

*Whether representational or abstract, in revolt or assent, art must be symbolic of the reality of life.*

## *The Organized Heresy: Abstract Art in the United States*

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"THIS IMAGERY," reads the catalogue to a recent art exhibit, "is brought into action by these coagulations of energies emerging within a viscous tracery of veined protrusions as if they were injections into ectoplasmic space." If this statement appeared on the dust-wrapper of a book—even of a book of "poems" by a beatnik—it would instantly be laughed out of court as the pathetic bluff it so obviously is.

What are we to say, however, when the official twenty-fifth anniversary volume of New York's Museum of Modern Art describes a painting by Pollock as follows: "The picture surface, with no depth of

recognizable space or sequence of known time, gives us the never-ending present. We are presented with the visualization of that remorseless consolation—in the end is the beginning"?

It is the critic's duty to forswear the seductions of this cocktail babble; his "remorseless consolation" must be to pierce the rhetorical smoke screen created around abstract art and find out, in short, just what the shooting match is all about. To discover why, in the words of the London *Times*, "Abstraction in the United States flourishes, apparently, with the obstinate vigour of an organized heresy."

He is, I might say, hindered from doing so today by a variety of built-in devices. First of all, the smoke screen of prattle puffed out about official abstract art in this country contains the poison that *any* challenge of the mode automatically smacks of aesthetic reaction. Such was entertainingly brought home in a recent exchange between the editors of the *New Republic* and that funny little periodical called *Art News*. If you happen to dislike the emotional reversion, or bloodthirsty *furor teutonicus*, served up under the current banner of abstract expressionism, that is, you are *per se* "conservative."

Very convenient. Art critics (and, it transpires, museum directors) don't want to be caught out again—least of all here in America, where for sociological reasons the new is rather more likely to be held up as the authentic than elsewhere. (These reasons Margaret Mead incidentally explains when she points out that "Americans have substituted anthropology for history," which is to say that they compensate for lack of depth by catholicity of width, as it were.)

Secondly, total abstraction *pur sang* endeavors to inoculate itself against criticism via the indolent cliché that since the advent of the industrial civilization great painting has been, by and large, opposed to the taste of the time and that the whole shift of libido in the symbolist tradition, as best codified in Baudelaire's *salons*, automatically authenticates almost anything the public dislikes.

This theory fits reasonably well in literature and for that reason makes much of a book like Q. D. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public* fairly persuasive. It does not necessarily hold water in painting, however, where the masses are not really impinged upon at all. At the conclusion of his historiography of the famous Armory Show, Russell Lynes comments that even

this widely publicized and visited exhibition had a "scarcely noticeable" influence on "the taste of most Americans."

The audience for a book, that is to say, may contain a considerable crass element; the very small number of people, proportionate to the whole of the United States, who enter art galleries are probably of a much higher intellectual quotient, and surely the very few who penetrate the mysteries of those purely abstract morgues in New York City cannot be dismissed with the usual scorn reserved for the "rascall meiny." For this reason, Huntington Hartford's clarion call *The Public Be Damned* of 1955, placed by advertisement in several newspapers, seemed to me to miss the point. "Ladies and gentlemen, form your own opinions concerning art. Don't be afraid to disagree—loudly, if necessary, with the critics." The public, as such, can scarcely have known what he was talking about at all.

NOW TO A CONSIDERABLE extent all art is an abstraction, or selective re-ordering, of reality. Still, ever since Daguerre's invention in the last century painting has seemed to take an increasingly liberating interpretation of this tradition. Alongside it, criticism has been provoked into according the divorce from natural form and environment higher and higher esteem, thus lowering the prestige of Renaissance painting, pouring contempt on the reproduction of appearances, and revaluating primitive, Byzantine, and, to some extent, impressionist painting. For primitive man, according to the influential German aestheticians Worringer and Lipps, lived at odds with or *against* his natural world, and his art was an abstraction of that universe in a call to absolute values.

Does not the modern painter, outlawed by his society, experience something of the same dispossession and ensuing resent-

ment? Dada thought he did, and it is not for nothing that dadaist manifestations today, such as Marca-Relli's Tzara-like collages or Rauschenberg's bed-clothes on exhibit in a New York gallery, or Motherwell's book on the subject, still pass muster in America (and are even thought of in our art press as new), despite the fact that they would have been *passéiste* in Europe forty years ago. "What!" exclaimed André Gide, in a knowing summary of this phenomenon: "While our fields, our villages, our cathedrals have suffered so much, our language is to remain untouched! It is important that the mind should not lag behind matter; it has a right, too, to some ruins. Dada will see to it."

Yet, on the whole, it has been within this cultural continuity that European abstraction has developed. The recent school of "action" (or drip or fling) painting in this country, which has undoubtedly been responsible for some of the worst canvases ever seen in the history of the world, is, as they say, something else again.

We all know that the old conception of the horizontal picture-plane with its laws of gravity, depth, and perspective yielded to the smaller refraction, the tilted tabletop, and eventually the perpendicular, of the Cubists and their successors. Picasso took the movement ahead very fast but he grew disinterested in any one single discipline, and it could well be argued that, by present canons, Picasso has never painted an abstract picture. He has not. He has always worked within a tradition that has given a subordinate character to arrangements of pure form and color. In fact, Matisse's carpet and wall-paper motifs affirm that for him, too, total renunciation of symbolic identity in art lies in the realm of ornament.

Disliking both this tradition and (with an instinct of self-protection perhaps) the philosophical premises of analytical ab-

straction, which bifurcated out of the movement in general under the cool wing of Piet Mondrian and others, the New York school of "action" painting has tried to develop the art of the flat surface, wherein the old laws of perspective and gravity belong to the artist rather than to the natural world. Slashing and sloshing, sometimes in handsome, carefully controlled arabesques, Pollock groped his way towards creating a very small metaphysical radius of recession within his picture-span. The area of drama in a good Pollock, or a good (?) Kline, is but a fractional aspect of the total expression. And it is always the artist's subjective domain. This was part of Pollock's difficulty, a kind of agony really. The other half lay in his times, which forced on him the role of both martyr and hero. It is also notable that his expositor, Clement Greenberg, excitedly espouses in his writings the art of the flat surface.

Thus a dilemma arises—one which, I suggest, may well prove the crisis of American art in the next decade. The artist who has represented (or, even, *can* represent) natural forms divests himself of something of the requirements of his mystery when creating a pure abstraction. Essentially he must feel it as a limitation, amusing for a while, but fundamentally illusory. So a great draftsman like Picasso, for example, finds the control of response by sheer designs, purity of effects, arrangements of shapes, and the like, too easy, and eventually monotonous. And he moves on, after perhaps a few years of laboratory experiments of the sort.

But young American painters brought up under the shadow of the whole gnosis of abstract expressionism scarcely find the style confining at all. To them it is all a glorious liberation. Their mystique derives ecstatically from Wassily Kandinsky and, behind him, Fauvism—namely, the externalizing of occult emotions through non-

representational design. Indeed, not even by design. By anything. No visual equivalents are called for, plastic values are despised, the less conscious a painter is of what he is doing the purer is his expression—he “becomes,” like Mathieu, his own painting, and the less he controls his spectator’s responses the better. So the most enigmatic and trite variations of color, the mildest or wildest palette schemes are all validated, or can be at whim, it is easy to see, as some crude code of imaginative endeavor. Or fanatical therapy. “We are presented with the visualization of that remorseless consolation—in the end is the beginning.” Such are, roughly speaking, the present limitations of our “emancipation” in the arts.

THE QUESTION now arises as to whether painting which spits on art is to be called art at all. In fact, it has already been suggested elsewhere (by Maurice Grosser in the *Nation*) that the place of “action” painting is really in the world of commerce, in industrial design, factory murals, and so forth. Writing in the *New Republic*, Frank Getlein summarizes the problem as follows:

More and more, month by month, abstract expressionism reveals itself as more fraud than Freud. The movement is based on the proposition that you can’t kid the id, but each succeeding dredging of the unconscious proves anew that the spectator/purchaser has a right to the ego and occasionally the super-ego, not to mention some mastery of the sheer craft of painting and the assurance that the thing’ll hold together till he gets it home. So much for the reverse Rorschach of the theory. What makes the fraud intolerable is that its first and most complete victims were the perpetrators.

Well, I suppose one might pity these

sorry dupes if their pretensions were less and if they had not been so hectically successful in bullying men of good will in the museums into their point of view. Prefacing the last Carnegie International at Pittsburgh the director, Gordon Washburn, mentions casually that any ideas of drawing and proportion are pretty misleading; one of his eminent jurors, James Johnson Sweeney, curator of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, says much of the same, more cagily, in a recent address to Cooper Union all about “The Spirit of Play.”

Nobody knows how to draw any longer, and fewer and fewer individuals know how to judge drawing. (Most museum men tend to think “tight” draftsmanship good, and also modern, so that a really fine performer in this field like Rico LeBrun sometimes comes off quite badly.) Although when you meet them many of these abstract expressionists claim laconically that they can draw “like Ingres” if they want to, the lack of ability in the craft of painting is pitifully evident in their work. Not that they care.

Willem de Kooning, virtually high priest of the movement at the moment and a painter whose “maelstrom of slashing strokes and jarring colors” has even met with the approval of *Life* magazine, is quoted in a recent interview as follows: “‘I was unable to solve either of those arms,’ he said, ‘so I gave up the picture.’” In a catalogue to a show at the Betty Parsons Gallery, one Boris Margo writes, with evident accuracy, “I search into the swirl of paint with which I begin.” In the *Nation* not long ago John Berger quoted two art teachers, one of painting and another of sculpture, both ignorant of any technical knowledge of their craft—and both, apparently, proud as punch of it. In an *Art News* interview with Franz Kline this painter of black slashes on a white ground (the styles change annually, as Mr. Washburn has remarked, like those of motor-

cars) writes of his works: "to change them merely out of technical consideration would be inconsistent—the emotional results count and not intellectual afterthoughts."

As for composition, to say it is becoming a dead art would be what the *New Yorker* calls the understatement of the year. Quoted in the *New York Herald Tribune* recently, an artist who draws reasonably well but can't compose a picture to save his life, a certain Larry Rivers, very much "in" with *Art News* and the museums though not an "action" boy, describes "the separate parts of my pictures" as like "the sounds in a piece of music by Webern. A plunk way up high, another one low, a third somewhere else. Maybe the plunks relate to each other, maybe not. It's still music."

Again, the development of Yale's once admirable School of Fine Arts, or of the instruction at Pratt Institute, towards the teaching of effects rather than how to draw, might be instanced to this argument. In *Notes About Painting* (World, 1955) by Xavier Gonzalez, another practitioner and teacher (but a conservative and not a space-cadet), there is a joyful section entitled "The Sterility of Composition" wherein we are told that "composition that is weighed and calculated in purely geometric terms often ends in sterility." Under the almost sarcastic title *Rules for composition* the student of this book is told that "it is not essential to learn what composition is . . . rules for composing are static yardsticks that kill the idea before it is born." In the 1959 Illinois Annual catalog the revered abstractionist Hans Hofmann writes: "Imitation should not be permitted to have even the slightest part in the creative process."

Why continue? Who rides may read. A highly favored lady abstractionist has been quoted to the effect that for her the Museum of Modern Art was her art school.

"Feeling and thinking are one," yips yet another abstract expressionist in the frothing wake, evidently, of Sir Herbert Read's *Icon and Idea*, his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in which the artist as emoter staggers back, rather wearily, from the *Ion* and *Hosea*.

And yet it was the recent *Report on the Visual Arts at Harvard University* which made a (last?) attempt to correct this view of artist as sybil, or inspired idiot (Van Gogh's stock was never higher, of course): "It is curious," the report stated, "to what extent this myth is reserved for the visual arts. Few people believe that an author, a poet or a composer might be slow-witted, if not frankly insane." Sometimes the attack on the intellect, and the values of painting, will be called "the exploitation of the accidental" (Clement Greenberg), sometimes "the spirit of play" (James Johnson Sweeney quoting Mallarmé like mad here), sometimes—hm—the "fluid value" (Harold Rosenberg).

TO BE INTELLIGIBLE today, Wilde said, is to be found out. What I am suggesting is that in the younger New York abstract expressionists we have a group of "painters" whose aesthetic potentialities, primarily through lack of any formal training, are so low that Picasso's position becomes reversed. For these new youths abstraction is the "tradition," the official mode, the way to recognition, with the result that they try to relegate all representation to the role of decoration—assigning it to portraits (which they seem to despise), to magazine illustration, and the like. This is a position they are likely subconsciously to espouse more and more; for, as the director of Washington's Corcoran Gallery, Mr. Hermann Warner Williams, has put it:

There is a more or less lost generation of young painters who turned up their

noses at the basic disciplines of draftsmanship and just jumped into abstraction. Although they are now trying to use figures, they can't make the switch because they haven't had those early disciplines.

(A recent quote in *Time* from Richard Diebenkorn would further substantiate this opinion, from the point of view of a practitioner.)

To my mind, the error has been made of assuming that because certain social assumptions no longer obtain, the techniques to which they gave rise must also be outdated, and utterly useless. But this is to deny the very fabric of social relationships. For instance, Renaissance numerology with its virtually superstitious symmetry no longer holds good today as a concept, yet the ideal of balance it enforced in art has worked aesthetically, quite independent of the ideology behind it. And no matter how Mr. Gonzalez may fulminate against composition (interlarding his text, incidentally, with dud drawings of apples and one give-away sketch of the human form), composition of a kind still supports the best abstractions today. It certainly supported Pollock.

Then again, the great vision of Christ on the cross which was required of so much great art we know and admire forms a triangular shape, with the eye led triumphantly upwards, that abstract arrangements can approximate and make aesthetically meaningful for a Mohammedan; as a matter of fact, the Illinois University annual often faces two paintings on exhibit together in its catalogue in this manner. But when art enters the realm of epistemology (and this does *not* imply message-bearing), it must in a human world involve the icons of human beings and/or their activities. It is simply a filibustering *reductio ad absurdum* of this argument to say that it claims that the more representational art

is, the better it is. Nonsense. Giotto remains as fine a painter today as far more literal realists.

What it does claim is this: that since human life is symbolic, unlike animal life, its art is correspondingly most valid when it abstracts reality into sets of symbols, and not—as per the abstract expressionists—into sets of further abstractions. (For the sake of a working human society I have been told to call the quadruped I see outside my window a cow: we're not going to get anywhere if you tell me it's a goat and someone else it's a zebra—nowhere except the nuthouse, that is.) Independent pictorial qualities which do not communicate symbolically thus reject the basic premise of human cooperation and survival, and must accordingly be admired in the more modest role of a luxury, of auxiliary decoration, which they have usually held. Consequently, an art that declines to accept the semantic relationship between man and his world is committed to reject the products of human society itself, tools and craft.

THESE AESTHETICS—of anti-art, of anti-intellectualism—have customarily gone hand in hand with concepts of the alienation of the artist. Nothing is more romantic than abstract expressionism in this country at the moment. My own studies in this kind of advanced, élitist literature in our century—of those like Eliot, Pound, Wyndham Lewis in England, the George-Kreis in Germany, and the Seillière-Massis band in France—have led me to conclude that it often cohabits with extreme social reaction. Reaction is glibly associated with conservatism, but that the two are totally different in art, at least the art of our era, is readily apparent. Did Thomas Mann hate the world, and detest the intellectual premises of human society?

The stylization of reality does not obligatorily have to be a revolt against the prem-

ises of that reality, although in some civilizations this may appear so. It appears so in ours. For the Camus of *L'Homme révolté*, for example, the "style" imposed by the artist on his world is essentially a negation of that world. The recrudescence of movements of strong stylization, or of a negation that radically alters "what is," after the second world war again suggests this theory, that an aesthetic value pertains in the act of creating a strong style in the face of a frustrating reality.

The substantiation of this theory is, indeed, so easy to find at the present moment that it makes the entire idea suspect of a certain facility. The imposition of style on a disparate and chaotic reality seems to force the impression of negation on the aesthete. It seems, in essence, an heroic act, one carried out in the teeth of Arnold's

strange disease of modern life  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims  
Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts.

After the first world war, then, dada and the rest of it. After the second, abstract expressionism or "action" painting and the fervid crusades of *Art News*. For a final clincher, too, consider the walls of any big "modern" American exhibition of art, particularly in the New York orbit, and notice how "style as vision" has run amok as an aesthetic philosophy. Camus's thesis should not be misrepresented, however:

The artist remakes the world after his own fashion . . . music does exist where symphonies are completed, where melody gives its form to the sounds which, alone, do not have it, where a particular arrangement of notes draws from natural disorder a unity which is satisfying for the mind and for the heart.

Unity is the artist's gift to human society, Camus says, and it may very well be achieved by revolt. It probably has been

achieved, as an aesthetic goal, in this way in the first half of the century in Europe as much as, or more than, at any other time.

It remains to be borne in mind, however, that this aesthetic goal is not the prerogative of eccentricity and extremism in art forms. A repugnance for the vital relationships that compose society in its fundamental norms can soon turn into a cliché—in our day and age a successful cliché, as the museum walls of New York City annually demonstrate. A program of abstraction can then push art along a path of false progression, or (better) "aheadofness," sanctioned (nay, sanctified) by the relentless canon of an "advanced" technology. A technology, one might add, which is rapidly spreading all its forms, and concomitant cultural emphases, back to Europe again, and which resulted in that recent classic statement by Mr. Washburn of the Carnegie Institute (*horresco referens*) that "Styles in art keep changing just they do in architecture, wallpaper and automobiles."

Fortunately the laws governing objects of ostensible use do not necessarily apply to art and it may be that Mr. Washburn is righter than we dare admit! This kind of painting does have a *couturier* quality about its incessant change and display. If so, then for the museum directors we have seriously attained that stage of what Thorstein Veblen called "aesthetic nausea," when "the new style must conform to the requirement of reputable wastefulness and futility."

IT STILL REMAINS highly debatable, however, whether the stylization of revolt is the only one inducing that clarification of unity which is the pabulum of art. Perhaps, indeed, the aesthetic energy necessary in that epiphanic leap from non-art to art, in that ordering of our world, actually requires more of those who find reality satis-

fyng. Can there be such an artist? Does he have the right to the title who enjoys life, and above all perceives beauty, in a century that has seen Büchenwald and the H-bomb?

The "action" painter roars back: No—to fail to defy reality is an act of consentment with corruption. (On a lower level, visible monthly in the art press, this attitude becomes vulgarized into calling any realist painter, who is not too old or too powerful to present competition to the prevailing coteries, "reactionary.")

But is consentment so obstinately ignorant as our avant-garde critics like to consider it? The reality of life is one constantly accorded us, and to give form to that reality *on its own terms* may well be the highest function possible for art today, conferring a coherent history on man's endeavors, and refusing the world as it is simply by affirming universal values. Abstract expressionism, I am suggesting, may well be too easy a way to achieve freedom—a spurious freedom, since the first step "against the grain" is no more than just that, it is conditioned by that reality which is being so mesmerically denied.

Meanwhile, the whole question of societal revulsion affecting art involves the increase of communicative media in the past fifty years; it involves so many questions of relative valuation that it is impossible to answer them. Were the Elizabethans more "violent" than we are? Who knows? We can never say. They frequented public executions (how many of them?)—a modern state countenanced the cremation of a race. To know whether our reality is really so chaotic and corrupted, or whether we are simply made more immediately aware of injustices today, we should need to have access to sociological studies of the kind made by *Fortune* teams in previous centuries. And even these would be challenged.

"The most important new concept in

American art is that 'everything' can be art, and that art can be 'everything,'" writes Thomas B. Hess, editor of *Art News*, in a recent issue of the London *Encounter*. And of a de Kooning canvas the *New York Times* informs us that "the only reference the picture makes is to the gestures that made it." At the same time the *New York Times*, via another critic, Kenneth B. Sawyer, also contemporaneously tells us that de Kooning is "Ingresque in his response to the sublunary world." Does anyone imagine statements like this mean anything? A painter further removed from Ingres than de Kooning would be hard indeed to think of. No, reading comments like these, one is brutally reminded of that moment in *Crome Yellow* when Mary Bracegirdle is alarmed to find Gombauld painting an intelligible picture—"After five years of schooling among the best judges, her instinctive reaction to a contemporary piece of representation was contempt. . . ."

Only here and there do we find the tide on the turn and the capitulation of the critics arrested, as in the reception of the recent New York exhibitions at French & Co., to whom Clement Greenberg was announced as artistic advisor. Even the *New York Times's* Dore Ashton, sympathetic to extreme abstraction, here found the decorative qualities of Barnett Newman ("part of the splendor of American painting in the past decade and a half," according to Greenberg) too much for her:

Newman's largest paintings with their slender dividing lines unquestionable produce tension. It is the kind of tension projected by architecture. We experience a gracefully scaled ceiling and wall with pleasure. In the same way, it is an experience to encounter an overwhelming field of navy blue, stretching on and on. . . . It is almost impossible to avoid producing some strong effect if you

posit giant areas of color on a white wall.

And, one might add, it is—or was—the artist's function to solve tensions, as well as create them. The Morris Louis exhibit, which followed Newman's at this gallery, was summarized by Carlyle Burroughs of the *New York Herald Tribune* as follows: "No draper, seriously concerned with making an interior handsome and vaguely exotic, could fulfill his decorative function with better taste."

What can be said, in conclusion, without too much controversy is that the craft of Western painting is a graphic patrimony, a signal of civilization, handed down to us from a culture whose assumptions may in some cases seem outdated. Yet the craft itself can still be made to work for our time,

regardless of the spectacular attacks and cultural bluffs made on it by this exclusive clan or that. "To be out of step with your contemporaries," writes Mr. Washburn, "is to be camouflaged. Although clearly visible, no one may chance to 'see' you."

To which one can only quote André Masson in reply: "that which goes contrary to the prevailing taste is, for me, the most precious of things . . . whatever is scorned, despised or not understood by the society in which one lives has prospects for the future." Attacked on all sides, the craft of painting goes gradually underground. As Baudelaire put it in his day,

voilà ce que c'est de venir dans un temps où il est reçu de croire que l'inspiration suffit et remplace le reste . . . voilà l'abîme ou mène la course désordonnée de Mazeppa.

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### *Whatever Made Tertullian Rave*

Whatever made Tertullian rave  
or strict Jerome in anger kick  
at his cub clawing in frolic  
and live flagellant in a cave

or grim Savonarola not recant  
with fire at his fingernails  
or Dante circle several hells—  
tops cedars in the high Levant

with domes of lissome cumulus,  
uplifts from molten Orizaba  
flaming spews of welting lava,  
steadies over waves, tumultuous

in storm, winds wild with birds  
in panic, strewn from echelon—  
and ekes from this balked hand  
the twisting filament of words.

SAMUEL HAZO