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Chapter 13: The Rise and (Partial) Fall of Abstract Painting in the Twentieth Century

Introduction

The abstract painter denounces representation of the outer world as a mechanical process of the eye and the hand in which the artist's feelings and imagination have little part. Or in a Platonic manner he opposes to the representation of objects, as a rendering of the surface aspect of nature, the practice of abstract design as a discovery of the "essence" or underlying mathematical order of things.

Meyer Schapiro, 1937¹

Abstraction is perhaps the single most distinctive development in twentieth-century painting. It is also among the most misunderstood, not only by the general public, but also by many in the art world. In part this is a consequence of its variety, for artists have made nonrepresentational art from many different motives, using many different techniques. This paper will trace the changing role of abstraction in painting over time, considering the goals of some of its most important practitioners, and examining their methods. Before presenting a chronological treatment, however, it is valuable to begin with a cautionary lesson.

Deceptive Appearances

[W]ith Mondrian, arriving at the idea was of exceptional importance. The conception came before the painting; it was the primary act of creation.

Harold Rosenberg, 1971²

When Piet Mondrian died in 1944, the critic Clement Greenberg declared that his painting "takes its place beside the greatest art." Greenberg went on to defend the mechanical nature of Mondrian's art: "Perhaps Mondrian will be reproached for the anonymity with which he strove for the ruled precision of the geometer and the machine in executing his paintings: their

conceptions can be communicated by a set of specifications and dimensions, sight unseen, and realized by a draftsman. But so could the conception of the Parthenon.”³

In 1995, the scholars Angelica Rudenstine, Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, Hans Janssen, and John Elderfield called attention to a “a problem of perception” involving Mondrian’s art: “Mondrian’s early partisans praised his work as a blueprint for modern architecture or typography, as ‘formal experimentation’ destined to be ‘applied’ in various fields; and his neoplasticism has often been characterized (admiringly) as that of a geometric designer.” They emphasized that their research had led them to a very different understanding of Mondrian’s working process: “As becomes especially clear from this selection of unfinished works, Mondrian’s abstract work was far from geometric or mathematical in its origin or expression; rather, it was the product of a highly intuitive mind and hand, gradually working toward carefully modulated but far from measurable composition solutions.”⁴

Accounts by friends of Mondrian testify to the absence of preconception in his art. An artist who knew him in Paris in the 1920s recalled watching him work: ‘If the black line was too thick, he’d take a piece of white paper, or a paper of about the same color as the color planes next to that line, and then he pasted it onto the canvas, and then held it at a distance to see ‘is the line the way I want it or not.’”⁵ When the artist Charmion von Wiegand first met Mondrian in New York late in his life, she recorded that “He explained that he did not work with instruments nor through analysis, but by means of intuition and the eye. He tests each picture over a long period by eye: it is a physical adjustment of proportion through training, intuition, and testing.”⁶

Von Wiegand became a close friend of Mondrian’s, and studied his art. Interestingly, she reported that although he famously restricted his palette to primary colors, their precise

composition was never constant: “his hues changed in every picture. His red was never the same red, nor his blue the same blue. It had to be in perfect equilibrium with the whole painting and the proportions of each plane. He was very aware of how color interaction can change a hue and make a red look bluer or a blue look redder.” She was shocked when she first saw what would prove to be his last completed painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, with its many small colored squares that violated Mondrian’s published generalizations about his art. She recalled that “I exclaimed: ‘But Mondrian, it’s against the theory!’ I remember him standing back from the painting, squinting his eyes, and saying, ‘But it works. You must remember, Charmion, that the paintings come first and the theory comes from the paintings.’”⁷ The painter Carl Holty, who also knew Mondrian in New York, wrote of his constant revision of his works in progress: “Watching the pictures change into others as he worked, I asked him whether he wasn’t losing good pictures in numbers because of his exigence. He said, ‘I don’t want pictures. I just want to find things out.’”⁸

On the basis of an intensive technical study of Mondrian’s late paintings, Ron Spronk concluded that “He scraped away paint and often stripped parts of the paint surface and ground layer to the bare canvas. These reworkings left their marks on the paintings. Many of them are visible to the naked eye or can be seen with a microscope; others are hidden by (sometimes multiple) layers of thick paint and need to be revealed by other means.”⁹ One example is afforded by *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, which Mondrian dated as completed in 1942. The painting was photographed in 1934, and again in 1936, and it was recently X-rayed by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Spronk reported in part that “Close comparison of the images from April-May 1934, 1936, the present state, and the X-radiograph shows changes to

the composition both before and after the first state was completed in 1935. Between the 1934 photograph and the completion of the first state, the left vertical black line was shifted to the left, the yellow color field was enlarged downward and the top horizontal brought down accordingly, and the lower horizontal line was moved up. The black bar at upper left was widened and moved up, while the lower black bar was widened and moved down. In the final, 1942 state Mondrian added the blue field, the black and red bars at lower left, and the central horizontal black line. The upper black bar was changed to a red bar, moved upward, and widened. The lower black bar of the first state was brought down still further.”¹⁰

Technical examination of his paintings and eyewitness accounts by Mondrian’s friends thus support the artist’s own claims that his art was made empirically and visually rather than theoretically and mathematically. Both Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were deceived by the appearance of his completed paintings into drawing the false conclusion that Mondrian worked mechanically, by preconception.¹¹ Mondrian was not a conceptual artist, who privileged ideas, and for whom conception preceded execution, but rather an experimental innovator, who allowed theory to emerge from his paintings, who worked by trial and error, and whose primary goal was to learn from the process of making his paintings. The cautionary lesson is clear. If even highly respected critics can make such basic errors, it must always be kept in mind that simply looking at a painter’s finished works is not sufficient to understand how and why they were made: the appearance of paintings alone cannot be assumed to reveal the methods and goals of the artist.

The Pioneers

We, the abstractionists of today, will be regarded in time as the “pioneers” of abstract art, who had the good fortune, through clairvoyance, to live perhaps centuries ahead of our time.

Wassily Kandinsky, 1922¹²

Abstract painting was first developed in the years immediately before and after the outbreak of World War I. The three great pioneers – Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich – independently arrived at very different forms of abstraction, through different means, from very different motives. Yet all three made their discoveries with the confident belief that abstract art would play an active role in creating a better world in the future, whether by directly affecting social behavior or by complementing the impact of political institutions.

In an essay titled “Reminiscences,” written at the height of his career in 1913, Kandinsky described the development of his art. He recalled a key event that occurred in 1896, when he was 30, which contributed to his decision to become a full-time artist. At an exhibition of the art of the French impressionists in Moscow, for the first time he came upon a painting that was not obviously realistic: “That it was a haystack, the catalogue informed me. I didn’t recognize it. I found this nonrecognition painful, and thought that the painter had no right to paint so indistinctly.” In spite of his discomfort, Kandinsky discovered that the painting had seized his imagination: “I noticed with surprise and confusion that the picture not only gripped me, but impressed itself ineradicably upon my memory, always hovering quite unexpectedly before my eyes, down to the last detail. … What was … quite clear to me was the unsuspected power of the palette, previously concealed from me, which exceeded all my dreams. Painting took on a fairy-tale power and splendor. And, albeit unconsciously, objects were discredited as an essential

element within the picture.”¹³ Kandinsky’s account revealed that he was intensely affected by a visual event, as his first sight of a Monet not only demonstrated the power of color, but also planted the seed that would eventually grow into the realization that effective art need not be representational.

Another pivotal event occurred several years later, after Kandinsky had moved to Munich to study painting:

I was enchanted on one occasion by an unexpected spectacle that confronted me in my studio. It was the hour when dusk draws in. I returned home with my painting box having finished a study, still dreamy and absorbed in the work I had completed, and suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow. At first, I stopped short and then quickly approached this mysterious picture, on which I could discern only forms and colors and whose content was incomprehensible. At once, I discovered the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, standing on its side against the wall.

The next day, Kandinsky was unable to recapture his enchantment with the picture: “even on its side, I constantly recognized objects, and the fine bloom of dusk was missing.” He drew a simple but momentous conclusion: “Now I could see clearly that objects harmed my pictures.”¹⁴

The empirical and visual source of Kandinsky’s belief in the validity of abstract art points to his experimental nature as an artist. The same is true of the extended process by which he gradually developed his form of abstract art. Thus he reflected in 1913 that “Only after many years of patient toil and strenuous thought, numerous painstaking attempts, and my constantly developing ability to conceive of pictorial forms in purely abstract forms, engrossing myself more and more in these measureless depths, did I arrive at the pictorial forms I use today, on which I am working today and which, as I hope and desire, will themselves develop much

further.” He recognized that he had to proceed intuitively, letting forms appear as he worked: “My only consolation is that I have never been able to persuade myself to use a form that arose within me by way of logic, rather than feeling. I could not devise such forms, and it disgusts me when I see them. Every form I ever used arrived ‘of its own accord,’ presenting itself fully fledged before my eyes, so that I had only to copy it, or else constituting itself actually in the course of work, often to my surprise.”¹⁵ What Kandinsky came to understand was that he could only create his art gradually, and that abstraction could only come at the end of a “long path, which I *had* to follow.”¹⁶

Kandinsky considered painting as a “struggle with the canvas,” in the course of which he “derived spiritual experiences from the sensations of colors on the palette.”¹⁷ While he worked he was constantly sensitive to the appearance of the developing image: “The artist ‘hears’ how something or other tells him: ‘Hold it! Where? The line is too long. It has to be shortened, but only *a little bit!*’ ‘*Just a little bit, I tell you.*’ Or: ‘Do you want the red to stand out more? Good! Then add some green. Now they will ‘clash’ a little, take off a little. But only *a little*, I tell you.’” Response to the work in progress was essential: “One must have the perception to ‘listen’ when the voice sounds. Otherwise, no art.”¹⁸ The importance of vision led Kandinsky to reject systems: “My advice, then, is to mistrust logic in art.”¹⁹

Kandinsky evolved gradually from a painter of landscapes into a painter of images abstracted from landscapes. Unlike most experimental artists, he routinely made preparatory drawings, watercolors, and even oil sketches for his early abstract paintings. Unlike conceptual artists, however, for whom a painting is often an enlarged replica of a final preparatory image, Kandinsky’s paintings are generally the last, most abstract, stage of a progression, in which the

image became progressively more divorced from reality as each sketch moved farther from the recognizable forms of the first drawing. Thus when Kandinsky spoke of hiding or concealing objects in the approach to abstraction, he was not referring to a process that occurred in the course of application of successive layers of paint to single canvas, but rather one that was carried out in a series of separate works. Once consequence of this is that ambiguous objects in his early abstract paintings can often be identified by consulting the related preparatory works.

Vivian Barnett made this point in discussing a key series of early abstractions:

Kandinsky's *Improvisations*... retain unmistakable references to his favorite, recurrent motifs. They contain multiple and abstract images of horses, riders, boats, rowers, waves, cannons, graveyards, citadels and reclining lovers... In formulating the *Improvisations* between 1911 and 1913, the artist made preparatory watercolor sketches. By studying a group of related watercolors with the final oil version, it becomes clear that Kandinsky moved away from the object, obscuring the specific motif so only allusions to its representational origins are retained. Sometimes he executed a detailed watercolor on which he based a canvas... In the large oil paintings the forms have been obscured to an even greater degree than in the preparatory study. The images have been abstracted from nature to such an extent that they cannot easily be identified or "read."²⁰

Scholars have remarked on the causes and consequences of Kandinsky's experimental approach. Alan Bowness observed that during his approach to abstraction "Kandinsky was a man struggling in the dark. He was aware of this – it is part of his historic importance that he admitted that neither the creation nor the appreciation of a work of art is an exclusively conscious process."²¹ Kandinsky's friend and biographer Will Grohmann stressed that he achieved abstraction not decisively, from theory, but tentatively, from experience:

It is only with the greatest caution that Kandinsky made the transition to abstract forms. Had he been guided by theory alone,

he could easily, after he wrote *On the Spiritual in Art* (i.e., from 1910 onward), have completely eliminated naturalistic elements from his painting. In actual fact it took him four years to reach that point, and he was still painting landscapes as late as 1913.

Kandinsky did not want to paint decorative works, states of mind, or music. He consciously aimed at the pictorial, and for this reason he had to try to retain the forms he had intuitively experienced, but at the same time he filled them with the content of his lived experience.²²

Analyzing Kandinsky's work of this transitional period, David Sylvester compared his practice to that of another great experimental painter: "The incompleteness of these paintings – the way that passages are left unresolved – is something like the incompleteness of an unfinished Cézanne still life."²³

Mondrian's development of abstract art also originated in a process of simplification of real scenes: as he wrote in 1914, "I am seeking to approach truth as closely as possible, and to abstract everything from it until I reach the foundations (always visible foundations!) of things."²⁴ He carried out this process gradually and tentatively. A Dutch friend recalled being with Mondrian in Domburg in 1914: "On a walk beside the ocean, late in the evening, under a radiant, starry sky, he took a tiny sketchbook out of his pocket and made a scribbled drawing of a starry night. For days he worked over that suggestive little scribble. Every day he took a tiny step further away from reality and came a tiny step nearer to the spiritual evocation of it."²⁵ The critic Michel Seuphor, a friend of Mondrian's, recalled his extreme attention to detail, finding progress in changes so small that others might fail to notice: "Even so, it's another step," he once said to a friend who was studying a new picture of his, 'or don't you think so? Don't you find that it represents even a little step forward?'"²⁶ For Mondrian, this process of incremental change made all his work part of a single continuous progression: "I began as a naturalistic painter.

Very quickly I felt the urgent need for a more concise form of expression and an economy of means. I never stopped progressing toward abstraction. One period flows logically from the one before.”²⁷ The cumulative effect of Mondrian’s many marginal changes was very great. David Sylvester observed that “A Mondrian retrospective is not just a procession of great pictures, but a progression which in itself is an aesthetic experience: the trajectory of a man’s art becomes as much a thing of beauty as the art.”²⁸

Mondrian not only made changes from one painting to the next, but also within the execution of individual works. Joop Joosten and Angelica Rudenstine stressed that “Mondrian’s compositional method was anything but systematic or mathematical... Nothing was predetermined. Reworking, rethinking, and refining characterized his resolution of every problem.”²⁹ His revisions often occurred over extended periods. So for example when Mondrian traveled to New York in 1940, he took with him 17 paintings that he had started in Paris and London during the preceding five years. He exhibited these “transatlantic paintings” in New York in 1942, and he inscribed on them dates indicating the intervals during which he had revised them: thus *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, which was discussed above, was dated 1935-42.³⁰ Technical analysis of these transatlantic paintings led Ron Spronk to conclude that “Mondrian routinely reworked his compositions in his New York years, and these revisions were often elaborate and invasive.”³¹ Even the size of his paintings was provisional, as throughout his career, Mondrian’s uncertainty about his finished works led him “to create most of his paintings on supports whose final size was determined during the working process.”³² Charmion von Wiegand recalled that “Mondrian was never *finished* with a painting, which further proves that he had no predetermined compositional ideas. He would change a picture

over and over again.” When she asked him why he didn’t make a series of paintings instead of repeatedly revising *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, the large work that remained unfinished at his death, Mondrian replied, “It is not important to make many pictures but that I have one picture right.”³³

Although the appearance of their paintings differed enormously, the experimental artists Kandinsky and Mondrian both arrived at non-representational images by a gradual and visual process of abstraction from nature. The conceptual Malevich did not. In 1916, he declared that “The artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have nothing in common with nature.”³⁴ Nor must progress necessarily be gradual: “in art it is not always a case of evolution, but sometimes also of revolution.”³⁵ He also believed that art should follow rules: “in constructing painterly forms it is essential to have a system for their construction, a law for the constructional inter-relationships of forms.”³⁶ These rules should be derived from theory: “The system, hard, cold and unsmiling, is brought into motion by philosophical thought.”³⁷

John Milner observed that by 1913, when he began the key period in his development of abstract art, Malevich and his colleagues Lyubov Popova and Vladimir Tatlin “were all three *constructing* figures on the basis of geometry.” Rather than simplifying natural objects, they were using mathematical relationships to create generalized forms: “Individuality, likeness and character were all of secondary importance.” Milner concluded that “In preferring generalized form to specific detail, and the approach of constructing with geometry, these painters relinquished the whole realist tradition.”³⁸ Larissa Zhadova explained that Suprematism, which Malevich designated as the successor to Cubism and Futurism, was intended to symbolize the cosmos, but not to resemble it: “His pictures can be described as images of the world’s cosmic space. But they are not copied from nature; this is not the space one sees by looking at the blue

sky above one's head. They are hypothetical images, conceptual images, plastic formulation images, 'factorizations' carried out by the artist's imagination."³⁹

Malevich considered Suprematism a radical new departure, that would effectively negate all previous representational painting.⁴⁰ The apocalyptic tone of the manifesto Malevich wrote for the 1915 exhibition that announced the arrival of the new art underscored the drama of the breakthrough, as he announced that "I have transformed myself into the *zero of form*, and dragged myself out of the *rubbish-filled pool of Academic art*." Denouncing the imitation of nature as the cowardly act of artists lacking in creativity, he declared that "*to gain the new artistic culture*, art approaches creation as an end in itself and domination over the forms of nature." The emblem of the new movement was to be his painting, *Black Square*: "The square is a living, royal infant. It is the first step of pure creation in art." Art would be changed forever: "Our world of art has become new, non-objective, pure." He closed with an appeal to all: "We, Suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry! – For tomorrow you will not recognize us."⁴¹ John Golding contended that Malevich's art justified his rhetoric: "To be confronted by Malevich's work is like travelling in uncharted territory."⁴²

Kandinsky's early experiences in Russia, which included ethnographic research on folk art and a commitment to the Russian Orthodox Church, gave him an awareness of the moral aspects of art, and an abiding belief in its healing and redemptive properties.⁴³ Mondrian believed in Theosophy, and from it he became convinced that all life is directed toward evolution, and that the purpose of art is to give expression to that evolution.⁴⁴ Kandinsky and Mondrian thus both believed that the beauty of abstract art could accomplish utopian social goals, but they were vague in explaining how and when this might occur. Malevich had more

immediate goals, as in 1918 he took Russia's political revolution as a model for art: "The social revolution which smashed the chains of capitalist slavery, has not yet smashed the old tables of aesthetic values." He was confident, however, that art had a key role to play in the new society, as the next year he asserted that "The aesthetic, the pictorial, takes part in the construction of the whole world."⁴⁵

The three pioneers of abstract painting were all important figures in early twentieth-century art: Kandinsky was a leader of German Expressionism, Mondrian was initially the leader of the Dutch De Stijl movement, and Malevich was the founder of Russian Suprematism. Yet Paris remained the center of advanced art, and the dominant figures there had the broadest influence overall. The Cubists Picasso and Braque approached abstraction before World War I, but their decision to stop short of it, together with Matisse's steadfast dedication to representation, prevented abstraction from taking the central place in advanced painting early in the century.

Abstract Expressionism

The consciousness of the personal and spontaneous in the painting and sculpture stimulates the artist to invent devices of handling, processing, surfacing, which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation – all signs of the artist's active presence. The work of art is an ordered world of its own kind in which we are aware, at every point, of its becoming.

Meyer Schapiro, "Recent Abstract Painting," 1957⁴⁶

It was only after World War II, with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism in New York and Tachisme in Paris, that abstraction became the dominant form of advanced art. The

leading Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Barnett Newman, and Robert Motherwell, became more influential than their counterparts in Paris, the most prominent of whom were Pierre Soulages, Jean Fautrier, Hans Hartung, and Nicolas de Staël.⁴⁷ Although the two groups had little contact during their formative years, and had little direct influence on each other artistically, they shared a number of basic characteristics, including their belief in the need to create new forms of art and their conviction that this should be done experimentally, by trial and error, rather than conceptually, by the application of theory. Although these artists came to maturity little more than three decades after the pioneers of abstraction, two world wars and a great economic depression had occurred in this brief span, so it is not surprising that they did not share either the optimistic utopianism of the pioneers, or their belief in the power of art to improve society. Instead, the artists who led the new movements in both New York and Paris were individualistic, and their goals were more personal and introspective than those of their predecessors. So for example in 1948 Barnett Newman declared that American painters, “free from the weight of European culture” and its “outmoded images,” were creating a new art for a new age: “Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.”⁴⁸

The Abstract Expressionists were deeply influenced by Surrealism, which was perhaps the most important European development in advanced art between the wars. Most generally, the Abstract Expressionists took from the Surrealists the idea of drawing on the subconscious to produce new, personal images. So for example in 1943 Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote a statement of their beliefs, which included the propositions that “To us art is an adventure into

an unknown world,” that “This world of the imagination is...violently opposed to common sense,” and that “It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.”⁴⁹ Jackson Pollock explained in 1950 that modern artists wanted to express the aims of contemporary society: “we have a mechanical means of representing objects in nature such as the camera,” and consequently, “The modern artist, it seems to me, is inventing and expressing an inner world.”⁵⁰

A number of the Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock, borrowed the device of automatism from the Surrealists, in order to accomplish their goal of painting from the unconscious. Yet the Americans used this technique differently from the Europeans. André Masson, Joan Miró, and other Surrealists often began their paintings with random markings, then finished them by developing the figures and symbols they found to be suggested by these markings. In contrast, the Americans did not use automatism to create figurative works, but instead used the initial markings as the basis for coherent but still abstract compositions. Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists thus adapted automatism to their own purposes, in order to create a new and more spontaneous way of producing abstract images. Pollock explained in 1948 that “When I am *in* my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about.”⁵¹ Pollock’s celebrated drip method of applying paint, with the inevitable spattering and puddling that could not be completely controlled by the artist, was one means of escaping from preconceived ideas and forms.

Whether or not they used the technique of automatism, the Abstract Expressionists almost unanimously subscribed to the belief that the artist should work without preconception. Indeed, perhaps the most basic shared characteristic of the group was their goal of allowing

unexpected forms to emerge during the process of painting. Pollock declared that, while working, “I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.”⁵² Rothko explained that “I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated, or described in advance.” The painter’s initial ideas were only a point of departure: “Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur...The picture must be for [the artist], as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation.”⁵³ De Kooning reflected that “I find sometimes a terrific picture ... but I couldn’t set out to do that, you know.”⁵⁴ The importance of the working process to their art in fact led one of the group’s leading supporters, the critic Harold Rosenberg, to suggest in 1952 that they should properly be called “action painters,” on the grounds that their paintings were records of the act of their own making. Rosenberg argued that “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”⁵⁵ To increase the visual impact of their gestures, many of the Abstract Expressionists worked on wall-sized canvases that allowed the viewer to become engulfed by their images.

For most of the Abstract Expressionists, repeated revision of their works in progress was a routine consequence of their uncertain goals. The painter and critic Elaine de Kooning described how intensively her husband worked on his paintings in the early ’50s: “He worked on these one at a time – just all day, every day. Even the small ones. Even if it took a year ... [0]n any given canvas, I saw hundreds of images go by. I mean, paintings that were masterpieces. I

would come in at night and find they had been painted away.”⁵⁶ Because they wanted to discover new forms and images, for some of the artists much of this time was spent looking at their works in progress. An assistant who worked for Rothko during the ’50s recalled that he “would sit and look for long periods, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days, considering the next color, considering expanding an area.” A biographer concluded that “since the late 1940s Rothko, building up his canvases with thin glazes of quickly applied paint, had spent more time considering his evolving works than he had in the physical act of producing them.”⁵⁷

Their uncertainty about their goals equally led to difficulties in deciding when a painting was finished. During the last decade of his life, Pollock painted on lengths of canvas unrolled and laid flat on the floor, and he often began without determining either the size or orientation of the finished work. His widow, the painter Lee Krasner, recalled how this complicated the process of completing a picture: “Sometimes he’d ask, ‘Should I cut it here? Should this be the bottom?’ He’d have long sessions of cutting and editing … Those were difficult sessions. His signing the canvases was even worse. I’d think everything was settled – tops, bottoms, margins – and then he’d have last-minute thoughts and doubts. He hated signing. There’s something so final about a signature.”⁵⁸ Barnett Newman stressed the continuity in his own enterprise by declaring that “I think the idea of a ‘finished’ picture is a fiction. I think a man spends his whole lifetime painting one picture or working on one sculpture.”⁵⁹

The Abstract Expressionists worked for long periods to create their mature styles, and the eventual results were so novel and radical that even the artists themselves were uncertain about their achievement. Thus for example Robert Motherwell wrote of helping a friend, William Baziotes, hang the paintings for Baziotes’ first gallery exhibition in 1944. When they finished,

Motherwell recalled that Baziotes was seized by anxiety: “Suddenly, he looked at me and said, ‘You’re the one I trust; if you tell me the show is no good, I’ll take it right down and cancel it.’ At that moment, I had no idea whether it was good or not – it seemed so far out; but I reassured him that it was – there was nothing else I *could* do.” Motherwell’s doubt went beyond the immediate issue of the quality of Baziotes’ paintings: “You see, at the opposite side of the coin of the abstract expressionists’ ambition and of our not giving a damn, was also not knowing whether our pictures were even pictures, let alone whether they were any good.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Lee Krasner remembered that during the early 1950s, even after he had been recognized as a leader of the Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock had shared the same doubt, as one day “in front of a very good painting … he asked me, ‘Is this a painting?’ Not is this a good painting or a bad one, but *a painting!* The degree of doubt was unbelievable at times.”⁶¹

The Tachistes were as diverse stylistically as the Abstract Expressionists, and each of them also developed signature abstract forms based on distinctive gestures. Their commitment to an experimental method was strikingly similar to that of the Americans. So for example Pierre Soulages explained that he painted by instinct: “Often I decide to do something, to intervene in a certain way and I don’t know why, and I don’t seek to know why.” He discovered forms as he worked: “It’s a kind of dialogue between what I think is being born on the canvas, and what I feel, and step by step, I advance and it transforms itself and develops, becomes clearer and more intense in a way that interests me or not. Sometimes it surprises me; those aren’t the worst times, when I lose my way and another appears, unexpectedly.” The decision that a painting was finished was made on visual grounds, over a period of time: “When I see that I can’t add much without changing everything, I stop and consider that the picture is finished for

the moment ... Then I turn the picture to the wall and I don't look at it for several days, several weeks, sometimes several months. And then when I look at it again, if it still seems to accomplish something, if it seems alive, then it can leave the studio.”⁶²

The generation of artists who came to maturity after World War II represented the high point of abstraction in the twentieth century: this was the one generation in which virtually all of the most important painters made their greatest contributions in an abstract idiom.⁶³ The pioneers of abstraction had confidently believed that abstraction would be the art of the future, but for them this had been a matter of faith. During the early 1950s the Abstract Expressionists and their supporters could legitimately feel that abstraction had become the dominant form of advanced art. Remarkably, within a decade after the end of World War II, Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, and a few dozen other artists had simultaneously shifted the center of the art world from Europe to the United States, and made Abstract Expressionism the dominant style of advanced American painting.⁶⁴ They firmly believed that they were creating the art of the future. So for example in the early '50s, Mark Rothko told a friend, the sculptor David Hare, that he and his colleagues were “producing an art that would last for a thousand years.”⁶⁵ And unlike the diverse attitudes of the pioneers, the abstraction that emerged at mid-century was based on a shared set of attitudes and practices. David Sylvester summarized these, observing that “Most of the artists whose styles were formed in the 1940s subscribed to the idea that making art meant feeling one's way through unknown territory ... Art was the lonely journey of existentialist man ... This common ethical ideal led to a generally shared attribute of style: the way in which the work was made was more or less visible in the end-product.”⁶⁶

After Abstract Expressionism

Especially in the last fifty years, a lot of abstract art has demonstrated that our intelligence innovates not by making things up out of whole cloth or by discovering new things about nature, but by operating with and upon the repertoire of the already known; by adapting, recycling, isolating, recontextualizing, repositioning, and recombining inherited, available conventions in order to propose new entities as the bearers of new thought.

Kirk Varnedoe, 2003⁶⁷

Although a number of important Abstract Expressionists worked through the 1960s, the demise of Abstract Expressionism as the central form of advanced art began when Jackson Pollock died in an automobile accident in 1956, progressed further when Jasper Johns had his first gallery exhibition in New York in 1958, and was effectively completed when Andy Warhol and Pop art exploded on the art world in 1962. Nearly all of the forms of abstract painting that have been developed since Pollock's death have been reactions to Abstract Expressionism.

A basic division appears among the abstract painters who came to maturity during the late 1950s and the '60s. One group followed the Abstract Expressionists, trying to extend their art while accepting their basic attitudes and methods. Another group rebelled against Abstract Expressionism, and created a variety of new forms of abstraction that nearly always consisted of a direct and negative comment on the older art. This basic division followed a clear pattern, for the followers of the Abstract Expressionists were experimental artists, whereas those who repudiated Abstract Expressionism were conceptual.

The following discussion will briefly examine the motives and methods of some of the key figures in each of the two camps. It should immediately be emphasized that during the past five decades, styles of abstraction have proliferated. The reasons for this will be seen here, but

one consequence is that no treatment on the scale of this one can possibly be complete in coverage: there are too many important artists, who have created too many different approaches to abstraction, to examine all of them even briefly. What this discussion will do is to consider how, and why, some of the most important painters from the late 1950s on have gone about making abstract art.

Most of the key experimental abstract painters of recent times first emerged during the late '50s, as direct followers of the Abstract Expressionists – often students and friends of the older artists. These were primarily younger artists who were inspired by the beauty of the Abstract Expressionists' art, and excited by their conviction and commitment to existentialist ideals. So for example Helen Frankenthaler recalled that when she first saw Pollock's paintings in 1951, shortly after she had graduated from college and moved to New York to become an artist, "It was as if I suddenly went to a foreign country but didn't know the language, but had read enough and had a passionate interest, and was eager to live there. I wanted to live in this land; I *had* to live there, and master the language."⁶⁸ Frankenthaler followed Pollock in applying paint without touching the canvas. She achieved novel results, however, by pouring thinned pigment onto canvas that had not been primed: the diluted paint soaked into the fabric of the canvas, and produced a visual effect closer to watercolor than to traditional oil painting. Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis emulated Frankenthaler's new technique, and produced new forms of abstraction that featured pure colors stained into canvases that were often as large as Pollock's late works. The paint was absorbed into the canvas, and the pigment consequently did not create the surface texture that was visible in Pollock's paintings. Because there was nothing to distract from the effect of the areas of color, this art was often called "color-field" abstraction.⁶⁹

A number of younger experimental painters followed the Abstract Expressionists in developing their own distinctive abstract forms, that became recognizable as their signature marks or gestures. Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis were prominent among these. The beauty of their work was based on the interaction of their imaginative use of color and their free, often calligraphic brushstrokes.⁷⁰

The first-generation Abstract Expressionists were all born before 1920. Most of their second-generation followers, including Frankenthaler, Noland, Mitchell, and Francis, were born between 1920 and 1930. Relatively few important experimental abstract painters emerged from later birth cohorts. One who did is Brice Marden, who was born in 1938. Marden is an avowedly visual artist who works without preconception: “If you’re not working with preconceived forms and thinking, then you can concentrate on expression.” He hopes to make discoveries while working: “There are times when a work has pulled ahead of me and goes on to become something new to me, something that I have never seen before; that is finishing in an exhilarating way.”⁷¹ Marden admires Cézanne’s “intense, long, slow process of working, looking, assimilating.”⁷² Marden has also acknowledged his debt to Pollock. In 1989, he explained that Pollock’s approach had affected his attitude toward his own art: “The great thing about Pollock … was his conviction that each work is part of a continuing quest. To be an artist is not about making individual works. To be an artist is to do your work and let your work express the evolution of a vision.”⁷³

Marden’s comments about Cézanne and Pollock focus on central elements of the experimental approach to art in general. The long, slow process of development and the conviction that the artist is engaged in a quest for a personal vision together point to a shared

characteristic of all the experimental abstract painters discussed here, from Kandinsky and Mondrian through the two generations of Abstract Expressionists – namely the goal of creation by the individual of a unique signature style. At some point in their careers, each of these artists became committed to abstraction, and for nearly all of them this subsequently became a lifelong commitment to that form. Even in those cases, including Pollock and de Kooning, in which the artist returned to varieties of figuration, this occurred gradually, and within an aesthetic of color, brushstrokes, and forms that demonstrated clear continuities with their earlier non-representational work.

The conceptual approaches to abstraction that have been developed since Pollock's death are generally very different. Not only are they extremely diverse in style and purpose, as will be described below in a number of specific cases, but almost without exception they do not have the characteristic of commitment. Since the demise of Abstract Expressionism, conceptual painters have developed the novel practice of part-time abstraction – of alternating between making representational paintings and abstract paintings. And beyond this absence of commitment to abstraction, most of these artists have lacked a commitment even to a single style of abstraction. One of the most important painters of the era, Andy Warhol, clearly demonstrates both of these practices. Thus although Warhol's most celebrated paintings, including those of Marilyn Monroe and Campbell's soup cans, were based on photographs, he made non-representational paintings at a number of points in his career, and he made these abstract paintings in a number of completely different ways, in completely different styles. Not surprisingly, Warhol explained that this should not be a source of concern: “an artist ought to be able to change his style without feeling bad.”⁷⁴ Many of his fellow conceptual artists shared this opinion, and this is a distinctive

feature of conceptual abstraction since the late 1950s.

The aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism and Tachisme was a powerful presence in the advanced art world of the 1950s, and ambitious young conceptual artists quickly rebelled against it on both sides of the Atlantic. Robert Rauschenberg is a prominent early example of an artist who was deeply influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, but who reacted against their art in a number of ways. Rauschenberg conceded that he owed a great debt to the Abstract Expressionists, but he stressed that “I was never interested in their pessimism or editorializing. You have to have time to feel sorry for yourself if you’re going to be a good Abstract Expressionist, and I think I always considered that a waste.”⁷⁵ His artistic rejections of Abstract Expressionism were not subtle. So for example in 1953 the 28-year-old Rauschenberg carefully erased a drawing by de Kooning that the older artist had given him, somewhat reluctantly, for this purpose. Rauschenberg framed the work, and titled it *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. He considered it “a legitimate work of art, created by the technique of erasing.”⁷⁶ Harold Rosenberg described this as a turning point: “Art-historically, the erasing could be seen as symbolic act of liberation from the pervasive force of Abstract Expressionism … ‘Erased de Kooning’ became the cornerstone of a new academy, devoted to replacing the arbitrary self of the artist with predefined processes and objectives.”⁷⁷

Many of the conceptual reactions to Abstract Expressionism not only appear to comment on that style, but to do so ironically. In 1957, Rauschenberg produced *Factum I* and *Factum II*, two paintings with collage elements, done in an Abstract Expressionist style, that appear identical, even to the drips of paint that run down from the smeared brushstrokes. The two paintings have been widely interpreted as a parody of the Abstract Expressionists’ insistence on

spontaneity and uniqueness.⁷⁸ Their somewhat obscure titles may underscore this challenge, for an obsolete definition of “factum” is from mathematics: “the product of two or more factors.” The two paintings are in any case early examples of preconceived, conceptual abstract paintings that are designed to appear unplanned and experimental.⁷⁹

As a young artist in Paris during the 1950s, Yves Klein explored the use of pure color to represent the infinite in nature, an interest that he had developed looking at the sea and sky during his childhood on the Mediterranean coast of southern France. He wanted to make abstract paintings, but he strongly rejected the attitudes of the Tachistes, and their emphasis on the use of gesture as personal expression: “I detest artists who empty themselves in their paintings, as is often the case today ... In place of thinking of beauty, goodness, truth, they render, ejaculate, spit out all their horrible, impoverished and infectious complexity in their paintings as if to relieve themselves.”⁸⁰ In 1955, Klein began to make monochrome paintings, each a single uniform color, most often the intense ultramarine pigment he patented as International Klein Blue, or IKB. Initially he gave each of these paintings its own distinctive surface texture, but within a few years he stopped doing this, and began applying the paint to uniform flat surfaces with a roller, to eliminate any gestural traces of the artist’s hand. Klein explained that “My personal psychology does not impregnate the painting when I paint with a roller, only the color value itself radiates in pure and inherent quality.”⁸¹

In 1960, Klein began to make what a friend, the critic Pierre Restany, named his “anthropometries,” in which nude models pressed themselves against canvases tacked to the wall, or rolled on canvases laid on the ground, after covering themselves with blue paint. From then until his premature death in 1962, at the age of 34, Klein devised a series of other ways to

produce abstract paintings. So for example he painted with fire, by using a blow torch to scorch the surface of a specially prepared canvas; with wind, by coating a canvas with wet paint, strapping it to the roof of his car, and driving from Paris to Nice; and with rain, by putting a freshly painted canvas outside to be marked by a spring shower. (He also attempted to record the impact of lightning on a canvas, but noted that ‘Needless to say, the last-mentioned ended in a catastrophe.’) In a 1961 manifesto, Klein discussed these methods, and specifically responded to critics who claimed that the anthropometries were a form of action painting: ‘I would like now to make it clear that this endeavor is opposed to ‘action painting’ in that I am actually completely detached from the physical work during its creation.’⁸² Throughout his brief career Klein made abstract paintings without using the traditional method of applying paint with a brush. In effect, much of his oeuvre can be thought of as answering a question: how many ways could a conceptual artist think of to make paintings that resembled gestural abstractions, but in which the forms were created by means other than the artist’s personal gestures in applying paint to a canvas?

Jasper Johns’ famous early work reacted against the attitudes of the Abstract Expressionists, in its preconceived depiction of everyday objects. As he later recalled, ‘There was this idea associated with Abstract Expressionist painting that the work was a primal expression of feelings, and I knew that was not what I wanted my work to be like.’⁸³ Johns’ most celebrated works remain his early, representational paintings of flags, targets, numerals, and maps, but at several points in his career he has made non-representational paintings. Many of these have consisted of groups of parallel cross-hatched line segments, fitted together like flagstones on a patio. Kirk Varnedoe has observed that these paintings parody Pollock. Like

Pollock's large, all-over compositions, Johns' abstractions have no central point of interest. Yet in each case, Johns' composition presents "a systematization of the idea of gestural abstraction. Its complexity can be reduced to modular form." Johns thus transforms Pollock's improvised experimental art into a planned conceptual form: "It is a calculated program, quite the opposite of Pollock's sense of automatic release. You do not need a roadmap to recognize that there is an order to this picture; you understand that it is fragmented, not continuous, and that it is plotted."⁸⁴

The entire Pop art movement was in large part a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, and many of its members mocked the older artists not only with words but with works of art. Warhol's famous statement of 1963, that "The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine," was an obvious affront to artists whose goal was self-expression, but he did not limit his challenges to interviews.⁸⁵ The most insulting of Warhol's parodies of Abstract Expressionism was the series of *Oxidation* paintings he produced during 1978. Large canvases – up to 25 feet long – were spread on the floor of his studio and coated with copper paint. Warhol, his assistants, and occasionally visitors to his studio then urinated on the canvases, producing abstract images where the acid in the urine oxidized the metallic base, turning it from copper into shades of green and brown.⁸⁶ Their large size, their flowing liquid forms, and their execution on canvas laid flat on the floor all made these works immediately recognizable as references to Pollock's drip paintings, which had emerged as the most famous emblems of Abstract Expressionism.⁸⁷

The Warhol paintings that are generally considered his most important abstractions are the series of 102 works, titled *Shadows*, that he made during 1978-79. Large paintings, each 6

feet by 4 feet, were produced by silkscreening a single enlarged photograph that an assistant took of the shadows cast by cardboard cutouts.⁸⁸ In each painting, a black form that resembles the bold brushstrokes of the Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline is placed on a colored monochrome background. Although the use of a number of different ground colors makes the appearance of the paintings differ, the same shape recurs in every work, making the series an ironic comment on Abstract Expressionist uniqueness and spontaneity.

Warhol subsequently produced other abstract works. In 1983, he made a large silkscreened painting from an enlarged photograph of lengths of yarn of various colors tangled in interlocking loops against a white background. The resemblance to Pollock's drip paintings is obvious.⁸⁹ In 1984 Warhol made the *Rorschach* series. After pouring black paint onto a large canvas laid on the floor, he folded the canvas to duplicate the image. Warhol improvised his own abstract compositions, in the mistaken belief that psychiatric patients created their own ink blots for Rorschach tests. He later explained that he would have preferred to enlarge the standard images: "I wish I'd known there was a set."⁹⁰ The symmetry of the black forms has been considered to be an ironic comment on the paintings of the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell, which often consisted of abstract black forms on a white ground, while Warhol's method of pouring paint onto unprimed canvas parodied the stain paintings of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis.⁹¹

In addition to his famous early paintings based on comic strips, during the 1960s Roy Lichtenstein made a series of works based on paintings by great modern artists. Having quoted paintings by Cézanne, Picasso, and Mondrian by reproducing specific paintings by each artist using his trademark benday dots, he found himself "inevitably led to the idea of a de Kooning."

Instead of reproducing the image of a painting, however, as he had done for the earlier artists, Lichtenstein found that he “was very interested in characterizing or caricaturing a brushstroke.” During 1965-66, he made a series of large *Brushstroke* paintings, each of which presented stylized characterizations of one or more magnified brushstrokes: thick black outlines, the spaces enclosed by them filled with solid colors, set against backgrounds of Lichtenstein’s imitations of benday dots. Lichtenstein made these forms by brushing black paint onto transparent plastic sheets, allowing the paint to shrink and dry, then projecting the result onto a canvas, and tracing the enlarged contours. Although the brushstrokes were not actually copied from de Kooning, Lichtenstein conceded that they “obviously refer to Abstract Expressionism.”⁹²

Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, which he intended to look as brushstrokes would appear in a comic strip, are clearly parodies. David Sylvester observed that “we see his meticulous imitations of slashing brushmarks as a joke about the Abstract Expressionist cult of heroic spontaneity ... [T]he basic irony is simply the notion of representing the appearance of *any* spontaneous daub with obvious deliberation and care.”⁹³ Kirk Varnedoe agreed: “He takes the lavish, heated, inimitable, signature brush stroke of painters like de Kooning ... and shows that it can be codified – freeze-dried, if you will – as if in comics, undermining as insincere the rhetoric and scale of these painters. Everything that is supposed to be ethereal, ineffable, ambiguous, or soulful about abstract expressionism is rendered as die-cut, stamped form, reduced literally to comic formulae in these hard-won brush strokes by Lichtenstein.”⁹⁴

Frank Stella rejected representational painting when he was in junior high school: “I wasn’t very good at making things come out representationally, and I didn’t want to put the kind of effort that it seemed to take into it.” During his high school and college years, he painted in a

style derived from Abstract Expressionism. In his senior year of college, however, he saw Jasper Johns' first exhibition in New York, and he was strongly affected by the patterns of the targets and flags, "the idea of stripes ... the idea of repetition. I began to think a lot about repetition." He soon began to react against "the romance of Abstract Expressionism ... which was the idea of the artist as a terrifically sensitive ever-changing, ever-ambitious person ... I began to feel very strongly about finding a way [of working] that wasn't so wrapped up in the hullabaloo, ... that wasn't constantly a record of your sensitivity."⁹⁵

Stella promptly devised a new approach, based on his rejection of the idea of the painting as a record of process: "I didn't want to record a path. I wanted to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas." He also rejected the goal of recording the artist's subconscious feelings: "I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting ... [T]hey always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there." He disliked the visual complexity of gestural abstraction: "One could stand in front of any Abstract-Expressionist work for a long time, and walk back and forth, and inspect the depths of the pigment and the inflection and all the painterly brushwork for hours. But I wouldn't particularly want to do that and also I wouldn't ask anyone to do that in front of my paintings. To go further, I would like to prohibit them from doing that in front of my painting." Toward this end, he wanted his paintings to present simple and straightforward images: "All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion ... What you see is what you see." And he rejected the older artists' uncertainty: "We believe that we can find the end, and that a painting can be finished. The Abstract Expressionists always felt the

painting's being finished was very problematical."⁹⁶ Stella left no doubt that he valued ideas over technique: "I do think that a good pictorial idea is worth more than a lot of manual dexterity."⁹⁷

Stella's objections to gestural abstraction led him to make a series of abstract works called the Black paintings, which he completed at the age of 24. These paintings, which remain his most important works, effectively made the repetitive patterns of Johns' targets and flags non-representational, as he used housepainters' brushes to fill large canvases with parallel stripes of black paint, each approximately 2½ inches wide, in a variety of simple geometric patterns.⁹⁸ Harold Rosenberg belittled Stella's paintings as "the most professorial paintings in the history of art," arguing that they represented the result of formalist art criticism rather than artistic self-discovery: "He wished to negate not only the content of Abstract Expressionism but its gesture, too."⁹⁹ Stella followed the Black paintings with a series of paintings which used aluminum paint to create geometric patterns. These effectively enacted his wish to prohibit viewers from standing in front of his works for an extended period, for as he conceded, the aluminum paint was "repellent" to look at: "these would be very hard paintings to penetrate ... It would appear slightly reflective and slightly hard and metallic."¹⁰⁰ Stella's "slap in the face" to Abstract Expressionism had a considerable impact, for his avoidance of the gestural brushstrokes and tactile surfaces of Abstract Expressionism in favor of simple geometric patterns produced with anonymous techniques and industrial materials gave a powerful stimulus to the young artists who went on to create Minimalism, by making simple geometric sculptures out of industrial, manufactured materials.¹⁰¹

Gerhard Richter is widely considered one of the most influential painters of recent decades. His reputation rests largely on an innovation of the early 1960s, in which he responded

to Pop art's revival of figuration by devising a new, distinctive style of representational painting based on photographs. But he is also known for the great stylistic variety of his work, and it is consequently not surprising that he has made abstract paintings. What is striking is how many distinctly different styles of abstraction he has devised, each based on a different method. His output is so large and varied that no simple summary of his approaches is possible, but many of his paintings fall into groups, to which he gives collective titles.

In 1966 Richter began making large paintings he called Color Charts, which consisted of grids of rectangular blocks of color that were copies of sample cards from paint manufacturers. The earliest Color Charts had small numbers of colors, but over time Richter increased these by mixing colors to make new shades; by 1974 he made a painting with 4096 different colors.¹⁰² The paintings were made systematically, as Richter and his assistants applied the paint as smoothly as possible, and distributed the blocks of color randomly on the support. The Color Charts thus blended accident and preconception, as Richter observed that "I found it interesting to tie chance to a wholly rigid order."¹⁰³

In the early 1970s Richter made the Gray Paintings, monochrome works with a variety of surface textures, some with visible brushstrokes, others with smooth surfaces. In the late '70s he began several series of Abstract Pictures, which he continued over the following decades. Some of these, often called the "soft abstractions," were made by taking photographs of small sections of earlier paintings, then enlarging them by projecting them onto new canvases. With scale enlargements of 100:1, the new works become both non-representational and blurred. Another series of abstract paintings was made by drawing rigid squeegees vertically or horizontally over the surfaces of large canvases that had been covered with a variety of colors, often chosen at

random. Richter would repeat this process many times, each time applying more paint, then scraping the surface – in one documented case, a painting went through 33 discrete stages – with the effect that the final paintings generally bear visible traces of many colors in many layers.¹⁰⁴

A theme that runs through Richter's statements in interviews and published writings is that his art is motivated by ideas. In considering Richter's alternation between forms, Varnedoe remarked that he was “programmatic in his gambits between abstraction and representation,” and in pondering Richter's methods in making non-representational paintings, Varnedoe further observed that “He comes to his abstraction from a climate of dead cynicism and irony.”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The standard history of abstraction, and the one that the satirists and ironists of the 1980s would write, smugly and in self-congratulation, is a history of faith and its loss, a history of illusions replaced by knowing, of dreams dispelled by reality.

Kirk Varnedoe, 2003¹⁰⁶

Early in the twentieth century, three great artists pioneered a radical new form of painting. All three came from places that lay outside the central traditions of western art – Kandinsky and Malevich from Russia, Mondrian from Holland – but each was heavily influenced by mainstream artistic movements of their time – Kandinsky by Fauvism, Mondrian by Cubism, and Malevich by both of those movements, as well as by Futurism. They proceeded in very different ways, the experimental Kandinsky and Mondrian gradually and visually, the conceptual Malevich precipitously and conceptually, in arriving at their discoveries. Their specific goals for their art also differed greatly, but they shared a basic optimism, and a belief that the new forms of art they were pioneering would not only be the advanced art of the future,

but would directly and powerfully contribute to improving human society.

Abstraction became the dominant form of advanced painting during the decade following the end of World War II. The rise of abstraction coincided with the rise of New York as the center of the advanced art world, as a group of ambitious young experimental artists worked for decades in what proved to be a successful attempt to transform themselves from art world outsiders into the new leaders of modern art. Only thirty years, but also two world wars and a worldwide depression, separated their arrival at their mature art from the pioneers' original discoveries, so it is hardly surprising that the Abstract Expressionists were less optimistic than their predecessors, and few if any of them genuinely believed that their art would have a real impact on society at large. They were committed, however, to using art as a vehicle for learning about themselves: as they experimented with new ways to use paint to create novel images, they hoped that the forms they discovered on their canvases would reveal new insights into the sources of their own feelings and motivations.

The dominance of abstraction as the leading form of advanced painting was cut short abruptly during the late 1950s and early '60s by the innovations of a succession of young conceptual artists; the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism did not last a millennium, as some of its leading members had expected, but barely a decade. The rise of conceptual approaches in advanced art, from the late '50s on, greatly reduced the importance of abstract painting. In part this was a consequence of the return to figuration in painting, while in part it was also a product of a general deemphasis of painting in favor of new genres of art, many of which were devised as rejections of Abstract Expressionist painting.

Yet although abstract painting declined in importance, it did not disappear altogether

from advanced art after 1960. It persisted, but in a new role that many analysts have found puzzling. So for example in an essay of 2002 the critic Arthur Danto, a thoughtful observer of the contemporary art world, looked back to what he called “the art wars of the mid-twentieth century,” and reflected that “it says something about human passion that the distinction between figuration and abstraction was so vehement that, in my memory, people would have been glad to hang or shoot one another, or burn their stylistic opponents at the stake, as if it were a religious controversy and salvation were at risk. It perhaps says something deep about the spirit of our present times that the decisions whether to paint abstractly or realistically can be as lightly made as whether to paint a landscape or still life – or a figure study – was for a traditional artist.”¹⁰⁷ Although Danto did not attempt to explain the difference between these two eras, the answer in fact appears to lie in the analysis outlined in the two preceding sections of this paper. At mid-century, disputes over the relative merits of figuration and abstraction were spearheaded by experimental artists, who were deeply committed to just one or the other as a superior path to artistic truth. Thus an Abstract Expressionist who returned to figuration – as both Pollock and de Kooning did, temporarily, during the '50s – might be denounced by his colleagues or the critics who championed abstraction as reactionary traitors to the cause.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, by 2002 a host of conceptual artists alternated between these forms frequently and at will, since they considered them no more than different languages, each with its own advantages in expressing certain ideas. No critic would have thought to call them traitors, for there were no commitments or causes at stake.

Abstract painting thus underwent a series of remarkable transformations within little more than five decades. When it first appeared on the eve of World War I, its creators had no

doubt that it would not only dominate the future of art, but that it would play a central role in creating a better world. Three decades later, it did become the central form of advanced painting in the hands, and gestures, of the Abstract Expressionists. The cataclysmic events that separated Pollock and his colleagues from the pioneers of abstraction produced a radical diminution in the later artists' expectations for the role of art in society at large, but they were nonetheless committed to a quest for the personal image, and to abstraction as a vehicle for exploration and personal discovery. Within a decade after Pollock's death, however, abstract painting was largely taken over by conceptual artists, the most prominent of whom saw it as no more than a part-time style, and many of whom used it primarily to mock the seriousness of earlier abstract painters. Today abstraction is considered by most artists as a particular strategy, and considered by most of those who employ it as merely one available means among many of making their personal artistic statements.

Footnotes

1. Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), p. 195.
2. Harold Rosenberg, *Art on the Edge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 39.
3. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 188-89.
4. Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, Angelica Rudenstine, and Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondrian* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p. xix; also see p. 295.
5. Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2001), p. 49.
6. Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1956), p. 181.
7. Thomas Messer, *Piet Mondrian* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), pp. 81-82.
8. Carl Holty, “Mondrian in New York: A Memoir,” *Arts*, Vol. 31, No. 10 (1957), p. 21.
9. Cooper and Spronk, *Mondrian*, p. 67.
10. Cooper and Spronk, *Mondrian*, p. 118.
11. More recently, the scholars Simon Schama and Rosalind Krauss have also considered Mondrian’s work to be conceptual; Cooper and Spronk, *Mondrian*, pp. 8-9.
12. Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 481.
13. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, p. 363.
14. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, pp. 369-70.
15. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, p. 370.
16. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, p. 393.
17. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, pp. 372-73.
18. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, p. 799.

19. Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, p. 827.
20. Vivian Barnett, *Kandinsky at the Guggenheim* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), pp. 29-30.
21. Alan Bowness, *Modern European Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 133.
22. Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1958), p. 145.
23. David Sylvester, *About Modern Art* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), p. 79.
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