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Other Politics

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Subjects of the Artist

POSTWAR AMERICA WAS anxious. Its mood was described by W. H. Auden in *The Age of Anxiety* (1946): the prophet and the professor, he wrote,

*Agree in predicting a day
Of convulsion and vast evil
When the Cold societies clash
And the great brain which began
With lucid dialectics
Ends in a horrid madness.¹*

The Cold War began with fears of imminent atomic disaster and was soon accompanied by the terror of an anticipated Communist takeover. The popular press responded by describing fear as the major postwar psychological trauma in the United States; *Time* magazine published results of Navy tests on the physiology of fear; articles on fear and anxiety in the popular press increased steadily after World War II.² "Faith, Not Fear, Must Move Us," declared the title of an article by Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1947. The way to defeat Communism, the author suggested, was not, like Joe McCarthy, to make people live in fear that any casual observation that might be construed as pro-Communist could cost them their jobs, but, on the contrary, to establish an atmosphere of optimism and trust. "At a time when communism is more unpopular than ever in this country," Atkinson observed, "many Americans are unwilling to trust the common sense of public opinion or the sound political traditions that have made America a strong nation in the first

place." He warned, "Fear not only distorts normal judgment, but it freezes the heart."³

A year later, in the same magazine, Carlo Levi wrote an article entitled "For Freedom, We Must Conquer Fear," pointing to the source of this paralyzing fear in "the feeling that man has no existence as an individual apart from his participation in the vague and amorphous life of collectivity." Levi saw collectivity as a negative force. "Collective fear disarms the defenders of freedom," Levi told his audience, "and pushes the individual back into the amorphous masses." Listing the injuries a lack of individual identity could promote, Levi wrote that the fear it caused "replaces thoughts and words with slogans, genuine feeling with propaganda . . . and voluntary action with pompous declarations." Strikingly contradicting the devaluation of reason in existential philosophy (and Abstract Expressionism), Levi argued that irrationality was destructive. "When man is driven by irrational forces," he wrote, "engulfed by blind collective impulses, he is pushed hither and yon like a pawn. . . . To stave off fear, we must be free human beings." Such views, commonplace after the war, constructed an American subject, an "individual" who would feel demeaned merely to follow the crowd.⁴

The idea that subjects (that is, humans in their economic, social, and philosophical/psychological positions) are formed by such imperatives, that they are interpellated, or called, into their posi-

15. Michael West, *Man Playing Cello*, 1946, oil on canvas. Location unknown. Photograph courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Friedman, New York City.



tions (at least in part) by the popular press and by film, is one that has come into currency since mid-century. Seeing peoples' ideas of who they are and what is possible for them as being formed through interchanges with the world, rather than being inborn, is part of what poststructural thinkers (principally Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault) have called the "construction of the subject."⁵

The fine arts participated in postwar American society's formation of subjects as "individuals" by providing as models exemplary practitioners, whose supposedly unpredictable products—paintings and, more rarely, sculpture—were viewed as proof of the absence of herd mentality in their makers. This art was to provide experiences for its viewers (pace Newman and Smith in chapter 1) that encouraged them to be "individual" subjects, too. Despite their rejection of the wholly irrational (associated with Surrealism), Ab-

stract Expressionists' emphasis on individual initiative as the appropriate corrective to mass culture at home and the perceived threat of a (Communist) collectivity imposed from outside merged powerfully with existentialist calls for a primarily inwardly determined subjectivity.⁶ As James Thrall Soby of the painting and sculpture department at the Museum of Modern Art wrote, "In an age steadily becoming more collective, art remains one of the few means through which the individual will can assert itself."⁷ This was as true for women as it was for men. Painter Michael West wrote in 1946 that the kind of painting that she, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Jackson Pollock were doing (fig. 15) was "a new form of cubism—that is happening today and is called—the new mysticism in painting—Existentialism. The price of victory is insecurity. Fear is lack of perspective."⁸

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the interpretation of Abstract Expressionism was inhibited by a form of art criticism that emphasized the viewer's identification with the artist's subjective experience—the personal, heroic authenticity of his spontaneous decisions. Early critics, following the artists' leads, tended to favor formal or existential readings linked to the artists' declared avoidance of intelligibility, "mastery" of the medium, desire to transcend, treatment of certain general concepts as subject matter, and intention to make the works refer to the process of their making. Critics either celebrated Abstract Expressionism's ambiguity or eschewed interpretation of individual paintings altogether, partly because of the sheer difficulty of connecting the artists' statements to specific aspects of their work, and partly because they shared the desires of many of these artists to escape certain kinds of interpretation. "Ambiguity is the protean strategy that de Kooning has used to open his art so that it could

become anything and everything, as paintings used to be in the past," wrote Thomas Hess in 1959. "As the stroke becomes freer under the sure control of wider experience, colors open with concepts; the path continues to more and more wonderful diversities."⁹

As the degree of abstraction in Abstract Expressionism increased, the earlier influence of nonindustrial cultures—particularly in the form of "primitivism"—did not dissipate. But whereas in the thirties and early forties there was a tendency to incorporate the motifs of other cultures, in the later forties and fifties artists preferred to adopt "primitive" compositions and what they conceived as the concepts and processes of the cultures of Africa and the American Northwest Coast. This avoided the specificity that traceable motifs or titles provided and made people "look at a picture for what it is—pure painting," said Jackson Pollock in 1950.¹⁰ The evolution from picture to process was a key factor in the formation of the mature styles of many Abstract Expressionist artists. Their lack of finish, certain compositional arrangements, "intuitive" approach, and "earthy" colors were seen as both "primitive" and pure. They intended to confirm this, noted Clement Greenberg, pointing early on to "Oriental, primitive, and children's art as instances of the universality and naturalness and objectivity of their ideal of purity."¹¹ They were heading in exactly the opposite direction, in fact, Greenberg noted, from the visual cultures of "the native of China, no less than the South American Indian" in which these qualities were being defiled by an influx of modern Western kitsch.¹² The modern painters he preferred (those we now recognize as Abstract Expressionists prominent among them) searched for purity in the art of other cultures and other times, both chronological and develop-

mental, obscuring their sources by abstracting their forms and refusing to identify their subject matter in titles. Meanwhile, the idealized purity of those very cultures whose art Western artists ransacked for "universality and naturalness and objectivity," Greenberg saw as ironically being defiled by the mass culture of the West.

The fetishization of purity led Greenberg during the forties and increasingly thereafter to evaluate painting and sculpture on the basis of their formal qualities alone, and to promote each medium's freedom from contamination not only by any other medium but also by cultural and political concerns. Paradoxically, he claimed that these criteria are purely Western. It is a paradox because he stakes a social and political assertion on the absence of social and political criteria (a purity, moreover, that never existed).¹³ In the case of Rosenberg and Hess, the valorization of nonrational processes as valuable in themselves led to a greater concentration on the existential "truth" of spontaneous decisions. But they also raised a vexed question of genius and quality. Whose objects were the purest, the most authentic? In partial response to this question, Abstract Expressionist artists and critics placed renewed emphasis on the well-worn modernist issue of artistic primacy—that is to say, originality.

For the past one hundred years, avant-garde art discourse has been marked by an evaluative insistence on originality. The idea of the self as origin, untainted by tradition, has been a fairly consistent theme from Rodin to the present. "Painting is self-discovery," claimed Pollock.¹⁴ By definition, an avant-garde artist's work had to be original.¹⁵ Although there was substantial disagreement about whether originality was to be found in subject matter or formal invention, whether it was to be measured by its closeness to the begin-

16. Mark Rothko, *Number 15*, 1948, oil on canvas, 51 7/8 x 29 1/8 in. Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, ©1995 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. ©1996 Kate Rothko-Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
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17. Milton Resnick, *Untitled*, 1945, oil, crayon, and pencil on masonite, 15 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. Collection of Muriel Kallis Newman.



nings of culture in early history or early childhood, few disputed its centrality as a criterion of quality.¹⁶

As Abstract Expressionism began to gel as a recognizable mode at mid-century—"to become professional," as Willem de Kooning urged—the criterion of "originality" became a catch-22 that kept the movement's roster small and focused. Artists whose work was not similar to that of the self-defined core of artists who attended the Club and frequented the Cedar Tavern, its unofficial extension in Greenwich Village, did not seem relevant to the emerging style. Yet if their work was too similar, they were not sufficiently original. These artists thereby acquired an informed but disenchanted perspective on the premium Western culture places on originality. Think of Theodoros Stamos (see fig. 8) and Mark Rothko (fig. 16), or Michael West and Pollock or Pousette-Dart, or compare Milton Resnick's *Untitled*, 1945 (fig. 17) to

18. Willem de Kooning, *Pink Angels*, c. 1945, oil and charcoal on canvas, 52 x 40 in. ©1996 Willem de Kooning Revocable Trust/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Estate of Frederick R. Weisman.
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19. Janet Sobel, *The Attraction of Pink*, c. 1944, oil, lacquer, and enamel on canvas, 70 x 32 in. Mr. and Mrs. Sol Sobel for the Estate of Janet Sobel.
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Willem de Kooning's *Pink Angels*, c. 1945 (fig. 18). As Resnick noted, "If you're a *real* artist, there's no one like you. To the extent that you were *like* Picasso, you were *less* than Picasso."¹⁷

Those to whom more recognized painters were closest in style seemed to suffer most. Michael West is a case in point, as is Janet Sobel. Sobel's gemlike abstractions, whose linear forms were directed by blowing the liquid paint after it was applied to the canvas (fig. 19) or by pouring it (figs. 20, 21), were linked by some at the time with those of Pollock

and Tobey as exemplars of a new "polyphonic" all-over composition that characterized Abstract Expressionism. They were "furtively" admired by Greenberg and impressed Pollock when they were seen in shows at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century in 1944 and 1946 (before Pollock began his pourings), but they have only recently begun to find their way into art historical accounts.¹⁸

The criterion of originality was so arbitrary, so contradictory, and so subjectively applied that it could boomerang even among that small core of canonical

artists. Barnett Newman's first show was greeted with "silence and contempt" because his peers believed that he was somehow less than original.¹⁹ Primacy assumed crucial importance. Newman and Motherwell later developed a running battle that hinged on claims about who did the first stripe—Still or Newman.²⁰ Women's claims to primacy were noted less publicly, and later. Of Janet Sobel's painting, Clement Greenberg wrote parenthetically to her son, "I was impressed by the same painting, independently, that Pollock was impressed by; isn't it in Peggy Guggenheim's collection, now? Pollock told me, in 1948 when he saw—in reproduction—his first Tobey, that he thought your mother was better."²¹ Stamos, sensitive to the gendered inflections of aesthetic judgments, observed of Newman's first show, "the reaction was: what a camp."²² Camp culture is traditionally a gay male preserve whose most visible form is female impersonation.²³ The implication of Stamos's recollection is that others saw Newman's apparent neo-Con-

structivism as flaunting its own derivative-ness (especially, perhaps, after Newman's open admiration of the painting of former Constructivist Theresa Zarnower).²⁴ The reaction to Newman's show was negative not only because some of Newman's colleagues felt that his work was too close to theirs (a serious matter that led to a cooling of Newman's friendships with Gottlieb, Rothko, and Still); there was also an impression that Newman was presenting what might be read as simply a grandiose version of Mondrianesque geometric abstraction as his own majestic invention.²⁵

The tautologies involved in the application of the criterion of originality were seldom perceived, however, even by those severely disadvantaged by it. For most artists who matured in the thirties and forties, it was imperative to strive for originality; this was the measure of one's art. As Thomas Hess wrote caustically in 1951, "The American myth of sacrosanct originality (probably initiated by patent lawyers, but today perpetuated by all retailers, especially art dealers) has made

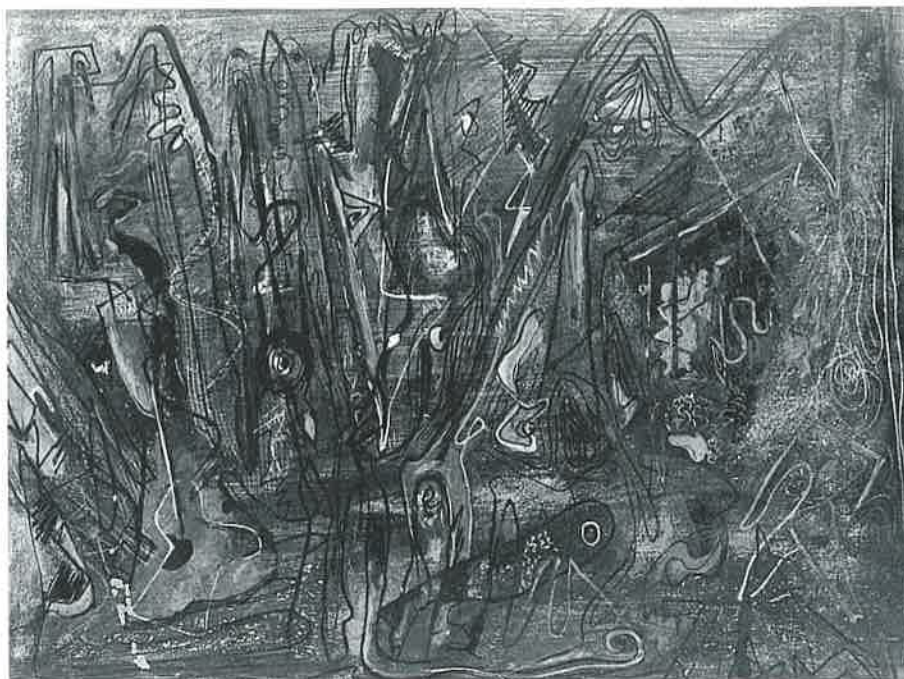
20. Janet Sobel, *Untitled*, c. 1946–48, oil and enamel on canvas, 18 x 14 in. Mr. and Mrs. Sol Sobel for the Estate of Janet Sobel. *left*



21. Janet Sobel, *Untitled*, c. 1946–48, oil and enamel on masonite, 18 x 14 in. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sol Sobel. Photo by Victor Pustai, courtesy of the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. *right*



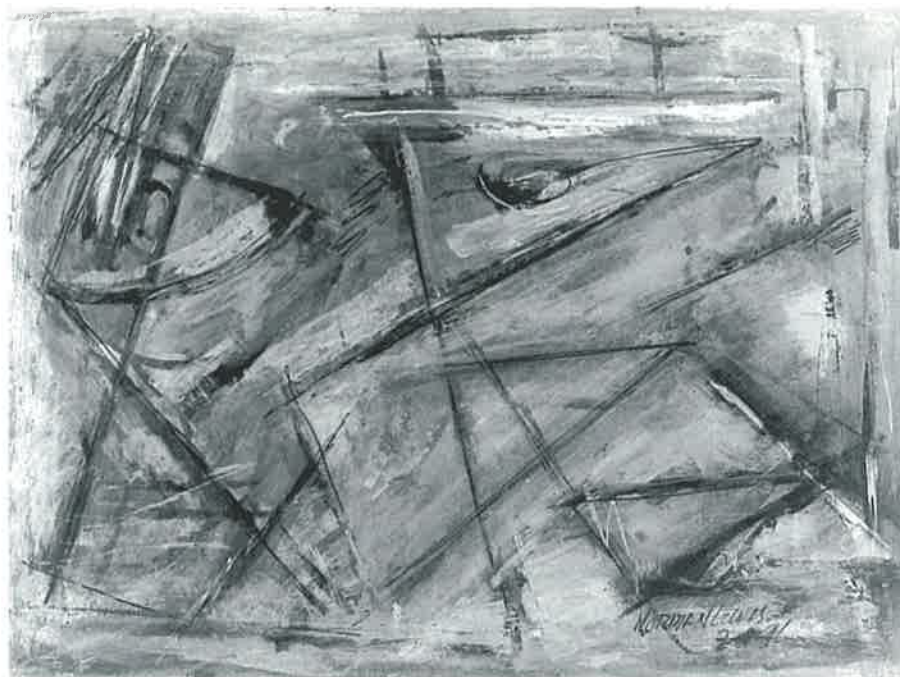
22. Norman Lewis,
Drunk, 1946, oil on ma-
sonite. Location un-
known.



the possibility of derivation more unmentionable than venereal disease."²⁶ The attitudes of artists of color and women, no less than those of white men, were shaped by this attitude. "*Derivative*," mused Louise Bourgeois. "That is the worst word, just about the worst."²⁷ Norman Lewis's bid for a Guggenheim grant in 1946 characterized his artistic activity as a pursuit of originality and emphasized its generative potential—his paintings varied from the delicate organicism of *Drunk* (fig. 22) to the more jagged aggression of *Untitled (A11)* (fig. 23). He intended in his new work "to find hitherto ignored or unknown combinations of forms, colors, and textures and even psychological phenomena, and perhaps to cause new types of experience in the artist as well as the viewer. Above all, it breaks away from its stagnation in too much tradition and establishes new traditions to be broken away from by coming generations of artists."²⁸

The work of the painters whom Hess characterized as America's new abstractionists presented a "new interpretation of nature and of man [whose] mysteries and grandeurs became the heroes."²⁹ Milton Resnick also acknowledged the importance of originality but understood its instrumental value. "It paid off to be yourself, too. Because collectors were already convinced that the only good art is original art. You've got to have your trademark. You've got to convince everybody that you're different from everybody else. It's political, it's economical; it's the function of value to be different."³⁰ This insight—that to be recognized, artists need to develop a sign that is recognizably their own—was understood by Robert Rauschenberg, who in his *Factum I* and *Factum II* of 1957 suggested that the authenticity connoted by the expressionist stroke and the "spontaneous" drip could be copied. The premise has been expanded by Richard Shiff, who noted in

23. Norman Lewis, *Untitled (A11)*, 1946, oil on masonite, 10 x 14 in. Norman Lewis Collection.



1978 that “the sketchlike brushstroke or the unusual, even disturbing, color may have been calculated to imitate the look of another’s individuality rather than being the mark of one’s own.”³¹

Resnick went on to say, “If you look at Cézanne, who’s supposed to be the most original, he’s certainly influenced by Pissarro and everybody else. But beyond the crudity of where he’s influenced . . . he’s like a terrific machine that came together in a split second and held on to something that was his originality, his life, his meanings, everything there. *But how that machinery came together is more important than the parts of the machine*” (italics added).³² This last part of Resnick’s observations on the Abstract Expressionist idea of originality as a criterion of value opens the door to consideration of some of the artists whom I wish to reclaim for Abstract Expressionism. Like Cézanne, their originality may be seen in the ingenuity with which they joined their

marginalized positions to the meanings available in a dominant art form. As Zora Neale Hurston had written decades earlier in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “what we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas. . . . So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything he touches is reinterpreted for his own use.”³³ Resnick’s and Hurston’s comments suggest that investigating the processes of the artist and the mechanics that regulate the attribution of quality to an object are as important, or more important, in evaluating its originality than examining the object alone.³⁴

In 1978, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., presented an exhibition entitled *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist*. In the introduction to the catalogue, curator E. A. Carmean, Jr., argued that the artists generally grouped as Abstract Expres-

sionists were actually quite diverse and that their art works shared little in terms of iconography, style, or themes. What united these artists, he claimed, was their common adherence to “subject matter,” despite the pronounced abstraction of their work. Carmean recalled Rothko’s insistence in 1958 that his works and Gottlieb’s “depart from natural representation only to intensify the expression of the subject.”³⁵ Carmean based the exhibition on this idea, focusing on the Subjects of the Artist, an institution founded in New York in 1948 by William Baziotas, David Hare, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, and dedicated to “a spontaneous investigation into the subjects of the modern artist.”³⁶ I will examine the subject of the artist in a way related to, but not the same as, the treatment of subject matter at the heart of Carmean’s exhibition. What is the relation between the artist as subject and the subjects of the artist? I want to suggest a point at which the two subjects merge.

The National Gallery exhibition sought to follow the school’s curriculum through an in-depth focus on seven artists: Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Motherwell, Newman, Pollock, Rothko, and David Smith. Instead of analyzing the meaning of an artist’s total oeuvre, or the stylistic influences on the artist, Carmean wanted to investigate how each artist’s subjects grew out of their material processes. For him, the Abstract Expressionist subject was not the description of an object or event, but “the articulation of it.” As with Pollock, whose subject in his poured paintings Carmean saw as the ordering of chaos, the Abstract Expressionists often recognized after the fact rather than planned the subjects that appeared in their work. Carmean’s emphasis on material and process allowed him to claim that even recognizably rep-

resentational subjects like de Kooning’s *Woman I* were concerned more with “the ways in which her characteristics are linked with the pictorial style” than with issues of femininity. As support, Carmean cited Greenberg’s recent claim that “if there was anything Pollock was set against in his poured pictures it was iconography. They have a subject—Jackson was sure of that—but it wasn’t there because of iconography.” “Central to abstract expressionism,” Carmean concluded, is “that the subject of each work is a result of the work, which is the use of materials.”³⁷

In this book, *subject*, as in literary theory, refers to a person immersed in ideology who nevertheless, in her or his interaction with conflicting aspects of ideology in an increasingly complex society, generates action or meaning.³⁸ For my purposes, that generally means the artist. Despite the prevalence of the term *subject* in writings about Abstract Expressionism, few authors distinguish between the word’s denotation in traditional art history (as in William Seitz’s *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 1955) and a quite different meaning in psychology (Jacques Lacan), literary theory (Roland Barthes), and political theory (Louis Althusser). Psychoanalytically grounded language theorists such as Lacan and cultural critics like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (in their *Anti-Oedipus*, 1983), have for some time been reviving and revising both the ideological subject of interpellation described by Althusser and the agency of the author who was decentered when poststructural critics like Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida designated the reader and/or the text as the source of meaning instead of the author/artist.

So when Meyer Schapiro used the term *object* when referring to the “object-matter” of abstract art in 1957, he was se-

manically ahead of most of his art historical colleagues. "The object of art," he wrote, "is, therefore, more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling. The painting symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work." Barnett Newman drew on this distinction when he said in an interview, "Most people think of subject-matter as what Meyer Schapiro has called 'object-matter.' It is the 'object-matter' that most people want to see in a painting. That is what, for them, makes the painting seem full. For me both the use of objects and the manipulation of areas for the sake of the areas themselves must end up being anecdotal. My subject is anti-anecdotal."³⁹

In the end, Newman fell back on the term *subject* to describe what in Schapiro's linguistic terms would have been "object." Tellingly, though, Newman wanted to extricate his "subject" from the object category. So he used the term *object* for the anecdotal use of objects (realism, some Surrealism) and the manipulation of areas for the sake of the areas themselves (art-for-art's sake, decoration) in order to distinguish them from his "anti-anecdotal" paintings. Newman's paintings, in other words, were not *about* things. They *were* things, generators of meanings themselves. They were, in a sense, subjects.⁴⁰

In art historical discussion, the word *subject* is often used interchangeably with *subject matter* to refer to the meaningful content (for example, Pollock's control of chaos) of the art. In other disciplines, however, the signification of Pollock's skeins of paint would be the object of his painting and he, the person who made them, would be the subject. Like the subject of a sentence, the subject in political, philosophical, and literary theory is the one who acts, or is acted upon by social

law. For what is *in* the art, I will use both *object* and *subject matter*, the latter a term often used by the artists themselves.

As Carmean's introduction illustrates, canonical Abstract Expressionism's subject matter has been seen as being about, or growing out of, the act of making the painting. This emphasis on the work's making as its meaning fits well with existential definitions of freedom and its principal sign in art, spontaneity. In New York in the forties, the aesthetic atmosphere was charged with spontaneity, freedom, and its closely associated implication, authenticity, and permitted a fusion in the minds of both artists and public of the "objects" (the art and its meanings) to the "subjects" (the artists) who produced them.

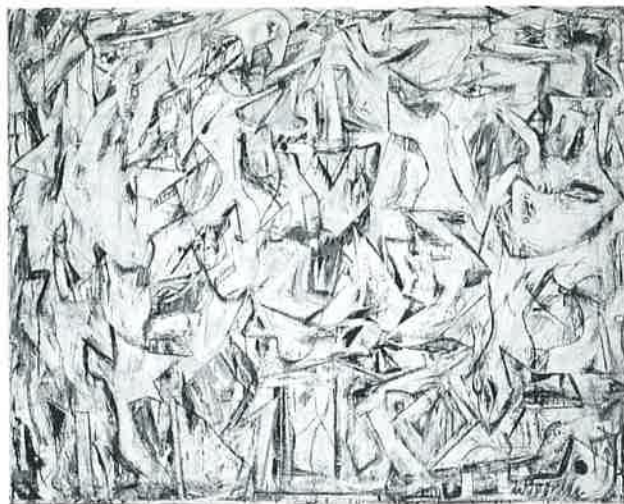
In 1944 Robert Motherwell wrote, "Modern art is related to the problem of the modern individual's freedom. . . . For this reason the history of modern art tends at certain moments to become the history of modern freedom."⁴¹ Motherwell's statement is a good example of the increasing influence on the Abstract Expressionists of what Michael Leja has called "Modern Man" literature (works like James Harvey Robinson's *Mind in the Making* [1921] that focused on the behavior of "modern man"), in conjunction with existentialist ideas.⁴² Artists and writers were drawing their subject matter not only from the concept of a drama of archetypal figures warring in their psyches but also from the moral issue of freedom. They began to see the subjective choices involved in making a work of art as more than simply the means to create an object, but as an end in itself, as what the art was really about.

Under such circumstances it was important to act authentically, sincerely. Conversely, as Greenberg said in relation to Robert Motherwell, "studiousness is a vice."⁴³ To act out of reason, not feeling,

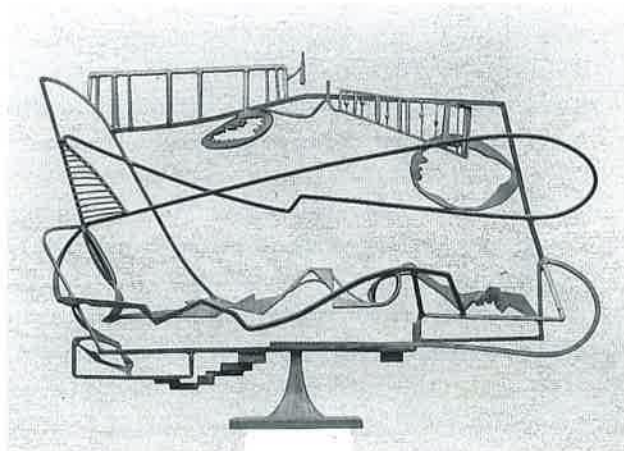
24. Herbert Ferber, *He Is Not a Man*, 1950, bronze with welded metal rods (unique cast, from original in lead), 67 1/4 x 19 1/2 x 13 3/8 in., set in concrete base 18 x 12 x 12 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of William Rubin. Photograph ©1996 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
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25. Willem de Kooning, *Excavation*, 1950, oil on canvas, 6 ft. 8 in. x 8 ft. 4 1/8 in. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Noah Goldowsky and Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize, 1952.1. Photograph ©The Art Institute of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.
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26. David Smith, *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951, welded painted steel and stainless steel, 49 15/16 x 73 3/4 x 16 9/16 in. Purchase. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements. ©1996 Estate of David Smith/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.
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was to act inauthentically. Philosopher Hannah Arendt told the readers of *Partisan Review* in 1946, "Man's task is to 'become subjective.'" She claimed that "realized anxiety before death" ignites a passion to make oneself subjective, to seize the moment, "since only in the moment is Existenz, namely Reality, guaranteed."⁴¹ To be sincere was to act freshly in each situation, not according to formula. In art, this meant to paint each time as if one had never painted before. Thus, Willem de Kooning said, "That's what fascinates me—to make something I can

never be sure of, and no one else can, either."⁴⁵ To be off balance, to be always improvising, was a mark of sincerity. Such minute-to-minute instability could be signified quite literally, as in Ferber's *He Is Not a Man*, 1950 (fig. 24) or, more performatively and gesturally, in Pollock's poured paintings, de Kooning's apparently ad hoc abstractions such as *Excavation*, 1950 (fig. 25), and Smith's *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951 (fig. 26).

I have used Ferber and Smith as exemplars of Abstract Expressionist spontaneity, but art historians as well as the

27. Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1945. Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York.



28. Helen Levitt, *New York*, c. 1945. Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York.



artists themselves have generally felt that the greater flexibility of painting gave painters advantages in spontaneity (over sculptors) and in originality (over photographers), and thus a better claim to be Abstract Expressionists. This was despite the fact that in some photographs, such as Helen Levitt's *New York* series, c. 1945, for instance (figs. 27, 28), stern geometry coexists with more organic as well as less predictable events. As determined as any Abstract Expressionist to escape the predetermined, the rational, and the verbal, Levitt photographed soap bubbles—the iconographic image par excellence of instability—against a massive stone wall, moored only by the attentive glances of a group of young girls.⁴⁶ Her photograph of children toppling a box in similarly stern surroundings resembles the counterposition of container and contained in Adolph Gottlieb's pictographs, and even, in a more general way, the contrasts between line and blot in Robert Motherwell's *Pancho Villa Dead and Alive* (see fig. 7) and between purposeful-looking straight and circular forms and

29. Barnett Newman, *Genesis—The Break*, 1946, oil on canvas, 24 x 27 1/8 in. Dia Art Foundation Collection, courtesy the Menil Collection, Houston.



more improvisationally organic ones in Newman's *Genesis—The Break* (fig. 29). But despite their thematic and formal similarities to these works by Gottlieb, Motherwell, and Newman, the mimetic bonds of Levitt's *New York* photographs to certain places, certain times, and certain people would have made them ineligible for consideration as part of this development.

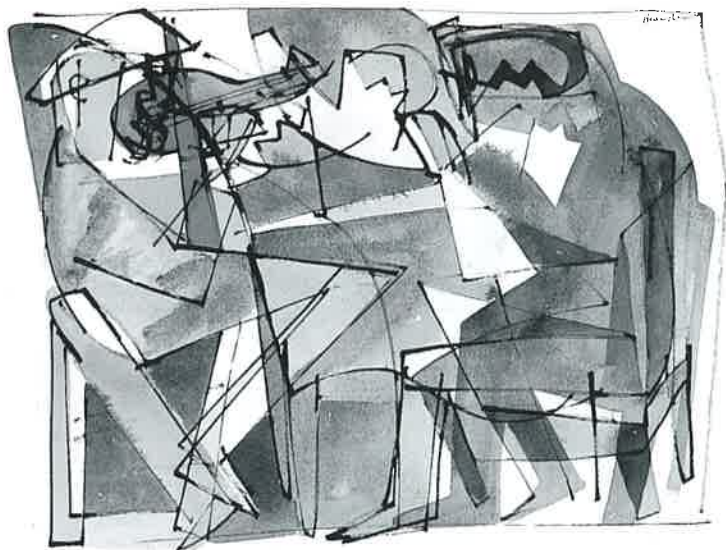
In the case of sculptors, historians have felt that the intractability of media such as steel and clay—their “failure to read as expressive enactment or equivalent—rather than illustration”—precluded true spontaneity and thus denied them the status of Abstract Expressionism.⁴⁷ In the case of photography, the fact that it appeared to mime (to copy, or to reflect an object in the world), rather than to index (to exist as a trace of the artist's thought or action) precluded originality. Both of these “disadvantages” worked to painters' advantage.⁴⁸ Therefore, despite the thematic similarity of many photographers' and sculptors' work to that of canonical Abstract Expressionists, painting has received the lion's share of attention as Abstract Expressionism.

If, however, one understands Abstract Expressionist painting not as the index of spontaneity, but as the *representation* of

spontaneity (signaling the myth of, or representing authenticity, originality of spontaneity rather than resulting from it), then the dismissal of sculpture and photography as Abstract Expressionist media becomes quite significant. In being read so much more obviously as “an indexical sign of its own appearing”—that is, as a representation rather than a “presence”—sculpture and photography give “action” painting's game away.⁴⁹

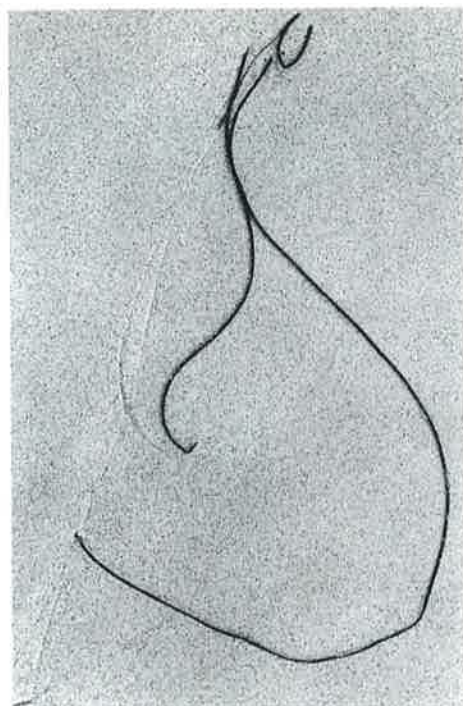
Along with the heroic pathos of existential authenticity, heroic individualism became a part of a professional ideology of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁰ The apparent spontaneity in Abstract Expressionist painting, which served as both an index to its truth and a demonstration of the sincerity of its makers, did not obviate the artists' professional concerns. As de Kooning asserted in 1950, “We ought to have some level as a profession. Some part of painting has to become professional.”⁵¹ In Ad Reinhardt and Robert Motherwell's introduction to the *Modern Artists in America* catalogue of abstract art shown in New York during the 1949–1950 season, they noted of their effort, “it is odd that this effort to bring some order into the situation should come not from critics and scholars, but from practicing artists; still, this may have its good side.”⁵² Such professionalization involved deciding who was abstract in the most promising way and who was not. In the end, the efforts of not only critics, collectors, and gallerists but to an important degree the artists themselves secured as the basis of value in Abstract Expressionism those characteristics that were also marked as having the highest social value in American society: masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness.⁵³

An emphasis on spontaneity, essence, and immediacy was frequently allied in the work of a number of Abstract Expressionist artists with the “primitive” and



30. Romare Bearden, *The Blues Has Got Me*, c. 1946, watercolor and ink on paper, 19 1/2 x 25 1/2 in. Collection Dr. Walter O. Evans, Detroit, Michigan.
left

31. Aaron Siskind. *Seaweed, Martha's Vineyard*, 1947, vintage silver print, 7 x 4 1/2 in. Copyright Aaron Siskind, Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery.
right



thus with African American dance and music. Ironically, however, the notion of improvisation, strongly associated with African American jazz, did not serve as a conduit through which black abstractionists were welcomed into the ranks of the Abstract Expressionists. Although Romare Bearden, for instance, both represented jazz images and evoked the improvisatory qualities of jazz in the fluid washes and staccato lines with which he played on fixed representation in watercolors like *The Blues Has Got Me*, 1946 (fig. 30), his work has rarely been considered in exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism.⁵⁴ Bearden was included in Samuel Kootz's exhibition *Homage to Jazz* in 1946 with Baziotes, Motherwell, and Gottlieb.⁵⁵ With a touch of condescension, *New York Times* critic Edwin Alden Jewell noted, "Romare Bearden seems really to be getting somewhere as an 'interpreter of the blues.' His paintings really do look like jazz."⁵⁶ Similarly, Roy De-

Carava, whose apparently candid but virtuosically composed photographs (*Two Women*, *Mannequin's Hand*, 1950) shared with Aaron Siskind's (fig. 31) both the spontaneous look and the flatness of Abstract Expressionism, remarked: "Jazz and photography are immediate things; they both have to do with now. . . . [T]he jazzman and the photographer have to react at the moment."⁵⁷

In comparison, Pollock's interest in jazz and bop (a rebellious, anti-assimilationist, and comparatively abstract version of jazz and the blues that began during the war and flared brightly after World War II) has been seen as a facet of Abstract Expressionism that connected him to American culture—further proof of his all-American identity.⁵⁸ Pollock's image could be compared not only to the cowboy, but also to the jazzman, another heroic American image, inventing his composition as he went along (Pollock even painted to the music of Charlie

32. Norman Lewis, *Musicians*, 1945, oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 19 1/4 in. Norman Lewis Collection, New York City.

Parker and Dizzy Gillespie).⁵⁹ Like jazzmen, he worked in an improvisational pattern that art historian Matthew Rohn has compared to musical "gesture and response" or "call and response," a basic structure in some African and African American music in which different instruments (or, in Pollock's case, pigments) carry different structural components, "trading off with one another so that no single instrumentalist or structure establishes absolute dominance [and in which] voices and structures keep weaving in and out, modifying and reshaping one another."⁶⁰ But while the influence on Abstract Expressionism of the formal innovations of jazz, blues, and bop has been acknowledged, the relation between the social and political meanings of the music and its visual representation has only begun to be explored.

Like the relation of jazz to the more narrative tradition of the blues, much African American abstraction does not oppose narrative or figural work to form, but employs them for new meanings.⁶¹ Pollock adapted the formal structures of jazz but left its explicit references to its African American roots behind. African American artists such as Norman Lewis (*Musicians*, 1945, fig. 32), Rose Piper (*Death of Bessie Smith*, 1947, fig. 33), Romare Bearden (*The Blues Has Got Me*), and Roy DeCarava (*Ellington #9 Session Break*, New York, 1954), however, meshed analyses of the structure of jazz with visual references to its production by African Americans and its place in the African American community.⁶² This didn't mean that they ignored its formal structures; quite the opposite. Bearden's famous insistence on the importance to him of the interval demonstrates his intimacy with jazz phrasing. Rather, blacks could see jazz's structure but also lived with the inheritance of its social roots.

Many of the artists in this book were able to regard abstraction and mimesis as complementary rather than as contradictory modes of representation. As DeCarava has observed of white photographers like Robert Frank, "He is incapable of seeing what I see. But I can see what he saw. Because I have this duality, I am like a person with two languages. Most black people are."⁶³ Lewis's "spontaneously" brushed *Musicians* refers, for instance, to the Jenkins street bands and to other similar youth-group bands that had played in the summers on streets in many American cities and in Europe from before the turn of the century.⁶⁴ The Jenkins Orphan Home School in Charleston, South Carolina, routinely trained its children to play musical instruments, so that by the time they were ten, the children were touring cities as far north as Boston, playing in the streets and taking up collections to support the school. The colors in Lewis's painting suggest that his inspiration may have been one of the original Jenkins Street Bands, whose members' sweaters corresponded to their instruments (the trumpeters wore green; the saxophonists wore blue; and the rhythm section wore some other color).⁶⁵ Like Piper and Bearden, Lewis's thematizing of jazz emphasized, as poet Lloyd Barrell wrote, that "Jazz is American—American Negro—American as anything can be. . . . Regarded openly as light—taken heavily to heart in private. . . . Jazz is the authentic Negro expression."⁶⁶

When female artists used materials or employed themes or strategies particular to their own experiences, they also found less recognition than their male peers. Even when women employed typically Abstract Expressionist techniques of spontaneity and improvisation, they experienced difficulty in having their work recognized as Abstract Expressionism.





33. Rose Piper, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, 1947, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in. M. Lee Stone Fine Prints.

Collage artist and printmaker Anne Ryan valorized the apparently unplanned in the immediacy of prints such as her *Amazon* (fig. 34) and in the frayed edges of the fabrics of her small collages (fig. 35). In relation to her lack of formal training, she also observed, “The self-taught are more apt to create spontaneously than the academically taught.”⁶⁷ But the naive or folk tenor that in men’s work gave such spontaneity the flavor of authenticity, carried in Ryan’s collages, especially because of the gendered association of their medium and small size, connotations of the sewing

basket that prevented them from being applauded as acts of existential heroism. “Existentialism had to do with the brutality of the real thing,” painter Milton Resnick insisted. “What was real wasn’t supposed to be very elegant and beautiful, charming and flowery. It’s supposed to be a bunch of guys—arraggh,” he growled by way of illustration.⁶⁸ By this definition, diminutive or “pretty” work like Ryan’s was considered too decorative to be designated as Abstract Expressionist.⁶⁹

For many critics in the 1940s, the opposite of “the brutality of the real thing”



34. Anne Ryan, *Amazon. Tiger's Eye 9*. Private collection
left



35. Anne Ryan, *Untitled, no. 234*, 1949, collage, 7 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy Joan T. Washburn Gallery.
right

was the decorative. Greenberg used the term *decoration* to describe allover patterning—when it failed. “Decoration is the spectre that haunts modernist painting,” he wrote, “and part of the latter’s formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself.” Greenberg felt that painting that was concerned primarily with surface but that the decorative potential of surface design forced painting to narrow its range of expression, losing unity and dynamism as it gained immediacy and concreteness.⁷⁰ Greenberg’s version of Abstract Expressionism as all sur-

face, a painting whose “interior”—the emotions or thoughts it was meant to signify—was extraneous to its most important avant-garde function (“to keep culture *moving*”), can be seen as masculinist, in some ways surprisingly like the “new man” (as Klaus Theweleit described him) produced by German military academies before and during World War II. These soldiers understood themselves as the antithesis of the feminine and the maternal. Their very beings were exteriorized on the surface of the body, which they understood as a machine whose principal

goal also was “to keep itself moving.”⁷¹ Men like Pollock, of course, and Motherwell were consciously trying to mine their feelings and thoughts, not escape them. But in categorizing as “decorative,” with all of the feminine, domestic, and trivial, and derivative connotations that term carried, painting whose allover patterning did not work against itself, most men and some women of this period (as well as later) struggled mightily with the gendered paradox of Abstract Expressionism’s two-dimensional abstraction.⁷² Critics before and after Greenberg have interpreted decoration as the nightmare of abstraction, its mindless doppelganger.⁷³ The fear of abstractionists like Pollock, claimed Rosalind Krauss, was that they might be making “mere abstraction, abstraction uninformed by a subject, contentless abstraction, for which the term—wholly pejorative for everyone from Kandinsky and Mondrian to Pollock and Newman—is *decoration*.”⁷⁴

One way to escape the pejorative connotations of decoration, in abstract painting—at least in the 1940s—was to evoke the architectural, to make works that were large.⁷⁵ So although paintings like Pollock’s *Number 1A, 1948* (see fig. 6) and his *Unformed Figure, 1953* (fig. 36) and Willem de Kooning’s *Excavation, 1950* (see fig. 25) displayed many decorative qualities, their large size allowed the artists and their apologists to reject this term emphatically. Jeffrey Wechsler’s exhibition and catalogue, *Abstract Expressionism, Other Dimensions: An Introduction to Small-Scale Painterly Abstraction in America, 1940–1965*, explored the premise that because large size has become such an unquestioned element of the received definition of Abstract Expressionism, not only very small works by well-known artists, but also a number of artists whose works are not large but are

“Abstract Expressionist” in every other way, have been excluded from consideration.⁷⁶ Smaller works, especially those associated with the ornamental arts, were often linked to women (recalling the infamous statement by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, “There is a hierarchy in the arts: decorative art at the bottom, and the human form at the top. Because we are men!”).⁷⁷ For the Abstract Expressionist generation, to produce decorative work was to be inconsequential—it was to be feminine.

By definition, the decorative is that which is *in excess* of function. This damned it for a generation that was in search of art’s intrinsic power, “the power it exerts in its own territory and in its own name,” as Norman Bryson has put it. As Bryson has argued, however, such power resides in the capacity to *exceed* what it apparently represents.⁷⁸ “Major” Abstract Expressionism was conflicted in this regard. On the one hand, painting in excess of representation was exemplary transgression and the route to power; on the other hand, it could also be seen as superficial, cosmetic, unnecessary, and therefore in the realm of the feminine. I would argue not that this painting has failed to exceed what it apparently represents, but rather that this (“decorative”) painting’s abstraction points to subject matter marked by American society as feminine, or as “tribal,” rather than as masculine, conscious, and European in origin. Ornamental patterning has been associated most often with the surfaces of African sculpture and with such domestic “crafts” as embroidery, weaving, and furniture design, all generally regarded as within the province of the feminine or the racialized other. As Hedda Sterne recalls, in the 1940s, decoration was hardly considered an appropriate vehicle for subject matter like tragedy or transcendence.⁷⁹ Barnett Newman even

claimed that in Kwakiutl societies women's abstraction (basket weaving) was decorative, whereas men's abstraction (painting on hides) was directed toward metaphysical understanding.⁸⁰

This sort of "anthropological" perception was perpetuated throughout American education in the 1940s, and its gendered bias was continued. In 1950, Lynn White, president of Mills College, argued that men were uniquely suited for the abstract thinking necessary in the sciences, mathematics, and the fine arts, and that equal education for women would doom women to failure. Women's instincts, he wrote, were practical and earthy; therefore, they should study minor (decorative) arts like ceramics, textiles, weaving, leatherwork, and flower arranging. Female subjects, in other words, were by nature precluded from being able to produce consequential art.⁸¹

Few artists, male or female, wanted their work associated with the low status that decoration implied. "When you work in the school of abstraction, you have to avoid . . . the decorative," Louise Bourgeois told an interviewer as late as 1979.⁸² Steve Wheeler, a painter who produced intricately patterned allover paintings (fig. 37) and who had observed closely the patterns of Northwest Coast Native American art and studied with Hans Hofmann, remembered his teacher's most severe reproach: "Too *dekorativ*! Too *dekorativ*!"⁸³ This criticism, however, had particular resonance for women artists, who were aware that any hint of ornament in their work tended to relegate them to the personal, feminine ghetto of the home. As a result, many women artists, like Elaine de Kooning, strove mightily to avoid decoration (fig. 38): "In early American art, women studied watercolor, for instance, but it was in terms of decoration. They were supposed to

take care of the home, to beautify it by putting up little watercolors and painting on cabinets. But that heritage doesn't affect a serious woman artist. For instance, as a young artist, I never thought for a moment that I had to use women artists as role models. My role models were Rembrandt, El Greco."⁸⁴ Before her exhibition *Thirty-One Women* had even opened, Peggy Guggenheim felt compelled to defend the women in the show against charges of decoration.⁸⁵ Their art, she wrote, was "by no means restricted to the decorative vein as could be deduced from the history of art by women throughout the ages."⁸⁶

One way to remove apparently nonobjective art from the opprobrium of the decorative realm was to emphasize its spontaneity, because to plan ahead, as one did to produce the repeated patterning deemed characteristic of the decorative, was to forgo the promptings of genius, to be unauthentic. "What happens on the canvas is unpredictable and surprising to me," wrote William Baziotès. "There is no particular system that I follow when I begin a painting."⁸⁷ David Smith told a radio audience in 1952 that when he began a sculpture he wasn't sure what its final appearance would be; "I don't want to know how it ends," he said, "because maybe the battle of solution would seem too easy."⁸⁸ In a similar vein, "I begin a painting with a series of mistakes," wrote Robert Motherwell in 1947. "The painting comes out of the correction of mistakes with feeling. . . . only in a state of quickened subjectivity—of freedom from conscious notions, and with what I always suppose to be secondary or accidental colors and shapes, do I find the unknown."⁸⁹ Even Barnett Newman, whose relatively controlled fields and taped zips (as he called the thin verticals on his canvases) suggest careful consider-



36. Jackson Pollock, *Unformed Figure*, 1953, oil on canvas, 52 x 77 in. Museum Ludwig Köln. Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln. ©1996 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

37. Steve Wheeler, *Curly Legs*, 1943, tempera, 24 x 14 in. Courtesy Snyder Fine Art, New York. ©1996 Estate of Steve Wheeler/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. *opposite*

ation, if not actual measuring, insisted, "I am an intuitive painter, a direct painter. I have never worked from sketches, never planned a painting, never 'thought out' a painting."⁹⁰ Echoing the views of other Abstract Expressionists, Clyfford Still wrote, "It has always been my hope to create a free place or area of life where an idea can transcend politics, ambition, and commerce."⁹¹ For these artists, the freedom and universality of spontaneous abstraction was a sign of originality, as well as a welcome relief from the prison of prewar realist images.

In 1950, Motherwell drew a distinction between what he called the "mode of discovery and invention" and the "mode of joy and variation." The first of these modes, he said, represented "the deepest

painting problem, the bitterest struggle."⁹² For the Abstract Expressionists, originality was linked not only to the idea of being the first to introduce a certain combination of effects but also to certain ideas about the origins of art. They connected their discoveries of self with their discoveries of "primitive" art; both were understood more as stages of human development than as the production of a specific historical time and place.⁹³ The Abstract Expressionists used this idea to align aspects of their art with cultures such as those of Oceania and Africa (at the same time as some distinguished their own work from that of "primitive" peoples). "I think my work is primal," remarked Richard Pousette-Dart, "in the sense of a first intensity of feeling—not primitive."⁹⁴



38. Elaine de Kooning, *Untitled #2*, 1949, crayon on paper, 13 1/2 x 9 15/16 in. Courtesy of Joan T. Washburn Gallery.

As anthropologist Marianna Torgovnik has perceptively noted, "The attraction to 'the primitive' depends on a not-quite-realized critique of western individualism."⁹⁵ Judging so-called "primitive" art by universal standards made it possible to value it as a critique of modern culture without interacting with the modern representatives of the cultures deemed "primitive."⁹⁶ The concept of "primitivism" trivialized *contemporary* difference based on sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and class, and favored instead the more essentializing originality of a mythical primal beginning.⁹⁷ The universalism of a sort of generic and idealized primal originality was especially attractive to a populace for whom the brief euphoria that followed the victory of World War II was horribly soured by revelations about the Holocaust and the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on the inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The qualities promoted by America's popular heroes in the face of these events and in the subject matter and persona chosen by the Abstract Expressionists were by and large those favored by what was then understood as a socialist humanism: universality, individual freedom, equality, the dignity of the human person, and freedom of expression.⁹⁸ As Michael Leja aptly put it, "The 'subjects of the artist' were the artists as subjects."⁹⁹ A number of Abstract Expressionists—Pollock, Rothko, Gottlieb, Roszak, and Smith, for instance—had been involved with various forms of socialism before the forties;¹⁰⁰ more came to favor the socialist-leaning reforms of the New Deal, whose WPA had so benefited them. Following the 1939 Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact, the 1939 Russian invasion of Poland, and the defeat of Finland in 1940, however, many artists, along with the rest of America's leftist intelligentsia,

rejected Communist socialism as a panacea.¹⁰¹ The "humanist" stance of socialism offered them a way to participate in the class struggle—to live a revolutionary practice—within the confines of a capitalist democracy.¹⁰²

Poststructuralists have followed Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida's examination of the "death of the author" to link humanism to the repressive and limiting effects of identifying authorial intention with true meaning.¹⁰³ But humanism's paternalistic Western bias during the forties was not apparent to most of those who had spent their lives within its embrace. Whether socialist or capitalist, that is, meshed with the sterner and more puritan ideals of New Humanism (the old Puritan virtues of inner control and moderation espoused by Irving Babbitt), humanism's dominance was seldom disputed in the forties.¹⁰⁴ Its allure, however, was one-sided. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarked in 1947, "In its eyes, Western humanism is the love of humanity, but to others it is merely the custom and institution of a group of men, their password, and sometimes their battle-cry."¹⁰⁵

Helen Levitt's *New York*, c. 1945 (see fig. 28), showing a group of children scuffling under a tipping box, suggests with wry humor the delights as well as the blindness of homosocial bonding.¹⁰⁶ However, it presents the possibility of dichotomous readings similar to those Merleau-Ponty found in Western humanism. One cannot, of course, tell *who* is under the box. They are, within the confines of a strictly visual analysis, for instance, ungendered. But most viewers will see this as a rowdy group of boys whose anonymity is more apparent than real. The idea of Abstract Expressionism as a universal language presents a similar paradox. For the kinds of persons—the subjects—who could appropriately pro-



duce that art were limited by American social mores to heterosexual men of European descent, or to those who could pass as such. Those few who spoke out against this situation were seldom in a position to change it.¹⁰⁷ Artistic procedures, forms, or materials that carried feminine connotations that could not be transformed or mastered by a masculine idiom, or aesthetic styles or images from other cultures that were not generalized

enough, were considered to lack the universal appeal of great art. And because an important measure of value in Abstract Expressionism was the degree to which the art and the artist were one, its subjects, its subject matter, and its audience tended to locate their outlook where this was most feasible: the territory of the heterosexual, the Caucasian, and the male.