

Chapter 4

Recovering the Self and Other Directions

With parts of Europe in ruins after World War II, and many European artists having gone to the United States (including Max Ernst, Naum Gabo, Fernand Léger, Jacques Lipchitz, and Piet Mondrian), the center of the art world shifted to New York City. It is there that the story of abstraction resumes in earnest. Though most American artists were not touched directly by the war's devastation, they were no less disillusioned than their European counterparts. Having lived through the Depression and global war and witnessed the ravages of mankind's latest moral failures, they had lost faith in modern civilization. || Utopianism had demanded a trust and passive optimism that most artists and intellectuals no longer shared. Alienation had eroded any sense of collective idealism, and American artists began to find their voice by exploring the self and celebrating personal freedom. In support of these views, they cited writings by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung based on the fundamental idea that the truth of one's inner life holds sway over the dictates of reason.¹ They also found themselves increasingly caught up in the ideas of existentialism, which seemed to reflect their personal and social anxieties and reinforced their belief in individual freedom.²

The mood of artists in the United States after World War II recalls certain patterns of thinking during the initial phase of abstraction. Foremost among these was the perception of freedom being threatened, which was particularly strong in the repressive postwar atmosphere. Maintaining a resolute faith in reason or in the possibility of human perfectibility was difficult; the human condition—indeed, human dignity—needed propping up.³ The tragic vision that Vasily Kandinsky and Mondrian had attempted to transcend through their art appeared to have been deeply embraced by a new generation of artists.

Among these young artists, there was a general loss of faith in the prevailing ideologies, and a tendency to view abstraction as a style of the past. In the early to mid-1940s, the artists of the then developing New York School were elaborating on Surrealist examples through an increasing awareness of all types of archaic art and primitivizing themes. Their work from this phase is a combination of figurative and abstract elements, richly allusive in the manner of André Masson, Matta [Roberto Sebastián Matta Echaurren],⁴ and Joan Miró (though, of the entire New York group, only Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky achieved a sustained and fully realized voice working in this manner; see fig. 99). During the postwar period the term "abstraction" carried a negative connotation, implying an interwar movement that was too unambiguous and positivistic, untouched by events, antagonistic toward individuality, and unalterably wedded to pictorial laws, in contrast to Surrealism's celebration of ambiguity, imagination, and individual creative freedom.

Although the word "abstraction" was anathema to some, its stylistic force and underlying romantic outlook were fully in place among the New York School artists who became known as the Abstract Expressionists.⁵ Only the early European abstractionists had held a comparable degree of faith in art. This new generation took seriously Karl Jaspers's call for artists to "make transcendentalism perceptible," reviving the waning concern for conveying serious, meaningful subject matter within an abstract vocabulary. In hindsight, it seems apparent that if the Americans had not come along to reattempt this synthesis, abstraction might have gone into permanent decline.

The one ideology that continued to attract artists and intellectuals during the 1930s and 1940s was Marxism, although it certainly did not enjoy official acceptance in the United States. Indeed, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was founded in 1938, by a vote

in Congress of 191 to 41, specifically to combat Communism and other influences considered antithetical to national interests. But the right-wing press had already been on the attack for several years. Among the actions regarded as particularly suspicious were declarations advocating absolute freedom, which Leon Trotsky had cited in 1938 to be the province of true art.⁶ Fifteen years later, musician Artie Shaw said, "I am at a point today if someone says, 'Here is a committee for personal freedom,' I don't want any part of it. I don't know what these things mean anymore."⁷ Art that was not Regionalist or anecdotally naïve was considered subversive. In this climate, an artist whose work showed signs of "foreign influences" might even be investigated. Artists subsidized by the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—two-thirds of whom were concentrated in New York City, which was regarded as "an almost alien outpost of foreign influences"⁸—were under attack as Communists.⁹ To depart from conventional expressions of traditional American values was clearly risky, whether in the form of Social Realist tributes to class struggle and to unrestrained political freedom or Modernist displays of aesthetic freedom. Abstraction, with its foreign roots, was especially suspect.

The Great Debate

For advanced American artists of the late 1930s who wanted to escape the constraints of anecdotal and Regionalist practices, European art offered the choice of two seemingly disparate models, abstraction and Surrealism. In Europe, the schism between the two had developed into a "violent quarrel"¹⁰ that had spread to the United States, so that, in 1942, when Peggy Guggenheim opened her New York gallery, Art of This Century, she wore one earring made by Yves Tanguy and another by Alexander Calder "in order to show my impartiality between surrealist and abstract art."¹¹ In 1944, however, Sidney Janis asserted that "the schism between the factions is not as insurmountable as their members believe."¹² About this bitterly divided time, Masson wrote that categories were for the "lower slopes of the mind."¹³ Still, the issues proved divisive.

The debate was addressed in part in Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, for his Francophile position favored Surrealism as a continuation of the School of Paris, while American abstraction was shut out of the exhibition altogether.¹⁴ The formation of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) group exemplified the extreme position of abstraction in America. In its first exhibition, in 1937, AAA stressed that "a liberal interpretation would have to be placed upon the word 'abstract,'" and affirmed the group's broad internationalism, with its roots in the Abstraction-Création movement based in Paris and the Circle group in London.¹⁵ Another strong influence on many AAA artists was the work of Stuart Davis, who in the late 1920s had developed a thoroughly American Cubist-derived version of abstraction based on a system of flat planes and geometric shapes usually combined with bits of lettering, words, or phrases. He explained that "a subject had its emotional reality fundamentally through our awareness of such planes and their spatial relationships."¹⁶ Even in the face of the public's hostility toward abstraction between the wars, Davis maintained a strict adherence to his aesthetic principles. In 1939, he proclaimed: "Abstract art is here to stay because the progressive spirit it represents is here to stay. A free art cannot be destroyed without destroying the social freedoms it expresses."¹⁷ Indeed, although AAA failed to attract Barr's enthusiasm, it should still be given credit for drawing enough serious attention to American abstraction that during the year 1938, as one magazine noted, abstract art flooded the galleries.¹⁸



99. Arshile Gorky, *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 7 feet 9 1/2 inches x 12 feet 11 inches (2.37 x 3.94 m). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1952.

100. Hans Hofmann, *Fantasia*, 1943. Oil, Duco, and casein on plywood, 51 1/16 x 36 1/16 inches (130.7 x 93.2 cm). University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California at Berkeley, Gift of the artist.

The AAA group was concerned that the Surrealist glorification of individual sensibility might diminish an emphasis on unfettered plasticity.¹⁹ It was no longer Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian but the AAA and its counterparts in Europe who had come to epitomize abstraction and to represent its aesthetic positions. Hence, the emphasis on plasticity became a hallmark of the abstract approach. This extreme formalist outlook was maintained not only by many artists but also by curators and critics.²⁰ The increasingly influential critic Clement Greenberg, for example, railed against all forms of representational painting in recent art, especially Surrealism, which (except for automatism) he considered too literary. In a characteristically elitist remark, Greenberg suggested that Surrealism catered too much to popular taste, lowering instead of raising the sensibility of Everyman. The art that he favored, he archly stated, was "arduous."²¹ As a champion of formalism, he even surpassed Roger Fry, who had left room for a link between art and life; for Greenberg, there was none.²² Thus, the frequent characterization of abstraction by its enemies as an ivory-tower pastime is hardly surprising.²³ It was also attacked as "a symptom of cultural, even moral, decay,"²⁴ as Greenberg noted in one essay.

In 1937, in an essay called "The Nature of Abstract Art," art historian Meyer Schapiro challenged the strictly formalist, ahistorical view of abstraction perpetuated by Barr and others. After describing Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* as "the best that we have in English on the movements now grouped as abstract art," he condemned Barr for disregarding the fundamental notion that art is shaped by the conditions of the moment and the nature of the society in which it arises. Barr, he said, had erroneously attributed the development of abstract art entirely to the "exhaustion" of representational art, theorizing that, "out of boredom with 'painting facts,' the artists turned to abstract art as a pure aesthetic activity." Schapiro insisted that, on the contrary, such a "broad reaction against an existing art is possible only on the ground of its inadequacy to artists with new values and new ways of seeing," as a critique of existing conditions and an affirmation of freedom. And he completely rejected the notion that art is a purely aesthetic activity, "a 'pure art' unconditioned by experience."²⁵ Schapiro elaborated on the idea of abstract art as the domain of freedom in a talk in 1957, in which he proposed that the revolution in modern painting and sculpture introduced "a new liberty . . . a new sense of freedom and possibility." Recent abstract painting, he asserted, featured new approaches to "handling, processing, [and] surfacing" that emphasized "spontaneity or intense feeling" and "the freely made quality" of the work, and embodied an artist's profound realization of "freedom and deep engagement of the self."²⁶ In 1960, in a brief essay defending abstraction against some common misconceptions and criticisms, Schapiro concluded (with a shade of ambivalence): "Looking back to the past, one may regret that painting now is not broader and fails to touch enough in our lives. The same may be said of representation, which, on the whole, lags behind abstract art in inventiveness and conviction; today it is abstract painting that stimulates artists to a freer approach to visible nature and man . . . and has opened to [them] regions of feeling and perception unknown before."²⁷

Abstraction was constantly under attack in the United States during the 1930s and early 1940s, its imminent demise a frequent topic of discussion.²⁸ Throughout the 1930s, abstraction was often identified with Communism,²⁹ in spite of the broad range of political views and affiliations among its adherents in the United States. Stylistically, American abstraction was criticized for what were perceived as its

9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

numerous faults, including an arid, machine-made look and a pallid academicism. Although some commentators acknowledged that abstraction was suitable for "decorative" uses in architecture and design, they insisted that it did not meet the higher requirements of other forms of art.³⁰ When it was not being criticized for lacking expressiveness, abstract art was being described as too subjective.³¹ Because it was seemingly without roots in a great tradition, some critics regarded it as incapable of the subtlety of representational art, and called for a return to both representation and subject matter in order to combat the sterility that they believed had permeated contemporary modes of expression.³² One of them asked, "In avoiding life, can abstract painting live?"³³ Barr must have been responding to these discussions when he categorized a number of European artists as "Abstract Expressionists" in his 1936 exhibition, thereby showing that the idea of abstraction could be rescued by a synthesis with Expressionism.

In the mid-1940s, in this hostile environment, the AAA still managed to succeed in its goals of fostering abstraction and bringing it to public attention.³⁴ But with much of the work of its members dominated by formulaic geometry and pattern-making, the group's leaders harbored doubts about whether a place could be made within their approach for some degree of expression.³⁵ However, there were younger artists outside their group who were exploring more radical modes of abstraction in a search for expression beyond representational styles, and who realized that a fusion of expressive content and pictorial qualities was called for. Perhaps it was apparent by this early date that the young Abstract Expressionists might reinvent abstraction, and the AAA wanted to co-opt or at least include the upstarts' efforts within their own agenda. But despite the AAA's intention, it never attracted this new generation, although it continued to offer an organized base for abstract artists into the 1950s.

The New York School: Abstract Expressionism

Early twentieth-century abstraction began with the gestural work of Kandinsky and the quite different rectilinear paintings of Mondrian, followed by a similar contrast between the organic abstraction of Jean Arp and Miró and the geometrically inclined Constructivists. The pattern continued in the two branches of abstraction practiced in America during the 1950s and 1960s: the exuberant gestures of de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and other Action painters, and the relatively uninflected planes of color of the Field painters, including Josef Albers, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still.

Although de Kooning's paintings are rarely larger than human scale, he achieved an epic effect through the dramatic intimacy and muscular physicality of his brushstrokes. The freedom and energy of de Kooning's brushstrokes were anticipated in twentieth-century art only by Kandinsky. But whereas Kandinsky almost always gave his brushstrokes room to breathe, de Kooning treated space with a certain degree of ambiguity. In such works as *Painting*, 1948 (fig. 101), he only partially relieved the density of the massed black forms with a few glimpses of white "space" here and there. Soon after making this work, he began to focus on what became his primary activity as a painter—the elaboration of the drawn colored line inscribed with swaths of pigment. Each painting became the repository of gestures so numerous and densely layered, as in *Composition*, 1955 (fig. 102), that the painted surface obliterated any breathing space that may have been present in its earlier stages. Perhaps because a line constantly verges on description, some of the gestural painters of the New York School

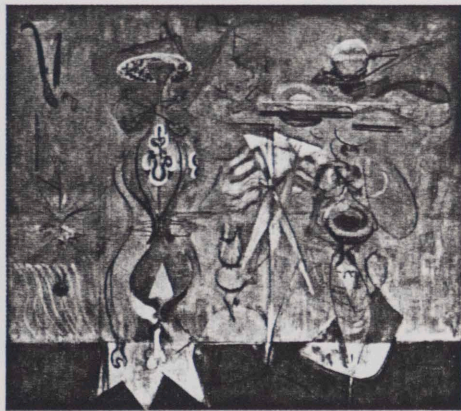
occasionally left hints of a figurative subject in their compositions. De Kooning, in his works of the 1950s and 1960s, often maintained the sense of a centered configuration or even a recognizable figure, and in his *Woman* series of the early 1950s he made subject matter quite obvious. In fact, throughout his career de Kooning moved between pure abstraction, as in *Composition*, and obvious or apparent representation, as in *Palisades*, 1957 (fig. 103). But the paintings of his landscape series, to which *Palisades* belongs, are mostly subliminal in their references to landscape or any other sources. Such works are evocations of raucous urban or suburban energy in dynamic equilibrium, a counterpart to Mondrian's vision and, like Mondrian's works, essentially metaphysical. In the 1970s, in works such as . . . *Whose Name Was Writ in Water*, 1975 (fig. 104), and *Untitled* (fig. 121) and *Untitled I* (fig. 122), both 1977, de Kooning maintained his ambiguous approach to the density and buoyancy of his painted gestures.

Pollock and Hofmann also seemed to have been strongly influenced by the gestural work of Kandinsky. Their earliest drip paintings—for example, Hofmann's *Fantasia* (fig. 100) and Pollock's *Composition with Pouring II* (fig. 105), both 1943—exhibit the same free, highly personal, nondescriptive gesture and imprecise but atmospheric space evident in Kandinsky's work, along with a suggestion of Miró's often liquid line.³⁶ These American gesturalists stressed the physicality of the medium and the raw process of painting.

Process and improvisation were central to the working methods of both de Kooning and Pollock. But Pollock, with his drip technique, courted chance and spontaneous effects more than de Kooning did. Compared to the controlled fury of de Kooning's gestures, Pollock's line is more akin to a masterful accident of the hand, as in *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* (fig. 106) and *Number 3* (fig. 120), both 1950. Although Pollock had dealt with the figure in the early 1940s and occasionally returned to it a decade later, there is almost never a shape hinted at or described in most of his mature works, which consist of linear "skeins"—densely woven, filamented lines and textures that overlap and interweave, as in *Number 13A: Arabesque*, 1948 (fig. 107) and *Lavender Mist*. In these works, Pollock stressed an all-over compositional format in which space, or the possibility of visual penetration, appears to be invited and then denied.

Pollock began making large-scale paintings in the early 1940s,³⁷ a development that may reflect, in addition to his often-cited interest in Mexican murals, the interwar abstractionists' expansion of scale in order to achieve a fuller, environmental impact. This expansion of pure abstraction continued in the 1950s, when the Field painters created large paintings that consist chiefly of flat expanses of color, with a minimum of gesture and not even a hint of figuration, such as Newman's *The Word II*, 1954 (fig. 114). Indeed, the size of these works, often even larger than Pollock's, was a critical element in achieving the goals of these artists. With the scale of abstraction enlarged to epic proportions, the viewer is physically overwhelmed, compelled to enter the space of the picture and—the artists hoped—to experience firsthand a completely abstract world defined by the sensuous qualities of the painted surface, comparable to viewing the most dramatic effects of nature.

The Field painters, more than the gestural painters, were especially interested in expressing a sublime and/or tragic vision.³⁸ After making paintings incorporating imagery based on archetypal myths of the ancient Greeks and the North American Indians during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Newman, Rothko, and Still began using richly colored abstract shapes to evoke a more intense sensation of nothingness or



108. Mark Rothko, *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 6 feet 3 1/4 inches x 7 feet 1/4 inch (1.91 x 2.15 m). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Bequest of Mrs. Mark Rothko through The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1981.

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109. Franz Kline, *Siegfried*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 8 feet 7 inches x 6 feet 9 inches (2.62 x 2.06 m). The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Gift of the Friends of the Museum, 1959.

^{infinity} infinity than had ever been painted. By the 1950s, their subject matter ^{theme} was no longer insinuated through symbols but was real and present in the space of the viewer, conveyed by a new pictorial language that relied entirely on color, line, and space.

Color was abandoned for a while by de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, and Pollock during the period from the early 1940s to the early 1950s—and almost permanently by Kline (see fig. 109)—in favor of an ascetic black-and-white palette. Its stark, dramatic contrast, evoking the grim world of Hollywood film noir, seemed to deny sensuality in favor of an aggressively tragic vision. There is no desire to “entertain” by the use of color, or to please, as in the School of Paris. In an all-white painting such as *The Name II*, 1950 (fig. 115), Newman appears to have used whiteness less to convey infinity or purity than as something tough and raw, more a neutral tonality than a symbolic one, even if a certain symbolism is suggested by the tripartite composition. Indeed, any suggestion of infinite expansion is abruptly denied by Newman’s treatment of the painting’s left and right edges, which he deliberately left unpainted.

Rothko’s evolution away from Surrealist-inspired imagery is similar to that of several of his colleagues, including Newman, Still, and, to a degree, Pollock, but somewhat more formally systematic, perhaps comparable to that of Mondrian. In the 1940s, after several years of figurative work, Rothko began painting mythic or totemic images of Surrealist inspiration against neutral fields (as in *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea*, 1944, fig. 108), something like what Masson and Miró had been doing. Then, in the late 1940s, he eliminated all figurative references and all traces of line, with the abstract background or flat plane beyond the pictorial events in the foreground gradually becoming the entire subject matter of his art. A typical Rothko composition, such as *Blue over Orange*, 1956 (fig. 126), or *No. 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey)*, 1961 (fig. 110), consists of two or three soft-edged rectangles of highly saturated color, stacked vertically, with the largest usually presented as the central focus and the other colors subtly balancing the dominant one, creating an atmosphere of weight and mystery. Rothko used a range of color, thinly painted and applied with great nuance, as in *White Band (No. 27)*, 1954 (fig. 111), giving his reductive compositions a vulnerable, even human, dimension, which is magnified by the blurred edges of his forms. The effect is theatrical, for Rothko was a master at creating a physical impact, and his evocation of infinity, or the sublime, is palpable.

Seeking an archetypal image in abstract terms, Newman reduced his compositional elements to a large field of uninflected color with a narrow vertical column (sometimes several) of another color interrupting it, as in *Onement I* (fig. 112) and *Onement II* (fig. 113), both 1948. By subsequently enlarging the scale of his paintings to epic proportions, he thought art could be made a vehicle of strong feeling,³⁹ exemplifying Motherwell’s belief that American artists’ passion for largeness of scale signifies a heroic impulse and a desire for the sublime. Unlike Rothko’s, Newman’s use of color, even when it creates a sense of vast, overwhelming space, still recalls works by Mondrian: a flat, dense, careful application, usually of primary hues. And, also unlike Rothko, Newman never gave up line as a basic component of his work, and said that drawing was crucial for him.⁴⁰ Indeed, the vertical “zip” that marks or delimits his fields of color, and which is the central element of his art, is a powerful expression of the drawn line, an emphatic and solitary gesture. Sometimes, though, he reduced it to nothing more than a narrow space between two adjacent rectangles, as in *Ulysses*, 1952 (fig. 116).

Still’s mature paintings consist of great expanses of roughly textured,

thickly encrusted pigment of one color often violently interrupted by patches (or irregular streaks or jagged, mountainous forms) of one or two other colors, as in *1954*, 1954 (fig. 117), and *1957-D No. 1*, 1957 (fig. 118). These dramatic, sometimes nearly monochromatic works, like some by Newman and Rothko, are heroic evocations of space, but Still's motifs are more closely linked to elements of landscape.

In many ways, Abstract Expressionism represents the full flowering of abstraction. The abstract object gained a presence and force of reality through an enlargement of scale, and a poignancy through an emancipation of feeling. However, it is difficult not to see the Americans' aesthetics in the terms first given by Kandinsky. Like him, they expressed a degree of inner feeling and subjectivism through abstract forms, and their emphasis on the sublime effectively echoed Kandinsky's religious fervor. While the gestural painters' assertive, dynamic stance carried some of the overt romanticism of the early abstractionists, the approach of the Field painters is aptly characterized by Paul Klee's description of abstraction as "cool Romanticism."

Americans on Their Predecessors

By the 1940s, the impact of abstraction as epitomized by the AAA group began to change as Americans came into direct contact with the pioneering work of the early European abstractionists. Although the work of Kazimir Malevich remained almost unknown, the paintings of Kandinsky and Mondrian gained increased recognition around that time in New York. After Mondrian moved there in 1940, his exhibitions at the Sidney Janis Gallery and his strong influence on many members of the AAA made him a major force in American abstraction; his 1945 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, a year after his death, extended that influence and made his work more widely known. Kandinsky's art had become familiar in New York through the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, founded in 1939 by Solomon R. Guggenheim under the direction of his art advisor, Hilla Rebay. According to Dore Ashton, Gorky was a frequent visitor at that museum from the start and was especially affected by the works by Kandinsky he saw; and Pollock worked there briefly as a custodian.⁴¹ A memorial exhibition of more than 200 of Kandinsky's works was organized there in 1945, and it had a major impact on New York artists.

Today, it seems obvious that Pollock's early pouring technique, as well as the contemporaneous drip paintings by Hofmann, were influenced by Kandinsky's freely painted lines. But among artists of the period, opinion was mixed on the art of that pioneer abstractionist. Motherwell once commented that no one except Gorky ever had a good word to say about Kandinsky, which of course was an exaggeration. Hofmann expressed great admiration for Kandinsky and for Mondrian (as well as for Klee and Miró),⁴² and acknowledged a primary position for Kandinsky in the history of modern art.⁴³ Another admirer of Kandinsky was John Graham, a Russian-born artist who came to New York around 1920 and who knew and influenced many artists, including de Kooning, Gorky, Pollock, and David Smith. His book *System and Dialectics of Art* shows a deep knowledge and appreciation of Kandinsky's central ideas.⁴⁴ Smith, in a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952, acknowledged that his aesthetics were "influenced by Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Cubism."⁴⁵ Newman characterized Kandinsky's and Mondrian's ideas as seminal, and Miró and Mondrian as "the most original of the abstract European painters," but believed that his and his American colleagues' achievement was greater, as they had created "a truly

abstract world which can be discussed only in metaphysical terms."⁴⁶ He claimed that they, unlike the European painters, had given physical presence and reality to "abstract concepts" without any reference to the natural world,⁴⁷ thus surpassing the efforts of their aesthetic "fathers." Rothko found inspiration in the work of Surrealists such as Miró as well as that of the pioneers of early abstraction, and in 1945, two years before he began to articulate his mature style, he wrote, "I quarrel with surrealist and abstract art only as one quarrels with his father and mother; recognizing the inevitability and function of my roots, but insistent upon my dissension."⁴⁸

The critics argued over the status and significance of the pioneers of abstraction. Greenberg complained that Kandinsky was too illusionistic in his approach,⁴⁹ while Harold Rosenberg, a well-known critic of the period who was unencumbered by Greenberg's formalist bias, recognized that abstraction contained something else besides its pictorial innovations. Rosenberg analyzed Mondrian's formalism, for example, as a rejection of "the tragedy of history" and, therefore, a sign of an advanced position in art.⁵⁰ Although Kandinsky's influence remained for the most part unacknowledged, it was often apparent in the language of the critics, as in James Johnson Sweeney's introductory essay for Pollock's first exhibition in 1943, where he wrote of the need for more artists to "paint from inner impulsion,"⁵¹ recalling Kandinsky's exhortation to the artist to work from "inner necessity."

De Kooning acknowledged the importance of Kandinsky's art, but found his writing to be a "philosophical barricade."⁵² Mondrian was a far more complicated issue for him, perhaps because both were Dutch. Although he described Mondrian as a "great merciless artist,"⁵³ and his painting as having "terrific tension,"⁵⁴ de Kooning could not identify with his hermetic and utopian nature.⁵⁵

Motherwell was one of the few who seemed to be aware of the work of Malevich during this period. In 1944, he wrote that Malevich and Mondrian had made tremendously significant contributions to the history of modern art, but he also criticized their work for its formalist emphasis, which inhibited individual expression.⁵⁶

The opinions of most Abstract Expressionists about the Bauhaus were completely negative. Both Rothko and de Kooning felt that its functional approach to design denied the human and spiritual dimension and eliminated the possibility of "high" art ideals in favor of a kind of "low" art aspiration. Hofmann also attacked the Bauhaus for its "confused" approach to fine and applied arts.⁵⁷ Newman despised anything "programmatically and doctrinaire,"⁵⁸ and was cynical about utopians.⁵⁹ Hence, he was caustic in his disapproval of the Bauhaus, describing its practitioners as designers of "screwdrivers, modernistic furniture, and bric-a-brac," for whom art was not an act of the "human spirit" but merely the means for the better manufacture of "automatic flapjack turners" and other such products.⁶⁰ Still was antagonistic toward the Bauhaus and its machine aesthetic, materialist outlook, and emphasis on architecture, and expressed his resentment against the former members of the Bauhaus who came to the United States and "dumped their authoritarian theology on our museums and educational institutions."⁶¹ Belligerently asserting that the Bauhaus had "herded" earlier movements (presumably abstraction) "into a cool, universal Buchenwald,"⁶² Still was perhaps the only member of the Abstract Expressionist group to express such extreme hatred of the German school and its followers.

The School of Paris retained enormous stature and significance in New York during this period, as indicated by Pollock's statement in 1944 that all of the important art of the past century had been produced in France.⁶³ Although Surrealism as a viable contemporary

alternative was generally in decline by the early 1950s, the Surrealists' practice of automatism was extraordinarily influential, popularized by Masson, Matta, and Miró. Automatism supplied the "creative principle" that artists were searching for,⁶⁴ because it was spontaneous, leading to art that originated in the subconscious and that represented states of feeling⁶⁵ (including a direct emotional response to the devastations of war⁶⁶). Surrealism was a correction to abstraction's seemingly contentless approach, which Motherwell understood when he commented that the "strength of Arp, Masson, Miró, and Picasso lies in the great humanity of their formalism."⁶⁷ However, Motherwell also declared that "no Parisian is a sublime painter, nor a monumental one,"⁶⁸ although, of the painters he named, Miró probably came the closest and therefore exerted the greatest influence in the United States during the 1940s and early 1950s.⁶⁹ According to Ashton, even artists "such as de Kooning, who were never to embrace even the most abstract of surrealist notions, nevertheless showed their awareness of its impact in their work."⁷⁰ Motherwell reported that Greenberg hated Surrealism to such an extent that for a long time its influence on Pollock was underestimated.⁷¹

Newman acknowledged that, although the influence of Surrealism waned after World War II, it contributed to the revival of subject matter in American painting. But he criticized the dream worlds evoked by the Surrealists for being "mundane" and "never . . . transcendental," and attacked the Surrealist artists, with the exception of Miró, for failing to address the issue of plastic values.⁷² He thus acknowledged the importance of Miró, but in 1947 singled out Miró's one weakness as remaining overly tied to the world of appearances.⁷³

The historical breakthrough accomplished by Abstract Expressionism was its synthesis of a Surrealist concern for subject matter and abstraction's concern with a formal presence—Rothko's "father and mother." Still described such a synthesis being discussed in the 1940s, although it was the Bauhaus form of abstraction that was considered.⁷⁴ In 1944, Newman said that "compromise" might better express the relationship but a year later used the word "fusion" to describe the effect in Miró's art.⁷⁵ He also declared that American "art of the future will . . . be . . . abstract yet full of feeling,"⁷⁶ a characterization that properly acknowledges the absolute position of abstraction while indicating a desired modification of its course. It was in this context of rapprochement that Peggy Guggenheim donned each of her earrings.

On the Subject of Abstraction

The Abstract Expressionists, while not completely united in their thoughts on the general subject of abstraction, held some similar ideas and criticisms of it. Their chief complaint was that it is soulless. In 1945, Rothko repudiated the abstract artist's "denial of the anecdote," for he believed that art "is an anecdote of the spirit."⁷⁷ In 1951, Mark Tobey said, "We have tried to fit man into abstraction, but he does not fit."⁷⁸ The most vocal on this subject was de Kooning, who in 1951 described abstraction as the pastime of theoretical-minded types who purified form of its human dimension,⁷⁹ leaving out all the "drama, pain, anger, [and] love" that he was concerned with in his art. He felt that in their hands, abstraction did not allow for the uncertainty of life, while for him, "Nothing is positive about art."⁸⁰ This kind of dissociation of art from life had been noted by Motherwell in 1942 when he declared that the problem with Mondrian's art and abstraction in general was its lack of "contact with historical reality."⁸¹

Another severe reaction to abstraction concerned its apparently decorative purity. In this regard, the designation "geometric" was a

particular curse for Newman,⁸² who derided American abstractionists (undoubtedly the AAA geometricians) as "dull" and feared that an emphasis on geometry, purity, and form, such as had been practiced between the wars, would lead to empty formalism.⁸³ Rothko, too, felt that abstraction had become overly geometric, and he criticized any art or artistic process that might be dehumanized or that became chiefly concerned with design.⁸⁴ Years later, Philip Guston summarized the matter: "There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art. That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, and therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting *is* 'impure.' It is the adjustment of 'impurities' which forces painting's continuity."⁸⁵ For the young Americans, an art-for-art's-sake position was sterile and inappropriate; abstraction needed to evoke the powerful forces of life, of reality. "Art never seems to make me peaceful or pure,"⁸⁶ declared de Kooning, who believed that style is "a fraud," and that an artist fills space "with an attitude"⁸⁷—an attitude of restless searching and spiritual independence, which gives an otherwise pure style its human dimension.

There were some in this new generation of abstractionists, however, who strove for purity in their work and shunned expression of any kind. Reinhardt, who as a member of AAA in the late 1930s and 1940s had worked in an energetically complex mode related to geometric abstraction, stripped it down by the early 1950s to ascetic cruciform arrangements of squares of similar colors, as in his *Abstract Painting*, 1960–66 (fig. 130), concentrating on what he described as "pure form, pure color, and pure monochrome."⁸⁸ He rejected "Expressionism" as early as 1957 and again later distanced himself from all "expressionist" labels.⁸⁹ Philip Pavia recalled that there had been a great struggle over the term "abstract expressionism" in 1952, when for about six months one was either an abstractionist or an expressionist, but not both.⁹⁰

As a defining stylistic hallmark, though, "abstraction" had become an imprecise, general term, and remained in flux.⁹¹ In 1951, de Kooning grudgingly allowed that "if I *do* paint abstract art, that's what abstract art means to me."⁹² "Abstraction" was usually thought of by the Americans more as a language or style than as a movement, but one that they had made their own. There are numerous, increasingly positive expressions of this in their writings, such as David Smith's declaration in 1940 that abstraction "is the language of our time," Newman's in 1944 that abstraction "is the art of the future," and Gottlieb's in 1956 that "we are going to have perhaps a thousand years of non-representational art."⁹³ In 1959, Reinhardt made the point that abstraction was about fifty years old and had come to characterize the century. Rather than being a "'moment' or 'school' or 'ism' . . . it was a new idea or beginning, with limitless possibilities."⁹⁴

Like Smith, Newman recognized abstraction as the "language"⁹⁵ or "style" of the times⁹⁶ and placed it at the forefront of future art. Perhaps distinguishing himself from his AAA contemporaries, Newman described "a difference between a purist art form and an art form used purely."⁹⁷ He wanted a "confrontation with abstraction,"⁹⁸ in order to create a "new type of abstract thought."⁹⁹ That is, he treated abstraction as a worthy tradition, stale but not debased, and saw himself as contributing to its future.

Although the paintings of Gorky are almost never completely abstract, he was a champion of the style and a great influence on his younger colleagues. Unlike the other major European immigrant artists, such as de Kooning and Rothko, Gorky had immersed himself in the ideas of the pioneer abstractionists. In 1947, he analyzed abstraction as having the potential to disclose views of infinite inner

realms, and said that "abstraction is . . . the probing vehicle, the progressive thrust toward higher civilization, . . . the emancipation of the mind." He even declared that abstract art "is at the root of all creativity."¹⁰⁰ Thus, for Gorky, abstraction was more than just a style—it was a process that led to the sublime.

Similarly transcendent notions seem to underlie the views of several of the Abstract Expressionists toward abstraction. Newman contrasted illusionistic art and its "overload of pseudo-scientific truths"¹⁰¹ to the metaphysical truths¹⁰² and pure expressions of feeling¹⁰³ in abstraction. By noting that his paintings have no beginning or end,¹⁰⁴ Pollock emphasized their evocation of eternity. This desire for a transcendent realm can also be found in the thinking of Still, for whom the sublime had been "a paramount consideration from my earliest student days,"¹⁰⁵ and Rothko, who declared that he sought "transcendental experiences," "miracles," and "revelation" in art.¹⁰⁶ Although Motherwell professed a dislike for the word "mysticism," he acknowledged it to be the true content of abstraction.¹⁰⁷ All of these artists wanted their paintings to embody otherwise unviewable phenomena, and used abstraction as the means toward that end. Newman described "the new painter" making use of metaphysical models,¹⁰⁸ as if his or her goal was to create on the canvas a world apart from the material reality of ordinary existence.¹⁰⁹ However, Reinhardt was an exception in this respect too, for even though his art resembles the others in some ways, he hardly ever referred to such transcendence in his statements and writings. Rather, he sought purity, as an antithesis to the apparent dissoluteness of daily life.¹¹⁰ Among the Abstract Expressionists, the Field painters—the creators not of dynamically gestural paintings but of those consisting of vast planes saturated with color—were most intrigued by a Romantic vision of the Sublime, whereas most of the gestural painters explored a more "impure" realm. In discussions of their art, it was Newman who most often invoked images of a sublime realm driving his aesthetic thinking and, comparing his work to earlier examples of abstraction, suggested that his project was the most "exalted" of all.¹¹¹

Most of the Abstract Expressionists made emotion the cornerstone of their art and believed that abstraction, despite their fears of its sterility,¹¹² held the key to the expression of raw feelings and even self-discovery.¹¹³ Newman acknowledged the desire for self-exploration as the paramount subject of art, declaring that "the self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture."¹¹⁴ Hofmann stated the matter in psychoanalytic terms, insisting that abstract art "means . . . to discover myself,"¹¹⁵ and Pollock, too, maintained that "most modern painters work . . . from within."¹¹⁶ Self-examination had, in part, replaced utopian ideals, as if the only viable subject for the artist in an apparently bankrupt society was the self. Although de Kooning only rarely mentioned emotion, his approach was dominated by life experiences and sensations, which are clearly reflected in his paintings and which he once characterized as "the melodrama of vulgarity"; indeed, the character of his abstract work epitomizes the expression of feeling.¹¹⁷

Motherwell asserted that the "emergence of abstract art is a sign that there are still men able to assert feeling in the world . . . no matter how irrational or absurd."¹¹⁸ Emotion, being messy, romantic, and even "vulgar" (to use de Kooning's word), injected a new attitude into the ostensibly "empty" vessel of abstract art. The artists asserted that their works, rather than being anecdotal renderings of emotions, were the feelings themselves, real and present in the same space occupied by the viewer. In this regard, Pollock carefully explained that his art was not about the narration of feelings but was the

expression of them;¹¹⁹ thus, his description of being "in" his painting¹²⁰ might be understood as evoking a state of high emotional excitement. Rothko, explaining why he made large paintings (for example, fig. 124), also described the sensation of being "in" the painting, and ascribed it to his desire "to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience . . . with a reducing glass. . . . However you paint the larger picture, you are in it."¹²¹

Rothko fervently wished his art to evoke the human condition, and even declared, "The only thing I care about is the expression of man's basic emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom."¹²² These extremes of feeling are reflected in his colors, from the sunny yellows and oranges of many works from the 1950s to the somber blacks, browns, and grays that predominated in his last years, as in *Untitled (Black on Grey)*, 1970 (fig. 125). Kline and Hofmann talked about emotion as essential to their work, but did not describe it in any detail.¹²³

Newman proclaimed the importance of feeling in his art repeatedly throughout his career,¹²⁴ and, as befitting the true abstractionist, acknowledged an admiration for music's pure expressiveness.¹²⁵ He was not interested, however, in ordinary feelings but in universal truths that he could summon from within the depths of his being. In the mid-1940s, he wrote, "The present painter [i.e., himself] is concerned not with his own feelings or with the mystery of his own personality" but instead was "attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets" in order to "catch the basic truth of life."¹²⁶ He spoke of emotions in art as being "absolute" and regarded each of his paintings as embodying a "specific and separate" emotion.¹²⁷ His description of creating "cathedrals" of feeling¹²⁸ recalls the aspirations of Malevich.

These artists' dedication to emotional freedom was rooted in the existential notion of living freely and actively in the present,¹²⁹ in accord with what Henri Bergson called the primacy of one's instincts. Early on, Gottlieb, Newman, and Rothko made use of the term "risk" to describe and perhaps dramatize their enterprise: "To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take risks."¹³⁰ Here, they were echoing an idea that André Breton had introduced five years earlier when he wrote, in an essay about Masson, "The taste for risk is undeniably the principal mechanism capable of carrying man forward to an unknown way."¹³¹ In Newman's case, the celebration of this quality is extreme: "Risk is the high road to glory; of course, I hate the idea of glory, but . . ."¹³² The notion of freedom discussed here—a state of being unconstrained by societal strictures—underscores that the project of abstraction continued to be idealist, if no longer utopian. Rothko stressed his aesthetic independence, explaining that the shapes in his paintings have "a passion for self-assertion" and attain an "internal freedom" that does not "conform with or . . . violate what is probable in the familiar world."¹³³ Still spoke of his commitment to the "unqualified act"¹³⁴ and of his desire for the "liberation of the spirit,"¹³⁵ but suggested a social aspect to all this, calling his work "a critique of values."¹³⁶ He used the word "emancipation" to describe the result of his endeavor,¹³⁷ but added a cautionary and even pedagogical note when he spoke of "the disciplines of freedom,"¹³⁸ a concept akin to the spontaneous yet disciplined expression in jazz improvisation.

Describing the emancipating possibilities of modern art, de Kooning said "I get freer."¹³⁹ Pollock, although he never specifically commented on this subject, offered the most absolute declaration when he said "I am nature,"¹⁴⁰ thus suggesting that spontaneous freedom is amoral and apolitical. Being completely detached from a program of requirements, abstract art was for these artists the ultimate—but not the only—

vehicle by which freedom of expression might be achieved. Because this freedom informed the process of making abstract art and the language of abstraction itself, they believed that it was evoked both by analogy and by actual fact.

In the American milieu, the idea of emotional freedom was linked to political freedom. "Art is born of freedom and liberty, and dies of constraint," wrote David Smith in an essay around 1940, in which he decried fascism's curtailment of artistic freedom, not only abroad but in America, where "outright fascists" and "political and cultural reactionaries" had threatened artists' ability to freely express emotions and ideas.¹⁴¹ Artists had to fight against these tendencies by actively exploring the freedom offered by abstraction, which Smith saw as the true revolutionary art, and he believed that "the great majority of abstract artists are anti-fascist and socially conscious."¹⁴² Newman declared that "if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism." According to him, his paintings offered a vision of an "open society . . . not of a closed institutional world."¹⁴³

But society in the 1940s and 1950s did not appear open and welcoming to the Abstract Expressionists and other artists, who saw themselves cast in the roles of outsiders and social outcasts. Wilhelm Worringer's notion that abstract art arises out of the transcendental urge brought on by anxiety over the arbitrary conditions of life appears to apply to the Abstract Expressionists, given their feeling of alienation from modern life and their search for the sublime. Motherwell said that abstraction is meant to be used to "close the void" felt by the artist toward the modern world,¹⁴⁴ and described Kline as "a born abstract painter, since he could not . . . endure the tensions of modern life."¹⁴⁵ In 1949, writing to Rothko on the subject of their relationship to the public, Still lamented: "We are alone,"¹⁴⁶ echoing a similar complaint made earlier by Klee. Elsewhere, he typically justified this alienation as a moral position, declaring that society was a "sordid" place.¹⁴⁷ Both Reinhardt and Rothko used a similarly moral tone in complaints about the ethical deficiencies of their fellow citizens. Indeed, Rothko complained that the "people" were a cruel, "vulgar," and "impotent" lot altogether.¹⁴⁸ He acknowledged the discouraging response of contemporary audiences toward his work (an indifference that all the Abstract Expressionists experienced early in their careers), and described a clandestine existence for the abstract artist, whose activity essentially consists of destroying the "familiar identity of things."¹⁴⁹

Gottlieb, too, linked abstraction to a position of being "at war with society." Like Rothko, there is a stridency and ill will in his words; he asserted that abstraction declares to the public: "You're stupid. We despise you. We don't want you to like us—or our art."¹⁵⁰ Earlier abstractionists had shown at least some desire to connect with society, but the American group seemed to embrace their position as outcasts, having seen that abstract art had failed anyway to attract an audience.

Did the bohemian—or Beat—pose accurately reflect the Abstract Expressionists' economic situation? Whether they attained financial success is a matter of contention among scholars. Lawrence Alloway reported that there was little such success (and that Serge Guilbaut's claim of the group supporting a conservative political agenda is false).¹⁵¹ Analyzing the sale of works by the Abstract Expressionists during the early 1950s, Ashton wrote that "a few of the New York School painters were escaping from the egalitarian condition of poverty" and becoming "relatively 'successful,'" but there were still exhibitions where no works sold.¹⁵² A recent essay by one art historian, however, supports the view that the apparently bohemian pose of the

group was a sham.¹⁵³ Motherwell, in a typically conflicted theoretical discussion of this issue, linked the striving for freedom on the part of his colleagues to the path of the working class, as if in revolutionary solidarity; but in the same essay, he declared that "as a conscious entity the working class does not exist." He finally concluded, regretfully, that the artist seeks to "transcend the social," and that artistic freedom is an individual rather than a collective matter.¹⁵⁴ It would appear that the absence of a public for abstract art inevitably separated its creators from the population at large.¹⁵⁵ Pining for an audience turned into an attack, which in no way would have been ameliorated by even a degree of financial success. Rothko, however, tried to make use of the public's "hostility . . . as a lever for true liberation."¹⁵⁶

Paradoxically, while the Abstract Expressionists were intent on reversing what they saw as the pattern of arid abstraction that was their inheritance from the interwar generation, their formalist admirers failed to acknowledge that situation. The artists would never agree with Greenberg, the most influential of the critics, that their art was independent of context or meaningful intentions. To focus only on the objecthood of the work of art would appear too close to the abstraction of the 1930s, which they despised. The formalist thinker conceived art to be an analytical process, but the Abstract Expressionists were dreamers. They wanted to instill in their works something spiritually rich, vast, moral, important, and compelling. Unlike any formalist, Newman admired the art of the Northwest Coast Kwakiutl tribe for succeeding in making a shape "a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings [the artist] felt before the terror of the unknowable."¹⁵⁷ He announced a desire "to paint the impossible . . . the greatest painting that has ever been made,"¹⁵⁸ and, similarly, Reinhardt imagined making "the last painting anyone can paint."¹⁵⁹ These claims appear to be a deliberate corrective to Aleksandr Rodchenko's *The Last Painting*, 1921 (fig. 72), which he had intended to be the ultimate statement about painting and abstraction; the Americans wanted to resurrect the fields of art that Rodchenko believed had no future.

Americans on Subject Matter

The Abstract Expressionists rejected the formalist notion that abstraction is meaningless and proclaimed that their abstract art has subject matter.¹⁶⁰ This was a way not only to answer questions regarding the worth of that art but to potentially gain an audience. It was also a means by which they could take the middle road in the debate between abstraction and representation, maintaining an abstract style while also communicating something. They were grappling with the same issue as the pioneer abstractionists, who also wanted their art to be about something beyond formal essences. However, the question of what constituted subject matter remained a thorny problem for them.

The American artists referred to this problem often during the 1940s, at a time when their work was primarily influenced by Surrealism and was based on primitive and archaic myths. In turning to this kind of material, they were rejecting traditional anecdotal subjects founded on conventional values in favor of universal themes that gave authentic expression to man's basic emotions. In particular, totemic imagery from tribal cultures and prehistory abounded in their work at this time.¹⁶¹

Announcing their aesthetic beliefs on the pages of *The New York Times* in 1943, Gottlieb, Newman, and Rothko wrote, "We assert that the subject is crucial."¹⁶² Speaking about Pollock in 1944, Motherwell said, "His principal problem is to discover what his true subject is."¹⁶³

William Baziotas asserted in 1945 that, while he was painting, "there is always a subject that is uppermost in my mind,"¹⁶⁴ and Gorky wrote in 1947, "What to paint is as important as how to paint. Great art contains great topics."¹⁶⁵ Newman declared in 1945 that earlier abstraction had destroyed subject matter, and that the job of artists in his time and in the future was to discover a "new subject matter,"¹⁶⁶ one that would express all kinds of feeling with abstract means.¹⁶⁷ Reinhardt, who insisted that his art was "meaningless,"¹⁶⁸ was nearly alone among his colleagues on this issue. When Baziotas, David Hare, Motherwell, Rothko, and Still started a school in 1948, they gave it the unwieldy but specific, programmatic name "The Subjects of the Artist," indicating the importance of subject matter in their art.¹⁶⁹

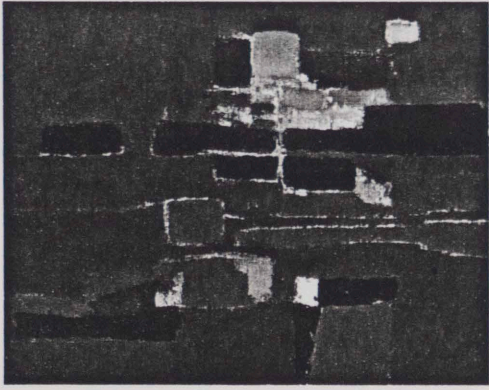
Starting in the late 1940s, the work of most New York School artists began to change in outward appearance, from the recognizably totemic images that they had been making to a more purely abstract art. When this occurred, a new explanation of subject matter was called for. In 1952, Rosenberg, a friend of these artists, described the new work that they were doing as the record of the process of its creation, and referred to the canvas 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 a canvas was not a picture but an event."¹⁷⁰ Dubbing such work "Action Painting," Rosenberg evoked the personal liberation and expression of self that are emphasized in early abstractionist theories and conveyed by Kandinsky's brushstrokes. But Rosenberg was claiming that for these artists the canvas was a site for glorious spectacle, on which an Act would occur, not merely an expression of feeling. "Such is not 'pure art,'" he declared, as if to say that earlier abstraction had failed. Indeed, "the new painting has broken every distinction between art and life."¹⁷¹ It was another assertion that the highest forms of abstraction are not simply formalist but are engaged with reality. Rosenberg further explained that the Action painters undertook the "creation of private myths."¹⁷² Rather than dealing with universal totemic imagery, each artist formulated his or her own iconic myth in terms of an individual abstract style. In the work of these artists, Rosenberg implied, subject matter had become folded into the very appearance of the abstract style that each artist chose to develop.¹⁷³

Newman was probably the most articulate among the New York artists in discussing the "new subject matter." In 1947, his notion of "the ultimate subject matter of art" was "the defense of human dignity," but during the 1950s it shifted inward and by 1965 he expressed it as the exploration of "the self, terrible and constant."¹⁷⁴ He wrote admiringly of certain literary works in which there was a return to "epic" and "moral" themes. Although he warned that such topics had become "stylized" at times,¹⁷⁵ he aimed to communicate a subject that he variously termed "sublime," "transcendental," "religious," and "world-mystery."¹⁷⁶ He and his colleagues Gottlieb and Rothko asserted in their 1943 letter to the *Times* that "only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless."¹⁷⁷ Whereas Kandinsky and Mondrian sought to avoid tragedy in their art, the bleak postwar mood and a concern with tragedy were among the most deeply felt and often-expressed subjects of the Abstract Expressionists.

While it might be argued that, in contrast to artists who pursued socially relevant themes in their work, the Abstract Expressionists were frightened of politically controversial subject matter and avoided it, they (and the critics who supported them) claimed that their tragic subject matter was proof of political engagement. They believed that they could communicate the ideas of absolute freedom



123. Barnett Newman, *Fourth Station*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 6 feet 6 inches x 5 feet ¼ inch (1.98 x 1.53 m). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection 1986.65.4.



128. Nicolas de Staël, *The Red Sky*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 64 1/2 inches (130.8 x 162.9 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation, 1954.



129. Jean-Paul Riopelle, *Painting*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 45 1/8 x 28 3/8 inches (115.2 x 72.5 cm). Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice 76.2553 PG187.

and moral commitment through their deep involvement in their art practice and the values represented by that activity.

During and after the 1950s, the same rhetoric regarding subject matter continued, but with greater specificity. Newman, describing the white line in *Fourth Station*, 1960 (fig. 123), from his series *Stations of the Cross*, called it an “abstract cry.”¹⁷⁸ Sam Francis, a West Coast Abstract Expressionist (see fig. 131), also made reference to a religious context when he described his art as being a vehicle for contact with “the Holy Ghost.”¹⁷⁹ Rothko believed that his paintings are expressions of religious feeling, declaring that “the people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them”;¹⁸⁰ and he addressed this belief directly in the series of paintings that he began in 1964 as a commission for a chapel at the Institute of Religion and Human Development at Rice University in Houston (and which were installed there posthumously in 1971). Around 1955, Reinhardt, having earlier separated himself from his New York colleagues by asserting the apparent meaninglessness of his art, described his work as evoking “spirituality . . . absoluteness . . . transcendence,”¹⁸¹ thus implying a religious meaning in his use of a cruciform pattern in his black-on-black paintings.

Postwar European Abstraction

By the late 1940s, abstraction had become the lingua franca of European art, and in the 1950s and 1960s it became dominant. Kandinsky and Mondrian had both died in 1944, and in the following decade other modern masters—Arp, Georges Braque, Léger, Henri Matisse, Miró, Pablo Picasso—were in, or approaching, the period of their late styles. Of all the established art movements, only Surrealism maintained a sizable following, but many artists during the postwar period were exploring various modes of abstraction. In many ways the theories and practices of European artists at this time echoed recent developments in the United States. Hans Hartung, a German-French gestural painter, wrote in 1947 that “the painting called ‘abstract’ is not an ‘ism’ . . . nor a style, nor a ‘period,’ but an entirely new means of expression, another human language.”¹⁸² Proponents debated “lyrical versus concrete (systemic) abstraction,”¹⁸³ also called *abstraction chaude* (hot) and *abstraction froide* (cold). Although each camp had its adherents, a majority of European abstractionists during the late 1940s and 1950s seemed to favor the lyrical mode, including Nicolas de Staël (see fig. 128), Hartung, Serge Poliakoff, and Emil Schumacher. In general, they took an expressive, unstructured approach based on improvisation and rooted in earlier European practices, including the color application of the Fauves, the spatial and linear freedom of Kandinsky, and the spontaneous, graphic quality of the Surrealists, especially Miró and Matta.¹⁸⁴

To describe this often gestural kind of painting, French critic Michel Tapié began using the term “Art Informel” (literally, “art without form”) in 1950, and two years later, “Art Autre” (“art of another kind”). These terms refer to the work of, among others, French artists Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, Georges Mathieu (originator of the phrase “lyrical abstraction”), Henri Michaux, and Jean Riopelle; the Catalan Antoni Tàpies; and two German artists who had moved to Paris, Hartung and Wols [Wolfgang Schulze]. In 1954, another French critic, Charles Estienne, introduced the term “Tachisme” to describe a style of painting that is similarly spontaneous and expressive, but characterized by signs or gestures in the form of blots or patches of color (*taches*, in French) rather than the more calligraphic lines of much Art Informel. However, the terms are often used interchangeably. Some artists, such as Mathieu and Riopelle, worked during this period