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Bourne-Again Art

by
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When American abstract painting was hailed triumphantly in the sixties, the mantle of the avant garde passed from the School of Paris to the School of New York. Or did it? The second-most important element of the School of Paris, the virulently hostile French bourgeoisie that formed its easily-provoked early audience (there were riots at the first Paris performance of *Le Sacre du Printemps*), was long gone; and even if it had still existed, the avant garde, like the gothic style of the late Middle Ages, was a local wine that traveled poorly. They did, after all, call it the School of *Paris*. Since the avant garde left such a rich inheritance, acknowledging this doesn't detract from the importance of subsequent modern art—it merely acknowledges that claims to rival the School of Paris were doomed. Early American vanguardists, for instance, from Dove to Hartley, encountered withering isolation of a sort unimaginable to European artists for trying to introduce avant garde content to a society that was so different from that of Europe.

One of these differences was the American social dynamic created by successive waves of massive immigration. Early in the twentieth century, several writers grew concerned about the too rapid vault toward assimilation by immigrant groups. The social critic Randolph Bourne in particular worried about individual ethnic mores that, he wrote, somehow failed to influence America's traditions and expressions. Over these bearers of ancient vital cultures fell, he thought, the pall of a conformist, shallow Anglicization.

The Anglo Saxon element is guilty of . . . the imposition of its own culture upon the minority peoples. The fact that this imposition has been so mild, and indeed, semi-conscious, does not alter its quality.

Bourne urged

an examination of what Americanization might rightly mean.
. . . It is apparently our lot to be a federation of cultures. . . .

we find that we have all unawares been building up the first international nation . . . America is already the world federation in miniature.

Bourne's vision of open cultural federation, however, was not to be realized. The nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century was an age of Anglo-melt, and the price of joining was ethnic concealment. Newcomers anglicized the names of their children, aped Protestant attitudes and manners, and spoke English in public. To display ethnic character invited derision; the melting pot was based on emphasizing apparent similarities and suppressing obvious differences. The process of assimilation and the world it created are at the core of the American aesthetic in literary no less than visual art, and has often been written about. One especially poignant book, *Call It Sleep*, Henry Roth's 1930s masterpiece, uniquely describes growing up in a New York City ghetto near the turn of the century.

Roth's novel explores some of the forces that powered assimilation and the price young immigrants had to pay to survive (surprisingly, Roth's model for immigrant assimilation would also come to serve Abstract Expressionism). Roth's main character, the young, sensitive, Lower East Side-dweller David Schearl, is supported by a protective mother who transmits to him a world of culture. In a book with great feeling for language, English, the tongue of the New World, is rendered in a butchered speech without nuance, while the translated Yiddish David speaks at home is rendered as elegant, delicate and complex. Isaiah Berlin, speaking of the eighteenth century German philosopher, poet and historian Johann Gottfried Herder, exactly captured this culture formation in his description of people's urgent need to retain their sense of place:

Herder virtually invented the idea of belonging . . . just as people needed to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. . . . To be human meant to be able to feel at home somewhere, with your own kind. Each group, according to Herder, has its own . . . set of customs and a life style, a way of perceiving and behaving that is of value solely because it is their own. The whole of cultural life is shaped from within the particular stream of tradition that comes of collective historical experience shared only by members of the group.

Roth, seen through Herder's lens, is carefully delineating how the only route to full culture can be blocked by American mores that require a path which suppresses open acknowledgement of one's own culture.

For David, the contrast between the delicacy and considerateness of his home life and the brutality and indifference of the world around them is overwhelming, and eventually the delicacy and structure of his internalized immigrant world is destroyed. He becomes overwhelmed by the frustration of his childish efforts to understand his situation. When his world finally tears apart, he too is torn, and David experiences, in an uncharacteristic outpouring—almost like speaking in tongues—a raw energy that pours through him in a wild flow: “He fled through to the street, one wild glance at his house and he scurried west. A strange chaotic sensation was taking hold of him. . . . I'm somebody else . . .” David experiences a remarkable surge in physical energy in the context of his self-negation, and the invulnerability it bestows on him is striking: “Ain' even tiad! Ain' even me!”

But the point is clear: a child has made a sacrifice that has wiped out much of his identity, in the process releasing an energy that makes the melting pot work. American subjugation of self to public identity was aggressively spelled out by the young Richard Rodriguez, a writer with what one might call a combination of overseer's complex and Stockholm Syndrome. Like Roth, Rodriguez focuses on themes of American acculturation in an autobiographical narrative called *Hunger of Memory*, published in the 1970s. Young Rodriguez, like Roth, speaks of the social self-obliteration and self-surrender of a sensitive and shy Hispanic child in the parochial school system, but unlike Roth, Rodriguez embraces and celebrates it.

Only when I was able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in gringo society, could I seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality. . . . despite the fact that the individuality I achieve in public is often tenuous—because it depends on my being one in a crowd.

For Rodriguez, who attacks the “brazen intimacy” of teenagers speaking black English to each other, the outcome of the war between public and private is an emptying of a once-privileged realm. Bilingualists, he declares,

do not seem to realize that there are two ways a person is individualized . . . while one suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by becoming assimilated to public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of public identity. . . . only in private . . . is separateness from the crowd a prerequisite for individuality. . . full individuality is achieved, paradoxically, by those who are able to consider themselves members of the crowd.

Public space, the neutral area in which Americans interact away from the precincts of intimacy and their private lives, continues to be a social and political necessity, despite the truth of Bourne's insights, because—in this Rodriguez was right—our heterogeneity necessarily defines the place where we meet almost as if we were all strangers. Up until the sixties and seventies, the sobersides business culture, tonally void of character save for echoes of its long-gone WASP founders, served as an inert behavioral model for the more expressive subcultures. Rodriguez's idealization of public space as a value in itself and an eradicator of the cultures for which it stood in as placeholder exemplified assumptions that came to be destructive both to the cultures under attack and to public space itself. This idealization ended the taken-for-granted neutrality of public space. Later on, it also stimulated a resistance that led to activist agendas and ultimately to the landmined PC mentality of identity politics. Bourne's vision of America as a nation of many strong cultures could ultimately be a recipe for political disaster (as it has been in the Balkans), but it is achievable microculturally. Rodriguez's solution, to take away from people what can't be taken away—their identity—and replace it with whatever gives us presence in public space, was an attempt to substitute crab apples for oranges.

Nothing could have been further from the European avant garde experience than that of Roth and Rodriguez. The School of Paris successfully attacked the larger world with eccentric individual vision and style, not the other way around. Ambitious European outsiders like the Fauvist painters didn't need mass support—they could arm themselves with theories and produce manifestos to justify their surprising art. They established themselves through the strength and definiteness of their ideas, which needed to resonate only in a few appropriate places in their class-structured world to achieve a degree of security and recognition.

In America, by contrast, the Fauvists would have had trouble registering. As a fascinated and somewhat alarmed de Tocqueville put it in the early nineteenth century, “No longer do ideas, but interests only, form the links between men, and it would seem that human opinions were no more than a sort of mental dust open to the wind on every side and unable to come together and take shape.” In the New World, dissenting thought, even robust social experiments, would arise but tended to disappear, leaving scarcely a trace. Commenting further on the way ideas lost their status in the American climate and were replaced by the power of consensus, de Tocqueville wrote that “the idea of rights inherent in certain individuals is rapidly disappearing from the minds of men; the idea of the omnipotence of the authority at large rises to fill its place.” In a rather chilling assessment of these developments, the historian John Patrick Diggins, author of *The Lost Soul of American Politics*, has written that “society [was forming] as a self-regulating entity whose laws operated not only independently of the political state but [was] held together by unconscious needs and desires, society as something alien to the self.” Rodriguez’s violent self-cleansing was performed in the name of this society.

Early vanguardists were required to enter our society of strangers and create an aesthetic to fit, not challenge, the vast, neutrally-defined arena of public space. Abstract Expressionism sought to move the capital of world art from Paris to New York. But to be a Frenchman in Paris, the hub of centralized French politics and culture, is to be at the center of a cultural orchestration that never misses a beat. From Alsace to Normandy, identity in this Herdorean universe is simply a fact; each Frenchman’s political and cultural birthright, locally and nationally, are seamlessly one.

To watch a busy Paris street is to watch a rhythm. The processes of acculturation are profound—so profound that a French painter’s own taste could become the national style, as Jean Renoir reports his father’s did. By comparison, New York City has rhythm, but not a rhyme: it is always thrilling to come back to the city after an absence and with a fresh eye encounter the unanticipatable melee of styles that a New York street affords—a near chaos in which each citizen is working out his own pursuit of happiness in his own way and at his own pace, just trying not to bump into anyone else. The Founding Fathers, who bestowed on us the right to the pursuit of happiness, left the individual relatively disconnected and without context. The early removal of the capital of the country to out-of-the-way Washington, D.C., to preserve the federal government from local political

influences, cut the individual off from a sense of participation in central decision-making, leaving an apolitical, unmoored citizenry and making federal power seem remote and irrelevant to local interests. Abstract art played a significant role in the expansion of idealized public space. The European tradition of an art that established niches and boundaries needed to be transformed into an art of identification in which boundaries dissolve. The two traditions are profoundly different: the former often involves respect for what you can't identify with. When in the nineteenth century Oscar Wilde addressed American coal miners wearing velvet knee britches and they cheered him, Wilde's audience was accepting, not identifying with him. When the identity of a community is secure enough, as in Herder's universe, it is possible for it to accept an alien element, as the coal miners accepted Wilde for his guts, his performance, and his britches. When gay theater, the most original theater in the 1960s heyday of Off-Off-Broadway, finally emerged from midnight, out-of-the-way performances, it engaged in a debate about self-presentation. The decision was made by key players like Charles Ludlam and the general gay community that their theater should not publicly formulate its aesthetic and worldview as one openly different from heterosexual theater's, but present itself more as an already included, attractive ethnic group, as in, "There's a little Italian in each of us." The proffer of identification, unlike that of acceptance, means that the audience is being offered more social and personal space to expand into. This form of art, which expands public space, helps explain why in America cultural innovations that start out with considerable character rapidly turn into mere trends once the move toward "the center" is made. The center, rather than being a location equidistant from two extremes, as is invariably represented, is actually a loose puddle that erodes structures which express character.

Abstract Expressionism was well on its way to a rendezvous with public space long before the gay theater. Its avatars too had their own strategies. In a world where society itself pre-empted alienation, the alienation of the artist, foundation of the European avant garde, couldn't register. So would-be American vanguardists did not attack their equivalent of the bourgeoisie—the middle class—but worked to convince Americans that modern art was not as far from middle class interests as provincial reactions of rejection might lead one to think. The author of *How New York Stole the Idea of Painting*, Serge Guilbaut, noted that in 1943, in an effort to help gain acceptance for their painterly convictions, two painters—Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb—wrote to *The New York Times* to explain that their movement (Abstract Surrealism, which was to become Abstract Expressionism) sought

“simple expressions of complex thoughts.” Their ambition—to field a “just us folks” version of abstract art—is telling. First, as an aesthetic posture, it’s more than a little condescending—a hypocritical tone invites the audience to participate in its own dumbing down. Second, their formula may set a limit on accomplishment—in a discipline like art, whose high achievers have always been famously single-minded, a calculating preoccupation with packaging complexity to look simple risks having marketing considerations interfere with artistic interests. Practically, however, Gottleib and Rothko weren’t misguided; they were merely seeking to broach an American resistance toward abstract work whose intensity sometimes masked a certain empathy. As an example of backhanded appreciation, consider the words of a disapproving Chicago critic who wrote of Duchamps’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*: that “it looks like an Omaha lumberyard in the tornado season”—a brilliantly empathetic image that suggests the painting had struck home. But even when abstract painting struck a responsive chord, the road to acceptance was rugged.

Abstract Expressionism overcame these obstacles by changing the tentative explorations of Abstract Surrealism into an intellectually unthreatening form that Americans could identify with—painting that emphasizes itself as an act (in fact dubbed Action Painting by the critic Harold Rosenberg). A material gesture in paint is an incontestable material fact that could serve as the simple expression Rothko and Gottleib sought. Difficult to unpack and as incontestable as a small avalanche, gesture could compellingly stand as a force whose literal actuality could override and mask whatever it carried along. Action Painting’s immediacies, in other words, grow from an impressively physical style that foreclosed interpretation while encapsulating the emotive resonance of the broken-surface brushstroke of, for instance, Rembrandt, Velazquez and Rubens. These seventeenth century painters confirmed and celebrated the European tradition that the freely released painterly gesture can bear with it not just material, but feeling. The European painterly gesture created elements of an image into which feeling had been infused by virtue of the hand of the artist, expressing, sometimes miraculously, both his body and his mind. In this way, the School of New York, offering the same tradition in a wholesale form, in an instant stroke delivered to the emptiness of public space the fullness of culture.¹

¹ The Abstract Expressionists had major differences, and statements about the movement may not apply equally—or at all—to every painter. (Hans Hofmann, in his preservation

The contradictions inherent in this posture were as massive as the paintings themselves, since it was a question whether painterly values could be detached from European contexts hardly reflected in American experience. For the most part, the American aesthetic for which physicality is deliberately central, for instance, is a hand-me-down from the era of the Genteel Society in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when, as Santayana observed, men took on the bully work—continent taming, exploring and building a great nation and great business empires—“The House of Will,” as he put it—while women, in control of manners and morals, controlled the arts and writing—“The House of Culture.”

In the nineteenth century the thought and writing of the American Renaissance bloomed with Emerson and his contemporaries, and the rise of magazines, as the more softly surfaced Genteel Tradition began to rule in place of earlier, male-oriented Calvinism. Though the majority of the new voices were still male, men in the new context experienced frustration over the difficulties of putting forward any aesthetic that expressed male roles and a male authority that shared characteristics with the purposive Calvinist model. Complaining about the imperviousness of American cultural thought to critique, Henry James, a beneficiary of the new climate and himself preeminently genteel, writing in frustration in *The Speech and Manner of American Women*, complained that this unapproachable style of cultural authority

defies the criticism and the criticism, gasping at the impunity, is reduced to the impotence of the traveler, waiting, carpet bag of notes in hand, at a by-station, for the train that whizzes past without stopping. Whence the wondrous vicious circle—the train ignorant of a goal, but never so much as slowing up, the traveler conscious of a mission, but never so much as making a dash. Whence, in other words, the rare perfection of the impunity, assured *in advance* of the non-intervention of criticism.

of the German color tradition, was most in a class by himself.) For the purposes of this essay, de Kooning is in the forefront.

American male writers of the day—Twain, Thoreau, and Melville, who were also beneficiaries of the new society—were frustrated and reactively wrote books in which women have no place (Huck Finn has no mother; *Moby Dick* is virtually womanless). *Moby Dick*, a masterpiece, was an early project of wounded masculinity, which itself became an aesthetic as the struggle to make art out of the man's cultural portion of triumphal, often physical work went on in the writing of Hemingway and a multitude of others. Abstract Expressionism, an art movement that barely included women and fielded a massive, violent art with concealed content, eminently belongs to this tradition.

With their unfancy housepainter's brushes and Duco, the Abstract Expressionists associated themselves with everyday blue collar journeymen and their unexceptional materials, appropriating a democratic status that seemed to bypass complex ideas and was very different from the status European movements derived from structured thought. Abstract Expressionists, who were often indifferent to the impermanence of their materials, abjured the craftsmanship whose skills had conferred traditional status on objects in Europe. In America, the values of the craft tradition, suitable for limited production of articles of quality, were obliterated by the need for objects in quantity and the pressures of technological change—the American designer of clipper ships, when asked why his vastly superior vessels weren't put together with greater care and so didn't last, answered that it was because builders knew that within a few years even better-designed ships would be replacing them. The continent's apparently endless resources promised a vast flow of unspecified materiality that could be directed to manufacture whatever object was desired. This river of fluid materiality was the New World's democratic response to the crafted, niche-creating status object, and it was to this vast potentiality that Abstract Expressionism turned, rather than to the precision and specialized knowledge of the craftsman.

One all-important aspect of the new role of the artist as unintellectual aesthetic athlete was Abstract Expressionism's near total abdication to critics. In absolute contradiction to the tradition of the European avant garde, whose members were in control of their own theoretical destiny and were witty, sharp-tongued and feared, Abstract Expressionists handed over their voices to critics, especially to Clement Greenberg. An arts impresario almost without peer, Greenberg wrote for *The Partisan Review* and worked in the 1930s, '40s and '50s to make America the center of advanced abstract art, engineering, as Guilbaut has described, the shift from the School of Paris to the School of

New York. But the demand on artists to represent themselves—a group of mature men who had mastered one of the most difficult disciplines of the century—as exuberantly witless, if occasionally oracular, cowboys, was only one of several sleights of hand required.

Given the differences between Paris and New York, Greenberg had his work cut out for him in creating a marketplace for American abstract painting (which had been frozen out by European work), leveraging the leap from third-rate to world leader status in painting and displacing the French-oriented galleries that then reigned in New York City. First, he winnowed the number of artists to be called Abstract Expressionists, much as Dutch explorers when they discovered a Pacific island of nutmeg trees immediately cut down three-quarters of them, ensuring the scarcity that a strong market requires. (For instance, an artist named Janet Sobel made drip paintings before Pollock, which the artist saw and admired—and though Greenberg admitted they were the first “allover” paintings, he pruned her from the canon.) He also insisted, in the very political aftermath of the Depression, that the artists divest their work of political intentions. Then he put abstraction on a weight-loss program that roughly paralleled the one endured by American women since WWII. On this artistic journey, art would shed its “expendable conventions”—all components of a painting that did not point to its material elements as paint and canvas—in order to arrive at a perfect, irreducible, inherent flatness. Using technical language to apply this highly selective reading of European aesthetic developments that began with Cézanne (“I am the primitive of a new art”), Greenberg claimed to be able to identify the steps to the ideal of flatness that he advanced as painting’s all and everything.

In doing so he designed a historicist criticism that, like the stance Henry James complained about, was able to bypass and ignore the content of individual works—the sites on which painterly value is actually created. In contemporary formalist criticism, the critic Leo Steinberg wrote, “The criterion for significant progress remains a kind of design technology subject to one compulsive direction: the treatment of ‘the whole surface as a single undifferentiated field of interest’. . . there is rarely a hint of expressive purpose, nor recognition that pictures function in human experience.”

Easter Monday

The School of New York can be said to divide into three parts, the more buttoned-up, “uptown” artists (Gottlieb, Motherwell, Rothko, and Newman), the “downtown,” bohemian-seeming expressiveness of de Kooning, Kline, Gorky, and Pollock, and the explosive, color-saturated work of Hans Hofmann, who wedded the German painting tradition to American abstraction. Willem de Kooning was the most central figure of the downtown group and probably the painter who most justified the movement’s second defining term, “Expressionism.” De Kooning’s *Easter Monday*, painted in 1955-56, has shallow space, powerful brushstrokes made with housepainter’s brushes, traces of newsprint, and ranks with masterworks of the School of Paris. It is deeply anti-conventional in its indifference to elements that hold a painting together, like internal reverberations and echoings of color and shape; de Kooning’s painting not only doesn’t cultivate such connective harmonies, but seems to turn against them. The openness and vulnerability of the painting seem to contribute to a mood of ambivalence, even apathy. It is a powerful and physical performance somehow laced with torpor.

Easter Monday, as if it were made of debris and litter, the continuous grinding of impacting edges and pulverizing pressure, seems to suggest that in the gutters of the urban mind all consciousness is degradable. It is, incidentally, an extremely difficult painting to hold in memory, in all likelihood because the principles of its formation seem to violate principles of coherence that help us recognize landmarks and make the world seem familiar.

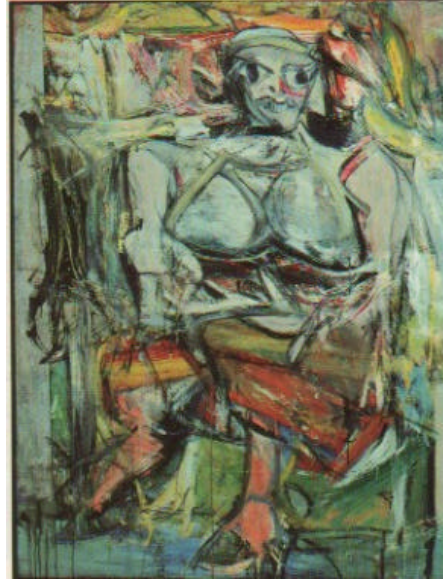
A painting by de Kooning can brim with assertions which never quite reach the level of full articulation; the energy and tension of the work come out of a ferment that generates an almost insurrectionary overtone of part to whole. We would anticipate imminent riots were it not for the densely shifting connections which recalesce just in time to avert bloody hell, but which offer no more sense of permanent coalition than flotsam. In fact, there seems to be an unusual relation between the energy of the surface and the passivity of its elements. *Easter Monday* recalls Bourne’s earlier, rather black vision of aspects of America, which he said, are “centrifugal, anarchical. They make for detached fragments of people. . . . they become the flotsam and jetsam of American life, the downward tow of our civilization . . . the cultural wreckage of our time . . . America has as yet no impelling integrating force. It makes too easily for the detritus of cultures. In our loose, free country, no constraining national purpose, no tenacious folk tradition and folkstyle hold the people to a line.”

Easter Monday manifests an extraordinary American artistic vision, an accomplishment of the first order even though it offers us no way to cope with the condition it creates beyond a relentless jockeying and parrying. Much of its greatness, and for that matter the power of Abstract Expressionism's high aesthetic, comes from faith in American ideals—like its use of the material as a metaphor and a medium for universal, egalitarian sharing. De Kooning's work shows us how painting that embraces and embodies the character of a remarkable society can achieve great art, however peculiar that society's limits and the strictures placed on artists; if Abstract Expressionism, like *Moby Dick*, has at its heart a tragic misconception, it is not one that barred the production of masterpieces.

Abstract Expressionism's aesthetic of what-you-feel/see-is-what-you-get can't help but involve a kind of oblivion. For the benefit of Everyone, the artist, as a somebody and as a class, was to surrender his or her irritating separation, which normally has been sustained by insider knowledge about the means, history and tradition of the practice of painting. The cost of Abstract Expressionism's appearing to relate so directly to the public, as if Greenberg's dictatorship of the aesthetic proletariat had already succeeded, is that it circumvented the reality of the special knowledge, traditions and even the existence of the artistic communities from which painting springs. This more direct relation to the viewer was occasionally asserted in various ways by different artists, who attempted to articulate the authority of their art. Their comments stood, if without much force, against the historical imperative promoted by Greenberg's criticism. Greenberg might be guiding painting toward ultimate simplification graspable by all, but he was doing so by manipulating the esoteric technicalities of historical aesthetic process. In his resistance to critical authority, Rothko could sound wistful ("I'm not an abstractionist . . . I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions. . . ."); Newman fielded muscular and feisty bluster (the artist declared that he preferred questions about content, which he called "subject matter," to those about technical fact, which he dubbed "object matter"); and de Kooning's defense of his deeply contradictory style was magisterial (he had, he dismissively said, no interest in "abstracting or taking things out or reducing painting to design, form, line and color").



Willem de Kooning, *Easter Monday*
1955-56; 96" x 74"



Willem de Kooning, *Woman I.*
1950-52; 76" x 58"

The idea that a triumph over our external enemies in World War II was to be followed by a triumphant struggle within our own culture that transformed the discomfort of our own alienation was a uniquely American fantasy—a notion that Melville, for one, would have appreciated. With the artist as a touchstone and exorcist, the alienation of the artist could substitute for the alienation of the society. Unfortunately, the social alienation of public space only superficially resembles that of the individual.

We can see the results of this confounding in the ambivalent *Woman* paintings of de Kooning, executed with characteristics that appear at first glance to be the essence of individual alienation: impassioned brushwork, powerful color, exaggerated emotion, obsession with the subject. De Kooning, however, especially in this series of paintings, remained locked in the bounds of public space, rather than seeing his own alienation through, and he specifically rejected catharsis. To challenge catharsis as the engine of a too-comfortable humanistic art is understandable; to reject connection is not. Catharsis remains a part of the process by which individuality comes to terms

with its own alienation. There is no entity, after all, to be made whole in the realm of public space, and no one's humanity to confirm; de Kooning's Women paintings (which should rank high among the projects of wounded masculinity) have much heat but little warmth. In this they are entirely different from the works of one of de Kooning's masters, Soutine, who (by Greenberg's account) used paint with a powerful physical expressivity that makes a positive, even Rembrandtian connection with the subject. In de Kooning's Women paintings, by contrast, the emotionally violent painterly releases are combined with a *lack* of connection or identification with the subject. De Kooning's deep knowledge of painterly traditions notwithstanding, the alarming image keeps looking not like a vision of humanity that has achieved emotional reality, but like the portrait of a panic attack that is not being dealt with.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, behind which Picasso is reported to have sat on a chair for three days "in horrible moral isolation," embodies the fruit of individual alienation—daring risk, idiosyncratic vision that reveals a challenging and surprising version of reality, a need to visibly connect with the past (if only in reaction) and to reconcile vastly different forces (in this case the psychological power of African masks, the classical nude that echoes through the treatment of the figures, the Mannerist skies of El Greco); it also shows a desire to arrive at completion and closure. Public space lacks a context for fathoming the urgency of the artist's need to make contact with traditions, or the meaning of a statement like Kafka's that the artist's work should be "the axe that destroys the frozen sea within us." The works of public space, in other words, like the artist in a recent exhibition who shows himself idly drinking a Coke before Buchenwald, can't entirely grasp the character of crisis or morality. Warhol's electric-chair and suicide paintings reassure the consumer society that no matter what human horror threatens, Pop's aesthetic quotation marks can restore the interests of the consumer to center stage.

Abstract Expressionism stabilized, if at an ultimate price for some of its members, as an unrepeatable moment in art, forming a fulcrum between two worlds—Europe and America—and two epochs (the mid-20th century and previous abstraction). But in practical terms, what it had to offer would be confined to its own generation. The Abstract Expressionists were terrible parents.

The Sixties and After

What became of this uniquely American movement over the next decades? Something quite strange: in the early 1960s, without explanation, American culture began its 90-degree turn into Pop Art. For the many serious younger artists whose artistic life was bound up with Abstract Expressionism—and most serious young artists in New York City then were—it was as if, without any public announcement, a large cruise ship bound for the Riviera suddenly began steaming toward Nome. Astonishingly, the movement that put America on the art map simply dropped away after one generation. Although its artists continued to work and their paintings appreciated in value enormously, they left no path, and showing space for Abstract Expressionist-influenced art began to dry up.

Abstract Expressionism's abrupt short-circuiting was due both to the working out of Greenberg's legacy, and the Faustian bargain the movement made with his theory. Greenberg's reasoning masked several fault lines—to begin with, the extreme heterogeneousness of the movement's members, who, because of differing artistic intentions, would not have been called a movement anywhere else in the world. Thanks to Greenberg's suppleness and determination, that issue never even came up. His theories also conveniently skirted issues of vanguard obligations on which they reneged (for example, conforming to the standards of reigning power, democratic or otherwise—though their swagger and intransigence always made them seem rebellious). Politically, his doctrine, claiming to shape painting's march to its ideal state, retained Marxist elements that he deliberately concealed as the country geared up for the Cold War. Guilbaut noted the strong links between Greenberg's theories and

the powerful Marxist movement of the 1930s, to the crisis of Marxism, and finally to the complete disintegration of Marxism in the 1940s. . . . Greenbergian formalism was born from those Stalinist-Trotskyite ideological battles, the disillusionment of the American left, and the de-Marxification of the N.Y. intellectual.

That many of the artists developed in a leftist context was rarely mentioned. Abstract Expressionism's burden of obscurity was heavy.

The surrender of Abstract Expressionism's artistic critical voice to theoretical handlers was a disaster. Failure to coherently express its artists' views contributed to the suppression of similar ideas in the next generation. And while Abstract Expressionism's strategy of injecting a kind of orphaned high art without name or reference into public space was effective, the shock tended over time to wear off. As the '60s approached, even Greenberg could not alter the fact that his theory of "expendable conventions" had run out of gas. An art was about to appear for which the purity of the physical act would be irrelevant. In December 1959, Frank Stella presented a largish canvas with regularly spaced dark diagonal black stripes at MOMA. The work was applauded by Greenberg's critical acolytes. With artists now recast as "practitioners," the "vanguard" had turned into scribes whose mind experiments formulated reductive theories and decided which paintings fit them. Ultimately, these critics would insist that their prescriptions were not just guidelines for art practice but were in some sense art itself.

Or such was their fantasy. While it is impossible to say what art is or predict what it will be, we can make one rule for what art is not: when you get no more from a description of a painting than you do from the painting, it falls short (Stella's painting fell short of art, a blank canvas also isn't art). Greenberg the art critic, who spoke often of "quality" and would anoint a painting with a cryptic "It's good," knew this perfectly well, but Greenberg the art-theoretical *macher* had to accept his own logic, even though it had led painting to the dead end of literalism. He theorized that Colorfield painting was the successor to Abstract Expressionism, but his absolutist reign was over, and Greenberg was sidelined.

Aesthetics of the American Center

A neutral arena for public encounter is so necessary for our ethnically varied mass society that it deserved to be better protected, even from the ambitions of its champions. But American victory in World War II and the Cold War's fierce competition so intensified the urge toward an assimilationist make-over that this aspect of our culture took on imperial overtones; in 1961 the social critic Dwight MacDonal characterized the new American center:

Masscult is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. . . . For the process destroys all values,

since value-judgments require discrimination, an ugly word in liberal-democratic America. Masscult is very, very democratic; it refuses to discriminate against or between anything or anybody.

Greenberg's theoretical arrogance, minus his love of quality, was communicated to the Minimalists. Donald Judd simply dismissed past art—his work, he said, entailed “getting rid of the things that people used to think were essential to art,” and “all the structure, values, feeling of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that's all down the drain.” To Minimalist theorists and many of their contemporaries among the dizzying array of movelets—OP, Pop, Pattern, etc.—the implicit connection of Abstract Expressionism with European advanced painting had become irrelevant. Robert Morris wrote that “the sensuous object, resplendent with compressed internal relations,” the result of a process of artistic empathy that empowered an artist like Renoir when he sat before his subject, whether a nude or a bouquet, “has got to be rejected.” Some Minimalists, it should be said, like Tony Smith and Anthony Caro, exhibited work with a broader, more complex and engaging aesthetic. But with Judd and Morris's new, openly negative vanguard, which aggressively defined itself more by what it wasn't than by what it was, the art scene engaged with what could be called a Public Space Movement.

If every art movement seeks its own audience by selectively cultivating some aspect of the fluid, morphologically varied individual persona, then at the heart of the Minimalist universe dwells the normative self. Judd and Morris's choice, the quotidian, unremarkable normative self— Minimalism's definition of order was “just one thing after another,” practically a definition of the normative—was an original one. Ubiquitous and unsung except in focus-group circles and by market researchers, our normative capacities, necessarily on auto-pilot and not derailed by thought or sunsets, had never been grist for an aesthetic; they are designated merely to effectively get us through daily tasks, from reaching for the OJ to dealing with insurance documents. Tamped-down subjectivity allows us when in person-as-statistic mode to move fluidly through the crowd; such normative preeminence, which art and especially the avant garde classically challenge, wavers as soon as it loses its focus. Morris's Minimalist prescriptions train the viewer to preserve the sense of routine.

Of course subjectivity plays out in all human situations, but it plays out differently; in public we are more buttoned-down and guarded. But if, by virtue of a condition everyone automatically fulfills—physicality—the normative self could ignore art's challenges and become art's constant and unchallenged subject, Morris's "non-personal or public mode" would expand mightily. Behind such expansive social friendliness, to which an aesthetic such as Morris's contributed, lay a rather aggressive spirit. Claiming to overflow all boundaries, it became programmatically impervious to culturally dissenting voices within the indefiniteness that summed itself up as the American middle class. The wave of narcissism that swept over American arts and letters (Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* was published in 1959) for forty years persisted so long because it supported the process with an insouciant accommodation posing as dissent and dressed in sporty radical clothes.

The ideas that accompanied the idealized melding of American society may not have brought the art scene to the pinnacle of art history, but came close to establishing one landmark: world-historical mindlessness. On the high end, critics, mostly in the universities, were conducting an art dialogue of such rarefied acceleration that artists might well have thought, as some did, that to paint they needed first to master Kant and then set forth on the slippery slopes of deconstruction. On the other end, art that asserted a degree of separation from social pressures encountered a sea of feeble, uncritical opinion that swamped serious thought. There was no way—echoing Henry James, one might say no occasion—to contest, explain or demur; many culturally oriented intellectuals, convinced that the field of engagement had moved from the canvas to the domain of their own thoughts, were content to let the market be the test of ideas. The function of galleries was to intrigue a curious, often barely involved audience that was shopping for spectacle but was also hoping that the rumor that their personal lives were being enhanced was true. Rivers of money were pouring into the art scene, and for artists to be granted a stall at the art market was to be granted validity, period—the vision of salesmen needed no other standard. Art also fit well into the age of therapy, as one more mode of expansion for the citizen consumer. Internationally, American art encouraged other cultures to believe that the most insignificantly minor and trivial aspects of their lives, soup cans for example, elevated to the iconic, were every bit as important as the pleasures and tribulations of the kings and saints whom art once commemorated.

Despite the continuing enthusiasm of the curators of major American museums, in terms of any implicit claim to be the cutting force of history, the

aesthetics of Dwight MacDonald's Masscult have expired. As a *New York Times* art critic wrote in April 2002,

What little good can be said about the 2002 Whitney Biennial has been said. It has been called noble, eclectic, generous and inclusive—not inaccurate characterizations from certain angles. But the latest version of this major showcase of American art is also bleak, pious, naïve, monotonous, isolated and isolating.

This assessment suggests that if the Whitney curators were looking for art that in any sense still honors avant garde ideals, they didn't know where, or perhaps how, to look. But the exhaustion of officially sanctioned advanced trends is only one marker of an era's end. The resistance to admitting the existence of repressive and limiting boundaries within our society has been idealistic and understandable, but by the late '90s, really, the unraveling of the aesthetic behind an all-inclusive expansiveness was complete. The social structures that supported it were no longer there:

- The American middle class has no longer been expanding, but shrinking, as rapidly mounting disparities in income reveal a class system. We are galloping toward oligarchy. To protect itself the middle class will openly define standards and make exclusions (of many kinds—standardized tests, for instance), which cancel the universality that the indefiniteness of middle class boundaries was intended to sustain.
- The generation of the '30s and '40s, which championed the virtues of idealized public space and brought to the table—and to the Depression and World War II—a desperate energy to succeed and a way to set the American stage, has now passed. Its views and strategies look as dated as an Odets play.
- Pure populist values, valid as they may be, have failed to include everybody. Specifically, though it enthusiastically made use of black and gay mores and attitudes to recharge the blankness of the cultural center, American middle class omniverousness has only been able to partially digest the interests and the identities of blacks and gays. Serious limitations also continue to be placed on women's interests.

- The blithe assumption that all people and cultures want to be like Americans, and the effort to include them by acting oblivious to their stated differences is increasingly risky in a world of dangerous realities. We have to understand people whose outlook is different from our own.
- New immigrant cultures are not being broken down, or are only partially going through the Rothian dynamic. Their home cultures are only an airflight or e-mail message away, and new cultural forms are necessary for their assimilation.

Re: Bourne

It . . . becomes easier to see that . . . some artists have carried on trying to do what the first generation of Abstract Expressionists attempted: they have tried to find the forms through which they could bear witness to lived experience with its present pleasures, frustrations and potentialities. . . . when the surveys of modern American art are written, the art-historical tree is pruned in such a way that they are eliminated. . . . the true history of art in postwar America is yet to be written.

—Peter Fuller

That Abstract Expressionism was an implosion, curling away from the future as well as the past, was revealed in the issue of succession: Diana Crane's *The Transformation of the Avant Garde*, published in 1987, chronologically charts Pop, Minimalism, Figurative, Photorealism, and Pattern. (Colorfield should be added, and why not throw in Trash painting like Schnabel's?) The succession of small movements that followed Abstract Expressionism's ascendancy, and the critical ink on which they floated, seemed made to illustrate Yeats's canny observation that "reality is not logical but can be made to seem so if logical refutations are discovered of the writer or movement going out of fashion." Nowhere in Crane's book is there any indication of Abstract Expressionism's most obvious successor—a line of exploratory abstract painting investigating abstraction in the expressive tradition of the School of New York; as the polar opposite of Minimalism, it could be termed Maximalism (today it could be referred to as the "Slow Painting Movement," like Slow Food and Slow Cities).

Crane, however, was responding only to lines of painting that fit the culture of public space. These movements, where they drew critical attention of any substance, were often supported by the same academically oriented critics who continued to address art issues as if they were philosophical arguments, usually against a historicist background that displaced or ignored the role of the individual artist and ruled out expressive content.

In an unusual article in *The New Republic* in October 1992, the art critic Jed Perl spoke of the collapse of the American art community, pointing out that in the past art and artistic standards have been maintained by the relationship between the “private art” world shared by artists and the “public art” world which more directly creates the art economy and reputations. (“In the studios of New York—and, for all I know, across the country—artists in their 30s and 40s and 50s and 60s are making the incremental developments that are what art is all about. . . . The support system of galleries and grants and collectors and curators and publications that makes it possible for artist to have slow-developing, serious careers is in a state of near total collapse. . . . There is simply no longer a support structure that nourishes these incremental developments.”) Perl believes that “as the public art world has become self-perpetuating, the private art world has become increasingly isolated, fragmented, frozen . . .”

To paint in a non-homogenous culture with egalitarian ideals is a messy proposition; aesthetic values aren’t particularly concerned with fairness. Most aesthetic values are by definition shared within particular groups and are, however informally, institution-creating, since values establish choice and hierarchy, and this can always be interpreted as unfairness—but what, for art, can be the alternative? Despite its inegalitarian aspects, we inevitably see with our values—and therein lies the value of seeing. Artists who have made a success in the content-undifferentiated contexts of public art as Perl defined it have often fielded art that works *against* openly displayed value, as does that of David Salle, the leading “post-modern” painter of the ’80s. One Salle admirer, Janet Malcolm, saw his work as “an art that refuses to be any one thing or to find any one thing more interesting, beautiful, or significant than another.”

Salle’s painting, which can look peculiarly tepid to other viewers for its very choicelessness and lack of passion, Malcolm declared to be a “melancholy art of fragments, quotations, absences” with “an appearance of mysterious, almost preternatural originality,” even though “nothing in it is new,

everything has had a previous life elsewhere—in master paintings, advertising art, comics, photographs.” This is an original use of the word original: Salle’s is different from the startling originality of El Greco, for instance, who, with genius, wedded two very different traditions, the iconic and the Spanish. The effectiveness of Salle’s art, its ability to surf what Salle termed “the din of the moment,” lies in the contrast of its deceptively undefined qualities to the more characterizable work of his contemporaries, which then look passé to Malcolm. Of course the shelf life of such art lasts only as long as it takes for familiarity to set in. We can’t help but contrast El Greco with other painters, admiringly, but not because his work diminishes, eliminates or replaces theirs. Broadening and intensifying Malcolm’s kind of quest, Leo Steinberg in his essay “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Audience” attempted to canonize painting that treats human and aesthetic values negatively (his example is Jasper Johns’s *Target Painting*, which casually chops off the tops of a row of heads), for the purpose of divorcing from them. He declares that the resulting shock in the mind of a knowledgeable viewer creates a valuable sense of dread—but then so does bankruptcy.

Even when not being so obliquely or directly hostile to values, other critics, like Arthur Danto, focusing on the logical outcomes of artistic trends and history as they see it, have been unsympathetic to the process of slow development Perl describes as sustaining art. By itself critical analysis is a powerful tool, but can become an arid, unfriendly environment for the contexts of intimacy that contribute real value to art. And when (despite Mailer’s wish-fulfillment remark that “Democracy is culture”) an accomplished and idealistic liberal society fails to admit that it can’t satisfy its hunger for a rich psychic existence through direct pursuit of its own conscious goals and its sense of justice, an acute sense of starvation amid plenty can result. (Such is the undernote sounded throughout Trilling’s melancholy *The Liberal Imagination*.) Far from isolating experience and demanding an ever more purely physical aesthetic (Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” comes to mind), an art that can entertain suggestiveness, even seduction, is closer to desire and its goals than the relentless definition and stripping away of affect that our society compulsively associates with freedom and truth.

Yet as Fuller protested, art with the contrasting values of Maximalism has consistently been produced over the last forty years—and it has sought, without special drama, to grow into itself and move art forward. It would be tempting to pick among Maximalists with a list of examples from back when

to now—say, Alan Kleiman, Ray Spillenger, George Dennison, Angelo Ippolito, John Evans, Liz Yamin, Peggy Jane Smith, Lieby Miedema, Jan Sunderland, Nancy Storrow, Larry Warshaw, Marty Greenbaum, Kim Tieger, Nora Kersh (and one could go on)—but any one list can't be typical of Maximalism's many scarcely known painters, who as a whole seem to function something like a network of participants in a SETI-like operation; geographically separated though they may be and different as their solutions may be, the consistency of the problems they work on turns out to be surprising. We can't catalog with much accuracy the themes of artists we don't, as Peter Fuller pointed out, even know about, but we can make a prediction—that Maximal art will turn out to have been interested in personal as well as formal discovery, seeking to extend and comprehend abstraction through an art of exploration and play, and that it built on precedents *and* innovation. (For instance, the painterly impulses of Arshile Gorky, informed by the traditions of the past and reaching toward flight on a flat surface, introduced a warm abstraction that grew out of an intimate frame of mind and his unabashed identification with the artistic traditions of his native Armenia.) As Peter Schimmel wrote about the Abstract Surrealist model that has frequently been the jumping-off place for Maximalists, they worked with

a multifaceted, multi-perspectival space in which images of the unconscious, the sublime, the primordial and the sexual could be suspended. . . . The figure/ground relationship was constantly explored and a tension created between the linear elements that rest on the surface and the vague illusion of a third dimension. . . interweaving line and color, foreground and background in a metaphorically rich primordial brew."

Maximal art doesn't offer itself as the solution to the problems of the century. It isn't opera, chanting, sculpture, sociology or an ethics class. It does value pleasure. What especially fueled Maximalist art at its outset at the end of the '50s was the fact that beneath the relatively taut skin of its well-run commercial networks, post-war America was a cultural free-for-all with many competing groups and zero orchestration. The United States had arrived at the pinnacle of nations. For the first time, a plurality of its citizens contemplated lifestyles that had previously been the province of playboys. America was waking up to the possibilities of life free of WASP repression, and to be a Maximalist was to sense that as a culture America was a global village in pieces that needed to be sifted through and put together, patiently

and by organic process, by synthesis and cultural bridge-building, in a Bournean spirit.

At the beginning of the '60s, a page had turned in the book of Modernism: for artists entering early adulthood, abstraction was in no imaginable way an act of rebellion against long-vanished bourgeois reality, and, no matter how much art critics demanded it in order to make an impression on readers, little valid ground remained for the drama, claims and swagger of breakthrough art. No one knew what abstraction divested of rebellion could mean or be—was it necessarily neutral and technical, or could it be as hot as a nude draped over a lusty bull? Was abstraction suited to reach out to the global feast that anthropology had revealed? What would be the final destiny for the abstract ideas created by the School of Paris?

The problems might be daunting, the palette vast, and the precedents few, but the prospects were great. Even taking into account the appeal that self-isolation had for Abstract Expressionism, so great was the promise of the era that the movement's infertility and (nearly uniquely among significant art movements) its failure to bond with young artists who sought to develop its expressive content remains mysterious.

For the full art that public space can't produce, much less sustain, we need forms that are complex, split, double, that connect overarching American mores with our many cultural communities, freeing public space from the damaging burden of claiming to be everything for everyone. Maximalist paintings poke around, establish surfaces in the absence of pressure (a nearly insurrectionary act in America), and even challenge Maximal painterly intentions. While it may invite analysis, Maximalist work seems to also call for critical language shaped, like that of wine aficionados, to communicate sensory experience.

Art that caters to the normative, aside from risking sycophancy, too greatly narrows imaginative realities that, by definition, aren't normative. Whether or not art harbors elements of representation is a red herring—Hofmann's great abstractions, among others, have taught us how our immediate grasp of the visual world can become the basis for a mature abstract art—abstraction doesn't necessarily begin by rejecting what we think we see. Maximal art over time is capable of establishing viable new artistic conventions, in pursuit of a spirit that was, sunnily and curiously and at a moment of pressure when his career was flagging, well expressed by David Salle: "To go against the tidal

wave of literalism and literal-mindedness—to insist on and *live* the life of the imagination . . . to be the experience, instead of pointing to it . . . to have and give *access to feeling*.” Salle’s naked, if boilerplate, expression of optimism about what lies at the heart of painting describes the very spirit that his style of painting attempted to freeze—the embalmed quality of his work triggered excitement in some post-modern minds because of its imprisonment of content. For these critics the attraction was hardly aesthetic: Salle’s art offered the charm as well as the structure of a hand grenade.

Mature work establishes a less hidden relation to an artistic optimism that may not be voluntary and not in the power of the artist to withhold: an optimism that blooms whenever the hand of the artist handles the materials of art. The impasses of art in the face of the radically open artistic possibilities of our time means that our lease on the models through which we expressed that optimism and the myths it gives rise to has expired. But the prolonged delay in the reformulation and discovery of new models isn’t entirely the fault of the artists. Art doesn’t go on in a vacuum; the developing kind of work that Salle so enthusiastically if belatedly endorsed has crucially lacked support in American culture. In fact, confirming Jed Perl’s fears, the forty-year combination of market forces and Cold War ambitions, along with a mighty boost from deconstruction and Marxist criticism, may have desiccated the landscape of art so thoroughly that repair is very difficult.

Over the last few years theorists lost control; we have been left with a welter of unrelated art styles that, added together, approach William Empson’s definition of democratic art: “One note each and the tune goes out free.” Unfortunately, even good painting when stripped of context may turn into mere cultural litter—each painting, good or bad, becoming one more grunt added to the infernal, moronic din. Paintings to be seen need contexts the way fish need coral reefs, because contexts provide expectations which are the basis both for public participation and artistic production. Hope is imaginable when currents—not movements, which are exclusivist, but currents—begin to form. Of course, paintings don’t create contexts by themselves—there is the audience. It would help if lovers of art could develop a degree of immunity toward the kind of art that claims to celebrate free-radical individualism with no earthly ties—the very definition of freedom in the society of strangers—because that’s what puts all the eggs in the basket of public space. And we know where that has brought us.

Despite the insistence of a previous generation, America has never and will never provide the comparatively seamless cultural/social/political, wrap-around world of Paris—the sort homogenous societies enjoy. But however complex the hand we have been dealt is, the cards we hold are our own. We can, with a less buffered and sometimes wry consciousness, while honoring the overarching neutral culture that we all share and fully appreciating the level of culture it can attain, experience through our Bournean cultural federation a view of life and art that—like our democracy—is unique and unparalleled in history.