Abstract Expressionism, or The Subject of the Artist

At the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century, the idea of the avant-garde, which has provided the dynamo for a kind of 'modernist' faith in contemporary art circles, has been severely shaken. The current debate over 'modernism' and 'post-modernism' is a sure indication that something underlying the whole project of the avant-garde has faltered. In the visual arts, this tendency seems to be taking the form, both in the United States and in Europe, of a reawakened interest in painting and specifically of a renewed concern for figuration.

It might be interesting to look more closely at this situation. Is there an inevitable association between the art of painting and the figure? Does a renewed interest in painting imply a return to the question of the figure? What has happened to the well-established mode of 'abstract' painting, where there is no apparent figure, and is the notion of 'abstraction' ultimately linked to that of the avant-garde? These questions must be asked if we want to understand recent developments in contemporary art.

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Such considerations will necessitate reopening chapters of modern art history hitherto considered definitively closed. Perhaps we should look again at Cezanne and his influence; also, the impact of Cubism and the different achievements of Picasso and Matisse. No doubt such a task is already being undertaken, especially under the impact of the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Cezanne's late work and its more recent Picasso retrospective. In this connection we should pay special attention to the series of exhibitions dealing with different aspects of Abstract Expressionism which have been held in American museums over the last few years[1].

The chapter dealing with Abstract Expressionism is perhaps the most firmly closed of all in the history of art. Our understanding of this movement is dictated by a highly articulate and persuasive mode of 'formalist' criticism that has tended to define its achievement and subsequent influence. However, if we read the statements of the artists themselves, we will see that they categorically rejected this critical approach to their work. No attention is paid to this inconvenient truth.

Renewed consideration of the history of Abstract Expressionism holds the key to a reassessment of modern art and to our understanding of contemporary developments, centered on a renewed interest in painting and linked to the question of the figure. That the museums should draw

[1] I am referring to the Whitney Museum's exhibition of the early years of Abstract Expressionism (1978); the large Guggenheim retrospective of Mark Rothko (1978); the National Gallery of Washington show entitled "American Art at Mid-Century: the Subjects of the Artist" (1978); and the Metropolitan Museum's retrospective of Clyfford Still (1979). The quotations appearing in this essay are taken from the catalogues of the first three of these exhibitions.

our attention back to Abstract Expressionism at a time when it has been given the status of major art and has been absorbed by history, and that, in addition, their curators should have published a large number of new critical essays in the accompanying catalogues, when criticism seemed to have exhausted its treatment of this art, is indeed a sign that an unprecedented opportunity for reassessment does exist. It is, therefore, to the criticism of Abstract Expressionism and to these most recent attempts to capture its achievement that we should perhaps turn our attention.

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Historically the Abstract Expressionist painters occupy a transitional position in twentieth century art, comparable to Impressionism in the nineteenth century. The Abstract Expressionist generation found itself situated between an aging Europe and the formation of a new society in America, at a moment when European society was poised to bankrupt itself for the second time in twenty years with the Second World War, and American society, seemingly unable to envisage any valid alternative, remained attached to a redundant set of values derived from Europe.

This position was such that neither criticism nor public opinion has ever been sure of how to deal with the large and imposing canvases of Abstract Expressionsim. Should they be measured against the established tradition of painting or should they be seen as something drastically new which escapes cultural qualification? Should they be viewed in a ‘representational’ or ‘abstract’ context? Should we try to establish the external reference of an intellectual, social and institutional experience or insist that they follow a self-contained, autonomous development? Are they animated by a logical and progressive outlook, accessible to a rationalist critique, or by an involuntary gesture of repudiation, a sort of reactionary anarchy?

In general, art historians have insisted, in reaction to the popular ideas of the time, which detected an iconoclasm in the new painting, on the undoubted link between Abstract Expressionism and the history of modern art in Europe, in particular the Impressionists, the late work of Monet, the Cubists and the Surrealists. But it must be admitted that such theses are not very apt at seizing the element of new experience contained in this painting, and other less orthodox commentators have looked elsewhere for more suitable references.

For example, John Graham, who was close to many of the artists during the thirties and forties, has written “The purpose of art *in particular* is to re-establish a lost contact with the unconscious … with this primordial racial past and to keep and develop this contact in order to bring to the conscious mind the throbbing event of the unconscious mind.” Allusion to the unconscious opens up the whole field of Freudian investigation but it should be noticed here that the unconscious is conceived of as primitive or animal and possessing a special relationship with the new and unexplored continent of America.

The Whitney catalogue devotes considerable space to such explanations, insisting on the similarity between early Abstract Expressionist work and cave art, citing the influence of Mexican and Indian art and drawing our attention to the large exhibitions of primitive art held in New York during the thirties and certainly visited by the young American painters. However, we may well wonder if this emphasis on the primitive is any better adapted to dealing with the elusively modern quality in Abstract Expressionism. The impression is left that this, ultimately Jungian, bias is responsible for the failure of psychoanalysis to provide an effective frame of reference in American art criticism.

The sense emerges that the criticism shaped under the impact of Abstract Expressionism wanted to bury the Abstract Expressionist painters with ceremony, but also with a speed and ambivalence of attitude bringing to mind the fate of the father in Freudian theory. While the Abstract Expressionist painters have been honoured with the highest place in American art, succeeding generations of artists brought up under the influence of this criticism have made a concerted effort to avoid their work and something which they had tried to discover has been repressed.

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Faced with the phenomenon of Abstract Expressionism, art criticism has always been ill-at-ease. In turn, this has tended to isolate the painters and their work and surround them with a kind of stubborn mutism. However, if Abstract Expressionism seems to resist the language of art criticism, it does not claim an independence from discourse and thought. The Abstract Expressionist painters were deeply concerned with questions of art and culture which artists of the next generation wanted to avoid through a compulsive insistence on reductionism.

Abstract Expressionism will better be understood if we change critical focus from the painting as object and situate it instead in the extremely complex context of subjective experience. Far from being indifferent to discourse and thought, Abstract Expressionist painting tenaciously struggles to refill its empty structures with a mode of language capable of replying to an insistently repeated question -*"But who speaks…?"*

This question confronts traditional criticism. It reaches to the very center of its orientation, dissolving its judgment and leaving a void which the painters found themselves increasingly obliged to fill with their own statements. For this reason, it is always very interesting to compare what the critics have to say with the remarks made here and there by these artists who felt an increasing need to assume responsibility for the critical problems posed by their work.

Straight away in reply to the question, "But who speaks…?", which of course was never framed as such, but which is however implicitly present inside Abstract Expressionist painting, the artists turn to the issue of the *subject matter* of their art.

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In 1948, a new school was formed in New York City by Baziotes, Hare, Motherwell, Newman, Rothko, and Clyfford Still, with the rather inelegant name of 'The Subjects of the Artist.' The school's project was to initiate a '…spontaneous investigation into the subjects of the modern artist.' One could be forgiven for asking why these artists should choose this old preoccupation of classical painting. After all, painting termed 'abstract' and the idea of abstract form had already existed in modern art for a considerable period of time. They even had the supreme exponent of abstract art in Mondrian who was among the exiled European artists present in New York during the war. Nevertheless, thirty years later, the question preserves enough fascination for the National Gallery in Washington to give this name as the subtitle of its exhibition. Barnett Newman got to the core of the issue when he stated paradoxically that, '…it is this struggle against subject matter that is the essence of the contribution the modern artist has made to world thought… Yet the artist cannot paint without subject matter.'

Obviously there was no question of returning to the classical conception of the subject with its dependence on the representational model, but these artists just as strongly refused a definition of abstraction which believed itself independent of the exterior world. In this regard, Newman provides us with another extremely important precision, "Most people think of subject matter as what Meyer Shapiro has called 'object matter'. It is the object matter that most people want to see in a painting. That is what, for them, makes the painting seem full."

For Newman himself, on the other hand, subject matter was 'the deepest content of art, what it is' [emphasis Newman]. In other words, rather than abandon or simply avoid the issue of classical subject matter, the American artists wanted to develop a thoroughly modern conception of the subject. Newman very clearly affirmed as much when he said, 'We are raising the question of subject matter and what its nature is' and elsewhere, speaking of his generation, '… they felt it as no solution for the painter dissatisfied with cheap subject matter [a reference to the American Scene Painters] to deny it entirely … The problem was what kind of subject matter?'

At the basis of these reflections, we can discern a debate on the very identity of art. The American painters seemed to sense intuitively that they were situated at the end of a long cultural tradition which over the preceding centuries had begun to undermine the associations contained in the representational system, first of all with classical rationalism and afterwards with scientific positivism. They sensed that across this question of representation something of human identity had been pushed aside and repressed, and their great ambition was to unblock this experience by giving it a modern expression.

In any case, it is in this sense I think that we must interpret Newman's words when he says that subject matter is 'the deepest content of art, what it is' and also these word from Rothko: "They [Gottlieb's and his own paintings] depart from natural representation only to intensify the expression

of the subject.' These artists tried to find a truly modern expression of the subject, and in doing so were obliged to consider the history of painting which has been shaped by representation.

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This led them to refuse the easy solution of those developments which had systematically falsified the problem by shifting the equilibrium of the old subject/object dichotomy in favor of objectivity and the exterior vision of things. In consequence, we can see easily enough that for these artists there could be no question of exchanging representation for the then widely held conception of abstraction which still remains the principal misunderstanding of our thinking about art. Once again, they seem to have sensed with acuity that to identify abstraction with the *idea* or with a conception of *pure form* was to fall back into the trap of a narrow analogy with a rational and scientific vision of the exterior world – in other words – lift this vision quite simply to a 'higher' or 'transcendent' level.

In this respect it is very interesting to see how these painters quickly related the debate over abstraction to the increasingly influential mode of formalist criticism to be found in New York. Thomas B. Hess writes of how in 1955, Clement Greenberg made use of Newman's work to illustrate his thesis that modernism was 'under the irresistible pressure of history to purify its medium.' For Greenberg, again according to Hess, this amounted to advocating 'A pure color experience, uncontaminated by drawing, composition, surface textures (the "painterly") or anything else that might distract from the sensation of chroma.'

Newman strongly objected to this formalist schema. As for Rothko, he unequivocally stated that 'I am not interested in relations of color to form … I'm not an abstractionist.' Elsewhere, he went to the point of saying that the debate on abstraction and representation was false. 'I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again.'

But precisely what silence is Rothko alluding to here, if not the silence of a determined attempt to annihilate the subject in a culture unable to absorb the shock of an immense technological and scientific upheaval? If this is the case, can we continue to maintain the conception of *multiple subjects* extracted from nature and translated to the surface of the canvas as in the classical painting mode, or should we rather conceive of the subject as a play with the *identity of the artist's personal individuality?*

I would see confirmation of such a proposition in these words by Newman, 'I was drifting away and casting about, involved in a search for myself and for my subject … *in a hunger about myself'* [emphasis mine]. And this can perhaps explain Abstract Expressionism's longstanding

difficulty with criticism and language. The Abstract Expressionist painters had embarked on a radical deconstruction of this 'I' which is the key principle of critical perspective and the first function of language lost by the aphasic in his rupture with our reality. Motherwell seems to say as much when he asks, 'What is the content of our work? What are we really doing? The question is *how to name what as yet has been unnamed'* [emphasis mine].

In this case, I would suggest modifying the name of the school founded in 1948 and also the title of the Washington Gallery catalog by suppressing the plural of 'Subjects' and replacing it by a single 'Subject,' no longer belonging to each picture or series or to the work of each artist, but rather an inter-personal subject and a *subject in process* which interrogates itself and makes and unmakes itself across the experience of painting[2].

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If we want to understand Abstract Expressionist painting, we must insist on the notion of a *subject in process* and look for it in the passage of gesture and color. Motherwell has said of Pollock that 'his principal problem is to discover what his true subject is. And since painting is his thought's medium, the resolution must grow out of the process of his painting itself.'

This search for the subject testifies to a great artistic ambition to confront the inherent sense of art through the act of painting itself – to make painting into a means of thinking concretely. In consequence, it is hardly surprising to see these painters directly confronting the major pictorial problems of classical painting – figure, line, color – and trying to find a synthesis. But it also must be recognized that it is in the character of this ambition that there should remain a large measure of doubt, interrogation, and refusal of ready-made formulas.

In this perspective, E.A. Carmean's statement with regard to de Kooning's 'Women' series may give us pause. With evident relief at having found an easily recognizable form, he remarks, 'One thing is certain about the paintings, the subject is clearly a woman.' Such a statement would seem to beg the question of de Kooning's art. De Kooning certainly chose the woman on account of the historical value of its role as the privileged subject of classical painting. He admits as much himself when he says, 'The Women had to do with the female painted through all the ages, all those idols…' However, can we say on this basis that de Kooning worked towards this point of culmination of the classical tradition? Is not this woman rather a point of departure in an attempt to *disintegrate* such an integral image and *bend it* to the pictorial technique of modern painting and de Kooning's transgression of that technique? By modern painting's pictorial technique would be meant the flattening of form practiced by cubism with a certain complacency in its attitude towards

[2] For this concept, see the work of Julia Kristeva. A collection of her essays has recently appeared at Columbia University Press, New York, entitled Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Edicted by Leon S. Roudiez and translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez.

the object, and the subject, and the brutal and spontaneous gesture of the brush with which de Kooning struggled to break through the superficiality of Cubism's spatial structure.

Near the end of the forties, de Kooning was already painting in an abstract style and his return to the figure with the 'Women' series (1950-53) represented a return to a difficult and unresolved problem in modern painting. The series demanded an enormous amount of energy and personal investment and the painter obsessively reworked his canvases almost to the point of destroying them, as if he was driven by the desire to definitively rid himself of his image. De Kooning worked on the first 'Woman' over a period of two years, with many interruptions when he seemed incapable of advancing, and for all the canvases of the series he made a large number of drawings in which he redid each pose in a play of repetition which seems to testify to the artist's compulsion and fascination at having at last touched on something so far lacking in modern art. However, such a project demanded a personal expenditure and anguish as if de Kooning had found *something dead and decomposing inside himself* (inside-his-self). This anguish is clearly visible in de Kooning's practice of tearing his drawings into pieces and collaging the fragments to the surface of the canvas and in the dislocation of the faces and bodies of the women.

Thomas B. Hess has remarked that numerous commentators have compared this anguish to an 'existentialist despair' and that de Kooning himself never denied such a comparison. But something goes beyond despair in the 'Women' to a kind of want of modesty and a mad humour which touches us in our conception of woman with the suspicion of a sexual inanity.

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To the extent that de Kooning's 'Women' Series directly, even frontally, engages the figure, it occupies a key position in Abstract Expressionism. Nevertheless, this preoccupation with the figure is far from neglected in the work of his colleagues, even if it is interpreted very differently. Motherwell had the following to say about Pollock's relationship with the figure: 'With convulsive violence, Pollock then splashed out, or struck out his human image, realizing that his negative striking-out was image enough.' It is interesting that Motherwell emphasizes the violence which strikes Pollock, like de Kooning, when he is faced with the figure. It is also worth remarking on how Motherwell states that the *'negative'* of the figure '*was image enough'*. Enough for what? Is it not surely a sufficiency which is capable of carrying over to modern painting, through a transformation of pictorial means, a certain experience and knowledge within the past that had been contained in the figure? Pollock's solution in his famous 'drip paintings', in which he unravels the figure with the impulse of his line, and in which he imposes his own body in the place of the figure, is eloquent testimony and allows Michael Fried to write: 'There is no inside or outside to Pollock's line or to the space through which it moves… Pollock's line bounds and delimits nothing'. In later canvases Pollock explicitly returns to the figure, saturating black paint into raw canvas as if he wanted to insist that this problem had always been at the center of his work. A slightly eccentric but

nevertheless suggestive remark by Charles F. Stuckey reveals this ambivalence: ‘Are they [referring to the hands in the corner of Pollock’s ‘Number One’] the prints of left hands trying to penetrate the canvas, or are they representations of right hands trying to escape?’

The work of Pollock, like de Kooning, betrays a preoccupation with the figure as attached to an expression of violence, even if in the ‘drip paintings’ Pollock managed to temporarily escape this violence. These painters continually return to this central issue in the history of art as if driven by a desire to make and unmake the figure in a play of repetition. Having put forward such a proposition, it is important to understand the ambiguous relationship between painting and language. If we can say that Pollock and de Kooning confront the figure directly, such a statement implies that in this figure these painters are dealing with a certain formation of language which has managed to penetrate painting. For it must not be forgotten that in employing literary concepts such as the ‘figure’, we are inscribing pictorial preoccupations in language. From this, we can perhaps understand the violence of these works which feel themselves to be touched or penetrated in their subject by language, and in consequence goaded into rejecting all contact with language at the pictorial level.

The point being made here can perhaps be clarified by a reference to the work of Robert Motherwell. In Motherwell’s panting, we find this relationship to the figure, which is necessarily a relationship to language, interpreted in quite different manner. In the expansive ‘Elegies’ series, Motherwell treats the problem of the figure in form without having to pass by the figure itself. Tellingly, Motherwell’s principal reference here is to Matisse as opposed to Cubism. This is not to say of course, that there is not a more or less accentuated expressionist element in the ‘Elegies’ but rather that with the motif of these forms, Motherwell has found a means of confronting the great pictorial problematic of Abstract Expressionism, without undergoing the subjective dislocation which it imposed on Pollock and de Kooning.

However, if Motherwell was able to work on his forms without violence, he was only able to do so perhaps because he had discovered how to come to terms with language. Through dedicating the Elegies to the Spanish Republic, he manages to find a relationship to language which does not interfere with his pictorial practice. Motherwell has said of the Elegies that they are ‘like a memorial to it [the war in Spain], like a tomb’ and also, ‘It was only after a period of painting them [the 1950-53 paintings] I discovered Black as one of my subjects – and with black the contrasting white, a sense of life and death which to me is Spanish. They are essentially the Spanish black of death contrasted with the dazzle of a Matisse-like sunlight.’ Motherwell is concretizing his associations of traditional Spanish culture in a title, and turning this experience on Matisse’s treatment of the figure in line. With his discovery of black, Motherwell manages to speak of death – but which death, specifically? Is this not a metaphysical Death, or the death of a certain metaphysic, which compliments the memory de Kooning had found decomposing inside him. Motherwell is the poet of

this Death when he says that ‘The Spanish Elegies are … my private insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot.’ The large monumental forms of the Elegies commemorate this Death, and also perhaps mark the burial of the figure through their refusal to superimpose their contour on a background and through searching out another experience of the subject in the depth of the colour black.

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This research, across the figure, for the ‘subject’ inevitably induces painting to consider the question of color. However, it is not enough to see how the ‘subject’ and color are intimately linked, we must also see how the *specific treatment* of color plays a crucial role. In addition, since color is so difficult to speak about with adequacy in painting, we should once again expect to see criticism and language struggle.

The relationship between language and painting is such that criticism exerts a far greater influence on painting than is generally imagined. We have already mentioned Greenberg’s thesis, with its inclination towards an art of ‘pure color experience,’ and Newman’s negative reaction, but the influence that such a thesis is hypothetically capable of exerting on, for example, Newman, is not limited to whatever consciously formed appraisal the painter may have been able to make of Greenberg’s texts. We are dealing here with the complex exchange between painting, language and thought, and their relationship with the social world and with culture. These are forces determining Greenberg’s formulations and they must also be counted among the determinations influencing the painter, whether he is sympathetic to the particular critical opinion expressed or not.

Rothko expressed his attitude to the figure when he said ‘It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purpose … But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.’ What more eloquent testimony to the violence of Abstract Expressionism could one hope to find? And so we are led to believe that Rothko turned from the figure to a direct investigation of color.

In the Guggenheim exhibition catalogue, Diane Waldman proposes that ‘Rothko is inexorably moving beyond mythic subject matter and Surrealist forms to replace imagery with color.’ However, there is the danger that in replacing the figure with color, the artist may open his work up to a mystical and spiritual interpretation which is an extension and finally a guarantee of the continued presence of the figure, modestly veiled and elevated to a ‘superior’ plane of transcendence.

Criticism happily takes up this interpretation, as can be seen again and again in Diane Waldman's text.

> 'Color is the vessel of transcendental meaning'; "Rothko belongs very much in the tradition of such metaphysicians of painting as Mondrian, Paul Klee, and Vassily Kandinsky, for whom color was the key to the realm of the spirit'; 'For Rothko abstract form and pure color had significance only in so far as they represented a higher truth'; 'In these pure, reduced, transcendent works, Rothko makes the concrete sublime.'

Such criticism relies heavily on a familiar rhetorical style, as elsewhere in such remarks as 'a synthesis of the physical and spiritual' or 'the finality of death, the reality of the spirit'.

This rhetorical approach to criticism leads in the text by Tom Hess on Newman, an extract of which is printed in the Washington catalog, to a discussion of biblical and kabbalistic references, in order to arrive at the conclusion that the act of creation in Genesis is the source of the artist's inspiration. Hess, and other like minded critics, use such reference to religion in order to combat the opposing critical camp of formalism. Newman himself in his writings and in such titles as his 'Stations of the Cross' envisages such associations. Rothko is also on record as asserting: 'The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.'

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The art of this century can be presented in terms, on the one hand, of color's 'reduction' to a formal definition and, on the other, to its 'spiritualization.' By 'reduction' would be meant the treatment of color as an element detached from the subjectivity of the artist and open to formal manipulation; 'spiritualization' would indicate an effort to link color with philosophical notions of transcendence. These two attempts to recuperate the most powerful force in modern painting by critical means are nowhere more clearly discernable than in the work of Newman and Rothko. No one has understood this problem better than the artists, as the Washington exhibition was able to show in a most decisive manner.

The exhibition displayed in neighboring rooms Newman's 'Stations of the Cross' series, painted between 1958 and 1964, and a selection of Rothko's 'Brown and Grey paintings' executed near the end of his life. Newman said of his pictures painted in black onto raw canvas, 'Black is what an artist uses… when he is trying to break into something new, when he is clearing the decks for experiment, when he wants to find a new way to his image and a way out of the restrictions his old paintings have imposed.'

For Rothko, the ‘Brown and Grey’ paintings were executed in a smaller format than usual, on paper nailed against the wall. In opposition to the large canvases of soaked color, the resistance of the wall allowed Rothko to paint with a pronounced gesture, leaving the mark of the brush clearly visible. William Rubin wrote in his obituary for the painter that ‘Mark Rothko sometimes spoke of himself as a violent artist’, and Dore Ashton has written that ‘Rothko claims his is the most violent painting in America today.’

For the brand of criticism which sees the paintings of the last years as ‘landscapes of the spirit’ by an artist who ‘had reached the father shore of art’ such propositions are difficult to reconcile. However, they may also be taken to acknowledge a certain impasse that every great painter of this century, who has the courage to take up the issue of color, must encounter. In the tension and austerity of the paintings by each of these artists, we can see the evidence of a critical reconsideration of their life’s work which led them both, by the passage of violence, to return to the original problematic of Abstract Expressionism, which fundamentally is an *anguish of the subject.*