

# The Gestural Impulse 1945–60

Paintings from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza

September 29–December 1, 1989

## The Gestural Impulse 1945–60

At one time or another, almost all artists associated with Abstract Expressionism have observed that it is difficult to group them as practitioners of a coherent style. Willem de Kooning's infamous remark "I do not need a movement" is only the most blatant such formulation. That their differences, even outright oppositions, were clear to the artists themselves is evident from the profusion of contradictory, sometimes argumentative, statements and writings they composed either to attack, or defend themselves against, one another. Conversely, of course, such a dialogue can be construed as a confirmation of their association, however uneasy, and of the existence of a school, incohesive as it may be.

Within much contemporary art criticism and commentary, it has become commonplace to consider the abstract and gestural painting which dominated the later 1940s and 1950s from a formalist perspective. It is perceived as an art exclusively concerned with the relationships of colors, shapes, and lines; the establishment of the flatness of the canvas surface; and the purely physical characteristics of a medium. This overly simplified and largely misconstrued scenario characterizes abstract, gestural painting as the ultimate manifestation of an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic, as a completely self-referential system of representation born of a refusal to engage social, political, and economic issues.

The writings and recorded comments of the artists of the New York School, however, testify to the narrowness and illegitimacy of such analyses. It cannot be denied that formal issues—what Hans Hofmann referred to in his teachings and writings as the "limits," "understanding," and "possibility" of the "medium of expression"—are the irreducible means with which these artists worked. Thus, Hedda Sterne insisted upon a mastery of "technique" and the "craftsmanship" of painting with her declaration, "You cannot cheat matter." Grace Hartigan, contradicting interpretations of gestural painting as an expression of uninhibited abandon, similarly demanded a "rage for order," to be achieved through a disciplined knowledge of formal means. That formal issues are precisely considered as a means, rather than an end, is frequently made clear in the published statements of New York School artists. Hofmann spoke of embracing abstract and formal concerns as the most convincing

pictorial means "to enrich and to give deeper content to life," which he confirmed as the ultimate aim of "every cultural pursuit."

Other abstract gestural artists often declared their vehement opposition to formal interpretations. Clyfford Still, for example, wrote that it is "necessary to reject the superficial value of materiel." Lee Krasner irreverently spoke out against an overburdening emphasis on issues of pure form and physical technique: "after a while such questions become a bore." Willem de Kooning claimed that he included figures of women in many of his paintings largely in an effort to repudiate "all this silly talk about line, color and form." Though he admitted that he was not a "non-objective painter," he considered representational content to be only a "glimpse of something," a "very tiny—very tiny" aspect of his work. William Bazotes echoed such convictions about the subject matter in his own more abstracted paintings; it often emerged, he said, not from what he consciously observed, but from an "incidental thing in the background, elusive and unclear." It becomes evident that the commonly perceived rigid dichotomy between abstract and representational painting was not itself the primary concern of these artists. "Pure abstraction," Mark Tobey confessed, "would mean a type of painting completely unrelated to life, which is unacceptable to me." In an attempt to refute charges that non-figurative work is "devious and obscure, and sealed from comprehension," James Brooks maintained that "formal relations are much more than formal relations."

Indeed, during the late forties and throughout most of the fifties, the adoption of both generally abstracted forms and gestural painting techniques was widely considered by the practitioners as a reaction against the more hard-edged Neoplastic abstractions of Piet Mondrian or the Purist aesthetic of Fernand Leger, an aesthetic associated with a celebration of the industrial, the mechanistic, the technological, and the metropolitan. In fact, the direct association of the gestural mark with the artist's physical movement and action served to enhance the association of the brushstroke with the handmade as opposed to the machine-made and with the survival of the individual in a postwar society altered by urbanization and an emergent corporate economic system. It was largely the gestural impulse, the seemingly involuntary and unconsciously produced mark of the brush loaded with pigment, which most effectively and convincingly registered and recorded the rejection of consumer, corporate, and mechanistic elements of modern life. In this sense, gestural painting was an active and conscious indictment of the social, economic, and political

environment of postwar America. The meaning of these works is most fully embodied in recognition of what New York School artists refused to paint. They adamantly rejected the encroaching aspects of consumerism and materialism engendered by the increasingly monolithic mass media; Adolph Gottlieb vociferously eschewed "integration within this system" and characterized mass culture as "stereotyped and moronic." In a reiteration of Gottlieb's assertion that painting must be considered an "anti-social act," Jack Tworkov professed that his will to paint was largely a reaction against "our civilization itself that fills me with despair," a despair he described as a longing "to become an earthworm, a snail, a slug, and get away from humanity."

Speaking of an art of "nakedness, an art stripped bare," Robert Motherwell enumerated "whole worlds" that abstract and gestural painting renounces. Espousing sentiments of alienation—"a feeling of being ill at ease in the universe" and of "a primary sense of gulf, an abyss, a void between one's lonely self and the world"—Motherwell defined his painting as a general refutation of "the social world that tends to appear irrational and absurd." Ad Reinhardt asserted that "one can find some of painting's meanings by looking not only at what painters do but at what they refuse to do" and proceeded to list the many negations which determined the forms of his abstract painting. A clear rejection of the commercial values dominant in a corporate economic system and expanding mass media is found in Clyfford Still's claim that his art vigorously avoided any collusion with "the collectivist rationale of our culture" or compromise with its "authoritarian devices for social control." Even Esteban Vicente's call for art to be "poor . . . restrained, spare, meager" can be interpreted as a denunciation of contemporary material abundance and its commercial values.

That this opposition to the general and pervasive directions of American culture and society proved to be a losing battle has contributed greatly to the myth of heroism which surrounds the art of this period. As early as 1959, Clyfford Still determined that the battle was lost and that "corruption is complete." This was before movements such as Pop embraced media imagery, Minimalism adopted industrial materials, and Conceptualism exploited language within the pictorial realm. In an act of transgression, subsequent generations of American artists would, almost inevitably, take up what the New York School rejected. In the current market-dominated, Neo-Pop, Neo-Minimalist, Neo-Conceptual artistic moment, it is now

considered self-evident that there is no way for art to maneuver outside of what Still characterized as a universal mass culture with the "omnivorousness of the totalitarian mind." From this perspective, Jack Tworkov's plea for an "identification with a world outside oneself" and Lee Krasner's desire for an art in which the "inner and outer are inseparable" seem valorous in their pursuit of the perpetually and inexorably elusive.

Ultimately, it can be claimed that Abstract Expressionism rejected the mass cultural values which were being formulated in America at mid-century. Yet its very refusal to participate in that system constituted an act of inclusion. It was precisely the ubiquity of contemporary mass culture that generated a search for alternatives—and thereby determined the forms in which Abstract Expressionism took refuge.

Karl Emil Willers

## Works in the Exhibition

All works are from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

### **William Bazotes** (1912–1963)

*The Beach*, 1955  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48  
Purchase 56.12

### **James Brooks** (b. 1906)

*Number 27, 1950*, 1950  
Oil on canvas, 37 x 46  
Purchase, with funds from  
Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger 53.32

### **Willem de Kooning** (b. 1904)

*Woman Accabonac*, 1966  
Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 79 x 35  
Purchase, with funds from the artist and  
Mrs. Bernard F. Gimbel 67.75

### **Helen Frankenthaler** (b. 1928)

*Blue Territory*, 1955  
Oil on canvas, 113 x 58  
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art 57.8

### **Adolph Gottlieb** (1903–1974)

*Artist Inside Landscape*, 1956  
Oil on canvas, 42 x 72  
Gift of the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Fund  
75.32

### **Grace Hartigan** (b. 1922)

*Sweden*, 1959  
Oil on canvas, 83 3/4 x 87 1/2  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Guy A. Weill 64.66

### **Hans Hofmann** (1880–1966)

*Fantasia in Blue*, 1954  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 52  
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art 57.21

### **Franz Kline** (1910–1962)

*Dahlia*, 1959  
Oil on canvas, 82 x 67  
Purchase, with funds from an anonymous group of  
friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art  
66.90

### **Lee Krasner** (1908–1984)

*The Guardian*, 1960  
Oil on canvas, 53 x 58  
Purchase, with funds from the  
Uris Brothers Foundation, Inc. 60.61

### **Conrad Marca-Relli** (b. 1913)

*Junction*, 1958  
Collage of painted canvas, 56 x 77 1/2  
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the  
Whitney Museum of American Art 59.11

**Joan Mitchell** (b. 1926)

*Hemlock*, 1956

Oil on canvas, 91 x 80

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 58.20

**Robert Motherwell** (b. 1915)

*Afternoon in Barcelona*, 1958

Oil on canvas, 54 x 72

Gift of Robert and Jane Meyerhoff 79.35

**Richard Pousette-Dart** (b. 1916)

*The Magnificent*, 1950–51

Oil on canvas, 86 1/4 x 44

Gift of Mrs. Ethel K. Schwabacher 53.43

**Ad Reinhardt** (1913–1967)

*Number 18–1948–49*, 1948–49

Oil on canvas, 40 x 60

Purchase 53.13

**Milton Resnick** (b. 1917)

*Low Gate*, 1957

Oil on canvas, 76 x 68 1/2

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Guy A. Weill 60.67

**Hedda Sterne** (b. 1916)

*Metamorphosis*, n.d.

Synthetic polymer on canvas, 72 x 54

Gift of Eric Green 69.113

**Clyfford Still** (1904–1980)

*Untitled*, 1945

Oil on canvas, 42 3/8 x 33 5/8

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. B.H. Friedman 69.3

**Mark Tobey** (1890–1976)

*New Life (Resurrection)*, 1957

Tempera on cardboard,

45 3/8 x 27 1/4

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 59.13

**Bradley Walker Tomlin** (1899–1953)

*Number 1*, 1952, 1952

Oil on canvas, 79 x 46

Purchase, with funds from Susan Morse Hilles 73.12

**Jack Tworkov** (1900–1982)

*Duo 1*, 1956

Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 57 3/4

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 58.22

**Esteban Vicente** (b. 1906)

*Number 3*, 1958, 1958

Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 60

Purchase, and gift of Dr. and Mrs.

John Alfred Cook, by exchange 61.18

**Jack Youngerman** (b. 1926)

*Coenties Slip*, 1959

Oil on canvas, 81 x 68

Gift of Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller 69.94

# Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza

**Funded by a partnership of Park Tower Realty and IBM, the developers of Federal Reserve Plaza.**

This exhibition was organized by Karl Willers, Branch Director. Special thanks are extended to Julia Einspruch, Helena J. Muskens, Julia Reschop, and Monique S. van Vliet for their research assistance on this project.

## **Whitney Museum of American Art Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza**

33 Maiden Lane at Nassau Street  
New York, New York 10038  
(212) 943-5657

### **Hours**

Monday–Friday, 11:00–6:00  
Free admission

### **Gallery Talks**

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 12:30  
Tours by appointment

### **Staff**

Pamela Gruninger Perkins  
Head, Branch Museums

Karl Emil Willers  
Branch Director

Susan Wilharm  
Manager

Design: Marc Zaref Design  
Typesetting: Trufont Typographers, Inc.  
Printing: Eastern Press

Cover:  
Hans Hofmann, *Fantasia in Blue*, 1954  
Photograph by Geoffrey Clements

© 1989 Whitney Museum of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10021

**William Baziotēs (1912–1963)**

***The Beach*, 1955**

**Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase 65.12**

I cannot evolve any concrete theory about painting. What happens on the canvas is unpredictable and surprising to me. But I am able to speak of certain things that have occurred up to now in the course of my painting.

Today it's possible to paint one canvas with the calmness of an ancient Greek, and the next with the anxiety of a Van Gogh. Either of these emotions, and any in between, is valid to me.

There is no particular system I follow when I begin a painting. Each painting has its own way of evolving. One may start with a few color areas on the canvas; another with a myriad of lines; and perhaps another with a profusion of colors.

Each beginning suggests something. Once I sense the suggestion, I begin to paint intuitively. The suggestion then becomes a phantom that must be caught and made real. As I work, or when the painting is finished, the subject reveals itself.

As for the subject-matter in my painting, when I am observing something that may be the theme for a painting, it is very often an incidental thing in the background, elusive and unclear, that really stirred me, rather than the thing before me.

I work on many canvases at once. In the morning I line them up against the wall of my studio. Some speak: some do not. They are my mirrors. They tell me what I am like at the moment.

William Baziotēs, "I Cannot Evolve Any Concrete Theory," *Possibilities 1*, no.1 (Winter 1947–48). p. 2; eds. Robert Motherwell, Harold Rosenberg, Pierre Chareau, and John Cage (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc.). Reprinted in *William Baziotēs: A Memorial Exhibition* (exhibition catalogue: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), p. 40.

**James Brooks (b. 1906)**

***Number 27, 1950, 1950***

**Oil on canvas, 37 x 46 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger 53.32**

There are complaints that painting has become devious and obscure, and sealed from comprehension by its excessively private symbolism.

I work under these assumptions: that no one is contained by his own skin, but shares his birth, living, and death with all others; that a private symbolism is not even possible; that my painting will occupy others as it has me; that whether it does, and how soon, depends on things we can not know—the ultimate power of the painting and the need felt for it; that manipulation of meaning to assure an audience would destroy the reality of the work and debase the concept of communication; that good painting, as always, is a door opened to man's spirit; that it will not repel because of its obscurity, but may because of its directness.

I have found no air-tight reason for thinking non-figurative painting superior to the figurative. Precedent is to the contrary. But for me, it gives the strongest release into formal invention, and always, in the end formal relations are much more than formal relations. They are the carriers and mixers of the immense richness of tradition with what we are and are becoming now. This revelation of unexpected but inevitable relations gives all the intensity and fullness I can imagine, and is my reason for painting.

James Brooks, quoted in *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture* (exhibition catalogue: University of Illinois, Urbana, 1953), p. 170.

James Brooks, quoted in *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture* (exhibition catalogue: University of Illinois, Urbana, 1955), p. 182.

**Willem de Kooning (b. 1904)**

***Woman Accabonac, 1966***

**oil on paper on canvas, 80 1/2 x 36 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Mrs. Bernard F. Gimbel 67.75**

Certain artists and critics attacked me for painting the *Women*, but I felt that is was their problem, not mine. I don't really feel like a non-objective painter at all. Today, some artists feel they have to go back to the figure, and that word "figure" becomes such a ridiculous omen—if you pick up some paint with your brush and make somebody's nose with it, this is rather ridiculous when you think of it, theoretically or philosophically. It's really absurd to make an image, like a human image, with paint, today, when you think about it, since we have this problem of doing or not doing it. But then all of a sudden it was even more absurd not to do it. So I fear that I have to follow my desires.

The *Women* had to do with the female painted though all the ages, all those idols, and maybe I was stuck to a certain extent; I couldn't go on. It did one thing for me: it eliminated composition, arrangement, relationships, light—all this silly talk about line, color and form—because that was the thing I wanted to get hold of. I put it in the center of the canvas because there was no reason to put it a bit on the side. So I thought I might as well stick to the idea that it's got two eyes, a nose and mouth and neck. I got to the anatomy and I felt myself almost getting flustered. I really could never get hold of it. It almost petered out. I never could complete it and when I think of it now, it wasn't such a bright idea. But I don't think artists have particularly bright ideas....

The *Woman* became compulsive in the sense of not being able to get hold of it—it really is very funny to get stuck with a woman's knees, for instance. You say, "What the hell am I going to do with that now?"; it's really ridiculous. It may be that it fascinates me, that it isn't supposed to be done. A lot of people paint a figure because they feel it ought to be done, because since they're human beings themselves, they feel they ought to make another one, a substitute. I haven't got that interest at all. I really think it's sort of silly to do it. But the moment you take this attitude it's just as silly not to do it. It became a problem of picture painting, because the very fact that it had words connected with it—"figure of a woman"—made it more precise.... At one time, it was very daring to make a figure red or blue—I think now that it is just as daring to make it flesh-colored. Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny—very tiny, content.

Willem de Kooning interviewed by David Sylvester, "Painting as Self-Discovery" (B.B.C. broadcast, December 30, 1960). Transcript edited by Thomas B. Hess and published as "Content is a Glimpse....," *Location*, vol. 1, no.1 (Spring 1963), pp. 45–53. Reprinted in *Willem de Kooning: The North Atlantic Light 1960–1983*, pp.77–79.

**Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)**

***Artist Inside Landscape, 1956***

**Oil on canvas, 42 x 72 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Fund 75.32**

I would like to be able to say that painting is a social act, but I am afraid this would not be accurate. Would it be wrong to say that painting is an anti-social act? If the painter were useful to our industrial or business system his work could be a social act. But the painter as painter, in contradistinction to the painter-teacher, is rejected and at the same time rejects integration within this system....

Although we may in a manner of speaking refer to the relationship of the artist to society, we are really speaking of how unrelated art is to society or people in the mass. For the mass of people there are the mass media of communication and entertainment; and for them art on a high level is non-existent and unnecessary. Some individuals, however, need art, and for the artist the audience consists of these few isolated individuals. If I refer to art in relation to needs, or the artist in relation to usefulness, I am not referring only to an obvious utilitarianism or the applied arts. Industrial designers are adjusted to the requirements of the machine and marketing techniques. The modern artist does not paint in relation to public needs or social needs—he paints only in relation to his own needs. *And then he finds that there are individuals who respond to his work....*

From an economic point of view artists seem to have the suicidal impulse of lemmings and we are all marching to the sea. As mass cultural values have become more and more stereotyped and moronic, art has become seemingly more and more esoteric and difficult. Actually the obscurity and difficulties in painting are more apparent than real; yet there are some difficulties because the effort to maintain the vitality of art is difficult. By keeping art in a constant state of tension and flux, painters today are keeping the art of painting alive, which means of course that the artists themselves are acting vitally as artists. This is why the tendency to paint outrageously in relation to what is permissive even in art circles, while suicidal economically, is really an act of self-preservation—the deepest necessity to the artist as artist.

Adolph Gottlieb, excerpts from "Art Action," delivered to the P.A.A. Conference in Portland, Oregon, April 1956. Reprinted in *Adolph Gottlieb* (exhibition catalogue: M. Knoedler & Company, Inc., New York, 1985), n.p.

**Grace Hartigan (b. 1922)**

**Sweden, 1959**

**oil on canvas, 83 3/4 x 87 1/2 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Guy A. Weill 64.66**

[Andre] Gide said an artist should want only one thing and want it constantly. I want an art that is not "abstract" and not "realistic"—I cannot describe the look of this art, but I think I will know it when I see it.

I no longer invite the spectator to walk into my canvases. I want a surface that resists, like a wall, not opens, like a gate.

I have found my "subject," it concerns that which is vulgar and vital in American modern life, and the possibilities of its transcendence into the beautiful. I do not wish to describe my subject matter, or to reflect upon it—I want to distill it until I have its essence. Then the rawness must be resolved into form and unity; without the "rage for order" how can there be art?

Grace Hartigan, *12 Americans*, Dorothy C. Miller, ed. (exhibition catalogue: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1956). Reprinted in *The New American Painting As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958-1959* (exhibition catalogue: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959), p. 44.

**Hans Hofmann (1890–1966)**

***Fantasia in Blue*, 1954**

**Oil on canvas, 60 x 52 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from the**

**Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 57.21**

Creation is dominated by three absolutely different factors: first, nature, which affects us by its laws; second, the artist who creates a spiritual contact with nature and with his materials; and third, the medium of expression through which the artist translates his inner world.

The creative process lies not in imitating, but in paralleling nature—translating the impulse received from nature into the medium of expression, thus vitalizing this medium. The picture should be alive, the statue should be alive and every work of art should be alive.

Every work of art is the product of the artist's power for conscious feeling, and of his sensitivity to life-in-nature and life within the limits of his medium.

The depth of an artistic creation is a question of human development. The deeper the human content, the deeper the understanding of the medium....

The possibility of the medium is as unlimited as are the possibilities of the human capacity for comprehension.

It is the aim of every cultural pursuit to enrich and to give deeper content to life.

Genius is gifted with a vitality which is expended in the enrichment of life through the discovery of new worlds of feeling. Art and science create a balance to material life and enlarge the world of living experience. Art leads to a more profound concept of life, because art itself is a profound expression of feeling.

The artist is born, and art is the expression of his overflowing soul. Because his soul is rich, he cares comparatively little about the superficial necessities of the material world; he sublimates the pressure of material affairs in an artistic experience.

Art is something absolute, something positive, which gives power just as food gives power.

While creative science is mental food, art is the satisfaction of the soul.

A material world which excludes art will remain a troubled world. The materialist flees from the crying need of his unsatisfied spirit to the drive of the "daily grind." Since his physical satisfaction does not necessarily include spiritual satisfaction, the sum total of his living remains unsatisfied. Such a man suffers an inner emptiness, and soon cannot endure thoughtfulness, nor the products of contemplation.

Hans Hofmann, excerpts from "Painting and Culture" (as communicated to Glenn Wessels), *Fortnightly (Campbell, California)*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 11, 1931), pp. 5–7. Reprinted in Hans Hofmann, *Search For The Real And Other Essays*, eds. Sarah T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr. (exhibition catalogue: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, 1948), pp. 61–62.

**Franz Kline (1910–1962)**

***Dahlia*, 1959**

**Oil on canvas, 82 x 67 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from an anonymous group of  
friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 66.90**

In other words, these are painting experiences. I don't decide in advance that I'm going to paint a definite experience, but in the act of painting, it becomes a genuine experience for me. It's not symbolism any more than it's calligraphy. I'm not painting bridge constructions, skyscrapers or laundry tickets. You know that people have been drawing and painting... for centuries. The only real difference between my work and theirs is that they use a kind of metaphor growing out of subject matter. I don't paint objectively as they did in their period; I don't paint a given object—a figure or a table; I paint an organization that becomes a painting. If you look at an abstraction, you can imagine that it's a head, a bridge, almost anything—but it's not these things that get me started on a painting....

If something happens to look like something tangible, this doesn't bother me—but I myself don't use real objects as models. I just don't work that way. It's not that I don't accept the method; I don't think there's any reason to say "no" to the figure or to the object, but it so happens that I haven't been working with definite figures or objects. I don't see how I could with the kind of painting I do....

I don't paint in series but sometimes there are paintings that are similar, related visually more than in meaning or source.... when my paintings look somewhat alike I give them similar titles. Now take the paintings I've called *Bethlehem*. You'll find quite a number of Pennsylvania titles among my pictures because I came from that part of the country. Sometimes it's just that I like the names—the words themselves. For instance, the painting I called *Dahlia* doesn't have anything to do with a dahlia. The name "Bethlehem" has nothing to do with steel. Some pictures I don't even title, and if I do (as long as six months after they've been painted) it's only for identification.

Franz Kline, excerpts from an interview in Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 144–153.

**Lee Krasner (1908–1984)**

***The Guardian*, 1960**

**Oil on canvas, 53 x 58 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from the Uris Brothers Foundation, Inc. 60.61**

Painting, for me, when it really "happens" is as miraculous as any natural phenomenon—as, say, a lettuce leaf. By "happens," I mean the painting in which the inner aspect of man and his out aspects interlock. One could go on forever as to whether the painting should be thick or thin, whether to paint the woman or the square, hard-edged or soft, but after a while such questions become a bore. They are merely problems in aesthetics, having only to do with the outer man. But the painting I have in mind, painting in which inner and outer are inseparable, transcends technique, transcends subject and moves into the realm of the inevitable—then you have the

lettuce leaf.

Lee Krasner, "Statement by Lee Krasner," *Lee Krasner: Paintings, Drawings and Collages* (exhibition catalogue: Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1965, n.p.

**Conrad Marca-Relli (b. 1931)**

***Junction*, 1958**

**Collage of painted canvas, 56 x 77 1/2**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from the**

**Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 59.11**

It is extremely difficult to verbalize on the emotions involved in the making of a painting. For me, a painting has its own reality, and therefore, any attempt for a painter to describe the struggle involved in the making of a painting is as complex as trying to analyze one's self.

Paintings are very much like people. Some we like, some we don't; some work, some don't; some are neurotic and unhappy, some fall apart at the least provocation. Others can be pompous and secure in their tradition; and some are just anemic.

While I am working on a painting, it goes through many of the above phases, sometimes all, at one time or another. When it is finished, I look upon it as a human being. It is permitted to live its life unmolested unless it commits the most unpardonable sin of all, which is to become boring.

Conrad Marca-Relli, statement in *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture* (exhibition catalogue: University of Illinois, Urbana, 1955), p. 220.

**Joan Mitchell (b. 1926)**

***Hemlock, 1956***

**Oil on canvas, 91 x 80 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from the**

**Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 58.20**

I don't set out to achieve a specific thing, perhaps to catch motion or to catch a feeling. Call it layer painting, gestural painting, easel painting or whatever you want. I paint oil on canvas—without an easel. Conventional methods. I do not condense things. I try to eliminate clichés, extraneous material. I try to make it exact. My painting is not an allegory or a story. It is more like a poem....

It seems very clear what it means. I can't say it but the painting makes it clear.... If it seems right to me, then it has a meaning, but I can't tell you what meaning. I can't be more specific than that. It works when it means something, when I don't question it any more....

For me concepts are just words. "Concept" is to me C.O.N.C.E.P.T. There is no image. So you could put it in a comic strip balloon. It's a colorless thought. It's very frightening: a vast land without trees or anything. Not even barren: nothing. Something I can't understand. Or when I can understand, I think: well, is that all it's about? But an "abstract" painting is as real as an apple if it works

Seeing is not a natural thing for many people. It's an awareness, a faculty they have lost. They see only learned clichés. for them "apple" means A.P.P.L.E., round R.E.D. things. They are always in the word stuff. To me it means something else.... It got fused into something else. I like the fusion and I can't name it with words.

Joan Mitchell, excerpts from "Conversation with Joan Mitchell" (interview with Yves Michaud, January 12, 1986), *Joan Mitchell: New Paintings* (exhibition catalogue: Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York, 1986), n.p.

**Robert Motherwell (b. 1915)**

***Afternoon in Barcelona, 1958***

**Oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Robert and Jane Meyerhoff 79.35**

The emergence of abstract art is one sign that there are still men able to assert feeling in the world. Men who know how to respect and follow their inner feelings, no matter how irrational or absurd they may first appear. From their perspective, it is the social world that tends to appear irrational and absurd....

I think now that there is no such thing as the "esthetic," no more than there is any such thing as "art," that each period and place has its own art and its esthetic—which are specific applications of a more general set of human values, with emphases and rejections corresponding to the basic needs and desires of a particular place and time. I think that abstract art is uniquely modern...but in the sense that abstract art represents the particular acceptances and rejections of men living under the conditions of modern times.... I should say that this attitude arose from a feeling of being ill at ease in the universe, so to speak—the collapse of religion, of the old close-knit community and family may have something to do with the origins of the feeling. I do not know.

But whatever the source of this sense of being unwedded to the universe, I think that one's art is just one's effort to wed oneself to the universe, to unify oneself through union.... If this suggestion is true, then modern art has a different face from the art of the past because it has a somewhat different function for the artist in our time. I suppose that the art of far more ancient and "simple" artists expressed something quite different, a feeling of already being at one with the world....

One of the most striking aspects of abstract art's appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare. How many rejections on the part of her artists! Whole worlds—the world of objects, the world of power and propaganda, the world of anecdotes, the world of fetishes and ancestor worship. One might almost legitimately receive the impression that abstract artists don't like anything but the act of painting....

Nothing as drastic an innovation as abstract art could have come into existence, save as the consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need.

The need is for felt experience—intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic.

Everything that might dilute the experience is stripped away. The origin of abstraction in art is that of any mode of thought. Abstract Art is a true mysticism—I dislike the word—or rather a series of mysticisms that grew up in the historical circumstance that all mysticisms do, from a primary sense of gulf, an abyss, a void between one's lonely self and the world. Abstract art is an effort to close the void that modern men feel. Its abstraction is its emphasis.

Robert Motherwell, excerpts from "What Abstract Art Means to Me: Statements by Six American Artists", *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, vol. XVIII, no. 3 (Spring 1951), pp. 12–13. Read at a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 5, 1951, in connection with the exhibition "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America."

**Milton Resnick (b. 1917)**

***Low Gate*, 1957**

**Oil on canvas, 76 x 68 1/2 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Guy A. Weill 60.67**

The Act. The taking of paint and putting it down. The immediate impact on your psyche, your soul. Whatever it is that occurs when you empty your tube and raise that color. That has so much energy and danger in it. It's such a magical important act in your life. So important you have to make a point of understanding that it is more important than anything else about art. Nobody, of course, talks about that.

Milton Resnick, excerpt from Geoffrey Dorfman, "Out of the Picture: A Miscellany, Milton Resnick and the New York School" (unpublished manuscript). Published in *Milton Resnick: A New Decade* (exhibition catalogue: Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York, 1982), n.p.

**Hedda Sterne (b. 1916)**

***Metamorphosis*, n.d.**

**Synthetic polymer on canvas, 72 x 54 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Eric Green 69.113**

You are as good a craftsman as you are an artist and vice versa. If you are an artist you will find no rest until you possess whatever knowledge of your medium there is to be had. Because painting is a spinlike sequence in which craftsmanship and conception are alternatively cause and effect.

To serve your vision you have to master your technique. You cannot cheat matter. It shows. You must learn and respect its laws. You are required to use patience, courage and honesty, for instance, (as prerequisites in the fight with your means, of course, not as virtues) but by the time you have tackled your problem, having used them has changed you. You have turned a corner and face new territory suggesting new ways of being explored.

Your original image appears unsatisfactory. You improve it in the name of your newly acquired understanding.

Your next point of departure is determined by the former experience and the whole process will repeat itself with little variations, again and again.

Hedda Sterne, statement in "The Ides of Art: The Attitudes of 10 Artists on their Art and Contemporaneity," *The Tiger's Eye*, 2 (December 1947), pp. 44-45.

**Clyfford Still (1904–1980)**

***Untitled, 1945***

**oil on canvas, 42 3/8 x 33 5/8 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Mr. and Mrs. B.H. Friedman 69.3**

To add to the body of reference or "sensibility" which indulges homage or acquiescence to the collectivist rationale of our culture, I must equate with intellectual suicide. The omnivorousness of the totalitarian mind, however, demands a rigor of purpose and subtlety of insight from anyone who would escape incorporation.

Semantically and ethically the corruption is complete. Preoccupation with luminous devices is equated with spiritual enlightenment. The laws of Euclid are publicly damned to promote work illustrating an authoritarian dialectic. Witless parodies are displayed as evidence of social artistic commitment; and qualitative arrangements are presented as evidence of access to supernal mysteries. The rush to betray, in the name of aesthetics or "painting," an imagery born in repudiation of socio-psychological fallacies become a popular, but sinister, measure of its power.

Unknown are the crimes not covered by the skirts of that ubiquitous old harridan called Art. Even the whimperings and insolence of the venal are treasured in her name—and for their reassurance—by the arrogant and contemptuous. Indeed, among ambitious esthetes, artists, architects, and writers, the burden of our heritage is borne lightly but mainly by hatred or cynicism. The impudence and sterility which so hypnotically fascinate the indifferent, perform a sordid substitute for responsibility and truth.

I held it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which would aid in cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, and an idea be revealed with clarity.

To acquire such an instrument, however,—one that would transcend the powers of conventional technics and symbols, yet be as an aid and instant critic of thought—demanded full resolution of the past, and present, through it. No shouting about individualism, no capering before an expanse of canvas, no manipulation of academic conceits or technical fetishes can truly liberate. These only make repetition inevitable and compound deceit.

Thus it was necessary to reject the superficial value of materiel—its qualities, its tensions, and its concomitant ethic. Especially it became necessary not to remain trapped in the banal concepts of space and time, nor yield to the morbidity of "the objective position"; nor to permit one's courage to be perverted by authoritarian devices for social control.

Clyfford Still, excerpt from a letter to Gordon Smith, January 1, 1959. Published in *Paintings by Clyfford Still* (exhibition catalogue: Albright Art Gallery, The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, Buffalo, New York, 1959), n.p.

**Mark Tobey (1890–1976)**

***New Life (Resurrection)*, 1957**

**Tempera on cardboard, 45 3/8 x 27 1/4 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from the**

**Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 59.13**

Over the past 15 years, my approach to painting has varied, sometimes being dependent on brush-work, sometimes on lines, dynamic white strokes in geometric space. I have never tried to pursue a particular style in my work. For me, the road has been zig-zag into and out of old civilizations, seeking new horizons through meditation and contemplation. My sources of inspiration have gone from those of my native Middle West to those of microscopic worlds. I have discovered many a universe on paving stones and tree barks. I know very little about what is generally called "abstract" painting. Pure abstraction would mean a type of painting completely unrelated to life, which is unacceptable to me. I have sought to make my painting "whole" but to attain this I have used a whirling mass. I take up no definite position. Maybe this explains someone's remark while looking at one of my paintings: "Where is the center?"

Some critics have criticized me for being what they called an Orientalist and for using Oriental models for my work. But they were wrong. Because when I was struggling in Japan and China with Sumi-ink and the brush, trying to understand the calligraphy of the Far-East, I became aware that I would never be anything other than the Westerner that I am. But what did develop there was what I call the calligraphic impulse that has opened out new horizons for my work. Now I could paint the turmoil and tumult of the great cities, the intertwining of the lights and the streams of people caught up in the mesh of their net.

Mark Tobey, excerpt from a letter dated January 2, 1955. Published in Mark Tobey (exhibition catalogue: Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1962), p. 13.

Mark Tobey, quoted in *Mark Tobey* (exhibition catalogue, n.d.), n.p.

**Bradley Walker Tomlin (1899–1953)**

***Number 1, 1952, 1952***

**Oil on canvas, 79 x 46 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from Susan Morse Hilles 73.12**

One night a lot [of] artists ganged up at The Museum of Modern Art. They ganged up on the writers. They said the writers ought to go back to school. They said the writers ought to learn about artists, that then they might learn something about art. They said for the love of God stop giving us marks and correcting our papers. Most of us went through that at the universities. They said that writers ought to look into paintings not just at them. They said that writers were always trying to prove paintings pragmatically in the hope of finding an answer. They said that writers were always worried about what art had come out of, not what it had become. They said we ourselves had a lot of rules, but we had sense enough to throw them away.

They said that art had to be an adventure; that it was like making a journey into a country that was unmapped and unpredictable. They said that no one could ever really see a painting or penetrate its meaning unless for the time being he were willing to abandon his luggage.

Bradley Walker Tomlin, excerpt from "The Schism Between Art and the Public," a transcript of a lecture given to The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, March 1949. Reprinted in *Bradley Walker Tomlin: A Retrospective View* (exhibition catalogue: Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, n.d.), p. 161.

**Jack Tworlov (1900–1982)**

***Number 1, 1952, 1952***

**Oil on canvas, 79 x 46**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, with funds from Susan Morse Hilles 73.12**

My attitude towards the "art in the modern world" is complex and often contradictory. First of all, it's our civilization itself that fills me with despair. For instance, no area in the modern world has been as imaginatively creative as events in the sciences and technology. The automobile, the airplane, the space exploration, the atomic sciences, the camera, the radio, the television, and the discoveries in biology, in physics, are all unsurpassed for imagination and creativity in any other area, certainly unmatched in the arts. Yet what a century it has produced. You can certainly credit it with democratizing large parts of the world, of increasing the material satisfaction of large numbers of people; but when I pick up a newspaper, enter a department store, a supermarket, look at TV, see the advertisements for fashion, soap, cosmetics, and factory food, I despair. I long to become an earthworm, a snail, a slug, and get away from humanity. What eats at me is the thought that every art ultimately is the product of its time, and I see that in our time every good leads to corruption.

"All that is made perfect by progress perishes also by progress" (Pascal)....

I have sometimes longed for the past because I find too little besides alienation in the present. It is an illusion to believe one can find the spiritual within oneself—the spiritual flowers only in the identification with a world outside oneself—to be a leaf on a tree. The meaning of life: the nurturing of the tree. This is a consciousness that civilization deprives us of....

There was a period when I felt connected. It was in the late forties and early fifties, the time of the club. It coincided with that short period after World War II when I really believed that, after the sacrifices and horror the world went through, we were embarked on a better world. There were a few years of euphoria. America emerged as a world-saver in spite of the shadow the bomb on Hiroshima had cast on that image. The abstract-expressionist movement, although negative in its rejection of all tradition and especially of the French art of the first half of the century, did reflect this positive element, the postwar euphoria, the sudden feeling of strength both physically and spiritually. As we know, that spirit did not last long. Pop came along with two tongues in its cheek. On the one hand, it took, as the living symbols of American culture, the hot dog and the hamburger—it was hard to know whether in praise or disgust. On the other hand, it revived a form a Dada revolt against art as the dress-up culture of the fathers. Only by then, the middle class, more than ever, was beyond shock or outrage and was led by the art market, which dealt primarily in names rather than esthetics. And name-making absorbed a good deal of the energies of the artists.

I have sometimes dreamt of painting my hatreds. If I didn't, it was because of the fear that I would end up hating my painting. I've hated films that had the excuse that they were a true reflection of society but which I thought were themselves a contribution to the disease they were trying to depict.

The spectator who in front of my paintings will ask, "What does it mean?" has foregone the chance of

seeing it. For the only meaning in the painting is in the seeing of it. But that is true in looking at any painting. If you only see the landscape, you are not seeing the painting. If you only see the portrait, you miss the painting.

There is an element in painting which I have often referred to as true, by which I mean not truth in a moral sense but the concern similar to that of a good carpenter who supports his eye with the try square and level, on which all other qualities base themselves. The spiritual essence we draw from art is the absence of falseness; it teaches us not only about art but how to judge anything in life, from the clothes we wear to the food we eat, from what the preacher says to what the politician says and does. Art can become the try square and level of all things—provided it is itself not askew.

Jack Tworkov, excerpt from a letter to Andrew Forge, Dean, School of Art and Architecture, Yale University, June 30, 1981. Published in *Jack Tworkov: Paintings 1928–1982* (exhibition catalogue, n.d.), pp. 143–145.

**Esteban Vicente (b. 1906)**

***Number 3, 1958, 1958***

**Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 60 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Purchase, and gift of Dr. and Mrs. John Alfred Cook, by exchange 61.18**

The reality of painting, after all, is sensuous. The physicality of the painting has to be acknowledged in order to find the idea, the image. A physical sense of color gives meaning to the expression. I want to achieve luminosity through opaque color. I reject the idea of transparent color. Transparency in painting leads one to some kind of fancifulness. Anything fanciful in painting is evil; it is really a lack of control. I believe in total control. It is the only way to be free.

Art is based on order. I am against automatism and all that nonsense. Automatism is like nature, or, if we relate it to ideas, is what people often mistakenly think of as freedom. I am after the sensuousness of the material, but for me, painting has to be austere and somehow poor—poor in terms of means. I don't like luxurious painting. When you look back at Italian Renaissance painting, or at Rubens, especially at Rubens, so rich, I don't like that. By "poor" I mean restrained, spare, meager. I am very anti-baroque.

From the beginning of any work, I think in terms of the whole. The image will come from working. The image always remains the same, no matter what materials or forms I use. If I have to say something about the subject of my painting, I might say that it is an interior landscape. This image becomes the subject. It is always the same idea, the same image—from an accumulation of experience. I don't know if one can actually identify this image. When I say "landscape," I mean a structure. The structure of the painting is landscape—but not the color. That's why I say they are "interior landscapes."

Most of the time, while working, one is waiting for the moment of concentration. It doesn't last too long. You are struggling with everything that constitutes painting—rejecting, analyzing—and finally there is a moment when the painting responds to you. Then you act.

Sometimes you look at a finished painting and you don't know how you did it. That's the result of the moment, not of an accident.

Esteban Vicente, excerpt from "Painting Should Be Poor," *Location*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 1964), pp. 69–71.

**Jack Youngerman (b. 1926)**

***Coenties Slip*, 1959**

**Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 61 3/8 inches**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;**

**Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller 69.94**

Primacy to the form itself: if it cannot evade associations, neither is it lessened by them. Associations are many and different to each viewer, but each form, and each complex of forms, is unique.

Perhaps only geometry escapes this associative touch, but then any stone in a pond will draw circles....

Before the great slabs, alone among big cities, the streets of Manhattan lead to the horizon, and the sky between the towers descended to the streets. Two friends, a painter and a film director, both spoke of this: they did not speak of the inverted skyscraper of sky that the space between skyscrapers creates. On 34th Street looking west from Second or Third Avenue, a "negative" Empire State Building stands upon its head....

Can a shape be drawn that does not stir a reference to the shape of some already seen thing?

We are immersed in the powerful and autonomous images of the world before these forms are possessed and diminished by names and uses—the name preempting the form. Painting involves the restoring of the image to that original primacy.

Jack Youngerman, excerpts from "Portrait: Jack Youngerman," *Art in America*, vol. 56 (September–October 1968), p. 53.