
The American Action Painters

Harold Rosenberg

Introduction: The Critical Scene in New York

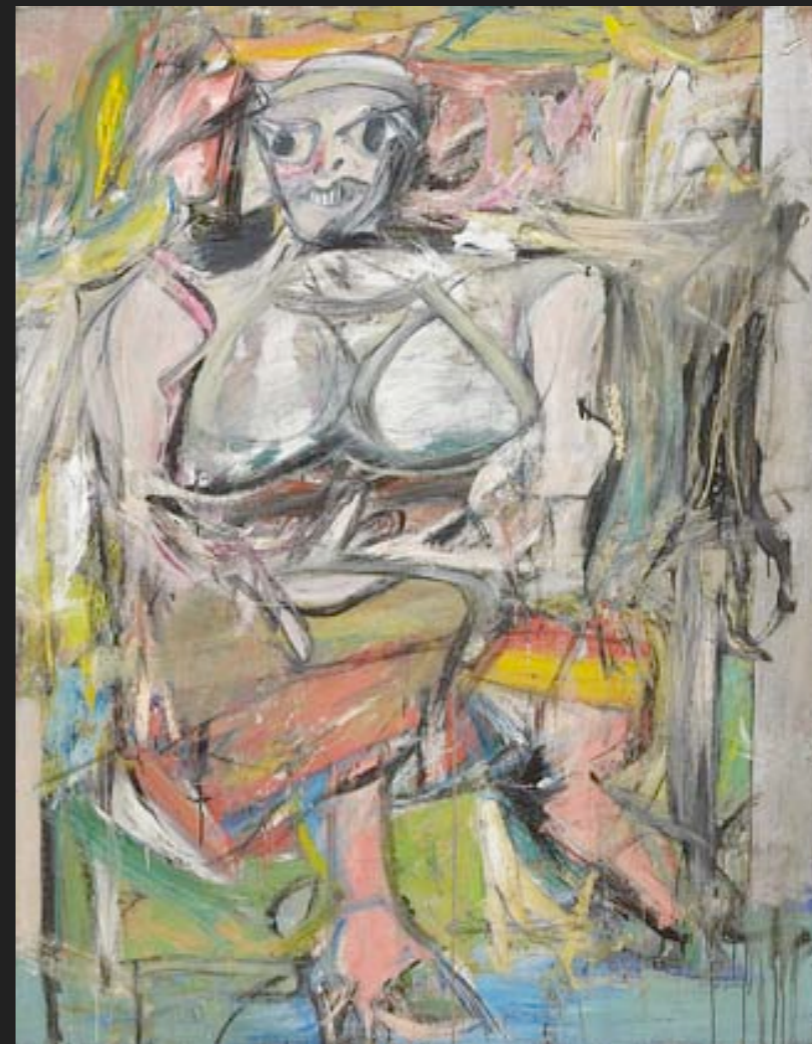
The **critical** scene in New York in the late 1940s through '50s was lively, to say the least. **Combative** may be more like it!

There seemed to be a great deal at stake in the arguments between critics — with **two sides** and **no middle ground**.

“**Abstract Expressionism**” was by far the **dominant** style and all artists were forced to measure their work in relation to it.



Hans Hofmann, Delight, 1947



Willem de Kooning, Woman I, 1952

The **intellectual** and **ideological** debate was shaped by two forceful critics — **Clement Greenberg** and **Harold Rosenberg**. The struggle between these two has a history of its own.



Hans Namuth, Clement Greenberg, 1950



Maurice Berezov, Harold Rosenberg, c. 1959



SHARED COMMITMENTS

1. **Socialist left** of the '30s & '40s, and the anti-capitalist **labor** struggle
2. A **cultural** avant-garde that resists
 - a. totalitarianism,
 - b. liberal ideology, and
 - c. mass culture (consumerism and kitsch)
3. **Independent** socialist press informed by
 - a. the search for a new form of **Marxism** and
 - b. efforts to unite the **anti-Stalinist left**

Dismayed by the **decline of the avant-garde** in Paris in the 1940s, and having **lost faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class**, many socialists in America were arguing for a “post-dialectical materialism” with the potential for radical **agency** emerging not from “the working class” but rather out of the creative potential of the **individual**.

Greenberg 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.

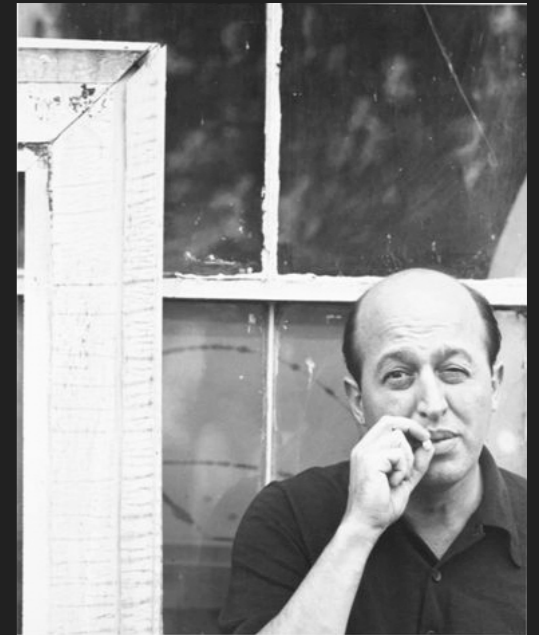
His **arguments** for the **avant-garde** looked back to late 19th century painting and sculpture in Europe.

Greenberg developed a theory of art based on

- close **formal analysis**, and a
- **progressive developmental history**.

His **critical** style was inspired by English critic **F. R. Leavis** and the poet and critic **T. S. Eliot**.

His **historical** approach drew largely from the German tradition — **Kant**, **Hegel**, and **Marx**.



Edouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass (Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe)*, 1863

In “Modernist Painting”, Greenberg tries to show that there was a **coherent** and **logical development** in the history of modern painting.

The **logic** behind this development was derived from Kant’s claim that **autonomy** and **self-justification** are the marks of the modern.



Gustave Courbet, *Burial at Omans*, 1849-50

Rosenberg's criticism was also influenced by western philosophy, but of a more recent **existentialist** variety:

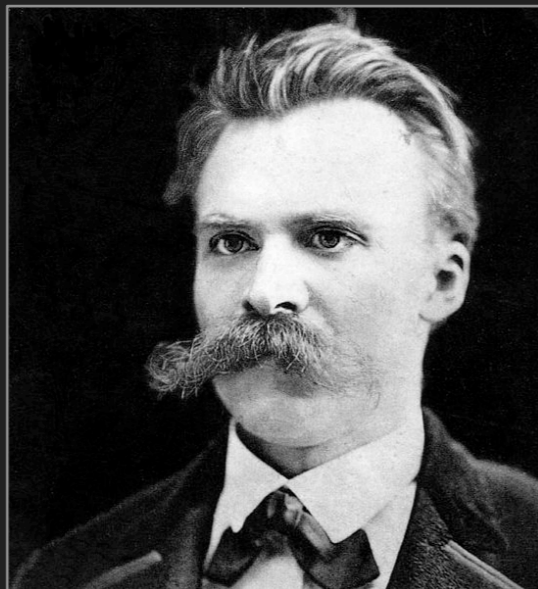
Kierkegaard

Nietzsche

Sartre

Camus

and their concern with the **phenomenological** and **subjective** dimensions of human experience.

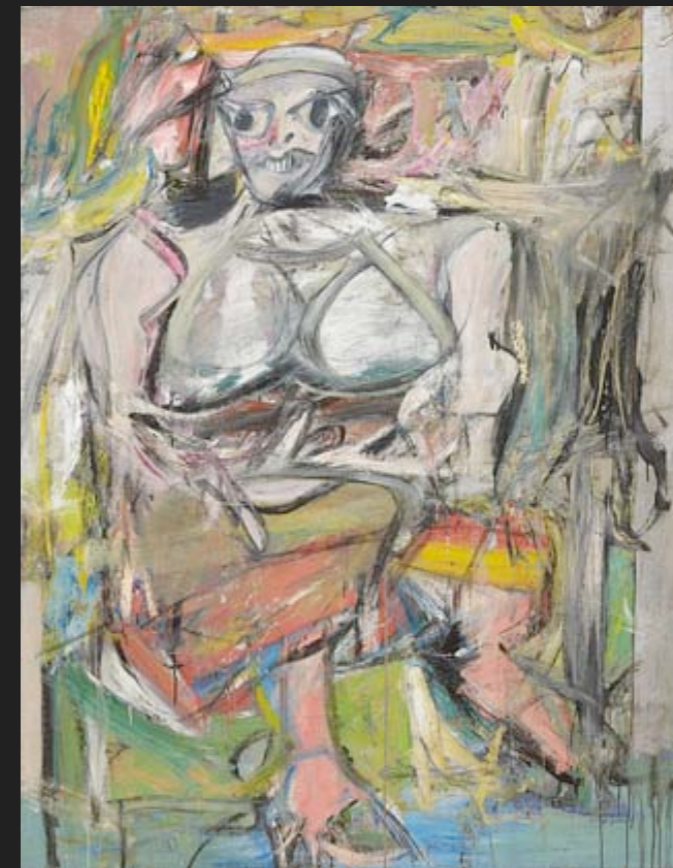


So, for example, you find more emphasis in Rosenberg's writing on **meaning** and **psychological states** — anxiety, will, and freedom — and less on the **formal properties** of individual works — shape, line, and color.



Hale Woodruff, Blue Intrusion, 1958

He also saw 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, Woman I, 1952



DIVERGENT VIEWS

Greenberg

1. Philosophical influence — **German Idealism** (Kant & Hegel)
2. Sees AbEx as **continuous** with modern art of the past.
3. Emphasizes **aesthetic properties** of the art object.
4. Style is **measured, analytic,** and **empirical.**

Rosenberg

1. Philosophical influences — **Existentialism** (Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus)
2. Sees AbEx as a **radical break** from modern art of the past.
3. Emphasizes **subjectivity** and creative **action.**
4. Style is **exuberant, expressive,** and **subjective.**

Their two **opposing** essays — Rosenberg's "**The American Action Painters**" (*Art News*, 1952) and Greenberg's "**American-Type Painting**" (*Partisan Review*, 1955), **dramatize** these differences.

What is “Action Painting”?

Rosenberg begins his essay with a general **observation**:

What makes any definition of a movement in art **dubious** is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement — certainly not as well as...the others. Yet without the definition something **essential**...is bound to be missed. [1]

He then raises a question: Is there anything **new** in recent American painting?



Arshile Gorky, Waterfall, 1943



Mark Rothko, Sea Fantasy, 1946

He acknowledges the 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 20th century by European artists associated with the “**School of Paris**”.



Amedeo Modigliani, Reclining Nude, 1917

Action Painting

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Joan Miro, Catalan Landscape (The Hunter), 1923-24



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Pierre Bonnard, The Terrace at Vernonnet, 1939

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Chaim Soutine, Dead Fowl, c. 1924

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Wassily Kandinsky, Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle), 1913

Action Painting

However, among the most advanced American artists today, one finds work that embodies a new “**function**” and **way of thinking** about painting.

This 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
- a **representation** of a preconceived idea,

but rather

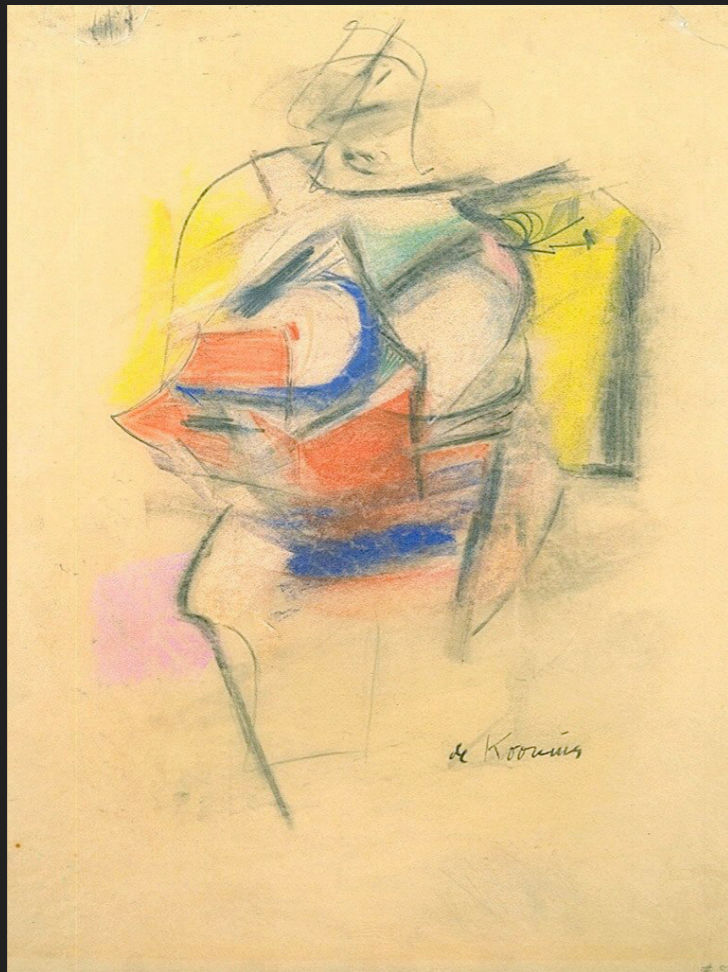
- as an **arena** within which
- an “**act of painting**” takes place.



Willem de Kooning, Figure And Landscape No. 2, 1951

This shift in interest can apply as much to **drawing** as it does to **painting**.

That's because the question is **not** about the **medium** one chooses, but the **motive** for going beyond the mere representation of an object.



Willem de Kooning, Study for "Woman VI", 1952



Willem De Kooning, Woman VI, 1953

Action Painting

This approach to painting, Rosenberg claims, subordinates the 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”.



Philip Guston, To B.W.T., 1952



Joan Mitchell, City Landscape, 1955

Action Painting

The shift in postwar American painting constitutes a change in both the **source** and the **sensibility** of art.

The **object** is no longer the primary focus.

The **goal** is no longer a painting intended to produce **aesthetic pleasure**.



Jackson Pollock, The She-Wolf, 1943

Action Painting

The **purpose** is to embody one's inner psychological state in the **marks** made on the canvas — the **record** of the **event** of painting.

This takes on **philosophical** significance for Rosenberg.

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**. [3]



Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, 1950

Action Painting

Rosenberg also claims that a **departure** from traditional painting this **radical** 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, and the critic using these outdated tools is a “**stranger**” to the avant-garde artist.



Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm, 1950

Action Painting

Rosenberg is quick to point out that we must not **identify** the **painting** with the personal, **psychological history** of the artist. 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**. [4]



Hans Namuth, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, East Hampton, Long Island, 1953

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



Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, 1950



Hans Namuth, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, East Hampton, Long Island, 1953

How did “Action Painting” come about?

Origins of Action Painting

Although many of the action painters came from a **Marxist** background, according to Rosenberg, their turn to painting **as** painting — away from the representation of **social realities** or the rehashing of modern abstraction — cannot be explained on **political** grounds.

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**.

The big moment came when it was decided to paint . . . just to PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value — political, aesthetic, moral.... 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. [4]



Franz Kline, Untitled, 1948

Origins of Action Painting

Rosenberg claims 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's 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**.



Grace Hartigan, Months and Moons, 1950

Origins of Action Painting

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**.



Franz Kline, New York, N.Y., 1953

What does this mean for the viewing public?

The Viewing Public

The problem for the **public** is that “modern art” is

- **institutionalized** by the artworld, and
- **promoted** solely in terms of its “**aesthetic quality**” by the “bureaucrats of taste”. [8]

As a result, it 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**. [8, emphases added.]



Andy Warhol, Brillo Soap Pads Box, 1964



Jeff Koons, Rabbit, 1986



Damien Hirst, For the Love of God, 2007

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Life Magazine, 8 August 1949, "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?"

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”.

In the context of its original publication, it would have been clear to the reader that **Clement Greenberg** was being portrayed as the **primary culprit**.



Clement Greenberg, ca. 1968 (The Herald & Weekly Times Limited)

"American-Type" Painting

Clement Greenberg

Greenberg's essay, published in 1955, is generally understood as a **response** to Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters", 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.



Clement Greenberg, ca. 1968

In contrast 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 the **subjectivity** and **actions** of the **artist**.

The Argument for Historical Continuity

His argument begins with a mere **passing reference** to one of Greenberg's 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. [208, emphases added.]

This brief passage, so casually tossed off, deserves **close scrutiny** and a bit of **unpacking**, 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 the **essential** and **defining** features of **modern art**.

Historical Continuity

The German philosopher **Immanuel Kant**, late in the 18th Century, argued that to be **modern**, 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 **logic** and **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**.



Unknown, Portrait of Immanuel Kant, n.d.

Greenberg applies Kant's "**law of modernism**" to the arts, and in particular to the visual arts **medium by medium**.

In this way, **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.

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Clement Greenberg, ca. 1968

Historical Continuity

Take, for example, representations of objects...trees, people, fruits, horses...



Unknown, Repoussoir Tree, Vondel Park, Amsterdam

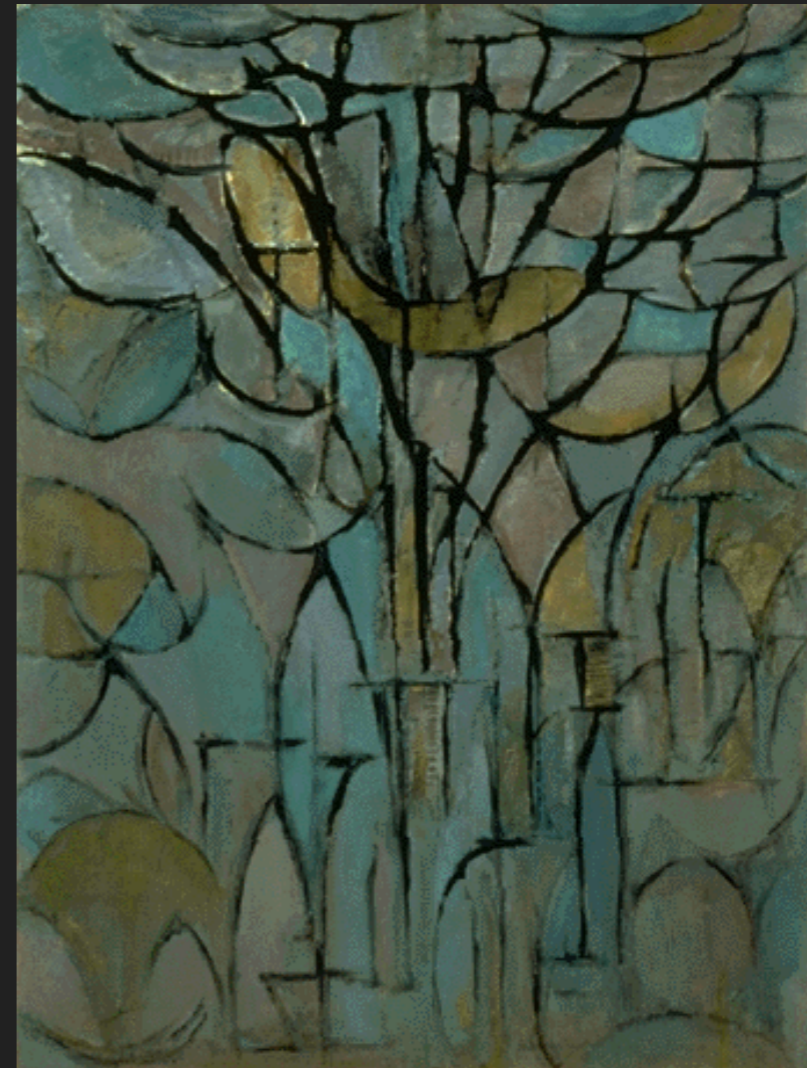
Historical Continuity

Images of such things can be produced not **only** in painting, but just as well, if not better, in **photography** and **film**.

Thus, they're not **essential** and must be **discarded** in painting that aspires to be **modern**.



Unknown, Repoussoir Tree, Vondel Park, Amsterdam

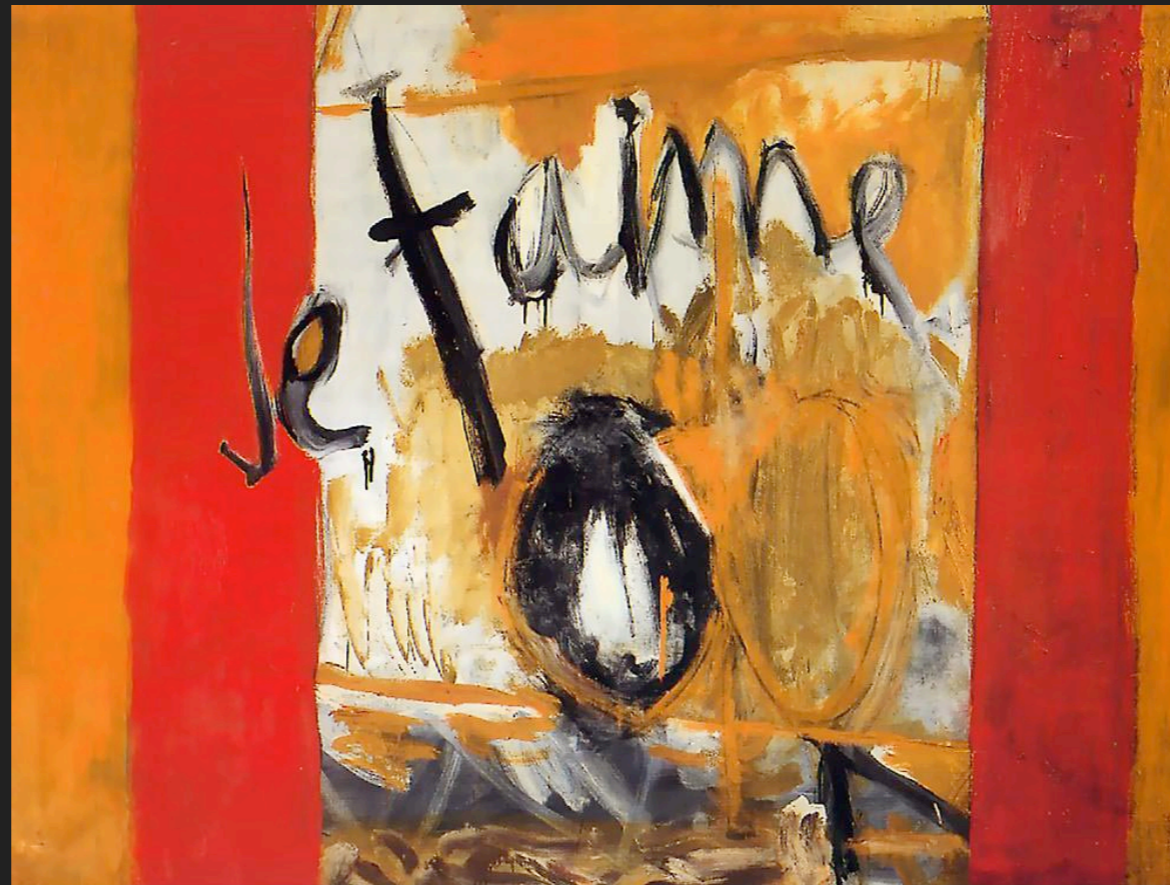


Piet Mondrian, *Trees*, c. 1912

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**.

In this way, painting **justifies** its existence through painterly means, demonstrates its **autonomy**, and becomes truly "**modern**".

The **self-purification** of painting continues in 1955, according to Greenberg, because it has not yet reached its **essence**.

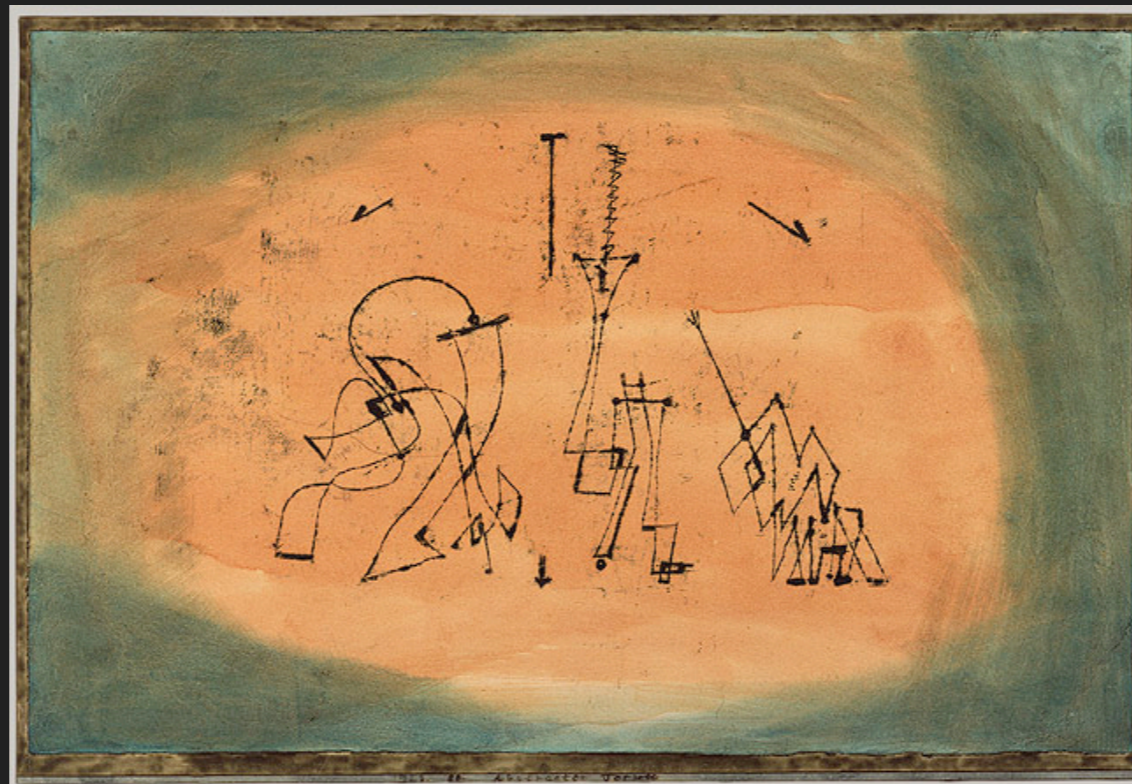


Robert Motherwell: Je t'Aime No. II, 1955 - oil on canvas

Greenberg also claims, **contrary** to Rosenberg's assertion, that 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. [210, emphasis added.]

He cites numerous examples in support of this claim.



Paul Klee, Abstract Trio, 1923

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Pablo Picasso, Night Fishing at Antibes, 1939

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Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition IV*, 1911

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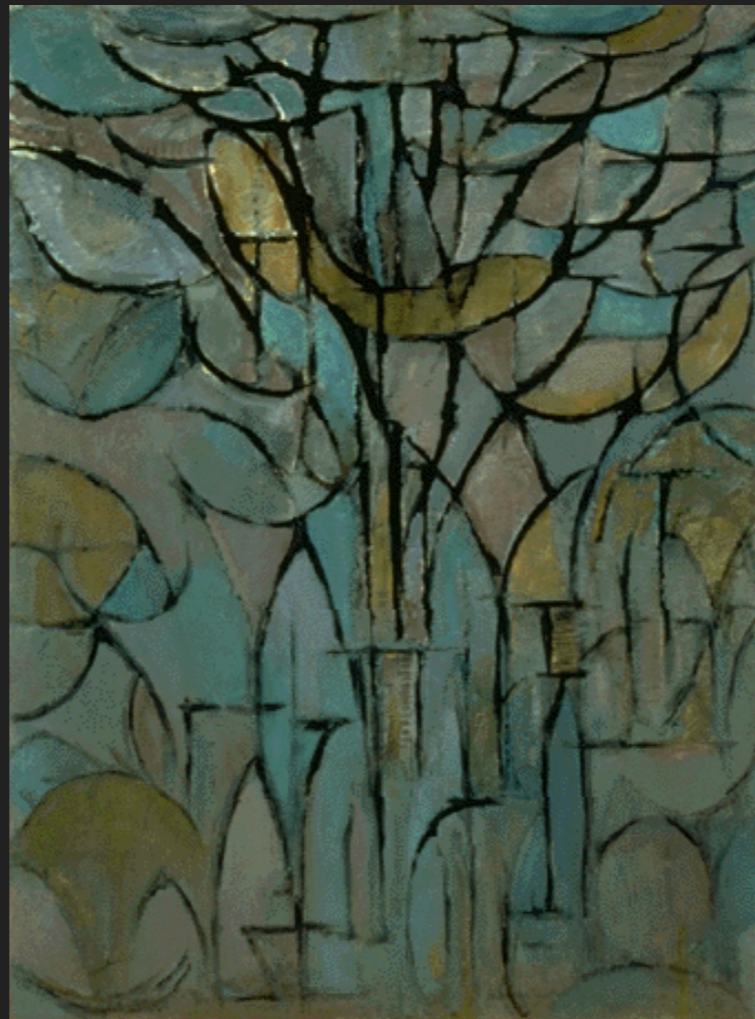


Joan Miro, Catalan Landscape (The Hunter), 1923-24

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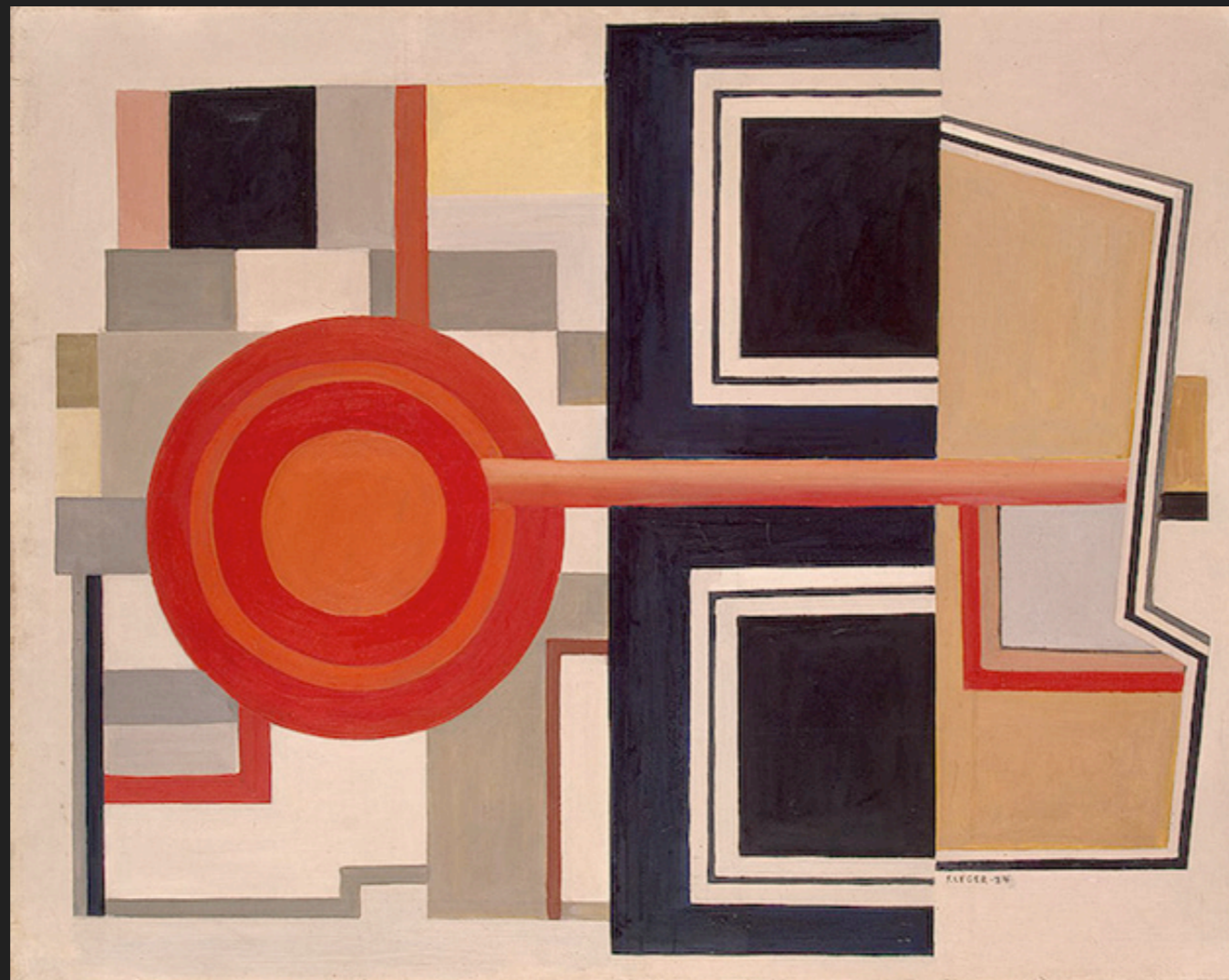


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Fernand Leger, Composition, 1924

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Arshile Gorky, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, 1944

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Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, 1952

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Hans Hofmann, Radiance, 1956

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Adolph Gottlieb, Division, 1948

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Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm, 1950

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Barnett Newman, Onement I, 1948

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Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1949

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Clyfford Still, 1957-D No. 1, 1957

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**;
- the opportunity artists had to work on the **Federal Art Project** of the **WPA**;
- an increasingly **well-educated** audience for art; and
- America’s relative **distance** from the **Second World War**.

Contrasting or Complementary Critics?

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.

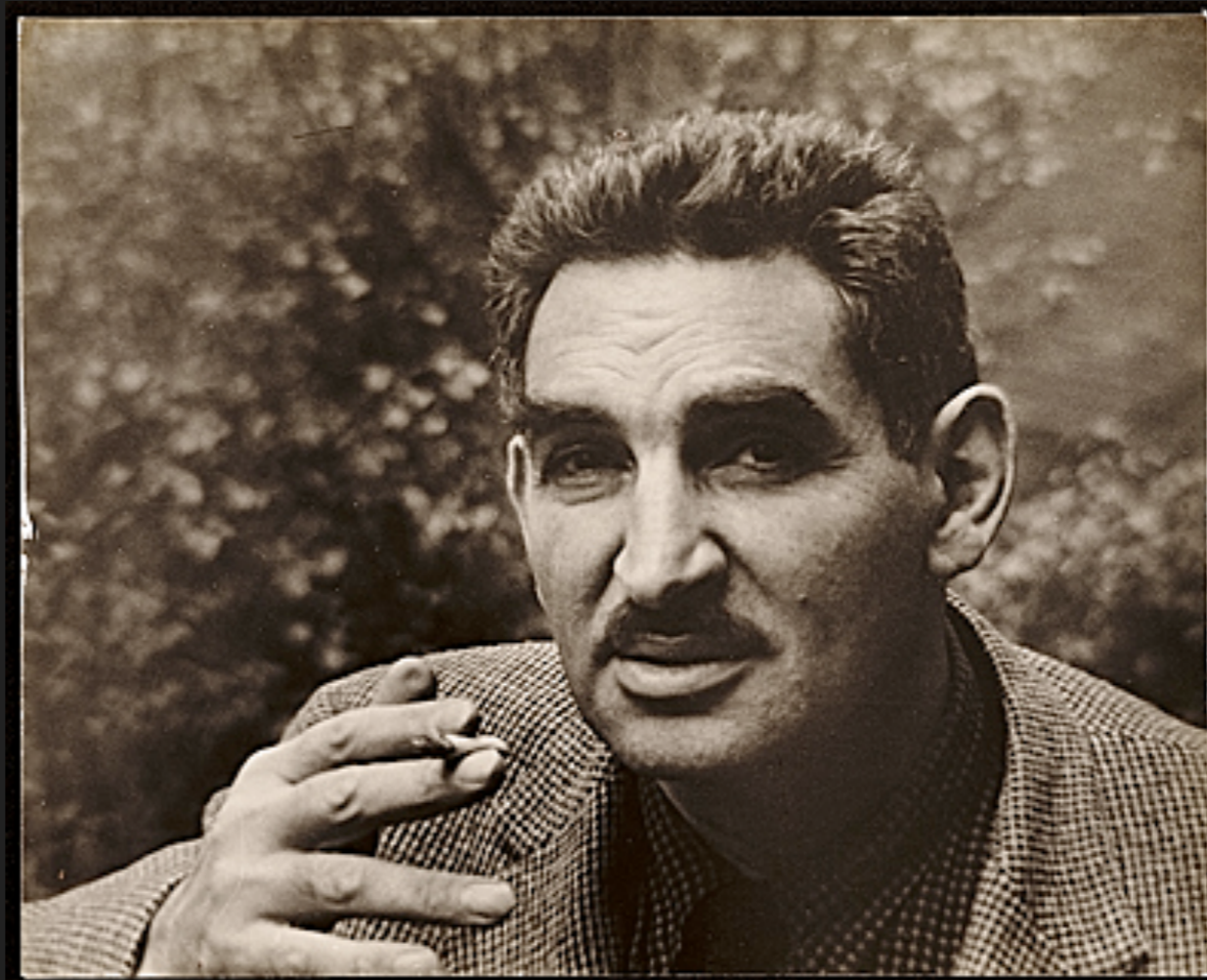
We are now committed to an **unqualified** act, not illustrating outworn myths or contemporary alibis. One must accept **total responsibility** for what he executes. And the measure of his greatness will be in the depth of his **insight** and his **courage** in realizing his own **vision**.



Clifford Still, 1947-J, 1947

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.



Harold Rosenberg, ca. 1950 / Maurice Berezov, photographer. Harold and May Tabak Rosenberg papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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, and discarded**.

The **process** from the artist's perspective, as Willem de Kooning would say, is "**mysterious**".

Greenberg helps **demystify** that process, without **diminishing** it.



Clement Greenberg, ca. 1968

Timothy Quigley, 2012