

Part 2: Abstract Expressionism and the politics of criticism

Clement Greenberg and the ascendance of the New York School

Writing in 1940, at about the time that Pousette-Dart commended the eclecticism of US art as a healthy comparison with the strait-jacket in Germany and the USSR, the critic Clement Greenberg speculated:

Abstract art cannot be disposed of by a simple-minded evasion. Or by negation. We can only dispose of abstract art by assimilating it, by fighting our way through it. Where to? I do not know. Yet it seems to me that the wish to return to the imitation of nature in art has been given no more justification than the desire of certain partisans of abstract art to legislate it into permanency.

(C. Greenberg, 'Towards a newer Laocoon', p.45)

In that essay, Greenberg's approval is reserved for the artists who now occupy central positions within the canon of Modernist art – Van Gogh, Picasso, Klee, Miró and Arp. Their work, Greenberg said, contributed

importantly to the development of modern painting ... with the desire to exploit the break with imitative realism for a more powerful expressiveness, but so inexorable was the logic of the development that in the end their work constituted but another step towards abstract art.

(Greenberg, p.45)

Eight years later, in a more declarative mood, Greenberg stated:

If artists as great as Picasso, Braque, and Léger have declined so grievously, it can only be because the general social premises that used to guarantee their functioning have disappeared in Europe. And when one sees, on the other hand, how much the level of American art has risen in the last five years, with the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith ... then the conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power.

(Greenberg, 'The decline of Cubism', p.369)

We are reminded here of the passage by Rose that I quoted on page 6, where she judges that the art of the Abstract Expressionists constituted a 'formal grandeur' in continuity with the European Modernists of the interwar period, transcending 'the mundane, the banal and the material' that was characteristic of 1930s illustrationism. And as Greenberg says in 'The decline of Cubism', this state of affairs, in which 'the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States', was connected to the rise of the USA as the global power in economic and political terms after the Second World War. How might this critical judgement, and the development of the critical consensus regarding the value of the Abstract Expressionists, be assessed? How might the work of the Abstract Expressionists produced in the late 1940s and 1950s, along with the influential criticism of Greenberg and others, be linked to the new status of the USA as the prime superpower within the Cold War?

Consider again Pollock's *Number 1*, Rothko's *Number 7*, Newman's *Covenant*, along with Gorky's *The Betrothal, II*, de Kooning's *Excavation* and Still's *Painting* (Plates 3–5 and 41–43). These paintings may stand as examples of what is usually called 'Abstract Expressionism'. The name itself was first used by the critic Robert Coates in 1946 to describe paintings by the German artist Hans Hofmann on show at the Mortimer Brandt



Plate 41 Arshile Gorky,
The Betrothal, II, 1947, oil on
canvas, 129 x 97 cm.
Collection of the Whitney
Museum of American Art,
New York; purchase. © 1992
Agnes Fielding-Gorky / ARS,
New York.

Gallery in New York. Hofmann's painting *Effervescence* (Plate 44) may have led Coates to apply the term – which had previously been used, with lower-case letters and adjectivally, in relation to works by Kandinsky, such as *Sketch for Composition IV (Battle)* (Plate 45). Hofmann had moved to the USA during the 1930s, and has generally been understood as a 'transitional' artist whose work in the early 1940s synthesized the formal and expressive conventions of inter-war European Modernist art while adding new features seen as unique to the Abstract Expressionists.⁷ Unlike Hofmann's paintings, those by Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Gorky, de Kooning and Still were constructed on a scale beyond what has been called 'the easel tradition'. The mural or quasi-mural size of work by the Abstract Expressionists has also been regarded as signifying, or embodying, a particular American element – using European Modernist forms but transposing them within a new overall form of pictorial organization. Greenberg later described this altered 'situational field' of decisions, preferences and choices within the work of these artists as "'American-type" Painting' (see his article of the same name, where he states that their work had sometimes been given this label in London).

⁷ For instance, see C. Goodman's *Hans Hofmann*, where she claims that in the early 1940s Hofmann developed the 'drip technique' before Pollock.

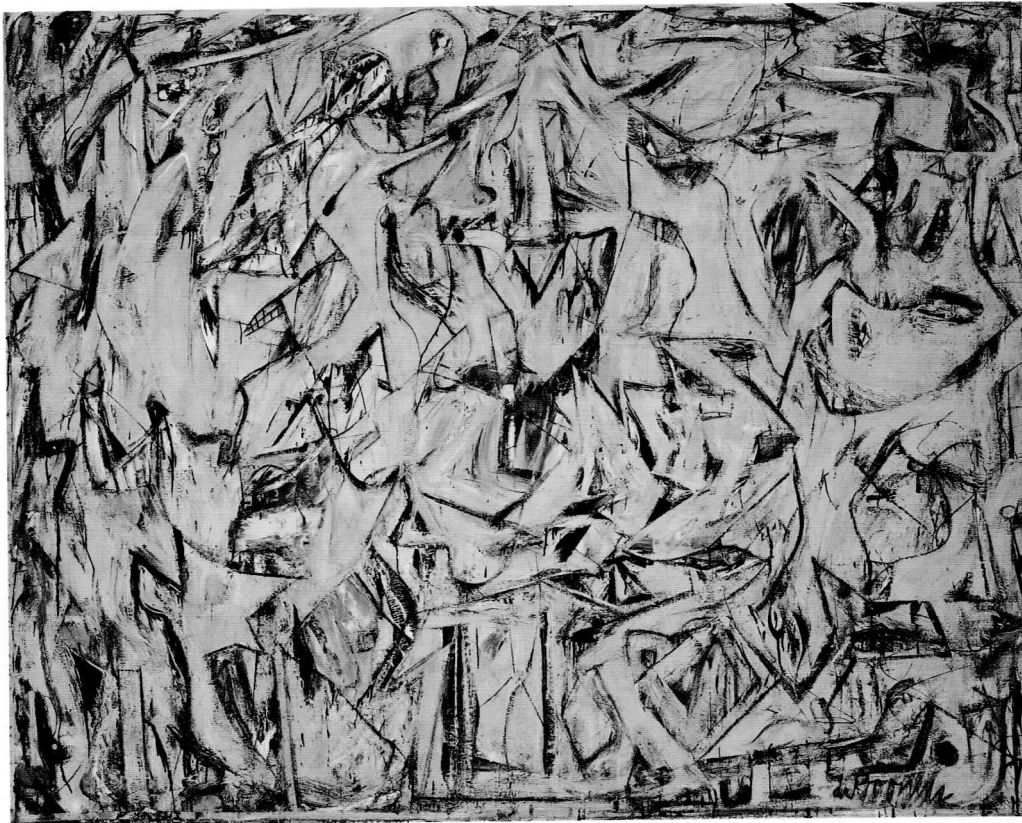


Plate 42 Willem de Kooning, *Excavation*, 1950, oil on canvas, 203 x 254 cm. © 1992 The Art Institute of Chicago, all rights reserved; gift of Mr and Mrs Noah Goldowsky and Edgar Kaufmann jr and Mr and Mrs Frank G. Logan Prize Fund, 1952.1. © 1992 Willem de Kooning/ARS, New York.

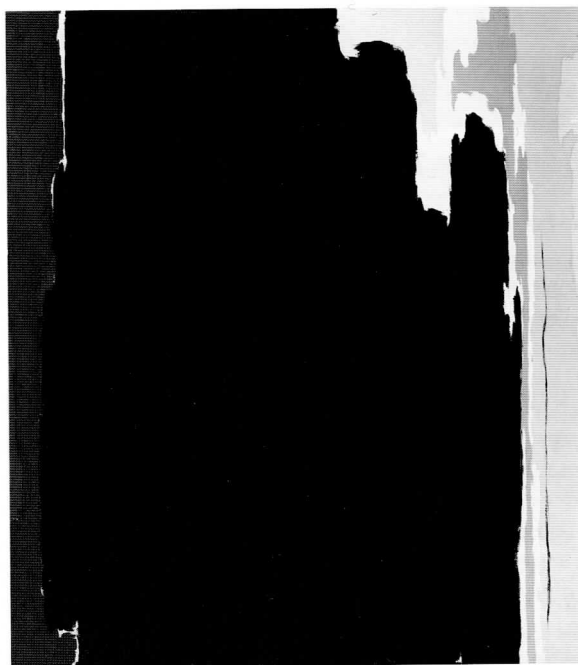


Plate 43 Clyfford Still, *Painting*, 1951, oil on canvas, 237 x 192 cm. © The Detroit Institute of Arts; Founders' Society Purchase, W. Hawkins Ferry Fund.



Plate 44 Hans Hofmann, *Effervescence*, 1944, oil, indian ink, casein and enamel on plywood panel, 138 x 91 cm. University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley; gift of the artist.



Plate 45 Vasily Kandinsky, *Sketch for Composition IV (Battle)*, also known as *Cossacks*, 1910, oil on canvas, 95 x 132 cm. Tate Gallery, London. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 1993.

Tendentious as both labels are, given that neither was used or adopted by the artists within their own accounts of their work, 'Abstract Expressionism' and "'American-type' Painting' are terms that enable us to begin to investigate the paintings to which they refer. We can explore the works both in formal terms (how we might describe the way the paintings look, or the technical way in which they were made) and, beyond that, in terms of how their 'Americanness' might relate to the wider economic, political and ideological circumstances of the post-war period. *Any* account of their work, however, inevitably involves certain principles of selection, interpretation, emphasis and judgement; and the conditions within which *these* principles are formed should not be cancelled out of the inquiry.

If we compare our selection of Abstract Expressionist paintings with works produced in the USA during the 1930s (discussed in Part 1), there are clearly great differences. The paintings by Pollock, Rothko, Newman and the others are *much* larger, in some cases dozens of times larger. This is also to say, therefore, that Pollock and Rothko left behind the small, easel-painting conventions that they themselves had used during the mid- and late 1930s (see Plates 6 and 8). Representation through conventions of 'resemblance' or traditional iconography has seemingly been abandoned by 1948. Paintings by Gorky, de Kooning, Still and Hofmann are similarly bereft of the forms of 'socially-symbolic' meaning regarded as necessary for authentic artistic communication by US painters working in the Depression. Technically, in terms of the means with which paint is applied to the surface, dramatic changes have been made, and these may be seen as related to the rejection of the narrative and realist means used ten years earlier. This is most evident in the work of Pollock produced between 1948 and about 1951, when the 'drip technique', along with other methods of applying paint, was developed and elaborated.

Although Pollock had a definite sense of the canvas as a picture, which had to be hung and viewed in the traditional manner – vertically, attached to a support and then fixed to a wall – the 'drip-paintings' were made with the unstretched and even uncut canvas laid on the floor. He would work around the surface on all four sides, applying paint through a variety of means. These included dripping the paint from cans and splattering it from the

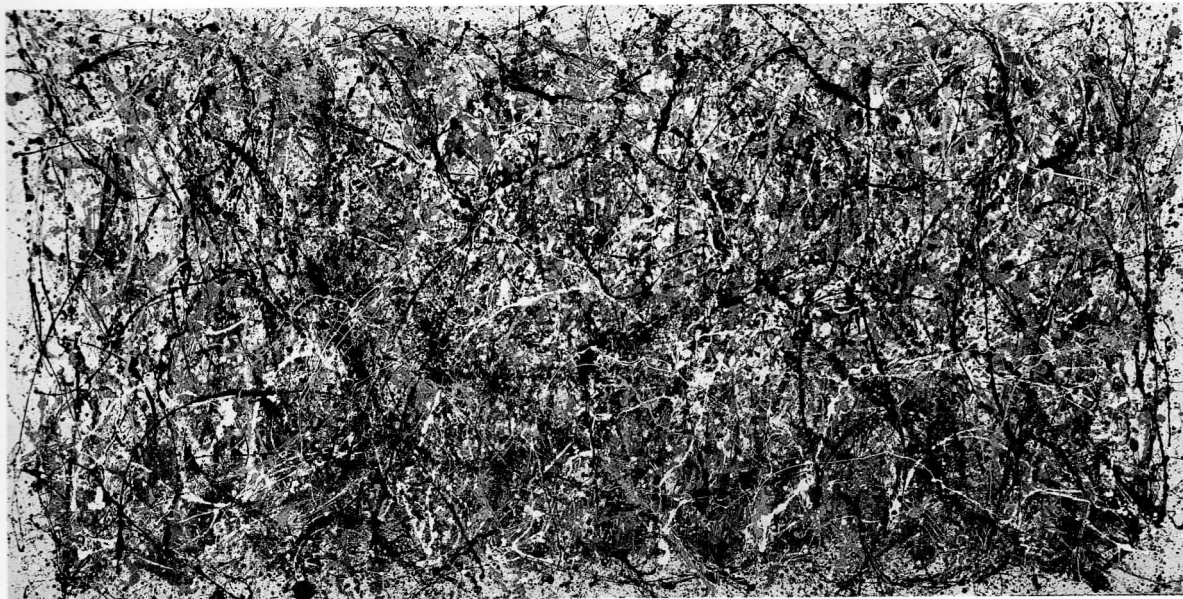


Plate 46 Jackson Pollock, *One (Number 31, 1950)*, 1950, oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 270 x 531 cm. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund (by exchange). © 1992 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York.

end of a brush, in a process that built up, layer upon layer, the dense skeins and veils of paint that are visible within *Number 1* (1948) and *One* (*Number 31*, 1950) (Plates 3 and 46). Pollock also used new kinds of industrial paint (including an aluminium composite), and the texture and gloss of these substances contrast markedly with traditional oil-paint effects. *Number 1* and *One* contain highly intricate, 'linear' patterns of marking; in a sense, Pollock has 'drawn' with the paint, although not with the intention or effect of constructing illusions or allusions to objects or events in the world. The dense, though variegated, 'webbing' of compositional form, with its chromatic and linear elements, creates a kind of 'image' or 'presence' on the canvas though it refers to nothing iconically (for example, a person or landscape). Spatial illusions *are* created through the interplay of actual skeins of paint lying on the surface and upon each other, as well as through the viewer's perception of the paint's chromatic and tonal variations. In addition to this, the webbing of paint that constitutes the compositional form recedes and diminishes towards the four sides of the canvas, and the contrast between the canvas underneath and the form upon it also creates a sense of depth and recession.

The sense of movement and rhythm within the painting – which, in one sense, *is* a record of Pollock's movement around the canvas in the process of making the composition – has led critics and historians to designate this type of Abstract Expressionist painting, including work by de Kooning and Kline, as 'gestural'. Despite this label, it's clear that de Kooning's *Excavation* and Kline's *New York, N.Y.* (Plates 42 and 47) share little with Pollock in terms of how their paintings were physically made. De Kooning's work, more so than Kline's, does share with Pollock's canvas that sense of 'all-over' compositional



Plate 47 Franz Kline,
New York, N.Y., 1953, oil on canvas,
201 x 130 cm. Albright-Knox Art
Gallery, Buffalo, New York; gift of
Seymour H. Knox, 1956.