modernism would "carry on, only under more favorable conditions" in "a compact and orderly ecclesiastical culture." Or, what Phillips referred to elsewhere in his essay as a kind of "clerical fascism."<sup>855</sup> Modernity without the Modernist critique is a bleak thought, at the very least; but Phillips' comments are a reminder that that critique comes with the conditions of Modernity.

At times, the discursive exchange achieved relatively high levels of criticism; clearly, at others, the level of discourse sunk to the level of personality.<sup>856</sup> Schwartz, Calas and

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<sup>850</sup> Richards, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion," *Partisan Review* 11:3 (Summer 1944): 311.

<sup>851</sup> Blackmur, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion," 303.

<sup>852</sup> Greenberg, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion," 307.

<sup>853</sup> *Ibid.* For references to the financial backing of *Partisan Review* by Henry Luce, publisher of *Time*, in the amount of \$10,000 in 1952, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press): 162–163, 335, *et passim*. *Partisan Review* was only ever published in English.

<sup>854</sup> Phillips, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion," 308–9.

<sup>855</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>856</sup> For a sharp-tongued exchange between Rosenberg and Greenberg, see the Letters page, *Partisan Review* 9:3 (May–June 1942): 269. For another equally-tart exchange between Morris and Greenberg, see Morris, "On Critics and Greenberg: A Communication," *Partisan Review* 15:6 (June 1948): 681–5; and Greenberg, "Reply," *Partisan Review* 15:6 (June 1948): 685–6.

others, who suggested that Greenberg was in over his head intellectually—or, that he flat out got Kant wrong—were looking for Greenberg to be a theorist and to deploy Kantian thought appropriately. However, Greenberg found his experiences before certain works of art confirmed in Kant (not *by* Kant—like Newman, Greenberg was not looking for an authoritative personality to follow).

#### VIII. Taste (Disinterest and the Disinherited)

[The man of Taste] will be enthusiastic over one *Work of Art* at one moment and unfaithful to it the next, because it can only raise his enthusiasm so long as it remains the newest form of Art and because he is always haunted by the fear that in the meantime an ever newer form of Art will crowd out his newest. . . . It has never before been so difficult, so strenuous, to be a Philistine of culture.

~ Hermann Baer, *Expressionismus*, 1916<sup>857</sup>

Investigate why the concept of Taste is obsolete. It emerged in the early stages of capitalism. Now we are in the late stages.

~ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Critic,” ca. 1931<sup>858</sup>

No longer detached from the work of art, since it deals with the taste of art, the history of culture is made one with the history of art. It has departed from intuition of the work of art by a journey through all the domains of the mind; and it returns to the intuition of the work of art and of the personality of the artist, enriched with a complete humanity.

~ Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, 1936<sup>859</sup>

An action is not a matter of taste.

~ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 1952<sup>860</sup>

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<sup>857</sup> Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus*, trans. R.T. Gribble (London: Frank Henderson, 1925): 16–7. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>858</sup> Walter Benjamin, fragment written ca. 1931, unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime. Printed in WBSW, Vol. II, 549. For Benjamin’s comments on Taste, see “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” WBSW, Vol. IV, 3–98.

<sup>859</sup> Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, trans. Charles Marriott, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1936): 317.

<sup>860</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 50.



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The problem of Taste has posed real and long-standing methodological paradoxes.⁸⁶¹ In 1934, Schapiro contributed an essay on Taste to *The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*.⁸⁶² The essay is demonstrative of the wound that Taste, as an objective concept, had been delivered by dialectical thought; in this respect, Schapiro's essay is very much one of its time. Taste, in the classical sense, is the "choosing" sense, as Schapiro argued: "It is the typical context of immediate and unreflecting judgments of the acceptable and the unacceptable."⁸⁶³ Taste should allow for the discernment between a work of art that is work marveling in front of from one this is not. The problems begin when Taste is extended into the social (political, commercial) realm:

In so far as the dominant class believes that its conduct and interests do not issue from exterior compulsions, like the conduct of the lower classes, but from considerations of the aesthetic pleasure of free individuals, the concept of good taste is extended to the larger activity of the class.⁸⁶⁴

What had hitherto been understood as natural, Schapiro saw as ideological: changes in period styles were "clearly related to the ideologies and situations of the dominant class."⁸⁶⁵ In this respect, Taste is, therefore, conservative and refers to the "discreet and restrained and conventional in art."⁸⁶⁶ Which is why, as Phillips would argue in his 1944 response to Eliot, that the *avant-garde*—who

⁸⁶¹ See also, Frank P. Chambers, *Cycles of Taste: An Unacknowledged Problem in Ancient Art and Criticism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928.

⁸⁶² Schapiro, "Taste," in *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. XIV (Servitudes–Trade Associations), eds. Edwin R.A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson (New York: Macmillan, 1934): 523–5.

⁸⁶³ *Ibid.*, 523.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 524.

⁸⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

were also part of the elite—tended to be radical, dissident, innovative and uncompromising.⁸⁶⁷

Two comments from Clement Greenberg made in 1947 are useful at this juncture:

Since, according to Kant (and this reviewer agrees with him), art gives one the sensation of a thing without necessarily including its meaning.

Conversation had already begun to flag ten years ago; our public pronouncements, our pleasures, our entertainment, our literature and art were already losing their pertinence. Today they seem...radically irrelevant.⁸⁶⁸

These comments appear in an essay by Greenberg that was prompted by Philip Wylie's *An Essay on Morals*. That "a writer of popular fiction undistinguished even in its own sphere" has noticed similar things suggested to Greenberg that, "the situation must be even more serious than we realize."⁸⁶⁹ That market forces could reify experiences and people into entertainment and things was a weighty commonplace for this generation of critics. To trust the sensations of the (unconditioned) unreflective judgments of the eye may have been the most radical of all stances.

In a 1950 essay, Leo Löwenthal would arrive at a similar distinction: "the counter-concept to popular culture is art."⁸⁷⁰ It is the difference between "an insight through a medium possessing self-sustaining means and mere repetition of given facts with the use

⁸⁶⁷ Phillips, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion," 309.

⁸⁶⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Pessimism for Mass Consumption," *Commentary* 4:4 (October 1947): 393–4. This appeared in the same number as John Dewey's "Liberating the Social Scientist: A Plea to Unshackle the Study of Man," 378–85.

⁸⁶⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Pessimism for Mass Consumption," 394. For Wylie's book, see *An Essay on Morals* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1947).

⁸⁷⁰ Leo Löwenthal, "Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 55 (1950). Reprinted in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press and the Falcon's Wing Press, 1957): 49, 46–58

of borrowed tools.’’⁸⁷¹ However, in modern culture, diversion has replaced real experience. The meaningful experience promised by art—the greater individual fulfillment that is Aristotle’s *catharsis*—was being discarded by popular culture. Popular culture (like ‘Primitivism’) belongs to Modernity, as does the autonomous work of art and the self-critical attitude of Modernism—provided that there is a self left to critique and an actuated body.

IX. Doubts and Promises Broken (ca. 1947)

The realm of the concept of nature under the one legislation, and that of the concept of freedom under the other, are completely cut off from all reciprocal influence, that they might severally (each according to its own principles) exert upon the other, by the broad gulf [*Kluft*] that divides the supersensible from phenomena. The concept of freedom determines nothing in respect to the theoretical cognition of nature; and the concept of nature likewise nothing in respect of the practical laws of freedom. To that extent, then, it is not possible to throw a bridge from the one realm to the other. — Yet although the determining grounds of causality according to the concept of freedom (and the practical rule that this contains) have no place in nature, and the sensible cannot determine the supersensible in the Subject; still the converse is possible (not, it is true, in respect of the knowledge of nature, but of the consequences arising from the supersensible and bearing on the sensible).

~ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 1790⁸⁷²

The defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass-produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimeters.

~ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947⁸⁷³

To experience beauty is to be liberated from the overpowering domination of nature over men. In popular culture, men free themselves from mythical powers by discarding everything, even reverence for the Beautiful.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁷² Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 36–37.

⁸⁷³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cunningham (New York: The Continuum Press, 1999): 154.

~ Leo Löwenthal, "Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture,"
1950⁸⁷⁴

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In his 1946 Preface to *The Dark Side of the Moon*, T.S. Eliot stated earnestly that "the world in which we live now...is a less moral one than the world of six years ago."<sup>875</sup> What concerned him greatly was the contemporary desire "to avert our eyes" or "to forget these thing."<sup>876</sup> As he had in his 1944 discussion with the editors of *Partisan Review*, he reverted to the religion question. Löwenthal took a different approach to the problem in his 1946 essay, "Terror's Atomization of Man." Löwenthal confronted the post-War myth that the threat of fascism was a thing of the past. Rather, he argued that trends in modern culture and economy make a future eruption of fascism a real possibility. Essentially, the modern system of terror amounts to "the atomization of man."<sup>877</sup> If mankind shudders at torture inflicted upon bodies, "we should not be less appalled by its menace to the spirit of man."<sup>878</sup> Left unfettered, the drive towards commodification would lead to circumstances ripe for fascism. In a section entitled "Reduction to Natural Materials," Löwenthal analyzed the means by which terror divides its victims from any sense of belonging to a whole human history (memory). Rather, victims of terror come to see themselves as surplus (raw) natural goods. He drew the chilling parallel between the treatment of concentration camp inmates and the movement and distribution of merchandise. This all goes to Löwenthal's larger point that "Mankind

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<sup>874</sup> Löwenthal, "Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture," in Reprinted in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, 51.

<sup>875</sup> T.S. Eliot, Preface to Helena Sikorska, *The Dark Side of the Moon* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1947): viii.

<sup>876</sup> *Ibid.*: vii–viii.

<sup>877</sup> Löwenthal, "Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture," 2.

<sup>878</sup> *Ibid.*

has today so tremendously improved its technology as to render itself largely superfluous.”<sup>879</sup>

In 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno published *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. As a collection of essays, it was largely the product of the authors’ wartime stay in America. Perhaps the representative essay from this collection is “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” In this essay, the authors offered a deeply pessimistic, blistering, analysis of mass culture—one that holds out slim (if any) possibilities for change. Capital, in Liberal Democratic countries, has created something new: the culture industry, whereby high art and ‘light’ distraction have been subsumed under ‘entertainment’. The false culture of entertainment (of *kitsch*) adequately matches the false consciousness of the masses. While this culture industry represents a totalizing system of domination of the masses by capital, Horkheimer and Adorno also argued that the reified masses are complicit with this system. The urgency for the authors is to expose the sham of freedom and individuality in commodity culture of the Culture Industry. Otherwise, the totalizing-system of the Culture Industry makes conditions ripe (again) for another such totalizing-system: fascism.

Early in 1947, the editors at *Partisan Review* ran a translation of Friedrich von Kleist’s celebrated “Essay on the Puppet Theater.”<sup>880</sup> As the brief note that accompanied the essay stated, the essay “is generally considered by German critics and historians of literature to be one of the finest essays in their language.” It was a timely re-statement: not

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<sup>879</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>880</sup> Friedrich von Kleist, “Essay on the Puppet Theater” *Partisan Review* 14:1 (January–February 1947): 67–72. Eugene Jolas translated the essay, and it was reprinted from an earlier anthology that he had edited. See Jolas, *Vertical: A Yearbook for Romantic-Mystic Ascensions* (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1941). Despite his antipathy for Jolas and the contents of *vertical* (see above), Greenberg may well have had a hand in the selection of this essay.

all things German were fascistic. (The distinction that Dewey insisted upon, as discussed above, between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* is exactly to the point here.) As Richard Shiff has argued, the thesis of Kleist's essay is that:

Each person's encounter with the momentary play of a discursive medium—its possibilities and its limitations—determines what is thought, visualized, enunciated, represented. We come to know what we try so hard to say only as the medium that contains our expression assumes a shape proper to itself.<sup>881</sup>

Kleist's is an understanding of freedom, the freedom from terror long sought in the modern era. It's a freedom sought not by mastering one's circumstances, but by being at play with (in) them. Löwenthal, who very well may have read Kleist's essay, would have agreed with his thesis. As Löwenthal concluded in his 1946, the Enlightenment dreams of the West may still become a reality, "if mankind can free itself from its use of human beings as surplus of commodities of means. Otherwise we too may face the terror."<sup>882</sup>

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<sup>881</sup> Richard Shiff, "Puppet and Test Pattern: Mechanicity and Materiality in Modern Pictorial Representation," in *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art and Literature (Writing Science)*, eds. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 328.

<sup>882</sup> Löwenthal, "Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture," 8.

Conclusion:

“What Abstract Art Means to Me,” 1951

## I. All Over Now

The situation is no longer what it was, but I hardly know whether the gains have or have not cancelled out most of the losses American culture has sustained since 1918.

~ Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," *Horizon*, 1947<sup>883</sup>

As early as 1947, I had moved painting beyond picture-making.

~ Barnett Newman, Letter to William Rubin, 1968<sup>884</sup>

Order, to me, is to be ordered about and that is a limitation.

~ Willem de Kooning, "A Desperate View," 1949<sup>885</sup>



It is generally understood that, ca. 1947–8, the New York School triumphed. In his now-famous essay, "The Situation at the Moment," Greenberg offered the impression—"but only the impression"—that the future of advanced art was to be made in America.<sup>886</sup>

That the future was now and in the US was happenstance, Greenberg concluded: "The historic impulses [of Western art], with all they carried in the way of enlightenment and of compensation for the hygienically destructive effects of enlightenment, have ebbed away in Europe under the suction of events and a declining bourgeois order."<sup>887</sup>

Greenberg made no mention of them in his text, but reproductions of two Pollocks from 1946 accompanied this essay (figs. 86 and 87). Not all of the artists who had contributed

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<sup>883</sup> Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture" *Horizon* 16:93/94 (October 1947): 21.

<sup>884</sup> Barnett Newman, "Letter to William Rubin," in BNSWI, 237. Cited in Shiff, "To Create Oneself," in BNCR: 15, 95, n. 91.

<sup>885</sup> Willem de Kooning, "A Desperate View," (1949), reprinted in Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968): 15.

<sup>886</sup> Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review* 15:1 (January 1948): 82.

<sup>887</sup> *Ibid.*



to the American scene were there to witness its success. On 21 July, 1948, Gorky hanged himself in the barn at his family's home in Sherman, Connecticut. It was the first of several deaths associated with this circle of painters. Whatever success Serge Guilbaut, for example, thought these painters had achieved by 1948, it was fragile.<sup>888</sup>

That there was greater visibility for American painters and their strange paintings by 1948 seems reasonable to argue (fig. 88). Dorothy Miller curated "Fourteen Americans" in 1946 and then "Fifteen Americans" in 1952 at MoMA.<sup>889</sup> De Kooning had his first solo show in 1948, and that year, Hans Hofmann's *The Search for the Real* was published, which put the painter's ideas into limited public circulation.<sup>890</sup> These painters, especially Pollock, were given more exposure in the popular press. In 1947, *Time* published a brief art review entitled "The Best?" in which the critical judgments of Greenberg were parodied, and paired with Pollock's *The Key* from 1946 (fig. 89).<sup>891</sup> The painting was reproduced up-side down (one can only wonder if this was an intentional error, or not as the signature is visible in the lower left-hand corner in the painting itself). *Life* was generally more amenable to modernist painting. It published a "Round Table on Modern Art" in October 1948, and in August 1949, the magazine asked if Pollock was, as Greenberg had maintained, the "Greatest Living Painter in the United States?"<sup>892</sup> In 1950,

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<sup>888</sup> See "Success, 1948" in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 165–94.

<sup>889</sup> See *Fourteen Americans*, exh. cat., ed. Dorothy Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946) and *Fifteen Americans*, exh. cat., ed. Dorothy Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952).

<sup>890</sup> De Kooning first one-person show was held at the Egan Gallery in New York City. See, Hofmann, *The Search for the Real and Other Essays*, eds. Sarah T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr. (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1948).

<sup>891</sup> *Time*, "Art: The Best?" (1 December, 1947), 55. See Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," 20–30.

<sup>892</sup> See "Round Table on Modern Art," *Life* (11 October, 1948): 78–9; and *Life*, "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" 27 (8 August, 1949). See also, Bradford R. Collings, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," *The Art Bulletin* 73:2 (June 1991): 283–308.

28 painters of the New York School protested the exclusion of modern art at a juried show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Fifteen of those protesters gathered for the now-famous photo (fig. 90) of *The Irascibles*, taken by Nina Leen (1909–1995).

Front and center in the photo is Newman, who, as is discussed in the previous chapters, continually sought out ways of making ethical choices (acts) in his art and criticism. The artist, as Newman wrote in his tribute to Gorky in 1948, is “the only man who performs an act for no useful purpose.” “The only moral act,” Newman wrote, “is the useless one, and the only useless act in the aesthetic one.”<sup>893</sup> One of the tragedies of the post-War years was that even this position could become reified, clichéd, comical, even, by those so inclined to have their actions made painfully clear. Here, for example, is Clyfford Still in 1959:

I held it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which would aid in cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, and an idea be revealed with clarity.<sup>894</sup>

Still attempted to legislate abstraction into a kind of permanency, at least in his own isolated work. (It was an un-dialectical attitude towards his medium.) What then might distinguish a Still from Newman’s strange, newly-discovered zips (see fig. 88)? Both were the products of artistic choice. And, after all, a critic wondered in 1949 if it Newman who was “trying to write *finis* to the art of abstraction.”<sup>895</sup> As Richard Shiff, has argued: “At no time did [Newman] care to reaffirm existing knowledge, nor did he seek a

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<sup>893</sup> Newman, “Arshile Gorky: Poet and Immolator,” in BNSWI: 112.

<sup>894</sup> Clyfford Still in a letter to Gordon Smith dated 1 January, 1959, printed in *Paintings by Clyfford Still: Catalog of an Exhibition Held at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y.* [5 November–13 December, 1959]. My thanks to Max Kozloff for bringing this letter to my attention.

<sup>895</sup> Helen Carlson, “Diversity of Style and Media,” *The New York Sun* 117: 37 (October 14, 1949): 27. Cited in Ann Temkin, “Barnett Newman on Exhibition,” in *Barnett Newman*, ed., Ann Temkin with essays by Temkin and Richard Shiff (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Museum of Art with Yale University Press, 2002): 34, 73, n. 62. Carlson’s comment was made most likely in response to *Onement III*.

degree of perfection in his art that, when attained, would have eliminated the emotional need to press further with his self-questioning.”<sup>896</sup> Some acts lead to further acts; some lead towards a final goal. A Newman was not a Still.

Metaphors of topography—realms in which to act—have been used by earlier critics of American abstraction (e.g., Cahill’s new horizons of 1936 or Kootz’s new frontiers of 1943). Most famously, in 1952, Harold Rosenberg conceived of the canvas as the painter’s arena, a space in which to act rather than one in which “to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined.”<sup>897</sup> What was “to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”<sup>898</sup> Performative acts (at least as theorized in 1952) were “not a matter of Taste.”<sup>899</sup> Despite his antipathy for this essay in particular, Greenberg also once made note of the “useless” acts of an artist in the studio: “His one great diversion...was dancing, and I am told that he liked it so much that [Mondrian] often danced by himself in his studio.”<sup>900</sup> In the wake of this new painting, the theorization of the art object changed. As Newman stated in a 1963 interview: “I’m against the object as a thing; I’m also against the non-object as a thing.”<sup>901</sup>

I have argued throughout this dissertation that the dialectic was the main diagnostic tool employed by art critics during these years. In the post-War recall to order, explicit

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<sup>896</sup> Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” in BNCR: 16.

<sup>897</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 22. See also, “Hans Hofmann: Nature Into Action,” *ArtNews* 56 (May 1957): 34 *et passim*; and “The Art World: The Concept of Action Painting,” *The New Yorker* (25 May, 1968): 116–128.

<sup>898</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 22.

<sup>899</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>900</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 58:10 (4 March, 1944): 288. For Greenberg’s response to “The American Action Painters,” see Greenberg, “How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name,” *Encounter* (19 December, 1962): 70–1. This was not Greenberg’s first complaint in print about the state of art writing. See Greenberg, “Art: On Looking at Pictures, a Review of *Painting and Painters: How to Look at a Picture: From Giotto to Chagall*, by Lionello Venturi,” *The Nation* 161:10 (8 September, 1945): 234–5; and “Pictures and Prattle,” *The Nation* 162: 4 (26 January, 1946): 378.

<sup>901</sup> Newman interview with Joanna Magloff (now Koss) and Michael Magloff, August 1963, Barnett Newman Foundation archives. Cited in Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” in BNCR: 3, 92 n. 4.

references to a Marxian dialectic declined (outside of the organized Left). Famously, in 1949, Arthur M. Schlesinger made use of the dialectic in *The Vital Center*, a Liberal call for collaboration between the non-Communist Left and the non-fascist Right to produce a vigorous center that allowed for the potentialities of the individual to be unleashed.

Borrowing from De Witt C. Poole, Schlesinger mapped out this vital center in a diagram that shows the left and right not as antipodes, but as contiguous (fig. 91). As a closed system, it's quite different from the open-ended diagram of Alfred Barr in 1936 (see fig. 7). In Schlesinger's analysis, the center was a scrappy place—the quest for freedom was always going to be a fight.<sup>902</sup> As dynamical as this sounds, Schlesinger's is the analysis of stasis. In post-War America (as opposed to 1930s New York), there would be no revolution to televise; there would always be anxiety—a pre-condition of freedom<sup>903</sup>

In his own post-War treatise, *The Lost Center: Art in Crisis*, Hans Sedlmayr mourned the loss of the center. The center, in Sedlmayr's book, is not a place of conflict, but of retreat: It's the God-fearing, mittel-Europa of an imagined past. (There's no suggestion in his rhetoric that, if this center ever existed, he may have been complicit in liquidating it.) Contemporary culture was ill; modernist art, with all of its anxiousness, was symptomatic of this. Sedlmayr neatly divided human history into four stages. Now in its fourth phase, Sedlmayr argued, civilization was either at the brink or a turning point. Civilization could

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<sup>902</sup> See "The Techniques of Freedom" and "Freedom: A Fighting Faith," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998, 1949): 189–218, 241–256.

<sup>903</sup> As Guilbaut has rightly argued, Schlesinger's worldview was more accepting of the anxiety-producing anarchic tendencies of the so-called free market than the New Dealers of the 1930s. Elsewhere in his book, Guilbaut argued that Abstract Expressionism, as art that is about anxiety, readily matched Schlesinger's New Liberalism. See Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 191–2, 200–3. Late in life, Schlesinger seemed still bothered by this assertion. In a letter to the author, dated 26 June, 2003, Schlesinger referred to the "absurd contention" made by Guilbaut. See also, Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002): 519–20.

either return to God, or it could continue headlong towards the precipice. (Like Schlesinger, he made use of Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming," as an epigraph: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold..."<sup>904</sup>) There is little, if any, difference in attitude between what Sedlmayr terms the art of the fourth phase, and that which the National Socialists has earlier designated *entartete Kunst*. However, the book contains no reference to the Holocaust or Sedlmayr's association with the National Socialists. As mentioned in the prologue, above, a letter published in 1938, in which Sedlmayr praised the *Anschluss*, was edited out of the 1960 publication of his collected works.<sup>905</sup> In *The Lost Center*, Sedlmayr perverted Riegl's idea of the *Kunstwollen* into a kind of *Naturdialectic*. For this myth to work, any kind of dissent (or, even, Sedlmayr's past associations with the Nazis) had to be suppressed. It makes Benjamin's extreme statement—that the "'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule"—an appropriate response.<sup>906</sup> As he argued elsewhere in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the ongoing task of the critic was to "brush history against the grain."<sup>907</sup>

## II. Myths to Live By

Some twenty-two years ago in a gathering, I was asked what my painting really means in terms of society, in terms of the world, in terms of the situation. And my answer then was that if my work were properly

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<sup>904</sup> Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, (Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1958): frontispiece. This work was initially published as *Verlust der Mitte* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1948). Yeats' "The Second Coming" was initially published in *The Dial* in 1920.

<sup>905</sup> Introduction to Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 12–13, 38, 54 n. 5. See Sedlmayr, "Vermutungen und Fragen zur Bestimmung der altfranzösischen Kunst," *Festschrift Willem Pinder* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1938), pp. 9–27. Cf. Sedlmayr, *Epochen und Werke* (Vienna und Munich: Herold, 1960), vol. 2, pp. 322–341. A standard reference work like *The Dictionary of Art*, makes no mention of Sedlmayr's engagement with the National Socialists. See Petra Schniewind-Michel: 'Sedlmayr, Hans', *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 28, ed. J. Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996): 350.

<sup>906</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 257.

<sup>907</sup> *Ibid.*

understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism. Because to the extent that my painting was not an arrangement of objects, not an arrangement of spaces, not an arrangement of graphic elements, was an open painting, in the sense that it represented an open world—to that extent I thought, and I still believe, that my work in terms of its social impact does denote the possibility of an open society, of an open world, not of a closed institutional world.

~ Barnett Newman, interview with Emile de Antonio, 1970<sup>908</sup>



In 1951, six artists gathered for a symposium on abstract art at the Museum of Modern Art: George L. K. Morris, Willem de Kooning, Alexander Calder, Fritz Glarner, Robert Motherwell, and Stuart Davis all spoke at “What Abstract Art Means to Me” on the evening of 5 February. The artists’ statements collected and published later that year have become a significant benchmark. The topic that evening was abstract art, *per se*. By 1951, the discourse was tending towards Abstract Expressionism, as gestured to briefly above. In their respective statements, Morris, Davis, and de Kooning all reflected back on the 1930s in New York, formative years for each of the three painters. Many of the participants spoke of issues central to this dissertation. Could entire worldviews (or world desires) be engendered in a painting, an abstract painting (such as a Newman would later claim in 1970)? Could the making and understanding of these works make for more understanding in culture at large? This is what Otto Pächt and Sedlmayr had hoped for in Vienna in the early 1930s with their new art history, even if Sedlmayr later renounced himself of that method and advocated, obscenely, for a closed society—markedly different from the one for which Newman hoped.

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<sup>908</sup> “Interview with Emile de Antonio,” in BNSWI, 307–308. Newman died of a heart attack on 4 July, 1970.

Morris continued with the theme of liberating painting through the practice of abstraction: His is a statement remarkable for its consistency in that it could have been made at any point in the 1930s. In his statement, the lengthiest of the group, de Kooning, discussed previous attempts to liberate painting at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

The esthetics of painting were always in a state of development parallel to the development of painting itself. They influenced each other and vice versa. But all of a sudden, in that famous turn of the century, a few people thought they could take the bull by the horns and invent an esthetic beforehand... The question, as they saw it, was not so much of what you *could* paint but rather what you could *not* paint. You could *not* paint a house or a tree or a mountain. It was then that a subject matter came into existence as something you ought *not* to have.<sup>909</sup>

The talking about art—that which put the “Art” into painting—concerned de Kooning that evening.<sup>910</sup> “The first man who began to speak, whoever he was, must have intended it,” he began that night.<sup>911</sup> (Like Kleist’s puppeteer, or Newman’s first man who was an artist, this first speaker was *with* his medium.) “If I *do* paint abstract art, that’s what abstract art means to me,” de Kooning concluded, “I frankly do not understand the question.”<sup>912</sup> Davis gave a more complicated definition of abstract painting (“an Idiom of Color-Space Logic... understood as the Universal Free Subject”), but his conclusion was, like that of de Kooning, resistant: “[T]here is No Abstract term. My intention is to keep it that way.”<sup>913</sup>

Side by side, these are statements of equal weight on the practice of painterly freedom. In a previous chapter of this dissertation, I compared latter-day reviews by

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<sup>909</sup> Willem de Kooning in *What Abstract Art Means to Me: Statements by Six American Artists*, in *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* (Spring 1951): 6.

<sup>910</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>911</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>912</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Compare this to Denis’ search in 1890 for “a *painter*’s definition of that simple word ‘nature’” See Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionnisme,” 1. Emphasis in the original in both citations.

<sup>913</sup> Stuart Davis in *What Abstract Art Means to Me: Statements by Six American Artists*, in *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* (Spring 1951): 15.

Greenberg and Rosenberg on the abstract art of the 1930s. In these reviews, each critic pulled out the word “sparkling.” Greenberg used it to describe Davis’ *Summer Landscape* of 1930, even if he thought it a minor canvas of the highest order that worked with “taste and personal sensibility inside an area long staked out by Paris” (see fig. 38).<sup>914</sup> Rosenberg used the same word to describe de Kooning’s *Untitled* of 1931 (see fig. 46). De Kooning’s work from the 1930s were, “in their sparkling tightness, Renaissance color, and polished surfaces, products of the ascetic discipline that in the thirties served as a personal code and a social ideal.”<sup>915</sup> The 1951 symposium offered another chance to compare their works: their statements were accompanied by Davis’ *Hot Still Scape for Six Colors* of 1940 and de Kooning’s *The Mail Box* of 1948 (figs. 92 and 93). If the art-historical question seeks to answer why the 1948 painting succeed more than did the 1940 in the post-War years, one possible answer is that the de Kooning of 1948 was possessed of an appropriate strangeness.

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<sup>914</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>915</sup> Rosenberg, “The Art World: The Thirties,” 208.



## Appendix: List of Figures:

1. Andrea Mantegna, *Tarquin and the Cumean Sibyl*, ca. 1495, Cincinnati Museum of Art, and Clyfford Still, *Painting, 1951*, The Detroit Institute of Art, as reproduced in Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 105.
2. Piet Mondrian, *Composition in a Square*, 1926, Collection of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., and J.A.D. Ingres, *Charles François Mallet*, Art Institute of Chicago, 1809, as reproduced in Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 106.
3. J.M.W. Turner, *Steamer off a Harbor's Mouth*, 1845, National Gallery, London, and Mark Rothko, *Slate Blue and Brown on Plum*, MoMA, 1958, as reproduced in Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 107.
4. Plate 48 of Carl Linfert, "Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung: Mit einem Versuch über französische Architekturzeichnungen des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Vol. I (1931). The reproduction shows two engravings (a & b, top) from the architectural volumes of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736–1806) and two sketches (c & d, bottom) from Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778).
5. Plate 15 of Emil Kaufmann, "Die Stadt des Architekten Ledoux zur Erkenntnis des autonomen Architektur," in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Vol. II (1933). The reproductions show three engravings from the Saline de Chaux designs of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (a, b & c).
6. Alfred H. Barr, "Torpedo Moving Through Time," 1933 (top) and 1941 (bottom). Two diagrams prepared by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. for the "Advisory Committee Report on Museum Collections," 1941. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York (no. 9a, 15).
7. Cover of the 1936 exhibition catalogue of *Cubism and Abstract Art* with a diagram prepared by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
8. "Field Notes: New York Resumé," *Magazine of Art* 30:7 (July 1937): 448, with reproductions of Joan Miró, *Rope and People, I*. Barcelona, March 27, 1935. Oil on cardboard mounted on wood, with coil of rope, 41 1/4 x 29 3/8", Gift of the Pierre Matisse Gallery. © 2007 Successió Miró/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris; with Francis Speight, *Tamaqua*, collection unknown; Ettore Caser, *Girl in the Sea-Shell*, collection unknown.
9. Ad Reinhardt, "How Modern in the Museum of Modern Art?" 1940, leaflet produced by the AAA, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

10. Arshile Gorky, *Activities in the Field*, from the series *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations*, now lost, 1936, oil on canvas panel, as photographed in the WPA/FAP Studio. Reproduced in Bowman, *Murals without Walls*, 50–51.
11. Willem de Kooning, Study for mural in the Williamsburg Project Social Room, 1935, now lost. Reproduced in Rosenberg, *Willem de Kooning*, pl. 5.
12. Piet Mondrian, *Composition*, oil on canvas, 34 x 42 ¾", 1915, The Kröller-Müller Foundation, Wassenaar, The Netherlands.
13. Joan Miró, *Composition*, June 13, 1933, oil on canvas, 68 ½" x 6' 5 ¼", The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Loula D. Lasker Bequest (by exchange). (Formerly in the collection of George L.K. Morris and the Pierre Matisse Gallery.)
14. Max Weber, *Bathers*, 1913, oil on canvas, 60 5/8 x 24 3/8", The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.
15. John Marin's *Abstraction— Lower Manhattan*, 1928, oil on canvas, collection unknown.
16. Joseph Stella, *American Landscape*, 1932, oil on canvas, formerly in the collection of the artist.
17. Arshile Gorky, *Composition, No. 1*, 1927, oil on canvas, formerly in the collection of J.B. Neumann.
18. Joaquin Torres-Garcia, *Composition*, 1929, oil on burlap, 32 x 39 ½", Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of A.E. Gallatin, 1952.
19. Rudolph Bauer, *Tetraptychon*, 1930, oil on canvas, 51 ½" square, Collection of the Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco.
20. Paul Cézanne, *Landscape, Pines, Rocks*, ca. 1897, oil on canvas, 32 x 25 3/4", Lillie P. Bliss Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
21. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit, No. 8*, 1930, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
22. John Marin, *New Mexico, Taos, Storm*, 1930, watercolor.
23. Arshile Gorky, *Organization*, 1933–6, oil on canvas, 49 3/4 x 60", private collection.
24. Arshile Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother*, 1926–36, oil on canvas, 60 x 50", Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Julien Levy for Maro and Natasha Gorky in memory of their father.

25. George L.K. Morris, *On a Balcony*, ca. 1930, oil on canvas, collection unknown.
26. George L.K. Morris, *Stockbridge Church*, 1935, oil on canvas, 54 1/8 x 45 1/16", Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh.
27. George L.K. Morris, *Posthumous Portrait*, 1944, oil on board with plaster relief, 21 x 19 1/2", private collection.
28. Willem de Kooning, *Untitled (The Cow Jumps Over the Moon)*, 1937–8, oil on masonite, 20 1/2 x 36 5/8", collection of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph T. Coltrera. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
29. Willem de Kooning, *Woman, I*, 1950–52, oil on canvas, 6' 3 7/8" x 58", Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
30. Mark Rothko, *Woman Sewing*, ca. 1934, oil on board, 28 x 36 1/16", The Mark Rothko Foundation, New York. © 2007 The Mark Rothko Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
31. Mark Rothko, *The Syrian Bull*, 1943, oil and graphite on canvas, 39 3/8 x 27 7/8", Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Gift of Annalee Newman in honor of Ellen Johnson, 1991. © 2007 The Mark Rothko Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
32. Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, oil on canvas, 91 x 71", The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Gift of Seymour H. Knox. © 2007 The Mark Rothko Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
33. Adolph Gottlieb, *The Family*, as reproduced in the *New York Post*, 19 December, 1936, first Arts page.
34. Adolph Gottlieb, *Man Looking at Woman*, 1949, oil on canvas, 42 x 54", The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the artist. © 2007 The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
35. Adolph Gottlieb, *Dialogue I*, oil on canvas, 66 x 132". The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr. © 2007 The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
36. Jackson Pollock, *Number 1A*, 1948. 1948. Oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 68" x 8' 8". Purchase, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2007 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

37. Stuart Davis, *Ursine Park*, 1942, oil on canvas, 20 x 40", collection unknown. Reproduced in Janis, *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America*, 53 and J.J. Sweeney, *Stuart Davis* (1945), pl. 4.
38. Stuart Davis, *Summer Landscape*, 1930, oil on canvas, 29 x 42", The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
39. Lee Krasner, *Untitled*, 1938, oil on canvas, 30 x 24", collection of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. © 2007 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
40. Arshile Gorky, *Xhorkom-Summer*, 1936, oil on canvas, 36 x 48", The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund and Partial Gift of David K. Anderson to the Martha Jackson Collection at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1999.
41. Willem de Kooning, *Untitled*, 1938, oil on canvas, 46 x 48", private collection (formerly in the collection of Edwin Denby). © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
42. Hans Hofmann, *Atelier Table with White Vase*, 1938, oil on canvas, 60 x 48", collection of the estate of Hans Hofmann.
43. Arthur Beecher Carles, *Untitled*, 1935, oil on canvas, 40 x 33", collection unknown (formerly in the collection of Mercedes Matter).
44. Henri Matisse, *Bathers by a River*, 1916, oil on canvas, 8' 7" x 12' 10", The Art Institute of Chicago.
45. Top: Mark Tobey, *Cirque d'Hiver*, 1933, pastel, 16 7/8 x 21 1/2", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Windsor Utley; Bottom: Mark Tobey, *Broadway Norm*, 1935, tempera, 13 5/8 x 9", Collection of Mrs. Carol Ely Harper.
46. Willem de Kooning, *Untitled*, 1931, oil on canvas, 23 7/8 x 33", collection of the estate of Willem de Kooning. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
47. Willem de Kooning, *Pink Angels*, 1945, oil and charcoal on canvas, 52 x 40", collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, Los Angeles. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
48. Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 137 1/4 x 305 1/5", Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid.
49. Charmion von Wiegand, *Environment, No. 2*, 1946, oil on canvas, 20 x 18", Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

50. Jerome Klein, "Art Comment: What Do You Call Modern?" *New York Post*, 1 May, 1937, p. 26.
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54. Joe Solman, *Venus of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street*, oil on canvas, 29 x 23", collection of Eva Roman Haller.
55. From Gerard Sullivan, "Mr. Gorky's Murals the Airport They Puzzle" (with photo inset), *The Newark Ledger*, 10 June, 1937; reproduced in *Murals without Walls*, p. 39.
56. Willem de Kooning, Study for a mural at the Williamsburg Housing Projects Social Room, Brooklyn, New York. Present location unknown.
57. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia with Arshile Gorky, at the opening of the FAP Gallery, 7 East 38<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, on 27 December, 1935; reproduced as the frontispiece in Harold Rosenberg, *Arshile Gorky: The Man, the Time, the Idea*.
58. Gorky, *Activities in the Field*, 1936, completed oil on canvas panel, as photographed in the WPA/FAP studios. Reproduced in *Murals without Walls*, reproduced in *Murals without Walls*, pp. 50–51.
59. Gorky, *Mechanics of Flying*, 1936–7, oil on canvas, 9' x 11'1", The Newark International Airport Art Collection, The Port Authority of New York/New Jersey.
60. Cover the Yearbook of the American Abstract Artists, 1938. Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.
61. George L.K. Morris, *Composition, No. 17*, oil on canvas, 16 x 12", collection of Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The Nichols Collection.
62. Ilya Bolotowsky, *Sweatshop*, ca. 1934–5, oil on linen, 27 5/8 x 36 1/2", collection of Andrew Bolotowsky.
63. Nicolas Poussin, *The Triumph of Bacchus*, 1635–6, oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 59 1/2", The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.
64. John D. Graham, Poussin *m'instruit*, 1944, mixed media on composition board,

60 ½ x 48 ½”, private collection.

65. Diagram reproduced in George L.K. Morris, “On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting,” *Partisan Review* 8:5 (September–October 1941): 403.

66. George Inness, *Peace and Plenty* with George L.K. Morris, *Composition No. 2 Peace and Plenty*, reproduced in George L.K. Morris, “On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting,” *Partisan Review* 8:5 (September–October 1941), n.f.

67. Jackson Pollock in front of the bare canvas for *Mural* in his apartment at 46 East 8<sup>th</sup> Street, New York City. Photo by Bernard Schardt, 1943; Jackson, *Mural*, 1943–44 (dated 1943), oil on canvas, 7’ 11 ¾” x 19’ 9 ½”, The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim. © 2007 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

68. A.J. Liebling, “Two Aesthetes Offer Selves as Candidates to Provide Own Ticket for Intellectuals,” *New York World Telegram*, 4 November, 1933.

69. Adolph Gottlieb, *The Rape of Persephone*, 1943, oil on canvas, 34 3/16 x 26 1/8”, The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Gift of Annalee Newman in honor of Ellen Johnson. © 2007 The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

70. Page with map by Mark Rothko, showing the Assyrian bull, from: Lewis Browne, *The Graphic Bible*, New York (1928): 64.

71. Human-headed winged bull and winged lion (lamassu), 883–859 B.C., Neo-Assyrian period. Excavated at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), northern Mesopotamia, alabaster (gypsum); height 10’ 3 ½”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

72. Barnett Newman, *The Break—Genesis*, 1946, oil on canvas, 24 x 27”, DIA Center for the Arts, New York. © 2007 Barnett Newman Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

73. Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (with detail of top right corner), 1942–3, oil on canvas, 50 x 50”, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously.

74. Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1944, oil on canvas, 50 x 50”, Gemeente Museum, The Hague.

75. Albert Swindon, *Triangular Movement*, n.d., oil on canvas. Reproduced from the AAA Yearbook of 1946.

76. Fannie Hillsmith, *Imprisoned*, 1944, oil and tempera on fiberboard, 12 ½ x 10 ½”, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Gift of Patricia and Phillip Frost.

77. Jean Hélion, *À Rebours*, 1946, oil on canvas, 44 5/8 x 57 1/2", Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.
78. Larry Rivers, *Studio Interior*, 1948, oil on paper, 17 1/2 x 23 1/3", Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.
79. Review from *Art Digest* (15 January, 1942) of the "French and American Painters" from the McMillen Gallery with Willem de Kooning, *Portrait of a Man*, ca. 1939, oil on paper, mounted on composite board, private collection. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
80. Jackson Pollock, *She Wolf*, 1943, oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas, 41 7/8 x 67", The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase. © 2007 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
81. Hans Hofmann, *Painting*, 1944, oil on plywood, 60 x 48", private collection. As published in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, 1944, p. 76.
82. Hans Hofmann, *Spring*, 1940, oil on plywood, private collection, Connecticut.
83. Janet Sobel, *Music*, 1944, oil on canvas, 24 x 17 1/2", private collection, New York. As published in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, 1944, p. 76.
84. *The Laocoön Group*, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, marble, height 7'2", Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio Clementino, Cortile Ottagono, Città del Vaticano, Rome.
85. Arshile Gorky, *They Will Take My Island*, 1944, oil on canvas, 37 4/5 x 48", Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Purchased with Assistance of the Volunteer Committee Fund, 1980.
86. Jackson Pollock, *Totem II*, 1945, oil on canvas, 72 x 60", The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © 2007 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
87. Jackson Pollock, *Grey Center*, 1946, oil on canvas, 23 x 18 1/4", private collection, Connecticut (formerly in the collection of Clement Greenberg). © 2007 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
88. Barnett Newman, *Onement, I*, 1948, oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas, 27 1/4 x 16 1/4". Gift of Annalee Newman. © 2007 Barnett Newman Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
89. Jackson Pollock, *The Key*, 1946, oil on linen, 59 x 82", The Art Institute of Chicago. © 2007 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

90. Nina Leen, "The Irascibles," gelatin silver print, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. ©Time Inc. Pictured: Theodoros Stamos, Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, James Brooks, Mark Rothko, Richard Pousette-Dart, William Bazotes, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne.

91. Diagram of the "Left" and "Right" by De Witt C. Poole that was reproduced in Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, p. 145.

92. Stuart Davis, *Hot Still Scape for Six Colors*, 1940, oil on canvas, 36 x 45", formerly in the collection of Jan de Graaf. Presently in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. As reproduced in *What Abstract Art Means to Me*, p. 14.

93. Willem de Kooning, *The Mail Box*, 1948, oil on paper, 23 1/8 x 30", formerly in the collection of Nelson Rockefeller. As reproduced in *What Abstract Art Means to Me*, p. 5. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



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## Vita

Justine Dana Price was born in Newark, New Jersey on 21 August, 1969, the daughter of James Maitland Price and Gail Katherine Hainfeld Price. She attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City, where she had a concentration in studio art. In 1992, she was graduated from Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where she took a major in the history of art. Upon graduation, she was employed by Harry N. Abrams in New York City. At Abrams, she worked on titles that included *The History of Art*, by H.W. Janson (5th Ed.), *Art*, by Frederick Hart (4th Ed.), and the first edition of *Art History*, by Marilyn Stokstad. She later worked at the Instructional Publishing Group of Scholastic Inc., and was then Director of Photography at Smith Studio, also in New York City. In the autumn of 1997, she entered the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin in the Department of Art and Art History. There she was awarded an M.A. in August of 1999, and began her doctoral studies in 2000. Since 2002, she has been at work researching for the forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* of the late Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. Currently, she is an assistant professor in the Department of Fine Arts at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY.

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