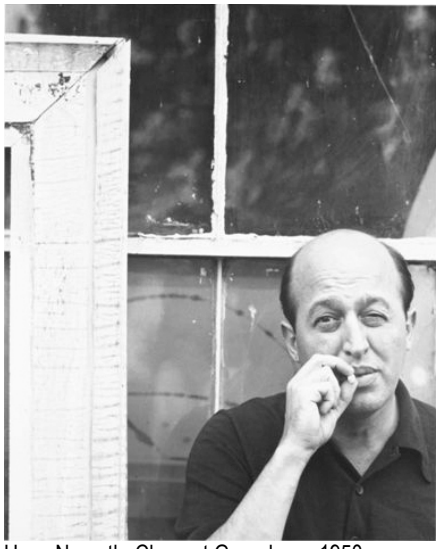
Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg: Dueling Critics

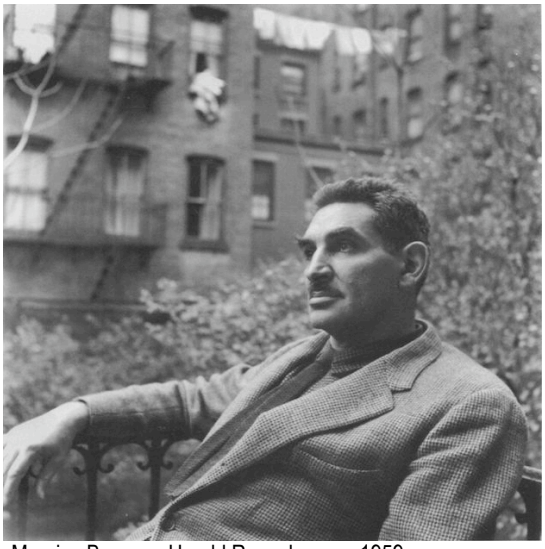
Brehon O'Riordan (1957)

The critical scene in New York is lively, to say the least. Combative may be more like it! Passions run high when artists, writers, and critics stake out and defend their views on the most important artists working today. There seems to be a great deal at stake in their arguments and no middle ground. To engage the issues is to take a stand on one side or the other. This way of putting it suggests there are only two sides. At present, that seems to be the case. Regardless of your status—artist, critic, curator, collector, dealer—or background, if you're involved in the art world, you have to come to terms with the most advanced and challenging art and those who have engaged the struggle to define and defend it.

Avant-garde painting today is referred to in the popular press as "Abstract Expressionism" and all artists are forced, by its increasing presence, to measure their work in relation to it. Whether you're an abstract painter or an "eyeball realist", your position will be determined by its standards.



Hans Namuth, Clement Greenberg, 1950



Maurice Berezov, Harold Rosenberg, c. 1959

To understand what those standards are and where they came from, you can't avoid the two most forceful critics—Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

The struggle between these two has a history of its own. Their critical assumptions and conclusions about recent American art are diametrically opposed. This is somewhat surprising given that they share similar intellectual backgrounds, both men shaped by socialist politics and the anti-capitalist labor struggles of the 1930s and '40s. Their commitment growing out of this—to the work of a cultural avant-garde resisting totalitarianism, liberal ideology, and the emergence of a mass culture "infected" by the values of consumerism and kitsch—is undeniable. Both have a long-standing association with the independent socialist press, in particular with *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, and *Commentary*—magazines informed by both the search for a new form of Marxism and efforts to unite the anti-Stalinist left. Dismayed by decline of the avant-garde in Paris in the 1940s, and with faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class shaken, leftist critical sentiment was in the U.S. shifted to a post-dialectical materialism that sees radical agency emerging not from "the working class" but rather out of the creative potential of the **individual**. So, given

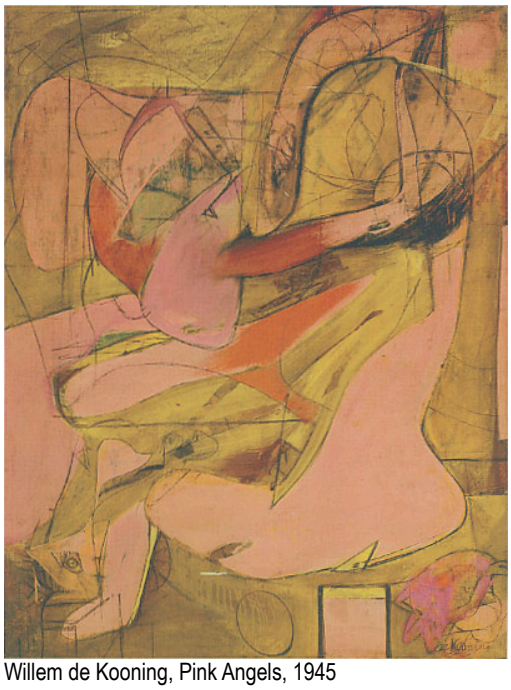
their active participation in these debates, one might assume that Greenberg and Rosenberg are on the same side politically. But "the devil is in the details" and that's where the debate heats up.

Both Mr. Greenberg and Mr. Rosenberg have cultural roots in a modern literary scene which became increasingly institutionalized and tame by the late '30s. Fledgling writers were inclined to look elsewhere for their wings.


Jackson Pollock, Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist),1950

Greenberg's professional career started as a poet writing cultural criticism for the *Partisan Review* while holding down a day job at the U.S. Custom House in New York. His first major essay on art, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", was published in 1939. Since that time he's written about many of the major painters and sculptors from the late 19th century up to the present and has developed a theory of art based on close formal analysis and a progressive historical narrative. His critical style owes a great deal to the literary analyses of T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, while his historical approach is taken largely from German philosophy—Marx, Hegel, and Kant. In the history of modern painting, Greenberg argues, one can find a coherent and logical development. The logic behind this development derives from Kant and the claim that autonomy and self-justification is the mark of the modern.

Mr. Rosenberg's criticism is also influenced by philosophy, but of a more recent existential variety—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, and their concern with the phenomenological and subjective dimensions of human experience. So, for example, you find more emphasis in Rosenberg's writing on meaning and psychological states—anxiety, will, freedom—and less on the formal properties of individual works—shape, line, and color. He also sees avant-garde art as a radical break with tradition, as opposed to Greenberg's claim for its continuity with the art of the past.


Willem de Kooning, Pink Angels, 1945

Both men have their affinities and alliances in the artworld. Greenberg, somewhat distant and aloof, notoriously favors only artists whose work supports his theory of modern art. But even here and to his credit, he's not entirely uncritical. Pollock's painting is currently his prime example of the historical discovery and realization of the "defining feature" of the medium—paint on a flat, two dimensional surface—and the move away from the traditional "easel picture" in favor of a large scale "all over" style. But even when referring to Pollock as the top

artist in the avant-garde movement today, he pulls no punches in pointing out where the artist falls short, draws back in his "stylistic evolution", or becomes "profoundly unsure of himself".

Rosenberg, a voluble raconteur closely associated with "the downtown scene" and a regular participant in artists' "bull sessions", defends Willem de Kooning as the "preeminent" American abstract painter. De Kooning's relentless reworking of a canvas—the surface on which he stages the "event" of painting as a process, not a finished product—fits perfectly Rosenberg's notion of "art as action". This valorization of individual freedom in the creative act is a consistent feature of Rosenberg's critical writings going back to "The Fall of Paris", published in *Partisan Review* the year following Greenberg's essay on kitsch.

Where Greenberg is measured, analytic, and empirical, Rosenberg is exuberant, expressive, and subjective. Their two recent essays, "The American Action Painters" (*Art News*, 1952) and "'American-Type' Painting" (*Partisan Review*, 1955), dramatize these differences.

What is "Action Painting"?

> 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. Harold Rosenberg

Rosenberg begins his essay with a general observation and disclaimer: Any attempt to define an art movement, in this case "action painting", inevitably falls short, particularly in capturing the character of the major artists. Nonetheless, it provides a necessary and useful approximation.

He turns next to a question: Is there anything new in recent American painting?


Franz Kline, Four Square, 1956

He acknowledges the frequent claim that much of the supposedly "new" work produced in America is derivative—borrowing from, elaborating on, or at best refining the achievements coming out of the first decades of the Twentieth Century by European artists associated with the "School of Paris". However, among the most advanced American artists today, one finds work that embodies a new "function" and way of thinking about painting.

A new kind of work emerges when a shift in perception occurs and the artist starts seeing the surface of the canvas not so much as a support for a picture or representation of a preconceived idea, but rather as an arena within which an "act of painting" takes place. This shift in interest applies as much to drawing as it does to painting. The question is not about the medium one chooses, but the **motive** for going beyond the **mere representation of an object**.

This approach to painting, Rosenberg claims, subordinates the artist's goal of producing an **aesthetic** object to the **existential search** for an "encounter" or "revelation". In order for this to happen, nothing can "get in the way of painting".

So the shift in approach constitutes a change in both the **source** and the **sensibility** of art. The **object** is no longer the primary focus. And the **goal** is no longer a painting intended to produce aesthetic pleasure, but to embody the inner psychological state of the artist in the marks made on the canvas—the record of the event of painting. This takes on philosophical significance for Rosenberg.

Such a radical departure from traditional painting also demands a shift in critical practice based on a revised set of assumptions. Here, with Greenberg clearly the target, Rosenberg claims that art criticism and the history of art and aesthetics understood in terms of "schools, styles, and forms" are no longer relevant to contemporary practive and the critic using these outdated tools is a "stranger" to the avant-garde artist.

Rosenberg is quick to point out that we must not identify painting with the personal, psychological history of the artist. Instead, we must understand it as something more general.

> With traditional aesthetic references discarded as irrelevant, what gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data but rôle, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation. The interest lies in the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena, a dramatic interest.
>
> Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked.

That's the situation for the artist and the critic, as Rosenberg see it.

How did "Action Painting" come about?

Although many of the action painters came from socialist, working-class backgrounds, their turn to painting as painting, and away from the representation of social realities or the rehashing of modern abstraction, cannot be explained in purely political terms. Rather it has to be seen as an act of **liberation**—an attempt by artists to **free** themselves from existing moral, political, and aesthetic values. (This brings to mind Nietzsche's notion of the "revaluation of values".)

> The lone artist did not want the world to be different, he wanted his canvas to be a world. Liberation from the object meant liberation from the "nature", society and art already there.

According to Rosenberg, the transformation is experienced by artists as a kind of secular conversion, brought about by the exhaustion of the past, triggering both optimism and exhilaration. It is motivated by a desire to re-enact the moment of liberation from the old values. In the process it contributes to the artist's self-transformation.

In pursuing this self-transformation, the artist embraces risk, possibilities, and the "anguish of the aesthetic". This is the measure of the work's seriousness and authenticity. The challenge for the artist is to sustain it in every gesture and each brushstroke.

What does this mean for the viewing public?

The problem for the public is that "modern art", institutionalized in the art world and promoted solely in terms of its "aesthetic quality" by the bureaucrats of taste, has lost its relevance and fails to reflect contemporary experience. It's become just another commodity.

> Examples in every style are packed side by side in annuals and travelling shows and in the heads of newspaper reviewers like canned meats in a chain store—all standard brands.
>
> To counteract the obtuseness, venality and aimlessness of the Art World, American vanguard art needs a genuine audience—not just a market. It needs understanding—not just publicity.

In the end, according to Rosenberg, the lack of will on the part of writers and critics to acknowledge this fact and foster greater public understanding and appreciation of the new American painting "amounts to a scandal". And in the context of the original publication of "The American Action Painters" in 1952, it would have been clear to the reader that Clement Greenberg was being portrayed as the primary culprit.

"American-Type" Painting

Greenberg's essay, published three years later, is generally understood as a response to Rosenberg's "American Action Painting", but its focus is very precise. It is an empirical, sustained, and unrelenting attempt to refute the claim that abstract expressionist painting constitutes a break with the past. Opposed also to Rosenberg's effusive style, Greenberg's writing is a close and meticulous visual analysis—analogous to the New Critic's close reading of a literary work—based on the formal elements of painting, rather than on concepts, ideas, and psychological states.

His argument begins with a mere passing reference to one of Greenberg's familiar and central concerns, namely the necessity of "self-purification" in modern art.

> It seems to be a law of modernism—thus one that applies to almost all art that remains truly alive in our time—that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized…. And it is understood, I hope, that conventions are overhauled, not for revolutionary effect, but in order to maintain the irreplaceability and renew the vitality of art in the face of a society bent in principle on rationalizing everything. It is understood, too, that the devolution of tradition cannot take place except in the presence of tradition.

This brief passage, so casually tossed off, deserves close scrutiny and interpretation, particularly for the reader not familiar with Greenberg's theory of modern art. It contains several fundamental and controversial theses having to do with justification, autonomy, and the search for essential and defining features of a thing.


Barnett Newman, Moment, 1946

It was Immanuel Kant who, late in the Eighteenth Century, argued that to be modern, a human undertaking—in his case, philosophy—must provide its own "justification" and, in doing so, defend its very existence. It does this "internally" by means of its own resources. In the case of philosophy this means using logical, philosophical reasoning to show that it contributes something significant in human experience that no other human practice can provide. This is what gives philosophy its value and reason for being. Demonstrating this in philosophical terms amounts to a **self-justification**. It also establishes philosophy's **autonomy**—that it is governed by its **own** laws and logic.

Greenberg applies Kant's "law of modernism" to the arts, and in particular to the visual arts **medium by medium**. In this way, for example, painting is called upon to justify its existence "internally", through the means and elements of painting itself. It must demonstrate that it offers something of value that no other medium can provide. This "self-justification" takes place historically through an extensive process of painters experimenting with and questioning the limits of the medium. When a "convention" or feature of painting is seen as **inessential**, it is discarded.

Take, for example, representations of objects—trees, people, fruits, tables, buildings, horses, etc. They can be produced not only in painting, but just as well, if not better, in sculpture, photography, and film. Thus, they are not essential to painting and must be discarded in art that aspires to be modern.

Greenberg's controversial claim is that through this process of "purification"—shedding all that is not unique to painting—what remains in the modern work are its essential features—paint on a flat, two-dimensional surface. Painting has **justified** its existence through painterly means, demonstrated its **autonomy**, and become truly "**modern**".

This process of the self-purification of painting continues in 1955, according to Greenberg, because painting has not yet reached its essence.


Arshile Gorky, Waterfall, 1943

Greenberg also points out that, contrary to Rosenberg's assertion, recent American painting associated with such self-purification constitutes "no more of a break with the past than anything before it in modernist art has". On the contrary, it depends on "a thorough assimilation of the major art of the preceding period or periods". He cites numerous examples in support of this claim. In fact, the rest of the essay, impossible to summarize here, is a fascinating and detailed account of the formal development of "'American-Type' Painting" seen through the work and influence of artists from Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, Miró, Mondrian, and Léger to Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Hofmann, Gottlieb, Motherwell, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still.

This emergence of an avant-garde tradition in New York, which takes over the role from the now exhausted "School of Paris", was made possible by a number of factors, according to Greenberg. They include: the presence of emigre European artists, critics, dealers, and collectors; major works of modern art on exhibit, many for the first time in America, at the Guggenheim Museum; support given to artists through the Federal Art Project of the WPA; an increasingly well educated audience for art; and America's relative distance from the Second World War.

Conclusion

In 1952, the year Rosenberg's essay appeared in *Art News*, the artist Clifford Still published a statement for *15 Americans*, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that included some of his paintings. He said:

> We are now committed to an unqualified act, not illustrating outworn myths or contemporary alibis. One must accept total responsibility for what he executes. And the measure of his greatness will be in the depth of his insight and his courage in realizing his own vision.

In his writings on art, Harold Rosenberg sounds much like an artist, which I expect he would take as a compliment. His passionate expression of the existential commitment of the avant-garde

painter today fits very comfortably on the page with Clifford Still's remarks. He **articulates** what the artist **feels**.

Greenberg, the cool and detached analyst of art, gives voice to another side of the painter's practice. He conceptualizes and articulates in compelling and persuasive terms what can be found in the artist's works, where the influences come from, how the "conventions" are used, refined, discarded. The process from that artist's perspective, as Willem de Kooning is wont to say, is "mysterious". Greenberg helps demystify without diminishing it.

There is a good deal of insight in the writings of both men. And plenty with which to disagree. The debates will continue, artists and critics weighing in on both sides and often in between. There's one thing for sure. We're witnessing a defining and dramatic moment in the history of art. And New York is currently the center of it.