



Plate 1 Alexandre Hogue, *Drouth-stricken Area*, 1934, oil on canvas, 76 x 108 cm. Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; Dallas Art Association Purchase, 1945.6.

CHAPTER 1

MODERNISM AND CULTURE IN THE USA, 1930–1960

by Jonathan Harris

Introduction

Questions of 'history' and 'theory'

In this chapter I consider the history of art in the USA between about 1930 and the early 1960s. In particular, I want to examine the shift from the type of painting illustrated by Plates 1 and 2 to the very different style of Plates 3–5. How can we account for this move from an art of 'naturalism' or 'social realism' to what became celebrated after 1945 as 'Abstract Expressionism' or "'American-type" Painting'? An adequate account of this shift, which involved a dramatic change in artists' interests and priorities, should also examine the role of particular critics and historians whose interpretation of art, artists and the wider historical circumstances was not a mere *supplement* to that development, but actually a defining feature of it. Within the dominant history of US art in the twentieth century, it is clear that certain critics and historians writing during the 1950s and 1960s – particularly Clement Greenberg – have held sway. While it may be true to some extent that these accounts have been criticized and revised over the last two decades, it is important to recognize that the legacy of specific accounts and judgements, as to the relevance and quality of works of art produced during the period, is still active and powerful in many quarters.

The chapter provides two main historical accounts and two theoretical discussions. In Part 1, I consider the history of 'Depression America' art, which is normally described as 'naturalist' or 'social realist'. This discussion will attempt to link these specific artistic products and practices to the wider economic, political and ideological circumstances of US society in the period 1930–1941, i.e. up to the entry of the USA into the Second World War. Part 2 deals with the reconstruction of US art after the war, when 'Abstract Expressionism', along with a number of other terms, was coined to describe the art associated with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and others. For Greenberg, an active supporter of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists working during the late 1940s and 1950s, the 'look' of these paintings *was* their most significant feature, in sharp contrast to the social and political intentions of artists who had worked during the Depression, for whom art was part of the intense ideological struggles over the crisis in US capitalism and over the possibility of an alternative, socialist future in that country. It will be necessary to point out, however, that such a rigid division between 'art of the 1930s' and 'art of the 1950s' is itself part of the critical legacy associated with Greenberg and other critics and historians, who would like to drive a wedge between the politics and practices of art and criticism before and after the Second World War. Many of the so-called Abstract Expressionists had been active artistically and politically during the Depression, and their work after the war was by no means unrelated – in terms of intentions, interests and values – to the concerns they had developed during the 1930s.



Plate 2 Reginald Marsh, *20-cent Movie*, 1936, egg tempera on composition board, 76 x 102 cm. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 37.43. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements.

The first theoretical discussion (see Part 2) presents an account of the nature and significance of Greenberg's art criticism as it impinged on art practice in the USA during the middle decades of the century *and* as it influenced and shaped later historical descriptions and explanations of US art. This dominant version, or historical and critical orthodoxy, presents US art as only really 'flowering' or becoming 'authentic' after 1945, while art of the Depression, in large part, is regarded as merely 'illustrational' and 'anecdotal'. We can describe such an orthodoxy of selection, explanation and evaluation as 'Modernist' in that it relies on specific notions of formal and technical innovation, conceptions of art's uniqueness as a medium, and the assumption that art is, in its most significant respects, autonomous from social and historical circumstances. Greenberg's two key essays in this respect are 'Avant-garde and kitsch' (1939) and 'Modernist painting' (1961).

The second theoretical discussion (in the conclusion) attempts to relate issues about art, culture and society during the 1930s in the USA to the situation in the early 1990s when monopoly capitalism is in 'recession'. I shall attempt to show that the 1930s debates and struggles in the USA over the role of art and culture within a capitalist society in crisis have a direct parallel in the conditions faced by people living in capitalist societies during the 1990s. The art-historical questions, then, I would propose, have distinct relevance to social life generally, and many of the features of the discussion about art practice and critical practice current in the period 1930–60 have continuing resonance. 'Modernist' accounts have attempted to *suppress* these wider social and historical issues and, by so doing, have made it harder for people to understand the situation in which they find themselves and their societies.



Plate 3 Jackson Pollock, *Number 1 (1948)*, 1948, oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 173 x 264 cm. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; purchase. © 1992 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York.

It should become obvious that the distinction between 'historical' and 'theoretical' debates and positions is, in an important sense, untenable. Whatever the analytic value in separating 'descriptions' and 'selections' from 'explanatory principles' and 'evaluations', the writing of history – the production of accounts of past acts, events, products and processes – involves assumptions and presuppositions if a perspective or focus is to be achieved at all. This is irrespective of whether particular critics or historians believe they are writing 'objectively'. The attempt to present a description or interpretation as unrelated to a set of personal or social interests *itself* reveals a very particular interest that needs interrogation. In what follows, therefore, the interaction of 'history' and 'theory', of 'descriptions' and 'judgements', should be acknowledged as a necessary and inevitable feature of writing, whatever the claims of those doing the writing.

Part 1: Capitalist crisis and artistic culture during the 1930s

Description and explanation

Consider these works: Alexandre Hogue's *Drouth-stricken Area*, Reginald Marsh's *20-cent Movie*, Jackson Pollock's *Number 1 (1948)*, Mark Rothko's *Number 7* and Barnett Newman's *Covenant* (Plates 1–5). The contrast between the first two paintings and the other three is obvious. It can stand for the difference, the schism, between 'work of the 1930s' and 'work of the 1950s' (this is a descriptive and conceptual division, rather than one based on precisely *when* a painting was produced). The works by Pollock, Rothko and Newman have canonical status within the body of Abstract Expressionist painting and within most histories of twentieth-century Modernist art. As art historian Barbara Rose wrote:

In Abstract Expressionism, then, American artists were at last able to realize their long maturing ambition for an art both of formal grandeur as well as spiritual significance. The literalism that limited American art for centuries was but a small portion of Abstract Expressionism; it was largely confined to making literal the flatness of the painting, and asserting the real qualities of the medium (i.e. that paint was fluid and surface was palpable). In all other respects, Abstract Expressionism was an art dedicated, above all, to transcending the mundane, the banal and the material through the use of metaphor and symbol.

(B. Rose, *American Painting*, p.70)

It may not be clear at this stage whether Rose's statement clarifies or obscures what these three paintings may be said to mean or represent. Part 2 includes a discussion of the ideas, intentions, interests and values of artists and critics active at the time of Abstract Expressionism. Rose's account, produced at the end of the 1960s, may not have much in common with an account that we might give if we simply try to 'describe' what we see. If we are unfamiliar with these paintings, we might be tentative, searching, unsure of what precise words are adequate to the experience of looking. Rose's words are confident, stronger, surer: she presents *concepts* rather than a stumbling list of colours, shapes, patterns or lines. Her terms – 'Expressionism', 'Abstract', 'formal grandeur', 'literal', 'fluid', 'surface' – appear certain of their place within a system that constitutes an explanation. Her terms and phrases may *appear* to be descriptive, but at the same time they have a conceptual weight, as part of what could be called a critical discourse or argument. And what about 'spiritual significance', 'the mundane', 'the banal', 'the material', as well as 'metaphor' and 'symbol'? Is it clear what objects or events or values she is referring to? What sense are we to make of these works and this kind of critical account?

We might begin by recognizing, and then trying to articulate, the sense of strangeness or unfamiliarity of these works of art. Without a knowledge of twentieth-century art up to 1945 (and perhaps even with it), we are unlikely to find signs of 'life' or 'the world' in these paintings: no people, or landscape or objects are depicted. Yet, for Rose, these absences don't add up to nothing: it appears that, for her, the tangibility of paint, the surface of the canvas, is made possible because of the absence of depiction. Perhaps 'depiction' is what Rose has in mind when she refers to 'the mundane' and 'the banal'. And it might be that the palpability of paint on canvas (in terms of texture, hue, pattern and 'line') is necessary if the paintings are to attain what she calls 'formal grandeur' and a 'spiritual significance'. Setting aside the task of description for a moment, we might well want to ask: where have Rose's notions of value and significance come from, and why have they been so invested in paintings such as these? Could these notions of value and significance be clarified simply through the act of looking at the works, as if Rose herself

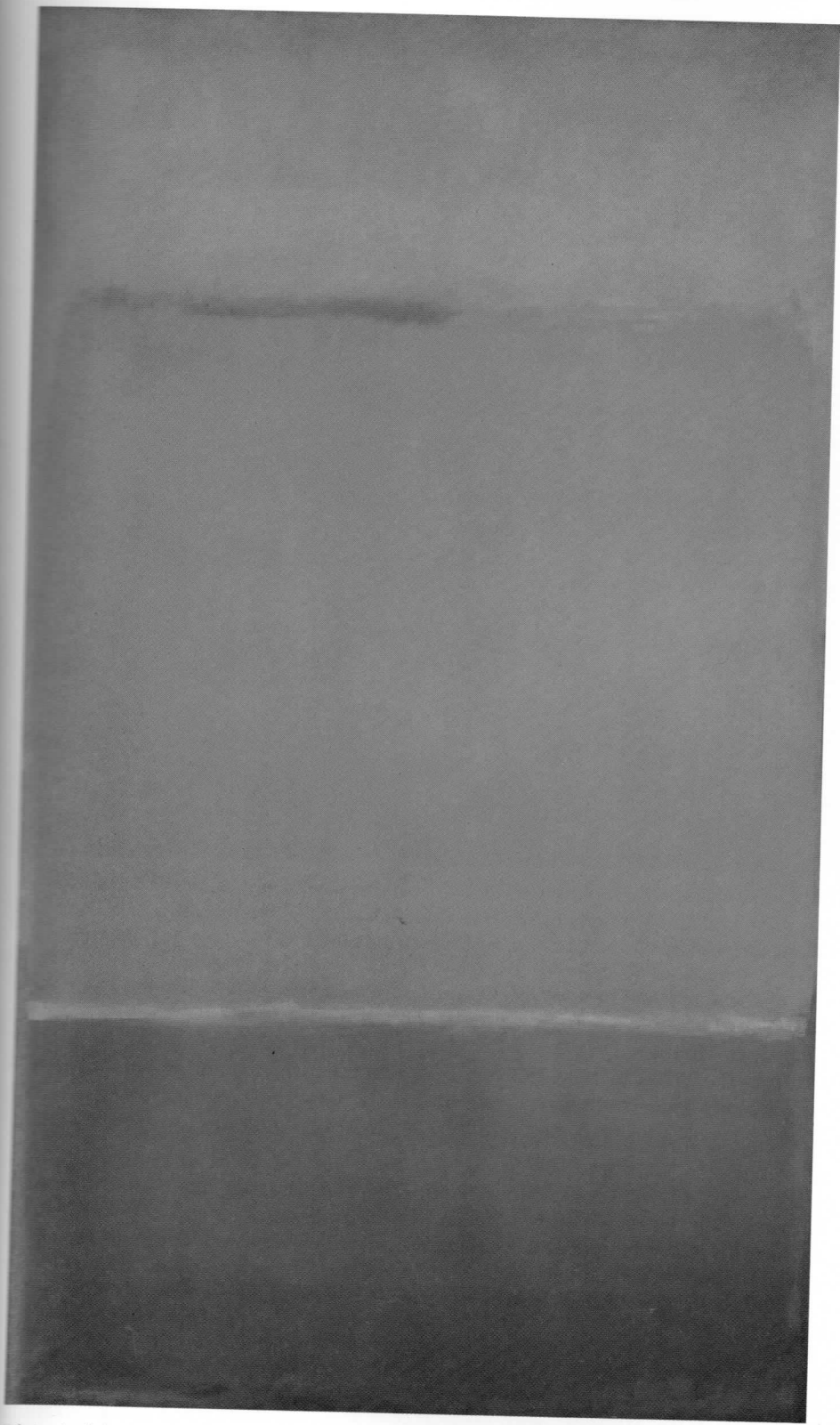


Plate 4 Mark Rothko, *Number 7*, 1951, oil on canvas, 239 x 138 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zurich.
© 1992 Kate Rothko-Prizel and Christopher Rothko/ARS, New York.

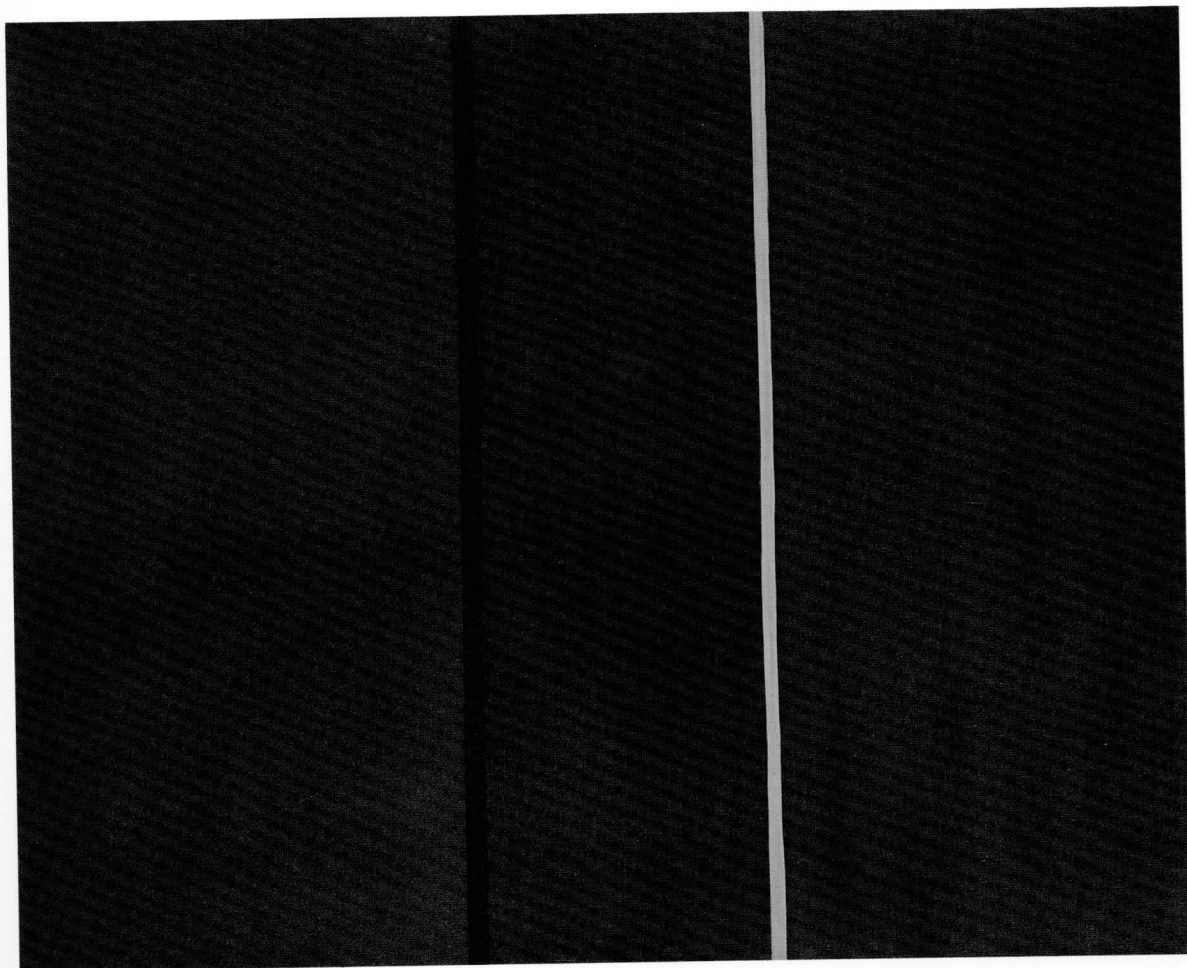


Plate 5 Barnett Newman, *Covenant*, 1949, oil on canvas, 121 x 151 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. Photograph: Lee Stalworth. Reproduced courtesy of Annalee Newman in so far as her rights are concerned.

had arrived at these notions merely by 'looking'? This seems doubtful. I shall return in Part 2 to the issue of how/where these values and assumptions may have been formed.

Now consider Hogue's *Drouth-stricken Area* and Marsh's *20-cent Movie*. Both were produced during the 1930s. In 1934, the year in which the former painting was made, the US art critic Thomas Craven wrote:

We can no longer turn away from the significance of the subject-matter of art. America lies before us, stricken with economic pains, but eager for the voice of criticism, and in desperate need of spiritual consolations. Shall we face the situation like honest workmen; or shall we hide in the dark tower and paint evasive arabesques on an ivory wall? Again and again, with all the temper at my command, I have exhorted our artists to remain at home in a familiar background, to enter emotionally into strong native tendencies, to have done with alien cultural fetishes. And at this critical moment, I repeat the exhortation.

(T. Craven, *Modern Art*, p.260)

These two paintings may be said to respond to Craven's exhortation, though in differing ways. Hogue's painting apparently pictures something of the 'economic pains' of the USA – a dilapidated farm in the Midwest, with skeletal cow and expectant vulture. The warping of wooden structures is echoed in the pictorial 'warping' of the perspectival devices: the outhouse to the right tips precariously, preventing the scene from appearing centred and

ordered. Both the painting and what is pictured within it appear on the point of collapse. Marsh's canvas represents, perhaps, Americans 'at home in a familiar background' – going to the movies. Yet the scratchiness of the mode of depiction, its harsh contrasts between light and dark, and the angularity of composition inflect the mood of the scene in a powerful way: something of the dowdiness and general 'poverty of life' appears to be expressed. Neither painting offers much in terms of 'spiritual consolation'. Both, on the other hand, seem to have little in common with European Modernist art, except in the sense of borrowing a general 'expressionistic' and non-naturalistic use of line. To apply a blanket label such as 'naturalism' to all the varying types of 'socially committed' art produced during the 1930s would be a crude misrepresentation.

It would also be wrong to conclude that Craven's exhortation in some way encapsulates *all* the art produced in the Depression, although it is true that later Modernist histories of that period – including Rose's – saw the vast majority of that art as tainted with the crude nationalist sentiments that Craven displays. I shall indicate something of the variety of works produced in this period by artists and groups of artists who saw their art as part of a number of *differing* social, political and ideological struggles and projects, on both the left and right of US society.

Whatever the differences in subject-matter, mode of depiction or intent, it is clear that the works by Hogue, Marsh and many others share a commitment to the realm of 'depiction' that was later to be dismissed by Rose as 'mundane' and 'banal'. These pictures are also much smaller: they are more like 'illustrations', diminutive and manageable in a way – unlike the Abstract Expressionist paintings, whose size lends them the quality that Rose describes as 'formal grandeur'. We can recognize the depiction of people, events and physical and social environments: we may be able to say that there is an immediate familiarity that allows us to be confident in describing what we see.

Attempting to describe these works of art simply by looking at them will get us only so far. Rose's account, as I've said, seems to depend on a complex conceptual language, used to value the Abstract Expressionist works above what she condemns as 'the banal' and 'the mundane' in art. We know (*American Painting*, p.36) that Rose *was* comparing the post-Second World War artists with some 1930s counterparts, the so-called 'naturalists' or 'realists', and deciding that the latter were mere illustrators. How might a knowledge of the history of the USA from the 1930s to the 1960s enable us to explain the differences and changes that characterize that four-decade period, in terms of artists' styles, intentions, values and interests? The change from 1930s 'realism' to 1950s 'abstraction' *seems* particularly abrupt. How might it be explained in relation to economic, political and ideological factors?

Depression, the New Deal and the Federal Art Project

In the 1930s many critics and artists in New York (including Pollock, Rothko and Newman) were committed to socialist politics and a vision of a non-capitalist USA. 'Naturalistic' or 'realist' representational practices dominated, and were seen as a cultural necessity for those affiliated to socialist and communist politics. With the slump in stock-market prices in 1929 came a rapid collapse of the US economy. Between 1929 and the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, the US Gross National Product fell from 104 billion dollars to 56 billion. Unemployment rose to at least one-quarter of the entire workforce in 1933. Urban workers received an average wage-cut of 40 per cent between 1929 and 1933. The recession was so long and deep that, for the first time, accurate official figures on national unemployment were gathered, and these were published in *Recent Social Trends* in 1933. Estimates of unemployment range from eight and a half million to seventeen million during the 1930s. In 1931 the Soviet Union advertised in the USA for 6,000 skilled workers and received 100,000 applications.¹

¹ D. Smith and J. Siracusa, *The Testing of America*, p.129.