

Plate 48 Willem de Kooning, *Woman, I*, 1950–52, oil on canvas, 193 x 147 cm. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; purchase. © 1992 Willem de Kooning/ARS, New York.



spread, with no focus. But the creating of specific shapes with allusive properties, in both *Excavation* and *New York, N.Y.*, is very unlike Pollock's radically 'decentred' webbing of paint. Kline's configuration of paint is evocative of shapes and structures found in a city such as New York (bridges, buildings, roads even), while de Kooning never lost interest in figuring parts of human bodies within his post-war style. If *Excavation* may be said to contain allusions to faces, eyes, ears and fingers, then his *Woman, I* (Plate 48) reinstates the tradition of representing the human female body (the genre of 'the nude'), articulating figuration within his fractured, 'gestural' mode of composition. De Kooning and Kline also differ from Pollock in that they still apply paint with the brush laid onto the surface of the canvas, in 'easel-painting' mode.

This 'gestural' painting has been seen as a major facet of Abstract Expressionism. Other painters had different concerns – for example, to produce a highly 'static' effect, again based on very different technical means of production. This has been called 'chromatic abstraction' or 'colour-field' painting, seen as having an important point of development in the work of Mark Rothko during the 1950s and being taken up in the early 1960s by a later generation of painters including Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski.

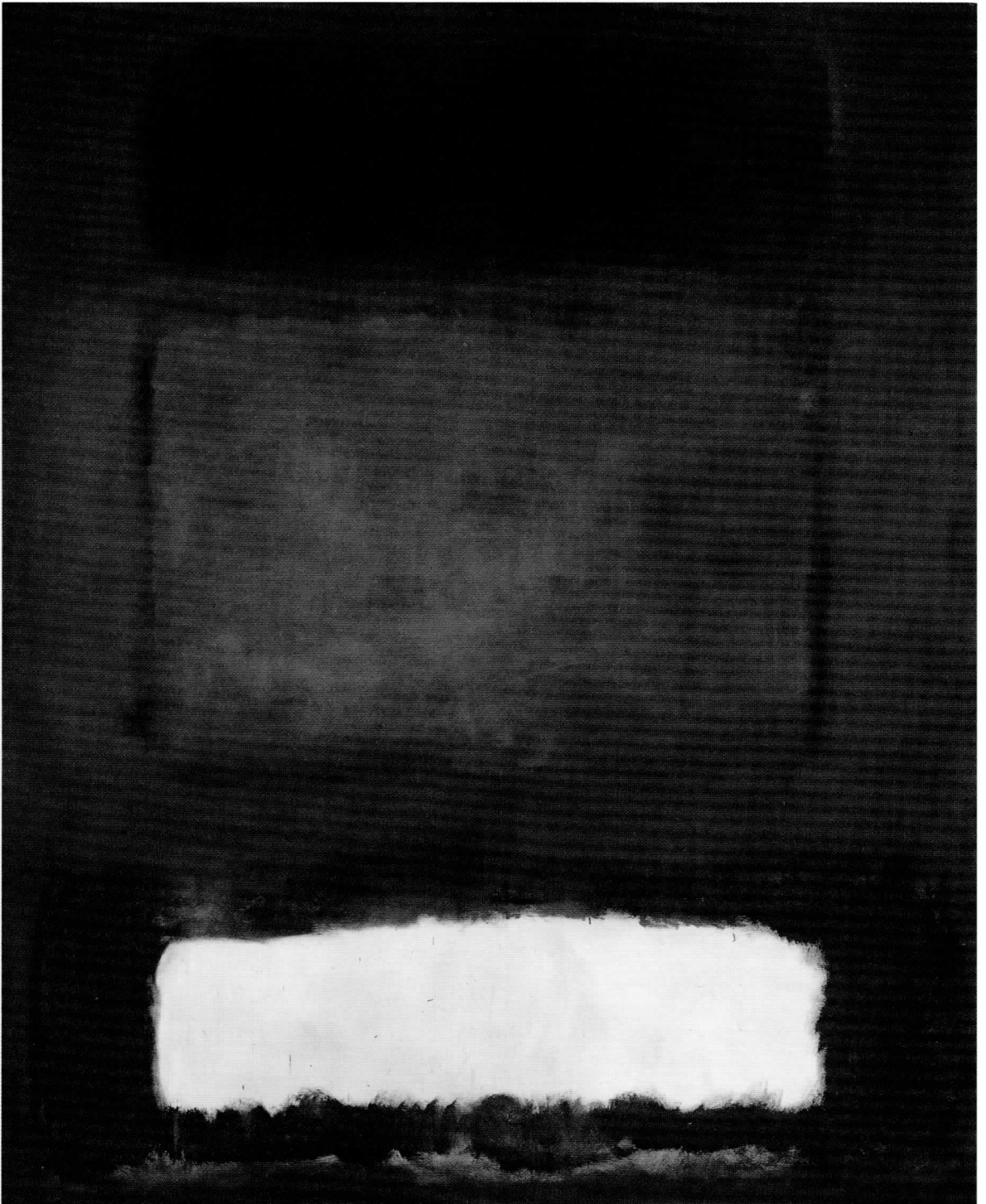


Plate 49 Mark Rothko, *Red, White and Brown*, 1957, oil on canvas, 253 x 208 cm. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum Basel. Inv. G1959.17. Colorphoto: Hans Hinz. © 1992 Kate Rothko-Prizel and Christopher Rothko/ARS, New York.

In contrast to Pollock's work, Rothko's paintings from about 1947 onwards have been described as containing 'floating fields of colour', still and unagitated compared with Pollock's drip-painting. There is little 'incident' or sense of movement within works such as Rothko's *Number 7* or his *Red, White and Brown* (Plates 4 and 49). Paint has been applied with a large, broad brush, and although it is possible to detect quite a number of subtle shifts in tone, intensity and saturation within these works (along with a deliberately 'rough' edging, showing the point of contact between brush and canvas), the spreading of paint 'all over' the canvas again prevents the viewer from being attracted to a single point within the composition. Contrasting areas of colour 'stand out' or 'lie behind' other areas, as if floating in space, but the 'all-over' quality of the painting as a whole is preserved. Still's *Painting* (Plate 43) contains broad areas of paint applied in a similar manner, although more 'agitated' pictorial incident exists towards the top and both sides of Still's canvas, and the rather harsher contrasts in colour create a different effect within the viewer's apprehension of the painting as a whole. While Rothko's 'fields of colour' appear to float together as part of a single form, there is a kind of 'ripping' effect within Still's chromatic contrasts, as if a 'peeling off' of layers of paint is achieved.

This examination of the terms 'gestural' and 'colour field' or 'chromatic abstraction' in relation to four or five actual paintings suggests that such labels should be used carefully. They constitute 'ideal types' of different kinds of Abstract Expressionist work, and thus

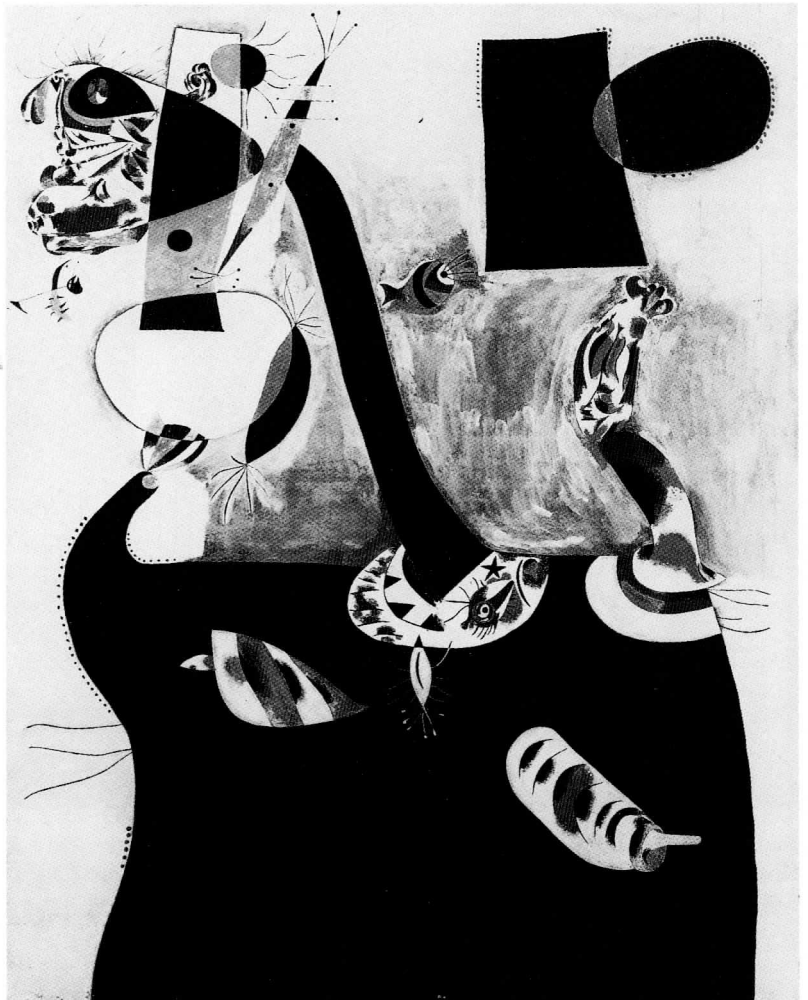


Plate 50 Joan Miró, *Femme assise, II (Seated Woman, II)*, 1939, oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Photograph © 1991 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 1993.

cannot capture the differing complexities of particular paintings. If Pollock's and Rothko's paintings come closest to these two typifications, then it may be that Hofmann's *Effervescence* and Gorky's *The Betrothal, II*, from the early years of Abstract Expressionism, combine features of both types. In this sense, they embody and represent the formal inheritance from inter-war European Modernism that is then adopted and built upon by Pollock, Rothko, Newman and others. I shall return to Newman, and *his* conception of what his practice may have been about. For, if a description of the 'look' of Abstract Expressionist paintings is a necessary part of an account of how they were made, then the issue of 'why' they were made, and within what circumstances, is also important.

Modernist accounts stress that Abstract Expressionism mobilized the formal conventions of European Modernist art from the inter-war period – especially the work of Miró, Masson and Mondrian – along with the continuing and shaping influence of Picasso's and Braque's Cubist paintings from before the First World War. The 'all-over' quality of Abstract Expressionist paintings is typically related to Cubist collage, to Mondrian's colour-grids and to Miró's own 'decentred' compositions from the late 1920s and 1930s. In these works, pictorial elements, seemingly unrelated to any important iconic or 'realist' purpose, simply constitute chromatic and linear patterns (see Plate 50, for example). The biomorphic forms of Surrealist painting – in the work of Masson, of Miró and also of Arp – are taken from their symbolic role within Surrealist theories of the unconscious, and are deployed by Gorky, Newman and Pollock in their works of 'the break' during the early and mid-1940s. Rothko's *Aquatic Drama*, Pollock's *Male and Female* and Newman's *Euclidean Abyss* are examples of this 'mid' stage between art 'of the 1930s' and art 'of the 1950s' (Plates 36, 37, 51). It is clear that the titles at this time also indicate the symbolic, 'mythic' values that the artists wished to invest in these works. 'Male' and 'female', 'abyss', 'drama', etc. all suggest allusion and symbolic reference. Contrast this with the types of title favoured by the Abstract Expressionists during the late 1940s and 1950s. Again, though, generalization should be avoided: while Pollock and Rothko often use numbers and colours, and thereby *close down* one source of connotational reading, some

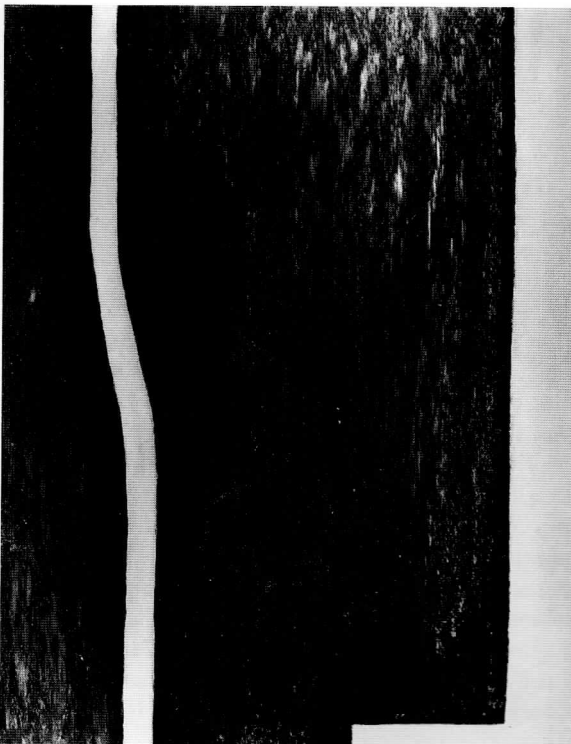


Plate 51 Barnett Newman,
Euclidean Abyss, 1946–47, oil and
gouache on canvas board, 71 x 56 cm.
Private collection. Photograph:
Malcolm Varron. Reproduced
courtesy of Annalee Newman
in so far as her rights are concerned.



Plate 52 Jackson Pollock, *Mural*, 1943, oil on canvas, 247 x 605 cm. The University of Iowa Museum of Art; gift of Peggy Guggenheim. © 1992 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York.

titles still obviously invite it. *Autumn Rhythm*, *Lavender Mist* and *Cathedral* are all titles used by Pollock, while Newman, for instance, persists in using obviously symbolic titles (such as *Adam*, *Eve*, *Covenant*) in the 1940s and 1950s. The influence of the Surrealists on the Abstract Expressionists is therefore not without dispute, in terms of how the former's ideological and social interests, as well as their formal and conventional devices, may have been used by the latter. Pollock's interest in both psychoanalysis and the unconscious is a case in point, and is useful in indicating how the concerns of the 1930s are not simply eradicated within post-1945 art, but are transmuted and reordered during the Cold War.

Pollock's interest in the mural form had roots both in the work of the Mexican muralists and in the radical technical and political meanings that during the 1930s became associated with Picasso's *Guernica*. Pollock's own *Mural* of 1943 may be taken as an attempt to devise a scale and compositional form capable of transcending the conventions of 1930s 'social realism' and yet constituting a 'public', rather than 'private' (easel-painting), expression (Plate 52). It is as well to bear in mind, though, that the mural was commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim, art collector and New York socialite attached to the avant-garde that was present during the war and was composed of European Modernists and Americans such as Pollock. The conditions of production of Pollock's *Mural*, therefore, were very different from those active within revolutionary Mexico. Anti-Communism was emerging during the Second World War as it became clear to the USA that, after the defeat of Fascism, the USSR would be a major world power, with an anti-capitalist ideology. But however much their political commitment was eroded by this, and by revelations about Stalinism, Pollock and many others still invested hopes and aspirations in an art that would not be merely 'private' and 'personal', but would have a social function. Although the symbolism in Pollock's works between about 1941 and 1945 may appear intensely *private* and *personal* (bound up with his own period of Jungian psychoanalysis and interest in the 'unconscious' as the source of art), the mural or 'quasi-mural' form may have held out, for him, the possibility of developing a new kind of 'history painting' – mobilizing the conventions of Modernist representation that he had inherited and adapted, yet also capable, at some future point perhaps, of being tied into a realm of public meanings. In leaving behind the forms of 1930s 'social realism', Pollock may have agreed with Newman that the canvases of the Abstract Expressionists consisted of 'images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful' (B. Newman, 'The sublime is now').

Post-war US painting developed out of this period of political and ideological reorganization, with the protocols of socialism and communism (along with realist pictorial codes) being challenged and then replaced with what is usually called US 'political liberalism'. This is *triumphalist*, in that it sees the USA as the most advanced and free nation economically and politically (following the destruction in Europe), and *confrontational*, in that the US regards the USSR as a threat to its own power and interests throughout the world. Arguments and struggles over positions and frontiers, boundaries and exclusion zones, took place within US–USSR political and ideological exchanges, but also within debates about the future and value of art within Cold War culture.

Artists and critics, Greenberg recognized in 1948, found themselves in a situation in which they were both 'isolated' and 'alienated' (see Greenberg's 'The situation at the moment'). Their withdrawal from active social and political involvement after the Second World War became a condition that Greenberg saw as necessary, if not desirable, for the production of what he called 'any ambitious art'. Only alienation and isolation allowed the experience of the 'true reality of our age' (p.82). It was then necessary to experience this reality to produce great art. We have here the complication that Greenberg is celebrating this 'ambitious art' while being decidedly ambivalent about the social, political and ideological conditions within which it was produced, i.e. within a monopoly capitalist society suppressing socialist opposition within it and waging Cold War against the USSR.

To understand the importance of Greenberg's criticism within a history of the shift of US art from the concerns of the 1930s to those of the 1950s, it is necessary to trace the manner in which Greenberg's *own* development as a writer itself went through a dramatic reorientation within the same period. The work of the Abstract Expressionists produced around 1947 or 1948 came to be represented as the new style born *after* the final eradication of the politics and artistic commitments characteristic of the Depression. Greenberg's writing between 1948 and 1960 became highly significant as a Modernist account and defence of that art. Two major tasks confront us: (a) to explain the development and nature of the principles and values underpinning this Modernist criticism, and (b) to relate this elaborate conceptual system to the institutional contexts and forces that enabled Abstract Expressionist painting (and its various critical proponents) to appear as both essentially 'American' and yet as an internationally recognized and dominant art – to be seen as the authentic inheritor of Parisian inter-war Modernism and the new embodiment of the avant-garde.

While it is true that Greenberg was not the only critic actively involved in examining and influencing the work of the Abstract Expressionists during the 1940s and 1950s, it would be difficult to claim that his role was *not* the most important, both in terms of the radicalism of his position and the extent to which his version of the history of Modernist art became disseminated within the critical and art-pedagogic culture of North America and Western Europe during the 1960s (B. Reise, 'Greenberg and the group'). For these reasons, a case study of his role within the 1950s art-critical culture in the USA is valuable, as well as integral to an adequate historical account of the Abstract Expressionists.

From 'Avant-garde and kitsch' to 'Modernist painting'

... all values are human values, relative values, in art as well as elsewhere.

Greenberg made this judgement in his essay 'Avant-garde and kitsch', published in *Partisan Review* in 1939. At this time Greenberg appears committed to a Marxist analysis of capitalist society. Written on the brink of the Second World War, 'Avant-garde and kitsch' contains a vigorous argument about the relations between art, culture, Fascism and the prospects for socialist revolution in Europe and the USA in the mid-decades of the twentieth century. After the end of that war, it may be argued, Greenberg jettisoned any commitment to socialism and began to cling instead to avant-garde Modernist art as itself a salvation – or perhaps a holding operation – from a world capitalist system that had

turned culture into commodities and the noblest human values into a crude instrumental and utilitarian rationality. Whether or not we agree with this account of Greenberg's shift of view from the late 1930s to the 1960s, I wish to propose that his concerns assembled in 'Avant-garde and kitsch' are still the ones that are most important for us now – irrespective of whether Greenberg's specific judgements and interests as an art critic are still relevant or significant. These concerns – modernity, culture, society, and the processes through which values are formulated – are the problems and stakes in *our* culture and society. These concepts, and their use in argument and debate, form the core of decisive reasoning about social and historical reality at the end of the twentieth century.

In 'Avant-garde and kitsch', Greenberg is concerned to talk about not just art but 'the culture of the masses' as well. This would have been a necessary element of any *socialist* discussion interested in the society as a whole. Art and 'mass culture', Greenberg argues, exist and are produced in the same capitalist society, apparently as elements in a single culture. He continues:

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover [see Plates 53 and 54]. All four are on the order of culture and, ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end.

(Greenberg, 'Avant-garde and kitsch', p.21)

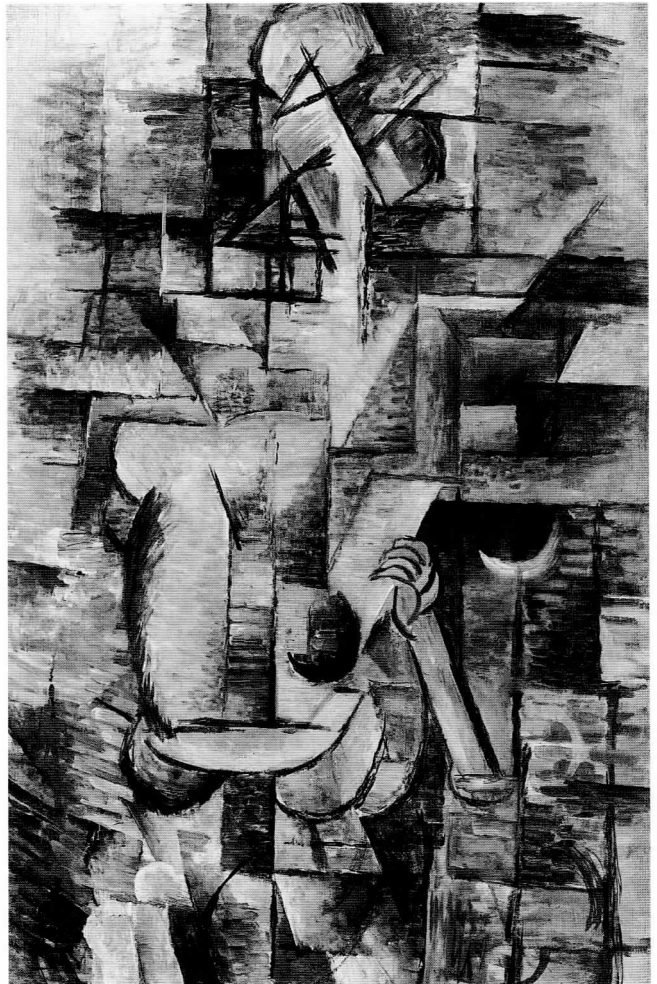


Plate 53 Georges Braque, *Femme tenant une mandoline* (*Woman with a Mandolin*), 1910, oil on canvas, 81 x 54 cm. Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Castagnola. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 1993.

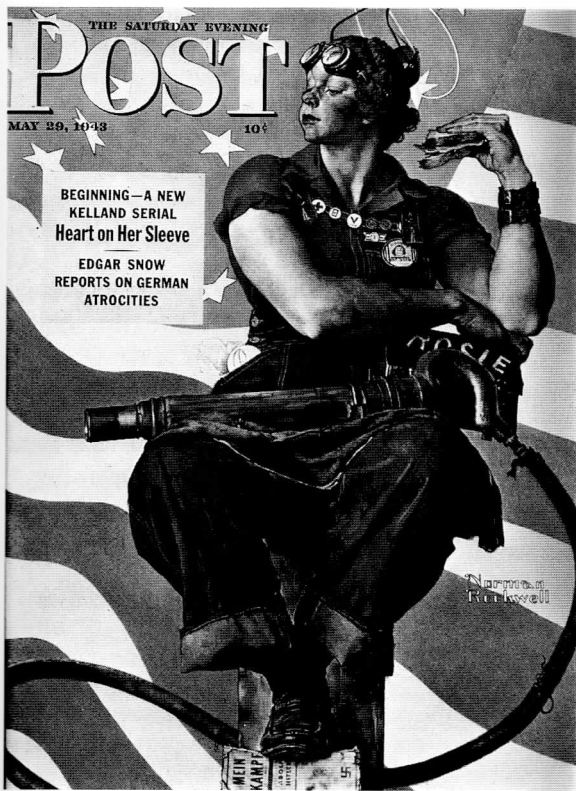


Plate 54 Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*, cover of *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 May 1943. Photograph by courtesy of the Curtis Archive, printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Trust. © 1943 The Norman Rockwell Family Trust.

Greenberg's 'seems' here is an important qualifier. He recognizes difference, he will certainly want to say what is good and what is bad, and yet he is also aware that his descriptions, analyses and evaluations are *relative*: they are made between elements in a single culture or way of life. As such, judgements and values related to art, or more strongly to 'fine' or 'high' art (having the 'formal grandeur' Rose talked about), might reasonably be related to a judgement on the 'mass culture'. This was the position Greenberg started from in 'Avant-garde and kitsch', when he attacked what he saw as the 'kitsch' of his day – popular music, magazine illustration and academic art (though his list is more extensive). Although Greenberg certainly condemns kitsch, he is prepared to see and discuss its emergence alongside avant-garde art; and, as he says, both can be viewed as elements of culture in a single society. By the early 1960s, and the publication of his essay 'Modernist painting', he has seemingly lost any interest in the culture as a whole and spends no time on 'mass culture'. 'Avant-garde and kitsch', in contrast, may be read as a sustained piece of cultural criticism, as part of New York socialist debate, with an important historical dimension concerned with the development and consequences of industrial capitalism. 'Modernist painting' (1961, although presented earlier in another form) reads much more like 'art criticism'. This 'specialization' may, in fact, be seen as a *reduction* of interests from those set out in 'Avant-garde and kitsch', and could be related to the idea that a professional art critic (which Greenberg had become after the Second World War) should be concerned with art rather than 'the culture as a whole' or the nature of 'mass culture'.

When Greenberg wrote 'Avant-garde and kitsch', notions of 'mass culture', language about 'the masses', and arguments about 'mass culture' were attempts to come to terms with the reality and consequences of social, rather than individual, patterns of production and consumption. Both ideas, of 'social' and of 'individual' production, need examination because they actually involve already-formed values and discriminations – about types of

media, conditions of production and the social relations of consumption. Paintings may in a sense be said to be produced by individuals physically (though even this case is complicated: for instance, consider the circumstances of Renaissance painting or nineteenth-century history painting). But the enabling and structuring *relations* of patronage, economic exchange, exhibition and critical reception are fully social. The social relations within a society, such as in the USA during the late 1930s, have serious consequences for the forms and practices of art, as cultural elements produced *within* that society. Capitalist social relations particularly influence and shape the development of the culture as a whole.

Taste and social crisis

The opposition made by Greenberg between 'mass culture' and a threatened minority civilization (or one already eroded by 'mass culture') was comparable to judgements made by other cultural critics. Compare, for example, Greenberg in 'The plight of culture' with T.S. Eliot in his *Notes toward the Definition of Culture* (1948):

... our culture, on its lower and popular levels, has plumbed abysses of vulgarity and falsehood unknown in the discoverable past; not in Rome, not in the Far East or anywhere has daily life undergone such rapid and radical change as it has in the West in the last century and a half.

(Greenberg, 'The plight of culture', p.28)

We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline: that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago ... I see no reason why the decay of culture should not proceed much further, and why we may not even anticipate a period, of some duration, of which it is possible to say that it will have no culture.

(T.S. Eliot, *Notes toward the Definition of Culture*, quoted in Greenberg, 'The plight of culture', p.24)

Notice that both Greenberg's and Eliot's conceptions of culture are intrinsically evaluative – a question of 'good' and 'bad'. In both there is a kind of apocalyptic vision of the 'bad' driving out the 'good'.⁸ In 'Avant-garde and kitsch', Greenberg's 'idealist' culture (this is not meant as a pejorative judgement on him) consists of the work of the authentic Modernist avant-garde, along with the recognized 'masterpieces' from earlier, pre-industrial capitalist centuries in Western Europe. Together these items of culture are represented as the only repositories of real 'high art' in an epoch dominated by the threat of kitsch. They constitute a fragile barrier, however, rather than forming assured elements of a new and general future direction for the culture as a whole.

Greenberg's argument in 'Avant-garde and kitsch' was a powerful statement defending a sphere of 'high art' against the encroachment of 'mass culture', kitsch and vulgarized civilization. After the Second World War, Modernist historical and critical accounts of past and present art made the issue of 'quality' central to the definition of 'relevant' discussion and evaluation of visual art. However, the attempt (as in 'Avant-garde and kitsch') explicitly to relate evaluative statements about art and culture to a wider social and historical analysis of particular societies may be said to have given way to a set of assumptions and implicit judgements that were no longer articulated openly or considered as still arguable.

Greenberg's essays such as 'Master Léger' (1954), "'American-type" Painting' (1955), 'Collage' (1958) and 'Modernist painting' (1961) are what we recognize now as straightforward 'art criticism' – difficult perhaps, but quite unproblematically concerned with 'art' rather than 'culture' or 'society'. What literally 'goes without saying' in these

⁸ At the same time it should be stated that Greenberg is critical of Eliot's position. However, they do agree on this central point. Greenberg claims at the end of the article that 'only socialism' can transform the culture as a whole, but this stipulation seems peripheral to the main force of his argument and is 'tacked on' as a saving clause. T.J. Clark described Greenberg's position as an 'Eliotic Trotskyism'; see his 'Clement Greenberg's theory of art'.

articles is the closed judgement – a sort of critical ‘common sense’ – that the culture at large, the society that has engendered kitsch, is now set in opposition to the values and practices of the authentic avant-garde, which after 1945 is synonymous with Abstract Expressionism. Though unspoken, that wider analysis and judgement of the whole culture and society structures the themes and values propelling Greenberg’s writing.

Greenberg’s criticism after 1945 elaborated a theory of Modernist practice in the visual arts and was inseparable from his defence and acclaim for particular artists working in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. The emergence of the New York School – and in particular the work of Pollock, Rothko, Newman and de Kooning – was thus closely related to the shift in the production of Modernist art from Paris to the USA. We cannot fully understand the ‘forms’ of this proclaimed avant-garde practice without also understanding the economic, political and ideological conditions with which they were bound up. In the same way, the forms of criticism associated with Greenberg (the paradigmatic text of which is ‘Modernist painting’) may also be understood as inseparable from the social and historical conditions after the Second World War.

As we have seen, by 1948 Greenberg is sure that US art produced by Gorky, Pollock and others has emerged as superior to that being produced in Europe (see the quotation from ‘The decline of Cubism’, p.42 above). He also notes that this is related to US economic and political supremacy after the war. Unlike in ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’, however, Greenberg does not go on to attempt an analysis of the relations between art and industrial production and political power. The significance of this relationship is recorded (as a ‘surprise’) but not considered. Greenberg’s turn away from a social critique towards a ‘specialization’ in art criticism may be seen as actually a product of the wider pressures and limits active in the context of McCarthyism and Cold War politics. Modernist criticism elaborated by Greenberg and his adherents in the 1950s and 1960s became an increasingly appropriated, institutionalized and ‘official’ practice, in effect complicit in an ideological representation of US abstract art. In this representation – exemplified by, for example, Alfred H. Barr’s introduction in the catalogue of the show *New American Painting*, which was organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959 – Abstract Expressionist paintings were portrayed as simultaneously ‘autonomous’ from the brute determinations of actual economic and political life in the Cold War, and yet also as symbolic of a kind of ‘free’, ‘creative’ cultural practice, as characteristic of a ‘free America’ standing up against the threat of the Soviet Union to the Western capitalist democracies. René d’Harnoncourt, vice-president of the Museum of Modern Art and in charge of the museum’s foreign activities, spoke in ‘Challenge and promise’ of modern art as the ‘foremost symbol’ of a ‘democratic’ society (i.e. the USA). It is important to examine both the developing logic within Greenberg’s criticism during the 1940s and 1950s and the ways in which this criticism became a part of the use of Abstract Expressionism as a ‘weapon of the Cold War’.

Greenberg’s essay ‘Towards a newer Laocoon’, written during 1940, continued his examination of the question in contemporary art. In this essay he made a tentative defence of abstract art, in an argument notable for its firm, yet undogmatic, tone. The discussion is part interrogative, part declarative, and its own uncertainty is displayed as a value:

My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standards through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment. I have no doubt that they will be replaced in the future by other standards, which will be perhaps more inclusive than any possible now.

(Greenberg, ‘Towards a newer Laocoon’, p.45)

Equally, however, there is present in Greenberg’s thinking the ethical imperative that will dominate his anti-relativist stance in ‘Modernist painting’, which will be discussed shortly. In ‘Towards a newer Laocoon’ he defends ‘purism’ in writing about art because of the values he sees it as representing – ‘the translation of an extreme solicitude, an

anxiousness as to the fate of art, a concern for its identity' (p.35). The 'advanced' or 'ambitious' Art – made by the Post-Impressionists, the Fauves, the Cubists and Mondrian, according to Greenberg – is an art that can 'test society's capacity for high art'; and those called 'purists', who defend abstract art as the only defence against kitsch and the decline in culture, are the ones who value art more than anyone else. Or rather, 'usually', Greenberg says. This qualification is important, as it indicates how 'Towards a newer Laocoon' still pursues an open inquiry, though it contains the hardening of certain concepts and assumptions into certainties. These certainties are yet to form a systematic doctrine. How are we to explain Greenberg's 'long-march' from a putative 'Trotskyite socialism' in 1939 ('Avant-garde and kitsch') to his position in 'Modernist painting' (1961), an essay in which 'the problem of culture' (and politics) has apparently disappeared, replaced by the purism of art criticism's 'specialized' interests?

'Modernist painting' retains the rhetoric of moral urgency present in his earlier writings: 'Modernism includes more than just art and literature. By now it includes almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture' (p.5). This reference to 'culture' harks back to 'Avant-garde and kitsch', but it is now little more than an alienated reference point. What now concerns Greenberg is an art that stands out against its general context of production, against what for Greenberg is the kitsch of contemporary society. For Greenberg the value of Modernist art is the 'capacity' and 'ambition' that it shares with all that remains 'self-critical' in contemporary society. 'Modernism', therefore, is not simply a practice, or set of practices, but a principled and coherent effort or project of self-criticism – a self-criticism operative, he believes, in a variety of practices that are unique and irreducible to any other (painting as a practice being Greenberg's own particular concern). Greenberg traces this tendency in what he calls 'Western Civilization' to the philosopher Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment, and proposes that Kant's critique of logic, which attempted to establish the true nature and limits of logical reasoning, is the model and basis for all authentic Modernist projects – to establish and maintain the intrinsic capacities and limits of particular practices.

Painting, Greenberg goes on to argue, is 'Modernist' in the sense that 'it' too (though the nature of this 'it' is slippery) is a unique and irreducible practice, can 'act upon itself' to discover 'its' own 'characteristic methods' – not, as he says, to subvert the practice, but 'to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence' ('Modernist painting', p.5). This is a process of 'internal' criticism, which Greenberg regards as 'a more rational justification' for 'every formal social activity' (p.5), though he concedes that this process in painting is distant from the origins of self-criticism in philosophy: 'Kantian self-criticism was called on eventually to meet and interpret this demand [for 'a more rational justification'] in areas that lay far from philosophy' (p.5).

At the same time Greenberg is anxious to point out, in fact to emphatically conclude his essay by saying, that Modernism in painting has not led to anything like 'a break with the past' (p.9) or with artists before Manet – who, he claims, is the first to paint Modernist pictures 'by virtue of the frankness with which [his works] declared the surfaces on which they were painted' (p.6). Greenberg says that there may have been a 'devolution', or 'an unravelling of earlier traditions', but nothing 'like a break with the past': art is, for Greenberg, among other things, 'continuity'. This continuity, rather than any rupture, is characteristic of art's history, a 'history' whose development and consistency are raised as values to be recognized and defended.

This stress on artistic continuity was also a necessary component of Greenberg's argument that US post-war artists had both absorbed and surpassed earlier European work. Read in conjunction with his 1955 essay "'American-type' Painting', 'Modernist painting' can be seen as a theoretical ratification of more particular judgements about specific artists and their continuities with earlier art and artists. Greenberg's dictum in the latter essay (p.8), that 'visual art should confine itself exclusively to that which is given in visual experience and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience',

is an argument that may be seen as illustrated in his discussion of paintings by Gorky, Gottlieb, de Kooning, Hofmann, Newman and Rothko. However, for 'visual experience' (a rather amorphous and problematic notion) read 'Modernist formal judgement'. Gorky's *Painting*, Greenberg says in "'American-type" Painting' (p.95), may 'ease the pressure of Picassoid space', but he 'remain[s] a late Cubist to the end' (Plate 55). De Kooning proposes, in *Woman, I* (Plate 48), 'a synthesis of Modernism and tradition ... in a grand style equivalent to that of the past'. And Still, with *Untitled* (Plate 56), 'has resumed Monet – and Pissarro', as 'the Cubists had resumed Cézanne' (p.95).

This 'specialization' (the concerns of the 'Modernist critic'), which as I've suggested may be seen rather as an actual reduction of both interests and values, is codified in 'Modernist painting' as the self-critical process of Modernist painting practice. It is a practice that Greenberg argues is based on the cumulative 'narrowing' or concentration of artists on the unique constituents of their chosen medium, which is, in painting, the two-dimensional surface and space of the canvas and its enclosing frame. This is what he calls 'the ineluctable flatness of the support' (p.6). But 'ineluctable' ('that against which struggle is useless or worthless') can have a subjective element. We might not all agree about what is ineluctable: it would depend on our values. Although Greenberg recognizes that *any* mark on a canvas creates some illusion of depth, of three-dimensional space, this illusory capacity is

the province of sculpture, and for the sake of its own autonomy painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture. And it is in the course of its effort to do this, and not so much – I repeat – to exclude the representational or the 'literary', that painting has made itself abstract.

('Modernist painting', p.7)

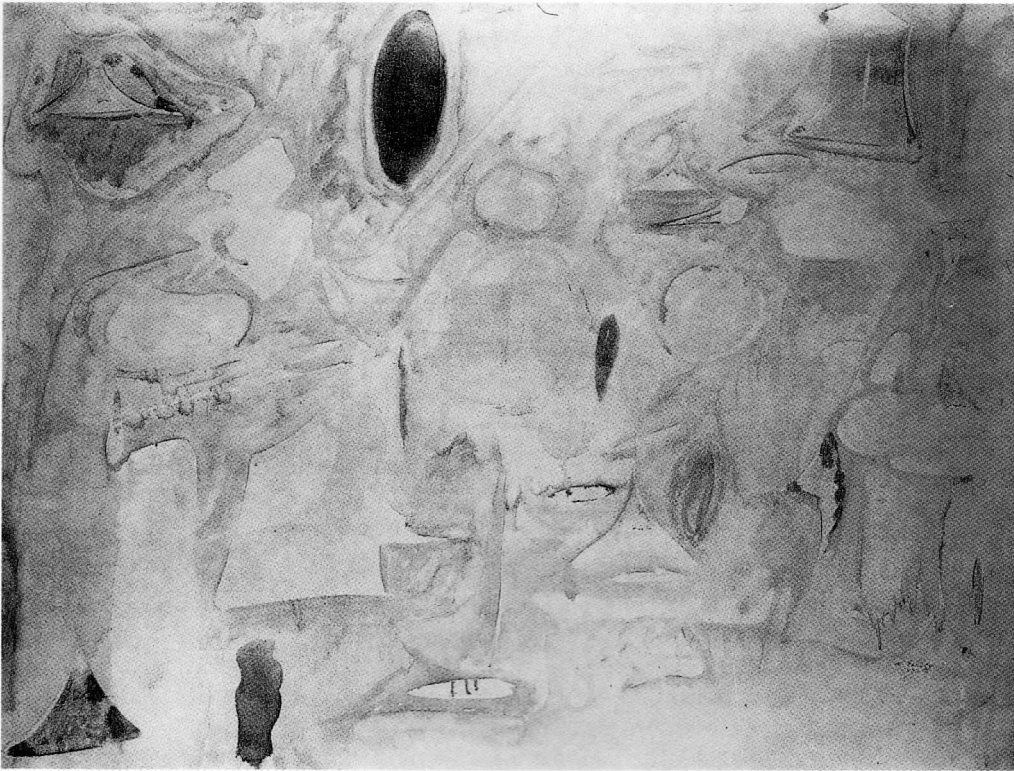
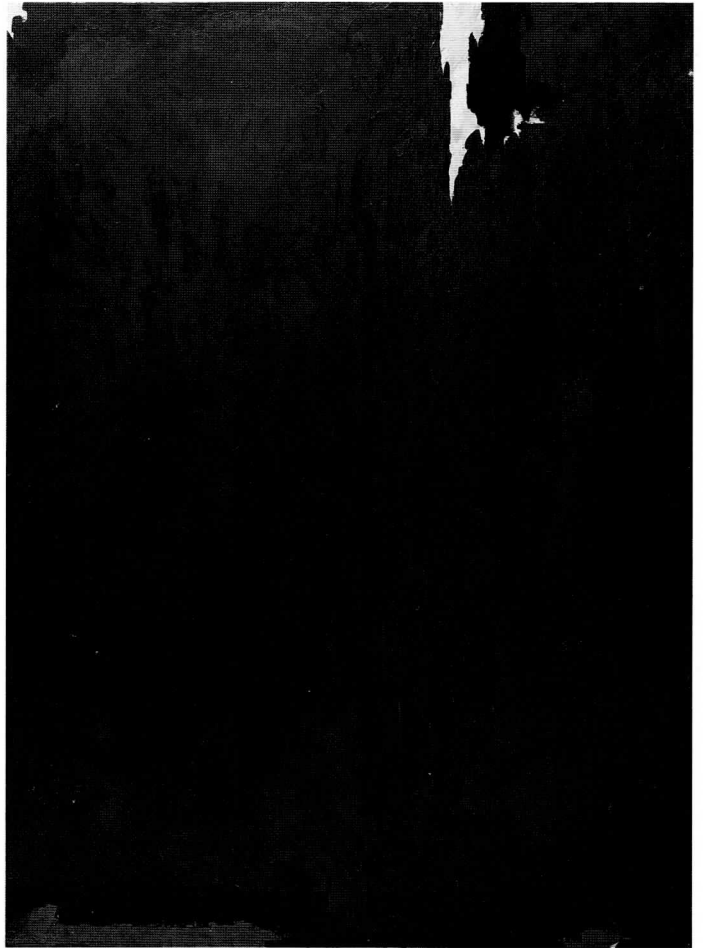


Plate 55 Arshile Gorky, *Painting*, 1947, oil on canvas, 96 x 127 cm. Private collection. © 1992 Agnes Fielding-Gorky/ARS, New York.

Plate 56 Clyfford Still, *Untitled*, 1953, oil on canvas, 236 x 174 cm. Tate Gallery, London.



The use of personification in this passage ('its own autonomy', 'to divest itself', 'everything it might share', 'made itself abstract'), and in the essay as a whole, is significant. 'Modernism' – personified, given human agency – does this or that; it appears to think and judge, to contain its own 'alertness', to make its own 'declarations'. What the essay actually excludes is an active investigation of the whole question of historical intentions, motivations, artists' accounts of their own work, and the circumstances in which decisions were made. These are silences in Greenberg's argument.

In his 1947 review of paintings by Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb, however, Greenberg was more forthcoming. He praised the work of the Abstract Expressionist Gottlieb as 'ambitious' and 'serious', but dismissed the artist's own stated symbolic and metaphysical intentions, arguing that there was something 'half-baked and revivalist, in a familiar American way' about these claims (consider Gottlieb's *The Oracle*, Plate 57). Dismissing the relevance of artists' own accounts of their work, he went on to argue in 'Modernist painting' (p.9) that Modernist art 'does not offer theoretical demonstrations'. This discounting of any authorial primacy actually requires Greenberg to specify the nature of the critical activity operative 'in painting': '[it] has never been carried on in any but a spontaneous and subliminal way. It has been altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice and never a topic of theory.'

This assertion, absolutist in its formulation ('altogether', 'never'), ratifies Greenberg's argument that he is indifferent to what artists state as their intentions, and to wider forms of explanation and argument about meanings and values. It also allows him effectively to

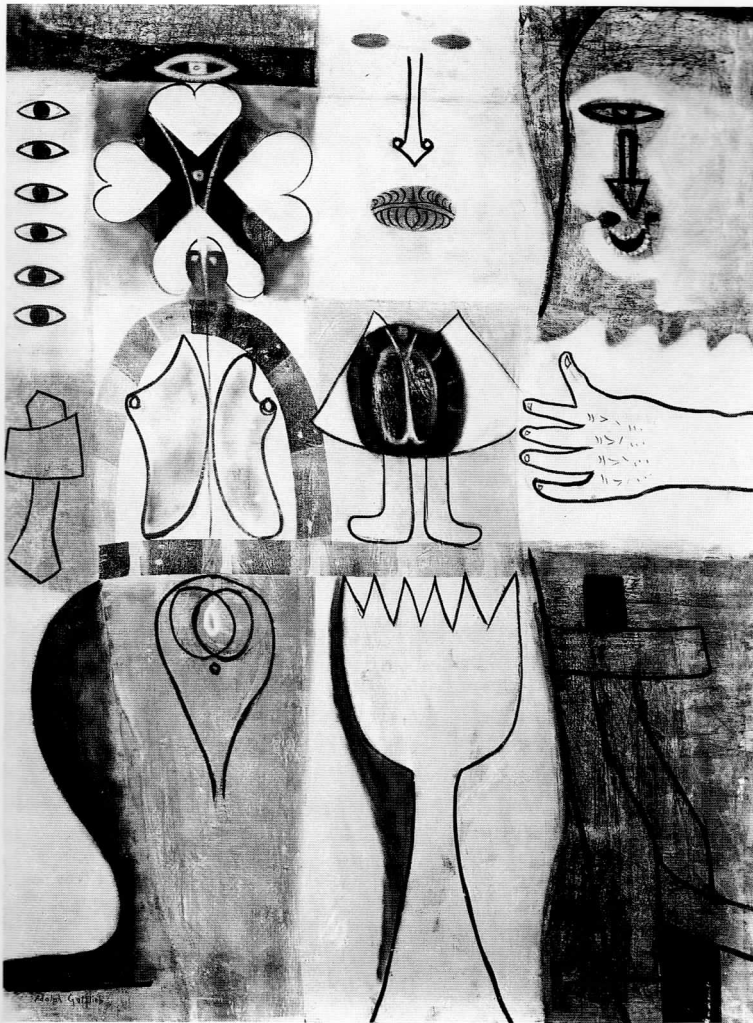


Plate 57 Adolph Gottlieb, *The Oracle*, c.1946, oil on canvas, 152 x 118 cm. Collection of Donald and Barbara Zucker. © 1979 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York.

render his own account, and his own evaluations, themselves simply the 'observation' of tendencies that he can claim are intrinsic to the practice 'itself'. In this, Greenberg shifts from the rhetoric of personification (giving art objects the qualities and capacities of people) to the rhetoric of objectivism (implying that art objects have innate qualities and values).

Yet this refusal to see artists' stated intentions as either relevant explanations of paintings, or even as relevant evidence *towards* any adequate explanation, is often undermined by his actual judgements on particular paintings, which often collapse together artist as agent and painting as object. Hence, for example, he says 'Gorky found his way', 'de Kooning proposes a synthesis', and Hofmann 'stated and won successful paintings' ("*American-type*" Painting', pp.96-7). One of the most salient examples of this is Greenberg's account of Pollock, which suggests that Greenberg believed himself to have special knowledge of Pollock's intentions and motives:

One of the unconscious motives for Pollock's 'all-over' departure [Plate 58] was the desire to achieve a more immediate, denser and more decorative impact than his later Cubist manner had permitted ... he wanted to control the oscillation between an emphatic physical surface and the suggestion of depth.

("American-type" Painting', p.97)