

# 1 GESTURAL ABSTRACTION

*Peter Selz*

The dominant art mode during and after World War II has been labeled as abstract expressionism, action painting, tachism, lyrical abstraction, *art informel*, *art autre*, and a handful of other terms. Characterized by an intensely personal and subjective response by artists to their own feelings, the medium, and the working process, it was an art in which painters and sculptors were engaged in the search for their own identity. In a universe described by existentialists as absurd, the artist carried the romantic quest for the self, and for sincerity and emotional authenticity, into a world of total uncertainty. Therefore, the greatest value was placed on risk-taking, discovery, and the adventure into the unknown. Painters and sculptors manifested an attitude that the cubist Juan Gris had earlier described when he said, "You are lost the instant you know what the result will be."

In the aftermath of fascist domination of a great part of Europe and in the face of the increasing rigidity of authoritarian communism in Stalinist Russia, artists everywhere felt the need to establish a sense of personal autonomy. Auschwitz and Hiroshima were cataclysms of such monstrous proportions that they could elicit little direct commentary from visual artists. The very act of depicting the unspeakable evil, Theodor Adorno suggested, would have placed it in the realm of acceptability. The apparent collapse of liberal humanism and the dilemma of trying to deal with the conformity of mechanized mass culture and with a plethora of facile and easily accessible public media added to the artist's sense of alienation and the need for individual expression. The artist's own work became paramount. The very fact that paintings and sculptures were still handmade objects became significant, and the particular quality, the material, the "facture" of each was emphasized.

André Malraux observed that "modern art was doubtlessly born on the day when the idea of art and beauty were separated," suggesting that Francisco de Goya might have been the starting point (see chap. 3). During the nineteenth century, having

abandoned the subject matter of history, artists also became dubious about narration, realism, and verisimilitude. With the aesthetics of cubism and expressionism in the early twentieth century, art as a source of pleasure was largely relinquished. In the period between the world wars many abstractionists dealt with geometric forms, with circles and squares and cubes. By midcentury, however, many though by no means all (see chap. 2) artists rejected these forms as being too closely related to science and technology, too formalistic, too impersonal. As the century progressed, artists increasingly broke with traditional aesthetics, with conventional values and ideas. The repudiation of traditional means was not entirely without precedent but related to what Wassily Kandinsky, the first "abstract expressionist," had called an "art of internal necessity."

Although there were perceptible differences in both theory and praxis, similar attitudes toward art arose approximately at the same time in Europe and the United States, which is not surprising, considering the increasingly unified culture of the Western world in the postwar era. Surrealism, with its emphasis on the personal psychology of the artist rather than on the phenomenological world, was the primary avant-garde movement in Europe between the world wars. The surrealists' desire for unpremeditated spontaneity held the promise of true creative freedom, and their groundbreaking attitudes and work were of pivotal importance on both sides of the Atlantic. The world of the artists considered in this chapter shows emphasis on gesture and its expressive meaning. They worked in a realm of ambiguity and communicated through their gestures an aesthetic of incompleteness. At times this exploration turned toward new and unexpected figuration, as in the work of Alberto Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, and the northern CoBrA artists (see chap. 3), while at others it manifested itself in gestural abstraction. The existential act of making the work was an essential aspect. Even more than in previous manifestations of modernist art, the dialogue between the maker and the consumer of the work became a necessary element for its completion.

### *THE AMERICANS*

Most of the American artists who came to the limelight after World War II had been developing their personal styles during a rather long period of gestation. Many of them were supported by the government's Works Progress Administration (WPA) program in the 1930s, which established an art community by offering a meal ticket as well as the possibility of intellectual exchange. Painters and sculptors discussed marxist theories and political action as well as the social and individual purposes of their work. Having rejected American scene painting, they also felt that social realism was not an adequate way to deal with the situation of human and societal crisis. After the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact, artists and intellectuals

in the United States and Western Europe became increasingly disenchanted with political action. Differentiating the artist from the politically identified individual, Robert Motherwell, feeling that art was too important to be used as a tool, wrote in 1944: "The socialist is to free the working class from the domination of property, so that the spiritual can be possessed by all. The function of the artist is to make actual the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed."<sup>1</sup> Older forms of expression were no longer held valid. Only revolutionary methods could arrive at revolutionary solutions and nothing less was called for.

Before or during the war, many of the surrealists—André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, André Masson, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Kurt Seligmann, Eleanora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and Matta—had come to New York. Their work—above all, Miró's evocative and poetic abstractions—had been admired in New York galleries and museums. But now the makers were walking the same streets, frequenting the same restaurants, attending the same art openings as American artists. Once in contact with these established "masters" scarcely older than themselves, American painters and sculptors began evolving a movement that they saw as part of an ongoing European tradition. The tragedy of the fall of France in 1940 affected American artists and intellectuals as profoundly as it did the Europeans. Noting the impact of the surrealists on the American painters, Dore Ashton in her contextual analysis of the New York school wrote, "Myth, metamorphosis, risk, event painting—these liberated possibilities were little by little impressing themselves upon the troubled psyches of many New York painters."<sup>2</sup>

But the "new American painters," as they were to be called, had an ambivalent attitude toward Europe. Many of them felt the need for a decisive break with tradition in Western art, but few went as far as Clyfford Still, who, although well versed in European modernism, expressed extreme hostility in 1959: "The fog has been thickened, not lifted by those who . . . looked back to the Old World for means to extend their authority in this newer land. . . . But that ultimate in irony—the Armory Show of 1913—had dumped on us the combined and sterile conclusions of Western European decadence."<sup>3</sup> Although most American painters did not show such animosity, they looked beyond the European horizon, many of them hoping to find affirmation in the art of primitive cultures and ancient civilizations. Barnett Newman looked at the ethnic art of Oceania and the pre-Columbian Americas, Pollock at native American painting and dance. Mark Rothko imbued himself with Greek mythology. Adolph Gottlieb examined prehistoric petroglyphs, and Mark Tobey was deeply influenced by Baha'i and Zen.

In general, the American artists of the New York school found themselves cut off from a society that had more immediate concerns in the postwar era. In fact, American artists, even more than their European colleagues, felt a lack of moral recognition and financial support from the public. Not expecting fame and for-

tune, artists felt free to follow their own inner necessity and to take risks toward the creating of an art that had not existed before. In their large lofts in lower Manhattan, they began to paint in enormous formats, far exceeding the space limitations of the private apartments of potential collectors. It was in a dialogue with the work that they were able to reenact the drama of contemporary experience.

Jackson Pollock (1912–56), the most celebrated American painter, came to New York from the West. His early work, influenced by his teacher Thomas Hart Benton and by the Mexican muralists, soon became affected by surrealist practice and Jungian theory. By the later 1940s he began to pour paint freely onto canvases placed on his studio floor. His artistic decisions were made during the working process and the resultant paintings are evocative of rhythm and action. He was also one of the first American painters who moved from salon-size painting to large-scale, almost mural-size work.

Barnett Newman, (1905–70), a man of searching intellect and a sharp polemicist, warned against the dangers of decoration in abstract art and proposed uncharted paths, working with chaos to unravel the “meaning of life and death.” Newman, who postulated the startling idea that in human history “the aesthetic act always precedes the social one,” looked at the new American art as a concern with transcendental experience.

Mark Rothko (1903–70), who was born in Russia, grew up in Oregon, studied on a scholarship at Yale, and then went to the Arts Students League to learn about painting. His early work, expressionist in style, was done under the influence of Max Weber, his chief teacher. Then, after a period indebted to surrealism and searching for a meaningful mythology, he found his own style of vibrating color planes. In the brief passage quoted here,<sup>4</sup> he explained that his painting needed to be large in order to place the viewer intimately into the picture space itself. At the end of his life, Rothko completed fourteen large paintings for an ecumenical sanctuary in Houston. Eliminating all references to subject matter, but retaining the triptych shapes for his almost monochromatic dark paintings, he succeeded in evoking undefined yet universal meaning and emotions.

Robert Motherwell (1915–91), one of the youngest of the original New York school artists, was born in Washington State and, before turning to painting, was a student of philosophy, literature, criticism, and art history at Stanford and Columbia universities. He became a personal friend of the French surrealist painters who had emigrated to New York and a guiding force, both as artist and theorist, in the search for postsurrealist ideas. In his own work, Motherwell was able to achieve a synthesis of free exploration and a rational sense of form and order; in a key essay of 1946 he demarcated the path of the artist as proceeding toward “ordered chaos.”

Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928), belonging to the second generation of abstract expressionists, was impressed by Pollock’s technique of pouring paint directly onto

canvas and originated a stain-painting technique by causing light-colored pigments to flow directly onto primed canvas, thereby integrating color and support in a single unit. Her flat surfaces and stain method and her alliance with Clement Greenberg's formalist theories and advocacy of what the critic called "post-painterly abstraction" established her as the antecedent of color-field painting by artists such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland (see chap. 2).

A landscape painter by inclination but an abstract painter by formal inheritance, Joan Mitchell (1926–93) made loosely brushed gesture paintings, infused by her sensations of the water, trees, and rocks in her garden at Vétheuil, close to Monet's water garden. Born and trained in Chicago, Mitchell, like her friend and mentor Sam Francis, moved to Paris and was an important American presence in France.

At about the same time, Cy Twombly (b. 1928) moved to Rome, where he resided after 1957. In his work he brought a contemporary sensibility, gestural manner, and sense of disorder to the provocation of ancient myths. The German poet Heiner Bastian (b. 1943), who also wrote about the art of Joseph Beuys, devoted much of his creative energy to the interpretation of Twombly's work, which seemed to defy interpretation in its floating and drifting elusiveness. Twombly's indiscernable writing revealed the presence of the void and was related to Mallarmé's hermetic symbolism and the importance of nothingness to Zen.

American sculptors maturing in the 1930s and 1940s experimented with form in space in a manner appropriate to the new age. Isamu Noguchi, perhaps the most consummate American sculptor, was able to combine Brancusi's sense of form with his own Asian heritage and eventually directed much of his energy to creating new sculptural sites (see chap. 6). Others adapted concepts and techniques of the cubist-constructivist tradition. No longer limited to the established conventions of either building up form in clay and plaster or of carving it away in stone and wood, these sculptors were able to use welding techniques to draw in open space. Working directly with metal, Ibram Lassaw, David Smith, David Hare, Theodore Rozak, Herbert Ferber, Seymour Lipton, Richard Lippold, and others created sculpture in which the space—the void—became an essential element of form.

Among the pioneers, it was David Smith (1906–65) who probably made the most significant contributions. Born in Indiana and trained originally as a painter, Smith was both personally and programmatically close to the abstract expressionist painters. Like many of them, he was profoundly influenced by avant-garde European art and was eventually able to combine the innovations in welded construction by Pablo Picasso and Julio González with American technology. He created a series of works that became increasingly abstract and universal in form and content. His sculptures, ranging from his use of metal to draw calligraphically in space to the development of solid geometric forms, were poetic and tough metaphors of the American vernacular in the industrial age.

Smith wrote in a very affirmative language of belonging to his own time and elegized a Whitmanesque sense of freedom, luxuriating in the intellectual as well as the sensual. He also spoke of the unpredictability of the final product, a quality that can flourish only during a fortuitous working process.

In the late 1940s, Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), originally working as a painter in Paris but now creating sculptures in New York, fashioned wooden pieces that, although abstract, had figurative proclivities. With ineluctable fantasy Bourgeois used a great variety of materials, including wood, marble, plaster, bronze, rubber, and plastics. Many of her enigmatic objects were autobiographical in nature, and male and female sexualities were a major theme. In 1988 she granted a long interview to the eminent critic Donald Kuspit. In the excerpts presented here she discussed her working methods and artistic concerns as well as her thoughts about feminism.

The interaction between artists and seriously engaged critics was of great importance in the heady years of ascendancy of the New York school. Discussions were going on in artists' studios, cafeterias, bars, and the Artist's Club. Most notable among the critics were Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both of whom had been left-wing literati before turning to art criticism. Their work helped to legitimize the new American painting, which was most unpopular because it was difficult for the general public to comprehend. Greenberg, who originally had aspirations to become a painter, studied with Hans Hofmann in the early 1940s and adopted many of the influential German-American abstractionist "laws" about painting and the significance of the two-dimensional picture plane. Greenberg showed a good deal of passion for the art he advocated and, although his ranking of artists often seemed arbitrary, his discriminating taste made him a perceptive advocate of artists such as Pollock and Smith. As he developed his style of criticism, it became increasingly doctrinaire, but it functioned within the framework of the formalist tradition of Heinrich Wölfflin, Roger Fry, and the prepositions of logical positivism.

Rosenberg, like Greenberg, is represented with important essays in the previous volume in this series.<sup>5</sup> Differing with Greenberg's "art in a vacuum" approach, Rosenberg felt that art and art criticism could be forms of social action. At one time editor of the left-wing journal *Art Front* (1934-37), he supported the revolutionary character of the new paintings in perspicacious essays and reviews for *Art News* and then for the *New Yorker*, for which he wrote the art column from 1967 until his death in 1978. For Rosenberg, who introduced the term "action painting" into the vocabulary of art history, the spontaneous decisions made by the painter confronting the canvas were tantamount to a moral act.

The art historian Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1902-89), was the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, establishing the first multidimensional museum devoted to all the visual art of our time. Because of the museum's premi-

ment position in the art world, its major exhibition *The New American Painting*, shown in eight European countries in 1958 and 1959, gave it official sanction and helped bring about the hegemony of American painting. Barr in his preface to the exhibition's catalog made specific connections between existentialist thought and this new art of commitment and anxiety. He also emphasized the political ramifications of this art as "demonstrating a freedom in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude."

The younger art historian and critic Max Kozloff also saw the new American painting as closely related to American political ideology. In spite of the artists' own belief that their work was independent of the body politic, it was true, as Kozloff pointed out, that "the most concerted accomplishment of American art occurred during precisely the same period as the burgeoning chasm of American world hegemony."<sup>6</sup> While the artists had separated themselves from political engagement ever since the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, the work of the abstract expressionists found support in the political and cultural establishment. This work was sent abroad as "evidence of America's coming of creative age"<sup>7</sup> to show the world the fruit of American freedom in contrast to the putative suppression behind the Iron Curtain. A year after Kozloff's article, Eva Cockcroft, a spokesperson of the radical left, examined the same problem from a more orthodox marxist point of view,<sup>8</sup> and in 1983 the French art historian Serge Guilbaut published a polemical treatise in which he attempted to document a sequence of accommodations and cooptations by which the abstract expressionists were supposed to have worked hand-in-glove with the American Cold War establishment. He entitled his book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.<sup>9</sup>

### THE EUROPEANS

After years of occupation and suppression during World War II, Europe's liberation in 1945 signaled a renewal of all aspects of life, including literature and the arts. With most surrealist artists in exile, that movement, so central before the war, now had less presence. The geometric abstractions of Mondrian and his followers seemed to have little relevance after the catastrophes of fascism and war. Although a new figuration (see chap. 3) was an essential aspect of post-war art in Europe, *informel* abstract art offered the widest diversity of possibilities for free and spontaneous expression. Compared to American art, the painting in Europe seemed less aggressive and more inwardly directed.

After the war, Paris continued to function as the center of European art. For a brief time a group calling itself "young painters of the French tradition" attempted to combine the color of Bonnard and Matisse with the structure of cubism into a harmonious abstraction. But harmony was not what the postwar experience called

for. More radical voices like that of the critic Michel Tapié (France, b. 1909) spoke out against the encumbrances of the great classical tradition that left no room for “all the meaningful ecstasy of life and mystery” and invoked the lessons of dada and the revolution of surrealism for an art that took risks and was willing to abandon security and come in close touch with “ambiguous and transcendental reality.”

The Galerie René Drouin was the focal point of the most provocative new manifestations. Even before the liberation, Drouin had organized exhibitions of Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, and then, in quick succession, Wols, Henri Michaux, Georges Mathieu, and Hans Hartung. Mathieu painted with great speed and energy, inventing his forms on the spot in front of audiences. His actions were considered vulgarizations of the privacy of the artist by some, but he must also be seen as a precursor of performance art (see chap. 8). Wols (Germany, b. Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, 1913–51) had studied music and architecture, had practiced photography, and was largely self-taught as a painter. He also wrote poetry and was keenly interested in biology and geology. Living in France during the war, he was interned several times and at the age of thirty-eight, after many years of heavy drinking, died in Paris. Comparing Wols with Pollock, the German art historian Werner Haftmann said:

Because of their unprecedented acceptance of the terrible events of the desolate years before and during the war, the lives and works of Wols and Pollock seem to provide documentary evidence of that period. Pollock was rebellious, Wols passive and resigned; he merely recorded whatever happened to him—not the simple facts of his life, but the images which streamed from his wounded soul.<sup>10</sup>

Henri Michaux (Belgium, 1899–1984), also self-taught as a draftsman and known primarily for his poetry, literally scribbled his path toward self-orientation by making doodles and signs that the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz observed to be free of “conceptual burdens and closer in the realm of language to onomatopoeia than to words.” Michaux believed in total anarchic freedom and used mescaline in order to provoke new insights and heightened states of awareness. His “signs” tapped the unconscious and are vibrations of the most extreme psychic improvisation.

In Italy, many groupings of abstract painters emerged after the overthrow of fascism. In the beginning, a species of lyrical abstraction occupied a good many painters, but soon a number of leading personalities emerged. In Milan, it was Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) who was in the center of the new experimentation. Born in Argentina, he was educated in Milan, where he made sculptures in ceramic and cement that formed an early bridge between the arts and crafts. During World War II, he returned to Buenos Aires, where he became a central figure in an evolving movement in modern art. Together with a number of followers, he published the “Manifesto blanco” in 1946. Very much in the spirit of the era, Fontana insisted



that "change is the essential condition of existence." Conceiving of a total transformation of life in all its aspects, he cited recent discoveries in the sciences and called for a "new art that is in greater harmony with the needs of the spirit" in an age in which "the painted canvas and the standing plaster figure no longer have any reason to exist"—a prophetic announcement at the time. He propounded an art based on the four dimensions of existence, on the unity of time and space, an art that could be brought about only if reason were kept subordinate to the unconscious. On his return to Milan, Fontana became the founder of spatialism and created some of the first abstract environments. Around 1950, he began piercing and then slashing his canvases with holes, introducing actual space as part of the painting. His work had strong resonance for younger Italian painters (monochrome painters, *arte povera*, conceptualists) as well as Germans (Group Zero).

While Fontana became the leading force in art in Milan, Emilio Vedova and Alberto Burri fulfilled similar functions in Rome and Venice respectively. The Venetian artist Emilio Vedova's (b. 1919) works exhibited the dual impact of Tintoretto and Boccioni. By the early 1950s, he had produced his own form of "action painting," dynamic abstract works that responded directly to his working on the picture surface. Vedova also set out to liberate the picture from the wall and made free-standing paintings on panels of wood and metal—the *Plurimi* series (1962–65)—which became early environmental experiences. In a brief essay of 1948, Vedova stated his thoughts about the tensions and difficulties of being an artist in the contemporary world, of having to lead the way toward a new and unknown art.

Alberto Burri (1915–95), trained as a physician in Rome, began painting when he was a prisoner of war of the United States in Texas. By the early 1950s, the former surgeon had made paintings out of old tattered sacks to which he applied trickles of red paint, recalling the blood-stained bandages of war victims. During a long and productive career, Burri worked with a great variety of materials: burned wooden sheets, industrial plastics, battered tin plates, large pieces of cellotex. His abstractions often contained unavoidable references to the real world, from the early metaphors of wounded bodies to the later panels suggesting the earth's surface. His work in many ways anticipated the *arte povera* that flourished in Italy in the 1960s.

After the collapse of the Third Reich, German culture found itself in what was called *Stunde Null* (zero hour). Most of the artists who had been prominent earlier had left Germany. Others had died during the Nazi era. One survivor who came to the fore was Willi Baumeister (1889–1955). Before the war, he had painted mural-like pictures related to the work of the Purists of France and then did ideograms during the Nazi period that, although they resembled prehistoric writing, were actually imaginary characters originating in the depth of the psyche. In his semiautobiographical book, *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst* (The unknown in art), written during the war and first published in 1947, Baumeister differentiated art from na-

ture and saw the aim of art as a search for the enigma and the unknown. Like the much younger Twombly, Baumeister was also oriented toward the Tao in Eastern philosophy.

Generalissimo Franco's fascist Spain was considerably less repressive of its artists, and after the war important groups such as *Dau al Cet* in Barcelona (1948) and *El Paso* in Madrid (1957) organized there. In spite of the cultural isolation that occurred during Franco's regime, visual artists created work that, although distinct in its qualities, was related to the international modes of the era. The Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies (b. 1923) began working in a heavy textural fashion in the 1950s and was related to other European "matter painters" such as Dubuffet, Fautrier, and Nicolas de Staël. But Tàpies also embedded or concealed in his paintings objects from the real world, with the effect of evoking ambiguous associations. In his 1967 essay "I am Catalan," he communicated his awareness of the precarious situation in his country and the obligation of the artist to prepare "the ground work to give our world a new direction."

By the mid-1950s, *informel* painting had spread throughout Europe to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and above all Poland during a period of considerable intellectual and cultural freedom. One of the leading spirits of this new movement of freedom was Tadeusz Kantor (1915–91). After the war, Kantor, who was a man of the theater before turning to painting, created an experimental theater in Kraków that shared many characteristics with Antonin Artaud's theater of the absurd. Kantor's work in all disciplines is characterized by innovation, risk, uncertainty, and rebellion. In a poem written in 1955, he saw painting as a "living organism" and a "demonstration of life toward the human epilogue."

The multiplicity of directions taken by art in the pluralistic or postmodern era is documented in the subsequent sections of this volume. In the 1980s, after years of minimalist reduction and conceptual ideology, sensuous, expressive, and painterly painting was once more permitted. To be sure, the greatly expanded international art market required works that—unlike earthworks, performance art, and conceptual art—could be commodified, but a fair number of excellent authentic artists throughout the Western world once more asserted the painter's priority of process and revelation. Gestural painting that attempted—and at times succeeded—in the modernist enterprise of organizing states of feeling on canvas came once more to the fore. Lacking a better term, critics and art dealers put the label of "neoexpressionism" on this mode of painting. As examples of this continuity of gesture painting, we cite two Europeans, one of them totally abstract, the other using historic or personal subject matter.

The Danish painter Per Kirkeby (b. 1938), originally a student in geology, was concerned primarily with the physical world. Kirkeby worked as a performance artist, was a member of Fluxus (see chap. 8), and was known as an experimental

filmmaker and an accomplished writer of poetry, essays, and novels. In the passage from *Bravura* quoted here, Kirkeby discussed the mysterious quality of physical layers in the making of a painting and noted that the "light of ambivalence is a heavenly one."

Ambivalence, deriving from the fusion of reality and myth, was essential also to the art of Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945). Most of his paintings and books referred to phenomena in history, mythology, the artist's world, music, the land, and water. Although made during a period in which subject matter once more became paramount, process and gesture were essential to Kiefer's work. When required he added extraneous materials such as straw, clay, wire, and lead to his agitated paint surfaces, producing objects of dominant physical presence. Like the action painters of a previous generation, he felt that both traditional and new structures were no longer valid and that the artist must take risks and assume responsibilities.