

A Review of the Critical Approaches of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg to Abstract Expressionism

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In recent years it has become increasingly apparent that American abstract painting in the forties and early fifties resulted in substantial impact on the widely diverse art forms which followed. Much attention has been given to the artists of the so-called New York School. The critics of the movement have also come under increasing scrutiny. Of these critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg have presented us with diametrical approaches in their attempts to define the new directions that they detected in the works of such artists as Jackson Pollock, Wilhelm de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.¹ In this paper, I will attempt to define these polarities in order to evaluate the extent to which each author succeeded in ascertaining the role of Abstract Expressionism as harbinger of the directions that American art would take after 1955.

Greenberg's first fully developed presentation of his basis for critical analysis appeared in the 1940 July-August issue of *The Partisan Review* in an article entitled "Towards a Newer Laocoön."² In effect, the author offers an historical apology for abstract art. He emphasizes the historical precedents for the art of his own times, discusses the relationship of literature and music to the visual arts, acknowledges Cubism as the precursor for all subsequent abstraction, and describes the use of formal elements in the works of avant-garde painting. Greenberg developed a "purist" aesthetic, the postulates of which called for clearly visible and well-defined brushstrokes, and tints and shades replacing primary colors. Additionally, works had to show a minimal use of line, with forms being simplified, and mirroring the shape of the preferably square canvas. Flatness predominated, with forms sitting parallel to and flush with the picture plane. A distinction existed in Greenberg's mind between what he called "optical illusion" and "realistic illusion."³ The former, the preferable solution, made use of *trompe l'oeil* or carefully-drawn lettering. The main difference between the two approaches involved subject matter: optical illusion referred to the suggesting of light and shade on a geometric form, while realistic illusion referred to the illusionistic rendering of recognizable objects taken from the everyday world.

A major flaw in Greenberg's evaluation of abstract painting was his failure to assess the impact of Surrealism on the American avant-garde. One may question Greenberg's understanding of Surrealism. He lamented the suppression of technique, specifically, of brushstrokes and texture, and questioned Surrealist subject matter: he could only see "a new object to be posed and arranged, but requiring no further fundamental changes in the conventions of painting as established by the Renaissance."⁴ Further, he charged Surrealism with being "more literature or document than painting or art."⁵ His formalist views, predisposed towards the evaluation of a purist art, were, contrarily, less disposed towards the detection of the ap-

pearance of new subject matter in painting. The content of Surrealist art and later of Abstract Expressionist painting was a documentation of sorts, not of a literary nature to be sure, but rather of subjective experience.

The problem central to the evaluation of the critical writings of Harold Rosenberg is one of applicability. Hermetic by nature, the concept of Action Painting as defined by Rosenberg has value as a literary equivalent of *the mood* engendered by the images discussed, but falls short in seeking to establish a meaningful commentary on other than the broadest of concepts underlying the corpus of Abstract Expressionist works.

In the "American Action Painters," published in the December 1952 edition of *Art News*, Rosenberg dismisses the traditional means of critical analysis: "Form, color, composition, drawing, are auxiliaries, any one of which can be dispensed with. What matters always is the revelation contained in the act."⁶ In his description of the act, Rosenberg uses words such as "encounter" and "event," terms that bring to mind Jackson Pollock's celebrated description of himself as being literally *in* his paintings.

Rosenberg intentionally and forcefully counters the views of Clement Greenberg. Rosenberg directly attacked the concept of "pure art," maintaining that "the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the aesthetic."⁷ Traditional aesthetic references are replaced by what the critic called "role" as the basis for the critical analysis of the new art. Rosenberg described role as "the way the artist organized his emotional and intellectual energy."⁸ The spectator-critic, we are told, must come to think "in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction, psychic states, concentration and realization of will, passivity, and alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradation between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked."⁹ Elsewhere, the critic claims philosophical and social ideals to have been left behind in favor of "what is basically an individual, sensual, psychic and intellectual effort to live actively in the present."¹⁰

Rosenberg's existential tone is characteristic of much of his writing. In the single issue of the Abstract Expressionists' publication, *Possibilities*, the author speaks of an "estrangement from American objects reaching to the level of pathos."¹¹ For Rosenberg, the anonymity of the megalopolis resulted in loneliness for the artist in relation not only to things, but to people as well.

Rosenberg's existential criticism accounts, I believe, for an anti-traditional outlook. The solipsistic mentality of the Existentialist does not allow of the present for the building of bridges with past effect or event for purposes of establishing a hierarchy of universally-shared experience or statement.

Rosenberg's description of the creative process has an uncanny quality to it. For Rosenberg, the creative process is climactic in nature, the anticlimax itself coming about

within a short interval of the completion of a work and characterized by the distancing of the artist's *communitas* with the just-completed image. This concept, too, is based in Existentialism and illustrates the manner in which the author sees as futile any attempt to deal in depth and, *a posteriori*, with the issuance of the creative act, that is, the work of art itself. Rather, it is the artist's psychological state in the fury of the creative act which merits our attention, the canvas itself being a vestigial record of the spent creative force.

A peculiar correlation may be shown to exist between the approach of the critic and the evaluation of that approach which I would now like to attempt. The common denominator of this correlation, I call *time*. Rosenberg sensed a futility in the objective description of the painting as object. Attempts to assess Rosenberg's writings might be said to be similarly futile. Today, we are more distant than ever from the collective mentality necessary for producing the Abstract Expressionist gesture. At the same time, historical perspective now necessitates a treatment of Abstract Expressionism that goes beyond an apology for gesture. As the collective American aesthetic consciousness becomes more and more distanced from fundamental Abstract Expressionist sensibility, Rosenberg's approach seems to proportionally lose its ability to communicate the uniqueness of the Abstract Expressionist experience.

The evaluation of the contributions of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg with regard to subsequent directions in American art necessitates fixing the position of Abstract Expressionism within the whole of twentieth-century American art. Specifically, if Abstract Expressionism has set itself apart in the mainstream of twentieth-century art as a period of pronounced innovation and originality, should the movement then be seen principally as a culmination of prior events, or may it be seen as an incipient form of what follows?—and, if both, on which side of the argument should the emphasis be placed?

Clement Greenberg advocated the first of these hypothetical positions. For him Abstract Expressionism was part of a continuum beginning with the developments introduced at the turn of the century. His purist art theory featured the purging of elements not endemic to the plastic arts. While both he and Rosenberg cited the suppression of the object from Abstract Expressionist works, Greenberg saw this suppression as part of a linear development beginning early in the twentieth century. Greenberg's talents seem to have lain with the detection of subtle shifts in the attitudes of the American vanguard as regards their continuing responses to the developments of contemporary European abstractionists.

I believe Rosenberg's views are more important in the description of the evolution of Abstract Expressionism. He refused to admit that purging of the object from painting was a conscious aesthetic principle of a formalist nature. For Rosenberg, what mattered always was the revelation contained in the act of painting.

In "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg does not treat the suppression of the object and the relevance contained in the act of painting independently, but rather as symptomatic of one upon the other. Accordingly, Rosenberg has described the beginning of more recent trends in American art and not the finalizing of trends first appearing at the turn of the century. In 1962, Rosenberg noted a later manifestation of the above-discussed phenomenon when he wrote of the abandonment of the canvas itself in order to produce happenings.

Abstract Expressionism was a forward-looking movement. The artists accepted a credo that was basically existentialist in nature. Their beliefs were open to question, to differing interpretation, and to change. The hermetic quality of their art with its predominantly closed and unyielding iconography has resulted in some confusion as to its purposes, aims and directions. In particular, the extreme painterliness of Abstract Expressionist compositions often impedes the reading of a continuity between these works and the subsequent, more conceptually-oriented pieces typical of much post-Abstract Expressionist art. As a result, a desire to consider Abstract Expressionism exclusively in terms of preceding developments and stressing a continuum of formalist-oriented essays is all the more expected.

It is possible, indeed preferable, to consider Abstract Expressionism as a basis for subsequent developments. For example, in the historical chronology of post-Abstract Expressionist art, happenings may be isolated as the direct heirs of the New York School. Happenings stress gesture and, as Rosenberg himself suggested, may be seen in one respect as action painting without the painting. Close historical and stylistic parallels are such that critics have, on occasion, referred to happenings as baroque manifestations of Abstract Expressionism. Conceptual art, too, offers basic tenets whose incipient forms may be found in Abstract Expressionism. Among these are the suppressing of art object, the advancing of art as idea, and the holding of the importance of documentation over that of product.

Ideational aspects of Conceptual art, defined by Ursula Meyer¹² as dealing with *intentions* rather than appearances in any given work, find *their* direct counterparts in Rosenberg's discussion of "role" and "the spectator-critic." Further, the relationship of the purity of an idea as *inversely* related to the rendering of the art object is a theme explored by Rosenberg in his analysis of the act of painting and the metaphysical distancing of the artist from his work upon its completion.

The subject of an evaluative review of the critical literature surrounding Abstract Expressionism is indeed a complex one. It is certainly deserving of greater attention than is here possible, given the restrictions of the present undertaking. Today, we are wont to talk not only of Abstract Expressionism and the impact of Abstract Expressionist artists on subsequent American art, but also of the schools of criticism attending to the critical analyses of Abstract Expressionist painting. Often times this criticism is broached in terms suggesting an independence from the very art which ostensibly was the catalyst for critical review. Ironic though this might seem, a brief survey of the most recent art criticism clearly suggests such an evaluation.

Recently, authors such as Barbara Rose, Donald Kuspit and William Barrett have debated the existence of schools of critical thought, the influence of Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg among others on the development of a schism in contemporary approaches to critical review and the historical consequences of such seats of power as typified by the editorial board of the *Partisan Review* (Clement Greenberg was a writer for the publication) in the fourth and fifth decades of this century.

New attitudes and approaches by present-day art critics invite reappraisals of earlier critical evaluations. The era of the late thirties and forties of our century is ripe for this type of re-evaluation, as I have attempted to demonstrate. Specifically, the formalist approach of Clement Greenberg in the review of Abstract Expressionist painting has proved inadequate in terms of the identifying of Abstract Express-

sionism as a springboard for subsequent artistic activity. Contrarily, the more personal and at times seemingly hermetic and mystical writings of Harold Rosenberg do, I believe, reveal a greater prescience of developing trends. In this manner, Abstract Expressionism is seen as a point of departure rather than the dénouement of a linear development of formalist concerns first appearing in the early

twentieth century. It is my hope to have shown here the manner in which, clearly, specifics can be cited, illustrating Rosenberg's understanding of the underpinnings of Abstract Expressionism as inaugurating new directions in American art which only subsequently were to realize their full flowering.

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1 Clement Greenberg was at various times art critic for *The Nation* and *Partisan Review*. A collection of critical essays was independently published under the title, *Art and Culture* by the Beacon Press in 1961. Harold Rosenberg published extensively in *Art News* and was a contributor to the single edition of the Abstract Expressionist magazine, *Possibilities*, 1947.

2 C. Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review*, VII, no.4, July-August, 1940.

3 *Ibid.*, 308.

4 Greenberg, "Surrealist Painting," *The Nation*, CLIX, no. 8, August 19, 1944, 219.

5 *Ibid.*, 220.

6 H. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News*, LI, no. 8, December 1952, 23.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 R. Motherwell (ed.), *Possibilities*, Winter 1947/48, 75.

11 *Ibid.*

12 For a discussion of ideational aspects of conceptual art as put forth by Ursula Meyer, see her introduction to *Conceptual Art*. New York, 1972.

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