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The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the "Vital Center"

We now know that the traditional make-up of the avant-garde was revitalized in the United States after the Second World War. In the unprecedented economic boom of the war years, the same strategies that had become familiar to a jaded Parisian bourgeoisie were skillfully deployed, confronted as they were with a new bourgeois public recently instructed in the principles of modern art.

Between 1939 and 1948 Clement Greenberg developed a formalist theory of modern art which he would juxtapose with the notion of the avant-garde, in order to create a structure which, like that of Baudelaire or Apollinaire, would play an aggressive, dominant role on the international scene.

The evolution of Greenbergian formalism during its formative period from 1939 to 1948 cannot be understood without analyzing the circumstances in which Greenberg attempted to extract from the various ideological and aesthetic positions existing at the end of the war an analytical system that would create a specifically American art, distinct from other contemporary tendencies, and international in import.

When we speak about Greenbergian formalism, we are speaking about a theory that was somewhat flexible as it began clearly to define its position within the new social and aesthetic order that was taking shape during and after the war; only later would it solidify into dogma. We are also speaking about its relationship to the powerful Marxist movement of the 1930s, to the crisis of Marxism, and finally to the complete disintegration of Marxism in the 1940s —a close relationship clearly visible from the writings and ideological positions of Greenberg and the abstract expressionists during the movement's development. Greenbergian formalism was born from those Stalinist-Trotskyite ideological battles, the disillusionment of the American Left, and the de-Marxification of the New York intelligentsia. [...]

SOURCE: *October* 15 (Winter 1980), 61–78. Reprinted with the permission of Serge Guilbaut and M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass. Translated by Thomas Repensek. This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper delivered at the conference "Art History and Theory: Aspects of American Formalism," Montreal, October 1979. This text has been edited, and footnotes have been renumbered.

De-Marxification really began in 1937 when a large number of intellectuals, confronted with the mediocrity of the political and aesthetic options offered by the Popular Front, became Trotskyites. Greenberg, allied for a time with Dwight MacDonald and *Partisan Review* in its Trotskyite period (1937–1939), located the origin of the American avant-garde venture in a Trotskyite context: "Some day it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way heroically for what was to come."[1] When the importance of the Popular Front, its voraciousness and success are taken into account, it is hardly surprising that Trotskyism attracted a certain number of intellectuals. The American Communist party's alliance with liberalism disillusioned those who sought a radical change of the political system that had been responsible for the Depression. This alliance prepared the stage for revolution. [. . .]

It was the art historian Meyer Schapiro who initiated the shift. In 1937, abandoning the rhetoric of the Popular Front as well as the revolutionary language used in his article "Social Bases of Art," in which he emphasized the importance of the alliance between the artist and the proletariat,[2] he crossed over to the Trotskyite opposition. He published in *Marxist Quarterly* his celebrated article "Nature of Abstract Art,"[3] important not only for its intelligent refutation of Alfred Barr's formalist essay "Cubism and Abstract Art,"[4] but also for the displacement of the ideology of his earlier writing, a displacement that would subsequently enable the Left to accept artistic experimentation, which the Communist Popular Front vigorously opposed.

If in 1936, in "Social Bases of Art," Schapiro guaranteed the artist's place in the revolutionary process through his alliance with the proletariat, in 1937, in "Nature of Abstract Art," he became pessimistic, cutting the artist off from any revolutionary hope whatsoever. For Schapiro, even abstract art, which Alfred Barr and others persistently segregated from social reality in a closed, independent system, had its roots in its own conditions of production. The abstract artist, he claimed, believing in the illusion of liberty, was unable to understand the complexity and precariousness of his own position, nor could he grasp the implications of what he was doing. By attacking abstract art in this way, by destroying the illusory notion of the artist's independence, and by insisting on the relationships that link abstract art with the society that produces it, Schapiro implied that abstraction had a larger signification than that attributed to it by the formalists.

Schapiro's was a two-edged sword: while it destroyed Alfred Barr's illusion of independence, it also shattered the Communist critique of abstract art as an

in the hands of the independent artist; yet they maintained a revolutionary optimism that Greenberg lacked. For Trotsky, the artist should be free of partisanship but not politics. Greenberg's solution, however, abandoned this critical position, as well as what Trotsky called eclectic action, in favor of a unique solution: the modernist avant-garde.[8] In fact, in making the transition from the political to the artistic avant-garde, Greenberg believed that only the latter could preserve the quality of culture against the overwhelming influence of kitsch by enabling culture to continue to progress. Greenberg did not conceive of this cultural crisis as a conclusion, as had been the case during the preceding decade, that is, as the death of a bourgeois culture being replaced by a proletarian one, but as the beginning of a new era contingent on the death of a proletarian culture destroyed in its infancy by the Communist alliance with the Popular Front, which *Partisan Review* had documented. As this crisis swiftly took on larger proportions, absorbing the ideals of the modern artist, the formation of an avant-garde seemed to be the only solution, the only thing able to prevent complete disintegration. Yet it ignored the revolutionary aspirations that had burned so brightly only a few years before. After the moral failure of the Communist party and the incompetence of the Trotskyites, many artists recognized the need for a frankly realistic, nonrevolutionary solution. Appealing to a concept of the avant-garde, with which Greenberg was certainly familiar, allowed for a defense of "quality," throwing back into gear the progressive process brought to a standstill in academic immobility—even if it meant abandoning the political struggle in order to create a conservative force to rescue a foundering bourgeois culture.

Greenberg believed that the most serious threat to culture came from academic immobility, the Alexandrianism characteristic of kitsch. During that period the power structure was able to use kitsch easily for propaganda purposes. According to Greenberg, modern avant-garde art was less susceptible to absorption, not, as Trotsky believed, because it was too critical, but on the contrary because it was "innocent," therefore less likely to allow a propagandistic message to be implanted in its folds. Continuing Trotsky's defense of a critical art "remaining faithful to itself," Greenberg insisted on the critical endeavor of the avant-garde, but a critique that was directed inward, to the work itself, its medium, as the determining condition of quality. Against the menacing background of the Second World War, it seemed unrealistic to Greenberg to attempt to act simultaneously on both a political and cultural front. Protecting Western culture meant saving the furniture.

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was thus an important step in the process of de-

Marxification of the American intelligentsia that had begun around 1936. The article appeared in the nick of time to rescue the intellectual wandering in the dark. After passing through a Trotskyite period of its own, *Partisan Review* emphasized the importance of the intellectual at the expense of the working class. It became preoccupied with the formation of an international elite to the extant that it sometimes became oblivious to politics itself. [. . .]

Greenberg's article should be understood in this context. The delicate balance between art and politics which Trotsky, Breton, and Schapiro tried to preserve in their writings is absent in Greenberg. Although preserving certain analytical procedures and a Marxist vocabulary, Greenberg established a theoretical basis for an elitist modernism, which certain artists had been thinking about since 1936, especially those associated with the American Abstract Artists group, who were also interested in Trotskyism and European culture.[9]

"Avant Garde and Kitsch" formalized, defined, and rationalized an intellectual position that was adopted by many artists who failed fully to understand it. Extremely disappointing as it was to anyone seeking a revolutionary solution to the crisis, the article gave renewed hope to artists. By using kitsch as a target, as a symbol of the totalitarian authority to which it was allied and by which it was exploited, Greenberg made it possible for the artist to act. By opposing mass culture on an artistic level, the artist was able to have the illusion of battling the degraded structures of power with elitist weapons. Greenberg's position was rooted in Trotskyism, but it resulted in a total withdrawal from the political strategies adopted during the Depression: he appealed to socialism to rescue a dying culture by continuing tradition. "Today we no longer look towards socialism for a new culture—as inevitably as one will appear, once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism *simply* for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now."[10] The transformation functioned perfectly, and for many years Greenberg's article was used to mark the beginning of the American pictorial renaissance, restored to a preeminent position. The old formula for the avant-garde, as was expected, was a complete success.

The appearance of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" coincided with two events that threw into question the integrity of the Soviet Union—the German-Soviet alliance and the invasion of Finland by the Soviet Union—and which produced a radical shift in alliances among Greenberg's literary friends and the contributors to *Partisan Review*. After the pact, many intellectuals attempted to return to politics. But the optimism which some maintained even

after the alliance was announced evaporated with the Soviet invasion of Finland. Meyer Schapiro could not have chosen a better time to interrupt the self-satisfied purrings of the Communist-dominated American Artist's Congress and create a split in the movement. He and some thirty artist colleagues, in the minority because of their attempt to censure the Soviet Union, realized the importance of distancing themselves from an organization so closely linked not only to Stalinism, but also the social aesthetic of the Popular Front.

And so the Federation of American Painters and Sculptors was born, a nonpolitical association that would play an important part in the creation of the avant-garde after the war, and from which would come many of the first-generation painters of abstract expressionism (Gottlieb, Rothko, Pousette-Dart). After the disillusion of 1939 and in spite of a slight rise in the fortunes of the Popular Front after Germany attacked Russia in June of 1941, the relationship of the artist to the masses was no longer the central concern of major painters and intellectuals, as it had been during the 1930s. With the disappearance of the structures of political action and the dismantling of the Works Progress Administration programs, there was a shift in interest away from society back to the individual. As the private sector reemerged from the long years of the Depression, the artist was faced with the unhappy task of finding a public and convincing them of the value of his work. After 1940 artists employed an individual idiom whose roots were nevertheless thoroughly embedded in social appearance. The relationship of the artist to the public was still central, but the object had changed. Whereas the artist had previously addressed himself to the masses through social programs like the WPA, with the reopening of the private sector he addressed an elite through the "universal." By rediscovering alienation, the artist began to see an end to his anonymity; as Ad Reinhardt explained, "Toward the late '30s a real fear of anonymity developed and most painters were reluctant to join a group for fear of being labeled or submerged."[11] [. . .]

Nineteen forty-three was a particularly crucial year, for quietly, without shock, the United States passed from complete isolationism to the most utopian internationalism of that year's best-seller, *One World* by Wendell Wilkie.[12] Prospects for the internationalization of American culture generated a sense of optimism that silenced the anticapitalist criticism of some of its foremost artists. In fact, artists who, in the best tradition of the avant-garde, organized an exhibition of rejected work in January 1943, clearly expressed this new point of view. In his catalogue introduction Barnett Newman revealed a new notion of the modern American artist:

> We have come together as American modern artists because we feel the need to present to the public a body of art that will adequately reflect the new America that is taking place today and the kind of America that will, it is hoped, become the cultural center of the world. This exhibition is a first step to free the artist from the stifling control of an outmoded politics. For art in America is still the plaything of politicians. Isolationist art still dominates the American scene. Regionalism still holds the reins of America's artistic future. It is high time we cleared the cultural atmosphere of America. We artists, therefore, conscious of the dangers that beset our country and our art, can no longer remain silent.[13]

This rejection of politics, which had been reassimilated by the propagandistic art of the 1930s, was, according to Newman, necessary to the realization of international modernism. His manifest interest in internationalism thus aligned him—in spite of the illusory antagonism he maintained in order to preserve the adversary image of the avant-garde—with the majority of the public and of political institutions.

The United States emerged from the war a victorious, powerful, and confident country. The American public's infatuation with art steadily increased under the influence of the media. Artists strengthened by contact with European colleagues, yet relieved by their departures, possessed new confidence, and art historians and museums were ready to devote themselves to a new national art. All that was needed was a network of galleries to promote and profit from this new awareness. By 1943 the movement had begun; in March of that year the Mortimer Brandt Gallery, which dealt in old masters, opened a wing for experimental art, headed by Betty Parsons, to satisfy the market's demand for modernity.[14] In April 1945, Sam Kootz opened his gallery. And in February 1946, Charles Egan, who had been at Ferargil, opened a gallery of modern art, followed in September by Parsons, who opened her own gallery with the artists Peggy Guggenheim left behind when she returned to Europe (Rothko, Hofmann, Pollock, Reinhardt, Stamos, Still, Newman). Everything was prepared to enter the postwar years confidently.

The optimism of the art world contrasted sharply with the difficulties of the Left in identifying itself in the nation that emerged from the war. In fact, as the newly powerful middle-class worked to safeguard the privileges it had won during the economic boom, expectations of revolution, even dissidence, began to fade among the Communist party Left. And the disillusions of the postwar period (the international conferences, the Truman ad-

ministration, the Iron Curtain) did nothing to ease their anxiety. What began as a de-Marxification of the extreme Left during the war, turned into a total de-politicization when the alternatives became clear: Truman's America or the Soviet Union. Dwight MacDonald accurately summarized the desperate position of the radical Left: "In terms of 'practical' political politics we are living in an age which consistently present us with impossible alternatives. . . . It is no longer possible for the individual to relate himself to world politics. . . . Now the clearer one's insight, the more numbed one becomes."[15]

Rejected by traditional political structures, the radical intellectual after 1939 drifted from the usual channels of political discourse into isolation, and, utterly powerless, surrendered, refused to speak. Between 1946 and 1948, while political discussion grew heated in the debate over the Marshall Plan, the Soviet threat, and the presidential election in which Henry Wallace and the Communists again played an important part, a humanist abstract art began to appear that imitated the art of Paris and soon began to appear in all the galleries. Greenberg considered this new academicism[16] a serious threat, saying in 1945:

> We are in danger of having a new kind of official art foisted on us—official "modern" art. It is being done by well intentioned people like the Pepsi-cola [*sic*] company who fail to realize that to be for something uncritically does more harm in the end than being against it. For while official art, when it was thoroughly academic, furnished at least a sort of challenge, official "modern" art of this type will confuse, discourage and dissuade the true creator.[17]

During that period of anxious renewal, art and American society needed an infusion of new life, not the static pessimism of academicism. Toward that end Greenberg began to formulate in his weekly articles for the *Nation* a critical system based on characteristics which he defined as typically American, and which were supposed to differentiate American from French art. This system was to revive modern American art, infuse it with a new life by identifying an essential formalism that could not be applied to the pale imitations of the School of Paris turned out by the American Abstract Artists. Greenberg's first attempt at differentiation occurred in an article about Pollock and Dubuffet[18] [. . .]

Greenberg emphasized the greater vitality, virility, and brutality of the American artists. He was developing an ideology that would transform the provincialism of American art into internationalism by replacing the Parisian standards that had until then defined the notion of quality in art (grace, craft,

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finish) with American ones (violence, spontaneity, incompleteness).[19] Brutality and vulgarity were signs of the direct, uncorrupted communication that contemporary life demanded. American art become the trustee of this new age.

On March 8, 1947, Greenberg stated that new American painting ought to be modern, urbane, casual, and detached, in order to achieve control and composure. It should not allow itself to become enmeshed in the absurdity of daily political and social events. That was the fault of American art, he said, for it had never been able to restrain itself from articulating some sort of message, describing, speaking, telling a story:

> In the face of current events painting feels, apparently, that it must be epic poetry, it must be theatre, it must be an atomic bomb, it must be the rights of man. But the greatest painter of our time, Matisse, preeminently demonstrated the sincerity and penetration that go with the kind of greatness particular to twentieth century painting by saying that he wanted his art to be an armchair for the tired business man.[20]

For Greenberg, painting could be important only if it made up its mind to return to its ivory tower, which the previous decade had so avidly attempted to destroy. This position of detachment followed naturally from his earlier critical works (1939), and from many artists' fears of participating in the virulent political propaganda of the early years of the Cold War. It was this integration that Greenberg attempted to circumvent through a reinterpretation of modernist detachment—a difficult undertaking for artists rooted in the tradition of the 1930s who had so ruthlessly been made a part of the social fabric. The central concern of avant-garde artists like Rothko and Still was to save their pictorial message from distortion: "The familiar identity of things had to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment."[21]

Rothko tried to purge his art of any sign that could convey a precise image, for fear of being assimilated by society. Still went so far as to refuse at various times to exhibit his paintings publicly because he was afraid critics would deform or obliterate the content embedded in his abstract forms. In a particularly violent letter to Betty Parsons in 1948, he said:

> Please—and this is important, show them [my paintings] only to those who may have some insight into the values involve[d], and allow no one to write about them. NO ONE. My contempt for the intelligence of the scribblers I have read is so complete that I cannot tolerate their imbecilities, particularly when

> they attempt to deal with my canvases. Men like Soby, Greenberg, Barr, etc. . . . are to be categorically rejected. And I no longer want them shown to the public at large, either singly or in group.[22]

The work of many avant-garde artists, in particular Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, and Still, seemed to become a kind of un-writing, an art of effacement, of erasure, a discourse which in its articulation tried to negate itself, to be reabsorbed. There was a morbid fear of the expressive image that threatened to regiment, to petrify painting once again. Confronted with the atomic terror in 1946, Dwight MacDonald analyzed in the same way the impossibility of expression that characterizes the modern age, thus imputing meaning to the avant-garde's silence. "Naturalism is no longer adequate," he wrote, "either esthetically or morally, to cope with the modern horror."[23]

Description of nuclear destruction had become an obscenity, for to describe it was to accept it, to make a show of it, to represent it. The modern artist therefore had to avoid two dangers: assimilation of the message by political propaganda, and the terrible representation of a world that was beyond reach, unrepresentable. Abstraction, individualism, and originality seemed to be the best weapons against society's voracious assimilative appetite.

In March 1948, when none of the work being shown in New York reflected in any way Greenberg's position, he announced in his article "The Decline of Cubism," published in *Partisan Review,* that American art had definitively broken with Paris and that it had finally become essential to the vitality of Western culture. This declaration of faith assumed the decline of Parisian cubism, he said, because the forces that had given it birth had emigrated to the United States.

The fact that Greenberg launched his attack when he did was not unrelated to certain political events and to the prewar atmosphere that had existed in New York since January of that year.[24] The threat of a Third World War was openly discussed in the press; and the importance accorded by the government to the passage of the European Recovery Plan reinforced the idea that Europe—France and Italy—was about to topple into the Soviet camp. What would become of Western civilization? Under these circumstances, Greenberg's article seemed to rescue the cultural future of the West:[25]

> If artists as great as Picasso, Braque and Léger have declined so grievously, it can only be because the general social premises that used to guarantee their functioning have disappeared in Europe. And when one sees, on the other hand, how much the level of American art has risen in the last five years, with

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> the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith—then the conclusion forces itself, much to our own surprise, that the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power.[26]

New York's independence from an enfeebled, faction-ridden Paris, threatened by communism from within and without, was in Greenberg's eyes necessary if modern culture was to survive. Softened by many struggles and too much success, the Parisian avant-garde survived only with difficulty. Only the virility of an art like Pollock's, its brutality, ruggedness, and individualism, could revitalize modern culture, traditionally represented by Paris, and effeminized by too much praise. By dealing only with abstract-expressionist art, Greenberg's formal analysis offered a theory of art that finally brought "international" over to the American side.

For the first time an important critic had been aggressive, confident, and devoted enough to American art to openly defy the supremacy of Parisian art and to replace it on an international scale with the art of Pollock and the New York School. Greenberg dispensed with the Parisian avant-garde and placed New York at the center of world culture. From then on the United States held all the winning cards in its struggle with communism: the atomic bomb, a powerful economy, a strong army, and now artistic supremacy—the cultural superiority that had been missing.

After 1949 and Truman's victory, the proclamation of the Fair Deal, and the publication of Schlesinger's *Vital Center,* traditional liberal democratic pluralism was a thing of the past. Henry Wallace disappeared from the political scene, the Communist party lost its momentum and even at times ventured outside the law. Victorious liberalism, ideologically refashioned by Schlesinger, barricaded itself behind an elementary anticommunism, centered on the notion of freedom. Aesthetic pluralism was also rejected in favor of a unique, powerful, abstract, purely American modern art, as demonstrated by Sam Kootz's refusal to show the French-influenced modern painters Brown and Holty.[27] Individualism would become the basis for all American art that wanted to represent the new era—confident and uneasy at the same time. Artistic freedom and experimentation became central to abstract-expressionist art.[28]

In May 1948, René d'Harnoncourt presented a paper before the annual meeting of the American Federation of Art in which he explored the notion of individuality, explaining why—his words were carefully chosen for May 1948—no collective art could come to terms with the age. Freedom of individual

expression, independent of any other consideration, was the basis of our culture and deserved protection and even encouragement when confronted with cultures that were collectivist and authoritarian.

> The art of the twentieth century has no collective style, not because it has divorced itself from contemporary society but because it is part of it. And here we are with our hard-earned new freedom. Walls are crumbling all around us and we are terrified by the endless vistas and the responsibility of an infinite choice. It is this terror of the new freedom which removed the familiar signposts from the roads that makes many of us wish to turn the clock back and recover the security of yesterday's dogma. The totalitarian state established in the image of the past is one reflection of this terror of the new freedom.[29]

The solution to the problems created by such alienation was, according to d'Harnoncourt, an abstract accord between society and the individual:

> It can be solved only by an order which reconciles the freedom of the individual with the welfare of society and replaces yesterday's image of one unified civilization by a pattern in which many elements, while retaining their own individual qualities, join to form a new entity. . . . The perfecting of this new order would unquestionably tax our abilities to the very limit, but would give us a society enriched beyond belief by the full development of the individual for the sake of the whole. I believe a good name for such a society is democracy, and I also believe that modern art in its infinite variety and ceaseless exploration is its foremost symbol.[30]

In this text we have, perhaps for the first time, the ideology of the avant-garde aligned with postwar liberalism—the reconciliation of the ideology forged by Rothko and Newman, Greenberg and Rosenberg (individuality, risk, the new frontier) with the liberal ideology as Schlesinger defined it in *Vital Center*: a new radicalism. [. . .]

The new liberalism was identified with the avant-garde not only because that kind of painting was identifiable in modern internationalist terms (also perceived as uniquely American), but also because the values represented in the pictorial work were especially cherished during the Cold War (the notion of individualism and risk essential to the artist to achieve complete freedom of expression). The element of risk that was central to the ideology of the avant-garde was also central to the ideology of *Vital Center*.[31] Risk, as defined by the avant-garde and formulated in their work as a necessary condition for freedom of expression, was what distinguished a free society from a totalitarian

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one, according to Schlesinger: "The eternal awareness of choice can drive the weak to the point where the simplest decision becomes a nightmare. Most men prefer to flee choice, to flee anxiety, to flee freedom."[32] In the modern world, which brutally stifles the individual, the artist becomes a rampart, an example of will against the uniformity of totalitarian society. In this way the individualism of abstract expressionism allowed the avant-garde to define and occupy a unique position on the artistic front. The avant-garde appropriated a coherent, definable, consumable image that reflected rather accurately the objectives and operations of a newly powerful, liberal, internationalist America. This juxtaposition of political and artistic images was possible because both groups consciously or unconsciously repressed aspects of their ideology in order to ally themselves with the ideology of the other. Contradictions were passed over in silence.

It was ironic but not contradictory that in a society as fixed in a right-of-center position as the United States, and where intellectual repression was strongly felt,[33] abstract expressionism was for many people an expression of freedom: freedom to create controversial works, freedom symbolized by action and gesture, by the expression of the artist apparently freed from all restraints. It was an essential existential liberty that was defended by the moderns (Barr, Soby, Greenberg, Rosenberg) against the attacks of the humanist liberals (Devree, Jewell) and the conservatives (Dondero, Taylor), serving to present the internal struggle to those outside as proof of the inherent liberty of the American system, as opposed to the restrictions imposed on the artist by the Soviet system. Freedom was the symbol most enthusiastically promoted by the new liberalism during the Cold War.[34]

Expressionism became the expression of the difference between a free society and totalitarianism; it represented an essential aspect of liberal society: its aggressiveness and ability to generate controversy that in the final analysis posed no threat. Once again Schlesinger leads us through the labyrinth of liberal ideology:

> It is threatening to turn us all into frightened conformists; and conformity can lead only to stagnation. We need courageous men to help us recapture a sense of the indispensability of dissent, and we need dissent if we are to make up our minds equably and intelligently.[35]

While Pollock's drip paintings offended both the Left and the Right as well as the middle class, they revitalized and strengthened the new liberalism.[36] Pollock became its hero and around him a sort of school developed, for which

he became the catalyst, the one who, as de Kooning put it, broke the ice. He became its symbol. But his success and the success of the other abstract-expressionist artists was also the bitter defeat of being powerless to prevent their art from being assimilated into the political struggle.

The trap that the modern American artist wanted to avoid, as we've seen, was the image, the "statement." Distrusting the traditional idiom, he wanted to warp the trace of what he wanted to express, consciously attempt to erase, to void the readable, to censure himself. In a certain way he wanted to write about the impossibility of description. In doing this, he rejected two things, the aesthetic of the Popular Front and the traditional American aesthetic, which reflected the political isolationism of an earlier era. The access to modernism that Greenberg had theoretically achieved elevated the art of the avant-garde to a position of international importance, but in so doing integrated it into the imperialist machine of the Museum of Modern Art.[37]

So it was that the progressively disillusioned avant-garde, although theoretically in opposition to the Truman administration, aligned itself, often unconsciously, with the majority, which after 1948 moved dangerously toward the right. Greenberg followed this development with the painters, and was its catalyst. By analyzing the political aspect of American art, he defined the ideological, formal vantage point from which the avant-garde would have to assert itself if it intended to survive the ascendancy of the new American middle class. To do so it was forced to suppress what many first generation artists had defended against the sterility of American abstract art: emotional content, social commentary, the discourse that avant-garde artists intended in their work, and which Meyer Schapiro had articulated.

Ironically, it was that constant rebellion against political exploitation and the stubborn determination to save Western culture by Americanizing it that led the avant-garde, after killing the father (Paris), to topple into the once disgraced arms of the mother country.

Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, "The Late 30's in New York," *Art and Culture,* Boston, Beacon Press, 1961, p. 230.
2. Meyer Schapiro, "Social Bases of Art," *First American Artist's Congress,* New York, 1936, pp. 31–37.
3. Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly,* January–February 1937, pp. 77–98; comment by Delmore Schwartz in *Marxist Quarterly,* April–June 1937, pp. 305–310, and Schapiro's reply, pp. 310–314.

4. Alfred Barr, *Cubism a*
5. Leon Trotsky, "Art an 310; Diego Rivera and Art," *Partisan Revie* Painter's World, *Dyn*
6. J. T. Farrell, *A Note on*
7. Trotsky, "Art and Poli by Dwight MacDonal unencumbered. In fac accused of timidity i to write for the maga *Radicalism in Americ*
8. Trotsky agreed with B that recognized a rev ber 27, 1938, quoted 129.
9. Many members of the but looked to Paris f by the author, Februar
10. Greenberg, "Avant-G
11. Ad Reinhardt, interv *and Development of* York, 1957, p. xi.
12. Nineteen forty-three though occurring sl trum supported the speaking for the righ in *Life* magazine in to seize world leaders century as the ninete approved this new di best-seller, *One Wor*
13. Catalogue introducti Riverside Museum, Ja to the gigantic one Newman's appeal for the involvement of t by M. Avery, B. Brow I. Krasner, B. Margo
14. Betty Parsons, interv
15. Dwight MacDonald published in *Memoi* p. 191.
16. The abstract art fas borrowed classical

4. Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art,* New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1936.
5. Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics," *Partisan Review,* August–September, 1938, p. 310; Diego Rivera and André Breton, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review,* Fall 1938, pp. 49–53; Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World, *Dyn,* November 1944, pp. 9–14.
6. J. T. Farrell, *A Note on Literary Criticism,* New York, Vanguard, 1936.
7. Trotsky, "Art and Politics," p. 4. In spite of Trotsky's article, which was translated by Dwight MacDonald, the magazine's relationship with the movement remained unencumbered. In fact, Trotsky distrusted the avant-garde publication, which he accused of timidity in its attack on Stalinism and turned down several invitations to write for the magazine (Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America,* New York, John Wiley and Sons, p. 200).
8. Trotsky agreed with Breton that any artistic school was valid (his "eclecticism") that recognized a revolutionary imperative; see Trotsky's letter to Breton, October 27, 1938, quoted in Arturo Schwartz, *Breton/Trotsky,* Paris, 10/18, 1977, p. 129.
9. Many members of the American Abstract Artists were sympathetic to Trotskyism but looked to Paris for an aesthetic standard; Rosalind Bengelsdorf interviewed by the author, February 12, 1978, New York.
10. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review,* Fall 1939, p. 49.
11. Ad Reinhardt, interviewed by F. Celentano, September 2, 1955, for *The Origins and Development of Abstract Expressionism in the U.S.,* unpublished thesis, New York, 1957, p. xi.
12. Nineteen forty-three was the year of internationalism in the United States. Although occurring slowly, the change was a radical one. The entire political spectrum supported the United States involvement in world affairs. Henry Luce, speaking for the right, published his celebrated article "The American Century" in *Life* magazine in 1941, in which he called on the American people vigorously to seize world leadership. The century to come, he said, could be the American century as the nineteenth had been that of England and France. Conservatives approved this new direction in the MacKinac resolution. See Wendell Wilkie's best-seller, *One World,* New York, 1943.
13. Catalogue introduction to the First Exhibition of Modern American Artists at Riverside Museum, January 1943. This exhibition was intended as an alternative to the gigantic one organized by the Communist-dominated Artist for Victory. Newman's appeal for an apolitical art was in fact a political act since it attacked the involvement of the Communist artist in the war effort. Newman was joined by M. Avery, B. Brown, G. Constant, A. Gottlieb, B. Green, G. Green, J. Graham, I. Krasner, B. Margo, M. Rothko, and others.
14. Betty Parsons, interviewed by the author, New York, February 16, 1978.
15. Dwight MacDonald, "Truman's Doctrine, Abroad and at Home," May 1947, published in *Memoirs of a Revolutionist,* New York, World Publishing, 1963, p. 191.
16. The abstract art fashionable at the time (R. Gwathmey, P. Burlin, J. de Martini) borrowed classical themes and modernized or "Picassoized" them.

17. Greenberg, *Nation,* April 1947.
18. Greenberg, "Art," *Nation,* February 1, 1947, pp. 138–139.
19. For an analysis of the ideology of this position see S. Guilbaut, "Création et développement d'une Avant-Garde: New York 1946–1951," *Histoire et critique des arts,* "Les Avant-Gardes," July 1978, pp. 29–48.
20. Greenberg, "Art," *Nation,* March 8, 1947, p. 284.
21. M. Rothko, *Possibilities,* No. 1, Winter 1947–48, p. 84.
22. Clifford Still, letter to Betty Parsons, March 20, 1948, Archives of American Art, Betty Parsons papers, N 68–72.
23. Dwight MacDonald, October 1946, published in *Memoirs,* "Looking at the War," p. 180.
24. His article had an explosive effect since it was the first time an American art critic had given pride of place to American art. There were some who were shocked and angered by it. G. L. K. Morris, a modern painter of the cubist school, former Trotskyite and Communist party supporter, violently attacked Greenberg's position in the pages of his magazine. He went on to accuse American critics in general of being unable to interpret the secrets of modern art: "This approach—completely irresponsible as to accuracy or taste—has been with us so long that we might say that it amounts to a tradition." He ironically attacked Greenberg's thesis for being unfounded: "It would have been rewarding if Greenberg had indicated in *what ways* the works of our losers have declined since the 30's." Working in the tradition of Picasso, Morris was unable to accept the untimely, surprising demise of cubism ("Morris on Critics and Greenberg: A Communication," *Partisan Review,* pp. 681–684; Greenberg's reply, 686–687).
25. For a more detailed analysis of how events in Europe were understood by the American public, see Richard M. Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism,* New York, Schocken Books, 1974, pp. 293–306.
26. Greenberg, "The Decline of Cubism," *Partisan Review,* March 1948, p. 369.
27. When Kootz reopened his gallery in 1949 with a show entitled "The Intrasubjectives," Brown and Holty were no longer with him. The artists shown included Baziotes, de Kooning, Gorky, Gottlieb, Graves, Hofmann, Motherwell, Pollock, Reinhardt, Rothko, Tobey, and Tomlin. It was clear what had happened: artists who worked in the tradition of the School of Paris were no longer welcome. In 1950 and 1951, Kootz disposed of Holty and Brown's work, making a killing by selling the paintings at discount prices in the Bargain Basement of the Gimbels department store chain. It was the end of a certain way of thinking about painting. The avant-garde jettisoned its past once and for all.
28. The ideology of individualism would be codified in 1952 by Harold Rosenberg in his well-known article "The American Action Painters," *Art News,* December 1952.
29. René d'Harnoncourt, "Challenge and Promise: Modern Art and Society," *Art News,* November 1949, p. 252.
30. Ibid.
31. See discussion in "A... ed. Motherwell, Re...
32. Arthur Schlesinger. ... *American Liberalis...*
33. We should recall th... mittees was on the ... were made to bar p... ney Hook, himself a ... munism and the I... (February 1949), ...
34. See Max Kozloff. ... 1973, pp. 42–54.
35. Schlesinger, *Vital C...*
36. The new liberalis... certain level of n... which Schlesinger ... ogy of the avant-ga... anti-communist fe... on nonconformis... cratic strength" (p. ...
37. See Eva Cockcro... *forum,* XII (June ...

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SOURCE: *Arts Maga...* Firestone.

31. See discussion in "Artist's Session at Studio 35" in *Modern Artists in America,* ed. Motherwell, Reinhardt, Wittenborn, Schultz, New York, 1951, pp. 9–23.
32. Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: Our Purposes and Perils on the Tightrope of American Liberalism,* Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1949, p. 52.
33. We should recall that at that time the power of the various anticommunist committees was on the rise (HUAC, the Attorney General's list) and that attempts were made to bar persons with Marxist leanings from university positions. Sidney Hook, himself a former Marxist, was one of the most vocal critics; see "Communism and the Intellectuals," *The American Mercury,* Vol. LXVIII, No. 302 (February 1949), 133–144.
34. See Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *Artforum,* May 1973, pp. 42–54.
35. Schlesinger, *Vital Center,* p. 208.
36. The new liberalism accepted and even welcomed the revitalizing influence of a certain level of nonconformity and rebellion. This was the system's strength, which Schlesinger clearly explains in his book. Political ideology and the ideology of the avant-garde were united: "And there is a 'clear and present danger' that anti-communist feeling will boil over into a vicious and nonconstitutional attack on nonconformists in general and thereby endanger the sources of our democratic strength" (p. 210).
37. See Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum,* XII (June 1974), 39–41.

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James Joyce and the First Generation New York School

The artists of the first generation New York School, most of whom are known collectively as Abstract Expressionists, were as a group generally well-read or well-informed and in touch with the literary currents of their time. Nonfiction works by Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, and James Frazer combined on their reading lists with the writings of Baudelaire, the French Symbolist poets (especially Rimbaud), Herman Melville, André Breton and Garcia Lorca, among others. Although scholars have examined the connections between this group of artists and literature rather carefully, except in the case of David Smith

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