

who escaped the cultivated realms of French symbolist poetry for life as an adventurer in Africa—a metaphor, no doubt, intended to refer also to his own escape from the confines of Surrealism to the open-endedness of Abstract Expressionism since he tended in conversation to couch his art in terms of a grand and heroic struggle.

3. Rereading this section, I am amazed at the extent to which the ideological biases of race had been internalized by Motherwell, who equated the feeling in his work with a blackness that was atavistic, primitive, and African, or least diasporic. I am also amazed at my blindness then to this social and historical construction, but such is the far-reaching effect of dominant, well-ensconced ideologies.
4. As I now look at this section I am struck by the degree to which Motherwell, one of the most urbane of twentieth-century writers, was intrigued with a world that could be characterized as the polar opposite of the one he inhabited. With the exception of a dysfunctional childhood and his recurrent bouts with alcoholism, which he freely acknowledged, Motherwell's world was a highly cultivated and carefully circumscribed one, which was populated by his psychoanalytic poker-playing buddies who had life-long passions for James Joyce's writings, his few artist friends such as the highly literate sculptor David Smith, his penchant for French culture and cooking that he perfected as a Cordon Bleu student of Dione Lucas, and the overall affluent lifestyle that was financed first by a father who had been CEO of Wells Fargo Bank and later by sales of his own work and investments. In retrospect it appears that his atavism was highly intellectual and based on a thorough understanding of its effectiveness as a psychoanalytic metaphor for Freud's subconscious and Jung's unconscious mind.

DAVID SHAPIRO AND CECILE SHAPIRO

**Excerpt from "Abstract
Expressionism: The
Politics of Apolitical
Painting," Part 3**

Abstract art was the main issue among the painters I knew in the late thirties. Radical politics was on many people's minds, but for these particular artists Social Realism was as dead as the American Scene. (Though that is not all, by far, that there was to politics in those years: 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.)

—Clement Greenberg, *"The Late Thirties in New York"*

SOURCE: *Prospects* 3 (1977), 175–214. Reprinted with the permission of David and Cecile Shapiro.

III

The most surprising feature of well-written publicist criticism of Abstract Expressionism. Since a conspiracy of silence never claimed to have existed, the circumstances must be examined.

Abstract Expressionism, like McCarthyism, although the latter was a way toward explaining the expression of a vicious form of nationalism, in its drive to fall apart; the center can't hold. Yeats prophetically wrote, "The best of all worlds is the one in which McCarthyism ruled in the fact that their control was a certain parallels.

If the atmosphere of the 1950s, and art publicist, preceded vogue that stimulated to its success meant that schools, in the meaning and thus catching up with the Abstract Expressionists. That a group substantially larger of art noticeable during the represented during the 1950s and perhaps old-fashioned seemed to be funneled into the lifted Abstract Expressionism of the decade, suppressing the conceivable in our society.

The United States Institute for a great deal of American which ruled that our greatest examples of our creative energy of "avowed communists, p-

The most surprising fact about American art in the late 1950s is the dearth of well-written published material critical of or hostile to Abstract Expressionism. Since a conspiracy is entirely unlikely—even Senator Joe McCarthy never claimed to have uncovered any in the art world—more likely possibilities must be examined. [. . .]

Abstract Expressionism, of course, can in no way be equated with McCarthyism, although the conformism that pervaded the decade goes a long way toward explaining the power of each. But while McCarthyism was the expression of a vicious political authoritarianism, Abstract Expressionism might better be described as anarchist or nihilist, both antipodes of authoritarianism, in its drive to jettison rules, tradition, order, and values. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” Yeats prophetically wrote. Anarchist Abstract Expressionism and neofacist McCarthyism ruled in their separate spheres during the same period, and the fact that their control was almost complete for a time makes it fair to suggest certain parallels.

If the atmosphere of the times and the support of the leading critics, museums, and art publications helped Abstract Expressionism to reach an unprecedented vogue that stifled other forms during the 1950s, there were other stimulants to its success as well. The GI Bill for veterans and a new prosperity meant that schools, in this case mainly college art departments, were expanding and thus catching as young faculty the first wave of artists trained as Abstract Expressionists. They, in turn, taught the next generation of art students, a group substantially larger than ever before in our history. The varied modes of art noticeable during the 1930s and 1940s were virtually untaught and unrepresented during the 1950s for more reasons than that they seemed tired and perhaps old-fashioned in a postwar world. Unlike earlier periods, all art seemed to be funneled toward one type of expression [. . .] The lever that lifted Abstract Expressionism to the peak it achieved as the quasi-official art of the decade, suppressing other kinds of painting to a degree not heretofore conceivable in our society, was an arm of the United States government. [. . .]

The United States Information Agency, which as time went on was to sponsor a great deal of American art, worked within an official censorship policy which ruled that our government was not to support nonrepresentational examples of our creative energy nor circulate exhibitions that included the work of “avowed communists, persons convicted of crimes involving a threat to the

security of the United States, or persons who publicly refuse to answer questions of Congressional committees regarding connection with the communist movement.”¹⁶

Among the artists and organizations attacked at some point by one congressional committee or another were the Los Angeles City Council, the Dallas Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the American Federation of Art circulating exhibit called “100 American Artists of the Twentieth Century,” the Orozco murals at the New School for Social Research, the Diego Rivera murals in Detroit, and the Anton Refregier mural created with federal funds for the Rincon Annex Post Office in San Francisco.¹⁷

Almost any style, then, was a potential target for congressional pot-shots, ranging from that which was explicitly political and/or executed by artists involved with sociopolitical affairs, to art that categorically denied any possibility of ideological communication. Yet despite the problems, Abstract Expressionism became the style most heavily dispensed by our government, for reasons that were in part explained by Thomas W. Braden in a 1967 article that appeared under the title “I’m Glad the C.I.A. Is Immoral” in the *Saturday Evening Post*.¹⁸

Braden, executive secretary of the Museum of Modern Art for a short period in the late 1940s, joined the Central Intelligence Agency as supervisor of cultural activities in 1951, and remained as director of this branch until 1954. Recognizing that congressional approval of many of their projects was “as likely as the John Birch Society’s approving Medicare,” he became involved with using such organizations as the Institute of Labor Research and the National Council of Churches as fronts in the American cold war against communism here and abroad. The rules that guided the CIA allowed them to “use legitimate existing organizations; disguise the extent of American interest; protect the integrity [*sic*] of the organization by not requiring it to support every aspect of official American policy.”¹⁹ Braden said that “we placed one agent in a Europe-based organization of intellectuals called the Congress for Cultural Freedom.”²⁰ The agent remained for many years as executive director; another CIA agent became editor of *Encounter*. When money was needed to finance these projects it was supplied by the CIA via paper organizations devised for that purpose. Commenting on these activities years later, Conor Cruise O’Brien said that the “beauty of the operation . . . was that writers of the first rank, who had no interest in serving the power structure, were induced to do so unwittingly.”²¹ The same might be said of the Abstract Expressionists, and perhaps of the critics and museum personnel supporting

them. In any case, Braden’s CIA work was a continuation of the Museum of Modern Art years, still a part of the cold war, still a part of the propaganda war. It appears to me that the main purpose of the attack on the version of the discredit—namely, that this country “has no right to carry.”²² Backed by military and political power, Abstract Expressionism, Braden’s CIA work, and sending abroad artists

In his study of one of the CIA’s fronts for Cultural Freedom, Lasch

especially in the first half of the century, is not only trying to be understood, but also trying to understand the values they preferred to live by and to pass on to them.

The defection of Braden goes a long way toward explaining the CIA’s interest in the arts, but the intellectual and political isolation of the CIA, its lack of connection with consensus, its lack of respect for considerations of the public good, its obsession with “Americanism,” and its obsession with “American uniqueness” have become a part of the cold war against communism.

The prototype of the CIA agent was the disillusioned ex-CIA agent who had been disillusioned by the CIA and culture by the CIA, and who had become disillusioned by the evil and exploitation of the CIA.

Lasch’s description of the CIA’s role in supporting Abstract Expressionism is not as others. (*Partisan Review*, 1950) that for a time was significant. It did a great deal to do with the CIA in the 1950s. It is also worth noting that the CIA drums repeatedly in the CIA’s name: “The Present Position of American Action Painting” (1950)



them. In any case, Braden, possibly taking his aesthetic cue from his Museum of Modern Art years, supported the export of Abstract Expressionism in the propaganda war. It appears likely that he agreed with Greenberg's 1949 remark, the purport of which became for a time the American twentieth-century version of the discredited "white man's burden," which held—apropos art—that this country, "here, as elsewhere . . . has an international burden to carry."²² Backed by money available to the CIA and supportive of Abstract Expressionism, Braden's branch became a means of circumventing Congress and sending abroad art-as-propaganda without federal intervention.

In his study of one of the organizations infiltrated by the CIA, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Christopher Lasch wrote that

especially in the fifties American intellectuals, on a scale that is only beginning to be understood, lent themselves to purposes having nothing to do with the values they professed—purposes, indeed, that were diametrically opposed to them.

The defection of intellectuals from their true calling—critical thought—goes a long way toward explaining not only the poverty of political discussion but the intellectual bankruptcy of much historical scholarship. The infatuation with consensus; the vogue of disembodied "history of ideas" divorced from considerations of class or other determinants of social organization; the obsession with "American Studies" which perpetuates a nationalistic myth of American uniqueness—these things reflect the degree to which historians have become apologists, in effect, for American national power in the holy war against communism. . . .

The prototype of the anti-communist intellectual in the fifties was the disillusioned ex-Communist, obsessed by the corruption of Western politics and culture by the pervasive influence of Stalinism and by a need to exorcise the evil and expiate his own past.²³

Lasch's description fits both Greenberg and Rosenberg, who wrote articles supporting Abstract Expressionism for CIA-subsidized journals as well as others. (*Partisan Review*, according to Lasch, was one of those journals that for a time was sponsored by the CIA.) Their published material had a great deal to do with the acceptance of the style by other intellectuals in the 1950s. It is also worth remarking in this connection that the word "American" drums repeatedly in the titles of essays sympathetic to Abstract Expressionism: "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," "American Action Painting," "American Type Painting," "The New American Paint-

ing,” “Is Abstraction Un-American?”—the last a peculiarly 1950s-type question. It is not surprising, Lasch says, that these cold war intellectuals became affluent as well as powerful as their usefulness to the government, corporations, and foundations became apparent, “partly because the Cold War seemed to demand that the United States compete with communism in the cultural sphere as well as in every other.”²⁴

The Abstract Expressionists were used in the 1950s in a series of international exhibitions, sponsored by the International Council of MOMA, whose purpose appears to have coincided with the aims of government bodies.²⁵ (This may be a good place to note that from 1954 to 1962 the U.S. Pavilion in Venice was the property of the Museum of Modern Art, the only such national pavilion privately owned.) “The functions of both the CIA’s undercover operations and the Modern Museum’s International programs were similar.”²⁶ [. . .]

Although the artists who made this art were generally no longer political (including those who had been at some time in the past), they were on the whole in accord with official policy, not only in its fixation on the Communist menace but also in their disdain for figurative art, especially the left-wing political art of the Social Realists in America. If these factors did not entirely allay qualms about their employment as part of the establishment propaganda apparatus, they could take comfort, as artists inevitably do, in the exhibition record. Few are ever likely to argue about the purposes for which their paintings are exhibited just so long as they are in fact widely and regularly shown.

A vocal portion of the art world, moreover, was cockily triumphant about the splash American art was making abroad for the first time. As the Luce publications proclaimed, this was to be the American century. We had emerged from the war unscathed; we had the biggest and best of everything. We wanted the rest of the world to know it, and to know that it was all due to our true-blue goodness, our planning, and our form of government. The new world had invented a new art which lay claim to epitomizing a new freedom.

Yet another reason suggests itself for the speed with which government and museums cooperated in arranging exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism abroad. Social Realism, widely exhibited until World War II, is programmatically critical of capitalism. Its stated aim, in fact, is to serve as an instrument in the social change that will disestablish capitalism. The Museum of Modern Art had on occasion exhibited and purchased works of certain Social Realists and continued to do so for a time after the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, in 1946 MOMA had shown Social Realist Ben Shahn’s

work in a retrospective. It may have been relieved to be able to show MOMA, like most American museums, rich private collectors, and art dealers, a clan as refuge from the art produced.

These people, to put it bluntly, were dismantling the economic system that related reasons might cite as a source of hesitation, joined the new elements, of course, with the elements of the new mode with which they had never before been familiar. They quickly a sampling of the new art. Joshua Taylor, director of MOMA, earlier the rule had been to buy work by living artists. Now they were at ever-augmenting numbers. They became collectors of art, and they acquire works by the very artists of their own taste,” Daniel Bell has written. The rise to ethical problems—

Thus it came about that the new art, as well as the general preference for the avant-garde art galleries, was by the taxpayer, the need for dissent encouraged by MOMA, and all varieties of anti-Communist sentiment during the cold war and the cultural war economic vigor and the emergence of a totally new kind of American art. The art have at last migrated from Social Realism to Abstract Expressionism during the conforming 1950s.

The rise of Abstract Expressionism and from there to its position as the very term “avant-garde” in

work in a retrospective that established his reputation. But they may now have been relieved to be helped off a hot spot, for it should not be forgotten that MOMA, like most American museums, was founded and funded by extremely rich private collectors, and MOMA was still actively supported by the Rockefellers, a clan as refulgent with money and power as American capitalism has produced.

These people, to paraphrase Churchill, had no wish to preside over the dismantling of the economic system that had served them so well. It is likely that related reasons influenced other museums, which, after varying periods of hesitation, joined in support of Abstract Expressionist art. (Many other elements, of course, were operative as well.) Museums backed up exhibitions of the new mode with massive purchases of work by living artists on a scale that had never before been approached. "It was a kind of instant history, and quickly a sampling of their works was to be found in most museums," wrote Joshua Taylor, director of the National Collection, Smithsonian Institution.²⁷ Earlier the rule had been for museums to be extremely chary of acquiring work by living artists. Now museums not only splurged on canvases sold to them at ever-augmenting prices; the trustees who had authorized the acquisitions became collectors of the new art. "Trustees often urged the museum to acquire works by the very artists they were collecting, thus helping to bolster their own taste," Daniel Catton Rich has observed.²⁸ Even curators—giving rise to ethical problems—functioned as public taste makers and private clients.

Thus it came about that the critics and their theories, the art publications as well as the general press, the museums led by the Museum of Modern Art, the avant-garde art galleries, the clandestine functions of the CIA supported by the taxpayer, the need of artists to show and sell their work, the leveling of dissent encouraged by McCarthyism and a conformist era, the convergence of all varieties of anti-Communists and anti-Stalinists on a neutral cultural point, the cold war and the cultural weapons employed in its behalf, American post-war economic vigor and its sense of moral leadership, plus the explosion of a totally new kind of American-born painting that seemed the objective correlative of Greenberg's early announcement that "the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States"²⁹—all these combined to make Abstract Expressionism the only art acceptable on a wide scale during the conforming 1950s.

The rise of Abstract Expressionism to its leadership of the avant-garde, and from there to its position of official art, is replete with irony. First, because the very term "avant-garde," as proudly vaunted as Baudelaire's "modernism,"

was first used in art by *socialist* artists in the nineteenth century, and its meaning then was very close to what we have come to call Social Realism. “Avant-garde” as cultural vanguard was used in an 1845 essay in the following way:

Art, the expression of Society, reveals in its highest forms the most advanced *social* tendencies; it is a precursor and herald. Now, to know whether an art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, if an artist is really at the *avant-garde*, one must know where humanity is heading, what is the destiny of the species . . . *strip nude with a brutal brush all the ugliness, all the garbage that is at the base of our society.*³⁰

Or, as the French socialist philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon wrote twenty years earlier,

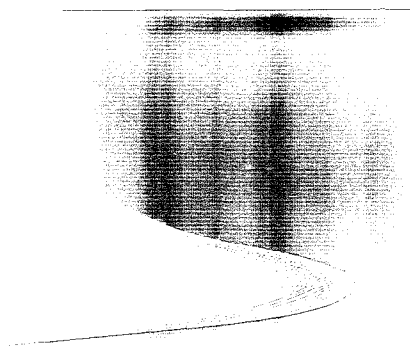
It is we, artists, who will serve you as *avant-garde* [in the struggle toward socialism]: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or canvas.³¹

It is ironic, too, that an apolitical art that arose at least in part as a reaction to didactic art, as an “art-for-art’s-sake” antidote to “art-as-a-weapon,” should have become a prime political weapon. As Max Kozloff wrote in 1973, in the 1950s the art establishment saw this kind of art as the “sole trustee of the avant-garde spirit, a belief so reminiscent of the U.S. Government’s notion of itself as the lone guarantor of capitalist liberty.”³² It is also an irony that an art indifferent to morality became the prime example of the morality of free expression, and that an art forswearing aesthetics came to be used as the originator of a new aesthetic.

And perhaps the final irony is that instead of reigning for a thousand years, as Adolph Gottlieb had predicted,³³ it lasted as king for a decade, with pop art—the epitome of the banal and the glorification of kitsch—its immediate successor. Jack had killed the giant, but the giant arose again, deformed, stronger, with greater pretensions, and flexing muscles never dared before. Pop, as everyone knows, has been succeeded by op, minimal, conceptual, photorealism, and more yet—but each of these in one way or another either derives from Abstract Expressionism or is a violent reaction against it, so that the disruption caused by the dominance of Abstract Expressionism for its decade will be felt not only in American art but all over the world throughout this century.

Notes

16. William Hausman, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, October 1973, p. 107.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
18. Thomas W. Brant, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, May 20, 1967, pp. 107–108.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Intellectuals: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 353.
22. Clement Greenberg, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, August 1949, p. 44.
23. Lasch, “Cultural Criticism,” p. 107.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 344. Hausman, “The Avant-Garde,” p. 107.
25. Russell Lynes, *The Avant-Garde: A History of the Art Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 107. Lynes said, “The avant-garde was not a cultural movement; it was a political movement, a cold war.”
26. Eva Cockcroft, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, June 1974, p. 47.
27. Joshua C. Taylor, *The Avant-Garde: A History of the Art Movement*, ed. S. S. Sontag (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 60.
28. Daniel Catton Fox, *The Avant-Garde: A History of the Art Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 107.
29. Clement Greenberg, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, (March 1948), p. 44.
30. James S. Ackerman, “The Avant-Garde,” *Recent American Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 375n. (Italian: *the Avant-Garde*, ed. Gabriel-Desiré Lacroix, 1968), p. 107.
31. Ackerman, “Democracy and the Avant-Garde,” *Historical Review*, 7 (1968), p. 44.
32. Max Kozloff, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, p. 44.
33. Selden Rodman, “The Avant-Garde,” *Artforum*, p. 87.



Notes

16. William Hauptman, "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade," *Artforum*, October 1973, p. 49.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
18. Thomas W. Braden, "I'm Glad the C.I.A. Is Immoral," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1967, pp. 10 ff.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War," in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed., Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Pantheon, 1968), p. 353.
22. Clement Greenberg, "Art Chronicle: A Season of Art," *Partisan Review* (July–August 1949), p. 414.
23. Lasch, "Cultural Cold War," pp. 323, 336.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 344. His statement about the CIA and the *Partisan Review* is on p. 335.
25. Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 384. MOMA's international exhibition program, Lynes said, was "to let it be known especially in Europe that America was not a cultural backwater that the Russians, during the tense period called 'the cold war,' were trying to demonstrate that it was."
26. Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum*, June 1974, p. 40.
27. Joshua C. Taylor, "The Art Museum in the United States," in *On Understanding Art Museums*, ed., Sherman E. Lee (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 60.
28. Daniel Catton Rich, "Management, Power, and Integrity," in Lee, *On Understanding Art Museums*, p. 137.
29. Clement Greenberg, "Art Chronicle: The Decline of Cubism," *Partisan Review* (March 1948), p. 369.
30. James S. Ackerman, "The Demise of the Avant-Garde: Notes on the Sociology of Recent American Art," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (October 1969), 375n. (Italics added.) Ackerman quotes from Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1968). The original lines were written by Gabriel-Desiré Laverdant, a follower of the socialist Fourier.
31. Ackerman, "Demise of the Avant-Garde," p. 375n. Ackerman is quoting from Donald Egbert, "The Idea of the Avant-Garde in Art and Politics," *American Historical Review* 70 (1967). (Italics added.)
32. Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum*, May 1973, p. 44.
33. Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), p. 87.