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# Modernist Success in a Postmodern Failure: Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, the Avant-Garde and the Ascension of Late Capitalism, Art after 1945

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*A Modernist Success in a Postmodern Failure:  
Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism,  
The Avant-Garde and the Ascension of Late Capitalism,  
Art after 1945*

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### *The Postwar Atmosphere*

It is hard to imagine the magnitude of the events at the end of World War II. The thought produced in the face of a myriad of deaths is almost unfeasible sixty years after the fact, but the energy was integral to the changing social landscape. Because of the country's prominence in and fortitude after the war, the U.S. was left responsible for reshaping and rejuvenating the international landscape that was destroyed by the years of brutal fighting and vile contestation. The American establishment was granted a major opportunity to establish itself amongst the global leaders. Such a grand responsibility must account for the multiplicity of thought that arises in such a decisive moment. In order to align the Abstract Expressionist art movement with the intersection of the intense, multifaceted thought developed during the postwar period, the following will discuss the political, philosophical, economic, and art historical overlap that occurred in the mid to late 1940s in the hopes of illustrating the fertility yet lingering problems associated with the restructuring of the world with America at the helm. In this way, the duration of the Abstract Expressionist moment will be better understood for both its triumphs and downfalls.

### *Political Disorientation*

The world was at a crossroads after the political idealism of the early twentieth century was shattered during the wars. With the rise and fall of the Nazis in Germany, the parallel of Fascism elsewhere in Europe, and the rise of communism in Russia and China, the failures of strict authoritarian control were proven in their restraint of

humanity. Those who previously were mystified by the thought of collectivity were now bemoaned and utterly shocked by the totality of state power that finds its genesis in such systems. The moment offers a point to reassess the manner in which cultural institutions operate. Society was left open to new structural possibilities in the wake of the former systems' failures. Utopian thought became a way to maintain hope and keep the ideals of advanced civilization moving forward; this mode of thought reasserted the need for authenticity in life, opposing itself with the rise and ultimate clash of industry rationale on the battlefields of Europe. The situation was left undetermined to the extent that the Utopian thought evidenced an impulse to the authentic, humanistic aspects of life; correspondingly there was a Marxist rejection of historical objectives and systems as ultimately having led to the widespread destruction of civilization during the World Wars. With no true Utopian precedent, there was no where to look to except the future. Nancy Jachec describes this as the condition of, "[...] the 'modern,' or post systemic thinker, who began with the act of subjective perception, operated beyond the confines of rational thought [...] this imaginative act enabled the thinker to project an alternative, or revolutionary situation. The problem of how this imagined utopia could be realized, however, was not even addressed, let alone resolved [...]" ('Philosophy and Politics' 77). The individual became responsible for determining the manner of his or her own idealized "alternative, or revolutionary situation" and the actual method of fruition is negligible due to the individual's lack of effective agency. Individualism, versus communal or totalitarian states, enacts a new level of subjectivity into the political realm. The determination of individual values and perceptions and how they can be aligned as a synthesized whole becomes a point of departure for new thought.

In the immediacy of the situation, American-style democracy becomes curiously fashionable. I say curiously because of the dual nature of American democracy as being both democratic and capitalistic. In evolving against the totalizing state nationalism of Stalinism or fascism, the advantages of democratic capitalism are clear. The self-reliance and social mobility that are inherent to the system appear to allow for the equality of all citizens. It seems that the choice was easy, or that there was no alternative. The systemic leap, however, seems to me to suggest a substitution of one extreme for another, and in fact there was questioning of such a leap at the time. The problem may arise within the Depression-era United States where utter desperation developed; hence, with the rise of America as the executor of the postwar world, individuals are more easily compelled to the glitter of money and the materialism it affords. The reversion to materialism that occurs under American democracy hinders the utopian dream of an authentic existence by masking military industrialism with a pervasion of refrigeration and automobiles. Humanist objectives lie in the shadows of technology as either inherent in invention or as the remnants of utopian, subjective thought.

In those who are able to resist the easy determination that American-style democracy is the best alternative to the totalizing thought of the other political systems of the era, there is a tendency to retain knowledge of and ground thought in the alienation of existence as a way to maintain humanist values. To facilitate the despair, disparity, and possibility of these individuals of the new postwar situation and their idealism that results from the relinquishing of the past in favor of a boundless future, it seems that in order to inject the political sphere with this newfound subjectivity, there is a requirement for a new mode of thinking. It is these individuals who advocate individual freedoms as

opposed to the mediated freedoms of the capitalist system that is attached to the hip of American democracy, but in what manner and through what precedence will their belief in existential freedom be able to affect the dictates of American capitalist democracy?

*Existential Thought in America*

In fact, the method of thought that will enable this postwar American leftist opposition had been in germination for nearly a century in Europe through the existential writings of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Their ability to incorporate tragedy and alienation into their philosophy becomes an origin for modern philosophical inquiry. Existentialism is often equated to the death, destruction, and horrors of life, as George Cotkin expresses:

[...] existentialism begins with Sartre's maxim that men and women everywhere, as part of the human condition, are 'condemned to be free,' forced to confront the dilemma of existence, to seek infinitude in the face of limits. To be existential is to have those dark nights of the soul when the loneliness of existence becomes transparent and the structure of our confidence lies shattered around us [...] To be existential is to wrestle most fully with the jagged awareness of one's own finitude, with the thunderbolt fact that I will die and that my death will be my own, experienced by no one else [...] To be existential is to recognize, in the face of all these somber truths clutched close to our own sense of being that we must act. Despite the dread and anguish that accompany the shocking recognition of our freedom, that threatens to stall us in our tracks, we must take responsibility for our lives; we must create the world anew. To be existential is to join [...] in a tragic acceptance of the limitations of existence while exulting in each affirmative breath of life, in each push of the stone up the mountain. (3)

It is difficult to try and assimilate into this mode of thought because it seems to be a form of romanticized melancholia. In its very practice it contains the notions of being

“condemned,” in a “dilemma,” wrestling with the idea of death, and of “tragic acceptance,” which do not at first seem to be modes of advancement, and when juxtaposed with the totality that spurred the World Wars or the materialism possible in capitalist democracy, it is understandable why these philosophical assertions were not met with wide acceptance. The rise of subjectivity as opposed to the collectivity of state is responsible for the spread of existential thought because existentialism decrees that, “All individuals, ultimately, [are] responsible for what they [make] of themselves. For the existentialist, ‘every truth and action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity.’” (Cotkin 4). This self-reliance is essential to the philosophy of existentialism, but is also an integral part to the capitalist system, and so such thought retains its utility under capitalist dictions. But fusing utility with tragedy does not seem to be a very tempting coupling for those individuals who wish to divorce themselves from the destruction of the preceding years. But there is an “upside to existential freedom.” It is “the freedom from the shackles of tradition, the possibility of a more authentic existence and the headiness that comes with the freedom to create and to be creative [...] existentialism presented itself bravely as ‘the literature of possibility.’” (Cotkin 6). Existentialism is able to ground thought in the limits and authenticity of human existence and with this realization comes the individual’s responsibility to respond and create, to envision something better, and for utopian thought. In the acts and products of existential thinkers, existential philosophy is seen to harness the uncertainty of the future and reconcile it with the tragedy of the past. But how did the philosophy of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche come to being in America and to what magnitude did the country feel their effect?



In order to find the origins of existential thought in America, one need not look either to Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, but to the history of American thought and creative production. As Cotkin asserts:

Much of the best in American thought and culture for the last two hundred years has come from thinking existentially, from a willingness to confront death and finitude with a spirit of critique and rebellion. Many intellectuals and artists of influence found their voice through existentialism. It led them, even when they retreated from politics, to at least understand the despair that leads to totalitarianism. Many of them were able to create art, the ultimate existential testament to overcoming the despair inherent in the human condition. (8)

Many authors found their voice through existential explorations of dread, despair, and death. Authors such as, Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Henry James explored the depths of experience to the extent of its finitude in order to create some of the "best" in "American" literature. I think it is this pioneering spirit that always becomes romanticized into American culture that these authors took upon themselves. They took the frontier to be themselves and ultimately produced their own subjectivity in the form of their works. But along with this pioneering attitude, there is optimism in the confrontation. At times, the European existentialism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche took on a pessimistic tone that added to their despair, but detracted from the motivating components of their effect. The approach is affirmed by Cotkin, that:

While American existentialists did not put a happy face on the pessimism and despair of European existentialism, neither did they contentedly wallow in such despair. They refused to make a fetish out of nihilism. In the hands of most [...] the existential grounds of anguish and despair functioned not as numbing forces but as goads to action and commitment. (7)

But there is a danger in existential thought. There is the possibility that the individual will be unable to overcome the tragedy they encounter exteriorly or in their own internal investigations, and that they will subsequently be stifled by this realization, unable to go on. So while at first existential thought bears an unromantic façade of tragedy and despair, once its pretenses are overcome, the tendency to romanticize the existential disposition of thought can also hinder motivation instead of giving it life. Existentialism risks being reduced to a “Kierkegaardian emphasis on anxiety, inwardness, and religious transcendence [...] a shift from a pragmatic concern with the changing world to an almost neurotic interest in ‘personal tragedy [,]’ a tragic sense of life [that prioritizes] ‘personal malady’ over politics.” (Cotkin 57). The application of existential thought becomes of interest as both a way to justify wallowing in personal misery and a way to instigate changes that will appease that same personal misery; existentialism’s difficulties come from its ability to both stop and start action, political or otherwise.

Regardless of the dangers and benefits of existential thought, the postwar atmosphere welcomed existential philosophy as a way to come to terms with the horrific aftermath of World War II, while maintaining hope and progressive thought. This philosophy became fashionable in various circles, especially those of New York, for its ability to find agency within the individual despite the shock and awe that resulted from the collision of various political systems. Existential thought circulated through the media and was able to make an impact on a variety of social issues, but became especially appropriate as a prompt for creative production. Clement Greenberg, *the* art critic of the post-World War II U.S. intelligentsia (who we will hear much more from later), “pronounced existentialism an important vogue that captured a ‘historical mood’ of

pessimism that might be aesthetically appropriate to our age.” (Cotkin 97).

Existentialism found its way to the shores of the United States and was able to contract many imaginations as to the possibilities of existence, but the philosophy was more than a fad, it was a way to seriously engage in self-assessment and progress in order to find new perspectives and forms within the American cultural landscape.

### *An Art Market in Need*

Along with this surge of political and philosophical energy, the postwar United States was also in the midst of an economic boom. The United States became the cultural center of the world and became an economic locus for global markets coinciding with them, “Almost immediately after Pearl Harbor, the American art market took off” (Dijkstra 24). The art market, however, did not progress abnormally from the common modes of commodity fetishism, and so “most of the new art patrons were soon buying art far too much in the same way they would purchase a fine radio or an automobile: to impress their neighbors. And what impressed their neighbors most became, once again, whatever they knew was particularly expensive...”(Dijkstra 24). The works of art were no longer important or valued because of their aesthetic effect or message, but were now no different than a sign of taste, of having the best things as a desired analogy to their owner. The new corporate elite that capitalized on the industrialization after the war spawned new divisions in the economy. As far as the art market, these new CEOs, “[produced] a new crop of art dealers who set out to give their wealthiest clients one-minute manager crash courses in the sort of cultural superiority that would instantly be bestowed on them.”(Dijkstra 26). This new breed of superficiality and appearance

drained the art world of the substance of its works, but also opened a divide within the fashionable tastes of art in America. This moment was, in other words:

[...] the historic post-WWII convergence of the authoritarian approach to art of conservatives such as Thomas Craven and Frederic Taubes and the narrow viewpoint of apostles of the new such as Samuel Kootz, Clement Greenberg, Thomas Hess, and Harold Rosenberg [...] all eagerly producing to the new corporate buyers: You don't know what you like, so please pay attention and buy what we tell you to. (Dijkstra 26)

Here lies a problem for 20<sup>th</sup> century American art where American Scene painting, which is concerned with romanticizing the American landscape, and Social Realism diverge.

The corporate market sought to find works that would appropriately frame their establishments mind set, however, “[CEOs] could neither display the products of the American Scene movement nor the art of the immigrant generation of American expressionism without serving to take sides in the conflict between sentimental idealization and brutal confrontation that these seemed to represent in most people’s minds.” (Dijkstra 27-28). The painting of the American Scene and Social Realism is politically too polemic, either too conservative or too totalitarian, respectively, and therefore in the corporate situation, either form of representation was a risky pronouncement that may stir some disgust amongst the clientele. Theodor Adorno discusses the dichotomy of forms under capitalism in his essay *The Schema of Mass Culture*. In this essay, Adorno describes the representations in terms of conflict and conflictlessness, saying:

History as such becomes a costume identified with the individual concealing the frozen modernity of monopoly and state capitalism [...] Monopoly is the executor: eliminating tension, it abolishes art along with conflict. Only in this consummated conflictlessness does art wholly

become one moment of material production and thus turn completely into the lie to which it has always contributed in the past. Yet at the same time it here approaches more closely to the truth than those remnants of traditional art that still continue to flourish, to the extent that all preservation of individual conflict in the work of art, and generally even the introduction of social conflicts as well, only serve as a romantic deception. (78-79)

In this way, we can read the American Scene's landscape documentation as a "moment of material production" for its romanticization of banality in America, and consequently read Social Realist art as an equally romantic, if more blatant, injection of social conflict into the realm of art.

This rift in the American art scene opened up a new space within the art market. Painting needed to reflect the stability of American Scene painting without the conservative element, while it also needed to exhibit the exploratory risk of the corporation without seeming too radical. The mode was towards political ambiguity and CEOs would require an art that would mirror the image that this trend was creating.

What was necessary was a:

'non objective' painting, a painting without any content except color, form and texture [that] was pretty much impermeable to political scrutiny...an art that by its very existence denied the importance of human interaction, of personal concern, an art that saw means as ends in themselves and could do away with the pesky issue of social concern [...] Such an entirely self-referential art would be impossible to prosecute. Thus, it was guaranteed to confuse and annoy the general public that, as always, continued to favor images with an easily digestible narrative content. (Dijkstra 28)

In the decree for a "non objective" painting lays a problem for Americans, that the history of abstract art was heretofore formed across the Atlantic Ocean in more culturally established Europe. Throughout the wartime period, the mainstays of the global art

market were clearly surrealism and cubism. But even these fixtures when appropriated in American art world started to break down. As Maude Riley observes in her article,

*Whiter Goes Abstract and Surrealist Art?:*

The younger generation of abstract and surrealist painters is of two kinds: those who are painting elaborations upon the premises set up by pioneers of these two expressions, and who are like outriders to the main procession; and those who have elected to stay within the traditions set up by the elder Europeans and Americans who preceded them. There are many of the former; few of the later. There are many abstractionists in modern painting; few true surrealists. (151)

The “elaborations” of the younger American artists seem new and uncertain; however, it is in their vitality that their mark will be made on the art world. The ability to transcend the hegemonic tradition and extend human perception that much further is where these new artists become important. It is not how these painters can be fit into the mold of previous generations, but, in the words of Howard Putzel, “What counts is that the painters, however respectful, are unimpressed with any idea of becoming ‘another Picasso’ or ‘another Miro,’ and that their works indicate genuine talent, enthusiasm and originality. I believe we see real American painting beginning now.” (152-153).

The American art world was on the verge of a break through, as I hope these discussions of the political, philosophical and artistic currents in postwar American life have shown. The conflict that proceeded this moment, once over, opened up new territory for human existence to explore. Knowing how devastating human existence could be, produced an opposing intellectual force that began to seek out ideals and utopian forms. But the contemporaneous economic direction of America is the deciding factor. The democratic values of America allowed for the diversity of thought that came

from the newfound subjectivity while providing a resistance against the totalitarian regimes; however, the success of any emerging thought in the situation after the war became dependent on its accomplishments in the budding market. Particularly for art, this dictated a need for an appeal to the bourgeoisie consisting of newly made millionaires, and also created the task of sustaining allure within the quickly changing fashions of the open market.

### *The Direction of Art*

What the American art world needed was an art form that would rival the modern art of Europe. Critics in America were at work to locate the artist or artists that would establish America as the new cultural, to coincide with being the economic, center of the world. Perhaps no critic would be as influential as Clement Greenberg who wrote primarily for the *Partisan Review*. Greenberg's two landmark essays, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and "Towards a New Laocoon," written in 1939 and 1940, respectively, would delineate the terms on which a new avant-garde art movement would be created. The formalist work of Greenberg often overshadows other critics that were integral to the formation and spirit of the new movement, later to be termed Abstract Expressionism. Harold Rosenberg, Robert Motherwell, and Sam Kootz, amongst others, also dedicated themselves to finding the terms, meaning, and passion which Abstract Expressionism sought to embody, but they attacked the issue of the postwar avant-garde from a less formal, more existential perspective. What I hope to uncover is that while the differing schools of criticism were at odds in language and motivation, the ultimate result led the avant-garde movement in the same direction; the two schools assist as opposed to conflict with each other and thereby encompass a new school of artistic production that would capture the energy of postwar liberalism unrivaled.

#### *A Formal Approach: Clement Greenberg*

After World War II, the critical impulse was to cast off history and enable society to progress out of its darkest moments. With this desire came the need to reexamine the



course of history in an effort to, if nothing else, secure knowledge over what not to do, while determining the functions of historical change. This historical investigation would enable the cultural realm to find an unexplored direction for art. What emerged is elaborated most effectively by Clement Greenberg as:

A superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism—made this possible. This criticism has not confronted our present society with timeless utopias, but has soberly examined in terms of history and of cause and effect the antecedents, justifications, and functions of the forms that lie at the heart of every society. Thus our present bourgeois social order was shown to be, not an eternal, ‘natural’ condition of life, but simply the latest term in a succession of social orders. ("Avant-Garde" 49)

By looking “soberly” at history’s process one is attempting to clear the air of formerly romanticized thematizations of time in order to confront the true nature of history and its development. In the moment where the society as a whole is struggling to determine the appropriate course of action that will enable the society to progress out of such devastation, the differing realms of society also risk being stilted in their own development. As a way to combat the risk of freezing progress in culture, Greenberg theorized a return of avant-garde culture that was a potent force during the Revolutions in France. In the face of such social indeterminacy:

[...] the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point [...] subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague [...] Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself. ("Avant-Garde" 49-50)

The artist of the new movement was required to relinquish his<sup>1</sup> role within the pervasive confusion in order to leave his attention fully upon his art form, as if, “The arts [...] have been hunted back to their mediums,” because “It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself...” (“Laocoon” 65-66). In this way, the medium would become the focus, and the social statements that had plagued art heretofore would become irrelevant. Greenberg wanted the works to be purposive to the extent that they can only be what they are and that they can only function as art. Adorno would refer to this new mode of artistic production as “responsible art,” or art that “develops purposive forms so unrelentingly in their purposiveness that they come into open conflict with all external purposes when pursued to the bitter end.” (81). Art was forced to relinquish its bonds to social debates and stand alone. To do this, Greenberg proposed that the task of the avant-garde became:

[...] to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to become their own justification. The avant-garde, both child and negation of Romanticism, becomes the embodiment of art’s instinct at self-preservation. It is interested in, and feels responsible to, only the values of art; given society as it is, has an organic sense of what is good and what is bad for art. (“Laocoon” 63)

By allowing art to develop on its own, specialized, and outside of societal demands, Greenberg opened up space for the organic, existential development of painting.

But understanding that the avant-garde movement was condemned to withdraw itself from society, ultimately for the benefit of that same society, is difficult to picture in

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally all the artists associated with the Abstract Expressionist art movement have been male, which has been addressed in recent revisionism, particularly in Ann Eden Gibson's *Abstract Expressionism:*

terms of the production and economics that would bring this to fruition. Saying that the artist withdraws themselves from society is a romantic illusion. The artist is, in fact, integral to society and vice-versa. Particularly as Greenberg alludes, “[...] the avant-garde remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed money.” (“Avant-Garde” 49). Artists were as subsumed by the capitalist system as the bourgeois class, and therefore were unable to enact full freedom through their withdrawal from society. By 1939, Greenberg acknowledged that given the decaying state of culture under capitalism, “the avant-garde itself, already sensing danger, is becoming more and more timid every day that passes. Academicism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places.” (“Avant-Garde” 51). But it is this fact that made the avant-garde’s task that much more important. With the rise in commodification comes the “relentless repetition of the unrepeatable” (Adorno 79) through which “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of new global culture [...] the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, [and] the play of random stylistic allusion [...]” (Jameson 17-18). Here, the avant-garde artist rejects the repetition of cultural forms, and narrows and raises his own production methods in order to discover new, if difficult, forms of vitality and expression, art.

Through Greenberg’s theory, there are a few dictates regarding the artist’s modes of production, but they are more prescriptive than restrictive, so that they are made to encompass the new style, an American avant-garde. To enable the exploration of form and style in painting, the different material aspects of the medium required discussion as to the nature of non-objective and pure works. The object of these discussions was to

determine the aspects of painting that had previously been identified as challenges to representation. By alleviating the painter from the problems associated with subject matter, painting withdraws itself from historical solutions to perspective, proportion, volume, and space. The flat surface is now only required to be just that, flat, and the illusionary techniques are no longer required to veil the nature of the work. Clement Greenberg writes that "the history of avant-garde painting" has been:

[...] that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium [...] Painting abandons chiaroscuro and shading modeling. Brushstrokes are often defined for their own sake [...] Primary colors, the 'instinctive,' easy colors, replace tones and tonality. Line, which is one of the most abstract elements in painting since it is never found in nature as the definition of contour, returns to oil painting as a third color between two other color areas. Under the influence of the rectangular shape of the canvas, forms tend to become too geometrical--and simplified; because simplification is also a part of the instinctive accommodation to the medium. But most important of all, the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas; where they lie side by side or interlocked or transparently imposed upon each other [...] In a further stage realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the planes surface [...] slamming the various planes together. ("Laocoon" 68)

By dissolving content and adhering to the basis of the medium, American painting would be able to assert itself as a progression from the older European avant-gardes. But what Greenberg leaves in question is how the dissolved content would look and by what means it would be achieved. The function of the art in society is neglected because it is not supposed to serve in a bipartisan debate, as American Scene and Social Realism had. In the movement into the space between the dialectic, Greenberg's theory of a new avant-garde keeps itself at a distance from questions of history, motivation and process. These issues, however, were part of the aura in the postwar art world, as the liberal press was at

work to establish both political agency in the creative act and authenticity in the mode of production in an effort to sustain the individual's ability to resist the capitalist system, all while remaining in favor of democracy.

### *Existentialism and the Avant-Garde*

In order to establish a political motivation for the new school of American art, American critics found the possibility in Europe, particularly France, for an effective, authentic form of agency. The vogue of existentialism, that was on the rise in America, offered a philosophical arena to explore the possibility of an individual's relation to political agency. With the new formal changes heralded by Greenberg, existentialism provided a means to withstand the bipartisan debate while not relinquishing a viable stance, as Nancy Jachec has noted:

[...] it was during those years of genuine political experimentation in France that the American avant-garde began to incorporate existentialist ideals into their own discussions about dramatic formal changes in their work, thus establishing Abstract Expressionism as the embodiment of contemporary leftist values [...] however [...] the same confusions between leftist, and liberal, or lyrical existentialism perpetuated by the leading independent left, also featured in the avant-gardes understanding of existentialism, the ultimate political indeterminacy of Abstract Expressionism being attributed to this uniform misreading of the politics of French existentialism[...]when the third-way effort in France collapsed, disillusioned American leftists salvaged its more aesthetic features, which would be transformed by the Abstract Expressionists and their allies into a replacement for radical agency. ("Philosophy and Politics" 65)

How could existentialism's glorification of the individual theorize a tangible political effect when attempting to appear neutral in the face of the controversial debates of the period? In looking at Sartre, we can locate a relationship between the ethical and the

individual, whereby the individual's action can both be a subjective experience and have larger political repercussions. Nancy Jachec explains that in Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism":

[...] the ethical, and at the same time political, basis of intersubjectivity as perception and consequently spontaneous action: 'feeling is formed by the deeds that one does; therefore I cannot consult it as a guide to action. And that is to say that I can neither seek within myself for authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect from some ethic, formulae that will enable me to act.' The formation of value was thus dependent upon sudden individual engagement with the world of objects—in other words, within situation. Consequently, there could be no universally shared sense of the ethical already in place to which individuals referred. Rather, individuals spontaneously created value in relation to their own experiences, thereby imposing their own conception of value on humanity at large: 'I am responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man. ("Philosophy and Politics" 75-76)

The individual is left to determine value spontaneously and for the common good. But as we well know, the alienation of the individual is capable of producing malice and scorn within the individual. The jaded individual presents a problem in that he can exemplify the reasons by which individual political agency can be discredited. In order to maintain the high ethical necessity for social life, the individual must retain some essence of a link to collective concerns; however, the preexisting class demarcations tend to produce more alienation than community. Nancy Jachec points out that, subsequently:

Sartre suggested that a vague, shared set of ideals could operate within certain individuals enabling them to form like-minded ethical groups. Because of their numbers, these groups could turn what had previously amounted to an essentially solipsistic, creative act into 'party' political action, however limited in scale. ("Philosophy and Politics" 76)

Sartre decreed that a framework over specific dictates would allow for the direct relation of individual's action to the collective. With the formal concerns arranged by Greenberg, existentialism provided the Abstract Expressionists with the philosophy that enabled them to instill the subjective action as a prime motivational force while still maintaining a group dynamic and concern.

Subjective action comes into frame as an exclamation of the individual, and allows for the artist to find himself. Once again, existential exploration issues itself as the process by which a purely subjective art can be found. In the situation, event, and or act of painting, the artist is able to generate the fruition of spontaneous value. Artists needed a way that they could approach the act of painting that would enable them to explore formal concerns without restricting the characteristics of the product. For this task the artists looked to the surrealists who implemented a technique known as automatism in order to engage the unconscious, disclosing the depths of the interior of the mind. Jonathan Fineberg proposed that, for painting, "Automatism seemed to be the ideal device for artists so concerned with radical individualism. The artists of the New York School viewed it as a technique for developing form that did not impose style"(35). But the Abstract Expressionists were not looking for a way to explore their unconscious, but "[...] departed from the surrealist concept by using automation as a device for objectifying an intense *conscious* experience as it was unfolding, rather than as a means of bringing forth unconscious material for association or of using unconscious thought processes to modify imagery." (Fineberg 35). This change in the objective of automatism allows artists to use their own mental processes to find new elusive forms. They are not attempting to narrate their own existence or illustrate the effects of the unconscious, but

to use their decisions in painting as a form of aesthetic, ethical choice. Through the engagement with the material, artists are able to produce events, spontaneous and valuable that forms an absolution of the subjective experience. Fineberg argues that in this way,

The encounter was never oriented either to past sources (psychological or art historical) nor to the anticipated future; the artist lived the painting entirely in the present, and the object was left over as an artifact of that event [...] These artists turned the conceptual enactment into an object. They sought an embodiment of the individual's act of making order out of chaos, but not the order itself. (35)

The experience of painting relinquished itself from the chains of history as well as the daunting expectancy for the future, and thus enabled the artist to hold a singular concern: what to do with the paint and the canvas. The result would be a unique formation out of the unknown that is an authentic presentation of the individual's decisions in giving form to confusion. Nancy Jachec observes that automatism embodied the existential call for individual, political agency and progress in a way that is "something like Nietzsche's metaphysical, action orienting knowledge and Sartre's ethical acts." ("Space" 25). In using automatism to broach existential freedom and subjectivity, the Abstract Expressionists found the source and method that would enable them to fully explore the formal qualities of their medium. I think it would be quite difficult to view the divide between the existential critics and the formalists as independent and conflicting because of their reliance on each other. So while the theorizing of an American avant-garde holds both a modernist formalism it also contains an existential creative strategy, and in this way we will see that the Abstract Expressionist movement will be able to capture the mood of the postwar epoch.



In suggesting that the formation of an American avant-garde is linked to existential philosophy is not an attempt to cast the Abstract Expressionists as an embodiment of existential beliefs. The assertion instead is an attempt to illustrate the pervasiveness of existential ideals in postwar America. Such figures in the liberal press as C. Wright Mills and Dwight Macdonald were interested in existentialism, not necessarily for its philosophical subjectivity, but as a mode of thought that is capable of keeping society moving forward. Nancy Jachec indicates that many in the liberal press found existentialism attractive because it "shared the same social concerns," that:

[...] can be broadly characterized as the possibility of political action within mass culture, and the necessity of making the framework of action normative instead of factual, scientific knowledge. Macdonald specifically sited existentialism as the then current vehicle for rethinking 'Determinism versus free will, Materialism versus Idealism, the concept of Progress.' ("Space" 19)

Existentialism was in the air, and provided a philosophical force that demanded the society to keep on moving. But it is not simply the "vogue of existentialism" that allowed for its application to art. Through magazines such as *Partisan Review* and *Possibilities*, direct links between the individuals, motivations, and goals of both the expatriate existentialists and the Abstract Expressionists can be made. Jachec suggests that they formed a community of intellectuals that came together in New York to enable the spread of postwar liberal values as evidenced by:

[...] the *Partisan Review* editors who hosted Camus, de Beauvoir, and Sartre in New York in 1946 and frequently published their work in their magazine, were also early supporters of the Abstract Expressionists, as well as personal friends of some of them. De Kooning and Kline were close to Barrett and de Kooning and Motherwell were also close friends of Harold Rosenberg, with whom Motherwell co-edited the short-lived

magazine *Possibilities*. Rosenberg's interest in existentialism during the forties is clear in his writing as well as his friendship with Sartre. ("Space" 19)

The artists of the new movement did not have to be well versed in existential debates, nor did they have to seek them out; there are some artists who were known to have deep interest in existential writings, such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman who shared fascination in the works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and Newman even titled works with Kierkegaard in mind, such as *Abraham* and *Covenant* (Cotkin 83-85). However, the reassertion of the individual's subjectivity and action only require an individual to make decisions.

In their "Editorial Preface" to *Possibilities*, Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg attempted to create a forum in which a Sartrean space for creative yet political action could blossom. By reaffirming "the act that sets free in contemporary existence forms which experience has made possible," they place an emphasis on creative action in the face of "the deadly political situation." (153). It is through the relationship of the political situation and the creative act that a political statement comes into being. For while:

Political commitment in our times means logically—no art, no literature. A great many people, however, find it possible to *hang around in the space between art and political action*. If one is to continue to paint or write as the political trap seems to close upon him, he must perhaps have the extremest faith in sheer possibility. In his extremism he shows that he has recognized how drastic the political presence is. (Rosenberg and Motherwell 154)

Motherwell and Rosenberg employ Sartre's individual, ethical action as political action by aligning them with creative decisions in process. In this way, the individual who is

able to produce a work that is an exclamation of both his individuality and his medium is able to act politically simply through the production itself. Motherwell and Rosenberg (though ultimately only producing one magazine issue) called into the open the possibility of political agency in artistic production.

To further the connection between the individual subjectivity and the new school of painting, Samuel Kootz and Harold Rosenberg wrote the catalogue for a show, "The Intrasubjectives." The show, opening in 1949 was one of the first efforts to consolidate the new school into its own. By implementing Sartre's "vague, shared set of ideals" Kootz is able to link very distinct artists into a group. The individual approaches artistic production in order to find personal authenticity. In his catalogue, Kootz writes:

The intrasubjective artist invents from personal experience; creates from an internal world rather than an external one. He also makes no attempt to chronicle the American scene, exploit momentary political struggles, or stimulate nostalgia through familiar objects; he deals, instead, with inward emotions and experiences. Dramatically personal, each painting contains part of the artist's self; this revelation of himself in paint being a conscious revolt from our puritan heritage. This attitude has also led him to abandon the curious custom of painting within the current knowledge of the spectator, attempting instead through self-experience to enlarge the spectator's horizon [...] Intrasubjectivism is a point of view in painting, rather than an identical painting style. (Rosenberg and Kootz 155)

With the highly existential wording of Kootz's entry, the relationship of this show to the formalism of Greenberg can seem disparate; however, in Rosenberg's comments for the show there is the possibility of making a connection between the two perspectives.

When Rosenberg says, "[...the artist] begins with nothingness. *That* is the only thing he copies. The rest he invents," the only thing that the artist has is not so much the "nothingness" that calls to mind Sartre, but Greenberg's medium (Rosenberg and Kootz

156). In exploring, the individual mediates their experience and it is only through the remnants of the medium that the art is able to make a statement. So while the disparity of Greenberg's formalism and, particularly Rosenberg's, existentialism seems quite apparent, the differences often lay in the words chosen to fit personal concerns.

Abstract Expressionism's formation occurred in the anxious postwar period and was fairly quick to develop in New York. The theorizing appears to be succinct, though time will lead to new dictates. The romantic tendency to associate Abstract Expressionist art with the tragic hero, the ultimate failure of leftist politics, and the ascendancy of American open market capitalism will plague the movement from the onset. But before the dissolution of the movement, there is an instant of brilliance, in which the American avant-garde came to dominance in the art world. We can look to see this moment because of one man's embodiment of both the successes *and* failures of the movement. Jackson Pollock will flash onto the art scene and leave just as quickly, but left in his wake will be all preconceived notions about what art is and what is possible in an artistic statement, along with changes in the conditions for artistic production.

*Jackson Pollock: Number 1, 1948*

Entering into a discussion of Jackson Pollock is a difficult and large step to take, given the quantity of criticism surrounding his work. The contradictory nature of his work and his turbulent life makes attempts to understand his importance difficult. Art historians struggle to find the adjectives that will adequately project what Pollock accomplished at the height of his production, but it is the difficulty in separating the artist from the art that has often led to a romantic view of Pollock as a tragic hero. His life was, in many ways, a constant struggle with his own existence and a search to find effective agency in an intense and confusing world. Through the uncertainty yet force of his paintings, Pollock was able to embody the New York School's motivation and determination and find a strategy to assert his own existence. Pollock's signature style, the drip paintings, is the source of many debates as to their justification, effect, and relation to Pollock's own life, but my examination of Pollock will attempt to focus on one work, *Number 1, 1948*, as the climax of postwar American art and the epitome of modernist creativity.

In choosing to use one work to define a movement, I do not wish to attempt to attest as to the value of other works by the artists of the New York School; however, with an understanding of the importance of Jackson Pollock to the success of postwar American art, I hope to demonstrate how *Number 1, 1948* is the work that best captures Pollock and thereby best aligns itself with the epoch. Art Historian T.J. Clark wrote in his book *Farewell to an Idea* identified with the work, saying:

If I had to choose a moment of modernism in which the forms and limits of depiction were laid out most completely – most poignantly – in ways that spoke to an age, or created one, this would be it. If I am asked what I ultimately mean by modernism and contingency, for example, I shall point in *Number 1, 1948*'s direction. (313)

Pollock's "all over" style and employment of automatism focuses on the medium while at the same time enabling existential action, thereby aligning his work with both the formalism of Greenberg and the existentialism of Rosenberg and leftist politics. The painting becomes an absolution of the medium that is able to make sense out of confusion, but it is also the anxious, exploratory nature of the work that lends itself to the modernist classification. In choosing *Number 1, 1948*, I am suggesting that the early drip paintings contain something that adds to their "authenticity," which the later works often lack. I think it is the complacency of the later works, their lack of experimentation and uncertainty that dull their edge. T.J. Clark notes that it is as if:

Pollock's big paintings of 1950 are no longer ludicrous and self-consuming enough: they have become almost comfortable with their scale and degree of generalization of touch: the 'true' is leaking back into the paintings, giving them depth and coherence, displacing the great empty performatives of 1948 and 1949. This again is one way of saying the big paintings could not be continued. (*Farewell* 382)

In *Number 1, 1948*, the process is so transparent that each of Pollock's marks announces his movement; he is struggling through the unknown. There is an active engagement with the exploration of the new drip technique that keeps the vitality of the work while restricting the work from becoming a cohesive, easily subsumed truth.

*Exploring the Medium*

*Number 1, 1948* extends the realm of painting to new lengths. The paint is being manipulated, explored to its physical limits, tested for its ability to hold together. Puddles are allowed to form and specks accumulate, but the painting becomes difficult when trying grasp the canvas as a whole. The canvas is violent and chaotic, but still unsure of its bounds. At the edges of the work, Pollock restrains the skeins of paint, as evidenced by the looping white drips that rebound from their trajectory towards the corners. The canvas at the top is left spare, arcing toward the middle as if the painting needed to be tied down in the interior of the work. Paint does extend further than the canvas, but the transgressions seem unassertive, accidents that will be subsumed by the totality. The handprints, particularly along the top right edge, are not disguised, but appear as if Pollock had to physically touch the work, to remind himself that it is still a painting and he a painter. With the medium being under such stress and uncertainty, Pollock had to insert himself into the work announcing himself as the author of the illegible text. The density of action in the interior of the canvas is very high in intensity, with slashing black lines and anxious pourings. The canvas relinquishes illusion, as volume dissolves and the paint flattens out so that it could only be described as paint, but without the work arriving at a solid composition. The work has no centralizing mark or other compositional device, but strives to find a new cohesive agent with every mark left. It does not quite know where it is going and organically consolidates on the canvas to find a foundation. The effect of the work does not exude only from the innovation of the

drip or accident,<sup>2</sup> but comes from the intensity of the painting and the hope that it will amount to something. Pollock's treatment of medium in *Number 1, 1948* is a leap of faith that is "so unrelentingly in [it's] purposiveness that [it comes] into open conflict with all external purposes." (Adorno 79). Pollock's ability to narrow his approach to the medium while intensifying his presentation in the face of doubt results in an exclamation of human subjectivity, of human alienation after World War II, and of the anguish of life under the capitalist system.

### *A Process of Expression*

The process of *Number 1, 1948*'s creation is clear in that without knowing what Pollock was thinking, what Pollock did is right there to be seen. The drip technique has been widely debated for its art historical origins, but it is also the source of debate as to the spontaneity of Pollock's work. Recent studies done by Coddington and Mancuso-Ungaro for the MoMA retrospective (1998-1999) have taken scientific measures to analyze the works to determine what if any level of dexterity is needed to produce the drip paintings (Coddington 101-115, Mancusi-Ungaro 117-153). To whatever extent Pollock harnessed his use of automatism, he certainly gained experience and knowledge of the physical limitations of paint through experimenting with the technique. A close relationship between the artist and the medium is obviously to be gained through practice, but what is more important than issuing Pollock's ability with paint is asserting the act of painting. Pollock would not have been able to complete most of the drip paintings in one

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<sup>2</sup> The origin of the drip technique has been widely discussed as a result of influence from both the Surrealists and the Mexican Muralists, and most recently came under the analysis by MoMA curator, Pepe Karmel, in "A Sum of Destructions" and by Robert Storr in "A Piece of the Action."



determined effort; he was not the violent paint slinger that would produce quick masterpieces, but used intuition and a close involvement with the work to engage existentially with the process of painting. Pollock's handprints become marks of productive vitality and ambition. The chaotic totality becomes the product of many intuitive acts. With each mark came a new decision. The process of finding and corrupting the balance of the work kept the painting in flux, alive, and changeable. Pollock's decisions in each new situation are inherent to his own subjectivity, his own perspective of the canvas, and the changes he would enact would thereby construct a realm consisting only of Pollock. In his assertion of the act of painting, Pollock makes mediated declarations of his condition only tangible through each mark of paint.

*The Individual, Creative Act Becomes Political*

If the process of painting produces a declaration of the individual, what is Jackson Pollock trying to express in *Number 1, 1948*? The complexity of the form itself is a deterrent from interpretation. There is no narrative, nothing figurative, but inexplicably it seems to contain a message. The dictates of the New York School prohibit the new American painting from containing a distinct political message, in favor of ambiguous forms that challenge bourgeois predilections of taste. With content dissolved, the interpretation of the work no longer requires the deciphering of meaning, but an exploration of how and why the work has come to exist as is. With the application of automatism to painting, the existential questions regarding a work become inextricably linked to the subjectivity of the painter, who is unable to mask their own involvement with painterly illusion.

The importance of Pollock's life to his work has been a source of controversy. The extent to which Pollock's psychotherapy influenced his work has been troubling due to the parallels with Jungian vocabulary that arise in many of his early works and the marks coinciding with Pollock's own Jungian therapy. Pollock's childhood in the West, alcoholism, sexual confusion, and early death have all been widely documented and discussed, most extensively in *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* by Steven W. Naifeh and Gregory W. Smith and more particularly in the catalogue essay of the recent Pollock retrospective by Kirk Varnedoe (the chief curator at the MoMA) entitled "Comet: Jackson Pollock's Life and Works." But a direct link between Pollock's existential torment and his work is difficult because these factors make it easy to glorify Pollock as a tragic hero. Understanding Pollock as an American, masculine, rebel, alcoholic, tormented individual makes it easy to relate to the bold chaos of *Number 1, 1948*. I can see Pollock, drunkenly and actively struggling to make something out of his own existence with the only tools he knows, paint and canvas. But this sort of determination is restrictive of the individual and a manipulation of reality. Pollock drank heavily for most of his life, but for the years of his greatest accomplishments and productivity, he remained relatively sober, at least according to his wife Lee Krasner. He moved to Springs, New York, settled down into his marriage with Lee Krasner, and, while not making huge financial gains, he was continually on a stipend from either of his dealers, Peggy Guggenheim or Betty Parsons. Under such patronage, Pollock never had to have another job and was allowed as much time as necessary to attend to his painting. Pollock certainly grappled with his own existence and lived a life of anxiety, doubt, and despair as existentialism decrees, but it is not as if Pollock was engaging in deep philosophical

inquiry through the French expatriates. Here I think it is possible to see Pollock's existentialism as symptomatic of his huge ambition juxtaposed with his alienation under the competition of the capitalist system; Pollock wanted to make his mark on the world, but uncertainty of what was to be accomplished and how that would be possible created an existential friction that hampered Pollock's creativity and drive. Pollock's involvement with Jungian psychoanalysis attempted to quell this existential anguish and is visibly a part of many of Pollock's early, more surrealist works. Pollock's claims that he worked from the unconscious, and the Jungian implications of the collective unconscious are attractive means to find meaning in his work. This consciousness over the source of his art, while possibly a conflict of interest between source and product, illustrates Pollock as consciously attempting to find universal meaning through overcoming his own existential restraints.

If Jackson Pollock spent his life trying to overcome the obstacles of existence that kept him from succeeding as an artist, works such as *Number 1, 1948* can be seen less as the romantic action painting of rebel existentialist and more as the conscious effort of a man trying to give form to discord. The engulfing size of most of Pollock's drip paintings is immediately apparent, but the painting that Pollock engages in denotes, what T.J. Clark calls, his "smallness." ("Pollock's Smallness" 1). The macroscopic and microscopic division in Pollock's work exhibits the tension of the process. Pollock is dwarfed by the size of the canvas, but in the density of the interlaced skeins of paint his marks are frequent and small. In making sense out of the void, the small size and quantity of marks exhibit the enormous effort and ambition with which Pollock worked. But in a work such as *Number 1, 1948*, the microscopic intensity does not quite amount to a rational

macroscopic composition. Pollock's vitality lay in his striving toward, but not reaching, the rationalization of chaos, in his tension and doubt. Matthew Rampley suggests that the all-over style also produces a "complete dissolution of hierarchy" that is chaotic and lacks structure, however the interlaced skeins of paint at times seem repetitious and banal in their totality (88). As T.J. Clark has noted:

[...] Pollock's painting in its best period, from 1947 to 1950, is contradictory: it lives on its own contradictions, thrives on them, and comes to nothing because of them. Its contradictions are the ones that any abstract painter will encounter as long as it is done within bourgeois society, in a culture that cannot grasp – for all its wish to do so – the social reality of the sign. That is to say: on the one hand, abstract painting must set itself the task of canceling Nature, and ending painting's relation to the world of things. It will make a new order of experience: it will put its faith in the sign, in the medium: it will have painting be a kind of writing at last, and therefore write a script none of us has read before. But on the other hand, painting discovers that none of this is achievable with the means it has. Nature simply will not go away. It reasserts its rights over the new handwriting [...] So that painting always reneges on its dream of *anti-phusis*, and comes back to the body – that thing of thing, that figure of figures. It cuts the body out of the sign, out of the field of writing. (*Farewell* 365)

The opposition in Pollock's work is difficult to resolve because of how unrelentingly the oppositions pursue their existence. The paintings have endless difference but also finds a sameness in chaos. Matthew Rampley suggests that the discord, "perhaps points beyond any putative indecision on the part of Pollock towards the dialectical relation between the two, where absolute dissonance passes over into the indifferent oneness so central to Pollock's works." (91). The drip paintings become more about the resolution of the part and the whole, the individual and the society. T.J. Clark has described the tension in Pollock's works in terms of Hegel's "Unhappy Consciousness:"

The Unhappy Consciousness knows it is twofold and divided, but does not know, or cannot accept, that this division is its unity. 'The two [kinds of self-consciousness] are, for the Unhappy Consciousness, alien to one another; and because it is itself the consciousness of this contradiction, it identifies with the Changeable consciousness, and takes itself to be the unessential Being.' Things would be more bearable if at least the Unhappy Consciousness could pursue its self-laceration to the point of extinction. But it never can. It can never lay hold of mere difference and embrace it as Truth, because difference turns on indifference, and contingency on essential nature. The Unhappy Consciousness can never get to the Unhappiness it seeks. (*Farewell* 329)

The contradictions in Pollock's work illustrate his "Unhappy Consciousness" in search of truth, or for the harmonious relation of difference to the whole, but also the ultimate inability to allow resolution. If Pollock's drip paintings exhibit both the individual's desire for the affirmation of their existence and the impossibility thereof, then the early drip painting *Number 1, 1948* exists as the pinnacle of Pollock's achievements. *Number 1, 1948*'s exploratory nature produces a heightened tension and uncertainty that becomes less apparent as Pollock became adjusted to the new technique. Pollock's existential difficulties are universalized in the contradictions of the drip paintings with the result that they act as a discourse of modern man, and thereby objectify the postwar epoch. So without overtly taking a politically stance, Pollock's ability to position himself outside of the dialectic enables him to display the disparity between the existence of modern man and the social structure, between subjectivity and objectivity, between uncertainty and certainty. The claims that Pollock found Truth in difference, created the ultimate expression of his existence, established a way for political action by positing his works outside the political dialectic, and materialized a period all through painting are difficult to fully substantiate. But without fully discrediting these claims, it is possible to see the

drip paintings for their assertion of action. As T.J Clark has said in attempting to ground these sorts of claims:

[...] this idea about art's relation to its host culture is pie in the sky; but so are most, perhaps all, other ideas about art's purposes and responsibilities – art as the vehicle of Truth or transcendence, for one; art as distilling the hard possibilities of *Geist*; art as opening onto a territory of free play and pleasure; art as putting an end to reference and being able to live off its own resources; art as Universal and Particular (seeing the world in a grain of sand); or art as the real form – the pure expression – of Individuality. The pie in these cases is so far in the sky as to be considerably less visible, to my way of thinking, than the pie we are looking at – the pie of resistance and refusal. (*Farewell* 363)

In establishing the importance of Pollock's drip paintings as his "resistance and refusal" Pollock's acts gain individual agency through their universal opposition coinciding with their denial of complacency. For the postwar art world, Pollock's ability to find an effective act of opposition opened up hope for progress like no other artist of the New York School.

*Consolidating the Movement: Abstract Expressionism*

By the early 1950s, Abstract Expressionism had come to the forefront of American painting. With Pollock's article in *Life* magazine, printed in 1949 almost two years earlier than the photo of "The Irascibles" (also in *Life*), he became the celebrity of the New York School. Despite Pollock's and the movement's apparent success, the reception of the new painting is problematic for its division in answering the demands of the postwar audience. As during the movement's formation, Clement Greenberg argues in "American-Type Painting" for the formal, art historical justification, while in "American Action Painting" Harold Rosenberg attempts to elucidate the radical agency found through automatism. The New York School's reassertion of the medium established New York as the new center of the art world and opened up unprecedented ground for artistic inquiry. But in the postwar climate that demanded the declaration of American identity, the public life of the work of the Abstract Expressionist's will challenge and manipulate their authenticity.

*Greenberg's Negation*

Greenberg was always striving to cast Abstract Expressionism atop the "ivory tower." To prove the dominance of the movement, he needed to justify the art and artists in terms of the last great movement in art history. In using the celebrity of Jackson Pollock, Greenberg makes a bold leap in the classification of the New York School; he writes:

Pollock remained close to Cubism until at least 1932-1946, and the early greatness of his art can be taken as a fulfillment of things that Picasso had not brought beyond a state of promise in his 1932-1940 period. Though he cannot build with color, Pollock has an instinct for bold oppositions of dark and light, and the capacity to bind shapes as a single and whole image concentrating into one the several images distributed over it. Going further in this direction, he went further beyond late Cubism in the end. ("American-Type" 205)

How Pollock relates to Cubism is a formal issue related to the handling of the medium, but nature of this assertion that is most interesting. Greenberg's desire to launch Abstract Expressionism to the forefront of Western art is complicated by the undigested, complex nature of the works of the New York School artists. By aligning the movement as a furthering of the work done by the celebrity of Picasso, he immediately gains accessibility for the general public, but the attribution of Pollock as succeeding Picasso also removes the work from its authentic existence and posits it in the realm of taste and commodity. But Greenberg is able to maintain the role of his modernist art as resistant to bourgeois society and also opens up terms for next generation of art. Where Greenberg formerly wrote about exploring the limitations of painting, he now writes about nature of the new painting and the next frontier in art that will follow from the Abstract Expressionists. For Greenberg:

'Advanced' art--which is the same thing as ambitious art today--persists in so far as it tests society's capacity for high art. This it does by testing the limits of the inherited forms and genres, and of the medium itself, and it is what the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists, the Fauves, the Cubists, and Mondrian did in their time. If the testing seems more radical in the case of the new American abstract painting, it is because it comes at a later stage. The limits of the easel picture are in greater danger of being destroyed because several generations of great artists have already worked to expand them. But if they are destroyed this will not necessarily mean the extinction of pictorial art as such. Painting may be on its way toward a new kind of genre, but perhaps not an unprecedented one [...] what we



consider to be merely decorative may become capable of holding our eyes and moving us as much as the easel picture does [...] ("American-Type" 214)

Greenberg proposes the end of painting as stemming from the realization of the limits of painting, largely to be objectified in Jackson Pollock's works. The movement took the formal dictates found in Greenberg's early writing and brought them to their logical conclusion. The work of the New York School denies illusion in painting to focus strictly on the medium, yet each artist found, in their signature style, the means to express his own personal empty alienation. But how the success of Greenberg's modernist formulation works is not simply by stepping past the work of the European modernist heroes, but by reducing, concentrating the concerns of production. In "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," T.J. Clark determines that:

Modernism is certainly that art which insists on its medium and says that meaning can henceforth be only found in *practice*. But the practice in question is extraordinary and desperate: it presents itself as a work of interminable and absolute decomposition, a work which is always pushing 'medium' to its limits--to its ending--to the point where it breaks or evaporates or turns back into mere unworked material. That is the form in which medium is retrieved or reinvented: the fact of Art, in modernism, *is* the fact of negation. (82)

If Greenberg's theory of art is dependent on its ability to negate the prior artistic fashions, than it becomes more understandable that Abstract Expressionism is an art of "resistance and refusal" to bourgeois dispositions.

*Rosenberg's "Liberation from Value"*

The anti-bourgeois message that develops within the work of the New York School lacks an effective origin when contained within the formal considerations of painting, and the large differences in the appearance of the works of the Abstract Expressionists make it difficult to form a cohesive group. Harold Rosenberg took steps toward consolidating the School and establishing the act of negation in painting. Following Sartre's "vague, shared set of ideals," Rosenberg determined that,

A School is the result of the linkage of practice with terminology—different paintings are affected by the same words. In American vanguard the words...belong not to the art but to the individual artists. What they think in common is represented only by what they do separately. ("American Action" 190)

Rosenberg's new school is not as concerned with the history of art, but with finding a way to recapture action and agency. In Rosenberg's formulation, "The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life." ("American Action" 191). The ability to engage in the act of painting, to see the "canvas...as an arena in which to act" becomes a declaration of existential subjectivity, of freedom ("American Action" 190). It is clear that Greenberg and Rosenberg developed very distinct perspectives toward the role of the new movement in American life; Greenberg was attempting to establish a new high art form that would catapult American art to the top of the world, while Rosenberg sought to establish "The gesture on the canvas" as an existentially discovered "gesture of liberation, from Value--political, aesthetic, moral." ("American Action" 193). The differences seem difficult to reconcile, but if it is possible to see Rosenberg's "liberation from value" as a

refusal to quantify life, it may also be possible to see Greenberg's concentration on medium as liberation from those same "political, aesthetic, moral" concerns.

### *The Greenberg-Rosenberg Controversy*

On the other hand the differences in the writing of Greenberg and Rosenberg seems partly predicated on a personal rivalry in terms of art criticism. As we have seen in "American-Type Painting," Greenberg believes that, "To produce important art it is necessary as a rule to digest the major art of the preceding period, of periods." (200). But Rosenberg indicates his feeling, that concerns about periods are out of touch with the new painting, in "American Action Painting" when he says, "The critic who goes on judging in terms of schools, styles, form, as if the painter were still concerned with producing a certain kind of object (the work of art), instead of living on the canvas, is bound to seem a stranger." (191-192). Rosenberg; however, also saw a risk in the new painting based upon the emergence of, "[...] *easy* painting--never so many unearned masterpieces. [...] The painter need keep himself on hand solely to collect the benefits of an endless series of strokes of luck [...] The result is an apocalyptic wallpaper." ("American Action" 195). Rosenberg felt that the authenticity of the new painting could be compromised by complacency in the act. Rosenberg's assertion stands in conflict with Greenberg's take on the changes in painting. Greenberg does not feel the same disdain for the decorative arts, as he says, "Painting may be on its way toward a new genre, but perhaps not an unprecedented one--since we are now able to look at, and enjoy, Parisian carpets as pictures--and what we now consider to be merely decorative may become capable of holding our eyes and moving us as much as the easel picture does." ("American-Type"

214). So while there has been a tendency to break the criticism of Abstract Expressionism into two schools, the formal and the existential, there is no real necessity to do so as they work on different sides to stake out the same issues. In dividing the criticism into two schools, the result seems to feed a fire of competition and personal difference between critics who are trying to best describe the new art in terms of their own subjectivity.

*The End of an Era and the Start of One New*

The movement's critical success, however, overshadowed the plight of the artists until the summer of 1956 when Jackson Pollock drove his car off a road near his home in Springs, New York. Pollock's death was the end of a tumultuous life and can be seen as alleviating Pollock's own existential difficulties, but his death also appears symptomatic of, or a signal for, a new dimension in the production of art. The New York School, for all its successes, was not enough. Allen Kaprow surmised that:

[...] Pollock was the center in a great failure: the New Art. His heroic stand had been futile. Rather than releasing the freedom that it at first promised, it caused not only a loss of power and possible disillusionment for Pollock but also that the jig was up. And those of us still resistant to this truth would end the same way, hardly at the top. (182)

Pollock's death signaled the end of the era, and the end to much of the vitality of Abstract Expressionism. Pollock was unable to move forward from his signature style, as evidenced by the black and white drip paintings, the return to some sense of the figure, and the return to color (specifically, the desperation with which Pollock desired to move

forward is evidenced in *Blue Poles*<sup>3</sup>). With his death also came the quick subsumption of the established works of the movement so that the radical nature of the works became a banal representation of human subjectivity. Allen Kaprow remarked just two years after Pollock's death that, "The act of painting, the new space, the personal mark that builds its own form and meaning, the endless tangle, the great scale, the new materials are by now clichés of college art departments. The innovations accepted. They are becoming part of textbooks." (183). The once primitive became academic, but along with the attempts to canonize the movement came the painting's acceptance from the general public, many of whom would not sympathize with the means and ideals of the artists and critics involved. The prices for the works, while not very high at first, found their cost quickly accelerated by the end of the 1950s, and fulfilled Abstract Expressionism's dream of become the new elite art in the world.<sup>4</sup> American art encountered a new problem stemming from the success of the initial avant-garde, how to continue moving forward. Allen Kaprow saw the future as laying in a return from the sublime to the everyday, common object, as he said:

Pollock [...] left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they

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<sup>3</sup> Naifeh and Smith, in the prologue to their biography of Jackson Pollock, anecdotally present the desperation in the production of *Blue Poles*. (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*).

<sup>4</sup> The dissolution of Abstract Expressionism into the open market is covered by A. Dierdre Robson in her essay, "The Market for Abstract Expressionism: The Time Lag Between Critical and Commercial Acceptance."

will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all will become materials for this new concrete art.” (186-187)

The new decrees for artistic production result in part from the relative direction of art, as having gone to the limit of painting and needing new material to work from, but the direction of art after the fruition of Abstract Expressionism is also symptomatic of the conditions that led to the dissolution of the new art into the society at large.<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg realizes that the problem is that:

[...] the new movement appeared at the same moment that Modern Art *en masse* “arrived” in America: Modern architecture, not only for sophisticated homes, but for corporations, municipalities, synagogues; Modern furniture and crockery in mail-order catalogues; Modern vacuum cleaners, can openers; beer ad ‘mobiles’—along with reproductions and articles on advanced painting in big-circulating magazines. *Enigmas for everybody*. Art in America today is not only nouveau, it’s news [...] (“American Action” 196)

The new relation between art and the public, the new nature of art and of the public, produces a newfound tension within Abstract Expressionist art. The success of the movement comes into question under the new conditions, but the failure will be of assistance in discussing the postmodern framework that developed during the postwar climate before coming to dominance after the vitality of thought settles during the 1950s.

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<sup>5</sup>Kirk Varnedoe has written extensively on the influence of Pollock in both "Open-Ended Conclusions about Jackson Pollock" and his catalogue essay to the 1998-1999 retrospective, "Comet: Jackson Pollock's Life and Works."

*The Postmodern Problem*

It is no coincidence that during the consolidation of the movement, art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg evoked the specifically "American" quality of Abstract Expressionism. At the onset of the Cold War, America promoted itself as the new center of vitality and freedom, but also as the center of a new generation of commodities primed for the new global market. Because of the increasing mass production of commodities, Guy Debord theorized that "With the coming of the industrial revolution, the division of labor specific to that revolution's manufacturing system, mass production for a world market, the commodity emerged in its full fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life." (29). The ascension of the late capitalist system that utilizes commodity fetishism, dramatically changed the social climate by reassigning modernist concerns of new cultural forms to concerns of a new materialism and fashion by expense of taste. But to whatever extent these changes found acceptance in the new American society, there was a distinct shift in the social landscape. Malcolm Bradbury notes this shift in his discussion of postmodernism:

Now, in the superpower age, America offered the best hope for its extension; it was assumed, at this period, that the centre of the modern art market and the direction of its experiment had moved from Paris to New York, from Picasso to Pollock. But not only that; in America the modern experiment had left bohemia and entered the mainstream. Mies van der Rohe may have started with European worker's housing, but he ended up with office blocks on the Manhattan skyline. 'From Bauhaus to Our House,' the American cultural commentator Tom Wolfe ironically called the process. Now, under the fascinated and sometimes highly ironic gaze of European philosophical gurus and intellectuals, it was American culture that displayed the spirit of cultural energy after modernism. Post-modernism was no longer Beckett's mysterious *deus absconditus*, Pinter's strange silences. It was Andy Warhol, radical chic, pink modernism,

experiment in quotes. Indeed, as Derrida or later Baudrillard said, it was surely just America itself: Hollywood, Disneyland, the car and casino culture of Las Vegas, the energetic, historyless, non-hierarchical spirit of high-tech, consumer-oriented, fun-filled American expression, which America's own technologies transmitted iconographically across the world. (769)

Given that this shift occurred in the few years just following World War II, I hope to explore the relation of such a change on the meaning of Pollock's work.

### *Interpretation under Late Capitalism*

The initial attempts by Greenberg and Rosenberg to interpret the work of the Abstract Expressionists are efforts to make concise and package the nature and meaning of works that are ambiguous and difficult to understand. Because of the difficulty of providing a succinct, all-encompassing interpretation, neither Greenberg nor Rosenberg were able to produce a comprehensive interpretation of Abstract Expressionist art. The disparity that emerges in each critic's essays becomes negligible because of their respective authority and only really serves to illustrate their differing concerns. The problem is that in interpretation, meaning is inevitably lost or manipulated. As Susan Sontag wrote in her essay "Against Interpretation," "By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable." (8). By interpreting a work of art, the inherent contradictions and unspoken motivations are smoothed over in order to produce a cleanly packaged idea or movement. The result of attempts to authoritatively consolidate the meaning of an art movement is that:



The pre-digested quality of the product prevails, justifies itself and establishes itself all the more firmly in so far as it constantly refers to those who cannot digest anything not already pre-digested. It is baby food: permanent self-reflection based upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place. (Adorno 67)

Interpretation is required under late-capitalist conditions in order to produce a salable object, however, interpretations also involve efforts to situate the importance accurately in a historical context. Adorno has referred to this inconsistency as the point at which, "History as such becomes a costume identified with the individual concealing the frozen modernity of monopoly and state capitalism"(77). Under the new postmodern conditions, interpretation is an effort to produce an image or façade that has no required relation to the actual cultural work being criticized. The façade acts to shield the individual from the financial concerns of those who initially produce and justify the image, but also from the harsh existential reality of the human toll of production and manipulation occurring under postmodern conditions.

Abstract Expressionist art is located in a difficult situation because of its insistence on medium and resistance of a distinct message. By avoiding the dialectic, the Abstract Expressionists hoped to escape the difficulties and divisions that interpretation presents. Susan Sontag has written on the nature of modern painting and its relation interpretation, saying, "The flight from interpretation seems particularly a feature of modern painting. Abstract painting is an attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content; since there is no content, there can be no interpretation."(10). Abstract Expressionism, in their rejection of painterly illusion and consequent resistance to interpretation, however, produced an unforeseen problem. Because of the difficulty in determining the meaning of a work, the lack of figuration, and the lack of overt

politicization, Abstract Expressionism was left open to the positing of meaning from outside sources. If we can see Pollock's drip paintings as taking a political stance of "resistance and refusal" amidst the ambiguity of his work, then we must also try to see the multifaceted nature of Pollock's work's public life. As Matthew Rampley has argued:

[...] that Pollock can be read in two ways, and that it is not a matter of choosing between them, of counting one and discounting the other. Instead one must recognise that the two belong together, that Pollock's automatism and all-over style have these other meanings not necessarily intended by Pollock himself, that his particular set of interests and their symbolism bore considerable ideological weight from the beginning and that, finally, the politicization of Abstract Expressionism follows from the ideology of the drip. (93)

### *The Public Life of Art*

Greenberg's "umbilical cord of gold" seems to forecast some of the difficulties with the reception of a work of new art, but problems also lay in the sudden mediation and celebrity that was imposed onto the works of Pollock, specifically ("Avant-Garde" 51). Pollock was featured in an article in *Life* magazine as a painting renegade, leaning uncaringly against the wall of the gallery. What take this mediation further are the pictures of fashion models in front of some of Pollock's works that appeared in *Vogue*<sup>6</sup>. This tendency to attempt to make Pollock fashionable illustrates a discrepancy between not only the drip paintings private and public lives, but also between Pollock's own private and public lives. If Pollock as a painter was trying to produce avant-garde resistance through new painting, than, as T.J. Clark acknowledges, Pollock in public "had a reputation for working the media when he had a chance." (*Farewell* 304). This sort of

disparity may, however, be accepted as a part of the nature of a new postmodern condition for an avant-garde art movement. Knowledge of the mediation, of the image, of the shallow requirements of the mass public becomes an obstacle that must be manipulated. T.J. Clark has suggested that artistic production must be aware that:

The future that works of art envisage, at least in modern circumstances, is very often one of misuse and misunderstanding. We know by now that they may either try to contain and figure this future, in an effort to control it, or attempt instead - as certain of Pollock's do, I think - to annihilate the very ground of misreading, shrug off past and future alike, and have the work turn on some impossible present, thickened to the point where it can dictate its own (unique) terms. 'Narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute,' to take up Greenberg's formulation again, 'in which all relatives and contradictions would either be resolved or beside the point.' 'Retiring from public altogether.' (Clark 305)

But Pollock and his works were never fully able to evacuate the public sphere. In some degree, Abstract Expressionism as a whole was even adopted for political purposes during the Cold War. In *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Serge Guilbaut offers a strong-handed, if problematic, examination of the political adoption of Abstract Expressionism by the United States government in their attempts at the "Americanization of Europe."<sup>7</sup>

Guilbaut's examination makes an attempt to illustrate a tangible link between United States cultural programs and Abstract Expressionism in terms of propagandistic use during the Cold War and has been the source of controversy surrounding the "Politics

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<sup>6</sup> T.J. Clark offers a good analysis of the public life of Pollock's works via the *Vogue* pictures in his latest book, *Farewell to an Idea* (Clark 302-369).

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Lewison offers a thorough investigation as to the reception of American art and values in Europe,

of Apolitical Painting."<sup>8</sup> Culturally, America was in a position where it needed to prove itself against the onslaught of European criticism. Guilbaut says that accordingly:

The American liberal spotlight [...] focused on art and intellectuals. They became the storm troopers in what president Dwight D. Eisenhower liked to call "psychological warfare." The glamorized and popularized art of abstract expressionism became the avant-garde wedge used to pierce the European suspicion that Americans were only capable of producing kitsch. (*How New York* 204-205)

In effect, the presentation of Abstract Expressionist art to European intellectuals opened up space for belief in the American way of life. If Americans were able to formulate and fulfill modernist dictates in emulation of European cultural superiority, then the display of intellect would gain support in other pursuits. But more than the cultural affirmation, the presentation of Abstract Expressionist art abroad was a promotion of American ideals, and in following the pre-digested nature of American commodities, the message of new American painting would be reduced. Guilbaut wrote that the:

Avant-garde art could be called American; it was cultivated and independent, yet linked to the modernist tradition. What is more, it could be used as a symbol of the ideology of freedom that held sway in the administration and among the new liberals. The domestic triumph of the avant-garde was important because it paved the way for conquest of the European elites. (*How New York* 193)

There arises a discrepancy between the artist's intentions and the usage of their works.

How could new painting, formulated for its ability to resist bourgeois practices and express the alienation and despair of life after World War II, come to represent freedom?

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<sup>8</sup>The Article "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting" by David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro was part of the debate over the political use of Abstract Expressionism that began in the 1970s. A thorough representation of the debate can be found in Francis Frascina's *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate Second Edition*.

It is hard for me to accept the positing of freedom as the meaning for New York School art. Instead of altering the meaning inherent to Abstract Expressionism, it is possible to see the paintings as representing America as a place that permits creation and controversy, but this form of freedom does not mean liberation from systemic authority. Guilbaut saw the difficulty in the altered meaning as a representation of societal or systemic differences, saying that:

It is ironic, but not contradictory that in a society as fixed in a right-of-center position as the United States, and where intellectual repression was strongly felt, abstract expressionism was for many people an expression of freedom: freedom to create controversial works, freedom symbolized by action and gesture, by the expression of the artist apparently freed from all restraints. It was an essential existential liberty that was defended by the moderns (Barr, Soby, Greenberg, Rosenberg) against the attacks of the humanist liberals (Devree, Jewell) and the conservatives (Dondero, Taylor), serving to present the internal struggle to those outside as proof of the inherent liberty of the American system, as opposed to the restrictions imposed on the artist by the Soviet system. Freedom was the symbol most enthusiastically promoted by the new liberalism during the Cold War. Expression became the expression of the difference between a free society and totalitarianism; it represented an essential aspect of liberal society: its aggressiveness and ability to generate controversy that in the final analysis posed no threat. ("The New Adventures" 395)

Regardless of the degree to which the U.S. government truly engaged with cultural affairs, the ability to package and label, to advertise Abstract Expressionism as uniquely American exploited the lack of content and the origins of the paintings. The new, shallow identity of Abstract Expressionism exhibits the postmodern symptom that:

All genuine experience of art is devalued into a matter of evaluation. The consumer is encouraged to recognize what is offered to him: the cultural object in question is represented as the finished product it has become which now asks to be identified. (Adorno 81)

The reality of the object, the contradictions and the uncertainty, are smoothed over in order to create a singular, plastic identity. The work of art is subsumed by monopoly and state capitalism which "[disenchant] conflict and the individual by means of [their] plain objectivity (Sachlichkeit)" (Adorno 78). The postmodern conditions perverted the original claims of Abstract Expressionist art to existential authenticity into a singular image for cultural advertising. The thought that the U.S. government was even partially involved exhibits the intricacies, prevalence and dominance of the postmodern societal mode, but the evolution of culture on a global scale has not simply been an advertising campaign for the American way of life. Frederic Jameson has noted:

[...] that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror. (5)

Abstract Expressionism's relationship to Cold War politics helps to illustrate a shift in the nature of cultural works as a result of the American postwar development, while also foreshadowing the acceleration of the Americanization of the global market by whatever means possible<sup>9</sup>. But the employment also shows the failure of Abstract Expressionism to find effective political agency in the face of totalitarian or capitalist thought, and ultimately the difficulty of avant-garde artistic production under postmodern conditions.

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<sup>99</sup> In *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, a recent book by the San Francisco Bay area group, Retort (including T.J. Clark), reassesses liberal attitudes to the last fifty years of U.S. military occupation and the role of the spectacle in its fruition.

*Art After Pollock: Movement Away from the Object*

In the 60 years since Pollock's death, the nature of art has changed so radically that the drip paintings no longer hold the initial shock value for their radical use of the medium. In the face of the "total flow" of modern media practice, the monuments of modernist aesthetics fade into the background (Jameson xv). T.J. Clark wonders whether the intent of the New York School is still relevant or if it has been subsumed by mass culture, when he wrote, specifically of Pollock, that "it is hard to tell at present whether ideas of resistance and refusal have any sustaining force still left them, or have been hopelessly incorporated into a general spectacle." (*Farewell* 364). While Pollock has been mediated in countless ways (videos, movies, magazines, photographs) and his image has certainly been at work amidst the general spectacle, the distortion does not necessarily detract from the contemporaneous originality of his work. Jameson has been able to reassess the state of modernist failures, indicating that:

[...] if there is no pure postmodernism as such, then the residual traces of modernism must be seen in another light, less as anachronisms than as necessary failures that inscribe the particular postmodern project back into its context, while at the same time reopening the question of the modern itself for reexamination. (xvi)

The work of the Abstract Expressionists cannot merely be let go as lost to the spectacle of society, but may be seen as a line in the art historical sand, a mark of a few men's attempts at the avant-garde and resistance to social norms. The new American painting demonstrates the imminent failure of modernist attempts under global market capitalism, while also exhibiting the inherent necessity of continuing attempts at avant-garde resistance.

Under postmodern conditions, resistance to the bourgeoisie takes on a different mode. Clement Greenberg's insistence on medium and on a lack of figuration was not adequate enough to complete "The destruction [...] of the object." ("Laocoon" 68), because the ambiguity and decorative nature of the works allowed them to be stripped of authenticity during their subsumption by the capitalist market. New strategies were necessary to preserve the avant-garde impulse. As mentioned earlier, Allen Kaprow believed that:

[...] we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch." (Kaprow 186)

With individual authenticity, and subsequently Abstract Expressionist painting, rendered futile by the rise of mass culture, the mundane, unromantic, or mass produced object became an attractive manner with which to assess the nature of postmodern life. But, inherently there is the problem of the object's vulnerability to commodification, and artists attempting to utilize everyday objects must be able to foresee their fate. However, to avoid commodification altogether and regain authenticity, some artists, as Kaprow did in *18 Happenings in 6 parts* (Joselit 52-53), chose to mediate their resistance through spontaneous performance and installation. Other artists, such as Sol LeWitt, began to focus on the concept of the work of art, subsuming the produced work to the idea. The removal of the object from the concept of art attempts to establish the idea and artistic statement as the most profound ingredient to a successful work. After the dissolution of the work of Jackson Pollock illustrated a shift in the conditions of cultural production,



artists are forced to explore new materials, develop new mediums for artistic expression, and focus on the conceptual nature of their artistic statement in order to provide a critique of postmodern life.

Discussing the Abstract Expressionist movement and especially entering debates about Jackson Pollock has often made me nervous about how one can write about the most significant art movement in the United States without being overtly championing or triumphalizing. I did not wish to add to the legend of Abstract Expressionism, and tried to acknowledge and ground the tendencies to romanticize Pollock's life and works. But at the same time, I find profound intellectual effort in the formation and fruition of the movement and have grown much respect for the people involved. My exploration of the subject stemmed from interest in the nature and process of social change and the manner of liberal opposition. I like the idea that art or creative expression can serve as a form of political resistance, that the individual is capable of converting their own existential concern into a statement capable of reasserting to the bourgeoisie that, "[...] the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror." (Jameson 5), but have often felt disillusioned to the effectiveness of such statements. Abstract Expressionism has offered me the ability to apply theory to cultural works and discuss the changing conditions for creative political statements after the major cultural shift of the twentieth century. The movement remains relevant, not only for its image of success and legendary status, but more importantly for its intellectual resistance to capitalism and open-market individualism opposed to attempts at collectivity and social planning. This project permitted me to reassess the nature of interpretation and criticism as a way to enable discursive measures as opposed to authoritative ones. Writing on Abstract Expressionism

has allowed me to think seriously about the nature and possibility of continuing the avant-garde impulse in contemporary art.

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