

## Guardians of the Avant-Garde

*The exhibition "Action/Abstraction" examines Abstract Expressionism and its aftermath in light of a longstanding critical rivalry.*

BY RICHARD KALINA



Jackson Pollock: *Convergence*, 1952, oil on canvas, 93½ by 155 inches. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Abstract Expressionism has engendered its fair share of museum exhibitions, although in recent years those shows have tended to be monographic retrospectives. It would seem difficult to come up with a new approach to an inclusive group show, but "Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976" does. Curated by Norman L. Kleeblatt at the Jewish Museum in New York, the exhibition examines the heyday of Abstract Expressionism and its aftermath through the lens of an art-critical rivalry. Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978) and Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) were the big critical guns of the day. Their opposing influences (we have nothing comparable today) exerted a strong dialectical pull on the art world. Greenberg's and Rosenberg's ascendancy also marked the beginning of modern American art criticism. Neither Greenberg nor Rosenberg was an artist, academic or, at least at the beginnings of their careers, associated with a widely circulating publication. (Rosenberg became the *New Yorker's* art critic in 1967.) Both critics combined

an intimate knowledge of artists—and those artists' beliefs and studio practices—with a set of overriding theoretical principles that were articulated, refined and expanded over time. Greenberg employed an analytic, formalist approach in the service of abstraction. Following in the modernist literary tradition of T.S. Eliot and the New Criticism, his focus was on the object itself. Rosenberg believed in action. He saw the artist's individuality, creativity, passion, political commitment and existential authenticity expressed less in the work itself than in the arena of its making.

While they had certain things in common—age, New York background, assimilated Judaism, Marxist beginnings, publications in small magazines—their views on key issues differed sharply. They quickly came to detest each other, and their rivalry contributed to the polarization of the art community at the time. That polarization was grounded in the general mood of argumentativeness that pervaded the postwar intellectual community: artists as well as writers and critics were engaged in ongoing conflicts of ideas and personalities. Contention surely contributed to Abstract Expression-

ism's vitality, and to be reminded of it undercuts today's nostalgic view of the times—the boozy camaraderie of the Cedar Bar and earnest talks at the Club, when life was simpler and an artist could show up in New York, paint from the heart and be given a place in a small, supportive community.

There's some truth to that, but the picture is more complicated, and "Action/Abstraction," along with its thorough and scholarly accompanying catalogue, presents a balanced account of the art, the artists, the critics and the issues. Much care is taken to set the stage. Historical and cultural context is emphasized, and the exhibition contains a wealth of supporting material—letters, photographs, publications of all sorts and musical excerpts, as well as film and old television clips. (I was particularly taken with a 1957 "Today" show clip, featuring the chimpanzee, Kokomo Jr., engaged in a rather thoughtful passage of gestural brushwork. Maurice Berger, who curated the exhibition's context rooms, told me that Kokomo and his "Today" show predecessor, J. Fred Muggs, also a chimp with artistic leanings, are still alive, although retired.)





Willem de Kooning: *Gotham News*, 1955, oil on canvas, 69 by 79 inches. Albright-Knox Art Gallery. © ARS.

A word about the exhibition's title: it's a bit misleading, put there perhaps as an inducement to the museum-going public. While Pollock and de Kooning do play major roles, the exhibition is scarcely a face-off between two star artists, who, after all, had more in common with each other than they did with, say, Barnett Newman. De Kooning and Pollock were the favored artists of, respectively, Rosenberg and Greenberg (in Greenberg's case, at least for a time). But the exhibition has a much wider reach. It reflects the fact that critical positions were taken and vigorously defended, not in an academic vacuum, but in the unstable and vital milieu of living artists and their ongoing work. The exhibition is as much about Newman, Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Clyfford Still and David Smith as it is about Pollock and de Kooning. It also deals sensitively with other artists of the period who were part of either critic's circle (or both)—Ad Reinhardt, Joan Mitchell, Philip Guston, Saul Steinberg, Herbert Ferber, Ibram Lassaw and David Hare. Distinct curatorial choices were made. There is no work by Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Adolph Gottlieb or William Bazotes, for example, but a number of artists of the next generation are included, imparting the very real sense of an art world in flux. We see Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow and Lee Bontecou as well as Greenberg's contingent of Color Field painters and welded-steel sculptors: Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Anthony Caro. These younger artists are set in the context of their older colleagues, who were, for the most part, actively working through the '70s and beyond.

Greenberg's object-directed formalism and Rosenberg's action-oriented existentialism might have been the defining critical strategies of the day, but this did not mean that all artists whose work could be seen in those contexts received the attention they deserved. While establishing the parameters of Greenberg's and Rosenberg's influences, "Action/Abstraction" also takes a look at artists whose work was given short shrift or only a passing nod by the two critics, and allows us the opportunity to see some neglected but truly excellent work.

Women, of course, were barely allowed in the Abstract-Expressionist door, and Berger's extraordinarily informative time line in the catalogue gives us chilling examples of the barriers they faced. In 1946 an unnamed male critic (not Greenberg or Rosenberg) reviewing Louise Nevelson's first major exhibition wrote, "We learned that the artist was a woman, in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among the moderns." And Lee Krasner speaking of Hans Hofmann, the leading teacher of his day, said, "I can remember very clearly his criticism one day when he came in and said about (my) painting 'this is so good you would not believe it was done by a woman.'"

There were exceptions to the general neglect. Rosenberg wrote favorably about Mitchell, and his advocacy of her work served as a counterpart to Greenberg's endorsement of Frankenthaler's. (The two women were not friends, and Mitchell, rarely restrained in her negative opinions, often had something cutting to say about her rival.) Rosenberg cited Mitchell firmly in the tradition of

gestural Abstract Expressionism, and her painting in the exhibition is an example of that style at its most confident. The untitled work (1957), a complex construction of juicily brushed passages of blue, green and white, sets up a loose perspectival system that, while abstract, manages to evoke a watery landscape. Forceful yet sensitive paintings like these marked Mitchell as one of the strongest of the younger Abstract Expressionists.

Rosenberg saw Mitchell as a member of Abstract Expressionism's Second Generation, but in Frankenthaler, Greenberg discerned something else. The critic and the artist enjoyed a particularly close personal relationship, and he became a strong supporter. He believed that her stained Color Field paintings, starting with *Mountains and Sea* (1952), pointed the way past Abstract Expressionism to a new optical, formally oriented, post-painterly abstraction. This was taken up in due time by painters like Louis, Olitski and Noland, whose work Greenberg championed with great vigor.

Greenberg also liked the then Washington-based artist Anne Truitt, a friend of Noland's, whose subtle columnar pieces, like *Esser* (1962), hovered between painting and sculpture. The critic was, however, of little help to women gestural painters. Krasner, who had introduced him to Pollock (as well as to Hofmann), got virtually nothing from him, and he dismissed Grace Hartigan in 1952 when, in contravention of Greenbergian principles, she introduced figuration into her gestural paintings. Hartigan's two canvases in the exhibition, *Summer Street* (1956) and *New England, October* (1957), show her work to advantage. *Summer Street*, with its lively jumble of blocky blues, greens, reds and oranges, and its subtle figurative and architectural notes, balances reference and abstraction while keeping tight control of the pictorial arena. Work like this, backed up, of course, by de Kooning's "Woman" paintings (his gritty 1954 *Marilyn Monroe*, with its billboard yellows and reds and bold frontality, is a fine example) allowed gestural painting to stretch itself beyond pure abstraction, and thus maintain its vitality into later decades. Painters like Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers (none of whom, unfortunately, is in the show) were able to apply the lessons of Abstract Expressionism to overt subject matter and to produce paintings that were lushly chromatic, emotionally direct and compositionally sound.

If women were largely excluded from the critical dialogue, African-Americans hardly registered at all. For me, one of this show's great pleasures was the work of Norman Lewis (1909-1979). Lewis knew many of the Abstract Expressionists and had seven solo shows at the well-respected Willard Gallery, which at the time represented David Smith, Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, among others. Lewis taught, was active in the African-American art community, saw his work collected by the Museum of Modern Art, received National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim grants, and had a retrospective in 1976 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York—a good career by most measures but, given the quality and the dates of his work, nowhere near what he deserved. (As I write, I have on my desk seven books of Greenberg's writings and eight of Rosenberg's, plus Florence



Rubenfeld's biography of Greenberg. There is not a single mention, as far as I can tell, of Lewis.)

Ironically, in the '40s, while Lewis and other African-American abstract artists were resisting direct social references in order to avoid having their art ethnically labeled, white painters like Gottlieb and Newman were taking up imagery from non-Western cultures in order to invest their work with mythic resonance. (In a further irony, painters like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, Lewis's contemporaries, stayed with social imagery and ended up receiving greater recognition.)

Lewis's paintings at the time were resolutely abstract, although they possessed a musicality, an improvisational structural interplay that has been likened to jazz. *Twilight Sounds* (1947) sets a vertically oriented, sinuous scaffolding of thin lines, filled in at strategic points with curved, primary-colored planar elements, against a rich gray-blue ground. The linear skein does not touch the edges of the painting, and at the bottom of the picture the forms are angled in a subtly perspectival manner so as to anchor the ensemble, while still keeping the painting buoyant and light. Lewis's works then were small (*Twilight Sounds* measures 23½ by 28 inches), and it would have been wonderful to have another of his paintings to compare it to—perhaps *Phantasy II*, a work from 1946 in the collection of MOMA. One hesitates to make curatorial suggestions after the fact—who

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knows the practical considerations involved?—but in this case I really wanted to see more.

Having the support of Greenberg or Rosenberg, while not a make-or-break proposition in the days of Abstract Expressionism, certainly helped. In the '40s it was not all that easy to tell, judging only by the work, which critic would be supportive. By the '50s, however, the stylistic lines had become more clearly drawn. Greenberg favored allover painters like Still, Newman and Rothko, who employed large, relatively uninflected color areas, while Rosenberg was a partisan of the gestural, action-oriented painting exemplified by de Kooning. Pollock was an odd case. It is well known that Greenberg was an early and enthusiastic supporter—first mentioning Pollock in a review in the *Nation* in 1943 and declaring that two of the smaller paintings in the show at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century, "are among the strongest abstract paintings I have yet seen by an American."<sup>1</sup> In 1945, again in the *Nation*, Greenberg called him

"the strongest painter of his generation,"<sup>2</sup> and posited in 1948 that Pollock would be able to compete with John Marin for "recognition as the greatest American painter of the twentieth century."<sup>3</sup>

But Greenberg was never one to give unalloyed praise. Even in the glowing 1948 review, he calls Pollock's *Gothic* "inferior to the best of his recent work in style, harmony, and the inevitability of its logic," refers to other canvases as weaker, expresses severe reservations about his use of aluminum paint and speaks of Pollock's weakness as a colorist.<sup>4</sup> When Pollock began to reintroduce figurative elements in 1954, Greenberg's enthusiasm cooled considerably. Greenberg's influential 1955 article "American-Type Painting," published in *Partisan Review*, says of Pollock's exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, "His most recent show, in 1954, was the first to contain pictures that were forced, pumped, dressed up."<sup>5</sup>

Greenberg's critiques of Pollock, both positive and negative, focused on the formal and material qualities of the work and on its relation to art history. The painter's interest in subject matter and his desire to

Right, Grace Hartigan:  
*Summer Street*, 1956,  
oil on canvas,  
80½ by 58½ inches.  
Corcoran Gallery of  
Art, Washington, D.C.

Far right,  
Anne Truitt: *Essex*,  
1962, restored 2001,  
acrylic on wood,  
69 by 12 by 8 inches.  
Estate of Marcella  
Louis Brenner.





# Though Rosenberg's *Art News* article "The American Action Painters" was a putdown of Pollock and a boost for de Kooning, it was also, importantly, an attack on Greenberg.

address the mythic and the archetypal were paid little attention. Pollock clearly stood out from the crowd in the '40s, and it made sense for Greenberg to admire him. But at heart he really wasn't Greenberg's type of artist. As Greenberg lost interest in Pollock, and as Pollock slipped deeper into alcoholism and erratic work habits, the incipient personal animosity between the two men deepened. Greenberg turned his attention to younger artists, whose work more closely reflected his formalist ideas and who, he believed (rightly or wrongly), would be more receptive to his suggestions.

In many ways, de Kooning's art should have been the focus of Greenberg's admiration. It was all over, chromatically sophisticated, compositionally solid and, most important, grounded in and extraordinarily cognizant of art history. Initially Greenberg supported the work (with caveats, as one might expect), referring to de Kooning in a review of his first solo show at the Egan Gallery in 1948 as "one of the four or five most important painters in the country," but saying, essentially, that he was more of a draftsman than a painter. Notably, he says in this review that "De Kooning is an outright 'abstract' painter, and there does not seem to be an identifiable image in any of the ten pictures in his show."<sup>6</sup> De Kooning had started out in the early '40s doing work with pronounced figurative elements, and it must have gratified Greenberg to see that the artist had bowed to the historical inevitability of abstraction.

When de Kooning showed his "Woman" series at Sidney Janis in 1953, however, Greenberg was not pleased, and he began to skewer the painter in subtle but unmistakable ways. Comparing de Kooning to Picasso in "American-Type" Painting," Greenberg says that de Kooning "hankers after *terribilità*," not that he actually *achieves* this Michelangelesque quality. To further undercut de Kooning, *terribilità*, with its sense of awe-inspiring and barely held-in-check power, is hardly a desirable trait for the Apollonian Greenberg, especially in a contemporary artist. Most damning, though, is Greenberg's contention that de Kooning "remains a late Cubist." (Note the static "remains.") He states a few sentences later that "De Kooning is, in fact, the only painter I am aware of at this moment who continues Cubism without repeating it."<sup>7</sup> Nice, but not exactly "the greatest American painter of the twentieth century." It's important to keep in mind that Cubism was Greenberg's great negative touchstone. Cubism's penchant for tonal, light-dark drawing implied the sculptural, something that painting must avoid; but just as significant for Greenberg, its presence in a contemporary work of art was an esthetic crutch, a sure indicator of the old-fashioned, the European, the undeveloped, the minor.

It scarcely helped that Rosenberg—with whom Greenberg had been at odds for years—and de Kooning were great friends. Greenberg clearly liked art more than he liked artists, but Rosenberg and the downtown artists got along splendidly. Greenberg and de Kooning grew to loathe each other, even to the point of coming to blows.

Nastiness abounded. A pivotal point in the history of Abstract Expressionism came with the 1952 publication of Harold Rosenberg's *Art News* article, "The American Action Painters," an essay that infuriated Pollock's supporters—particularly Krasner—and sorely vexed Greenberg. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Debra Bricker Balken recounts the complex history of "The American Action Painters." Originally intended for publication in *Les temps modernes* (Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existentially flavored journal), it was withdrawn by Rosenberg in pique after the magazine ignored his request to respond in print to Sartre, whom Rosenberg (rather strangely) believed had appropriated his ideas on Marxism. Having written the essay for a French journal whose readers might be unfamiliar with the artists he would mention, Rosenberg had decided to leave out all contemporary names. Rosenberg and *Art News*'s editor, Tom Hess, did not change that feature when the magazine published the essay a few months later.

For those in the know, the ideal action painter evoked by Rosenberg was de Kooning, and Pollock was disparaged, although not by name. Rosenberg did not particularly like Pollock or his paintings. He had a low opinion of Pollock's intelligence, was contemptuous of his drunken behavior and disapproved of his success. In addition, Rosenberg and his wife, May, did not get along with Krasner, Pollock's wife and his fiercest defender, a woman exceedingly quick to put someone on her enemies list. When "The American Action Painters" came out, Krasner saw it as a major threat and railed with increasing bitterness against both Rosenberg and de Kooning—a bad choice, since de Kooning was immensely popular among his fellow artists. (Despite the feuding of their supporters and detractors, the two principals generally got along with each other—a bit warily perhaps, but at the root of it, Pollock and de Kooning admired each other's work, and that counted for a lot.)

In "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg mocks Pollock's success. He writes, "The cosmic 'I' that turns up to paint pictures, but shudders and departs the moment there is a knock on the studio door, brings to the artist a megalomania which is the opposite of revolutionary. The tremors produced by a few expanses of tone or by the juxtaposition of colors and shapes purposely brought to the verge of bad taste in the manner of Park Avenue shop windows are sufficient cataclysms in many of these happy overthrows of Art." Rosenberg's conclusion: "The result is an apocalyptic wallpaper." "Apocalyptic wallpaper" is a catchy phrase, and it stung. The attack was also unfair. Pollock might have had the earliest success of the Abstract Expressionists, but he was a contrary and difficult man, scarcely a compliant lapdog of the rich. Rosenberg says a paragraph later, "Here the common phrase, 'I have bought an O—' (rather than a painting by O—) becomes literally true. The man who started to remake himself has made himself into a commodity with a trademark."<sup>8</sup> It seems telling that the letter "O" sits in the alphabet right next to "P."

The problem with making a veiled putdown of Pollock was that for many in the wider world, Pollock, the rough and ready Westerner, the artistic taboo-breaker, *was* the archetypal action painter. (Rosenberg's article appeared in *Art News* shortly after Pollock's show at Sidney Janis closed.) The iconic Hans Namuth film and photographs (1951) of Pollock immersed in the processes of painting had only reinforced that perception, and the artist considered himself someone deeply engaged in just those sorts of issues. According to Pollock biographers Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, Pollock "never doubted that Rosenberg had used him as a model—he later referred to the article routinely as 'Rosenberg's piece on me.'" In fact, Pollock believed that he had given Rosenberg the idea of action painting on a train trip they took through Long Island, but that Rosenberg had misconstrued it. Pollock said to the painter Conrad Marca-Relli, "How stupid. I talked about the act of painting, exposing the act of painting, not action painting. Harold got it all wrong."<sup>9</sup> In any case, discussion of the mythic importance of the act of painting and its function as a marker of the artist's resistance to mass culture had been floating around the art world before Rosenberg's article. Newman and Still, for example, were particularly insistent on it.

In many ways, Pollock's semi-suicidal death in 1956 made matters simpler for the two critics. Alive, Pollock was troublesome, a wild card: better to see him moved to the safer precincts of history. Greenberg could acknowledge Pollock's place in art (and his own prescience) without having to worry about any inconvenient new paintings showing up to prove him wrong, and Rosenberg could finally accept Pollock as a proper action painter and lavish him with analysis and praise, as he did in his 1967 *New Yorker* article, "The Mythic Act."

While "The American Action Painters" was a putdown of Pollock and a boost for de Kooning, it was also, importantly, an attack on Greenberg. Rosenberg writes:

The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life. It follows that everything is relevant to it. Anything that has to do with action—psychology, philosophy, history, mythology, hero worship, but art criticism. The painter gets away from art through his act of painting; the critic can't get away from it, the critic who goes on judging in terms of schools, styles, form—as if the painter were still concerned with producing a certain kind of object (the work of art) instead of living on the canvas—is bound to seem a stranger.<sup>10</sup>

This might sound abstract and general, but the art world knew exactly who that critic was. It was the same taste bureaucrat alluded to in this sentence: "Limited to the esthetic, the taste bureaucracies of Modern Art cannot grasp the human experience involved in the new action paintings."<sup>11</sup> Greenberg's eye was respected and his power acknowledged, but he was widely disliked for his maddeningly judgmental ways and bad studio manners—his habit of dismissing work as failed and his penchant for telling artists, for all intents and purposes, how to paint. De Kooning was in a position and had the temperament to throw Greenberg out of his studio; few others did.

Greenberg did not respond immediately to Rosenberg's attack (although he did give a passing and mildly dismissive mention to Rosenberg and Action



Painting in "American-Type" Painting"). But "The American Action Painters" refused to fade away, as no doubt Greenberg fervently hoped it would. Many readers didn't really understand it—the essay is hardly a model of clarity—and they could make light of its excesses (de Kooning thought that Rosenberg's theories were "a lot of nonsense"<sup>12</sup>), but many felt that it essentially validated their lives and their work. Naifeh and Smith write:

As with so many of Rosenberg's other ideas, they knew they liked the *sound* of it. According to Leslie Fiedler, they revelled in the sheer masculinity of it. To the generation that had come through the Project (the WPA), it justified the years of barroom antics, hard drinking, misogyny, and competitive cocksmanship. To the new generation of younger artists, it exploded the stereotype of the artist as foppish, worthless, and—worst of all in the can-do, postwar culture—ineffectual. At a time when anxiety about 'making it' was just beginning to be felt, they took comfort in its defiant anticommmercialism.<sup>13</sup>

Greenberg's festering anger took printed form in a lengthy 1962 article, published in *Encounter*, titled, "How Art Writing Earns its Bad Name." In it, he attacks Rosenberg by name, repeatedly and with great vigor, and even fixes the blame for the continued popularity of "The American Action Painters," writing, "That it finally did not get forgotten was mainly the fault of a young English art critic named Lawrence Alloway. Almost two years after its original appearance it was Mr. Alloway who rescued Mr. Rosenberg's article and set its ideas and terms in effective circulation."<sup>14</sup>

Against this background of animosity, it is easy to forget how much the two critics had in common. Born in New York City within a few years of each other, both were Jewish, secular, college-educated but without academic training in art history (Rosenberg graduated from law school). They were brainy, confident, argumentative and extraordinarily articulate. You went up against them at your peril.<sup>15</sup> They both started as Marxists, wrote for *Partisan Review*, and moved in overlapping literary and political circles. And they supported many of the same painters and sculptors, although for different reasons. Greenberg's take was formal, and few denied that he could look perceptively and clearly. (Even Alloway was an early admirer.) While many Abstract Expressionists had larger ideas about the meaning and scope of their own work and were responsive to Rosenberg's more expansive and romantic view, they were proud of their craftsmanship and formal abilities. They might have been dismissive of School of Paris good taste and the facility and refined sensibility that such art implied, but there was no doubt that they valued a well-made painting or sculpture: well-made, of course, on their terms.

De Kooning was, for his peers, a model of the deliberative painter, an artist who would spend more time looking than painting, who would obsessively rework a painting like *Gotham News* (or, famously, *Woman I*) until it was right. One of the questions artists repeatedly debated was, when is a painting finished? This was a matter of studio practice, not existential disquisition. At the moment the artist raised the question about his or her own work, the painting had obviously

come to some sort of end point. Was it the right one? The answer was not arrived at in a frenzy of activity, but through a mindful and tense dance of work and reflection. Rosenberg's notion of continuous rupture, while important in the larger scheme of things, was not particularly helpful when it came to the nuts and bolts of putting together a successful work of art.

When personal issues with artists did not get in the way (and personal issues were always important), Greenberg's and Rosenberg's theories were sufficiently elastic to allow for a wide range of enthusiasms. Greenberg's sharply defined theoretical stance, most importantly his insistence on each art discipline abjuring the devices of other disciplines, operated in tandem with his less predictable personal esthetic response; and Rosenberg's concept of action grew to occupy a much larger stage than that of gestural painting. Clyfford Still makes for an interesting example. Still started off close to Rosenberg in the 1940s and urged him to turn his critical skills from literature and politics to art. However, when Rosenberg published "The American Action Painters," the maniacally prickly and self-righteous artist wrote him a letter (included in the show and reproduced in the catalogue) that was so condescending and vicious that any possibility of continued friendship was crushed. From then on, Still was rarely mentioned in Rosenberg's writing. After the break with Rosenberg, Still transferred his allegiance to Greenberg, and the critic responded by moving Still to the upper reaches of his pantheon, although from letters we know that Greenberg could be called onto the carpet if Still disapproved of something he wrote.

Norman Lewis:  
Twilight Sounds, 1947,  
oil on canvas,  
23½ by 28 inches.  
Saint Louis Art Museum.







Morris Louis: *Iris*, 1954, acrylic resin on canvas, 80% by 106% inches. Collection of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz.

Both critics, however, liked the works of Hofmann, Gorky and Newman. "Action/Abstraction" has excellent examples from all three. Hofmann, the oldest (by a good 25 years) of the first generation Abstract Expressionists, produced a wide variety of paintings—providing, as one might imagine, much grist for Greenberg's evaluative mill (for how could some fail to be failures?). This variety makes for rewarding comparisons. The exhibition pairs Hofmann's *Provincetown House* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1943) with two better known Gorky paintings, *Garden in Sochi* (1940-41) and *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb* (1944). The Hofmann and Gorky works share an intense chromatic presence. *Provincetown House* and *Garden in Sochi*, both small, have strong yellow backgrounds—a golden tone in Hofmann's oil painting and a buttery one in Gorky's gouache. *Fantasia* and *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb* employ a greater range of colors, but each is coloristically structured around the interplay of primaries at different tonal levels. All four paintings are built from biomorphic forms, carefully interwoven with linear elements. *Fantasia* is notable for its very early use of dripped enamel lines. These white lines sit, optically and physically, on top of the picture plane and serve, not as an overall linear skein, as in Pollock's paintings, but as a precise drawing element, setting off certain portions of the underlying painting and contributing to its spatial push and pull.

A more cubistic Hofmann, *Exuberance* (1955), pairs up well with de Kooning's *Gotham News*, while the former's magisterial *Sanctum Sanctorum* (1962), with its thick blocks of acidic blue, yellow-orange, yellow and lime set against an orange and scarlet background (done when the artist was in his 80s), forms a rougher and more material counterweight to Rothko's hovering rectangles of disembodied color. Newman is represented by a range of work, from one of the early symbolic paintings (*Genesis—The*

*Break*, 1946) to a small early one-zip painting (*One-ment IV*, 1949) and on to a late, extremely powerful expanse of light red, edged with white (*White and Hot*, 1967). Also included in the exhibition is one of Newman's best sculptures, *Here III* (1965-66), a tall stainless-steel monolith mounted on a small, truncated pyramid of Cor-Ten steel.

Sculpture presented a problem for both critics. As Greenberg wrote, speaking of the failure of sculpture to live up to his high expectations, "These hopes have faded. Painting continues to hold the field, by virtue of its greater breadth of statement as well as by its greater energy."<sup>16</sup> For Greenberg, sculpture was too old-fashioned. It was tied to figuration and far too susceptible to the baleful influences of Cubism and Surrealism. He reserved a particular animus for the popular British sculptors of the day, like Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick and William Turnbull. The great exception to Greenberg's disappointment with the medium was David Smith, whom he referred to as "the best sculptor of his generation."<sup>17</sup> He admired Smith for his commitment to abstraction, mastery of materials and ability to "draw" in space in a suitably sculptural way. After Smith's untimely death in 1965, Greenberg's sculptural enthusiasm shifted to Smith's English admirer, Anthony Caro, and then on to the many sculptors of welded steel who followed in Caro's path.

Rosenberg preferred painting as well. It was, after all, more difficult to be action-oriented and spontaneous in a slower medium like wood or stone carving, plaster modeling or welding. He respected the work of the sculptors in his circle, especially Herbert Ferber and Ibram Lassaw, and in the '60s he supported Tony Smith, whose work was connected in the public mind with Minimalism, a movement greatly disliked by both Rosenberg and Greenberg. Smith, an architect-turned-painter-and-sculptor, was, in fact, from

an earlier generation than the Minimalists, a friend of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists. What Anne Truitt, with her severe painted wooden columns, was for Greenberg, Tony Smith was for Rosenberg: an artist whose work might superficially resemble Minimalism, but which differed from it in significant ways. Elucidate that difference, and Minimalism was made to look shallow. As Rosenberg wrote of Smith in 1967 in "Defining Art," "Unlike most 'primary' [i.e., Minimalist] constructions, the forms often suggest incompleteness; in several a plinthlike section thrusts outward in a gesture of seeking. Smith's refusal to close his structures may produce a preliminary feeling of frustration, but it has the virtue of communicating, like a sketch or partly unpainted canvas, the openness of the creative act."<sup>18</sup>

Politically, esthetically, philosophically and emotionally, Greenberg and Rosenberg were in thorough agreement on one important thing: mass culture and its artistic expression, kitsch, presented a manifest and powerful danger to creativity, art and freedom itself. In this conviction they were in accord with the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, particularly Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. While Walter Benjamin had held out a certain degree of hope for the possibility that mass art might bring something of value to the culture at large, Horkheimer and Adorno believed that what they called "the culture industry" served capitalist society and was compromised by its very nature. In such a system, art becomes a mere commodity and people are the manipulated, passive consumers of it. The title of their 1944 essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," says it neatly.

Greenberg's early and much remarked-on essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1939, and even though in later years Greenberg was uncomfortable with aspects of it, he never wavered in his animosity to popular culture. Published in *Commentary* in 1948, Rosenberg's "The Herd of Independent Minds" inveighs against the oppressive and alienating qualities of mass culture. Ten years later, he published "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism" in *Dissent*, an underknown essay that treats the subject in a nuanced, pessimistic and passionate way. In Rosenberg's view, not only had kitsch thoroughly taken over society in general, but it had wrapped its tentacles around virtually anyone who made it his business to write or think (ostensibly critically) about it. He wrote, "The common argument of the mass-culture intellectuals that they have come not to bathe in the waters but to register the degree of its pollution does not impress me."<sup>19</sup> He was most distressed by art's lack of independence, the way its form and content seemed aligned with what was successful, and how rather than challenging its audience, it catered to that audience's expectations.

As might be imagined, both Greenberg and Rosenberg had little patience for Pop art. Greenberg dismissed it out of hand as being ingratiating and irrevocably minor (to the point of claiming that Grant Wood was better than any Pop artist). But Rosenberg, while disliking work that seemed more polished and impersonal, like Roy Lichtenstein's, warmed to Claes Oldenburg's art, particularly his early painted plaster pieces. "Action/Abstraction" includes a good one, *Funeral Heart* (1961), a green, irregularly shaped, wall-mounted plaque of plaster-impregnated muslin



that is emblazoned with a drippily outlined red heart. Rosenberg appreciated Oldenburg's insouciant urban bohemianism, his engagement with materials and his pricking of social pretension. Peter Saul was another artist associated with Pop whom Rosenberg liked. He sympathized with Saul's political commitment and anger—expressed with a certain degree of black humor, but anger nonetheless. Rosenberg was for the malcontent, the outsider, the immigrant, the self-inventor, the person who could create what he termed “the anxious object.” Lee Bontecou made just such objects. Her patched-up, looming carvas-and-steel works, such as the untitled wall relief (1962) in the exhibition, were disturbing and palpably threatening artworks that countered the larger society's sense of satisfaction.

Although Rosenberg's project was serious, humor was not precluded. Thus his admiration for his good friend and Springs, Long Island, neighbor, Saul Steinberg. A witty and urbane immigrant from Romania, Steinberg remains a difficult artist to slot. Even though his cartoonlike drawings appeared (and years after his death continue to appear) in the *New Yorker*, his work has long enjoyed the respect of the art world. Steinberg's art is accessible—to a point—and makes you smile, rather than laugh. But there is a disquieting edge to it; his send-up of officialdom, provinciality and self-importance leads you to wonder if this doesn't, in some way, apply to you. The institutions of the art world are perpetually ripe for deflation. *Collection* (1971) gives us 13 mostly vertical wooden panels, painted with various recognizable subjects, including a classic Mondrian. The panels' tops and bottoms, however, are sharply angled, and the ensemble arranged to simulate a deep, vertigo-inducing one-point perspective. The flat, reasonably small piece of wall it actually occupies seems to be at least 50 feet deep, its grand recession an obvious fake.

As previously noted, Minimalism was another movement that failed to engage either critic. Although Minimalism, with its strong formalist bent, might have seemed suited to Greenberg's ideas, it wasn't to his taste. He wrote:

Minimal art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else. Its idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered. The geometrical and modular simplicity may announce and signify the artistically furthest-out, but the fact that the signals are understood for what they want to mean betrays them artistically. . . . The artistic substance and reality, as distinct from the program, turns out to be in good safe taste.<sup>20</sup>

Frank Stella is an interesting case, and “Action/Abstraction” includes Stella's major black painting, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* (1959). While much of his work from the '60s has been put into the Minimalist camp, Stella's strong Abstract Expressionist proclivities (evident in his paintings from the '70s on) can be seen in his early production. This was certainly the case with the pre-black paintings, but with their subtle surfaces and edges, and their clear traces of the hand, the black paintings, too, can be seen as being, if not gestural, in line with the work of Abstract Expressionists like Newman and Reinhardt. For whatever reason, Greenberg had little use for Stella's work.

If Stella was a painter whom Greenberg should have liked but didn't, then (to maintain curatorial balance) Allan Kaprow is on hand as an artist whom Rosenberg might have been expected to

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support but failed to. Kaprow's Happenings and other participatory works would have seemed the very essence of action. Rosenberg, however, had difficulty with open-ended works, where the artist's creativity was subordinated to the construction of meaning by the audience. The exhibition features Kaprow's *Words* (1962), a loosely sprung collection of hand-printed, projected and spoken exhortations, commands, sentence fragments and poetical riffs (re-created and rather self-consciously updated for the exhibition by Martha Rosler).

As for Greenberg, he had other artists of the '60s to support—the Color Field painters on the one hand and the welded-steel sculptors, heirs to the legacy of David Smith, on the other. Greenberg would not be held to theoretical absolutes. Flatness, for example, was fine, but only up to a point. Medium specificity, too. Anne Truitt's work—an amalgam of painting and sculpture—would seem to be exactly what he would disdain, but he didn't. When it came down to it, Greenberg liked what he liked, and he was smart and forceful enough to make a case for whatever he wanted. Greenberg was not artistically conservative in the sense of preferring older, safer art, but like many of the intellectuals of his generation who were said to have substituted culture for religion, his strong, almost theological belief in the sanctity of art predisposed him to a certain rigidity. One can almost read “salvation” into a painting's “success” and “damnation” into its “failure.”

For Greenberg, contemporary art's place in an art-historical continuum was of the utmost importance. If the art of one's times was to be taken seriously, it had to be judged against the great art of the past and measure up to it. Modern art was not a series of incoherent ruptures, but an intelligible progression from the past to the present. As Greenberg writes in “Modernist Painting” (1960):

And I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant, and does not mean now, anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling, of tradition, but it also means its further evolution. Modernist art continues the past without gap or break, and wherever it may end up, it will never cease being intelligible in terms of the past.<sup>21</sup>

Greenberg was too savvy to propose inevitability with respect to artistic change, or the permanent relevance of any one style. He was very aware of the potential for stylistic exhaustion and stagnation. It wasn't that the world had to produce a Morris Louis to reinvigorate Abstract Expressionism, but it did and, by Greenberg's lights, it did so at the right time. Looking at Louis's *Iris* (1954), we can see how the expansive scale; stained, flattened surface; subtly modulated, veiled color, tamped down by successive pourings of thinned, pigmented acrylic resin; muted tonal contrast and the absence of a residual Cubist grid (especially a Cubist grid delineated by drawing) would signal to Greenberg the advent of something quite new, as well as the arrival of a worthy successor to Pollock and Still.

After 1967, Greenberg's published writing slowed down; the '70s yielded a small amount of critical work, the '80s considerably less. A series of seminars delivered at Bennington College in the spring of 1971 resulted in nine essays, eight of which were published in art journals between 1973 and '79. A book, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste*, which collected all nine essays and included transcriptions of the original seminars, was published by Oxford University Press in 1999.

Greenberg's dwindling number of publications did not mean that he lost interest in the art world. His power and influence only seemed to increase. Formalist criticism, with its potential for focus and clarity (or as Leo Steinberg put it, “the professionalism of its approach”<sup>22</sup>) had begun to attract younger art writers and art historians like Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Barbara Rose and Walter Dabry Bannard. Museums, galleries and collectors, as well as artists, paid Greenberg a great deal of heed. In the '70s, especially, art that bore his stamp of approval gained a dominant position. Color Field painting and welded abstract sculpture even developed their own version of a Second Generation, with younger practitioners like Joel Perlmutter, Michael Steiner and Pat Lipsky showing in galleries like the SoHo branch of André Emmerich and Tibor de Nagy on 57th Street.

But as art's field expanded and artists began to look past the self-referential object, opposition to Greenbergian formalism increased. Painting, especially abstraction, while still important, lost its sense of inherited and inherent privilege, its guaranteed place at the head of the table. Krauss and others moved away from Greenberg, and interdisciplinarity in the arts as well as overt subject matter began to seem less like perversions of modern art's essence, as Greenberg would have it, and more like expressions of its innate potential. Summing up “Modernist Painting,” Steinberg dismissed Greenberg's neo-Kantian idea of modernist painting's self-criticality, its progression to greater flatness and purity, writing:

Whatever else one may think of Greenberg's construction, its overwhelming effect is to put all painting in series. The progressive flattening of the pictorial stage since Manet 'until its backdrop has become the same as its curtain'—the approximation of the depicted field to the plane of its material support—this was the great Modernist process of self-definition in which all serious Modernist painting was willy-nilly engaged. The one thing which painting can call its own is color coincident with the flat ground, and its drive towards independence demands withdrawal from anything outside itself and single-minded insistence on its unique property. Even now, two hundred years after Kant, any striving for other goals becomes deviationist. Despite the continual emergence of cross-border disciplines (ecology, cybernetics, psycho-linguistics, biochemical engineering, etc.), the self-definition of advanced painting is still said to require retreat. It is surely cause for suspicion when the drift of third-quarter twentieth-century American painting is made to depend on eighteenth-century German epistemology.<sup>23</sup>

Even though by the 1980s Greenberg's influence was sharply on the wane, he was still on people's



# The question is, does "Action/Abstraction" have anything to tell us about today? How might this debate between two long-gone critics relate to the problems of our more complex art world?

minds. He came to serve as a kind of critical lightning rod, the exemplar of the wrong way to go about things. Negative things were said and written about him, which only kept his name in the discourse. It was not that way for Rosenberg. In contrast to Greenberg, Rosenberg's written output increased. His position at the *New Yorker* was certainly a factor. While Greenberg's predilection was to find fault and exclude, Rosenberg cast a wider net and was capable of greater critical generosity. His concept of action was expansive, and embraced politics and ethics as well as a variety of esthetic stances and strategies. (If Ad Reinhardt could be an action painter, then that left the door pretty wide open.) One might think that Rosenberg's greater reach would have given his work a continuing relevance, but his death in 1978, 16 years before Greenberg's, effectively marked the end of his critical influence, although he is now experiencing a belated resurgence. Greenberg's active involvement with a younger generation of Color Field painters and welded-steel sculptors, while excluding much of the vital art of the period (he disdainfully lumped virtually anything new that he did not like under the category of "Novelty Art"), kept him in the game. One gets the sense that Rosenberg's heart belonged to the '50s, and his interest in later developments was, if not perfunctory, then nowhere near as keen.

Having worked our way through 25 intense years of art, criticism and contextualization, what are we to make of "Action/Abstraction"? Seen as a purely historical exhibition, it is clearly first-rate. The art is always engaging and often exhilarating, and the curatorial choices and catalogue reflect admirable precision, thoroughness and inclusiveness. The show will, I am sure, draw appreciative crowds when it travels to St. Louis and Buffalo. Even the examination of excluded art and artists is unlikely to provoke unease. The deeper question is, does "Action/Abstraction" have anything to tell us about today? In what way might this not so polite debate between two long-gone critics relate to the problems we face in a much larger and more complex art world? Art now seems to have no boundaries, literally and figuratively. Art is made and displayed virtually anywhere in an exponentially expanding world of art fairs, biennials and other temporary venues, on the Internet, in art-school open houses, in publications and blogs of all sorts, in performances, fleeting events—essentially, in any form conceivable.

On the one hand, this is liberating; on the other, extraordinarily confusing. There is something, however, that is certain: just as aspects of today's open situation create more opportunity and freedom for some, in the absence of shared and focused artistic concerns, market interests exert increasing power. The ability of those interests to subvert, divert, tempt, co-opt and preempt is frightening. The artist, despite the comforting illusion of connectedness fostered by the Internet, art schools, gallery districts and artist-friendly neighborhoods, is still, for the most part, an individual practitioner, unable to resist or control the

sophisticated economic and political engines of the world at large. This is something that Rosenberg and Greenberg would have certainly understood.

To come to grips with this situation, the first step is to regain a sense of proportion and the power to frame the debate. We should have some basis for determining if something is a valid work of art and, more importantly, for assessing, other than by the test of the marketplace, if it is good (or at least suggests the artist is pointed in the right direction). Clearly there is not a one-size-fits-all standard, but we could do worse than to aim for a combination of the best of that which animated Greenberg and Rosenberg, and which this exhibition illustrates so thoughtfully.

Both men possessed a deep understanding of art and culture, and they took art very, very seriously. At the least, a working knowledge of art history, particularly of the modern period, is necessary for evaluating art. An understanding of other contributing elements or disciplines—philosophy, anthropology, politics, current events or anything else germane—is also useful. Times have changed, and the two critics' strictures and edicts, their enthusiasms and visceral dislikes do not necessarily translate to our day. But from Rosenberg we might borrow certain evaluative standards. We could look hard at a work of art's newness, its evidence of creative spark. To take it a step further—and at the risk of passing judgment on the intentions and even the character of the artist—we might examine the work of art for signs of authenticity or seriousness of purpose, as well as a sense of commitment. Does it operate in good faith? Is there necessity behind it? Did it *have* to be done?

Following Greenberg's lead, we could question a work's historical lineage and the way it holds up in comparison to its predecessors. Formalism seems to be a passé method, but there is no getting around a thoughtful examination of the work itself, in whatever medium it is made. How well is it put together, do all the parts work with each other, is everything in it essential, is anything vital missing? No matter how conceptual, does it go beyond mere ideation? As Greenberg writes in "Recentness of Sculpture": "Aesthetic surprise hangs on forever—it is still there in Raphael as it is in Pollock—and ideas alone cannot achieve it. Aesthetic surprise comes from inspiration and sensibility as well as from being abreast of the artistic times."<sup>24</sup>

Great art often springs from unpromising soil. Both Greenberg and Rosenberg valued art that took the risk of failure and pushed deeper rather than wider, that abjured easy answers, ingratiation, the allure of predictability and the many varieties of slickness. They set high standards—standards that might seem idiosyncratic and exclusionary to our eyes—but standards nonetheless. If artists and those who truly care about art want to take hold of the dialogue once again, they must formulate and apply strenuous critical benchmarks. Some of those might be new, but others might be quite to the liking of Greenberg and Rosenberg. Paying serious attention to the issues raised by "Action/Abstraction" would be a good way to begin. □

1. Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Marc Chagall, Lionel Feininger, and Jackson Pollock," *The Nation*, Nov. 27, 1943, in *The Collected Essays and Criticism/Clement Greenberg*, ed. John O'Brien, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, vols. 1 and 2, 1986, vols. 3 and 4, 1993, vol. 1, p. 166.
2. Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Pollock; of the Annual Exhibition of the American Abstract Artists; and of the Exhibition *European Artists in America*," *The Nation*, Apr. 7, 1945, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, p. 16.
3. Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Worden Day, Carl Holty, and Jackson Pollock," *The Nation*, Jan. 24, 1948, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, p. 203.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
5. Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," *Partisan Review*, Spring 1955, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 226.
6. Greenberg, "Review of an Exhibition of Willem de Kooning," *The Nation*, Apr. 24, 1948, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, pp. 228-29.
7. Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," pp. 221-22.
8. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News*, December 1952, in Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (1959), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 34-35.
9. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, New York, Clarkson N. Potter, 1989, p. 708.
10. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 28.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
12. Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, p. 711.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 712-13.
14. Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," *Encounter*, December 1962, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 137.
15. Greenberg's intellectual curiosity and focus are evident in this recollection by his wife, Janice Van Horne: "In 1994, on one of Clem's last visits to the emergency room, barely able to breathe, he sat on the gurney rereading a shredded volume of Heidegger, in German of course, impervious as the tubes and needles invaded." Janice Van Horne, *The Harold Letters: 1928-1943; The Making of an American Intellectual*, Washington, D.C., Counterpoint, 2000, p. viii.
16. Greenberg, "David Smith," *Art in America*, Winter 1956-57, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 276.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
18. Harold Rosenberg, "Defining Art," in *Artworks and Packages* (1969), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 40.
19. Harold Rosenberg, "Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism," *Dissent*, no. 5, Winter 1958, in *The Tradition of the New*, p. 260.
20. Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April-June 1967, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 254.
21. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Forum Lectures*, Washington, D.C., Voice of America, 1960, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 92.
22. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" (based on a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 1968), in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 66.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.
24. Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," p. 254.

"Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976" is at the Jewish Museum, New York, through Sept. 21. It travels to the St. Louis Art Museum [Oct. 19, 2008-Jan. 11, 2009] and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo [Feb. 13-May 31, 2009]. The exhibition is accompanied by a 332-page, fully illustrated catalogue with contributions by Norman L. Kleeblatt, the show's curator; Maurice Berger, who curated the exhibition's context rooms; and other scholars.

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