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October, Vol. 69 (Summer, 1994), 22-48.

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October is currently published by The MIT Press.

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In Defense of Abstract Expressionism

T. J. CLARK

1. We have come a certain way from Abstract Expressionism, and the question of how we should understand our relationship to it gets to be interesting again. Awe at its triumphs is long gone; but so is laughter at its cheap philosophy, or distaste for its heavy breathing, or boredom with its sublimity, or resentment at the part it played in the Cold War. Not that any of those feelings have gone away or ever should, but that it begins to be clear that none of them—not even the sum of them—amounts to an attitude to the painting in question. They are what artists and critics once had because they did not *have* an attitude—because something stood in the way of their making Abstract Expressionism a thing of the past.

2. Not being able to make a previous moment of high achievement part of the past—not to lose it and mourn it and if necessary revile it—is, for art under the circumstances of modernism, more or less synonymous with not being able to make art at all. Because ever since Hegel put the basic proposition of modernism into words in the 1820s—that “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past”—art’s being able to continue has depended on its success in making that dictum specific and punctual. That is to say, fixing the moment of art’s last flowering at some point in the comparatively recent past, and discovering that enough remains from this finale for a work of ironic or melancholy or decadent continuation to seem possible after all. The “can’t go on, will go on” syndrome. I think of the relation of nineteenth-century orchestral and chamber music to the moment of Mozart and Beethoven; or of how nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature managed to continue living on the idea of “the Romantics,” or on the terminal images it fashioned of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, or of the past that “Impressionism” went on providing for French painting deep into the twentieth century (till the deaths of Bonnard and Matisse), or of the feeding of later modernisms on the myth of the Readymade and the Black Square.

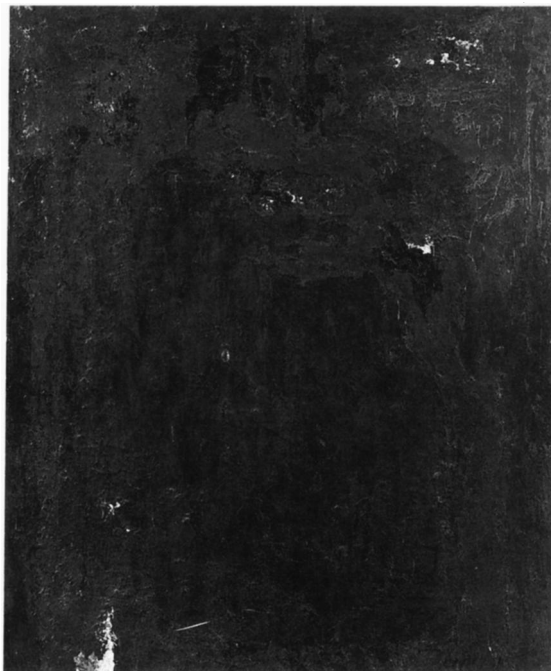
Hegel’s dictum had to be localized, that is to say. And to point to the fact that it can be localized, and therefore in a sense evaded, is, of course, to confirm the Hegelian thesis, not refute it. For Hegel did not anticipate any literal ceasing, or



Willem de Kooning. Woman, IV. 1952–53.



*Jackson Pollock. Phosphorescence.
1947.*



Clifford Still. 1949. 1949.

even withering-away, of activities calling themselves art. He just did not see that they could possibly remain the form in which men and women articulated the relations of mind and body to possible worlds. Or I should say, articulated them to good effect. What he did not see, as I understand it, was that the full depth and implication of that inability—the inability to go on giving Idea and World sensuous immediacy, of a kind that opened both to the play of practice—would itself prove a persistent, maybe sufficient, subject. That was because he had a naive hubris about philosophy, and because he could not detach himself from the sense of world-historical beginnings and endings that came with an adulthood passed in the shadow of the French Revolution. And other reasons besides. He could never have guessed that the disenchantment of the world would take so long.

Modernism, as I conceive it, is the art of the situation Hegel pointed to, but its job turns out to be to make the endlessness of the ending bearable, by time and again imagining that it has taken place—back there with Beethoven scratching out Napoleon's name on the *Eroica* symphony, or with Rimbaud getting on the boat at Marseilles. Every modernism has to have its own proximate Black Square.

Therefore our failure to see Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still as ending something, or our lack of a story of what it is they were ending, is considerably more than a crisis in art criticism or art history. It means that for us art is no longer a thing of the past; that is, we have no usable image of its ending, at a time and place we could imagine ourselves inhabiting, even if we would rather not. Therefore art will eternally hold us with its glittering eye. Not only will it forego its role in the disenchantment of the world, but it will accept the role that has constantly been foisted upon it by its false friends: it will become one of the forms, maybe *the* form, in which the world is reenchanting. With a magic no more and no less powerful (here is my real fear) than that of the *general* conjuror of depth and desirability back into our world—that is, the commodity form. For the one thing the myth of the end of art made possible was the maintaining of some kind of distance between art's sensuous immediacy and that of other (stronger) claimants to the same power.

3. Of course the situation I have been describing may not be remediable. It may be that we have lost Abstract Expressionism because we have lost modernism *tout court*, and therefore the need to imagine art altogether—whether continuing or ending. I have my doubts. But in any case my object in this essay is limited. I am going to mount a defense of Still and Pollock and others, couched in historical terms. Whether the defense makes any of them usable, in the sense I have been proposing—whether it makes them a thing of the past—depends on whether what I have to say tallies in the long term with art practice. At the moment I see no reason that it should; but, equally, I find it hard to believe that the present myth of post-ness will sustain itself indefinitely. All this remains to be seen; it is not art historians' business. I only bring it up because it would be futile to pretend that I do not think a great deal hinges on somebody, eventually, giving this painting its due.

4. To talk of interpretations, then. There has been a feeling in the air for some time now that writing on Abstract Expressionism has reached an impasse. The various research programs that only yesterday seemed on the verge of delivering new and strong accounts of it, and speaking to its place (maybe even its function) in the world fiction called America, have run into the sand. Those who believed that the answer to the latter kind of question would emerge from a history of Abstract Expressionism's belonging to a certain Cold War polity, with patrons and art world institutions to match, have proved their point and offended all the right people. But the story, though good and necessary, turned out not to have the sort of upshot for interpretation that the storytellers had been hoping for. It was one thing to answer the question, "What are the circumstances in which a certain national bourgeoisie, in the pride of its victory, comes to want something as odd and exotic as an avant-garde of its own?" It is another to speak to the implications of that encounter for the avant-garde itself, and answer the question, "To what extent was the meeting of class and art practice in the later 1940s more than just contingent? To what extent does Abstract Expressionism really belong, at the deepest level—the level of language, of procedure, of presuppositions about world-making—to the bourgeoisie who paid for it and took it on their travels?" It is not that answers to these questions are simply no longer being tried for. Work is getting done. And certainly they seem to me the *kind* of questions still most worth asking of the paintings we are looking at—far more so than going through the motions of discovering for the umpteenth time that here, in Jackson Pollock's *Phosphorescence* or Clyfford Still's 1949, "by means of their sensory reality, paintings are made to impede the impulse to construct an imaginary object, the eye being constantly led back to the paintings' constitutory elements—line, color, plane."¹ Once upon a time even this semiotic fairy tale provoked a faint sensation of wonder. But that was in another country. At least the tellers of the historical story recognize that their researches have landed them in a quandary; at least they are aware that their objects resist them. The semiologists, it seems to me, are frozen in the triumph of their prearranged moments of vision.

5. Sometimes the way out of this kind of impasse in historical work comes from proposing another set of possible descriptions that the paintings in question might be seen to "come under"—making the proposal, especially in the beginning, with no very clear sense of where it may lead. How would it alter things, one asks, what sorts of new orders in the objects would be set up, if we chose to look at them *this* way? How different would they look? Would they look better? Or properly *worse*? (Sometimes the way out of an impasse of understanding involves putting an end to a false, or even true, cathexis of the object. Eliot and Leavis said more about

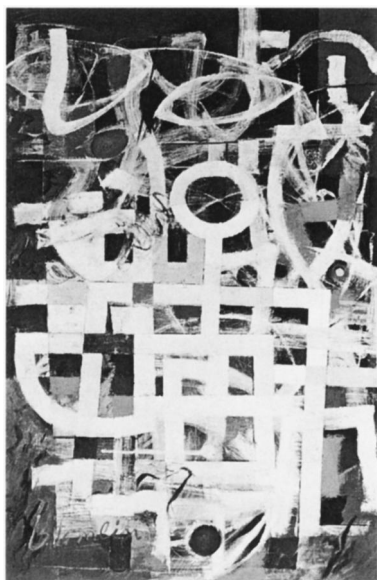
1. Hubert Damisch, "L'éveil du regard," in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 69. The subject here is Mondrian, but much the same verdict and form of words are applied, by Damisch and others, to Pollock, Newman, Rothko, etc.



Willem de Kooning. Collage. 1950.

Milton, and Fénéon about Monet, than all Milton's and Monet's admirers put together.) The theses that follow are offered in a similar speculative spirit.

6. I think we might come to describe Abstract Expressionist paintings better if we took them above all to be *vulgar*. The word for us is pejorative, and to be understood as such in the arguments to come. But this should not present an insuperable problem, especially for those of us used to thinking about modernism. After all, modernism has very often been understood as deriving its power from a range of characteristics that had previously come under the worst kind of pejorative descriptions—from ugliness, for example, or the merely fragmentary and disheveled; from the Material as opposed to the Ideal; from the plain and limiting fact of flatness; from superficiality; from the low and the formless. Nonetheless there still may be a slight *frisson* to the idea that the form of Abstract Expressionism's immersion in *bassesse* was vulgarity. It is not clear how saying of Willem de Kooning's *Collage* for instance, or Bradley Walker Tomlin's *All Souls' Night, No. 2*, that they are vulgar is to do anything besides denigrate them. That is fine by me. Not to be certain for once that the negative term brought on to describe a modernist artifact can ever be made to earn its positive keep—to emerge transfigured from the fire of discourse—may mean we are on to something. To call an art work vulgar is obviously (at least for now) to do something more transgressive than to call it low or *informe*. To have *made* it vulgar—to have had that be the quality in it (the only quality) that raised it from inertness and had it speak a world—must have been difficult. Pollock's drip paintings, for



Left: Bradley Walker Tomlin. All Souls' Night, No. 2. 1949.

Opposite left: Hans Hofmann. The Garden. 1956.

Opposite right: Adolph Gottlieb. Black, Blue, Red. 1956.

instance, seem to have been begun at the end of 1947 in a mood of triumphant access to the gaudy and the overdone—*Phosphorescence* is typical in this regard, and Ralph Manheim's title, beautiful as it is, somewhat naturalizes the painting's essential tackiness.² The drip paintings came to an end three years later when their maker discovered that even here, or especially here (on the floor, flicking his Duco and aluminum), true vulgarity was beyond his reach.

7. It is an advantage to the term "vulgar," as far as I am concerned, that discursively it points two ways—to the object itself, to some abjectness or absurdity in its very makeup, some telltale blemish, some atrociously visual quality that the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries; and to the object's existence in a particular social world, for a set of tastes and styles of individuality that have still to be defined, but are somehow *there*, in the word even before it is deployed. Herein, I hope, lies the possibility of class ascription in the case of paintings like Pollock's *Cut-Out* and de Kooning's *Woman*—the possibility of seeing at last, and even being able to describe, the ways they take part in a particular triumph and disaster of the petty bourgeoisie. But I am coming to that.

8. In Abstract Expressionism, and here is the painting's continuing (maybe intensifying) difficulty for us, a certain construction of the world we call "individu-

2. On Manheim's titling of works for Pollock's first show at Betty Parsons's, see Ellen Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), pp. 169–77.



ality” is revealed in its true, that is to say contingent, vulgarity. And so is *painting*; or rather, paintings like Hans Hofmann’s *The Garden* and Adolph Gottlieb’s *Black, Blue, Red*, done under the sign or spell of such a construction, by “individuals” in search of the gratifications and austerities it provides.

9. I should try to define my terms. It will not be easy. The entries under the word “vulgar” and its cognates in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveal, really a bit vulgarly, in the slipping and sliding of meaning over the centuries, and in the elusiveness (but for that very reason the intensity) of the panics and snobberies built into them. The three quotations that seem to me to help most with what we are looking at are, first, Jane Austen in 1797, in *Sense and Sensibility*, turning on “the vulgar freedom and folly” of the elder sister in the novel and declaring it “left her no recommendation”—I think it was the freedom even more than the folly that Austen objected to, and needed the word “vulgar” to dispatch. Then, Matthew Arnold in 1865, making the link between vulgarity and expressiveness that particularly concerns us here: “*Saugrenu* is a rather vulgar French word, but like many other vulgar words, very expressive.” And lastly, George Eliot, quoted in Cross’s *Life* as saying of Byron, in a letter of 1869, that he seemed to her “the most *vulgar-minded* genius that ever produced a great effect in literature.” Everyone will have his or her own favorite candidate—Still, de Kooning, Kline, Hofmann, Pollock when things went best for him—for the proper substitution in the case of painting.

10. Scanning the columns, the eye stops at OED usage 13: “having a common

and offensively mean character; coarsely commonplace; lacking in refinement or good taste; uncultured, ill-bred." Of actions, manners, features, recorded from 1643; of persons from 1678; of language from 1716; of mind or spirit from 1764. The key idea from our point of view is of vulgarity as *betrayal*, on the part of those who by rights ought to be above it. The OED does not seem quite cognizant of this shift, though it provides the evidence for its taking place. It is there already in Coleridge's complaining in 1833 of the "sordid vulgarity of the leaders of the day!" and it becomes a nineteenth-century commonplace. Ruskin, in volume five of *Modern Painters*, has a great climactic chapter, "Of Vulgarity," struggling with the shades of Quilp and Chadband and Mrs. Gamp, and of Dickens himself behind them, and speaking to his deepest fears and hopes for art. The noun "vulgarian"—"a vulgar person; freq., a well-to-do or rich person of vulgar manners"—is coined around 1800. I guess it is what Ruskin and George Eliot most have in mind.

11. I am proposing that one main kind of intensity in Abstract Expressionism is its engagement with the dangers and falsehoods just catalogued. And what is special about Abstract Expressionism—what marks it off from all other modernisms—is that the engagement is with the vulgar as opposed to the "popular" or "low." I think we should understand the "popular" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art as a series of figures of *avoidance* of the vulgar; that is, figures of avoidance of art's actual belonging to the pathos of bourgeois taste, a perpetual shifting and conjuring of kinds of simplicity, directness, naïveté, sentiment and sentimentality, emotional and material force, in spite of everything about art's actual place and function that put such qualities beyond its grasp. Abstract Expressionism does little or no such conjuring. That is what makes it hard to bear. We are used to an art that always sets off again in search of the *true* underlying the tawdry, and where the tawdry may divulge the true (to the artist) just because the tawdriness is someone else's, out there in the mass or the margin. But Abstract Expressionism does not go elsewhere for its language, and at its best (its most appalling) it seems in search of the *false* underlying the vehement, where the point is that cheap vehemence, or easy delectation, are what painting now is—the only values, the only forms of individuality, that it can stage without faking. Only those Abstract Expressionist canvases will do that are truly consumed with their own empty intensity, with painting as posturing, with a ludicrous bigness and lushness and generality. (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 why the big paintings could not be continued.)

12. Nobody would expect the terms and issues I am claiming as most deeply Abstract Expressionism's own to be simply present in the discourse of the time,

any more than the issues of flatness and modernity, say, were for even the best of Manet's critics. But one would at least expect to find the traces in discourse of the issues being avoided. Here is a New York critic in 1951, writing of an artist he greatly admires:

In this case the background is without question the most outrageously overwhelming the artist has ever contrived. Inspired by the most flagrant and bombastic French Baroque wallpaper, [he has] intensified to a maximum its brown and orange arabesque which surrounds areas of the harshest blue in the centers of which cluster pink and red roses. . . . All these gratuitous incidents superimposed on the wall and floor serve to break up and confuse the patterns on these surfaces so that the eye can find no security even in the repetition of ornamental motif—a comfort afforded in . . . earlier compositions . . .

Visually the *Decorative Figure* is a garish, violent, and upsetting picture. The rather mild problems which [the painter] had been posing for himself during the previous five years are here suddenly exacerbated almost to the point of burlesque. *Luxe, calme et volupté* have disappeared and in their places discomfort, excitement, and tension reign. The . . . *Seated Nude* of the year before had expressed [the painter's] rebellion against ease and softness; this big odalisque adds a revolt against charm and good taste. It represents a triumph of art over factitious vulgarity. Yet because the picture is so clearly an act of will in a field of artifice, the victory seems Pyrrhic.³

The last two sentences in particular—"It represents a triumph of art over factitious vulgarity. Yet because the picture is so clearly an act of will in a field of artifice, the victory seems Pyrrhic"—seem to me to provide the terms for a description of Abstract Expressionism. The key question, of course (which this critic understandably skirts round) is whether the victory over vulgarity is *meant* to seem Pyrrhic—whether the hollowness of the victory is what the picture wants to figure most urgently. But of course it is right and proper that even though these words were written at the height of Abstract Expressionism, and from the very seat of the movement's institutional power—by Alfred H. Barr in a MOMA catalogue—they precisely could not be written of Gottlieb or Hofmann or de Kooning, but only of Matisse, of his *Figure décorative sur fond ornemental* done a quarter of a century earlier.

13. I realize that it is still not clear what Barr or I mean by the word "vulgarity" as applied to paintings. And I do not think it ever will be. The word is opaque: it points, as Ruskin knew, to a deep dilemma of bourgeois culture; it is as close to an

3. Alfred Barr, *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 214.

ultimate term of ethics or metaphysics as that culture maybe will ever throw up. "Two years ago," ends Ruskin's chapter "On Vulgarly" in *Modern Painters*,

when I was first beginning to work out the subject, and chatting with one of my keenest-minded friends (Mr. Brett, the painter of the *Val d'Aosta* in the Exhibition of 1859), I casually asked him, "What is vulgarity?" merely to see what he would say, not supposing it possible to get a sudden answer. He thought for about a minute, then answered quietly, "It is merely one of the forms of Death." I did not see the meaning of the reply at the time; but on testing it, found that it met every phase of the difficulties connected with the inquiry, and summed the true conclusion. Yet, in order to be complete, it ought to be made a distinctive as well as conclusive definition; showing *what* form of death vulgarity is; for death itself is not vulgar, but only death mingled with life. I cannot, however, construct a short-worded definition which will include all the minor conditions of bodily degeneracy; but the term "deathful selfishness" will embrace all the most fatal and essential forms of mental vulgarity.⁴

I do not bring this passage of Ruskin on in hopes of solving our problem of definition, but more because it shows (more clearly than anyone nowadays would dare to) what the problem is—what terrible cocktail of class ascriptions and bodily disgust the word "vulgar" is an empty container for, and how fatal and essential is the sliding within it between a handy form of class racism and a general sense of class doom. Vulgarity is foulness and degeneracy; it is a "dulness of bodily sense," "all which comes of insensibility." "The black battle-stain on a soldier's face is not vulgar, but the dirty face of a housemaid is."⁵ But Brett's dictum is ultimately impatient of such distinctions. We are all housemaids now.

14. "Vulgarity is merely one of the forms of Death." Beware of taking Brett's dictum too literally in the case of Abstract Expressionism, and above all beware of converting it back into some ridiculous (vulgar) retelling of Abstract Expressionists' life stories. I think there may be some kind of fatal connection between this painting's deep vulgarity and its incessant courting of Death; but that is not to be understood as a biographical proposition but a formal one. It is a way of thinking again about Pollock's or Still's repetition compulsion, their constant (fruitful) drive toward emptiness, endlessness, the nonhuman and the inorganic. "Perhaps the last paradox these works contain is that of death," writes the novelist Parker Tyler of Pollock's drip paintings some time early in 1950, before the last show of them at Betty Parsons's:

4. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Boston and New York: Colonial Press Company, n.d.), vol. 5, pp. 347–49.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 344.

For in being a conception of ultimate time and space, the labyrinth of infinity, Jackson Pollock's latest work goes beyond the ordinary processes of life—however these might be visualized and recognized—into an absolute being which must contain death as well as life. Hence the spatial distinctions achieved by lines and spots of color within Pollock's rectangles go as much beyond mere optical vision as seems possible to painting. . . .

Jackson Pollock has put the concept of the labyrinth at an infinite and unreachable distance, a distance beyond the stars—a non-human distance. . . . If one felt vertigo before Pollock's differentiations of space, then truly one would be lost in the abyss of an endless definition of being. One would be enclosed, trapped by the labyrinth of the picture-space. But we are safely looking at it, seeing it steadily and seeing it whole, from a point outside. Only *man*, in his paradoxical role of the *superman*, can achieve such a feat of absolute contemplation: the sight of an image of space *in which he does not exist*.⁶

It would be easy to make fun of this. Its metaphysics are vulgar. But the terms and the tone seem to me as close as Pollock got to appropriate criticism in his own lifetime. It is fitting, again, that these were paragraphs deleted from Tyler's article in 1950 by Robert Goldwater, editor of the *Magazine of Art*. They only survive at all as part of Pollock criticism because the artist seems to have been given a typescript by the writer at the time, and kept it in his files.

15. Maybe the Death in Brett's dictum is simply or mainly that of *painting*. Maybe it always was, for Brett and Ruskin as much as Pollock and Parker Tyler.

16. Death makes a bad metaphor. Pictures that summon it up too readily—Newman's *passim*, Rothko's from 1957 on—get to look Gothic before their time. That we are meant to take the portentousness as ultimately having to do with "painting" or "signification" or some such only makes matters worse. Death is enlisted to make vulgarity look deep.

17. The trouble with Barnett Newman is that he was never vulgar *enough*, or only vulgar on paper.

18. The great Rothkos are those that everybody likes, from the early 1950s mainly; the ones that revel in the new formula's cheap effects, the ones where a

6. Parker Tyler, unedited text of "Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth," in Archives of American Art, Pollock Papers 3048, pp. 548–49. (The edited text was published in *Magazine of Art*, March 1950.) My thanks to Michael Leja for pointing me to the deleted paragraphs and sorting out the circumstances of their disappearance. For full discussion of the text(s), see Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 313–16.

hectoring absolute of self-presence is maintained in the face of absence, void, nothing, devouring simplicity: with vulgarity—a vulgar fulsomeness of reds, pinks, purples, oranges, lemons, lime greens, powder-puff whites—acting as the transform between the two possibilities of reading. *The Birth of Tragedy* redone by Renoir.

19. “When they are hung in tight phalanx, as he would have them hung, and flooded with the light he demands that they receive, the tyranny of his ambition to suffocate or crush all who stand in his way becomes fully manifest. . . . It is not without significance, therefore, that the surfaces of these paintings reveal the gestures of negation, and that their means are the devices of seduction and assault. Not I, but himself, has made it clear that his work is of frustration, resentment and aggression. And that it is the brightness of death that veils their bloodless febrility and clinical evacuations”: Clyfford Still to Sidney Janis, April 4, 1955.⁷ This is very like Fénéon on Monet: mean-spirited, partial, and tendentious, but somehow for that very reason (because it steps out of the circle of deference for once) the best criticism Rothko ever received.

20. And so to the question of class. “While formal analysis,” says Adorno in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, “was learning to trace the most delicate ramifications of [a work’s] manufacture, . . . the method of deciphering the specific social characteristics of music has lagged behind pitifully and must be largely content with improvisations.”⁸ Quite so, and maybe improvisation will turn out to *be* its method. But equally—this is Adorno in the same paragraph—“If we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie—not the echo of its slogans, the need to realize them, the cry for that totality in which reason and freedom are to have their warrant—we understand Beethoven no better than does the listener who cannot follow his pieces’ purely musical content, the inner history that happens to their themes.”

21. What remains to be thought about Abstract Expressionism (though the thought haunts everything written on the subject, especially those texts most anxious to repress it) is the painting’s place in a determinate class formation; one which, though long prepared, took on the specific trappings of cultural power in the years after 1945. I said its place in a determinate class formation—not in a State apparatus or a newly improvised system of avant-garde patronage or a museum/art world superstructure. Not that the latter are irrelevant. But they

7. Archives of American Art, Alfonso Ossorio papers, quoted in James Breslin, *Mark Rothko, A Biography* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 344. Copies of the letter seem to have been circulated at the time, either by Still or Janis.

8. Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 62 (translation slightly modified).

cannot be what we mean, fundamentally, when we talk about a certain representational practice inhering in the culture of a class. We mean that the practice somehow participates in that class's whole construction of a "world." We are talking of overlap and mutual feeding at the level of representational practice, at the level of symbolic production (ideology). When we say that the novel is bourgeois, the key facts in the case are not eighteenth-century subscription lists or even the uses early readers made of *Young Werther*.

22. Clement Greenberg begins a review of an exhibition of Courbet at Wildenstein's in January 1949 by saying that "Bosch, Brueghel, and Courbet are unique in that they are great artists who express what may be called a petty bourgeois attitude."⁹ Like Barr, he seems to me to be averting his eyes from Pollock and Clyfford Still. What is new in their case, of course, is that now a particular (hybrid) form of petty bourgeois culture—I am including in the term "culture" a set of political and economic compromise formations, with myths and duplicities to match, as well as a set of established styles of personhood—has become the form, the only viable medium, of bourgeois class power. It is not that the petty bourgeoisie in America *has* power, but that its voice has become, in the years after 1945, the only one in which power can be spoken; in it, and only in it, can be heard the last echoes of what the bourgeoisie had once aspired to be—"the echo of its slogans, the need to realize them, the cry for that totality in which freedom [no longer reason] is to have its warrant."¹⁰

9. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 2, p. 275, from *The Nation*, January 8, 1949. A month later, on February 19, Greenberg reviews Gottlieb and Pollock. "I feel that Gottlieb should make the fact of his power much more obvious," he writes (*ibid.*, p. 285), though he welcomes the painter's *Totemic Fission* (my choice for the perfect Abstract Expressionist title), *Ashes of Phoenix*, and *Hunter and Hunted* as pointing in the right direction. His review of the Pollock show at Betty Parsons's is that in which he takes *Number One, 1948*—"this huge baroque scrawl in aluminum, black, white, madder and blue"—as final proof that Pollock has become a major artist. The words "baroque scrawl" seem to me to be feeling for the qualities in Pollock's work that I am insisting on here.

10. This is not the place to enter into the difficulties involved in making, and sustaining, the distinction between bourgeois and petty bourgeois as terms of class analysis. Obviously I believe the distinction is real, and I do not want my talk in the text of class "cultures" and "formations" to give the impression that I do not believe the distinction is ultimately one of economic power. A bourgeois, for me, is someone possessing the wherewithal to intervene in at least some of the important economic decisions shaping his or her own life (and those of others). A bourgeois, for me, is someone expecting (reasonably) to pass on that power to the kids. A petty bourgeois is someone who has no such leverage or security, and certainly no such dynastic expectations, but who nonetheless identifies wholeheartedly with those who do. Of course this means that everything depends, from age to age and moment to moment, on the particular *forms* in which such identification can take place. The history of the petty bourgeoisie within capitalism is therefore a history of manners, symbols, subcultures, "lifestyles," necessarily fixated on the surface of social life. (Chapters 3 and 4 of my *Painting of Modern Life* try to begin such a history for the late nineteenth century. The material on "Modern Man discourse" in Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* strikes me as providing some of the elements for a parallel description of the 1940s and '50s.)

23. Abstract Expressionism, I want to say, is the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalizing cultural power. It is the art of that moment when the petty bourgeoisie thinks it can speak (and its masters allow it to speak) the aristocrat's claim to individuality. Vulgarly is the form of that aspiration.

24. Or could we say: Abstract Expressionism is the form of the petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, at that fateful moment when the bourgeoisie itself no longer so aspires; when the petty bourgeois has to *stand in* for a hidden—nay, vanished—bourgeois elite. (Of course we are dealing here with two class *formations*, two fictions or constructions, not two brute sociological entities. We are dealing with forms of representation—which is not to say that the kind of representational doubling described here does not have specific, sometimes brutal, sociological effects. McCarthyism was one of them, in which the bourgeois Frankenstein was for a while really paralyzed by its petty bourgeois Monster.)

25. Vulgarly, then (to return to our subject), is the necessary form of that individuality allowed the petty bourgeoisie. Only that painting will engage and sustain our attention which can be seen to recognize, and in some sense to articulate, this limited condition of its own rhetoric. Maybe it will always be a painting which struggles to valorize this condition *quand même*—for here we touch, as Adorno never tired of telling us, on some constitutive (maybe regrettable) link between art and an ethics of reconciliation or transcendence—but what we shall value most in the painting is the ruthlessness of (self-)exposure, the courting of bathos, the *unapologetic* banality. The victory, if there is one, must always also be Pyrrhic.

26. You see now why the concept “vulgarity” has more and more the notion of betrayal written into it as the nineteenth century goes on. For the bourgeoisie's great tragedy is that it can only retain power by allowing its inferiors to speak for it, giving them the leftovers of the cry for totality, and steeling itself to hear the ludicrous mishmash they make of it—to hear and pretend to approve, and maybe in the end to approve without pretending.

27. If this frame of reference for Abstract Expressionism turns out to work at all, one of the things it ought to be best at is a rethinking of the stale comparison

There is no need to be oversubtle about this. Sometimes symbols and lifestyles still have class inscribed on them in letters ten feet tall. What could be more disarmingly bourgeois, in the old sense, than the first-class section on an airplane crossing the Atlantic? And what more dismally petty bourgeois than coach? (Those in business—or what my favorite airline calls *Connoisseur*—class would take a bit more *ad hoc* class sorting, some going up, some going down. A lot depends on particular styles of corporate reward to middle management, for instance, which varies from country to country and phase to phase of the business cycle.) Anyway, the rough balance of numbers in this case seems to me quite instructive for the balance of numbers in the world at large.



Asger Jorn. Paris by Night. 1959.

between America and Europe. European painting after the war, alas, comes out of a very different set of class formations. Vulgarly is not its problem. In Asger Jorn, for example—to turn for a moment to the greatest painter of the 1950s—what painting confronts as its limit condition is always *refinement*. Painting for Jorn is a process of coming to terms with the fact that however this set of qualities may be tortured, exacerbated, or erased they still end up being what (European) painting is; and the torture, exacerbation, and erasure are discovered in practice to *be* refinement, that is, the forms refinement presently takes if a painter is good enough; they are what refines painting to a new preciousness or dross (it turns out that preciousness and dross are the same thing).

28. In calling Jorn the greatest painter of the 1950s I meant to say nothing about the general health of painting in Europe at the time. On the contrary. The clichés in the books are true. Jorn's really was an endgame. Vulgarly, on the other hand, back on the other side of the Atlantic, turned out to be a way of keeping the corpse of painting hideously alive—while *coquetting* all the time with Death.

29. An Asger Jorn can be garish, florid, tasteless, forced, cute, flatulent, overemphatic; it can never be vulgar. It just cannot prevent itself from a tampering and framing of its desperate effects which pulls them back into the realm of painting, ironizes them, declares them done in full knowledge of their emptiness. American painting, by contrast—and precisely that American painting that is

closest to the European, done by Europeans, by Germans and Dutchmen steeped in the tradition they are exiting from—does not ironize and will never make the (false) declaration that the game is up. Hofmann and de Kooning, the closer they get to Jorn's vocabulary, are Jorn's direct opposites.

30. It is my hope that conceiving of Abstract Expressionism as vulgar will lead to a new set of discriminations between particular painters within the group, and between moments in the work of a single artist. I have already referred to one or two such possibilities—for instance, the difference between Pollock's drip paintings in 1947 and 1948 and their final appearance in 1950. I have tried also to give a preliminary sense of the new priorities, and the new kinds of belonging together under the general (too capacious) banner, by means of the pictures accompanying my text. Let me say a word or two more on this subject.

Gottlieb, you will have noticed, emerges as the great and implacable *maestro* of Abstract Expressionism. He is Byron to Greenberg's George Eliot—the most vulgar-minded genius that ever produced a great effect in oils. A Mantovani or a Lawrence Welk. Charlie Parker playing insolent variations on the theme of "I'd Like to Get You on a Slow Boat to China"—feeling for a way to retrieve, and make properly unbearable, the song's contempt for those it was written for. Gottlieb is at his best when he goes straight for the cosmological jugular, straight for the pages of *Time* or *Life*—his worlds on fire like atomic-age parodies of Lissitzky's *Story of Two Squares*, ghastly in their beautification of destruction.

31. Certain moments and sequences of work in Abstract Expressionism that everyone, then and since, agrees to have been a turning point for the new painting begin, in this light, to make a bit more sense. For example, de Kooning's *Woman* series and the vehemence of Greenberg's reaction to it. What Greenberg was recoiling from, I think, is the way choosing *Woman* as his subject allowed de Kooning to extrude a quality of perception and handling that stood at the very heart of his aesthetic and fix it onto an Other, a scapegoat. "The black battle-stain on a soldier's face is not vulgar, but the dirty face of a housemaid is." For "dirty face of a housemaid" read "perfect smile of the model in the Camels advertisement." Greenberg drew back from this not, need I say it, out of concern at de Kooning's misogyny, but from an intuition that such splitting and projection would make it impossible for de Kooning's *painting* to go on sustaining the right pitch of tawdriness, ironic facility, overweening self-regard. I think he was right. Only when de Kooning found a way to have the vulgarity be his own again—or rather, to half-project it onto cliché landscape or townscape formats that were transparently mere props—did he regain the measure of meretriciousness his art needed. The male braggadocio, that is to say, had to be *unfocused* if he was to paint up a storm. It had to be a manner in search of an object, and somehow aggrieved at not finding one. What was wanted was general paranoia, not particular war of the sexes.



Adolph Gottlieb. Under and Over. 1959.

32. Vulgarity is gendered, of course. At the time we are examining, it belonged (as a disposable property) mainly to men, or more precisely, to heterosexual men. Not that this meant that the art done under its auspices was closed to reading from other points of view. What Cecil Beaton and Alfonso Ossorio and Parker Tyler and Frank O'Hara did to Pollock, with or without Pollock's permission, would have to be part—sometimes, as I have said, a central part—of any defensible history of the New York School. It seems important that, apart from Greenberg, the strongest early readings of Pollock's work (the strongest, not necessarily the best) all came from gay men. Namuth's films and photographs partake of the same homosocial atmosphere. Perhaps the deep reason why Greenberg was never able to realize his cherished project of a book on Pollock was that he found no way to contain, or put to use, the erotic hero worship that sings in the prose of his shorter pieces.¹¹

33. I do not mean to give the impression, by the way, that the set of issues I am pointing to never appeared in critical discourse at the time, or did so only in utterly displaced form. Now and again they surface directly, but what is striking when that happens is how the writer seems not to know what to do with the issues and terms once they show up. The terms are embarrassing. Greenberg, for instance, had the following to say about Clyfford Still's color and paint handling in his great essay "American-Type' Painting," published in *Partisan Review* in 1955:

I don't know how much conscious attention Still has paid to Monet and Impressionism [Greenberg has just been musing on the power within Abstract Expressionism of "an art like the late Monet's, which in its time pleased banal taste and still makes most of the avant-garde shudder"], but his . . . art likewise has an affiliation with popular taste, though not by any means enough to make it acceptable to it. Still's is the first really Whitmanesque kind of painting we have had, not only because it makes large, loose gestures . . . but just as much because, as Whitman's poetry assimilated, with varying success, large quantities of stale journalistic and oratorical prose, so Still's painting is infused with that stale, prosaic kind of painting to which Barnett Newman has given the name of "buckeye." Though little attention has been paid to it in

11. It would be too easy to catalogue the more flagrant phrases here—"His emotion starts out pictorially; it does not have to be castrated and translated in order to be put into a picture," etc.—and the result would inevitably have the flavor of Freudian "now-it-can-be-told." Whereas the point is the obviousness of the verbal love affair, and the fact that that very obviousness—which is integral, I think, to Greenberg's insights and descriptions from 1943 to 1955—was only allowable (or manageable) when it went along with a no-holds-barred, take-it-or-leave-it tone about *everything*—the tone Greenberg perfected as a writer of fortnightly columns and occasional aphoristic surveys. In a book—even one as brief and essayistic as Greenberg's on Miró had been—there would have been too obvious a seam between the documentary mode (Greenberg, understandably, was more and more anxious to disinter Pollock from under a mountain of biographical filth) and the awe at Pollock's energy and maleness.

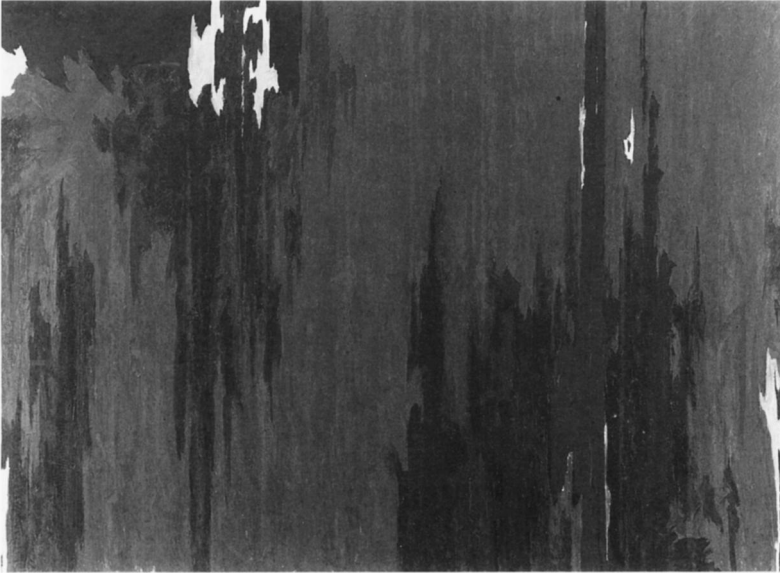
print, “buckeye” is probably the most widely practiced and homogeneous kind of painting seen in the Western world today. . . . “Buckeye” painters, as far as I am aware, do landscapes exclusively and work more or less directly from nature. By piling dry paint—though not exactly in impasto—they try to capture the brilliance of daylight, and the process of painting becomes a race between hot shadows and hot lights whose invariable outcome is a livid, dry, sour picture with a warm, brittle surface that intensifies the acid fire of the generally predominating reds, browns, greens, and yellows. “Buckeye” landscapes can be seen in Greenwich Village restaurants (Eddie’s Aurora on West Fourth Street used to collect them), Sixth Avenue picture stores (there is one near Eighth Street), and in the Washington Square outdoor shows. . . . I cannot understand fully why [these effects] should be so universal and so uniform, or the kind of painting culture behind them.

Still, at any rate, is the first to have put “buckeye” effects into serious art. These are visible in the the frayed dead-leaf edges that wander down the margins or across the middle of so many of his canvases, in the uniformly dark heat of his color, and in a dry, crusty paint surface (like any “buckeye” painter, Still seems to have no faith in diluted or thin pigments). Such things can spoil his pictures, or make them weird in an unrefreshing way, but when he is able to succeed with, or in spite of them, it represents but the conquest by high art of one more area of experience, and its liberation from *Kitsch*.¹²

There is a lot going on here, and no one interpretation will do it justice (the tangents and redundancies in the text, which I have left out for the sake of brevity, are actually vital to its detective-story tone). But what I see Greenberg doing essentially is struggling to describe and come to terms with a specific area of petty bourgeois taste. He rolls out the place names and pieces of New York City geography with a cultural explorer’s relish, all the better to be able to plead class ignorance in the end—“I cannot understand fully . . . the kind of painting culture behind them.” Readers of Greenberg will know that the final enlistment of the word *kitsch* is heavily loaded. Kitsch equals vulgarity, roughly. In Greenberg’s original Trotskyite scheme of things the word had strong class connotations. But 1955 is too late, by several years, for Greenberg to be willing to pursue this any further than he does. It is interesting (this is my argument) that he pursues it at all—that Still’s painting seemingly forces him to think again, at some length, about high art’s courting of banality. And he is in no two minds, at this point, about the importance of such a tactic, for all its risk. The next sentence after the one on Still and kitsch reads as follows: “Still’s art has a special importance at this time because it shows abstract painting a way out of its own academicism.”

12. Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, pp. 230–31 (from *Partisan Review*, Spring 1955).

Clifford Still. Untitled. 1951–52.



This sentence is altered out of all recognition in the version of “‘American-Type’ Painting” Greenberg put in his book *Art and Culture* six years later.¹³ All of the section on Still is given heavy surgery. The word *kitsch* gives way to “one more depressed area of art,” where surely “depressed” is exactly the wrong word. Kitsch is manic. Above all it is rigid with the exaltation of *art*. It believes in art the way artists are supposed to—to the point of absurdity, to the point where the cult of art becomes a new Philistinism. That is the aspect of kitsch which Still gets

13. See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 223–24. Part of the reason for the changes was the vehemence of Still’s and Newman’s reaction to Greenberg’s original wording. See Greenberg’s reply to a typical blast from Still (dated April 15, 1955, which suggests that Still’s original letter may have been sent off at much the same time as the one to Sidney Janis on Rothko), quoted in ed. Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (New York: Abrams, 1990), pp. 251–53. The term “buckeye” is one of the main bones of contention in the exchange. Still suspects that Greenberg borrowed not only the term from Newman (which Greenberg acknowledges) but also its application to his work. Greenberg says no. “Barney was the first one I heard name a certain kind of painting as buckeye, but he did not apply the term to yours. When I, some time later, told Barney that I thought there was a relation between buckeye and your painting, or rather some aspects of it, he protested vehemently and said your stuff was too good for that” (p. 252). Since Greenberg regularly gets told off these days for being waspish and superior about the Abstract Expressionists (as conversationalists and letterwriters) in retrospect, it is worth pointing to the well-nigh saintly patience of his 1955 dealings with Still on the rampage.

Marnin Young points out to me that in his spirited attack on Still in *The Nation*, “Art,” January 6, 1964, Max Kozloff seizes on Greenberg’s comparison to “Greenwich Village landscapists” (he quotes a few sentences from the *Art and Culture* text) and goes on: “Critical attempts to portray [Still] as an artist who bursts forth into a new freedom, or as an exponent of the ‘American sublime,’ overlook his terribly static, one ought to say, vulgar, exaltedness” (p. 40). But is not that what *makes* him an exponent? (Of course, given the date, one sympathizes with Kozloff’s distaste.)

horribly right. The “buckeye” of the *Partisan Review* text is abandoned in favor of “demotic-Impressionist” or “open-air painting in autumnal colors.” (Abandoned almost completely—Greenberg cannot resist a single, unexplained appearance of the word toward the end.) There are no more names and addresses on Eighth Street, no more baffled talk of a separate, impenetrable “painting culture.” This is a critic in flight from previous insights, I feel. And I think I see why.

34. Then, finally, there is the problem of Hans Hofmann. You will not be surprised to hear that it was in coming to terms with Hofmann in particular that the vocabulary of the present argument first surfaced. For everyone who has ever cared at all about Hofmann (including Greenberg, who cared very much) has always known that in Hofmann the problems of taste in Abstract Expressionism come squawking home to roost. A good Hofmann is tasteless to the core—tasteless in its invocations of Europe, tasteless in its mock religiosity, tasteless in its Color-by-Technicolor, its winks and nudges toward landscape format, its Irving Stone title, the cloying demonstrativeness of its handling. Tasteless and in complete control of its decomposing means.

35. Seen in its normal surroundings, past the unobtrusive sofas and the calla lilies, as part of that unique blend of opulence and spareness which is the taste of the picture-buying classes in America, a good Hofmann seems always to be blurting out a dirty secret that the rest of the decor is conspiring to keep. It makes a false compact with its destination. It takes up the language of its users and exemplifies it, running monotonous, self-satisfied riffs on the main tune, playing it to the hilt—to the point of parody, like Mahler with his sentimental Viennese palm-court melodies. A good Hofmann has to have a surface somewhere between ice cream, chocolate, stucco, and flock wallpaper. Its colors have to *reek* of Nature—of the worst kind of Woolworth forest-glade-with-waterfall-and-thunderstorm-brewing. Its title should turn the knife in the wound.¹⁴ For what it shows is the world its users inhabit in their heart of hearts. It is a picture of their “interiors,” of the visceral-*cum*-spiritual upholstery of the rich. And above all it can have no illusions about its own status as part of that upholstery. It is made out of the materials it deploys. Take them or leave them, these ciphers of plenitude—they are all painting at present has to offer. “Feeling” has to be fetishized, made dreadfully (obscenely) exterior, if painting is to continue.

36. I do not believe that what I have just offered is an account of Hofmann’s intentions, any more than if I had been arguing for the coldness and hardness of Matisse’s hedonism, say, or the pathos of Picasso’s late eroticism. (Of course it would be possible to give an account of all three which argued that our under-

14. . . . *And Thunderclouds Pass* comes from a poem by the Austrian Romantic Nikolaus Lenau, *And, Out of the Caves* from Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 2, 11.



Hans Hofmann. "...And Thunderclouds Pass." 1961.



Hans Hofmann. "And, Out of the Caves, the Night Threw a Handful of Pale Tumbling Pigeons into the Light." 1964.



Douglas M. Parker Studio. Marcia Simon Weisman Residence. Circa 1962.

standing of their intentions had been deficient up to now, and ought to include the pathos or the coldness or the capacity for self-parody. I just do not think the inclusions are necessary or plausible in Hofmann's case.) No doubt Hofmann "believed in" his own overblown rhetoric. (What would it be like to go in for it at this pitch of intensity *without* believing in it? Like Asger Jorn, maybe; not like . . . *And Thunderclouds Pass*.) I dare say he thought his titles were wonderful. (Who is going to quarrel with Nikolaus Lenau and the Sonnets to Orpheus? Only a modernist cynic like me.) And as for the place of his paintings in Marcia Weisman's sitting room? He surely assumed that at the level that really mattered—the level of taste, as opposed to day-to-day preference—there was a profound community of interest between himself and the best of his clients. And so there was. He could not have painted their interiors if they were not his interior too.

These are not the matters at issue, finally. The task for the critic is to find an adequate language for the continuing *effect* of, say, Hofmann's overblownness (I am not even saying that this is the only or primary quality of Hofmann's version of Abstract Expressionism, but it is the one that gets more interesting over time). The overblownness only matters because it seems to be what lends the pictures their coherence, maybe their depth. I am not meaning to congratulate Hofmann on getting a quality of petty bourgeois experience somehow "right." The quality is not hard to perceive and mimic. What is hard (what is paradoxical) is to make paintings out of it. That is what Hofmann did. Of course I am saying that doing so involved him in an encounter with the conditions of production and consumption of his own art. That is my basic hypothesis. But the encounter could only take place at the level of work, of painterly practice—the encounter *was* getting the overblownness to be pictorial, or discovering that it was the quality out of which paintings now had to be made. Even to call this an "encounter" is to give it too much of an exterior or discursive flavor. It was what Hofmann did, not what he discovered.

37. This is not an argument, *a fortiori*, about Abstract Expressionists' social or political opinions. Of course I relish the fact that Clyfford Still supported McCarthy, or that Pollock was "a Goddamn Stalinist from start to finish,"¹⁵ in much the same way that I like to know Manet was a frightful Gambettist and Renoir believed that "siding with the Jew Pissarro is revolution."¹⁶ But I know my interest does not count for much in understanding what any of the four did as *painters*. At best the facts may strike us as dimly consonant with one or another

15. On Still's McCarthyism, see Susan Landauer, "Clyfford Still and Abstract Expressionism in San Francisco," in *Clyfford Still 1904–1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel, 1992), p. 93. The verdict on Pollock's politics is Greenberg's, in an interview with me in 1981. I think he meant it seriously.

16. Rough draft of letter to Paul Durand-Ruel, February 26, 1882, discussing participation in that year's Impressionist exhibition. See Lionello Venturi, *Les Archives de l'Impressionisme* (Paris and New York: Durand-Ruel, 1939), vol. 1, p. 122. (The sentence was omitted in Renoir's final draft.)

aspect (usually a surface aspect) of their subject matter or handling—with Manet's epigrammatic brittleness, say, or Renoir's over-anxiousness to please. But they get us nowhere with what really matters, which is the artists' ability to have these surface qualities coexist with others seemingly at odds with them: Manet's pessimism and compassion, for instance, or Renoir's deadly economy of means.

38. I am not saying that Abstract Expressionists' social attitudes are just irrelevant. No doubt it helps to know that Rothko, for instance, had his own vision of the petty bourgeois future; and again, the fact that he saw it in the shape of the University—the University of Colorado at Boulder—is for me irresistible:

The University . . . is on the hill. At its base are the faculty apartments which are shells around appliances facing a court into which the children are emptied. Two hundred yards away is Vetsville, in which the present faculty itself had lived only four or five years ago when they were preparing to be faculty. Vetsville itself is occupied by graduates from army headquarters, already married and breeding who will be faculty in faculty quarters three or four years hence. They breed furiously guaranteeing the expansion which will perpetuate the process into the future.

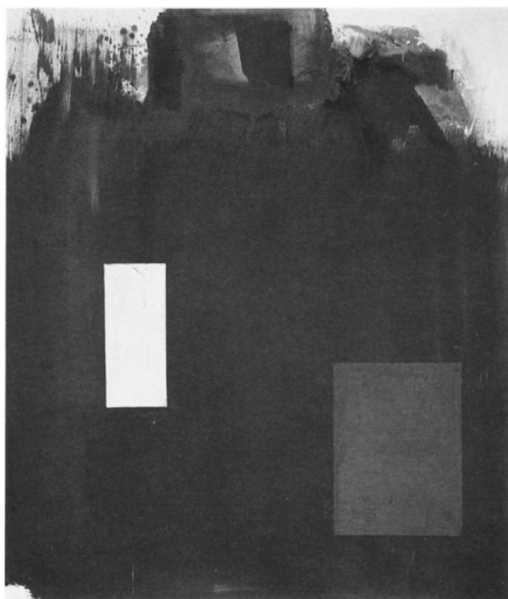
The faculty itself is allowed to stay here only 2 years whereupon they must assume mortgages in similar housing slum developments where thereafter they must repair their own cracks and sprinkle their grass. . . .

Here is a self-perpetuating peonage, schooled in mass communal living, which will become a formidable sixth estate within a decade. It will have a cast of features, a shape of head, and a dialect as yet unknown, and will propagate a culture so distorted and removed from its origins, that its image is unpredictable.¹⁷

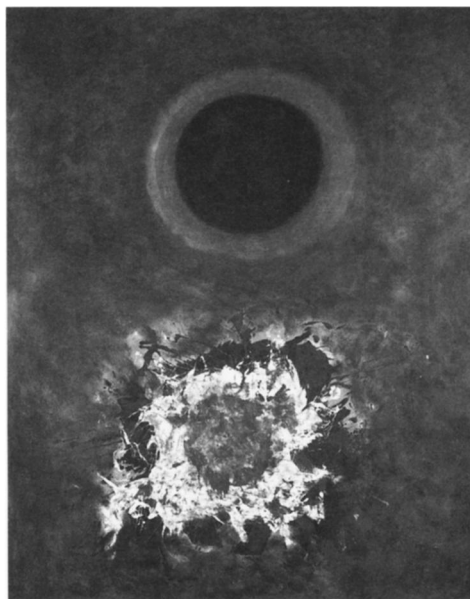
Anyone familiar with nineteenth-century styles of irony at the expense of the *nouvelles couches sociales* will recognize this as generic (solecisms and all). Condescension just *is* the form of the petty bourgeoisie's self-recognition. Look at the recent literature on yuppies. All the same, even this passage does not help me with what is really interesting, and ultimately baffling, about Rothko as an artist: why the same banal loftiness could lead to the brightness of death at one moment (1950), and to clinical evacuation at another (1965).

39. My title "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism" was not meant ironically. I have offered what I think is the best defense possible of this body of work, and of course I am aware that in doing so the noun "vulgarity" has turned into a term of

17. Archives of American Art, Herbert Ferber papers, letter to the Ferbers, July 7, 1955, quoted in Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, p. 352.



Hans Hofmann. *Memoria in Aeternum*. 1962.



Adolph Gottlieb. *Coalescence*. 1961.

value, whether I wanted it to or not. If the formula were not so mechanical, I would be prepared to say that Abstract Expressionist painting is *best* when it is most vulgar, because it is then that it grasps most fully the conditions of representation—the technical and social conditions—of its historical moment.

The moment was brief. By the time of the two paintings I choose to end with—1961 and 1962—it was almost over. The mode and indeed the titles of the two pictures—Hofmann’s *Memoria in Aeternum* and Gottlieb’s *Coalescence*—are nothing if not valedictory. Death puts in its usual appearance. The coffin is straight out of Evelyn Waugh. And this overstuffed, overwrought, end-and-beginning-of-the-world quality seems to me, to repeat, the key to these paintings’ strength. They have a true petty bourgeois pathos. One can see why art in New York felt obliged to retreat from such dangerous ground in the years that followed, and why a last effort was made to restabilize avant-garde practice in its previous (exhausted) trajectory. The popular was easier to handle than the vulgar—it had more of the smell of art about it. Reduction was a better way to generate recognizable modernist art works than this kind of idiot “Ripeness is all.” The site-specific was preferable to the class-specific. Art had to go on, and that meant returning art mainly to normal avant-garde channels.¹⁸ But for some of us—certainly for me—the price paid for this accommodation in the 1960s and after seems prohibitively high.

18. This defense is not intended as a covert attack, and these few sentences do not claim to characterize what was most productive (and genuinely excessive) in the art of the 1960s, especially from 1967 onward. But I let them stand, because I do think that part of the history of the 1960s will have to be written in terms of art’s withdrawal from Abstract Expressionism’s impossible class-belonging—its

The ridiculous moment of coalescence, or of mourning, or of history, is what we still want from painting, and what Abstract Expressionism manages to provide.

40. So now I think I understand what I have been defending all along. It seems that I cannot quite abandon the equation of Art with lyric. Or rather—to shift from an expression of personal preference to a proposal about art history—I do not believe that *modernism* can ever quite escape from such an equation. By “lyric” I mean the illusion in an art work of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own. I mean those metaphors of agency, mastery, and self-centeredness that enforce our acceptance of the work as the expression of a single subject. This impulse is ineradicable, alas, however hard one strand of modernism may have worked, time after time, to undo or make fun of it. Lyric cannot be expunged by modernism, only repressed.

Which is not to say that I have no sympathy with the wish to do the expunging. For lyric in our time is deeply ludicrous. The deep ludicrousness of lyric is Abstract Expressionism’s subject, to which it returns like a tongue to a loosening tooth.

This subject, of course, is far from being the petty bourgeoisie’s exclusive property. That is not what I have been arguing. Anyone who cares for the painting of Delacroix or the poetry of Victor Hugo will be in no doubt that the ludicrousness of lyric has had its *haut bourgeois* avatars. But sometimes it falls to a class to offer or suffer the absurdities of individualism in pure form—unbreathably pure, almost, a last gasp of oxygen as the plane goes down. That was the case, I think, with American painting after 1945.

horrible honesty about art and its place. Only *part*. Because the point is that the project of “returning art mainly to normal avant-garde channels” was and remains a hopeless one in America. The grounds (always shaky) for an enduring avant-garde autonomy, or even the myth of one, simply do not exist. In the later 1960s and early ’70s the project imploded. Frantic efforts have subsequently been made to reconstitute the project around some “new” technology, or set of art forms, or refurbished critical discourse; but what is striking is the way these phenomena cannot escape the gravitational pull of the later 1960s. And I am saying that the later 1960s are a satellite, or a form of anti-matter, to the preponderant black star of *Coalescence* and *Memoria in Aeternum*.

A final thing I do not want to be taken as saying or implying is that art could make Abstract Expressionism a thing of the past by *imitating* it, or trying to go one better than it in the vulgarity stakes. That has been a popular, and I think futile, tactic in the last ten years or so.