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Grounding the Social Aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism: A New Intellectual History of The Club

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation remaps the intellectual terrain of Abstract Expressionism, uncovering the deeply communal nature of the artists' aesthetic projects and shifting the narrative away from the usual biographical and psychoanalytic models. Drawing on extensive archival research, I argue that the early years of The Club, from 1949 to 1955, are central to understanding Abstract Expressionism. Not only does the evidence of the artists' weekly discussions suggest intellectual sources that have never before been associated with Abstract Expressionism (vitalism, Martin Heidegger's existentialism, Paul Goodman's Gestalt therapy, and Zen), but it also indicates that this social community embodied anarchist mutual aid that avoided the ideological Cold War rhetoric that pitted individualism against totalitarian collectivism. Vitalism's connectedness, Heidegger's Being-with, Gestalt therapy's organism-environment field, and Zen's awareness and interrelatedness addressed the fundamental issue of the individual's relationship with the collective, striking a new key that was neither Communist nor Capitalist. Using these discursive frames, I reread Harold Rosenberg's articulation of Action Painting and offer a new interpretation of the artists' "signature styles" as a community of difference rather than as emblematic of sovereign individuality. By looking at the artists' material processes and their compositional strategies, I recover on the surfaces of their canvases the communitarian impulses that also directed their intellectual discussions and their everyday lives. While Abstract Expressionism has come to signify heroic individuality and Cold War patriarchy, I want to suggest that it signifies the very obverse—radical community that recognized separate-togetherness. This rereading puts Abstract Expressionism squarely within the reformulation of Leftist politics that began after World War II and came to fruition in the New Left and the "new sensibility" of the 1960s.

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Introduction

> By the middle of the century, New York City had eight, ten, fifteen millions of people, depending on where you drew the circumference. You would imagine that in a population like that a man would be quite lost. But it didn't work out that way at all. For, just as a reaction to being lost, there came to be small language groups, of persons who understood what the others were talking about and therefore occasionally listened to what one said: such a group might be about the size of a small village where one's native tongue was spoken, and the rest of the people (if they were people, how would one know?) hardly existed at all. ——Paul Goodman, *The Empire City*[1]

The mythic Abstract Expressionist, toiling alone in his studio, spilled his emotions on the canvas, expressing his unconscious desires and his anxiety in gestural paint.[2] This image is not one that recent scholars invented; this mythologized portrait was contemporaneous with the formation, consolidation, and canonization of Abstract Expressionism. In a 1952 panel debating the "problem" of Abstract Expressionism, the painter Paul Brach accused expressionists of "taking down their pants in public" and of "emptying their guts" on the canvas.[3] In subsequent sweeping generalizations, all of

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[1] Paul Goodman, *The Empire City: A Novel of New York City* (Santa Rosa, Cal.: Black Sparrow Press, 2001), 553.

[2] This image has been perpetuated via Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock taken in 1950. For a particularly excellent example, see T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in the History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 348, fig. 210. Because of the exorbitant price for reproducing images in a dissertation, I have chosen to indicate in footnotes where particular images may be found in books or online.

[3] Note dated March 28, 1952, William Chapin Seitz papers, 1934-1995, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This comment was part of the panel discussion,

Abstract Expressionism, not just its expressionist branch, came to signify the emotional catharsis of an individual predicated on psychoanalytic and Sartrean notions of the self.

I want to propose a different image of the Abstract Expressionist painter, one in which an individual—feeling lost and alienated—finds similarly lost and alienated individuals, who speak the same language, and bonds together with them as maybe a small village would, to use Paul Goodman's metaphor; one in which the Abstract Expressionist visits other artists in their studios, takes walks around the downtown neighborhood, shares conversation over a slowly sipped cup of coffee or a meal; one in which the artist stops in at The Club—that loft at 39 East Eighth Street—to see who is around and to attend a Friday night lecture.[4] This Abstract Expressionist is closer to the historical reality than the one that has come to dominate the narrative we perpetuate about Abstract Expressionism. The story we tell ourselves about Abstract Expressionism tends toward the biographical; that is, it focuses on singular individuals, and so overlooks the sociopolitical setting of these artists who coalesced as a group in the first years of the Cold War. Even those scholars who attend to the sociopolitical context, such as Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja, continue to inscribe the split between the individual artist and the collective group of artists. Abstract Expressionist notions of individuality are made to stand in direct opposition to group formation and collectivist politics held by the artists during the 1930s. Here, the narrative asserts that the artists turned away from their more overt prewar political leanings in order to embrace pure

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"The Purist Idea (Abstract Expressionism VI)," moderated by Harry Holtzman, and included James Fitzsimmons, Paul Brach, Ad Reinhardt, and John Ferren.

[4] See the photo taken by James Burke for *Life* in 1956 at Milton Resnick's studio ("Elaine de Kooning; Milton Resnick; Ludwig Sander; Angelo Ippolito," *Life*, http://www.life.com/image/50411680).

interiority, eschewing politics and group formation altogether.[5] Individuality and collectivity become irreconcilable.

This ideological rupture between the individual and the collective fundamentally shapes the current understanding of Abstract Expressionism, but it fails to recognize how the New York artists in fact lived and worked in their downtown community. It fails to take seriously the fact that while the artists did work alone in their studios, there were also continuous and countless studio visits, nightly walks around the neighborhood, elbow rubbing in Washington Square Park, dinners at the Waldorf Cafeteria, and drinking at the Cedar Tavern. The artists may have been isolated from mainstream society and the work-a-day world, but the downtown community was not constituted of anti-social shut-ins. To be fair, on some level we do recognize this social milieu—we call it the "New York School." Sometimes it is used synonymously with Abstract Expressionism, but often its scope goes beyond the Abstract Expressionists to include so-called "second" and even "third" generations of artists.[6] There is no argument that artists such as John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers occupied the same geography and belonged to the same art world as the Abstract Expressionists, but they are not considered within its context; or rather, their

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[5] This narrative is articulated most thoroughly in Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and can also be seen in Caroline A. Jones, *The Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Michael Leja's narrative differs from Guilbaut's in important ways, but it still enacts the idea that notions of individuality were incompatible with group formation (Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)).

[6] Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), ix.

presence in the same social setting is not brought to bear on the formation, and more importantly, the formulation of Abstract Expressionism. Certainly, one could find Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Harold Rosenberg at The Club on any given Friday night, but one would just as likely find Cage and Reinhardt. Abstract Expressionism has come to represent a discursive and stylistic aspect of the New York School, but the formation of this community and its implications for how we understand Abstract Expressionism has not been adequately addressed.

While it began as a place to socialize outside of the studio, The Club quickly morphed into the place where diverse artists and intellectuals discussed and debated the foundations of the emerging Abstract Expressionism. The insistence on the individuality of the artists, by both the artists themselves and subsequent scholars, has overshadowed the key role The Club played in the formation of Abstract Expressionism. While monographic and survey studies regularly cite it as a place where artists met and discussed art, the relationship between the collective nature of The Club and the individual artists has not been considered.

This dissertation attempts to rectify this oversight in the scholarly literature by understanding The Club as a lived experience during a time when social critique was constrained by an increasingly conservative government and society. This small community of artists, musicians, poets, and intellectuals continued the ethical-political discourse of the Left in discussions that ranged over philosophy, psychology, metaphysics, and political commitment. Importantly, this discourse registered a new political key that was neither Communist nor Capitalist but tended toward anarchism. Abstract Expressionist notions of freedom and individuality have been mapped onto

Cold War ideological rhetoric, and while there is no doubt that these two frames coincided, the Abstract Expressionists far exceeded that rhetoric. It is my goal to recover the historical political possibilities of these years when the Left underwent a complete reorganization under conservative repression and totalitarianism, and in so doing, I want to argue that the Abstract Expressionists' intellectual and aesthetic project was a crucial part of that reformulation.

While the literature concerning Abstract Expressionism is vast—Ellen Landau's recent *selected* bibliography, dating from 1930 to 2004, fills over forty printed pages—the literature devoted to The Club is minimal.[7] Besides accounts given by artists, only two writers have considered The Club at any length: Irving Sandler and Dore Ashton.[8] Each offers eye-witness accounts that are necessary for any history, and while biases are apparent in each, their non-artist status provides a certain degree of objectivity that is lacking from the artists' reminiscences; however, their insider art-world status has made them seem less objective to more recent scholars.

Sandler has written the most about The Club and the downtown artists' community in the 1950s, beginning with a 1965 article in *Artforum* and most recently in

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[7] Ellen Landau, ed., *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 665-706.

[8] There are two other dissertations that consider The Club and the social parameters of Abstract Expressionism, but neither takes The Club as its sole subject. Sarah Johnson, "Zen and Artists of the Eighth Street Club: Ibram Lassaw and Hasegawa Saburo" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2005); Celia S. Stahr, "The Social Relations of 'Abstract Expressionism': An Alternative History (Milton Resnick, Hedda Sterne, Esteban Vicente, Elaine de Kooning)" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Iowa, 1997).

his 2003 memoir.[9] Though he cannot speak personally of the earliest years, he began keeping sporadic records in 1952 and accumulated other documents over the years that are indispensable to a reconstruction of a detailed history of The Club.[10] The biographical and anecdotal nature of Sandler's writings on The Club, however, prevent them from coalescing into the analysis of the historical import of The Club in the postwar era that I intend.

Dore Ashton devoted an entire chapter to the Eighth Street Club in her cultural history of Abstract Expressionism in 1972.[11] She highlighted the heterogeneous nature of The Club and the perennial yet contentious issue of community that inspired and riled many of the artists. She relied on the most salient aspects of the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950) and The Western Round Table of Modern Art (1949), held at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, for her discussion.[12] While these two

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[9] Irving Sandler, "The Club," *Artforum* 4 (September 1965): 27-31; *The New York School*, 29-45; *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 214-216; *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 26-42.

[10] Irving Harry Sandler papers, circa 1944-2007 bulk 1944-1980, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Irving Sandler papers, 1914-2001 bulk 1950-2000, The Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession no. 2000.M.43.

[11] Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 193-208.

[12] Portions of both discussions were published in *Modern Artists in America*, edited by Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, and Bernard Karpel (New York: Wittenborn, Schulz, 1951). A reprint of the Artists' Sessions recently appeared, but the text is flawed (*The Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)*, edited by Julia Klein (Chicago: Soberscove Press, 2009)). An unedited transcript of the first two days can be found in the George Wittenborn, Inc. Papers, I.C.27. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, and an unedited transcript of the Western Round Table can be found at "The Western Round Table on Modern Art," UbuWeb, http://www.ubu.com/historical/wrtma/index.html.

meetings crystallized some of the most important issues facing artists in 1949-1950 and while there were overlaps between participants and Club members, neither of these discussions were organized by, or held at, The Club.

William Seitz did not write about The Club specifically, but his scholarship deserves attention in this context. Seitz mined discussions held at The Club to write an analysis of Abstract Expressionism. As a graduate student at Princeton University, Seitz frequented The Club beginning in 1952 and took copious notes that became the basis for his 1955 dissertation. The notes that exist in his papers at the Archives of American Art are collaged under such headings as process, structure, and equilibrium. This method allowed Seitz to thematically chart the issues that concerned the Abstract Expressionists, exploring how six individual artists approached each theme.[13] In a mark of impeccable scholarly habit, Seitz typed his original hand-written notes and, before placing them under various headings, stamped each fragment with the date it was spoken at The Club. When uncollaged, the fragments provide indispensable transcripts for several evenings of discussion at The Club.[14] While Seitz did not consider The Club as an entity in his study, his use of the discussions as source material make his study one

[13] Seitz papers, Archives of American Art. Seitz's 1955 dissertation was posthumously published as William Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). The six artists that Seitz singled out were Mark Tobey, Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell. Other painters are mentioned in passing, but these six are his main focus.

[14] While at the Archives of American Art, I transcribed these fragments and put them in date order. It is difficult to say if they are complete, and it is impossible to put the remarks in the original order in which they were spoken. Despite these facts, they are the most important surviving documents of The Club's history.

of the most valuable documents on Abstract Expressionism, despite the fact that it is invariably overlooked in the literature.[15]

The Club is conspicuously absent from two of the most important and influential studies on Abstract Expressionism in the last twenty-seven years—Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* and Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*. Guilbaut speaks of it only in relation to the 1951 Ninth Street Show, which he declares "the victory of the 'Club,'" and Leja mentions it as a testimonial to the artists' "largely tactical willingness to organize," consigning it to a "professional and social organization," along with Studio 35.[16] Both authors end their inquiries around 1950-51, declaring this point the apotheosis of Abstract Expressionism, but it is precisely at this moment when some of the most consequential ideas about Abstract Expressionism were formulated in discussions at The Club.

Because meetings at The Club were regular occurrences, and not seen as significant, historical events and because of the oral nature of the proceedings, the archival record is thin, considering that the artists met every week for years on end. Additionally, Philip Pavia, the recognized organizer of The Club, was adamant that no

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[15] While copies of the 1955 dissertation circulated, its late publication, 1983, was not fortuitous, coming at the same time as Serge Guilbaut's revisionist account of the movement. I found only one review of Seitz's book, which compares it to previous studies by Sandler and Ashton (Lynne Cooke, "[Review]: *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*," *Burlington Magazine* 126 (August 1984): 509-510). The coincidence of publication timing, as far as I know, has gone unnoticed, but most subsequent scholarship took up Guilbaut's arguments and Seitz's study was largely forgotten.

[16] Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 179; Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 46.

one take pictures or mechanically record the meetings.[17] Despite these qualifications regarding the scantness of the historical record, more documentation survived than has been previously assumed. The contents of the Seitz papers at the Archives of American Art, the Sandler papers at both the Getty Research Institute and the Archives of American Art, the Pavia papers at Emory University, along with published and unpublished sources by the various speakers at The Club provide ample information to piece together a much fuller picture of The Club than the one currently in circulation.[18]

Given the documentation that does exist, it is clear that it is necessary to reevaluate not only the intellectual sources of Abstract Expressionism but also the categorization of postwar artists. While much has been written about the intellectual roots of Abstract Expressionism, much has been left out; discussions of vitalism, Martin Heidegger, Gestalt therapy, and Zen were prominent and must be considered along side the artists' chronicled interests in Jungian thought, mythology, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. Furthermore, John Cage and Ad Reinhardt emerge as two of the most active participants at The Club. While part of the "New York School," they are not stylistically considered part of Abstract Expressionism and, in fact, are often characterized as hostile towards it. Their presence at and involvement with the formation and articulation of Abstract Expressionism, however, must be recognized and analyzed, for it sheds new light on the foundational concerns of Abstract Expressionism.

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[17] Oral history interview with Fred McDarrah, conducted by Paul Cummings, June 15-July 15, 1971, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In a recent book on Milton Resnick, Geoffrey Dorfman suggested that one of The Club members, Emmanuel Navaretta, recorded all of the lectures beginning in 1949, but the tapes were destroyed in a fire (Geoffrey Dorfman, *Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2002), 11).

[18] Philip Pavia papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Based on these archival findings and the imperatives they carry, this dissertation rectifies the oversights and dismissals of previous scholarship and proposes a profoundly new reading of Abstract Expressionism by making The Club central to understanding not only the dynamics of the group but also central to the intellectual foundations, the social aesthetics, and the politics of Abstract Expressionism. In order to better understand the formation of The Club, chapter 1 examines how artists and critics navigated the individual's place within the collective during the 1930s and the 1950s, when these terms were freighted with ideological meaning. Because of the ideological rhetoric mapped onto these ideas, it is crucial to excavate how the Abstract Expressionists saw the individual within the collective, the society, the group. I propose that The Club can be seen as an example of anarchist community, inspired by Peter Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid, precisely at the sociopolitical moment at the beginning of the Cold War when such a community was largely unfathomable.

The second chapter considers several topics most commonly discussed at The Club—vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Gestalt therapy, and Zen—in order to contextualize one of the earliest attempts to formulate what this group was about, Harold Rosenberg's essay, "The American Action Painters." Drawn largely from various archival sources and rereadings of key period texts, my analysis radically remaps the accepted intellectual terrain of Abstract Expressionism. The thread that links each of these topics is a conception of the individual as fundamentally connected to others and to the world, upsetting the prevailing rubric of heroic individuality. This analysis also reveals that the manner in which the artists conducted themselves during these intellectual explorations instantiated the organic, anarchist community that was implied

in many of the topics, defying the Cold War polarity of Capitalist individuality and totalitarian collectivity. In its earliest years, the organization and spirit of The Club worked symbiotically with its intellectual forays.

Chapter 3 mobilizes this discursive frame in relation to the art works made by the artists. I disrupt the usual emphasis on the artists' interiority in order to suggest a more socially centered aesthetic. Reevaluating the reliance on signature styles and the bifurcation of gestural and colorfield painting, I examine the artists' insistence on the materiality and spontaneity of the artistic process along with their formal strategies, such as abstraction, all-over composition, and scale, to suggest deep affinities between Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko. This new discursive frame uncovers why scholars continuously group these artists together despite their ambivalence in doing so.

The concluding chapter proposes that with this new understanding, Abstract Expressionism becomes the ground for the new politics and sensibility of the 1960s, not its contrary. An analysis of Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* and a close reading of a 1966 interview with John Cage conducted by Irving Sandler expose the radicality of Abstract Expressionism and its connection to the reemergence of Leftist politics in the 1960s. In the end, this dissertation attempts to move the discussion away from the usual biographical/psychoanalytic understanding of the heroic Abstract Expressionist by offering a historical account of the artist's place within the sociopolitical moment of the postwar years.

The Social Foundations of The Club

The sculptor Philip Pavia was the primary organizer of The Club, and without him, it probably would neither have existed nor thrived. Beginning sometime in the mid- to late-1960s, Pavia began thinking about writing a history of The Club; his various attempts have been recently published, giving historians an intimate look into the downtown art community in the 1940s and early 1950s.[19] As with any first-hand account, there are biases, misrememberings, and omissions; additionally, as the years went by, Pavia's comments about The Club and the downtown art community became more dogmatic.[20] In my estimation, the shift in Pavia's tone can be attributed to the lack of scholarly attention paid to The Club and its artists as well as the Subjects of the Artist School/Studio 35 overshadowing The Club's position within Abstract Expressionism's narrative.

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[19] Philip Pavia, *Club without Walls: Selections from the Journals of Philip Pavia*, edited by Natalie Edgar (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2007). The selections were culled from Pavia's copious notes. His papers consist of numerous attempts and thousands of notes written on small sheets of papers, nothing so organized as "journals" would suggest. At the time when I visited the papers, they had not been systematically catalogued, so I am unable to provide more specific locations for the notes that I reference.

[20] Compare Pavia's statements in Oral history interview with Philip Pavia, conducted by Bruce Hooton, January 19, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and the dialogue between Pavia, Dan Rice, and Ray Spillinger in Stephen C. Foster, "Franz Kline and the Downtown Community: The Artists' Voice," in *Franz Kline: Art and Structure of Identity*, edited by Stephen C. Foster (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1994), 41-54.

While recognizing Pavia's biases, his greatest contribution to the discussion of The Club is his grounding of its history in the social milieu of the downtown art world. During the war, even before The Club existed, artists began congregating at the Waldorf Cafeteria at Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue. "The lineup at the cafeteria each night gained momentum. It wasn't long before it gained real cohesion. There were between some of us long and deep friendships, others were casual ones, and always unexpected brand-new faces would appear. During this formative period, there would be a cycle of dark moods and light tones in the succession of evenings. But shyness and politeness cushioned and absorbed all edges, soft or hard."[21] Repeatedly in his notes, Pavia attempted to situate The Club within the history of American intellectual salons led by the likes of Thomas Jefferson and William James.[22] Similarly, when Harold Rosenberg was asked about the downtown art community, he likened it to the 1920s when writers, with whom he associated, began coalescing into a small community.[23] One could also point to the salons held by Walter and Louise Arensberg and Mabel Dodge in New York City before World War I as precedents for The Club, except that The Club did not have a single patron. By putting The Club in such a lineage, The Club becomes more than a "tactical" or "professional" grouping of artists. It provided social,

[21] Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 4.

[22] William James' pragmatism and his ideas of stream of consciousness is a recurring theme in many of Pavia's notes. Pavia also jotted down, without elaborating, that he wanted to write an article comparing Thomas Jefferson and the Eighth Street Club (Undated note, Pavia papers, Emory University).

[23] John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York's Artists, Writers, Musicians, and their Friends* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 175.

intellectual, aesthetic, and, even if unspoken, political outlets when such channels were mostly nonexistent.

In addition to the countless evenings spent in the Waldorf Cafeteria listening to Landes Lewitin and Aristodemos Kaldis, both known for their polemical oratory, expound on art, philosophy, and aesthetics, artists spent much time walking around the neighborhood. Pavia recounted these regular evening perambulations: "First we would walk east on Eighth Street passing the Hofmann School. On the corner of Eighth and Macdougal was the Jumble Shop restaurant…. Or taking a left on Fifth Avenue to Fourteenth Street, then right on University Place and back to the park and Washington Square Arch, and across to Sullivan and Macdougal Streets, and another block further down on Macdougal Street we would go to the San Remo restaurant."[24] And then, they would inevitably return to the Waldorf. Along the way, they might see John Graham, Meyer Schapiro, Le Corbusier, André Breton, Ossip Zadkine, or Edgard Varèse. Pavia's description of this "Gulf Stream," as he termed it, gives a concrete picture of how the artists lived, worked, and moved in their downtown space, and it establishes more concrete parameters for looking at what the downtown artists were exposed to and experienced on a daily basis. This network of artists, places, streets, European émigrés, intellectuals, bars, and restaurants is the fabric of Abstract Expressionism. The physical proximity, the talking and walking, and the hanging out formed the foundation of The Club.

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[24] Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 29.

Inevitably there is some confusion surrounding the relationship between The Club and another important institution in the annals of Abstract Expressionism—the Subjects of the Artist School. The two were separate entities, and The Club was not an outgrowth of Subjects of the Artist. First and foremost, Subjects of the Artist was a school. Ibram Lassaw recalled, "For me it wasn't a place to congregate or to talk, but it was a place for formal discussions, for panels. And they had some very interesting talks."[25] While fairly informal and nonhierarchical, the absence of a more social facet made it a very different entity from The Club, but because of its proximity to The Club—both in location and timing—and its Friday night public lecture series, the Subjects of the Artist School played an important role in the formation of the intellectual foundation of Abstract Expressionism.

William Baziotes, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, David Hare, and later Barnett Newman founded the "small cooperative school" at 35 East Eighth Street in the late fall of 1948.[26] Many of the Friday night speakers held Surrealist inclinations; gallerist Julian Levy and author Marcel Raymond spoke, and Joseph Cornell showed his own films along with ones he had collected. But Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, and Fritz Glarner also spoke, rounding out the curriculum with their non-surrealist perspectives.[27] Sandler recalled that "the early speakers were invited by Motherwell. After four

[25] Oral history interview with Ibram Lassaw, conducted by Irving Sandler, August 26, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[26] *Modern Artists in America*, 9. Clyfford Still was also an early instigator, but he pulled his support and went back to California before the school began.

[27] Pavia clearly felt that the main difference between The Club and the Subjects of the Artist School was the school's insistence on a surrealist perspective, which the "downtown" group could not abide (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 45-49).

sessions, he asked Newman to take over, and Newman arranged the remaining programs, occasionally in collaboration with Motherwell and with the assistance of Robert Goodnough. For their efforts, speakers received a bottle of whiskey, dinner with Motherwell and Newman, and the gate, minus the cost of the chair rental."[28] Despite the popularity of these evenings, the school was a financial failure and closed in May 1949.[29]

In the following fall of 1949, Robert Iglehart, Tony Smith, and Hale Woodruff, all teachers at nearby New York University, took over the space and continued the school and public lectures, calling it Studio 35, named after its address. Studio 35 co-existed with the Club for several months; in fact, John Cage remembered that when they wanted to show Herbert Matter's film, "The Works of Calder," in February 1950 at The Club, they had to move next door to Studio 35, because the loft did not have the proper electrical wiring to accommodate the film projector.[30] Pavia referred to the artists involved with both of these schools as the "uptown" bunch, as they did not live, for the most part, downtown and already had some exposure through Peggy Guggenheim's and Betty Parsons' galleries. Later, Pavia meant the uptown moniker

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[28] Sandler, *A Sweeper-up After Artists*, 26. Annalee Newman kept records of expenses, how much money was brought in, and how much speakers were given at the end of the evening (Notes at the Barnett Newman Foundation, New York).

[29] *Modern Artists in America*, 9. Sandler recently wrote that the school closed after one semester (Sandler, *A Sweeper-up After Artists*, 26). Based on the dates of talks and other artists' memories, May 1949 is the correct closing date.

[30] John Cage, interview by Irving Sandler, [1966], John Cage Papers, Collection #1000-72, Special Collections & Archives, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, USA. The date is not indicated on the transcript, but the reference Cage makes to the "present exhibition" of Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* dates the interview to 1966.

pejoratively in order to judge the various contributions made by postwar artists to Abstract Expressionism. While Pavia exaggerated the divide between uptown and downtown artists, even going so far as to accuse the uptown group of trying to steal de Kooning for their own, the general consensus was that when it came to talking about art, uptown and downtown allegiances mattered little; everyone went to any art-related talk they could.[31] While the schools began the important dialogue for setting the intellectual foundation of Abstract Expressionism, they did not address the social needs of the artists. Many artists realized that a more friendly environment than the Waldorf Cafeteria and a more social one than the schools was needed for their increasingly frequent and larger discussions.

At this point, the founding date and membership of The Club need to be addressed, as these two facts have been widely disputed and have caused much consternation among those involved. In the late 1960s, Pavia suggested that there had been interest among the downtown artists in taking over the Subjects of the Artist space for The Club room, but the teachers at New York University were quicker to take it over.[32] Sometime in 1949, however, Pavia and others secured the loft at 39 East Eighth Street.[33] It should be noted that the 1949 date is not definitive, but it seems the

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[31] Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 45-47 and 55-56. Dore Ashton confirmed that the uptown/downtown divide did not matter when it came to talks (Dore Ashton, interview by author, February 2009).

[32] Gruen, *The Party's Over*, 268-269. This is the only time that Pavia articulated such a direct connection between The Club and Subjects of the Artist. Mysteriously, however, he says that they found their room on Fourteenth Street instead. The Club did not move to Fourteenth Street until October 14, 1955.

[33] Pavia said he found the loft in the summer of 1948 (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 53), but Lewin Alcopley remembers Kline finding it in the summer of 1949 (L. Alcopley, "The

most likely.[34] Whenever the exact date, the first meeting was held at Ernestine and Ibram Lassaw's loft on Sixth Avenue at Twelfth Street, before the loft at 39 East Eighth Street was rented. Ibram recalled the meeting in a 1968 interview, "I mean we didn't feel that we were making history particularly or anything. It was just some place for us to get together. We had a big table and we sat around. That was before we actually got this first loft on Eighth Street. About eighteen or nineteen of us got together, sat around and discussed how to organize the Club and so forth."[35] Ernestine remembers

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Club: The First Three Years," *Issue: A Journal for Artists*, no. 4 (1985): 45). Given other evidence, enumerated below in footnote 34, it is most likely that Alcopley's time frame is more accurate.

[34] Pavia gives the 1949 date in his earliest interviews with Emile de Antonio and John Gruen (*Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene, 1940-1970*, edited by Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 39; Gruen, *The Party's Over*, 268-69). While he did not specify a date in an earlier 1965 interview, Pavia said that The Club started six to eight months *after* Subjects of the Artist closed, making it late fall of 1949 (Pavia interview, Archives of American Art). Pavia's later insistence on 1948 may be due to his desire to position The Club historically as contemporaneous with Subjects of the Artist, which was run by the rival "uptown artists." Natalie Edgar, Pavia's widow, insists that The Club started in 1948 and gives the following rationale: "The 1948 date was recorded by Ad Reinhardt in his calendars, which are stored at the Archives of American Art. Reinhardt was careful about the accuracy and was a charter member of the Club…. Thomas B. Hess, a leading authority on the period and eyewitness, also cites 1948 as the date in the foreword to Pavia's first solo show at the Samuel Kootz Gallery. Most important, Philip Pavia knew very well when he started the Club and noted it as 1948" (Pavia, *Club without Walls,* 53-54). While Reinhardt did seem to keep meticulous calendars, there is at least one discrepancy in them relating to the date of when he delivered his lecture "Detachment and Involvement." Hess does give 1948 as the beginning date of The Club, but he also *incorrectly* gives 1956 as the year Pavia stepped down from organizing speakers and panels; Pavia stepped down in 1955 (Thomas Hess, *Philip Pavia* (New York: Kootz Gallery, 1961)). And then there are Pavia's own contradictory statements enumerated above. I point out these disparities not because they are definitive proof that The Club did not begin in 1948, but to suggest that there is no definitive documentation to show when The Club began.

[35] Lassaw interview, 1968, Archives of American Art.

that the meeting was rather pedestrian and that the, now lost, notes she took were not in the least enlightening.[36] She recalls that there was discussion about what to name The Club; no agreement could be made, and it was decided to use the most generic name—The Club.

Just as the exact date cannot be corroborated definitively, the original membership is also shrouded in mystery. A phone list in the Ludwig Sander papers at the Archives of American Art may have been used to determine the charter members.[37] Based on the addresses given, the list can be dated to between July 1949 and January 1950, corroborating a fall 1949 beginning for The Club. Already by 1955, however, there was uncertainty about the original charter members, and a committee at The Club was established to ascertain the facts.[38] Comparing names between Sandler, Pavia, and Sander, there are a few minor discrepancies, the most telling of which is the possibility that Leo Castelli was a charter member.[39] Sander recalled that Pavia began denying

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[36] Ernestine Lassaw, interview by author, May 9, 2009.

[37] Ludwig Sander papers, 1910-1975, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Sander said he had a phone list that they used to make up the charter members (Oral history interview with Ludwig Sander, 1969 February 4-12, Archives of American Art). My dating is based on listed addresses in the Manhattan phone directories between 1946 and 1951 as well as other biographical sources. For an image and transcription of the list, see Liza Kirwin, *Lists: To-dos, Illustrated Inventories, Collected Thoughts and Other Artists' Enumerations from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 84-85, 186.

[38] Sandler, *A Sweeper-up After Artists*, 30.

[39] Pavia maintained that the nineteen charter members were all from the cafeteria days, although he does not give the names (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 55). In his 1970 book, *The Triumph of American Painting*, Sandler lists the nineteen charter members: Lewin Alcopley, George Cavallon, Charles Egan, Gus Falk, Peter Grippe, Franz Kline, Bill de Kooning, Ibram Lassaw, Landes Lewitin, Conrad Marca-Relli, E. A. Navaretta, Philip Pavia, Milton Resnick, Ad Reinhardt, Jan Roelants, James Rosati, Ludwig Sander, Joop

Castelli was a charter member shortly after the first Adlai Stevenson presidential bid in 1952, because Castelli was somehow involved with organizing the artists to help with the campaign.[40] Whatever Castelli's position, he was an early participant and gave considerable sums of money at times to keep The Club solvent.[41] While reconciling discrepancies and determining the exact date of its founding and the original members involved gives a sense of historical definitiveness, it does not provide a deeper understanding of The Club's import. In fact, these indeterminacies live at the heart of The Club. Ernestine Lassaw remembered, "It was not orderly. Nothing was orderly. I mean it wasn't like a real club where you have members, and they're strict about everything. It was slapdash. Artists didn't go in for that."[42] There was an attempt in later years to keep track of members and dues in a systematic way, but the earliest years—1949 to 1951—were more fluid.

The Club is often characterized as a bastion of Abstract Expressionism, but upon closer analysis, it does not resemble any typical image of Abstract Expressionism

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Sanders, and Jack Tworkov (223, n. 8). In his 2003 memoir, Alcopley, Falk, Navaretta, and Roelants are no longer on the list (Sandler, *A Sweeper-up After Artists*, 28). A 1952 list with charter members, published in *Club without Walls*, is identical to Sandler's 1970 list with the addition of Ahron Ben-Schmuel. There are twenty-four names on Sander's telephone list. Those that do not show up on Sandler's 1970 list include: Aaron Siskind, Rudy Burckhardt, Janice Biala, Helena Newman, and Leo Castelli; Ben-Schmuel's name is crossed off.

[40] Sander interview, Archives of American Art.

[41] Pavia recorded that Castelli gave over eighty dollars at an early date for Club expenses (Notebook #1, The Club records kept by Philip Pavia, 1949-1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution). It is possible that Pavia was particularly sensitive about this issue as he did not want The Club to have a sole patron.

[42] Ernestine Lassaw, interview by author, May 9, 2009.

currently in circulation. Of course, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning were charter members and active participants, and in the early years, until around 1955, they drew many followers to The Club. The charter members of The Club, however, consisted mostly of artists that now do not even make the lists of *minor* Abstract Expressionists: Lewin Alcopley, Peter Grippe, Landes Lewitin, Jan Roelants, James Rosati, Ludwig Sander, and Joop Sanders. And if we move beyond the charter members, Harry Holtzman and John Ferren were particularly active members, but neither Jackson Pollock nor Mark Rothko were members.[43] The Club's favorite philosopher and most regular speaker in the early years was the German philosopher Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt's husband. Today, William Barrett and Lionel Abel are the two "New York Intellectuals" most often associated with the downtown artists, but just as popular was social critic, psychologist, and anarchist Paul Goodman, who was good friends with Harold Rosenberg. And John Cage—always cast as the perennial antagonist to Abstract Expressionism—was an honorary member of The Club because he could never afford to pay dues, and he spoke almost as often as Blücher.[44]

It is sometimes noted that women, communists, and homosexuals were not permitted at The Club. And while it is true that women were not allowed to be official members until several years later (Elaine de Kooning was not voted in as an official member until 1952), Mercedes Matter contributed dues in the Fall of 1949, and both she and Elaine were very active participants in many of the discussions from the very

[43] Rosenberg quipped that Pollock "didn't like to be doing stuff with coffee" (Gruen, *The Party's Over*, 177).

[44] For Cage's member status at The Club, see Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

beginning.[45] Ernestine Lassaw, while recognizing the restriction of women, scoffed at the idea that homosexuals and Communists were not allowed at The Club.[46] Both John Cage's and Paul Goodman's active participation from the very beginning suggest that The Club did not actively exclude gay or bisexual men; also Reinhardt's involvement and his continued support of the Communist Party long after most had abandoned it indicates that Communist sympathies did not bar one from The Club. The supposed stricture on Communism had less to do with specific political allegiances and more to do with not wanting to attract attention to themselves in the time of McCarthyist witch hunting, an important point to be discussed in the following chapter.[47]

In 1943, Herbert Read wrote in *The Politics of the Unpolitical*, "[T]o be unpolitical does not mean to be without politics: every attitude that is more than egoistic is to that extent social, and a social attitude is a political attitude. But it is one thing to have politics, and another thing to pursue them."[48] One of the main goals of this dissertation is to counteract the impression that the Abstract Expressionists traded their politics for egotistic interiority. By looking at The Club as a social entity and as the source of Abstract Expressionism's intellectual foundation, the radical politics of Abstract Expressionism come to the surface. The membership of The Club would not have used

[45] For Mercedes Matter's contribution, see Notebook #1, The Club records, Archives of American Art. Elaine de Kooning's election is recorded on a notecard in the Sandler papers, Archives of American Art.

[46] Ernestine Lassaw, interview by author, May 9, 2009. Ernestine said the only reason she was at the first meeting was because it was in her loft. Sandler has written that Elaine and Mercedes were present at the first meeting, but Ernestine's memory contradicts this (Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 28).

[47] Natalie Edgar, interview by author, June 30, 2009.

[48] Herbert Read, *Politics of the Unpolitical* (New York: Routledge, 1943), 11.

the word "anarchistic" to describe its organization. Anarchism was a charged word at a time when any critique of the government could lead to allegations of being un-American. The evidence suggests, however, that anarchistic was precisely what The Club was. Cage described anarchy in a way that could have described The Club just as well, "Anarchy (no laws or conventions) in a place that works. Society's individualized."[49] Cage, following Henry David Thoreau and Peter Kropotkin, vocalized the fundamental aspect of anarchism: autonomous individuals forming an organic, working community based on cooperation. The instantiation of this anarchist formulation of community is what makes The Club crucial for understanding the political and social foundations of Abstract Expressionism, even if it went unspoken by the artists.

The oral nature of The Club has been the biggest hurdle in studying it, since historians tend to value the surviving textual sources. While much of what follows is based on found textual records, this reconstruction depends on imagining conversations. What happened when Harold Rosenberg, Paul Goodman, John Cage, and Ad Reinhardt were in a room together? What did they say to each other? What did they agree or disagree about? It is through conversations at The Club, in the studios, at the Cedar, that ideas like "Action Painting" germinated. These ideas were not born from a void; they did not mature in a vacuum. They were talked about, debated, fleshed out, and only sometimes were they written down. More often they

[49] John Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)," in *A Year From Monday* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 161.

were painted down. But it is the conversations and its day-to-day concerns that make The Club a substantial and important entity for understanding Abstract Expressionism.

Chapter 1: "Society's Individualized": Reimagining the Individual and the Collective

Strikingly, in the early years of The Club, that is from 1949 to 1955, artists and intellectuals came every week—sometimes two or three or even five times a week.[1] Maybe they missed some evenings or some weeks, but their continued presence is a material, even if banal, fact that often goes unmentioned. What does not go unmentioned, however, are the artists' vociferous disavowals of belonging to a group and their insistence on individuality. The historical formation of Abstract Expressionism and the subsequent scholarship revolve around the seeming contradiction between the artists' actions and their pronouncements. Throughout the artists' formative years, from the 1930s into the 1950s, individuality and collectivity were made to do ideological battle. The polarizing politics of the 1930s Left upheld collectivism against selfish, Capitalist individualism. This polarity intensified and became much more complicated during the Cold War when the individual was made to be the antidote for Soviet collectivism and mass conformity while at the same time consensus was urged. These terms—the individual and the collective—have been mapped onto ideological Cold War rhetoric in such a way that we forget that they were still capable of different meanings at the time.

The purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the artists' and intellectuals' articulations of these various possible meanings. In order to examine the historical

[1] Ibram Lassaw said several years later, "It was something you did one day a week whereas in the very early months several times a week we got together" (Lassaw interview, 1968, Archives of American Art).

possibilities, it is necessary to consider how the historical record has been cast by subsequent scholarship, particularly by Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja, who have most thoroughly addressed Abstract Expressionism's formation in its sociopolitical moment. I want to recast the field of political engagement, however, in order to show that the formation of The Club, really the formulation of Abstract Expressionism, was bound up with the reorganization of the Left in the face of Stalin's totalitarianism.

Serge Guilbaut has chronicled the de-Marxification of the Left that happened just before and during the Second World War as it pertained to the art world, and while there have been critiques of Guilbaut's assessment, its basic outlines remain a dominant voice in the literature.[2] The thrust of Guilbaut's narrative that has been taken up by subsequent scholarship is that during the 1930s the artists positioned themselves in relation to the masses and were concerned with the social import of their art; after the war, the artists instead were concerned more with individuality and art's relation to the self. This turn amounted to a depoliticization of the avant-garde. This idea of depoliticization has become commonplace, and in its most extreme form, Abstract Expressionism is made into an emblem of capitalist patriarchy. In fact, though, Guilbaut is not so determinative. While he argues that Abstract Expressionist painting was "borrowed for the anti-Communist cause," because of its ambiguity, that is, its non-

[2] Nancy Jachec and David Craven offer direct critiques, and most recently Irving Sandler admonished the endurance of Guilbaut's thesis in a 2008 article. Caroline Jones takes Guilbaut's assessment of the artists' "depoliticization" as a starting point for her study on postwar American Art. (Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Irving Sandler, "Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War: Did New York Really Steal the Idea of Modern Art?," *Art in America* 96 (June-July 2008): 65-68+; Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 22.)

representational nature, he does not always ascribe the same intentionality of the borrowers to the artists.[3] Guilbaut is hesitant to ascribe complete apoliticism to the artist. He writes, "The avant-garde retained traces of political consciousness, but devoid of direction."[4] Guilbaut's assessment of the artists' "depoliticization" is predicated on the notion that after the war there was no longer an *organized structure* for radical political action. The revelations of Stalin's brutal deeds before and during the war led many artists and intellectuals to sever ties with the Communist party and Marxist ideology. For Guilbaut, there were only three viable options at the moment: the Communist Left, the conservative Right, and the new liberalism of the center. Guilbaut is correct that after this collapse of confidence there was no longer a *dominant* organized structure for radical political action on the Left, but this lack of structure, contrary to what Guilbaut argues, did not turn the artists away from social concerns. Instead, it provided fertile ground for the artists to consider the social in terms other than Marxist ones. Guilbaut misreads the possibilities for political engagement. This shift, then, was not the complete collapse of all political awareness. In fact, it is in this moment that the Left began its reorganization that came to the fore in the 1960s. Part of the goal of this dissertation is to recover what it meant to be political outside of accepted parties and organizations at this moment in history and to show that The Club was, in fact, a laboratory for articulations of a renewed relationship between the individual and the social in which the one did not mean the negation of the other.

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[3] Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 202. Leja discusses the two explanations between which Guilbaut vacillates (Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 20-21; 47-48).

[4] Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 113.

In order to move beyond the ideological dichotomies—the one that favors the collective as radically political and the individual as conservatively apolitical and the one that reads individuality as the triumph over conformist collectivity—the familiar narrative needs to be remotivated. In the face of a Marxist politics that revealed itself to be another means to human objectification, the radical Left began searching for a new vocabulary, a new world view, that understood that reality was not the individual at the expense of the collective, nor vice versa.

In 1936, the issue of the individual artist's relation to the social was a predominant theme at the meetings of the American Artists' Congress. The Congress was held in order to rally support for the Popular Front, the Communist Party's attempt to form a unified position against Fascism and the coming war by aligning with liberal and less radical groups. Both modernist painter Stuart Davis, the president of the Artists' Congress, and art historian Meyer Schapiro articulated the difficult matter facing artists. Davis argued that artists could no longer remain isolated in their studios, consumed with formal problems, detached from events happening outside.[5] Davis was not calling for social realism or propaganda in order to oppose fascism, since more often than not such tactics played into fascistic hands; instead, Davis called for the free functioning of artists and the building of a broader audience. Despite the plea for artistic freedom, there was no toleration for an artist merely occupied with the formal process of painting; art needed to be socially relevant. In his critique, Davis had in mind nonobjective, geometric painters, whom he saw as apolitical. Davis, however, gave no

[5] Stuart Davis, "Why an Artists' Congress?," in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 65.

indication of what this free, social art would look like or how it would express its social relevance. Davis lamented the wide gulf between the individual and society that had developed with the rise of formalist concerns, and while it is clear he wanted to overcome the split, he offered no means by which that might happen.

In his address to the Congress, Meyer Schapiro most clearly laid out the current thinking directed toward the individual's relation to the collective. In "The Social Bases for Art," Schapiro said that while the collective has been held up to be anti-individual and aligned with repressive institutions and beliefs, the reality is not so black and white; the individual, in fact, exists in and depends on socially-organized relationships, so the division of which people speak does not actually exist.[6] Furthermore, just because the artist uses handicraft and not collective, mechanical production does not mean that the artist is isolated from society or unaffected by social and economic change. This argument would become the basis for Schapiro's critique of Alfred Barr's exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* later that year and would have echoes in his 1957 article, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art." While Davis assumed the disjunction between the artist and society, Schapiro recognized that no matter what the artist did, he or she participated in, and was affected by, society.

The rest of Schapiro's argument, however, continued with a more heavy-handed Marxist analysis of the situation. He argued that the personal nature of artistic work allowed the artist not only to think of him or herself in opposition to society but also to think of the work as having only an aesthetic purpose. This perspective, however, created an illusory sense of freedom, and this "freedom" came at the expense of the

[6] Meyer Schapiro, "The Social Bases of Art," in *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 103-113.

oppression and misery of the masses because of its identification with consumption and enjoyment. This particular incarnation of the relationship between the individual and society could not deal with urgent social issues. Initially, Schapiro allowed for a more symbiotic relationship between the artist and society, but ultimately he came down against the individual as anti-collective and too egocentric.[7] Without elaborating, however, Schapiro maintained that under socialism, individuality would be redefined and would lose its exclusivity; a new individuality without capitalist connotations would emerge.[8]

During the 1930s, then, on the one hand, it was anathema for an artist to declare his or her individuality because it came at the expense of the collective, the social, but on the other hand, artists wanted freedom to paint whatever and however they wanted; they did not want to paint particular subjects, dictated by some higher authority. This freedom, following from Davis' and Schapiro's arguments, came with a caveat: one could paint whatever one wanted, but art still had to have a social content. In 1938, André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky opened the door a little wider for artistic autonomy. In "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," the authors insisted that "true" art was always revolutionary and aspired to society's reconstruction.[9] While they argued that a socialist regime was necessary for material production, in order "to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of independent liberty should from the first be

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[7] Ibid., 112-113.

[8] Ibid., 113.

[9] André Breton and Diego Rivera, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review* 5 (Fall 1938): 50. While only Breton and Rivera were credited as authors, Trotsky collaborated on the manifesto (Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 32).

established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of order from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without the constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history."[10] But again, this freedom came with a stipulation: "The artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art."[11] In other words, the social content had to be sublimated and then individually expressed. Tired of justifying themselves to the Party, to the congresses and unions, to the ivory tower, by the late 1930s, artists were receptive to this line of thinking. They wanted no justifications, no labels, no groups.

Therefore, fifteen years later, at the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 in April 1950, the sculptor David Hare declared, "I see no need for a community. An artist is always lonely. The artist is a man who functions beyond or ahead of his society…. I think this group activity, this gathering together, is a symptom of fear."[12] In a statement delivered a year later at the Museum of Modern Art, Willem de Kooning declared, "Personally, I do not need a movement."[13] And in 1955, Ad Reinhardt reminded an interviewer, "Toward the late 30s a real fear of anonymity developed and most painters were

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[10] Ibid., 51.

[11] Ibid., 52.

[12] "The Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," in *Modern Artists in America*, 10.

[13] Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 18 (Spring 1951): 7.

reluctant to join a group for fear of being labeled or submerged."[14] Being a group—with the only examples the artists knew first hand being unions and congresses—meant following a program; one's allegiance to the group, or the party, came before one's allegiance to one's art. This state of affairs is what Harold Rosenberg had in mind when he wrote about the downtown art scene in 1959, "Tenth Street is the opposite of a community. No one willed it: its coming into being took everyone by surprise. It has no history—though the neighborhood has—and…it is impossible to have a future. No "values" appertain to it; that anyone should put the interests of Tenth Street ahead of his own (imagine an artist sacrificing himself for it!) is inconceivable."[15] In other words, this was not a Communist collective held together with an ultimate value for which one would martyr him or herself. Nor was this the bohemia of the Latin Quarter or Greenwich Village as Rosenberg was at pains to point out. This downtown was a non-space, a non-environment with nothing aesthetic, romantic, or political about it, and so Rosenberg could declare that "individuals prevail over the group," showing twelve individual artists on their individual stoops.[16]

As leeriness of groups widened, both in the cultural and political spheres, the preoccupation with the individual self also grew, shaping the intellectual, political, and cultural discourses of the 1950s. K. A. Cuordileone provides an excellent overview of

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[14] Ad Reinhardt, quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 47.

[15] Harold Rosenberg, "Tenth Street: A Geography of Modern Art," *Art News Annual* 28 (1959): 188.

[16] See the photo collage in Rosenberg, "Tenth Street," 121.

what amounts to the psychologization of America in the postwar years.[17] Intellectuals discarded "old Marxian categories that failed to explain the complex and irrational dimension of human nature and political behavior" in favor of psychological accounts.[18] Studies on the psychology of totalitarian societies by Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm became the bases of interest in the psychology of mass culture and conformity in the United States.[19] David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and others articulated modern Americans' tendency toward conformity in the face of increased freedom and prosperity, and in doing so, signaled a warning call. Cuordileone gives a litany of books, novels, and films that take as their subject "the lone, pliable self [that] stands in opposition to some seductive, overwhelming force that squashes individual will and autonomy."[20] The rhetoric of the collective and the individual became ideological pawns in the postwar discourse that was unprecedented before this time, and the individual self became the key to fighting Communism, collectivism, totalitarianism, and

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[17] K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005); "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960," *The Journal of American History* 87 (September 2000): 515-545.

[18] Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 101.

[19] See also Sally Promey, "Taste Cultures: The Visual Practice of Liberal Protestantism, 1940-1965," in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, edited by Laura F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 250-293; Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, edited by Larry May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 38-57.

[20] Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 97-98.

conformism. This self, however, stood in the face of "fear, neurosis, retreat, conformity, and erosion."[21]

This problem of identity and authenticity was a continuation and intensification of what began in the late nineteenth century. Historian Jackson Lears pinpointed the emergence of what he termed the therapeutic world view at this time, "a constellation of concerns about self, energizing a continuous, anxious quest for well-being…of physical and psychic health."[22] The concerns manifested themselves in various anti-modernist guises including mind cure therapies. The post-World War II years saw its own growth of the self-help industry, and just as at the turn of the century, health was defined "in terms of spurious 'normality,' smooth adjustment, ceaseless 'growth,' and peace of mind."[23]

Following the groundwork laid by Lears, Leja's important book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* situates the artists within the continuing historical, cultural refiguration of subjectivity that took place after World War II. By employing the model of Modern Man discourse, Leja articulates the changing sense of individuality that occurred during the middle of the twentieth century. In mapping the definitions of this new subjectivity, Leja positions the relationship between individual and society within a therapeutic framework of adjustment. "Modern Man solutions meshed much more smoothly with the dominant middle-class ideology and its individualist orientation: they lent themselves

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[21] Ibid., 98.

[22] T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 304.

[23] Ibid.

to processes of correction and adjustment of prevailing structures of belief and subjectivity in ways that radical oppositional solutions did not."[24] This therapeutic world view meant people adjusted themselves to the cultural norms of society as they existed instead of actively changing or overthrowing them.[25]

Leja argues that this purely psychological understanding of the individual, however, resulted in the increased polarization "between the individual psychic and the politico-economic spheres."[26] Increasingly, during the Depression and after the war, the belief in "unidentified malevolent forces" that controlled the public sphere seemed more and more impervious to individual action; that is, individual action did not seem to change the way economics or politics worked.[27] Without elaborating, Leja suggests that if there had been a "vital and influential Surrealist movement in the United States," a Marxist and Freudian synthesis could have mitigated the deepening gulf between the spheres.[28] A viable Marxist-Freudian synthesis would not appear in the United States, however, until the latter half of the 1950s with the publication of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), but the absence of such a synthesis before that time should not preclude the recognition of other attempts to close the gap between the individual and society as they grew more and more polarized.

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[24] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 227.

[25] Eva Moskowitz also details the history of this therapeutic world view from its beginning in the nineteenth century into the 1980s (Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)).

[26] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 227.

[27] Ibid., 226.

[28] Ibid., 227.

At a time when social critique was repressed, energies were redirected into artistic projects, which could be understood as a retreat to a sort of art-for-art's sake position, but this redirection allowed the Abstract Expressionist artist to critique the prevailing notions of the individual and the collective that went beyond the ideological rhetoric and that would come to fruition in the New Left politics during the 1960s, which I will discuss further in chapter 4.

Of course, the Abstract Expressionists were not alone in their search. Figures such as Dwight Macdonald and Paul Goodman were also involved with finding alternatives to the prevailing social norms. In November 1945, Macdonald started a series of Friday night discussions that corresponded to the "New Roads in Politics" series in his magazine *politics*. Macdonald explained, "The object of the series is to criticize the dominant ideology on the left today—which is roughly Marxian—in the light of recent experience and to suggest and speculate on new approaches to the central problem: how to advance towards a society which shall be humanly satisfying."[29] Not unlike the line-up of speakers at The Club, both the lecture and the printed series included a wide spectrum of contributors: Macdonald, Will Herberg, Paul Goodman, Nicola Chiaromonte, Dan Calhoun, and several others. About 350 people attended the first Friday evening discussion, held at Stuyvesant Casino on Second Avenue on the Lower East Side, and they heard Macdonald give a short version of his future article, "The Root is Man."[30] The audience was divided largely between Marxists and anarchists,

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[29] Dwight Macdonald, [Editor's note], *politics* (December 1945): 369.

[30] Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 167-168; Dwight Macdonald, "The Root is

with the Marxists delivering harsh criticisms of Macdonald's "utopian tendencies," criticisms that continued in letters to the editor throughout 1945 and 1946 in *politics*.[31]

Lionel Abel remembered Chiaromonte's talk in 1946, "Nicola's views were rejected by almost everyone in the audience…. [Meyer Schapiro said,] 'If you follow Chiaromonte tonight you won't know what to do in a week, month or year; you won't even know what to do tomorrow morning.'" Abel's response to Schapiro's criticism cuts to a salient point that must be underscored about these years. Abel wrote, "I did not realize then that few who heard Chiaromonte that night knew what to do politically the next morning, or on the morning after that."[32] The years after the revelations of Stalin's atrocities, Nazi death camps, and the dropping of two atomic bombs left most everyone "groping toward some kind of alternative."[33] It is precisely this situation of groping and uncertainty that needs to be recognized as the immediate context for the beginnings of The Club and the artists' attempts to bridge the individual and the social in the aesthetic realm. With the recent collapse of the Marxist Left and the unfolding horrors of the war, there had not yet been enough time to have a systematic intellectual reconfiguration; they were all in the very midst of it.

Almost all of the writers who participated in the "New Roads" series attempted to find a place for the individual in their reconceptualizations of politics and society.

Man, Part One," *politics* 3 (April 1946): 97-115; "The Root is Man, Part Two," *politics* 3 (July 1946): 194-214.

[31] Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle: The Challenge of Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 168.

[32] Lionel Abel, quoted in Ibid., 168.

[33] Macdonald, [Editor's note], 369.

Will Herberg reasserted the individual using a religious framework of personalism, drawing from theologians Jacques Maritain and Nikolai Berdyaev, which held that individuals were ends-in-themselves, while social institutions and the state should be seen only as means.[34] Paul Goodman and Albert Votaw offered variants of psychology as the means to reinsert the individual into the social, and Don Calhoun reminded his readers that while revolutionaries speak of ends in the future, it must understood that human beings are always ends (not means) that exist in the present.[35] The spectrum of perspectives ranged from more conservative to radical, but each was an attempt to reimagine the individual's relation to the collective.

In 1947, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty contributed an article that, while not part of the series, fits within "New Roads." While most of the authors were operating outside of a Marxist paradigm, Merleau-Ponty went back to Marx himself in order to show that the individual was just as important as the collective in Marx's system. Merleau-Ponty wrote, "[W]hat is then for Marx the carrier of history and the driving force of the dialectic? It is man engaged in a certain mode of assimilating nature from which springs the mode of his relations to others; it is the concrete intersubjectivity, the successive and simultaneous community of lives realizing themselves in property relations to which they are subjected and which they transform, each created and creating."[36] Merleau-Ponty's perspective here is not just a matter of

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[34] Will Herberg, "Personalism Against Totalitarianism," *politics* 2 (December 1945): 372.

[35] Paul Goodman, "Revolution, Sociolatry, and War," *politics* 2 (December 1945): 376-380; Albert Votaw, "Toward a Personalist Socialist Philosophy," *politics* 3 (January 1946): 15-17; Don Calhoun, "Non-Violence and Revolution," *politics* 3 (January 1946): 17-21.

[36] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Marxism and Philosophy," *politics* 4 (July-August 1947): 174.

replacing the collective with the individual but, rather, a deep understanding of the mutuality of the two. Most of the contributors were searching for precisely this balance and mutuality, recognizing that either extreme led to unfulfillment and even atrocities.

What each of these articles confronted was the fact that individuals in collectivist societies had been turned into objects, into means, and that, similarly, serious consideration needed to be given to "man's fate in a mass-production society."[37] This concern about objectification appeared in the very first issue of *politics* in 1944 with Walter J. Oakes' article, "Toward a Permanent War Economy?" in which he predicted that national security outlays for the inevitable World War III would become a "legitimate end-purpose economic activity."[38] In the process, Oakes described how soldiers and munitions workers were classified as "employed" in order to shore up capitalism's public face, but in actuality they became instruments in the "bookkeeping scheme" so that such an economy could be socially sanctioned. Two later articles in particular stand out for their chilling depictions of the atomization of individuals: Bruno Bettleheim's personal account of life in a Nazi concentration camp, which Macdonald published in 1944, and Virgil Vogel's description of Hanford Engineering Works in Washington state where atom bombs were built by unsuspecting workers.[39] The operations of both totalitarian and capitalist regimes were exposed for their utter disregard for individual well-being and dignity. The editorial concerns of *politics* were

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[37] Votaw, "Towards a Personalist Socialist Philosophy," 16.

[38] Walter J. Oakes, "Toward a Permanent War Economy?" *politics* 1 (February 1944): 13.

[39] Bruno Bettleheim, "Behavior in Extreme Situations," *politics* 1 (August 1944): 199-208; Virgil Vogel, "Birthplace of the Bomb," *politics* 2 (September 1945): 261-262.

not so different from the realizations that some of the Abstract Expressionists were making. Jack Tworkov wrote in his journal in 1948, "One can hold opinions about the merits of communism without capitalism and democracy with capitalism—but if there was any kind of real integrity in the world you could get along with almost any kind of system. In a world ninety-nine percent savage any system continues to produce savagery."[40] Neither extreme was tenable because both lacked integrity.

Of all of the contributors to the "New Roads to Politics," Paul Goodman is of particular interest, as he was a link between this intellectual circle and the artists at The Club. Probably most famous for his 1960 book, *Growing Up Absurd*, and for his involvement with radical politics in the 1960s, Goodman's thinking in the 1940s and 1950s was remarkably prescient and struck deep chords with the Abstract Expressionists. The issues with which Goodman dealt—religion, psychoanalysis, politics, commitment, creative action—are a microcosm of the period, and Goodman's handling of them offers a guide to navigating the postwar terrain. Goodman's articles, "Revolution, Sociolatry, and War" and "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," pointed to ways that moved beyond the Marxist/Freudian synthesis. Goodman, never a party member or a fellow traveler, turned toward anarchism as a political foundation. Following the nineteenth-century anarchist and scientist Peter Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid, Goodman argued that small groups practicing mutual encouragement and aid were needed. Instead of arguing for workers' equality and pay increases, which only fed into the capitalist system, Goodman saw that such fraternal arrangements would "progressively incorporate more and more of the social functions

[40] Jack Tworkov, *The Extreme of the Middle, Writings of Jack Tworkov*, edited by Mira Shor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 66.

into our free society."[41] The aim was to, in some way, work outside of the system in small ways at first and over time increase the number of ways.

Just as the current understanding of Marxist demands aligned with the status quo, Goodman saw that Freud and his revisionists, like Erich Fromm and Karen Horney, also contributed to the status quo so that "the goal of therapy is the smooth running of the social machine *as it exists*."[42] Goodman, instead, turned toward the more radical theories of Wilhelm Reich in order to propose a revolutionary integration of the individual and society, and just a few years later he would flesh out these ideas in *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. Here, Goodman brought together Freud, Reich, Aristotle, John Dewey, and the Taoist sages to offer a remarkably fertile synthesis for a radical understanding of the individual *within* the collective.[43]

The alternative visions of the individual and the society articulated by Goodman and others are not usually considered when speaking of Abstract Expressionism. Having placed Abstract Expressionism firmly within the concerns of mainstream, middle-class ideology, Leja does not consider non-Marxian leftist politics in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*; he does, however, point to other non-Freudian versions of psychology that may have influenced the artists. In discussing the importance of writer Harvey Fergusson on Jackson Pollock, Leja acknowledges that Fergusson was uncomfortable with Freud's ideas, and for Fergusson, "the ultimate source of these impulses is mystical

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[41] Goodman, "Revolution, Sociolatry, and War," 379.

[42] Paul Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," *politics* 2 (July 1945): 197. Goodman's reading of Fromm and Horney was idiosyncratic at the time.

[43] See the section on Goodman and Gestalt therapy in chapter 2.

and unitary, strongly reminiscent of Bergson's cosmic vital impulse."[44] This observation leads Leja to discuss briefly "another influential tradition in United States psychology, one in which the unconscious was represented as a 'storehouse of dynamic power' linked directly to the Divine."[45] This tradition began in the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the mid-twentieth century. Ultimately, however, Leja pushes this important strain aside when discussing Pollock, opting for "a version somewhat less spiritual and more physiological."[46] Granted, Leja concentrates on Pollock's involvement with Jungian thought, the most "spiritual" of psychologies, but he overlooks one of the most important advantages of these alternative, non-Freudian psychologies, namely that more often than not, they offer a more holistic account of the individual's relation with society, bridging that divide between the individual and society, which Leja saw widening in the postwar years. Psychology with a vitalist underpinning, like Goodman's Gestalt therapy, offered a synthesis between the psychic and political-economic spheres that artists and intellectuals were so desperately seeking.

The Club as Anarchist Community

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[44] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 189. Jonathan Katz has developed the importance of vitalism for Pollock, an important issue that I will deal with in chapters 2 and 3 (Jonathan D. Katz, "Jackson Pollock's Vitalism: Herbert Matter and the Vitalist Tradition," in *Pollock Matters*, edited by Ellen G. Landau and Claude Cernuschi, (Chestnut Hill, Mass.: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2007), 59-72).

[45] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 190.

[46] Ibid., 191.

Most studies of Abstract Expressionism valorize the individual and assume that the only radical politics was one based on a Marxist paradigm. While the artist worked in solitude in his or her studio, there were always friends at The Club on any given evening, and members could go and come as they pleased.[47] Historians tend to focus on the artists' alienation from society without recognizing that in these early years the artists were not yet alienated from each other, a fact key for understanding the formation of Abstract Expressionism. In his exposition of subjectivity, Leja, pointing to all of the disavowals of group identification, persuasively argues that Abstract Expressionism did not constitute an avant-garde in the usual sense it has come to be understood, that is, as a unified group that shared a collective style à la the Cubism of Picasso and Braque. Additionally, he argues that the opposing conceptions of the self held by such varied artists as Pollock and Newman kept the artists from congealing as a unified avant-garde.[48] While Leja's argument is insightful, the question remains: if the Abstract Expressionists did not constitute an avant-garde, what kind of group were they? The painter and collagist Conrad Marca-Relli recalled in a 1965 interview:

> The Club started out with the definite mission of being just a social club. We did not want any art, any culture. It's odd that it turned the other way. We were just looking for a place where we could have a cup of coffee and talk among ourselves as we did in the cafeteria about painting, about art. But then it started having little lectures and panels and all that. Some were fair but I think most of

[47] In the early years, every member had a key to the loft (Ernestine Lassaw, interview by author, May 9, 2009).

[48] As I argue in chapter 3, Pollock and Newman were not so different in their conceptions of the self or their ideas of how one should view their paintings.

> them were pretty boring. But the real vital thing was that they stimulated conversation later.[49]

Despite the establishment of lectures and the ensuing boredom for some, Marca-Relli and others continued to attend and participate. This participation actualized a new form of the social that had not been seen recently in New York's artistic circles.[50] It was not the socializing and spectacle of earlier salons, nor was it the banding together for a cause, to protest a critic or museum, or to advocate for modern art. The Club was a banding together for the express purpose of hanging out and conversing *with others*.

Leja shows that most of the artists' group formations in the 1930s centered around labor and exhibition issues. They came together in order to lobby for government patronage, to protest the loss of jobs and pay cuts, to persuade galleries and museums to exhibit their works, and to stand against encroaching fascism. Their organization tended to be for professional reasons, underscored by the fact that the artists sometimes partnered with already established trade unions. Most of these activities put them outside of more radical avant-garde practices. There is, however, another aspect of the artists' organizing that Leja overlooks. Gerald Monroe has pointed out that while such professional concerns were important, "for the artists who worked in their studios, the [union] meetings were social events" and were equally important.[51] This specifically social aspect of collective organization is undervalued and

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[49] Oral history interview with Conrad Marca-Relli, conducted by Dorothy Seckler, June 10, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[50] There is still much work to be done in excavating the similarities and differences of The Club and earlier American avant-garde groups like the Stieglitz Circle.

[51] Gerald M. Monroe, "Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1974): 10.

usually passed over in the literature on Abstract Expressionism, but it is an integral part of understanding it.

The painter Ludwig Sander, evidently gifted with a photographic memory, gave one of the most encompassing descriptions of The Club:

> Everybody would be out on the street about eleven o'clock at night…. So we found out it was feasible to rent a loft. It had a kitchen in it. So we had coffee. We didn't allow liquor. And we had sandwiches. And it was pretty nice. There were about fifteen or twenty of us. And it wasn't intended to have any membership or any organization, name, and God knows, no panels or lectures. But that was forced in eventually and then membership and all that. It's like the Renaissance. It was over when it started…. We had a radio-record player which [Giorgio] Cavallon built in…. We had a fireplace which we got wood for. We had sort of comfortable furniture for a while. Milton Resnick…threw all the furniture out. He thought it was bourgeois…. It wasn't an aesthetic grouping or anybody with any manifestoes or any axes to grind. It was aesthetically as diverse a crowd as you could find…. It was just a place for them [its members]—it was like—The Club was somewhere between a bunch of kids building something in the backyard that they called a club, and a club like, say, The Players or The Century or something like that…. It was just a nocturnal crowd anyway, you know, after a long lonesome day in the studio. And it was very nice. There was great love and cohesion and respect for each other, and non-competitive. Nobody knew what it was like to be very ambitious then. We were happy within ourselves.[52]

The playful nature coupled with the desire to promote dialogue fostered an organic structure with little hierarchy. The communal nature of the group in these early years was formative for most of its members: impromptu dinners of sandwiches or spaghetti, Christmas and New Year's Eve parties when giant collaborative wall collages were

[52] Sander interview, Archives of American Art. Irving Sandler described Sander as having "total recall" (Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 36).

made, and dancing at the end of the evening combined with numerous, lengthy discussions of intellectual and artistic concerns mediated the isolation of the studio.[53]

The Club was at the center of how these artists worked and lived in downtown New York City after World War II. It is all too easy for art historians to compartmentalize their target of study, separating the social milieu from the physical art objects. When the art historian's concern is the painting process, which is done alone in the studio, it is easy to assert that the studio visits and nights at The Club were insignificant. This compartmentalization, however, is untenable. Casual conversations with friends over coffee or a sandwich informs an artist's work by giving new insights and allowing the brain to rest, regroup, and reenergize in order to go back into the studio. Also, given the artists' relationship with society—a society that by and large did not understand, appreciate, or esteem avant-garde art—knowing that there was a group of like-minded individuals (artists, critics, composers, gallery owners, intellectuals), no matter how small (in the early years, maybe 100-150 people), had to make working alone in the studio manageable.

The art world after the war was small compared to what it would be even a decade later, but this small number is still significant. During the early fifties, when Goodman was having trouble finding a publisher, he would send cards to his friends, asking them to buy a subscription to his novel or book of poems, and he would send them one or two copies of his new book. If he convinced 200 people to send him five dollars, he could have the book printed, and that made it real; 200 people were a real

[53] Alcopley recounted all of the dancing at The Club and the making of collages (Alcopley, "The Club: The First Three Years," 47). Ernestine Lassaw also remembered that the painter Landes Lewitin gave drawing classes at The Club during the afternoons, which she and others attended (Ernestine Lassaw, interview by author, May 9, 2009).

group. That was something tangible.[54] In a similar vein, Goodman, Macdonald, and many from the *politics* circle felt that for politics to be meaningful or workable, attention had to be turned to small groups. It is in small groups, as Goodman wrote, that one can practice mutual aid, which is understood to be part of our natural tendencies. The Club was this small, real group for the Abstract Expressionists. Sculptor James Rosati said, "I can honestly say that as a group we were all terribly compatible. All of us were very much concerned about each other in many ways. There was an affinity. There was a comradeship that existed that came about naturally. It wasn't a thing—there was no manifesto. Nobody was duty bound in any way. But this is the way it just really worked out, that's all. It just worked out that way. And it was very wonderful."[55] When one considers daily, face-to-face contact, this number of 100 to 150 is no longer insignificant.

Despite the numbers and the camaraderie, Rosenberg was reluctant to grant collective status on the downtown artists' community, but he did make the following concession, "It is a community of some stage of civilization both earlier and later than ours...with its public lounges…its cocktail- and evening-party circuits…its mutual aid."[56] Rosenberg was speaking of the downtown neighborhood a decade after the beginning of The Club, but his description is in line with the way others described the early years. When writing about The Club, art critic Thomas Hess observed, "The Club attracted most of the new artists at one time or another. Each in his own way felt a need to help

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[54] Taylor Stoehr, interview by author, January 29, 2009; Stoehr, "Paul Goodman as an Advance-Guard Writer," *The Kenyon Review* 25 (Winter 2003): 85-86.

[55] Oral history interview with James Rosati, April-May 1968, conducted by Sevim Fesci, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[56] Rosenberg, "Tenth Street," 188.

build and strengthen an outsiders' community of painters, sculptors, poets, composers, and oddball geniuses. Kropotkin's noble theory of 'mutual aid' seemed to have been realized in a bohemian microcosm."[57] The recurring reliance at this time on Kropotkin points to the attempt to reimagine society outside of a Marxist analysis.

Kropotkin published *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* in 1902. Here, Kropotkin provided a scientific basis for his theory of anarchism. Written as a corrective to scientific and sociological Darwinism, ascribed to some of Darwin's more extremist followers and not Darwin himself, Kropotkin proposed, based on his observations of animals and insects in Eastern Siberia and Northern Manchuria, that mutual aid and support played a more pivotal role in a species' survival and evolution than mutual contest and struggle. The animal instinct had its place in human society as well. Kropotkin argued,

> But it is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind. It is the conscience—be it only at the stage of instinct—of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own. Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed.[58]

Kropotkin also emphasized that while individuals of the same species might compete for food in the face of scarcity in order to survive a natural calamity, such as drought or

[57] Thomas Hess, "When Art Talk was a Fine Art," *New York Magazine* 8 (December 30, 1977): 83.

[58] Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) (London: William Heinemann, 1910), xiii-xiv.

snowfall, it was his observation that in fact when food was scarce the entire group is affected and "comes out of the ordeal so much impoverished in vigor and health, that no progressive evolution of the species can be based upon such periods of keen competition."[59] This sense of solidarity, however, did not impede Kropotkin's insistence on individual autonomy. As Newman described him, Kropotkin was "so intoxicated with the love of personal freedom…that he stood against all forms of domination over one's person."[60] Mutual aid is respect and support for other's individuality. It is this respect and mutuality that allows anarchism, as a political principle, to evade the dogma of Communism and Capitalism; it "rejects the concept of the state with its omnipresent evils of political power and authority."[61] The political scientist and historian William O. Reichert argued, "The task the anarchist has taken upon himself is to begin to lay the foundations of a decentralized, free society within the structure of the existing one. What anarchism urges is a complete rejection of the authoritarian principle which conditions people to look toward leaders for guidance."[62] Reichert saw anarchists following in the same line as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, a point that would not be lost on Rosenberg.[63]

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[59] Ibid., ix.

[60] Barnett Newman, "'The True Revolution is Anarchist!'" in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by John P. O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 45.

[61] William O. Reichert, "Discussion: Anarchism, Freedom, and Power," *Ethics* 79 (January 1969): 139.

[62] Ibid., 145.

[63] See the section on Action Painting in chapter 2.

Based on the descriptions given by Rosenberg and Hess, one must be careful not to read the later skirmishes, broken friendships, and monetary successes back onto this time when such scenarios were unthinkable. It is telling that Rosenberg placed this type of community outside of the immediate present. Given the political and cultural state of postwar society, this type of anarchist community was unfathomable. The idea that autonomous individuals could come together in a non-hierarchical, non-rule-ordered group was inconceivable in the oppressive, conformist nature of the early Cold War years, but The Club was recognized as the concrete manifestation of this anarchist principle, even if such an organizing principle was not overtly articulated by its founding members. Despite the entrenchment of the ideological battles of individualism and collectivity, The Club was able to maneuver between this political Scylla and Charybdis. The Club had neither pretense of re-establishing a healthy natural society nor did it ever purport to be anything but what it was; however, it had many of the hallmarks of a small fraternal group based on mutual aid and encouragement. The Club worked because it grew organically—from the Waldorf Cafeteria and Washington Square Park to the Cedar Tavern to the loft at 39 East Eighth Street, and in its organicism, it instantiated a model of mutual aid that was radical for the time period.

Ernestine Lassaw, who attended the very first Club meeting, insists that the artists at The Club were not at all concerned with politics or McCarthyism.[64] Sander admitted, "You know, [political views] were a little antiquated. They had no political views above the present. They had sort of romantic notions of 1849 or 1917. It was nice. It was all very honorable and well-intentioned. To them it still had its purity, you

[64] Ernestine Lassaw, interview by author, May 9, 2009.

know, for the good of man and so forth."[65] Lassaw's and Sander's testimonies would seem to underscore the usual narrative that the artists turned their backs on their more overt, pre-war politics. It is clear that these artists did not wear their politics on their sleeves, but the absence of overt political talk does not mean they were unconcerned with the direction in which society was moving. The Club—knowingly or not—resisted these directions.

The one overtly political event involving The Club more than likely resulted in one of its founding members being removed from the historical record. Leo Castelli and Audrey Hess, Tom Hess' wife, enlisted some of the artists, including de Kooning, Kline, and Esteban Vicente, to make posters for a campaign speech by Adlai Stevenson, during his first presidential bid in 1952.[66] According to Sander, Pavia was upset because he thought The Club was being "organized as Artists for Stevenson."[67] It was not necessarily that Pavia or others disagreed with Stevenson's political platform. In fact, many of the artists would have been sympathetic to his program of equal rights, the importance of a humane and creative society in resisting despotism, his quarrel with Republican red-baiting and witch hunts, and his belief that political labels such as Left, Right, and Center were no longer useful and distorted the picture.[68] Pavia's hesitance

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[65] Sander interview, Archives of American Art.

[66] Ibid.; Lassaw, 1968 interview, Archives of American Art; Harry Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 178-179.

[67] Sander interview, Archives of American Art.

[68] See Stevenson's two speeches "Equal Rights" which he gave at the Commodore Hotel, for which the artists made posters, and "Faith in Liberalism," a speech he gave the same day, in Adlai Stevenson, *Major Campaign Speeches, 1952* (New York: Random House, 1953).

can be attributed to the fact that he did not want The Club to be associated with an art in service to politics, nor did he want to draw attention to The Club during a time when many were being brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee and questioned about their allegiances for the slightest, even spurious, claims of Communist sympathies or disloyalty to the country.[69]

Thinking of these artists as political or apolitical is an unrealistic compartmentalization. It is more realistic to acknowledge that there is a spectrum of political inclination, and it does not always mean protesting, carrying signs, or actually talking about politics. In explaining the anarchist principle, Goodman stressed that anarchism does not *look* a certain way and that it was more about an *attitude* one has toward others, society, government, etc.[70] In whatever its guise, anarchism affirms "that valuable behavior occurs only by the free and direct response of individuals or voluntary groups to the conditions presented by the historical environment."[71] There is nothing permanent or set about anarchism, "it is always a continual coping with the next situation."[72] More often than not, the Abstract Expressionists did not directly engage in political activity, but their attitudes toward society and art held political implications that need to be excavated.

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[69] The latter reason was suggested by Natalie Edgar, Pavia's widow (Interview by author, June 30, 2009).

[70] Paul Goodman, "The Anarchist Principle" (1962), in *Decentralizing Power: Paul Goodman's Social Criticism*, edited by Taylor Stoehr (New York: Black Rose Books, 1994), 13.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 14.

On May 28, 1952, Goodman gave a lecture at The Club entitled "Vanguard and Popular Culture." This is one of the few lectures for which multiple sources exist—a half page of handwritten notes from an unknown listener, a recounting of the evening in an interview with George Dennison conducted by Taylor Stoehr, and two articles written by Goodman in 1949 and 1951 that deal with both popular and vanguard cultures.[73] Goodman's article, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," grew out of his experience at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1950.[74] The essence of the essay was to figure out in a practical way how the artist was "to persist at all, being an artist," a problem not unfamiliar to the painters and sculptors at The Club.[75] The aftermath of World War II had left them all shell-shocked in Goodman's estimation—not confident or anxious but shell-shocked—and so in order to persist "the advance-guard trie[d] to create a new relation of artist and audience."[76] Community had to be reestablished, and Goodman suggested that the writers return to Occasional Poetry, that is, they should write about and for each other. It only works though when everybody "understands what is at stake" since "in our estranged society, it is objected,

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[73] The handwritten notes reside in the Sandler papers at the Getty Research Institute. Taylor Stoehr recounted his interview with Denison in a conversation with the author on January 29, 2009. And finally, the two Goodman articles: Paul Goodman, "The Chance for Popular Culture," *Poetry* 74 (May 1949): 157-165 and "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," *The Kenyon Review* 13 (Summer 1951): 357-380.

[74] Other faculty members that summer included Willem de Kooning, Mark Tobey, Theodore Stamos, Clement Greenberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Alfred Kazin, William Carlos Williams, Merce Cunningham, Ernest Hemingway and others (Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 214).

[75] Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing," 370.

[76] Ibid., 372.

just such an intimate community is lacking. Of course it is lacking! The point is that the advance-guard action helps create such community, starting with the artist's primary friends."[77] As literary historian Andrew Epstein explains, this intimate community "could be a form of resistance to a vast homogenous, alienating society and could offer an alternative universe where people are free to create a sustaining sense of kinship."[78] The Club was precisely this community Goodman described, even if Goodman did not think it a perfect example.[79] To move beyond that small audience, however, was always a goal. In speaking of the poet who writes to form such a community, Terence Diggory extends the community to the reader who might not be a part of the poet's immediate circle. "[T]he reader is invited to read as *if* he were a member of the community the writer has imagined."[80] In a similar manner, the artists attempted to draw in their viewers so they too would feel physically a part of the community, a point I will return to in chapter 3.

In the unedited transcript of the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 in April 1950, Newman said, "I think we start from a subject of attitude, which in the process of our

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[77] Ibid., 375-76.

[78] Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.

[79] It seems that this talk was Goodman's last involvement with The Club, as his name does not reappear in the later documentation that I have found. Taylor Stoehr suggested that Goodman had become frustrated with the artists for not being more interested in ideas (Interview by the author, January 29, 2009).

[80] Terence Diggory, "Community 'Intimate' or 'Inoperative': New York School Poets and Politics from Paul Goodman to Jean-Luc Nancy," in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, edited by Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono, Me.: National Poetry Foundation, 2001), 18-19. Emphasis in the original.

endeavor becomes related to the world, and if somebody sees the picture and is moved, he will try to live a life which is prophetic to the picture. It is all imagination."[81] The first part of this sentence was published in *Modern Artists in America*, but the last clause—the clause about living the prophecy of the picture was cut. The goal here is that the world is not changed directly but that the painting works on the viewer, and in this way change is motivated—it is a matter of *attitude*. It is the attitude that is the heart of the anarchist principle.

As membership increased, business meetings became a weekly occurrence, usually on Wednesdays. Here, charter and voting members would admit or deny new members and discuss other organizational details. Rosenberg remembered that they held the same meeting every week to deliberate: 1. The sweeping of floors, 2. How to get people to go home, and 3. How too many prescribed roles would turn The Club into an organization.[82] Sweeping the floors was enough of an issue that Reinhardt included in his chronology that while he helped found the Artists' Club, he did not sweep the floors.[83] More important in this summation of Wednesday nights is the artists' realization of what The Club was not: it was not and could not exist as a hierarchical organization. It needed to remain organic if it was to continue to succeed.

In the narrative of Abstract Expressionism, the individual self is highlighted as the subject of painting and sculpture. It is not my intention to dislodge the self as the

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[81] Wittenborn papers, I.C.27., The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

[82] Taylor Stoehr, interview by author, January 29, 2009, based on his interview with Harold Rosenberg.

[83] Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, edited by Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 7.

defining feature of Abstract Expressionism, but I do want to propose a different image of the self: one that is not an island unto itself, one that is not antagonistic to group formation, and one that understands itself imbedded in society and community. In his sweeping study of the formation of the modern self, Charles Taylor writes that what most theories of the modern self overlook is "the search for moral sources *outside* of the subject through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision."[84] In reformulating the self, the Abstract Expressionist artists explored such various languages within the walls of The Club in order to find resonances, many of which will be discussed in the following chapter. It was not just a matter of adjusting themselves to the postwar society, but as Linda Henderson noted about some early twentieth-century figures, such a search "suggested important new possibilities for self-expression and artistic and literary 'languages of the future.'"[85]

[84] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 510.

[85] Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Mysticism as the 'Tie that Binds': The Case of Edward Carpenter and Modernism," *Art Journal* 46 (Spring 1987): 33.

Chapter 2: An Intellectual History of The Club: A Foundation for Action Painting

While The Club began as a social outlet in the summer or fall of 1949, it quickly evolved into something more.[1] The Club became the setting for artists, critics, intellectuals, musicians, and poets to articulate, to formulate, even if indirectly, what was happening in the studios across the neighborhood. The discussions were vigorous and intense, often with abstractionists on one side and expressionists on the other. Later, Ad Reinhardt sarcastically referred to the aesthetic doubletalk and partisan infighting of the downtown neighborhood as "nightschool metaphysics."[2] A more common attitude, however, can be found in Jack Tworkov's journal from 1952. After voicing his initial fear that The Club would be too bohemian or dilettantish with all of the talking, he described The Club as a university: "But I think that 39 East 8 is an unexcelled university for an artist, perhaps the greatest university for artists. Here we learn not only about all the possible ideas in art but learn what we need to know about philosophy, physics, mathematics, mythology, religion, sociology, magic. I'm amazed at the eagerness of philosophers, priests, poets, musicians, mathematicians, dancers and necromancers to come talk to us, to educate and entertain us."[3] If The Club was the artists' university, then one must look here for the intellectual sources of Abstract Expressionism.

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[1] Beginning in January 1950, Philip Pavia, with the help of Ernestine Lassaw, began sending out postcard announcements for Friday night lectures and panels.

[2] Barbara Rose, "The Return of the Image," *New York Magazine* (January 17, 1972): 50.

[3] Tworkov, *The Extreme of the Middle*, 42. Both Conrad Marca-Relli and John Cage recalled how fertile and enjoyable the discussions were after the lectures, when artists

Most scholars have included in the list of the Abstract Expressionists' intellectual pantheon Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Carl Jung, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Joseph Campbell, Sir James Frazer, along with writers such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. Most recently, Michael Leja has argued for less intellectually rigorous sources and found Abstract Expressionism's foundation in what he terms Modern Man literature, a more popularized version of intellectual ideas such as psychology, anthropology, and theories of subjectivity.[4] While there is no doubt that all of these sources were part of the cultural context in which the Abstract Expressionists found themselves, these were not the names most often invoked at The Club. The archival evidence suggests a different list that includes vitalism, Martin Heidegger, Paul Goodman, and Zen. In fact, it is these sources that ground the earliest attempt to articulate Abstract Expressionism, Harold Rosenberg's 1952 essay, "The American Action Painters." These debates cast new light on Rosenberg's misunderstood essay and uncover the political roots of Abstract Expressionism.

Often in narratives of Abstract Expressionism, the intellectual history is presented as a succession of phases. The artists were first interested in Marx, then turning away from a political orientation, moved to Freud and Jung, both of which were superceded by Sartre and Existentialism. One of the purposes of excavating the intellectual discussions at The Club is to show that such a linear schematic is not plausible, for all of these ideas were discussed simultaneously and were recognized as

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discussed the ideas amongst themselves and in smaller groups (Marca-Relli interview, Archives of American Art; Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University).

[4] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 203-274.

sharing common threads. The intellectual time line that has been constructed effaces the far messier, constantly recurring discussions over a number of years.

Vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Goodman's Gestalt therapy, and Zen each enabled an address on collectivity and individuality that evaded the Manichean rhetoric of Red Scare America. Certainly, these topics relate to the ones already associated with the artists' intellectual foundation, but they provide a decidedly different image of the thematics associated with Abstract Expressionism and disrupt our standard image of the group's concerns. The questions continuously posed at The Club were: What is the individual? What is the social? What is expression? Repeatedly, the answer given by vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, et al. was that the individual and the social, however defined, were necessarily mutual. That is, the individual was not pitted against nor made more important than the social. Each of these frameworks shares an abiding belief that one cannot speak of the individual without also speaking of society, of the world, of community. The excavation of this predominant theme allows for a reading of Abstract Expressionism that moves beyond the stereotypical heroic individualism and Cold War rhetoric usually associated with it.

Vitalism, most popular in the early twentieth century, acknowledged a pervading, connecting rhythm throughout all of existence that could not be reduced to mechanistic or chemical explanation. After the Second World War, with the disclosure of the horrors of the Holocaust, the building of atomic weaponry, and the dropping of two atomic bombs, many began to realize that individuals were increasingly objectified. Vitalism, then, reemerged at the moment when the individual's connections to society

were imperiled in order to offer an alternative view of the world. "Relatedness rather than isolated individuality" governed human existence.[5]

Perhaps more than any other philosophy, Abstract Expressionism is associated with Existentialism. Sartre was the public face of Existentialism, but it was more often Sartre's predecessor Heidegger who was discussed at The Club. Heidegger's concepts of Being-in-the-world and Being-with take the individual outside of a psychoanalytic understanding of the self and place him or her in the world with others. While Heidegger still dealt with the essential elements of Existentialism—angst, death, authenticity—his approach was not as nihilistic or pessimistic as Sartre's and so offered the artists a more positive structure for reimagining the individual's place in society.

The pervasive psychoanalytic understanding of the Abstract Expressionist is based on the theories of the unconscious put forth by Freud and Jung, but when psychology was formally discussed at The Club, the discussion was led by Paul Goodman and Fritz Perls, two of the founders of Gestalt therapy. Gestalt therapy combined Taoist wisdom, Wilhelm Reich's attention to the body, and Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship with American pragmatism in order to address the relational and communitarian aspects of human existence instead of personal neuroses. The organism-field relationship central to Gestalt therapy takes into account physicality and appetites along with historical and cultural constructs, without judgment of normality or abnormality. Goodman and Perls built their theory on ideas of creativity and anarchism that would have been welcomed by the artists at The Club.

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[5] Sheldon Cheney, *Expressionism in Art* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1934), 213.

Goodman's references to the Eastern philosophy of Taoism would not have been out of place at The Club, for Zen Buddhism, along with its relation to music, psychology, and literature, was discussed more than any other single topic. Zen Buddhism was not as tangential to Abstract Expressionism as some have made it out to be. With its emphasis on the here and now and awareness, Zen echoed the Abstract Expressionists' own concerns with spontaneity and awareness. Zen, too, is invested in the communal. The act of meditation is the attempt to quiet the self so that one's relation to otherness is made clear, so that one may perceive the connectedness of all life. This oneness was crucial for operating outside of the Cold War mentality that seeded "us" against "them."

Each of these frameworks—vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Gestalt therapy, and Zen—found its place in Rosenberg's explication of Action Painting, which in turn can be seen as its own framework that was discussed at The Club. Coming directly out of seven panels devoted to the "problem" of "Abstract Expressionism" in 1952, Action Painting was an attempt to synthesize many of the discussions held at The Club. Rosenberg's description of the Action Painter has more in common with Goodman's Gestalt therapy and vitalist spontaneity than it does with the image of an ego-centered artist slashing his feelings on the canvas. Most importantly, Rosenberg, linked the Abstract Expressionists with the tradition of Walt Whitman's spirituality and politics, situating the artists' metaphysical inquiries within a political context that was able to evade the politics of Cold War consensus.

In the last three decades, the accounts of Abstract Expressionism have settled into a narrative mixed with apoliticism, existential angst, and a psychoanalytic

understanding of the ego, but the original terrain was more complex and open for debate. After the war, artists and intellectuals were looking for "new roads" to explain their social, historical, political, and cultural situation. Each of these discursive frames used its own language to communicate something about the nature of the individual and society at a time when that relationship was becoming more and more tenuous. The intellectual concerns of The Club were based on the felt sense that the individual is not simply monadic but always connected to the environment and other individuals.

Vitalism at Mid-Century

In 1947*, The Saturday Review of Literature* reprinted Walter Lippmann's 1912 review of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. The article, "The Most Dangerous Man in the World," was republished, according to the editors, because "of its topical value [and] because of the interesting and significant juxtaposition of Bergson's ideas and continuing vogue at the close of World War I with the ideas and vogue today of Jean-Paul Sartre, at the close of World War II."[6] Lippmann argued that Bergson, more than any other thinker, articulated the modern person's "restless desire to find new ways of living and thinking," and those conservatives who wished morality, government, education, and science to remain fixed, idealized, and never questioned, "should regard

[6] Walter Lippmann, "The Most Dangerous Man in the World [1912]," *The Saturday Review of Literature* 30 (August 23, 1947): 18.

Bergson as the most dangerous man in the world."[7] Lippmann summarized the main point of *Creative Evolution*: "In it he asks you to think of all life as very much like your own. You are a part of life after all, and if you realize what it is like for you to be alive, you may get a hint to the rest of life."[8] One of the keys of Bergsonian vitalism is that understanding of the larger world—other people, other life forms—comes from understanding one's own self.

The connection between Bergson and Sartre that the editors detected went beyond the popular embrace of two French philosophers. Given the horrific outcome of the war and the possibility of a third looming, "new ways of living and thinking" were paramount. Despite their considerable differences, both Bergson and Sartre took the finite self as the center of reference in the here and now, an avenue of thought that many pursued after the war.[9] The political implications of Bergson's thought would also have been keenly felt in this conservative time.

Lippmann gave some inkling of these political implications when he wrote in his review, "Instead of change being against Nature, standing-pat is; it is the conservatives who violate the spirit of life when they want institutions to stay frozen tight, not the radicals who want them fluid."[10] He elaborated these ideas a year later in his book, *A Preface to Politics* (1913), which was not only heavily indebted to Bergson's vitalist ideas

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Jacques L. Salvan, *The Scandalous Ghost: Sartre's Existentialism as Related to Vitalism, Humanism, Mysticism, Marxism* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 22-26; 27-51 for a more detailed comparison of Sartre and Bergson.

[10] Lippmann, "The Most Dangerous Man in the World," 18.

but also to Freud's insights into psychology. The premise of the book was to resituate politics, which had been "centered mechanistically instead of vitally."[11] Politicians should be creative and inventive, Lippmann argued, "[putting] the deliberate, conscious, willing individual at the center of his philosophy."[12] Lippmann was not advocating a specific party line, "not a special reform embodied in a particular statute, but a way of going at all problems."[13] Politics needed to be an attitude, a lens through which one approached all tasks. Throughout the book, Lippmann wrote favorably of Georges Sorel and the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism. Additionally, it was essential for Lippmann that laws and politics not be negative; that is, "instead of tabooing [sic] our impulses [politics should] provide opportunities, not to announce ultimate values; to remove oppressive evil and to invest in new resources for enjoyment."[14] This positive image of a politics based not on repression but on creative expression would strike a chord thirty years later in the increasingly repressive society that the Abstract Expressionists faced. Additionally, art and culture were key to Lippmann's reconceptualization of politics, "for art can open up the springs from which all conduct flows."[15] In other words, art has the ability to change the way one sees and acts in the world. This belief would become central for the artists at The Club.

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[11] Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 23.

[12] Ibid., 9.

[13] Ibid., 69.

[14] Ibid., 49 and 201.

[15] Ibid., 110.

Despite the hope that Lippmann and others held out for vitalism, most scholars would agree that vitalism had lost its cultural hold by the 1940s.[16] Sanford Schwartz has shown that there was no unified response to Bergson in the early twentieth century, and his ideas were often taken up by opposing political forces. "By defining 'life' as a process of perpetual and dynamic flux, vitalism appeared to sanction the reform or overthrow of anachronistic institutions."[17] Vitalism could, therefore, support either Right or Left extremes, and this tendency led some to view it with suspicion. On one hand, it was seen to lead to the fascism of Mussolini, who was heavily influenced by Sorel, and on the other hand, it supported the progressivism of Lippmann and other American reformers and anarchists. There is evidence, however, that in the United States it saw a resurgence of popularity in the postwar years precisely for the reasons Lippmann cited in 1913. Branden Joseph has written of the importance of Bergson for John Cage's understanding of silence, and Dwight Macdonald was reading Bergson's "Introduction to Metaphysics" in late 1949-1950.[18] There was a spike in the republications of Bergson's work around 1950, but most significant was the publication

[16] Katz, "Jackson Pollock's Vitalism," 66; Richard A. Lofthouse, *Vitalism in Modern Art C. 1900–1950: Otto Dix, Stanley Spencer, Max Beckmann and Jacob Epstein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 40-41; Henderson, "Mysticism as 'The Ties that Binds,'" 34.

[17] Sanford Schwartz, "Bergson and the Politics of Vitalism," in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, edited by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 278.

[18] Branden W. Joseph, "White on White," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Autumn 2000): 106; Michael Wreszin, ed., *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight Macdonald* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 186-187 and 190.

of a collection of his essays under the title *The Creative Mind* in 1946.[19] In 1951, Herbert Read, the preeminent English critic and anarchist intellectual whose writings were followed by many of the Abstract Expressionists, declared himself an avowed Bergsonist in a series of lectures he delivered at Princeton University.[20] All of this documentation is to say that when the filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt showed Herbert Matter's film, "The Works of Calder," at The Club in February 1950, Matter's overt vitalism would have been familiar and largely welcomed by the attendees that night.

This was, perhaps, an insignificant evening at The Club; there is no documentation of how the movie was introduced or what discussion followed, but the main participants—Calder, Matter, John Cage (composer), and Jackson Pollock (key grip)—were important presences at The Club. Certainly the film would have sparked a lively dialogue.[21] Matter's twenty-minute film stands as a crucial nexus point of people and ideas. It allows the imagining of a conversation between unlikely collaborators about vitalist ideas that largely were considered outdated and yet completely apropos of

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[19] Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, translated by Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946). A search of the National Union Catalog Pre-1956 imprints indicates that there was a flurry of reissues of several of Bergson's books in the late 1940s. Bergson had died in 1941, but most of the reissues came almost nine years later. Though it is unclear when he acquired it, Newman owned the 1946 edition of *The Creative Mind* (Richard Shiff, Carol C. Mancusi-Ungaro, and Heidi Colsman-Freyberger, *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Barnett Newman Foundation, 2004), 635).

[20] Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 137. Seitz could have easily relayed this declaration to the artists on one of his numerous visits to The Club. The Club tried several times to enlist Read to speak at one of the Friday gatherings, but either because of scheduling problems or of a lack of interest on Read's part, such an evening never materialized (Dore Ashton, interview with author, February 12, 2009).

[21] Both Matter and Cage were early participants at The Club, and while Pollock did not frequent The Club, he was a common topic of discussion.

this time. This film presented an overt vitalist reading of Alexander Calder's mobiles. While Pollock and Cage never interacted during the production of the film, their involvements in the same vitalist project point to ways of reconsidering the intellectual terrain of the postwar years in terms of the transmutation of vitalism from the concern of the earlier European avant-garde to a relevant vocabulary for artists after the Second World War. Additionally, it illuminates that The Club fostered connections, overlaps, and sympathies between two antipodes of the postwar art world.[22]

Matter was a photographer and graphic designer married to the artist Mercedes Matter, both of whom frequented The Club in its earliest years.[23] He and Pollock formed a friendship at a pivotal moment in Pollock's artistic development. Ellen Landau has argued persuasively that Matter's interest in "action photography" was a model for Pollock's own experimentation with pouring and dripping paint.[24] Additionally, Matter would have been an important link between the American artists and earlier twentieth-century ideas about vitalism.[25]

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[22] This characterization of Pollock and Cage occupying opposite ends of the artistic spectrum is most forcefully argued by Caroline Jones (Caroline Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993): 628-665, especially 634-37).

[23] Both Herbert and Mercedes are listed as paying dues in October 1949 (Notebook #1, The Club records, Archives of American Art), and both are included in a 1952 list of voting members. At some later time "Mr. and Mrs." was crossed out and replaced simply with "Mercedes" (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 149).

[24] Ellen Landau, "Action/Re-Action: The Artistic Friendship of Herbert Matter and Jackson Pollock," in *Pollock Matters*, 9-57.

[25] Matter spent time in Paris in the late 1920s, but also, being Swiss, he was surely aware of Rudolph Steiner's architectural Gesamtkunstwerk, the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, not far from his hometown; the Goetheanum embodied vitalist ideas in its construction and materials.

Generally speaking, vitalism acknowledges a dynamic force, or impulse, that permeates the universe and connects everything in it. While the complex cultural history of vitalism has not been written, art historian Richard Lofthouse has provided an overview of vitalism as it pertains to modern art in the first half of the twentieth century, charting the influences of Nietzsche, Bergson, William James and John Dewey, and a bit later, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers on English and German artists.[26] Beginning as a reply to mechanistic science in the nineteenth century that aimed to pinpoint the inner workings of human beings, vitalism insisted "that living organisms possessed unique properties and that their biology could not be reduced to the laws of physics and chemistry."[27] These developments in scientific circles had lasting cultural and philosophical effects long after they had been discarded among scientists. The attraction of vitalism at the turn of the century lay in its insistence that while the life-force could be inferred, it was not demonstrable, and so in the face of an increasingly mechanized and materialist world, mystery still remained.[28] Culturally speaking, vitalism "was merely one strand in a thick rope comprising creative and emergent evolutionism, cosmic teleology, psychology, psychical research, the paranormal, the occult, eastern religion, and spiritualism."[29] These strands connected and intertwined in a myriad of ways in the first decades of the twentieth century. The

[26] Lofthouse, *Vitalism in Modern Art.*

[27] Ibid., 14-15.

[28] Ibid., 21. For a discussion of Bergson's influence on Futurism, Cubism, and Fauvism, see Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[29] Lofthouse, *Vitalism in Modern Art*, 23.

British historian, Alex Owen, has presented some of these entwinings in a clear and thoughtful manner, reminding the reader that the "mystical revival" at the turn of the century reached into various artistic, religious, secular, and esoteric venues.[30]

Henri Bergson's ideas of intuition, creative evolution, and *élan vital* popularized vitalist ideas in the first years of the twentieth century throughout Europe and the United States but resonated still half a century later. Bergson criticized traditional metaphysics that sought "the reality of things above time, beyond what moves and what changes," which created artificial, static constructs.[31] Instead, Bergson, by focusing on fluidity and duration, created a more vital metaphysics. "Metaphysics will then become experience itself; and duration will be revealed as it really is—unceasing creation, the uninterrupted up-surge of novelty."[32] By grounding metaphysics in everyday experience, Bergson allowed for a deeper engagement between the physical and the metaphysical. Bergson's perspective was mostly optimistic; he described reality as "fullness constantly swelling out, to which emptiness is unknown."[33] This immanent fullness and concrete support of metaphysics would act as a model, via Matter and others, for the Abstract Expressionists beginning to rethink their own aesthetic and its relation to the social.[34]

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[30] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 50, 139.

[31] Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 17.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 113.

[34] During the 1930s, Katherine Dreier, Sheldon Cheney, and Hilla Rebay each served as a bridge for earlier twentieth-century vitalist ideas as well. The collector and patron, Katharine Dreier, was heavily influenced by theosophy and lectured frequently in the 1930s and 1940s. Sheldon Cheney's primer on modern art, published in 1934, is filled

The first historiographer of Abstract Expressionism, William Seitz, repeatedly mentioned Bergsonian vitalism as an important source for the artists' understanding of composition.[35] He wrote, "[W]e must recognize that the vitalistic urge is paramount…. Dominated by a vision of an evolving organicism, and a Bergsonian concern for the *élan vital*, this organicism is evident in the emphasis on active application of pigment and the establishment of optically dynamic relationships."[36] Seitz recognized Bergson's influence in the artists' material and compositional concerns; he based his argument, in part, on the writings of Hans Hofmann. Hofmann, of course, was an important source and teacher for many of the Abstract Expressionists, both directly and indirectly.

Even earlier, however, Sheldon Cheney, one of the first popularizers of modern art in the United States, also used Hofmann's vitalist ideas of form and composition to gird his own theory of expressionism, but he went beyond composition in his vitalist understanding of modern art. Cheney employed Hofmann's teachings on the orchestration of plane, volume, color, and texture in creating plastic rhythm on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas.[37] It is this movement in the composition of the painting that Cheney argued "links with the deepest rhythms, arising from universal

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with vitalist and theosophical readings of the European avant-garde, and Hilla Rebay, director and curator of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, was famous for her vitalist and occultist-inspired readings of non-objective art. While the Abstract Expressionists had little, or in the case of Rebay mostly antagonistic, contact with these figures, their lone, even if quirky, voices were important transmitters of earlier avant-garde influences to the United States.

[35] Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 63-67, 94, 131.

[36] Ibid., 63.

[37] Cheney, *Expressionism in Art*, 166-177.

order: with the cosmic machine, the flow of the worlds, the tensions of galaxy, star and planet."[38] For Hofmann, it was the roving eye that allowed the viewer to understand that "tensions and movement, or movement and counter-movement, lawfully ordered within unity, paralleling the artist's life experience and his artistic and human discipline, endow the work with the power to stir the observer rhythmically to a response to living, spiritual totality."[39] Cheney's recourse to Hofmann's teachings suggests that vitalism was not simply the lure of a still-mysterious life force but, as Cheney pointed out, the recognition that fundamental to human experience was the idea of "relatedness rather than isolated individuality."[40]

Moving beyond the picture plane, Vitalism was an attempt to preserve an "enlivened universe" and human dignity in the face of increased reliance on mechanistic and materialist understandings of the human body and the natural world.[41] The mid-twentieth century saw similar attempts. Fundamentally, vitalism, based on ideas of flux and constant change, endeavored to perceive the world in a different manner from mechanistic scientism, relying on intuition over objectifying rationality. As Lofthouse explains, "Vitalism never attempted to transfigure anything, but sought out the spiritual in life and in things, almost like a radicalized…doctrine of incarnation."[42] As I will show, this immanence would serve for some not only as a formal strategy in the all-over

[38] Ibid., 124.

[39] Hans Hofmann, quoted in Ibid., 213.

[40] Ibid., 215.

[41] Lofthouse, *Vitalism in Modern Art*, 26.

[42] Ibid., 36.

composition that all of the Abstract Expressionists employed but also as a foundation for grassroots politics in face of the dehumanized, bureaucratic state.

It should also be noted that many of the European *émigrés*, such as Marcel Duchamp, Edgard Varèse, Hans Richter, and Frederick Kiesler, many of whom lived in the downtown environs, came of age when vitalist ideas mixed with more occult and esoteric speculation. As Malcolm Macdonald writes of Varèse, "At the start of his career, the occult was a part of his imaginative world," and while Varèse may have reacted against such esotericism, he never wholly rejected it.[43] All of these artists were interested in an attempt to reimagine the world. These ideas would have been discussed and passed around during this nascent period for the Abstract Expressionists.[44] During and after World War II, artists began reworking these early twentieth-century notions of intuition, vitalism, and sublimity in order to reimagine their own world, which had been rent by another war, genocide, and nuclear destruction. In many ways, the strong reemergence of vitalist ideas at this point in time fostered "new roads" in socialism, religion, and psychoanalysis. This artistic retooling coincided and intersected with an attempt by intellectuals like Macdonald and Goodman to rethink leftist politics in terms of immanence and intuition in the wake of a disunified Left.

Herbert Matter's "The Works of Calder" enables an examination of this transformation of vitalist ideas and their implications at this crucial moment. The movie was contracted in June 1948, and that summer Matter, with Pollock carting around

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[43] Malcolm Macdonald, *Varèse: Astronomer in Sound* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2003), 48.

[44] Pavia describes early encounters with Varèse and Mondrian (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 37-40).

equipment, filmed the nature sequences on Long Island that would constitute the first third of the film.[45] According to one of Pollock's biographers, "Sometimes Jackson asked questions about photographic procedures—he was always interested in how things worked—but mostly he and Herbert were silent, simply enjoying being outdoors as the photographer shot nature sequences for his film."[46] This filming coincided with some of Pollock's explorations of his pouring method.

In a letter to Burgess Meredith, the producer and narrator of the film, Matter set out the tripartite structure of the film as he envisioned it. The first part would be "an abstract presentation of movements in nature through a child's perception (emphasis on things closely seen)."[47] The second would find the child (Matter's son) entering into Calder's studio "accompanied by natural sounds instead of music" along with some narration. The third section would echo the first in presenting Calder's mobiles in their environment; all aspects—form, color, music—would be rhythmically integrated.

In response to Matter's outline, Meredith cautioned him to keep the nature bit to a minimum because it was to be a film "about Sandy and not an interpretation of him."[48] Meredith must have felt that linking the mobiles to nature in the way Matter envisioned was too much of a commentary on Calder's work and not straight forward

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[45] The movie was sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art but seems to have been instigated by the actor Burgess Meredith who enlisted Matter, perhaps based on his work on the 1943 Calder exhibition at MoMA (Landau, "Action/Reaction," 34, 55 n. 15).

[46] B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 121.

[47] Undated letter from Herbert Matter to Burgess Meredith, Herbert Matter papers, M1446. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

[48] Letter from Burgess Meredith to Herbert Matter, Matter papers, Stanford University.

enough. Matter did not entirely take Meredith's advice, as the nature shots and narration constitute almost six minutes of the twenty-minute film. The length of the opening sequence indicates that it is more than just a prologue; while the movie was to be a "documentary" on Calder, Matter was not interested in giving the viewers an "objective" documentation of Calder's sculpture, as such an approach would have undermined not only the vital essence of the mobiles but also would have been contrary to Matter's belief that film and photography needed to move beyond mere documentation of a subject. Matter was committed to using the inherent quality of film—its constant changing of images—to accentuate his vitalist theme of flux. In an undated note, Matter wrote, "In life or (time) on earth, nothing stands still, everything is moving, changing, moving by, going forward or backwards. Moving pictures are closest to life/the truth. Life has the element of change. Moving pictures [have] the element of change."[49] The opening nature sequence, then, acts as a foundation for the entire vitalist conceptualization of the film and music.

Matter's film (and many of his photographic experiments) indicate that vitalist visual tropes were still evocative at this point in time, and in many ways, this film underscores what the Abstract Expressionists found so compelling about Calder's work.[50] It is not just that Calder's mobiles *move* like the water or the blowing

[49] Undated note, Matter papers, Stanford University.

[50] Calder went to The Club frequently in the earliest months before he moved back to France in May 1950. The Club hosted a going-away party on May 3, 1950. Alcopley remembered, "When Sandy and Louisa Calder left for France, we had a party for them the night before their departure. Sandy was a passionate dancer and could move about with a partner for hours without stopping. When Louisa was exhausted, he grabbed me and we, a rather bulky pair of barrel-chested men, swirled around incessantly until I, too, became exhausted" (Alcopley, "The Club: The First Three Years," 47). Calder's

milkweed; the point—the vitalist point—is that everything moves, everything is connected. While the young Pundy stumbles upon a house with lots of windows, Meredith incants, "The wind made everything move. He found some jellyfish and under the water they were moving too, so was the water and the milkweed and the sun." Calder's mobiles, of course, also move. Towards the end of part two, after a few seconds of workshop noises, the narrator explains, "The boy watched him so long he got rather dreamy and the things he saw in the house and the things he had seen outside got mixed up together in his head. The man said that was what they were supposed to do. He said everybody saw something different after all, depending on the way they looked at the mobiles. Only the mobiles were exactly what they were and nothing else." By finding visual similarities between fluttering leaves and small rotating discs of a mobile, Matter fused art and nature, conveying that all is in sync, but he made an important distinction. While Calder's sculptures partake of the same rhythmic forces as nature, Meredith reminds the viewer the mobiles "[are] exactly what they [are] and nothing else." There is *autonomy* of the artwork and its *entwining* with nature and the environment. The mobiles are not supposed to mean a specific idea, and yet they are supposed to give one the sense of being connected in an intricate web of life by the way in which they move. Pollock's statement from a 1950 interview echoed Matter's portrayal of the autonomy and connectedness of Calder's mobiles; he told William Wright that viewers "should not look for, but look passively—and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what

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involvement with vitalism and metaphysics, particularly with Eugene Jolas' Verticalism, needs further research. Linda Henderson's forthcoming updated edition of *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art* (MIT Press) will be immensely helpful in tracking these involvements.

they are to be looking for."[51] Like Calder's sculpture and Matter's film, Pollock's paintings are exactly what they are and nothing else, but they too take part in nature's rhythmic flux.

Matter's thoughts on the music for the film were integral to his vitalist vision. In both, there is an equivalence between the medium and the content of the product that is crucial to the vitalist perspective. The unity between form and content, medium and intention bespeaks the underlying connectivity of everything that is so central to vitalism. While Cage eventually wrote the score for the movie, Edgard Varèse, Matter's first choice of composer, was also close friends with Calder.[52] Varèse's attitudes on rhythm and the role of technology would have melded seamlessly with Matter's. In his lecture, "Music: An Art-Science," a version of which he may have delivered at The Club, Varèse spoke of the need for sound producing—not reproducing—machines in order to "free musical expression."[53] In a similar manner, Matter wanted photography to move

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[51] Jackson Pollock, Interview with William Wright (late 1950) in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, edited by Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 20.

[52] At the end of 1949, Varèse would collaborate with Burgess Meredith again on a Calder project; Varèse composed a dance for a scene in *Happy as Larry*, an avant-garde play acted in and directed by Meredith. Calder designed the sets (Felix Meyer and Heidy Zimmermann, eds., *Edgard Varèse: Composer, Sound Sculptor, Visionary* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2006), 280).

[53] Olivia Mattis, email to the author, May 15, 2009. For the text of Varèse's lecture see, Edgard Varèse, "Music as an Art-Science," in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, edited by Elliott Schwartz and Barry Childs (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 198-201. See also "Edgard Varèse and Alexei Haieff questioned by 8 composers," *Possibilities* 1 (1947): 96. Alcopley remembered the night Varèse spoke at The Club, "The Club was so overcrowded that some people present, among them Sidney Janis who was a volunteer fireman, were scared stiff that the entire building would collapse" (Alcopley, "The Club: The First Three Years," 47). James Rosati recounted to Pavia, who was in Europe at the time, "Varèse gave a lecture and so many

beyond its reproductive capacity into a realm of creative activity. Just as painting was freed from representation with the advent of photography, so too did photography and sound need their freedom. Matter wanted a photograph "to control, to liberate, to create visual sensation."[54] H. Felix Krauss explained further Matter's goals, "He does not want to 'reproduce' nature or anything else in his work, but he wants to 'create' photographs—graphic appearances which in themselves are entities, not necessarily connected to anything else…. The purely graphic composition that will have the strongest response from the onlooker, which will not remind him vaguely or definitely of any experience or thing had or seen, but will actually be an entirely new experience to him, without depending on outside-of-photography effects."[55] The photograph becomes an abstract painting, so to speak.

The events that led to Cage's involvement instead of Varèse's remain unclear, but by what appears to be February 1949, Cage was willing to produce a score for Matter, and Matter was able to keep intact the vitalist vision.[56] Cage's composing methods and general attitude toward art are most commonly associated with Buddhism,

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attended that people sat on all floor space available and stood out in the hall and stairway! I thought surely I was to have many guests in my studio via the ceiling! Tremendous success!" and Emmanuel Navaretta recounted to Pavia that they had to turn people away (James Rosati to Philip Pavia, letter dated November 1950, Pavia papers, Emory University; Emmanuel Navaretta to Philip Pavia, letter dated November 29, 1950, Ibid.).

[54] Herbert Matter, "Herbert Matter," *Arts & Architecture* 61 (May 1944): 20-21.

[55] H. Felix Krauss and Herbert Matter, "Creative Photography," *American Photography* 37 (August 1943): 23.

[56] Undated letter, Matter papers, Stanford University. The date is barely discernible on the postmark of the tattered envelope.

and especially Zen; David Patterson and Douglas Kahn have argued, however, that between 1948 and 1950 Cage's turn toward Zen was not yet complete, and he actually drew heavily from various sources including Southeast Asian thought and early Christian mysticism along with occultism, Rudolph Steiner, Aldous Huxley and even astrology.[57] Branden Joseph has also suggested that Cage was deeply indebted to Bergson's critique of "The Idea of 'Nothing'" that can be found in his book *Creative Evolution*.[58] Cage's famous and revelational experience in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University recalls Bergson's belief that the ontological status of "nothing" is impossible. While experiencing sound deprivation, Cage came to the realization that there is never complete silence, since one's internal body processes always make sound that one cannot escape. The fullness of reality, and not its negation, is at the heart of vitalist thought. Cage's deep involvement with these vitalist ideas place him squarely within the concerns of the Abstract Expressionists that were engaged at The Club.[59]

The film score consists of three parts, as does the movie. Cage allowed the structure of the film to dictate the structure of his composition in order that the two could be worked on independently to create "a polyphony anonymous by nature, but

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[57] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (Winter 1997): 556-598; David W. Patterson, "The Picture That Is Not in the Colors: Cage, Coomaraswamy, and the Impact of India," in *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950*, edited by David W. Patterson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 177-216; John Cage, interviewed by Paul Cummings, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[58] Joseph, "White on White," 106.

[59] Caroline Jones argues that beyond a shared interest in primitivism, Cage's ideas were antithetical to Abstract Expressionism (Jones, "Finishing School," 634-637).

live the way nature is."[60] Cage insisted upon the idea that the music should not "accompany" the film "because each has its own center (which is no center). To bring about the state of no-accompaniment, there must underlie everything (whether words, pictures or what have you) a rhythmic structure."[61] Each was its own entity, and the music was not subservient to the film; the two were still connected. The idea of an underlying rhythm connecting all of the attributes of the film echoes vitalist conceptions of nature. So just as Matter connects the mobiles to the moving surf, Cage connects the sounds to the film's images, without making one-to-one correspondences between the two.

The first and third sections of the composition is a score for prepared piano. Cage wrote that his inspiration came in a dream; he wanted to use mechanical means to make unrelated sounds, but as he told Pierre Boulez, "[M]achines which are too perfect nowadays" halted his efforts.[62] Generally speaking, Cage's ideas about new electronic means and instruments were remarkably similar to Varèse's ideas about technology and sound as well as Matter's ideas about pushing photography beyond mere representation. For Cage, new instruments, and especially electronic instruments, should not imitate or

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[60] John Cage, "A Few Ideas about Music and Films," *Film Music Notes* X (January-February 1951): 12.

[61] Cage, "A Few Ideas about Music and Films," 12.

[62] Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, 17 January [1950] in *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, edited and translated by Robert Samuels (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 48.

reproduce old sounds but rather produce new ones.[63] As Pollock said, new times call for new techniques.[64]

Cage's second section of his composition consisted of recorded noises from Calder's studio, not unlike his inspirational dream. Cage described to Boulez the process of cutting and scotch-taping together tape of recorded noises from Calder's studio. He lamented that he had not done this with nature noises for the entire film.[65] This symbiosis between medium and means follows Bergson's idea that intuition must "[adopt] the very movement of the inner life of things."[66] In a 1951 essay on film and music, Cage wrote, "We are in a real life situation (not an academy) (acoustically speaking) and it is impossible to say which is cause and which is effect (our ears or our sounds) which technique and which vision. Technique is Vision and vice-versa, the Sudden School."[67] Medium and intention are inseparable and necessarily form each other. The "Sudden School" refers to Zen Buddhism and sudden enlightenment, but it is also not far removed from the vitalist discussions of spontaneity. The spontaneous coincidence of subject and object that occurs in intuitive action was a recurring theme not only in Zen and vitalism but also, as the following sections will show, in Gestalt therapy and Action Painting.

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[63] John Cage, "Future of Music: Credo," in *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 4 and also "Forerunners of Modern Music," in *Silence*, 66.

[64] Pollock, Interview with William Wright, 20.

[65] Cage, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, 93.

[66] Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 224.

[67] Cage, "A Few Ideas about Music and Films," 14.

In 1948, Cage recalled his reaction to hearing Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet*, "I don't think it is a matter here of communication…or even expressivity…. We were simply transported. I think the answer to this riddle is simply that when the music was composed the composers were at one with themselves. The performers became disinterested to the point that they became unself-conscious, and a few listeners in those brief moments of listening forgot themselves, enraptured, and so gained themselves."[68] For Cage, and I would argue for Pollock as well, it is through passionate detachment that one, either as artist/composer or as viewer/listener, is able to tap into the vital rhythm and to be accessible/receptive to those of the same mind. It is a process of integration—of the self with nature *but also of the self with others*. It is the modern artist's goal, according to Pollock, to "[work] and [express] an inner world…[express] the energy, the motion, and other inner forces."[69]

Neither Matter, Cage, nor Pollock were interested in established dogmas but were instead trying to find a space where such metaphysical languages as vitalism could begin to describe a new way of thinking outside of the traditional manners, and the collaborative project, "The Works of Calder," stands as a strong example that the artists at The Club would have sympathized with, recognizing their own artistic processes in Matter's and Cage's. This undogmatic approach was the foundation, not only for the organization of The Club, but also its discussions. In its eclecticism, The Club refrained from taking a particular aesthetic position or adopting a specific line of thought, or philosophy. At the start of the Cold War, it was the distrust of such

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[68] John Cage, "A Composer's Confession," *Musicworks* 52 (Spring 1992): 14.

[69] Pollock, Interview with William Wright, 21.

dogmatic stands that led not only many of the artists but also many on the Left to pursue alternative roads of discourse.

After the Second World War and the revelation of Stalin's misdeeds, the intellectuals around Dwight Macdonald and his magazine *politics*, which overlapped with some of The Club circle, realized the need "to clear the ground, to criticize the old methods that have landed us in a blind alley, and to grope in a new direction."[70] Neither the Soviet Union nor the United States offered an ethical model with which to move forward. This led to the "New Roads" series discussed in the previous chapter. The image of groping here is crucial: no one—neither artist nor intellectual—knew exactly what he or she was doing, what the goals were exactly, or what the outcome of this exploration would be. Poet and novelist Mary McCarthy remembered the immediate postwar years, "It still seemed possible still, utopian but possible, to change the world on a small scale."[71] This idea of the small scale, the grass roots, was crucial when politics was being debated on a global scale that did not take account of individuals.

Macdonald's politics at this time were rooted in personal intuition and imagination.[72] Macdonald wrote in his important, searching article, "The Root is Man," "I think each man's values come from intuitions, which are peculiar to himself and yet—if he is talented as a moralist—also strike common chords that vibrate correspondingly

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[70] Dwight Macdonald, "The Root is Man, Part Two," 208, quoted in Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle*, 110.

[71] Carol Gelderman, ed. *Conversations with Marcy McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 15-16, quoted in Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle*, 5.

[72] Macdonald, "The Root is Man, Part Two," 214.

in other people's consciences."[73] The individual—through imagination, emotion, and intuition—grasps that which connects him or her with others. Instead of building society from a preconceived system, one should begin with the individual and work out towards society—a grassroots approach instead of a top-down one. Following the writings of proto-anarchist William Godwin, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Macdonald and many others recognized "that individual rights can be guaranteed only within an egalitarian and mutualistic social context…committed to fostering personal, face-to-face relationships based on genuine friendship and solidarity. They would encourage democratic participation and dialogue and operating according to fluid, provisional, 'immanent' principles derived from concrete experience rather than rigid coordination from above…."[74] Macdonald is not far from Goodman's anarchism here or Bergson's idea of a vital metaphysics, and on a small scale, this social context was realized at The Club. Along with Goodman and Macdonald, these artists were trying to locate and encourage that "part of human existence exempt from catastrophic history and totalitarian social and cultural pressures" in order to exist being artists.[75]

Herbert Matter did not mean for "The Works of Calder" to be a political statement—such a goal would have been far from his mind—but based on his unpublished writings, an argument can be made that Matter's vitalism was part of his politics. Matter did not often speak of politics, but in the notebooks he kept while in Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s, his political leanings can be gleaned. He railed

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[73] Ibid., 197.

[74] Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle*, 121.

[75] Ibid., 108-109.

against conformity caused by single-minded government and education and accused the factory conditions of the workers for society's ruination. "Industry and Capitalism. Capitalism and Pauperism. Pauperism and Alcoholism. Everything is connected and are side effects of money and property rights."[76] This connectedness of economics and social problems is echoed in his thoughts on film and photography and even in his daily observations. On a yellow piece of paper with drawings of what appear to be electrical line towers, Matter wrote, "Everything contains the whole thing—world society construction multitude universe like atoms."[77] The many contain the one, and the one the many. The mutuality and parity of the very biggest and the very smallest is evident. The individual cannot be separated from society. This growing tendency to explore avenues of thought that allowed for connectivity and groundedness was not only the heart of Macdonald's editorial forays but also Matter's vitalist aesthetics and the basis for discussion at The Club. Paraphrasing Sheldon Cheney, vitalism allowed one to recognize connectedness instead of isolation.

While the Calder movie was not an overt political statement, it participated in the effort to establish immanence from concrete experience, which many intellectuals saw as the new grounding for affective politics. In another note on film, Matter wrote "a person not as a spectator but as participant."[78] Part of a vitalist aesthetic is the belief that one participates in the same flux with the sea, the trees, the sculpture, and the film, and one realizes that while one does not have a large audience, one has friends with

[76] Notebook #1, Matter papers, Stanford University.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

whom one can talk and stand with together in support—these are the concrete experiences from which society grows and politics is grounded. It is in these ways that the artists at The Club could move away from "catastrophic history" and totalitarian pressures, as Macdonald described, to something that resembled a healthy, anarchic collective.

Heideggerian Existentialism

Already in 1970, Robert Rauschenberg told filmmaker Emile de Antonio, "You have to have time to feel sorry for yourself if you're going to be a good Abstract Expressionist, and I think I always considered that a waste."[79] In the public, and even often in the critical, imagination, Abstract Expressionists are characterized by their "angst," and their paintings are to be viewed as visual analogues to Existentialism—an Existentialism typified by the nihilistic writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. Michael Leja has persuasively argued that existentialist philosophy is not essential for understanding Abstract Expressionism, and Willem de Kooning said, "We weren't influenced directly by Existentialism, but it was in the air, and we felt it without knowing too much about it. We were in touch with the mood."[80] Existentialism is not the single key to Abstract Expressionism (although de Kooning may have been understating their knowledge of it),

[79] de Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters Painting*, 87.

[80] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 249; de Kooning, quoted in Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 98.

but Existentialism was a common topic of discussion at The Club. Surprisingly though, the Existentialism discussed at The Club was not the popular Sartrean version. Of six evenings devoted to existentialist topics, four of them dealt specifically with the thought of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger.[81] Heidegger's ideas of Being-in-the-world and Being-with would have appealed to the artists for their this-worldly concreteness and would have echoed other ideas discussed in relation to Gestalt therapy, Zen, and Action Painting.

In addition to Sartrean Existentialism, Kierkegaard is often invoked as an important source of Existentialism for the artists, but there is little recognition that other versions of Existentialism circulated in the late 1940s. Not surprisingly, Paul Goodman's relationship to Existentialism offers and illuminating example. Goodman's existentialist pantheon went beyond Sartre and Albert Camus, for he did not want to be associated with Sartre's nihilism. Instead, Goodman drew from "earlier, more phenomenologically oriented positions…Kierkegaard, Kafka, Buber, and the Taoist sages Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu."[82] By taking a wider view of Existentialism, the issues move from a matter of influence, or how consistently the artists adopted a particular philosophy, to the ways in which Existentialism shared in the effort to articulate new ways of being in the world and being with others.

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[81] June 22, 1950—William Barrett, "Existentialism"; November 3, 1950—Egon Vietta, "Heidegger and Existentialism"; December 14, 1951—Hubert Kappel, "Heidegger and the Creative Attitude"; April 25, 1952—"Problems of the Engaged Artist," panel discussion with John Ferren, Barnett Newman, Emanuel Navaretta, Lionel Abel, Edwin Denby, Ray Handler, Elaine de Kooning, and John Cage.

[82] Taylor Stoehr, *Here Now Next: Paul Goodman and the Origins of Gestalt Therapy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 105-106.

Both Irving Sandler and Dore Ashton have mentioned Heidegger in passing in their discussions of Existentialism and Abstract Expressionism, but both have concentrated on Sartre and Camus.[83] Similarly, Nancy Jachec, author of the most complete study on Abstract Expressionism and Existentialism, dismisses Heidegger and Karl Jaspers as less important than Sartre and Camus, citing their apoliticism.[84] The existentialism put forward by Heidegger may not have been overtly political, but its radical conception of Being was grounded in the social, offering the artists a new way to envision the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Sartre's popularity and his status as the face of existentialist philosophy in the postwar years is not in question here, but his impact on Abstract Expressionism is.[85] In 1947, the editors of the *Saturday Review of Literature* recognized the trend, comparing Sartre to Bergson's popularity thirty years prior. When Sartre came to lecture at Carnegie Hall in 1946, the room was "filled to the rafters," according to John Myers, and "his audience seemed split between professors of French literature from Columbia and people from the Fifty-seventh Street art world."[86] Ashton recalled that all of the Abstract Expressionists went to this lecture.[87] While this would seem to confer some

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[83] Sandler, "The Club," 27-31; Ashton, *The New York School*, 178.

[84] Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, 69.

[85] In light of the evidence of Heidegger's prominence at The Club, I have chosen not to delve into the particulars of Sartre's complex philosophy. Certainly, Sartre saw himself following Heidegger, but this aspect of his thought was not usually taken up in the discussions of Sartre in the immediate postwar years.

[86] John Bernard Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World* (New York: Random House, 1981), 64.

[87] Dore Ashton, interview by author, February 12, 2009.

importance, or influence, Annie Cohen-Solal writes in her biography of Sartre, "Organized by Charles Henri Ford, editor of *View*, the evening turned into a real celebration: what the lion of French literature had to say about the renewal of the theater in postwar Europe mattered minimally since it was Sartre people had come to discover and appreciate, not his lecture."[88] This event was more about Sartre's celebrity status and less about the ideas pronounced. Myers recalled that Sartre spoke in French and discussed that contemporary theater should have "little or no scenery, characters engaged in actions that reveal what they are, [and] the facing up to contemporary problems without theatrical claptrap."[89] Certainly this authenticity without theatrics or play-acting would have appealed to the artists if they understood French, but the seeming absence of any discussion of Sartre at The Club is conspicuous and perhaps points to the fact that Sartre's philosophy was not as amenable to the Abstract Expressionists' own project as is usually assumed.[90]

In his 1951 article on the importance of Existentialism for modern times, the philosopher William Barrett argued that the thinking of Heidegger and Jaspers was more important than the popular notions of Sartre.[91] He also included the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and the theologians Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel among the most consequential thinkers on the subject. The essay was a transcript of a

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[88] Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 274-75.

[89] Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous*, 64.

[90] Sartre's name does not appear in any of the documented lecture titles, and he is only mentioned twice in passing on April 25, 1952 (Seitz papers, Archives of American Art).

[91] William Barrett, "What Existentialism offers Modern Man," *Commentary* 12 (July 1951): 17-23.

lecture given at the Institute of Religious and Social Studies, underscoring the degree to which Existentialism was bound up with notions of religion at the time. Kierkegaard, of course, wrote from a Christian perspective, but additionally popular Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr were taking up existentialist themes as well. In his essay, Barrett aligned all of these thinkers with Bergson and Alfred Whitehead, emphasizing that this so-called "anti-rational" tendency in modern philosophy can no longer be dismissed.[92] Barrett saw philosophy to be "the concrete effort of the living individual to relate himself to his own life and the life of others around him."[93] This relatedness is present in the vitalist perspectives voiced by Lippmann and Cheney, who were closely following Bergson, but it is precisely this connectedness that is missing in Sartre; Sartrean Existentialism, in its earliest guises, is fundamentally anti-communitarian.[94] For Barrett and the Abstract Expressionists, Existentialism was more than its popular image of isolation, despair, and nihilism.

One of the primary reasons Heidegger is overlooked as a source for the Abstract Expressionists is that his most famous book, *Being and Time*, was not translated

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[92] Ibid., 19. For a formulation of this anti-rationalist accusation, see the symposium "The New Failure of Nerve," over several months in *Partisan Review* 10 (January-February 1943): 2-57; (March-April 1943): 134-77; (May-June 1943): 248-62; (July-August 1943): 321-44.

[93] Ibid., 22.

[94] It was in the early 1950s that Sartre began reconciling his Existentialism with Marxism. He most fully engages with the outside world and the notion of community in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) (Hazel E. Barnes, "Review: Jean-Paul Sartre and the Outside World," *Chicago Review* 15 (Summer 1961): 107-112; Ann Fulton, "Apostles of Sartre: Advocates of Early Sartreanism in American Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55 (January 1994): 113-127).

into English until 1962.[95] There were, however, important earlier intermediaries that brought Heidegger's thinking to the artists. One of Heidegger's most famous students, Hannah Arendt, occupied the fringes of The Club. She spoke in 1951, and her husband, Heinrich Blücher, was the most popular speaker at The Club in the early 1950s.[96] Additionally, Arendt published essays on Existentialism, emphasizing Heidegger and Jaspers over Sartre, that many of The Club regulars would have read.[97] Both Blücher and Arendt were introduced to The Club by their good friend, Lewin Alcopley, who, along with being a doctor and one of the charter members of The Club, studied with both Heidegger and Jaspers in the early 1930s.[98] While none of the three seem to have spoken on Heidegger specifically at The Club, they would have been active participants

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[95] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962). There were earlier translations of some of Heidegger's essays, most notably in 1949 (*Existence and Being* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1949), but as Miles Groth points out, this translation was plagued with mistranslations (Miles Groth, *Translating Heidegger* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2004), 95-112). Even in the 1960s, Heidegger's reception in the United States was not very noticeable. It was not until the 1980s, when theories of deconstruction based on Heidegger's work, that his thought became more prominent (George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 9). Claude Cernuschi is working on a study that considers Barnett Newman in relation to Heidegger's ideas.

[96] Arendt spoke on "The European Intellectual" on March 23, 1951. Blücher spoke numerous times on topics such as André Malraux, Cézanne, and kitsch. See Appendix III for details. For an analysis of Arendt's thought in relation to Abstract Expressionism see Steven Zucker, "Art in Dark Times: Abstract Expressionism, Hannah Arendt, and the 'Natality' of Freedom" (PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 1997).

[97] Hannah Arendt, "What Is Existenz Philosophy?" *Partisan Review* 13 (Winter 1946): 34-56; "French Existentialism," *Nation* 162 (February 23, 1946): 226-228.

[98] Alcopley, "Hannah Arendt, Heinrich Blücher and Fundamental Thinking," in *One Man-Two Visions: L. Alcopley-A. L. Copley, Artist and Scientist*, edited by Alexander Silberberg (New York: Pergamon Press, 1993), 210. Here, Alcopley also recalled listening to Max Horkheimer's lectures at the University in Frankfurt am Main.

in any discussion involving him. William Barrett, known today as a popularizer of Existentialist thought, wrote one of the earliest expositions of Heidegger's thought in English. His long essay "What is Existentialism?" published as a pamphlet in 1947 by *Partisan Review* deals mostly with Heidegger.[99] Miles Groth, who has written a study of Heidegger translations, holds that "in Barrett, Heidegger finally had his first authentic voice in English."[100] Groth goes on to praise Barrett's depth of understanding and the facility with which he explained the complicated philosophy. Given Barrett's preference for Heidegger over Sartre, it is likely that in addition to his talk on Heidegger and time, on June 15, 1951, Barrett would have spoken on Heidegger during his earlier talk, "Existentialism," as well.

Besides Arendt, Blücher, Alcopley, and Barrett, there were two other figures who brought Heidegger's ideas to The Club—Hugh Kappel and Egon Vietta. While Pavia referred to Kappel as a dedicated Club member and translator of Heidegger, his relationship to The Club remains mysterious; he does not seem to have published any articles on Heidegger, nor do any notes or descriptions from his talks exist.[101] Vietta

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[99] William Barrett, *What is Existentialism?* (New York: Partisan Review, 1947).

[100] Groth, *Translating Heidegger,* 72.

[101] For Pavia's description, see Undated notes in Pavia papers, Emory University. Prof. John Sallis, a Heidegger expert at Boston College, did not know of any Heidegger scholar by this name (John Sallis, email correspondence, January 29, 2009). Pavia's description of Kappel as a "translator," then, should be taken informally. Tony Hale, Kappel's grandson was not aware of any study of or with Heidegger but suggested that Kappel may have become familiar with Heidegger's thinking while at the Sorbonne in the 1930s (Tony Hale, interview by author, May 27, 2009).

was a dramatist and lawyer who knew Heidegger and studied his work.[102] In 1950, he wrote *Die Seinsfrage*, which constituted a "large-scale critique of technology" with an exposition of some of Heidegger's thought.[103] While this study has not been translated into English, Vietta wrote an article "Being, World, and Understanding: A Commentary on Heidegger" that was translated in 1951.[104] It is unclear how Vietta found his way to The Club—perhaps via Arendt or Alcopley—but presumably his talk would have been based in part on his article. In a letter to Pavia, who was in Europe at the time, the sculptor James Rosati reported on the evening, "Everyone thought it was the best yet."[105]

Vietta's exposition of *Dasein* and *Mitsein* articulate foundational aspects of Heidegger's philosophy that would have been most compelling to the artists at The Club. In German, *Dasein* usually refers simply to human existence as opposed to, say, a tree's existence, but in Heidegger's usage, *Dasein* carries more ontological import. It is

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[102] In *Club without Walls*, Vietta is referred to as "Viotta." I am grateful for Prof. Sallis' suggestion that this was a misspelling and the person in question was actually Egon Vietta (John Sallis, email correspondence, January 29, 2009). For information on Vietta, see Heinrich Wiegand Petzet and Parvis Emad, eds., *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1929-1976* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 100-102.

[103] Petzet and Emad, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger*, 100. Vietta's point of departure was Heidegger's 1949 lectures "Einblick in das, was ist," which would become the basis for Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology."

[104] Egon Vietta, "Being, World, and Understanding: A Commentary on Heidegger," *The Review of Metaphysics* 5 (September 1951): 157-172.

[105] Letter from James Rosati to Philip Pavia, Pavia papers, Emory University. This letter is excerpted in *Club without Walls* (179) and given a date of November 2, 1950. There does not appear to be a date on the actual letter, and given the events described (Vietta spoke on November 3), the date is either incorrect, or the letter was written over a period of days.

"the human *way of being*."[106] *Dasein*—literally Being-there—names the nature of human existence: man is the "there" of Being; man is the "loci" of Being, as Vietta described it.[107] This location, or position, however, should not be understood in a strictly geometric or spatial sense. As Hubert Dreyfus explains, *Dasein* "is a moving center of pragmatic activity in the midst of a shared world."[108] Dreyfus' commentary echoes Vietta's and makes explicit two important points: one, *Dasein* is active, and two, *Dasein* is active "in the midst of a *shared* world."

While he never mentioned Freud by name, one of Vietta's primary goals was to distinguish *Dasein* from the psychoanalytic understanding of the Ego.[109] In doing so he proposed a reading of the individual self that was not bound up with consciousness and unconsciousness. *Dasein* is "not an ego containing a stream of private experiences," instead, *Dasein* is "a mode of comportment."[110] It is the way one carries, or conducts, oneself in the world; it is inherently active. This is a notion of the individual self that evaded the ubiquitous therapeutic world view that was increasingly dominating all understandings of the self. It is a view that would have echoes in Gestalt therapy and that would play a role in Rosenberg's description of the Action Painter.

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[106] Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 14.

[107] Vietta, "Being, World, and Understanding," 157 n. 1; 166.

[108] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world*, 164.

[109] Vietta, "Being, World, and Understanding," 157.

[110] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world*, 160.

Dasein belongs in a shared world; in fact, Being-in-the-world is the most basic activity in which *Dasein* participates. Dreyfus describes it as a sort of "background intentionality" in that *Dasein* is not usually aware of it as part of Being. Dreyfus likens it to being in a room and knowing it is a room without having to attend to its arrangement, furniture, etc.[111] One can take in the whole immediately because one has developed a sense of how things are and work and how one deals with them through prior experience with them. *Dasein* is always intimately connected with the environment and the world, and that world is always already there. The world does not depend on *Dasein's* understanding of it in order to exist. In this way, Heidegger escaped the fetishization of the individual.

It is not just that *Dasein* exists in a world, but *Dasein* exists in a world with other *Daseins*. Heidegger described this sharedness as *Mitsein*, or Being-with. It must be understood that Being-in-the-world and Being-with are modes of being in which *Dasein* participates. As Emmanuel Lévinas explained, "[T]hese prepositions in, for, and with are rooted in the verb to-be."[112] Being, then, necessarily encompasses all of these modes. Heidegger was very clear on this foundational nature of *Mitsein*, "Even if the particular factical *Dasein* does not turn to Others, and supposes that there is no need of them or manages to get along without them, it is in the way of Being-with...because *Dasein's* Being is Being-with, its understanding of Being already implies the understanding of

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[111] Ibid., 103.

[112] Jean Wahl and Emmanuel Lévinas, "An Essential Argument within Existentialism," *Instead* 7 (undated): unpaginated, reprinted in Ann Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1990), 302. Lévinas also including in his list Being-for-death.

Others."[113] Heidegger argued that because we have forgotten this aspect of Being, the problem of knowing other *Daseins* has occupied modern philosophers since Descartes.[114] Dreyfus argues that Heidegger's radicality resides in the way he overcame this stumbling block of modern philosophy. Traditionally, philosophers, such as Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, thought of the self as "an isolable occurent entity;" that is, they divorced the self from the surrounding world. They began with "my" world and moved to "the" world, but for Heidegger, there was only "the " world and human beings happen to be in it.[115] In this way there can be no separation of the individual and the collective/society; the two are inextricably bound together.

Barrett praised Heidegger for not falling into this trap of bracketing the world from consciousness in order to understand consciousness. Barrett rejected philosophy that devolved into solipsism and instead argued for a philosophy, as in Ancient Greece, that was conducted in the market place instead of one's private study. Barrett wrote, "What will do us for a market place? Washington Square on a fine spring afternoon, where we are lucky to find an empty seat to squeeze into, and this neighbor, whose existence we are to bracket, probably is sticking his elbow in our ribs."[116] While Barrett held Heidegger in high esteem, he felt that Heidegger did not go far enough beyond this traditional bracketing to realize the full potential of his radicality. One of Barrett's biggest critiques of Heidegger is his analysis of *Das Man*—the one. Sometimes *Das Man*

[113] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 160-161.

[114] Ibid., 162.

[115] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world*, 151 and 142.

[116] Barrett, *What Is Existentialism?*, 45.

is translated as the "they," but it is supposed to refer to our everyday daily existence. For Heidegger, *Das Man* is inauthentic experience, for authentic experience comes with the confrontation of death, the realization and understanding that one has to die and another cannot take one's place in this regard.[117] Barrett argued that while this is true,

> we must realize [also] our authenticity in communication and exchange with others…. [Heidegger's] trouble is that, though he begins by positing our existence as an existence-with-others, what he describes is an abstraction and not the concrete co-existence of daily life. Everyday life is not that undifferentiated public existence that he describes as the existence of the One [*Das Man*]; our banality is not the anonymity of the crowd, except for certain moments; we move within smaller communities rather than an abstract public world at large; within groups, circles of friends and enemies, full of the passion of personal intrigue, differences, backbiting, gossip, and now and then the possible occasions of friendship, the joys and communication in friendship. Hence it is within that concrete and extremely personal context (from which we start) that we must hammer out our own truthfulness and authenticity.[118]

Barrett would not follow this observation with an echo of Sartre, "Hell is Others." Such an attitude would be too flippant. Instead, there is an authenticity to be found in this daily co-existence, not just in the solitude of facing death or nothingness.

Barrett saw authenticity in the daily interactions of the downtown community. The artists hanging out in Washington Square park and the Waldorf Cafeteria moved to 35 East Eighth street in order to crystallize their co-existence, to make apparent *Mitsein*. The passion, the arguments, and the friendships evidenced at The Club were where

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[117] One must keep in mind that "authentic" and "inauthentic" do not necessarily contain positive and negative implications in Heidegger's thinking, although he was not always clear about this.

[118] Barrett, *What Is Existentialism?*, 49-50.

positive authenticity was found. In this way The Club became emblematic of a collectivity that was indescribable in the popular existentialism—or even in popular political rhetoric—of the time. With recourse to Heidegger's metaphysics and other sympathetic vocabularies, the Abstract Expressionists were able to establish a new concrete model of community in the midst of the Cold War era.

Barrett and Vietta would have disagreed on the concreteness of Heidegger's articulation of *Mitsein*. Vietta argued that Heidegger's philosophy was inherently social because of the ideas of *Mitsein* and *Das Man*, but the social implications of Heidegger's thought loomed ominously. Heidegger himself thought that his philosophy did not have a social mission, and that given the state of modern society, his philosophy no longer had a place.[119] Most controversial is Heidegger's participation in the Nazi party in 1933 when he became the rector for the University of Freiburg. It is beyond the scope of this section to go into detail about the controversy, but it was something that was acknowledged during the late 1940s by both Barrett and Arendt. Barrett cautioned his reader that while there were merits to be found in Heidegger's thinking, "he remains first and last one of the Brahmans of the great German academic tradition—capable of the most childish self-deception (alongside of great learning and profound introspective imagination) in empirical matters; facts to remember in connection with his later allegiance to the Nazi party."[120] Arendt felt much the same way, as she explained in a

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[119] Karsten Harries, "Heidegger as a Political Thinker," *The Review of Metaphysics* 29 (June 1976): 642.

[120] Barrett, *What is Existentialism?*, 39.

footnote to her essay, "What Is Existenz Philosophy?"[121] Without the concreteness that Barrett proposed, Heidegger's thought remained too abstract, and by implication, potentially dangerous.

Vietta did not explicitly refer to Heidegger's Nazism, but he did elucidate an important aspect of Heidegger's thinking that is not especially clear in the light of Heidegger's own political engagement. Vietta wrote that in this technological and mechanical age, "[T]he mastery of the masses as well as the mastery of the individual spring from one and the same root: both see the essence of man in unlimited and unconditional subjectivization. Since the Renaissance man has more and more acquired a central position."[122] For Vietta and Heidegger, scientific success—the technological world—was premised on man's ordering the environment to suit his own purposes, "since he presents it to himself and measures it to himself until everything is 'set' or has become a setting."[123] In other words, human beings, as *Das Man*, have become subjected. This perspective requires the understanding of a human being to be an individual, personal ego and not *Dasein* in Heidegger's terminology. In the end, then, focus on either the collective, the masses, or the individual results from the same near-sighted tendency to put humans at the center of the world. The polarity that is usually assumed between the individual and the collective collapses, each side amounting to a skewed view of humans' existential structure. The focus on a human-centered world leads to the obfuscation that human beings are, in fact, limited and conditioned by the

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[121] Arendt, "*What is Existenz Philosophy?*," 46.

[122] Vietta, "Being, World, and Understanding," 162.

[123] Ibid.

others they have to squeeze between and the elbows they have to endure in Washington Square Park.

Barrett's and Vietta's elucidations of Heidegger, in both their praises and criticisms, bring to the fore the issue that was persistently at stake in discussions at The Club: the place of the individual in society, in the world. Heidegger's existentialism offered an understanding of the individual that avoided fetishizing either the individual or the collective, for the two were intimately bound together. For the Abstract Expressionists, the moment of painting took place in the solitary space of the studio. Rarely did artists paint in front of others, and in the mythology of the genius artist, this isolated act is usually privileged as more authentic than the artist's everyday life; however, the production of art works must be expanded beyond the isolation of the studio, for the production is always in relation to imagining a viewer, visiting others' studios, going to galleries, and discussions at The Club. Being-with and Being-in-the-world as presented by Heidegger enlarge the artist's concerns, making everyday activities and interactions fundamentally part of what happens in the studio.

Paul Goodman and Gestalt Therapy at The Club

As I indicated at the outset, this chapter attempts to upset the ossified narrative of this mid-century movement and, in particular, to discredit the belief that the artists abandoned an interest in politics for an interest in interiority, effectively walling them off from the social and political implications of their art. This so-called shift from Marx to

Freud becomes emblematic of the polarization of the collective and the individual that divided the twentieth century.[124] This characterization of Abstract Expressionism, however, does not attend to the fact that the artists tried to ameliorate that divide. Paul Goodman's rereading of Freud, his articulation of Gestalt therapy, and his anarchism begin to point to how these two extremes could be mediated beyond the discursive frames of Marx and Freud in order to establish an alternative perspective, and his frequent participation in the early years of The Club place this mediation within the realm of Abstract Expressionism. Significantly, on two of the three occasions when psychology was discussed explicitly at The Club, the lectures were given by Gestalt therapists, Goodman and Fritz Perls, not Freudians or Jungians.[125] It is not too far a stretch to propose that Goodman was something akin to the resident voice of psychology at The Club in its earliest years.

According to Ludwig Sander, Goodman was the second person to speak at The Club after William Barrett in the days before postcards were mailed. Sander recalled, "And he was very good, too, because he was very flattering. He said in essence that the only people who did not walk around in quiet desperation were artists because they

[124] In one of his terser statements, Guilbaut said of this period, "Marxism gave way to psychiatry" (Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 165).

[125] The third lecture, on January 14, 1955, was delivered by Dr. Martha Jaeger on the intersections of Zen and psychoanalysis. I have not located any particulars of this talk, but that it was focused, in part, on Zen would indicate that it was not the typical Freudian or Jungian version that dominates the Abstract Expressionism discourse. Goodman, along with Fritz and Laura Perls and Ralph Hefferline, a psychology professor at Columbia University, articulated Gestalt therapy in the late 1940s (Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: Dell Publishing, Co., Inc., 1951). They loosely began the New York Institute of Gestalt Therapy in 1951 and began offering classes there in 1952 (Stoehr, *Here Now Next*, 136-163).

were doing what they wanted to do. Everybody else who had a job of some kind or some kind of business wished to God he had been doing something else, and not that."[126] The following year, on April 20, 1950, Goodman gave a talk, "Psychology and the Artist," and he was invited to a members' only evening in November where sculpture was discussed.[127] About a year later, Goodman was considered for a panel on "the influence of psychology on art" that would have included Lionel Abel, Parker Tyler, and Rosenberg, but this evening never materialized.[128] Goodman's last documented talk, "Vanguard and Popular Culture," occurred on May 28, 1952, and was introduced by Harold Rosenberg. In addition, Goodman's architect brother, Percy Goodman, spoke on March 9, 1951, and Goodman's colleague and co-author, Dr. Fritz Perls, spoke on "Creativeness and Neurosis" on May 2, 1952.[129] This litany underscores the centrality

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[126] Sander interview, Archives of American Art. Presumably, this evening was before The Club started sending out postcards, but it could refer to one of the other three documented appearances.

[127] In a 1950 letter from Emmanuel Navaretta to Pavia, Navaretta indicated that Goodman and Herbert Ferber were in attendance at a members' only meeting, and "Grippe insisted on no moderator/specific topic so not too successful but augurs well" (Pavia papers, Emory University).

[128] Notebook #4, The Club records. There is no documentation that this panel actually took place.

[129] Percy Goodman's talk, "Artists should be homosexual," remains enigmatic. Pavia noted that "his friend, Harold Rosenberg didn't think this was funny" (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 161). Given Paul's open bisexuality, the fact that Percy gave this talk, and not Paul, seems surprising. Taylor Stoehr suggested that Percy would have given the talk in jest, as he was "very straight" (Taylor Stoehr, conversation with author, January 29, 2009). Without documentation it is difficult to speak definitively about this talk, but one could imagine Percy using homosexuality as an example of liberation from societal norms in establishing relations and communality. One thinks of Marcuse's slightly later exposition of the role the artist and the homosexual play in opposing institutional repression (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press,1955)).

of Goodman's thought at The Club in its earliest years, especially as it pertained to psychology.

Recognizing Goodman as the voice of psychology at The Club significantly revises how one understands Abstract Expressionism's relation to psychology and psychoanalysis. The dominant psychoanalytic frame typically used depends on the theories of Freud and Jung and focuses on interiority and the unconscious. While Freud's ideas about the ego and the unconscious provide the foundation of the psychoanalytic understanding of the individual, the ideas of Carl Jung are most often associated with Abstract Expressionism, particularly with its early phase of "mythmaking," in the early- to mid-1940s.[130] Leja argues that since Jung emphasized the collective unconscious and visual symbols, he especially appealed to artists.[131] For some scholars, the collective unconscious provides an intellectual structure for the artists' own ideas of universalism and timelessness, but this aspect of Jung is dealt with quite abstractly.[132] The bridge between the individual and the collective unconscious, as discussed in art historical literature, remains too vague and vicarious, with the emphasis placed mostly on the artist's individual ego without much consideration of concrete collectivity. Pollock's early work, for example, is often analyzed according to which

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[130] In a letter to the art critic of the New York Times, Mark Rothko referred to himself and his colleagues as "mythmakers" (Mark Rothko, "Letter to the editor, July 8, 1945," in *Writings on Art*, edited by Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 46).

[131] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 172.

[132] Stephen Polcari's use of Jung in relation to the Abstract Expressionist artists is a case in point (Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Jungian symbols he employed and how Pollock, himself, became conversant with such themes.[133] What often goes unconsidered is that by drawing on the storehouse of archetypes, the artists relied on the promise of communication, of recognition, which automatically takes the painting outside of the artist's individual ego, allowing for what James Hillman calls "psychological understanding at the collective level."[134] This movement beyond the self is not often directly addressed.

Perhaps because talk of universalism is greeted with suspicion, art historians are reluctant to discuss further how the transmission of "universal" symbols might operate within the collective. Perhaps the artists themselves struggled with the universality of symbols, as their interest in archetypal myths seemed to wane as artists, such as Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman, came into their mature styles. It is too simplistic to conclude, however, that the artists abandoned their interest in Jung and the idea of universal communication in their subsequent turning to Existentialist ideas; the interest in psychology remained paramount throughout the early 1950s. In one of the seven panels devoted to discussing the label "Abstract Expressionism," the painter John Ferren pinpointed the problem as one of figuring out where the ego lay.[135] Along with Ferren's question of the ego's placement, questions concerning the makeup

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[133] Leja provides a good overview of the Jungian analysis of Pollock and adds his own, more balanced, interpretation (Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 141-202).

[134] James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), xiv.

[135] Notes dated March 28, 1952, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art. In his notes, Seitz made a parenthetical notation after Ferren's comment: "cf. Fromm," referring to the psychologist Erich Fromm, one of the most prominent Freudian revisionists at the time. It is unclear, however, whether this is a note Seitz made to himself or a note indicating that Fromm was discussed among the artists.

of the ego and its importance were also debated at The Club and found multiple answers in talks given by Vietta and Barrett on Heidegger as well as the talks given by Goodman.

In his social and cultural history of psychoanalysis, Eli Zaretsky affirms that the postwar years were profoundly entrenched in the psychoanalytic understanding of the self. He quotes historian Erich Heller, who understands that psychoanalysis during the 1950s was "more than merely one among many possible theories about the psyche; rather it comes close to being the systematic consciousness that a certain epoch has of the nature and character of its soul."[136] Zaretsky argues that because "collective traditions were vulnerable," psychoanalysis—resembling earlier mind cure therapies—was able to insinuate itself into the culture, and it became "central to the Cold War project of normalization."[137] It was this work of normalization and institutionalization that Goodman decried when he wrote, "Theorizing from the self-conquering ego, psychoanalysis can make no sense of a kind of contact that is exciting and changes reality. And the disgrace of our generation is that this kind of ego is so epidemic that what the artist does seems *extra*ordinary."[138] Because traditional psychoanalysis could speak only to the subject matter of art and not the process of artistic creation, it could not imagine art as a contact between artist and canvas, or canvas and viewer, that had the potential to change reality, nor could it imagine such a democratization of artistic creation when it depended on the neurotic, genius artist. Goodman's statement makes

[136] Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 276.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 396. Emphasis in original.

clear that one's notion of the self is inextricably tied to sociopolitical realities. Gestalt therapy's aim is to overturn what had become the "systematic consciousness" of modern society in order to bring about self-awareness, to get people to think for themselves. It also offers a model of psychology that did not eschew the political for interiority.

Besides Goodman's own developing anarchism, some of the theoretical foundations of Gestalt therapy point to its sociopolitical implications, namely the thought of Wilhelm Reich and Martin Buber. Reich's insistence on psychosomatic unity was central to the development of Gestalt therapy.[139] But as Taylor Stoehr has pointed out, it was more Reich's idea of "taking psychoanalysis 'into the streets'" that appealed to Goodman and the Perls.[140] In his article, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," Goodman argued that in leaving aside the "judging and deciding Ego," Reich's theory has "enormous revolutionary dynamism."[141] Reich thought, unlike Freud, that repression was antithetical to a free society. Goodman felt that Reich had demonstrated that "persons restored to sexual health and animal spirits simply will not tolerate the mechanical and routine jobs they have been working at, but turn (at whatever general inconvenience) to work that is spontaneous and directly meaningful…. [U]nrepressed people will provide for themselves a society that is peaceable and orderly enough…."[142] Similarly, Laura Perls, wife of Fritz Perls and also a cofounder of Gestalt

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[139] Ibid., x, 392.

[140] Stoehr, *Here Now Next*, 88.

[141] Goodman, "The Political Meaning of some Recent Revisions of Freud," 202.

[142] Ibid., 201.

therapy, remarked, "I think the work that I am doing is political work. If you work with people to get them to the point where they can think on their own and sort themselves out from the majority confluence, it's political work and it radiates even if we can work only with a very limited number of people."[143]

Laura Perls studied with Martin Buber while still in Frankfurt, and Buber's I-Thou dialogic relationship infuses Gestalt therapy's concept of the self as a boundary function. In an I-Thou relationship, as opposed to an I-It relationship, one recognizes the other as another I, as an end in and of herself, not as a means to one's own end. In Heideggerian language, it is one *Dasein* recognizing another as *Dasein*. The other is not treated as an object but as worthy in herself. More importantly, however, this I is never separated from an It or a Thou. Buber wrote, "There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It…. Whoever speaks one of the basic words enters into the world and stands in it."[144] In other words, the I is always relational; it cannot exist in isolation.

Buber extrapolated this relationship to discuss institutions. He described institutions as "what is 'out there,'" separated from person and community, yielding no public life.[145] He explained,

> When the automized state yokes together totally uncongenial citizens without creating or promoting any fellowship, it is supposed to be replaced by a loving

[143] Laura Perls, *Living at the Boundary*, edited by Joe Wysung (Highland, NY: The Center for Gestalt Development, 1991), 17.

[144] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 54.

[145] Ibid., 93.

> community. And this loving community is supposed to come into being when people come together. But that is not how things are. True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living reciprocal relationship to one another.[146]

In many ways, this echoes Goodman's conception of the avant-garde and the idea that community-building is necessary in order to reenliven and free society from conformity. In his 1950 book, *Paths in Utopia*, Buber wrote,

> The prime conditions for a genuine society can be summed up as follows: it is not an aggregate of essentially unrelated individuals, for such an aggregate could only be held together by a 'political,' i.e., a coercive principle of government; it must be built up of little societies on the basis of communal life and of the associations of these societies; and the mutual relations of the societies and their associations must be determined to the greatest possible extent by the social principle—the principle of inner cohesion, collaboration and mutual stimulation.[147]

These reciprocal relations have much in common with Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid.[148] Goodman's overarching motive, following Reich, was that healthier people would make a healthier society. A new, healthier society—begun in small circles—would be created in the midst of the old, unhealthy society. In order to do this, Gestalt therapy reenvisioned the self—away from the "self-conquering ego"—and dismantled traditional psychological dichotomies; it also attended to the act of artistic creation. Each of these aspects can be considered in relation to Abstract Expressionism, thereby uncovering

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[146] Ibid., 94.

[147] Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), 80.

[148] Buber considered Kropotkin's theory of the State and anarchy in his book *Paths in Utopia* (38-45).

Abstract Expressionism's own project of mending the rift between the individual and society.

One of Gestalt therapy's innovations was its reformulation of the idea of the self precisely at a time when the self was becoming synonymous with the Freudian Ego. In contrast to traditional psychoanalysis, which thought of the self as a substance, contained within one's skin, Goodman and the Perls understood it as a function, an activity, not completely unlike Heidegger's idea of *Dasein* as pragmatic activity. The self is "the system of contacts" in the organism-environment field. Because it depends on the moment, the self is in constant flux. "It varies with the dominant organic needs and the pressing environmental stimuli; it is the system of responses; it…is the contact-boundary at work; its activity is forming figures and grounds."[149] This version of the self is not the objective observer and analyzer of orthodox psychoanalysis; it is action that synthesizes and integrates the organism and the environment. The organism involves the sensory, muscular, and organic capacities of the physical body, including appetites and sexuality, feelings and reasoning, and the environment includes the physical environment as well as historical and cultural spheres. Goodman described the human organism/environment as "a field in which at least social-cultural, animal, and physical factors interact."[150] This holistic approach means that relatedness preexists the self, or rather, the self is defined as the negotiation of these relations. This reformulation of the self is centered on awareness at that contact boundary. Goodman wrote, "Self is not

[149] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 235.

[150] Ibid., 228.

aware of itself abstractly, but is aware of itself as contacting something."[151] Like Buber's I-Thou, the I cannot exist without being in relation. Here, the mind and body are not separate but integrated in such a way that one cannot speak of them as distinct entities. One cannot be aware of oneself unless one is aware of it in relation to another.

While traditional psychoanalysis focuses on what is "normal" and "abnormal," Gestalt therapy focuses on growth instead of "correction." Since neither the self nor prevailing structures are static, one should not adjust to something that will eventually change. Rather, in awareness, one is able to grow and move with change. Not surprisingly, these ideas of constant flux instead of fixed rigidity echo vitalist thinking as well as Taoist notions of *wu wei*, or effortless doing. This issue of adjustment was the reason Goodman opposed the work of Erich Fromm and Karen Horney. Goodman found it alarming that the current interest in psychoanalysis "lead step by step to a psychology of non-revolutionary social adjustment that is precisely the political ideal of the New Deal, the Beveridge Plan, Stalinism, etc."[152] The goal of Gestalt therapy is not to maintain the status quo but to motivate people to think for themselves, to be aware. This awareness echoes the awareness, or mindfulness, that one finds in Taoism and Zen and has a fundamentally political nature.[153]

Goodman wrote, "The figure (Gestalt) in awareness is a clear, vivid perception, image, or insight; in motor behavior, it is the graceful energetic movement that has rhythm, follows through, etc. In either case, the need and energy of the organism and

[151] Ibid., 377.

[152] Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," 197.

[153] For Goodman's involvement with Taoism, see Stoehr, *Here Now Next*, 118-119.

the likely possibilities of the environment are incorporated and unified in the figure."[154] Goodman also described this encounter in Buberian terms as well, "The feeling of [spontaneous] absorption is 'self-forgetful'; it attends completely to its object; and since this object fills the entire field…the object becomes a 'Thou,' it is what is addressed. The 'I' lapses altogether into its attentive feeling."[155] Goodman is not describing a complete identification with the object, but rather the awareness of the object's own presence and role in relation to oneself. In many ways, Goodman's descriptions here contain strong vitalist undercurrents and could easily describe Pollock's painting practice, a point taken up in the following chapter. In this understanding of the realm of the self, the world, objects, environment are not there to be used for one's own end, but instead constitute part of oneself. One enters into a reciprocal relation with the objects at hand; it is not a one-sided relationship of objectification or separation but a relationship based on integration and respect. This vision is fundamental to the politics that Goodman and Macdonald were articulating in *politics* magazine.

In addition to reformulating the self, Gestalt therapy dissolves the neurotic dichotomies of traditional psychoanalytic theory: body/mind, emotional/real, infantile/mature, biological/cultural, poetry/prose, spontaneous/deliberate, personal/social, love/aggression, unconscious/conscious.[156] Gestalt therapy shows that these are false boundaries that interfere with one's healthy relation to the world, society, and others. In terms of redefining Abstract Expressionism, these dissolutions

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[154] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 231.

[155] Ibid., 418.

[156] Ibid., 240-243.

are key, as Abstract Expressionism is widely seen as reifying these distinctions. Inevitably, the Abstract Expressionists are seen as emphasizing the self, emotions, spontaneity, the personal, and the unconscious over, or instead of, their counterparts. There are several occasions, however, when the artists expressed otherwise. Pollock's famous statement, "I am nature," can be interpreted many ways, but the idea that his existence is not separate from nature's existence is paramount. Similarly, Pollock made statements about painting from the unconscious but also insisted that he was able to control the process. Newman also felt that being aware of oneself necessarily led to the awareness of others.[157] Harold Rosenberg spoke of spontaneity, but not opposed to deliberateness, in his famous essay, "The American Action Painters." A careful reading of artists' statements and the defining literature points to a more balanced understanding of these so-called dichotomies than what the caricature of Abstract Expressionism has become.[158]

Goodman singled out the dichotomies of self/external world and personal/social as being two of the most pervasive articles of faith of modern western science. The continued polarization of internal/external, personal/social threatened political and inter-personal nature, and Goodman considered them "the ruination of community life."[159] By breaking down the dichotomies, the hierarchies, one aspect is not more important or dominating than the other, and if Gestalt therapy could spread this idea, it would be

[157] Barnett Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 257-258.

[158] The last section on Action Painting in this chapter along with the following chapter fleshes out these ideas further.

[159] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 241 and 242.

similar to Reich's attitude of taking psychoanalysis "to the streets," restoring awareness and communitarian action.

At the time Goodman delivered his lecture, "Psychology and the Artist," at The Club, he was finishing his portion of the manuscript, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality.*[160] In his introduction to the second volume, Goodman criticized psychoanalysts for their inconsistent treatment of artists. They hailed artists for their healthy spontaneity but at the same time considered them "exceptionally neurotic."[161] He also chastised psychoanalysts for singling out the artist's dreams as more exceptional and the artist's conscious calculation as more valuable than those by others. Goodman instead proposed the following:

> The important part of the psychology of art is not in the dream or in the critical consciousness; it is (where psychoanalysts do not look for it) in the concentrated sensation and in the playful manipulation of the material medium. With bright sensation and play in the medium as his central acts, the artist then accepts his dream and uses his critical deliberateness: and he spontaneously realizes an objective form…. His awareness is a kind of middle mode, neither active nor passive, but accepting the conditions, attending to the job, and growing toward the solution.[162]

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[160] It is largely acknowledged that Goodman wrote the second volume of the book, "Novelty, Excitement and Growth," which represents the more theoretical framework for Gestalt therapy. Goodman finished the first draft of *Gestalt Therapy* before he went to teach at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1950 (Stoehr, *Here Now Next*, 131).

[161] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 245.

[162] Ibid.

Goodman's emphasis on the material process of painting, on the artist's relationship with the paint and the canvas, would have struck a powerful chord with the artists at The Club.[163]

In a later section, Goodman elaborated his thoughts on the psychology of creation and style in contrast to Freud, who thought that psychoanalysis could only deal with the themes and the blocks to creativity. Traditional psychoanalysis is not equipped to deal with creative inspiration or technique. "To the artist, of course, technique, style, is everything: he feels creativity as his natural excitement and his interest in the theme (which he gets from 'outside,' that is, from the unfinished situations of the past and from the day's events); but the technique is his way of forming the real to be more real; it occupies the foreground of his awareness, perception, manipulation. The style is himself, it is what he exhibits and communicates: style and not banal repressed wishes nor the news of the day."[164] Not buying into the "mysteriousness" of creativity, Goodman takes a pragmatic view. One can explain, but not predict, the way in which the parts make up the whole, but Goodman was careful to insist that "the whole comes into being by a very ordinary (everyday) experience."[165] For Goodman, what the artist was able to accomplish should be what everyone is able to accomplish. Goodman's definition of the self, which is not an all-mastering ego, allows for a democratization of artistic production that moves away from the rhetoric of the tortured genius artist.

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[163] Goodman's resonance with Rosenberg's Action Painting will be more thoroughly discussed in the last section of this chapter.

[164] Ibid., 395.

[165] Ibid., 396.

Just a few days after Goodman's talk, the painter Ralph Rosenborg said during the artists' roundtable discussion at Studio 35, "The point is that anybody could paint the picture I paint instead of being a truck driver. I'm not an artist from the esthetic point of view. I'm just a practitioner with a manual point of thinking."[166] This statement was not taken up by any of the other artists, but it is striking in the midst of what has become the rhetoric of heroics surrounding Abstract Expressionism. For Rosenborg, and perhaps for others, the notion that his ideas were better, or more aesthetic, than a regular working person's was absurd; Rosenborg's "manual point of thinking," Goodman would perhaps say technique, was the way he approached the world; style becomes, then, a matter of one's comportment toward the world.[167]

The definitions of the self and the creative process offered by Gestalt therapy spoke to the artists' deepest concerns about the existence of the ego and how it contributed to the act of painting. The self as action, as the integrator of organism and environment, as constantly in flux, as always in relation to others and things echo many of the concerns of vitalism, Heidegger's existentialism, and as will be shown in the following section, Zen. The integration of the individual and society, into his or her surroundings, and the awareness of that negotiation is the heart of Gestalt therapy, and offered an anti-repressive voice in an increasingly repressive era.

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[166] Unedited transcript of the Artists' Roundtable Discussion at Studio 35, April 21-23, 1950, George Wittenborn papers, Museum of Modern Art Archive.

[167] This understanding of style as comportment is remarkably close to Merleau-Ponty's articulation of style in "Cézanne's Doubt," *Partisan Review* 13 (September-October 1946): 464-478.

Zen at The Club

In his essay on postwar America's embrace of Zen, Harry Hartoonian argues that Zen's emphasis on individuality and autonomy and its depoliticization of "everyday life" played into Cold War strategies of emphasizing "normative values and consensus rather than politics and ideology."[168] Hartoonian also finds affinities between Zen popularizer D. T. Suzuki's emphasis on individual experience and Reverend Fulton Sheen's and Norman Vincent Peale's counseling "tranquility and peace."[169] Hartoonian seems to equate the eschewing of political rhetoric with *de facto* depoliticization without understanding the radical critique such abstaining represented. Zen's avoidance of dialectic reasoning—us versus them, subject versus object—does escape the ideological rhetoric of the Cold War, but it does not indicate an escape from politics. Significantly, Ad Reinhardt and John Cage, two of the most vocal participants of The Club, were not only the most engaged with Buddhism (along with Ibram Lassaw) but were also the most politically involved as well. Reinhardt remained committed to organizations associated with the Communist Party long after the days of the Popular Front and into the late

[168] Harry Hartoonian, "Postwar America and the Aura of Asia," in Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 50.

[169] Ibid., 52. Hartoonian mentions Sheen "and others," which can easily be taken to include Peale.

1940s, and while Cage did not fully articulate his anarchism until the 1960s, it was tied intimately to his adoption of many Buddhist ideas in the early 1950s.[170]

Zen's radical political implications rest in its *communitarian impulse*, in its fundamental understanding of the harmony of the individual, society, and nature, which meant that "one could more cooperatively engage the world *without the need for political governance*."[171] Zen's communitarianism looked a lot like an anarchist community built on mutual aid, which eschewed state authoritarianism. While Zen's emphasis on individual autonomy may have coincided with American Cold War rhetoric, like the Abstract Expressionists' understanding, it far exceeded this rhetoric to offer a radically different foundation of the individual and society than that being offered by Cold War liberalism.

Scholars have downplayed Abstract Expressionism's connection to Zen and Asian influences. As early as 1955, Clement Greenberg dismissed "Oriental influence," arguing that "the roots of their art lie almost entirely within the Western tradition."[172] Philip Pavia wrote in an undated note, part of which was published in his selected journals, that Zen had "nothing to do with Abstract Expressionism's new reality, an American pragmatism. Zen did relate to the Spiritualism of Kandinsky, and therefore

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[170] Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2008), 52-59.

[171] James Brown, "The Zen of Anarchy: Japanese Exceptionalism and the Anarchist Roots of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance," *Religion and American Culture* 19 (Summer 2009), 222. Emphasis added.

[172] Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 227.

was attractive to abstractionists, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman."[173] Zen's foreignness made it an unwelcome source for those trying to define a uniquely "American" art. There is also a feeling that since the Abstract Expressionists were not practicing meditation or actively cultivating mindfulness through Zen practice, Zen was not consequential for the formation of Abstract Expressionism.[174] To this assertion I would argue that the artists did not adhere to Jewish or Christian dogma or practice either, but these spiritual traditions still informed their work and creative practice. This downplaying of Zen's impact can also be seen in Sandler who localizes Zen in only two artists—Cage and Lassaw—and asserts that Zen "did not give rise to much discussion at The Club."[175] Certainly Cage, Lassaw, and Reinhardt had the most sustained engagement with Zen, but to say that Zen was not influential, or had nothing to do with Abstract Expressionism, or that it was a passing fad overlooks the documentary evidence: between 1950 and 1955, there were at least ten evenings devoted to Zen and its connections with music, theater, art, and psychoanalysis. In other words, the artists at The Club discussed Zen more than any other documented topic—even more than Existentialism.[176] While discussing a topic does not indicate belief or adoption, Zen's

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[173] Undated note, Pavia papers, Emory University; Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 176.

[174] Already in 1958, Alan Watts discussed the Zen turn without the implementation of Zen practice (Alan Watts, "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," *Chicago Review* 12 (Summer 1958): 3-11).

[175] Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 41.

[176] Sarah Johnson has charted the dissemination of Zen at The Club through D. T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia University and period criticism in order to show that Zen ideas and Asian art were more prominent in the first half of the 1950s than is often acknowledged in the Abstract Expressionism literature. She concentrates on the

prevalence in the discussions at The Club would seem to suggest that it was of more than just a passing interest for many of the artists.

The sustained discussion of Zen throughout The Club's first years demonstrates that Zen carried with it many of the aspects the artists were already exploring in vitalism, Gestalt therapy, and Heideggerian existentialism. As shown in the previous section, Gestalt therapy borrowed Taoism's main tenet—awareness—as its own goal of establishing a healthy relationship within the organism and environment field. Heidegger, too, had ties to Zen, as he reportedly remarked upon reading the work of D. T. Suzuki, "If I understand this man correctly, this is what I've been trying to say in all my writings."[177] Additionally, in 1958, Heidegger participated in a colloquy on "Art and Thinking" along with Alcopley, a founding member of The Club, Hoseki Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, a Zen scholar, and Egon Vietta, who spoke about Heidegger at The Club in 1950.[178] In both Heidegger and Zen, the idea of non-being implies a positive space in which room is made for being and is not meant to be understood in a purely negative sense.

There is perhaps an even deeper connection between Zen and vitalism. The idea of a life force, a relatedness, that is not ended in death or inanimacy, is critical for both. Vitalism's deep affinity to Zen goes back to its own historical roots. Much of the

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sculptor Ibram Lassaw and the abstract painter and scholar Sabro Hasegawa, who spoke twice at The Club (Johnson, "Zen and Artists of the Eighth Street Club").

[177] Heidegger quoted in William Barrett, "Zen for the West," in *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, edited by William Barrett (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), xi.

[178] Alcopley, *Heidegger und Hisamatsu und ein Zuhoerender* (Kyoto: Bokubi Verlag, 1963).

rhetoric of turn-of-the-century vitalism, particularly as articulated by the Theosophists, was wrapped up in the growing discovery of the non-Christian religions of Asia.[179] Suzuki, himself, was a part of this dialogue. It should be remembered that Suzuki was already in his eighties when he began lecturing at Columbia in 1951, but his first trip to the United States came in 1897, just a few years after the World's Parliament of Religions held at the Chicago World's Fair, which sought to introduce Asian religion to a wider Western audience.[180] Suzuki and his wife were also involved in Theosophical circles in the early decades of the twentieth century.[181] Before taking his position at Columbia, Suzuki had already published more than thirty books on Zen and Buddhism in English, but art historians do not recognize Suzuki's influence on American culture before the 1950s when avant-garde artists and writers began hearing his lectures.[182]

Like Zen, central to the vitalist perspective is the fundamental connectedness of all things. Jonathan Katz articulates one of Zen's metaphors for consciousness, which could easily be understood in vitalist terms as well.

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[179] Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 30-32.

[180] For Suzuki's connection to the Parliament and its outcome, see James, "The Zen of Anarchism," 212-215.

[181] Suzuki was also active in Swedenborgian circles (Thomas A. Tweed, "American Occultism and Japanese Buddhism: Albert J. Edmunds, D. T. Suzuki, and Translocative History," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 32 (2005): 249-281; Adele Alegio, "Beatrice Lane Suzuki and Theosophy in Japan," *Theosophical History* 11 (2005): 3-16).

[182] For an overview of Suzuki's time in New York City, see Johnson, "Zen and Artists of the Eighth Street Club," 47-58; David Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords, c. 1942-1959: John Cage's Asian-derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College (Ph. D. diss., Columbia University, 1996). Suzuki was influential before this time of course; most notably, when he met Alan Watts in 1936 in London. Besides Suzuki, Watts was probably the other greatest popularizer of Buddhism in postwar America (Brown, "The Zen of Anarchy," 220-222).

> Any single drop of water has in essence been reincarnated in innumerable states, from part of the body of a dinosaur to our own bodies, and from rivulet to creek to river to ocean to rain to our faucet today. Water is at once always different and always the same, the material, time-traveling incarnation of the Zen vision of interconnectedness across time, space, and being. Like us, from one vantage point each drop of water is singular and autonomous, but from another, it exists merely as an instantiation of the continuum.[183]

Even one drop of water contains thousands of water atoms. The telescoping of scale here recalls Herbert Matter's note quoted above: "Everything contains the whole thing—world society construction multitude universe like atoms."[184]

In the past, scholars have looked for Oriental influence in the Abstract Expressionists' formal, or stylistic, composition. The most cited example being Franz Kline's black and white paintings, which resemble large-scale versions of Japanese calligraphy, but such formal comparisons do not uncover Zen's sympathy with the artists' discourse.[185] Again, the dominant psychoanalytic and biographical understanding of Abstract Expressionism effaces the role of Zen in the formulation of Abstract Expressionism in the early 1950s. The artist's paradigmatic gestural style, identified with

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[183] Jonathan Katz, "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction," forthcoming.

[184] Undated note, Herbert Matter papers, Stanford University.

[185] Bert Winther-Tamaki, "The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics," in *The Third Mind*, 145-157. Winther-Tamaki is primarily concerned with the formal confluences between calligraphy and postwar painting. He only briefly discusses that some Abstract Expressionists—namely David Smith and Philip Guston—were interested in Eastern metaphysics that explained the void as fullness, but he does not say what the larger implications of this understanding are for Abstract Expressionism. He also discusses the unfair denial of Asian influence on Abstract Expressionism due to nationalistic and gendered concerns (151-153).

the artist's personality and interiority, is seen as contrary to an Eastern metaphysics that posits an anonymous and impersonal artist.[186]

Self-expression, personal honor, and individual appraisal are not valued in either Buddhist or Indian philosophy; more importantly, all artists' works are valued "as a contribution to a supra-personal cosmic achievement."[187] The artist is not to be singled out as a special individual. By the same token, the idea of art in the East is far more encompassing, including tea ceremonies and flower arranging—any action that yields a product would be considered artful.[188] No one would suggest that the Abstract Expressionists practiced an impersonal art, but as I will explore in chapter 3, impersonality is a necessary corollary to the archetypal signature styles of Abstract Expressionism. The role of personality and its relation to the work of art were already being questioned and reworked by many speakers at The Club, and these redefinitions would find their way into Rosenberg's definition of Action Painting, which I discuss in the following section.

In the colloquy mentioned above, involving Heidegger, Alcopley, and Vietta, the Zen scholar Hisamatsu described Zen art as leading from reality to the source of reality and back to reality. He said, "It is indeed true that the essence of a drawn line does not lie in its symbolic character but in the movement itself…. The art work is no object

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[186] Surprisingly, Johnson opposes the Eastern and Western notions of artistic creation, essentially minimizing Zen's influence on Abstract Expressionism, as expressionist artists would not be capable of "ego-less" painting (Johnson, "Zen and Artists of the Eighth Street Club," 16).

[187] Betty Heimann quoted in Patterson, "The Picture That Is Not In the Colors," 188.

[188] Alcopley, *Heidegger und Hisamatsu und ein Zuhoerender*, 78; Patterson, "The Picture That Is Not In the Colors," 183.

behind which there could be a meaning or a sense; its 'meaning' lies in its immediate effect, in the movement. However, as long as the issue is how to get into the movement of the source itself, we are no longer or not yet in the source. Once we are in the source, it is the movement itself that moves."[189] Hisamatsu did not call attention to the individual artist, but his description of the artistic process of drawing a line recalls Pollock's own description of how he painted and how his paintings should be viewed. He described his process as "energy and motion made visible" and suggested that viewers "should not look for, but look passively—and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for."[190] Pollock, of course, was not Zen in the way Cage was Zen, but these vitalist ideas still resonated among many of the artists; within the artists' reconceptualization of the role of the artist and the place of art in society, Zen echoed and articulated many of the same issues.

In several undated notes, Pavia linked Zen awareness to the awareness in Existentialism and theosophy. "Zen is a personal tranquility. It immediately followed the terrible war. Experience from solitude and quiet. Theosophy. It's part that the artist immediately wanted to make a religion without the Church and the discipline, [its] magnification of space from a bland presence to an alive presence. No godh[ead]. Existentialism. Experience absurdity of man and god. Thus awareness of you being a

[189] Alcopley, *Heidegger und Hisamatsu und ein Zuhoerender*, 54 and 60.

[190] Pollock, Interview with William Wright, 24.

human being with death as the end. And your will will not help you against it."[191] While still inchoate, these notes articulate the need after the war to break free from authority and discipline to awareness, to recognize that as human beings we are part of a life cycle and cannot escape death, and by the same token, this life cycle imbues space with an "alive presence." Pavia noted in the corner of this note that all of these frameworks were important at The Club. In other notes, Pavia equated the stream of consciousness, which he attributed to William James, with Zen, East Indian philosophy, Bergson's vitalism, as well as theosophy and existentialism. This foregrounding of the interconnectedness of these modes of discourse reveals the essence of a long intellectual tradition, to which Abstract Expressionism belongs.

Of all of the nights devoted to the discussion of Buddhism and Zen, documentation exists for four of them: Ad Reinhardt's lecture, "Detachment and Involvement," on December 22, 1950, John Cage's "Lecture on Something" on February 9, 1951, Sabro Hasegawa's talk on February 26, 1954, and Ibram Lassaw's contribution to the second panel devoted to Zen on November 19, 1954. I will discuss Cage's famous lecture in the next section in relation to Action Painting, so I will leave it aside for now. According to Sandler, Hasegawa told four Zen stories over and over again for several hours, but because he does not indicate which ones, I will also leave this evening aside in order to concentrate now on the talks delivered by Reinhardt and Lassaw.[192] Both talks transmitted key ideas of Zen in relation to artistic attitudes of the creative

[191] Undated note, Pavia papers, Emory University. There is one other note that simply has " Zen Theosophy Existentialism" written on a single page in a column with "yoga" written off to the side.

[192] Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up after Artists*, 41.

process and the illusory nature of dualities. Both of these themes were recurring topics of discussion at The Club, finding various articulations in vitalism and Gestalt therapy. The Buddhist handling of these issues offers a radical alternative to traditional Western perspectives of what the artist is and what the artist produces and, in so doing, offers a critique of the Western dialectic that has consequential political implications at a time when the political rhetoric depended on polarities. While Reinhardt, Lassaw, and Cage were the most involved with Eastern metaphysics, others at The Club such as Philip Guston, John Ferren, and Harry Holtzman would have been especially sympathetic, and still others would have recognized the correspondences between Zen and their own artistic projects.

In his staccato notes, Reinhardt enumerated four historical attitudes of abstract art—impressionist, expressionist, cubist/pure/constructivist, and surrealist. Within each attitude, Reinhardt argued that there was a spectrum of artistic detachment and involvement.[193] The detached artist is interested in the "impersonal art reality—[insistent] on what it is—no free-for-all-wide-open" and is "artist as hero—God—'creator.'" The involved artist is interested in "personal performance," participates in a

[193] Reinhardt's notes for this talk can be found in his papers at the Archives of American Art. Pavia described it as "a spiritual content for abstract art" (Pavia, Club without Walls, 160). He elaborated further, "Reinhardt tied his spiritual plane to Zen (His good friend was Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk he would visit in a monastery). His paintings had a spiritual plane and a spiritual content for abstract art. It was a new content to substitute for Jungianism" (Pavia, quoted in Johnson, "Zen and Artists of the Eighth Street Club," 290). In his chronology, Reinhardt dated this talk to 1948 and indicated that it was given at Subjects of the Artist school (Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art*, 7). The undated talk is clearly marked, "talk, club." Reinhardt, as one of the founding members of the Club, would not have confused The Club with Subjects of the Artist School. Additionally, he indicated that he gave a talk on March 25, 1949 at Subjects of the Artist on the topic of Abstraction. This misdating of "Detachment and Involvement" is conspicuous given Reinhardt's almost obsessive precision.

"tapestry of feeling," slashing and stabbing his autobiography on the canvas. Instead of identifying as artist-creator, the involved artist is "'victim'—Jesus Christ." Considering Reinhardt's writings and his other contributions to The Club, it is clear that for him the proper attitude was one of detachment. Michael Corris argues that Reinhardt sought out Zen Buddhism as "an antidote for the glut of associative meaning."[194] Buddhism—with its insistence on the here and now—provided the framework for an art that grounds the present moment, an "art that exists in the immediate presence of its color, form, and material," an art that is not referential.[195] Reinhardt's friend, and sometimes Club contributor, Martin James wrote on Reinhardt's work in 1960, "Like the timeless paradises of Mahayana Buddhism, not glimpsed, like heaven, from a distance, but present, at hand, art is freed from goal-seeking."[196] Buddhist philosophy allowed Reinhardt to free art from personal associations and meaning so that one's personality was not bound up with the painting.

Reinhardt's duality—detachment and involvement—must also be considered in regards to his own politics. As mentioned earlier, Reinhardt, while never himself a member of the Communist Party, remained loyal to and supportive of several organizations still involved with the CPUSA. Reinhardt's connection to the CPUSA was enough that the FBI began surveiling him in the mid-1940s and continued well into the

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[194] Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, 87.

[195] Denise Lassaw, Email correspondence with author, June 13, 2009.

[196] Martin James, "Today's Artists: Reinhardt," *Portfolio and Art News Annual*, no. 3 (1960): 140.

1960s.[197] Reinhardt's measured and veiled responses to questions about his politics underscore the danger people felt for holding certain beliefs and belie his deep involvement with political activism. While Reinhardt was not a proponent of artists using "protest imagery," he saw his own artistic practice as inherently political, as I will show in the following chapter.[198] In order to be political, one had to detach oneself from the prominent political rhetoric—one had to refuse to participate, otherwise one just fed into the system, into the establishment.[199] Detachment, then, was not the opposite of involvement but was necessary for involvement.

Lassaw, too, addressed the artist's role both in society and in the moment of creation. The first line in his notes for his talk reads, "Fox Spirit."[200] In Japan, certain Shinto and folk traditions combined with Zen, enlarging the Buddhist pantheon of deities. In Zen, the fox deity can be "protective and redemptive as well as deceptive and cunning."[201] The fox is mysterious and known for its trickery. Denise Lassaw suggests that perhaps her father saw himself as the trickster fox spirit for saying that

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[197] Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, 52-59, 149-162.

[198] Ibid., 149-153.

[199] Ibid., 153.

[200] The notes for Lassaw's talk can be found in his papers at the Archives of American Art. This was the second panel devoted to Zen; Pavia noted, "Ibram Lassaw is forming a panel on Zen this Friday November 19, 1954. Harry Holtzman will moderate" (Pavia papers, Emory University, quoted in Johnson, "Zen and Artists of the Eighth Street Club," 292).

[201] Steven Heine, *Shifting Shape Shifting Text: Philosophy and Folklore in the Fox Kōan* ([Honolulu, HI]: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 26.

Zen was not at all spiritual but actually very ordinary.[202] It is also possible that Lassaw saw the artist as embodying the fox spirit. Steven Heine describes the fox in a way that is reminiscent of the manner in which many artists saw their own positions, "[T]he wild fox, as an undomesticated loner, existing on the fringes of human society, represents a realm of marginality or peripherality: challenging and undermining yet being chastised and governed by the conceptual center or mainstream."[203] With a few exceptions, in 1954, most of these artists were not yet recognized for their art and many were derided for their formal innovations, and yet they all belonged to the same cultural framework, creating a tension that was at times unbearable.

Most of Lassaw's talk was the recitation of parts of Suzuki's book, *Living By Zen*. One section in particular, that on Satori, echoes much of what was heard at The Club.

> Satori is intuition dynamically conceived. When you move with a moving object, when you are identified with it, and yet when you are not moving at all, a certain state of consciousness—super-consciousness—prevails, which is satori… Psychologically speaking, satori is super-consciousness, or consciousness of the unconscious. The Unconscious is, however, not to be identified with the one psychologically postulated. The Unconscious of satori is with God even prior to his creation. It is what lies at the basis of reality; it is the Cosmic Unconscious.[204]

Suzuki described a specifically Buddhist experience—satori—in Western, psychoanalytic terms only to distinguish it from Western notions of psychological unconscious, just as Goodman described the ego in decidedly un-Freudian terms. Satori is enlightenment,

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[202] Denise Lassaw, e-mail message to author, June 13, 2009.

[203] Heine, *Shifting Shape Shifting Text*, 30-31.

[204] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Living By Zen* (London: Rider and Company, 1950), 87-88.

but it literally means understanding. In one essay, Suzuki defines it as acquiring a new viewpoint.[205] The world suddenly looks different when one understands that there is no separation between oneself and the universe, or when one understands that "All things are Buddha-things," as the Diamond Sutra says.[206] Satori is the awareness of connectedness and relatedness, not isolation. With this understanding, one's involvement with the world and others is fundamentally different from the Cold War attitude of heroic individuality and the "us" versus "them" mentality.

John Cage acknowledged this communal aspect of Buddhism when he told Irving Sandler in 1966:

> …I am not *for* order and authority…. I would hope that society could find a way to function without that authority and control…. I actually think that if we pass through what Bucky Fuller calls the critical period, we will come out to a world where order, so to speak, has its place, but completely in what Buddhism would call the 'non-senscent' [sic], among the non-senscent [sic] beings, that is to say, among the telephones, the water, the gas, the electricity; and that we as senscent [sic] beings will live, each one at the center of the universe, anarchically.[207]

Cage described each of us living together with other individuals and non-sentient beings in an environment without hierarchy, without authority, but still together, recalling his later phrase, "society's individualized."[208] Cage's description of this Buddhist-like society

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[205] D. T. Suzuki, "Satori, Or Acquiring a New Viewpoint," in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 88-98.

[206] "The Vagrakkhedikâ," in *Buddhist Mahayana Texts* (1894), edited and translated by E. B. Cowell, F. Max Muller, K. Takakusu (n.p: Forgotten Books, 2007), 314.

[207] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

[208] Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)," 161.

underscores its political foundation as well—anarchism. The idea that autonomous individuals can cooperate and live together is the heart of anarchism. Hartoonian sees Suzuki as depoliticizing everyday existence, but he fails to understand that what the artists found to be so powerful about Zen and other Asian philosophies was its support of a radically new way of organizing society.[209]

The second theme both Reinhardt and Lassaw addressed was the illusory nature of dualities. Lassaw noted, "Also Zen is not mysterious—there is no duality of spirit and matter. It is not 'spiritualism.' It is concerned with 'now,' not the concept of Reality current but just 'this.'"[210] In Zen, the material is spiritual, and the spiritual is material. There is no distinction. In an undated statement on abstract art, Lassaw wrote, "When working on a piece of sculpture I see only the immediate reality of the particular forms and colors that confront me. The 'THUSNESS' or in Sanskrit 'TATHATA.' Concepts and associations fade away. The moment of working is to me an engagement in life. The sculpture itself is REALITY, not an interpretation of reality."[211] In many ways, as will become clear in the next section, Lassaw sounds very close to Rosenberg's idea of Action Painting, in that the creation of art is an engagement, an action. It is this engagement, in Eastern metaphysics, that inhibits one from polarizing the material and the spiritual. In many respects, here art and life come together, because the product that is produced in this engagement is not designated as art or separated from reality. As Lassaw said, "The sculpture itself is REALITY."

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[209] Hartoonian, "Postwar America and the Aura of Asia," 50.

[210] Ibram Lassaw papers, 1928-2003, Archives of American Art.

[211] Ibid.

The second half of Reinhardt's talk dealt with "ying yang dualisms [sic]—unity-opposites."[212] He compared the traits of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism as follows:

complete involvement	complete detachment
many is samsara	one is nirvana
true self in totality of things	negation—denial of self
Mahayana	Hinayana

In a provocative parenthetical, Reinhardt added, "samsara=nirvana." Samsara is usually understood as suffering and nirvana as enlightened mind. Reinhardt associated each with the many and the one, respectively, yet actually they are the same. Samsara is nirvana, and nirvana is samsara. The many is the one, and the one is the many; suffering is enlightenment, and enlightenment is suffering. There is no duality. One cannot pull out just one aspect of the dualism and make it determinative because the duality is a unity. Again, this understanding goes to the heart of Reinhardt's political engagement.

Besides giving insight into the depth and parameters of The Club's involvement with Buddhist metaphysics, the thematics of Reinhardt's talk can be extrapolated and used as a lens with which to view The Club. One thing that becomes clear from reading Pavia's notes and various transcripts composed by Seitz is that The Club contained two factions: the abstractionists and the expressionists. A number of Club members were part of the American Abstract Artists and painted geometric abstraction, most prominently Reinhardt, Lassaw, and John Ferren.[213] The other faction most closely tied

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[212] "Detachment and Involvement," Reinhardt papers, Archives of American Art.

[213] Despite the American Abstract Artists' disavowal of Hilla Rebay's and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting's aesthetics, there was considerable overlap between their membership and those who received small amounts of funding from Rebay and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, a point that needs further research (Undated note, Pavia papers, Emory University).

with expressionism, or at least expressionist facture, were painters like de Kooning and Milton Resnick. Reinhardt, sarcastically, and maybe even affectionately, referred to them as "wiggly line painters," who put their anguish on view.[214] In one sense, this division points to the presence of a diversity of voices present at The Club that did not settle into an easy, or simple, agreement. In another sense, using Reinhardt's yin-yang dualism, the difference between the two is ultimately non-existent, and this is the key to The Club's early success. Two artists in particular—Reinhardt and Resnick—were not only part of the group that started The Club but also remained active members well into the 1960s, by which time many of the original members had stopped attending regularly; these two represented stylistically opposite extremes, and yet in the end they were both intimately involved with Abstract Expressionism.

Zen offered an alternative to Western, dialectical thinking.[215] As evidenced by Reinhardt's and Lassaw's talks, the overcoming of this dualistic perspective allowed them to reimagine not only art's place in society but also how to keep a group of disparate artists from splitting apart at the seams. Additionally, the emphasis on the here and now reality—the "thisness" as Lassaw named it—resisted progressive politics and relocated the starting point for thinking about politics at this particular historical moment—the height of McCarthyism's suppression and policing of dissent. Walter Lippmann similarly tried to reimagine politics in 1913 using Bergsonian vitalism, and while Reinhardt remained loyal to the Communist Party much longer than most of his artistic and intellectual colleagues, Corris suggests that Reinhardt realized Marxist

[214] Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[215] Jonathan Katz, "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction," forthcoming.

politics was unable to account for all of life's aspects. "[While] the radical political ideology with which he was familiar may have analyzed the main contradictions of capitalism, [it] was thoroughly unprepared to address the question of how one is to live and go on in the world."[216] Buddhism, then, offered an answer to the questions being asked in the face of discredited politics (both Right and Left) and ambivalence about individuality. In his argument for why homosexual artists such as Cage and Agnes Martin were drawn to Zen in contrast to Western psychoanalysis, Jonathan Katz argues, "Zen understood silence as healthy and productive, for in allowing thoughts to arise and disappear without reifying them under a social category, the self was less in thrall to an illusion of its own monadic autonomy and better able to sound its deep connection to other forms of being.[217] Zen's silence, its willingness to leave things unarticulated, provided a model for artists and intellectuals who felt the current state of political discourse left no place for them. This silence was not a turning away from but a decision not to be governed by prevailing authorities.

Action Painting at The Club

[216] Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, 91.

[217] Katz, "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction." See also, Jonathan D. Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence or How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," in *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, edited by David Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41-61.

It should not come as a surprise that the first attempt to formulate Abstract Expressionism was a synthesis of the discussions that had been going on at The Club. For his 1952 article, "The American Action Painters," Harold Rosenberg drew on vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Gestalt therapy, and Zen to articulate what united the new American vanguard artists.[218] These discursive frames allow us to reread Action Painting in such a way that it applies more broadly to all of the artists at The Club and not just a few gestural painters whose painting action is visible on the surface of the canvas. While most would consider Pollock and de Kooning the quintessential Action Painters, Rosenberg's formulation was more encompassing and included artists such as Newman and Reinhardt. In fact, art critic Tom Hess thought Newman was *the* exemplar of Action Painting.[219]

While these frames constitute the larger discourse for understanding Rosenberg's essay, the more immediate context was a series of discussions held between January 18 and April 4, 1952, devoted to the "problem" of "Abstract Expressionism," spurred by the publication of Hess's 1951 book, *Abstract Painting*.[220] The variously capitalized and hyphenated titles for the panels—Expressionism, abstract Expressionism, abstract-Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Structural Concepts in Twentieth-century Art, and The Purist Idea—indicate the various perspectives voiced at

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[218] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51 (December 1952): 22-23+; reprinted in Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 23-39. Page numbers refer to the reprint.

[219] Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), 68.

[220] Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: Viking Press, 1951).

The Club.[221] Abstractionists and expressionists battled with one another, and according to the surviving and reimagined transcripts, neither side conceded much ground.[222] In the end, "Abstract Expressionism" seemed to describe no one in particular, and yet it is the name that survived. While there was not much agreement between the two camps of artists during the discussion, Rosenberg attempted to find common ground. Moderating the first panel on January 18, he recapitulated the main point of the discussion, "Painting is a struggle between the artist and the canvas."[223] The articulation of this struggle became the subject for his famous article.

The first panel of 1953 was to be a discussion of whether "Action Painting" was a better title than "Abstract Expressionism." Charlie Egan, the gallerist, was to chair the panel, but, according to Pavia, the panel fell through at the last minute.[224] While there is no indication as to what the consensus would have been, it seems to be accepted

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[221] For title and dates, see Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 165-169; "The Unwanted Title: Abstract Expressionism," *It Is*, no. 5 (1960): 8-11. The seventh evening was an informal café night, with no scheduled panel. Rosenberg also referred to these alternate titles as well in "The American Action Painters." There are partial transcripts for January 18, February 1, March 21, and March 28 in the Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[222] Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 110-120; Seitz papers, Archives of American Art. There are several reimagined transcripts in *Club without Walls*. It is difficult to say how accurate these might be.

[223] Note dated January 18, 1952, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art. It should be remembered that Seitz's notes do not necessarily represent verbatim discussion, but often he was able to capture entire phrases said by particular individuals.

[224] Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 172 and Notebook # 5, The Club records, Archives of American Art.

knowledge that no artist really took to the term "Action Painter."[225] However, the terms Rosenberg used and the issues he engaged would have been familiar to The Club regulars, particularly his depiction of psychology and the new painting's relation to mysticism; both of which, when understood properly, radically alter current definitions of Abstract Expressionism.

Rosenberg's alternative moniker, "Action Painting," was quickly simplified, misunderstood, ridiculed, and misused. Consequently, I maintain that this essay has been misinterpreted for more than sixty years. When Rosenberg republished it in his 1959 collection, *The Tradition of the New*, he included footnotes from later essays, clarifying his ideas of action, but in the subsequent literature on Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting, in its simplest terms, remains Sartrean Existentialism.[226] Most caricaturally, it indicates masculine virility.[227] Rosenberg covered many topics in his essay that cannot be condensed to an Existentialist scenario or heroic masculinity. He distinguished the new painting from what came before without separating it from

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[225] Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 271; Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation* (Lenox, Mass.: Hard Press Editions, 2009), 203.

[226] Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 96-98; Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*, 202-04; Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxvii.

[227] "From Harold Rosenberg's description of the action painter, from the picture we have of the action painter's approach to the canvas, his inconsummate encounter with it (for the erection of a tension is not a consummation), what comes to mind is a definition of modern lovemaking as the act in which a man and a woman try to do as much damage as possible to each other's genitals" (Hubert Crehan, "A Little Room for Feeling," *It Is*, no. 3 (Winter-Spring 1959): 29). After comparing notes from Crehan's 1954 talk at The Club with this 1959 article, it is clear that this essay was based on, or is, the earlier talk (Notes, Box 46, folder 3, Sandler papers, Getty Research Institute).

tradition; he described not only the Action Painter but also the massification of Modern Art, serious and weak mysticism, and the vanguard painters' "busy no-audience." He criticized those in power who would have Modern Art be a matter of taste and functionality instead of something more fundamentally human, and he took to task those painters whose art became just another brand, a commodity.

Clement Greenberg's version of Abstract Expressionism has eclipsed what scholars have deemed Rosenberg's less rigorous analysis.[228] Fred Orton is the only scholar to have reconsidered seriously Rosenberg's essay in order to counter what has become the "lazy existentialist-humanist" reading of Action Painting.[229] Orton's own analysis attempts to rectify the situation by analyzing Rosenberg's conception of Action Painting in relation to his earlier essays and his Marxist politics. Orton's rereading is compelling, but an emphatically Marxist analysis is still not inclusive enough to get to the heart of Rosenberg's dilemma: the artist's struggle to not only put him or herself in the painting but to situate his or her endeavor within the sociopolitical realm. By locating "The American Action Painters" in the midst of the dialogues at The Club, especially those initiated by Paul Goodman and John Cage between 1950 and 1952, the full complexity of Rosenberg's definition of Action Painting can be illuminated: the nuances of the mutuality between the individual and the social emerge along with the blending of mysticism and politics.

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[228] This view was still evident at the recent symposium at Harvard University, commemorating Greenberg's centenary ("Clement Greenberg at 100: Looking Back to Modern Art," Harvard University, April 3-4, 2009).

[229] Fred Orton, "Action, Painting, Revolution," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991): 3.

Talk of action was not new in 1952; it had been going on since the end of the war. Certainly action was a significant aspect of Sartrean Existentialism—authentic existence depended on acting—but in the wake of the collapse of the Marxist Left, there was also the question of how to act, or rather, what actions were currently possible, particularly with the rise of consumer capitalism and the institution of the military industrial complex. For artists and others who could no longer subscribe to a Marxist praxis, what options were available? For the artists in New York, the only option was "to paint," as Rosenberg stated and the artists consistently iterated.[230] The choice to paint, however, was not a turning away from politics in favor of an art-for-art's-sake position nor was it a matter of artistic solipsism. For the artists, it was a pragmatic choice of action. They did not think of themselves as heroic supermen for making such a choice, but rather as men and women doing the work at which they excelled.[231] For artists searching for new perspectives and new ways of communication, this decision was paramount. Action for the Abstract Expressionists was involved in not only self definition but also in the social realm.

The social implications of Action Painting invariably are overlooked because of the emphasis placed on the individual artist; however, one of the most misunderstood

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[230] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 30. Barnett Newman told the filmmaker Emile de Antonio, "…I had to start from scratch as if painting didn't exist…. I felt that there was nothing in painting that was a source that I could use, and at the same time I felt that the whole situation was such that we had to examine the whole process…. What are we going to paint?" (Barnett Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 303).

[231] During the March 28 panel, Ad Reinhardt admitted that he was not at all interested in some sort of superman theory but "just that someone should work at the height of his ability" (Seitz papers, Archives of American Art).

aspects of Rosenberg's essay is his recourse to individual psychology in describing the act of the Action Painter. With this misreading comes the stereotype of the self-involved, egotistic artist performing his alienation on the canvas, but this oversimplification is untenable. A careful reading of Rosenberg's use of psychology not only shifts attention from the ego to creativity but also opens the door for social analysis. In the original essay, Rosenberg wrote, "Art…comes back into painting by way of psychology….But the psychology is the psychology of creation. Not that of the so-called psychological criticism that wants to 'read' a painting for clues to the artist's sexual preferences or debilities. The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a 'world'—and thus transcends it."[232] The misunderstanding resides in the distinction between the psychology of creation and psychoanalysis.

The psychoanalytic tendencies of interpretation often encompass ideas of personality and the ways in which the personality manifests itself on the canvas. Personality was a repeated topic of conversation throughout the seven panels at The Club, but there were considerable differences amongst the artists as to what personality entailed or whether it was even relevant to painting. Ad Reinhardt insisted, "the school is not entirely wrapped up in personality. The painters are wrapped up in their work."[233] Reinhardt and other abstractionists questioned the expressionists' use of personality and wondered what was being expressed.[234] They objected to the notion

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[232] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 29.

[233] February 1, 1952 panel, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[234] March 28, 1952 panel, Ibid.

that painting was catharsis, that it included "everyday 'private' content."[235] Rosenberg and the expressionist painter Milton Resnick argued that the artist must be "present" in the painting, but this was not necessarily as simple as saying that the artist's personality was apparent in the painting.[236] John Ferren, an abstractionist, surmised that the problem was figuring out where the Ego lay.[237] What was meant by ego? Personality? Presence? These questions were the crux of defining Abstract Expressionism.

The distinction between psychoanalysis and the psychology of creation is crucial and is not considered in the Abstract Expressionism literature. The difference can be examined in the discussion of biography among The Club regulars. Paul Goodman spoke on psychology and the artist in 1950. In *Gestalt Therapy*, Goodman wrote, "[the artist's] I is his style in its present use; it is not his biography."[238] In other words, style is not bound up with the particular events of the artist's past but is more of an awareness of the present. Seemingly, Rosenberg contradicted Goodman when he wrote in "The American Action Painters," "a painting is an act inseparable from the biography of the artist," but he immediately explained that the biography to which he was referring was the moment of painting and the artist's present existence, not his neuroses.[239] Rosenberg's and Goodman's disagreement is a semantic one and not one of content. On at least one other occasion during the seven panels, the issue of biography was

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[235] Ibid.

[236] January 18, 1952 panel, Ibid.

[237] March 28, 1952 panel, Ibid.

[238] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 323.

[239] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 27.

raised. Harry Holtzman, most known for his championing of Mondrian and, therefore, seen as an abstractionist, agreed with Willem de Kooning, the quintessential expressionist, that a painting "is the biography of the painter—and a struggle with the canvas."[240] This struggle with the canvas does not necessarily mean slashing and stabbing the canvas. On a fundamental level, this formulation of the creative act goes outside of the artist's interiority into the world. The Heideggerian notion of Being-in-the-world is implicated in Rosenberg's definition. The artist is engaged with material that exists in and of itself apart from the artist. How the artist encounters and handles these materials depends on his or her biography. There was some agreement, then, among all of the artists that biography and personality, in relation to painting, was not necessarily the same as painting one's psychological state or appetites on the canvas but, rather, was about one's present relationship with the canvas at the moment of painting.

The similarity between Rosenberg and Goodman was recognized by many at the time. The gallerist John Myers even went so far to say that "Rosenberg expanded Goodman's basic notion and called it 'Action Painting.'"[241] On a separate occasion, a note taker at Goodman's 1952 lecture on vanguard and popular culture recognized that Goodman's ideas were "akin to Rosenberg's idea that art changes life."[242] The self, for both Rosenberg and Goodman, is not equivalent to an individualized ego. The self does

[240] February 20, 1952 panel, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[241] Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous*, 58. Myers referred to a 1946 catalog essay by Goodman as the precedent. While Goodman wrote several catalog essays in the 1940s, none match Myers' description, and Taylor Stoehr, the executor of Goodman's literary estate, does not know of a Goodman essay, either published or unpublished, that fits Myers' recollection (Taylor Stoehr, Email to author, February 9, 2009).

[242] Box 46, folder 3, Sandler papers, Getty Research Institute.

not exist in a vacuum, separate from the outside world. In Gestalt therapy, the self is the interaction of the organism and the environment and so belongs to both; it is not simply located in the organism. In one of the longer footnotes that he added in 1959, Rosenberg included an excerpt from a dialogue he had with Thomas Hess, which echoed Goodman's claim that the self is not entirely interior. Rosenberg emphasized the impersonal, transcendent aspect of Action Painting.

> Action never perfects itself; but it tends toward perfection and away from the personal. This is the best argument for dropping the term 'Abstract Expressionism,' with its associations of ego and personal *Schmerz*, as a name for the current American painting. Action Painting has to do with self-creation or self-definition or self-transcendence; but this dissociates it from self-expression, which assumes the acceptance of the ego as it is, with its wound and its magic. Action Painting is not 'personal,' though its subject matter is the artist's individual possibilities.[243]

This reaching out by the individual towards the environment, the transcendence of the ego toward possibilities, borrows some of its foundation from Taoist wisdom. The self is engaged with the present situation—the here and now. Again, in *Gestalt Therapy*, Goodman wrote, "In ideal circumstances the self does not have much personality. It is the sage of Tao that is 'like water,' assuming the form of the receptacle."[244] The self-that-is-not-a-personality is not the self that one usually associates with Abstract Expressionism, but here in one of the earliest definitions of "Abstract Expressionism" this image of the self is one that is not just an ego and that reaches out toward the environment.

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[243] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 28.

[244] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 427.

This conception of the self that does not reside in personality or ego, in "personal *Schmerz*," was one that John Cage also embraced. In the art historical literature, Cage is positioned as the anti-Abstract Expressionist, opposed to Rosenberg's existential ideas of individuality, but Cage's ideas are not out of place in this dissident reading I am proposing.[245] If "The American Action Painters" is situated within the context of The Club, then one must understand it to be in dialogue with one of the most popular contributors to discussions, namely Cage.[246] Of all of his talks, the most pertinent is his famous Zen-inflected "Lecture on Something." Given on February 9, 1951, Cage's lecture was ostensibly about Morton Feldman's music, although he quoted the *I Ching* and Meister Eckhart at length and referred to Pierre Boulez and Buckminster Fuller as well.[247] Cage's lecture employs many of the same terms used by Rosenberg and Goodman, namely acceptance and action.

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[245] Sandler situates Cage in opposition to Rosenberg in Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University. Caroline Jones also presents Cage as a foil to egotistic Abstract Expressionism (Jones, "Finishing School").

[246] There are nine documented appearances by Cage, either as speaker, introducer, or panelist.

[247] A note about dating: Cage gave several lectures at Subjects of the Artist School, Studio 35, and The Club. At least in the art historical literature, the dates for his most famous lectures, "Lecture on Nothing" and "Lecture on Something," have remained hazy. Pavia's papers indicate that on February 9, 1951, Cage gave a lecture entitled "Something and Nothing" (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 161). A close reading of both of Cage's lectures indicates that it was, in fact, "Lecture on Something" that was delivered in February 1951. A few times, Cage said, "This is a lecture on something and nothing," which would indicate the title given to the lecture by Pavia. Additionally, in "Lecture on Something," Cage quoted a letter written to him by Pierre Boulez, dated December 30, 1950 (*The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, 80-89). Cage gave "Indian Sand Painting or the picture that is valid for one day" at Subjects of the Artist School on January 28, 1949 and "Lecture on Nothing" at Studio 35 in early 1950, maybe in February. In "Lecture on Nothing," Cage wrote, "(Last year when I talked here I made a short talk. That was because I was talking about something; but this year I am talking about nothing and of

If one can speak of the essential point of "Lecture on Something," it resides in Cage's explication of Feldman's idea of no-continuity, which Feldman had discussed the previous week at The Club.[248] For Cage, Feldman's idea of no-continuity amounted to "accepting that continuity happens."[249] One does not insist or impose one's ideas but accepts what comes along. Here, Cage echoed Goodman's Taoist metaphor of the self as water assuming the shape of the vessel. Cage saw the imposition of ideas and expectations as absurd. He said, "Falling down on some one of the various banana peels is what we have been calling tragedy. Ideas of separateness artificially elevated. The mythological and Oriental view of the hero is the one who accepts life. And so if one should object to calling Feldman a composer, one could call him a hero. But we are all heroes, if we accept what comes, our inner cheerfulness undisturbed."[250] Acceptance, and not the prioritization of separateness, is the attribute of no-continuity.

Additionally, this Eastern view of the hero complicates the present day notion of the Abstract Expressionist hero. Harry Holtzman also spoke of the hero in Buddhist philosophy at Studio 35 on April 1, 1949.[251] His talk, "Everyman his own hero," more

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course will go on talking for a long time)" (Cage, *Silence*, 114). The short talk Cage referred to was not "Lecture on Something" but more than likely the Sand Painting talk.

[248] Feldman's talk was "The Unframed Frame: Modern Music." Pavia noted, "Jazz is too instrumental, not human; music needs a plane as in painting" (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 161).

[249] Cage, *Silence*, 132.

[250] Ibid., 134.

[251] The date of Holtzman's talk is listed on a postcard announcing upcoming lectures in the records at the Barnett Newman Foundation, New York. The title of Holtzman's talk can be found in Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 214.

than likely included ideas that Holtzman incorporated into a 1959 article, "The Sickness of the Cult of the Hero."[252] In describing the modern person's dilemma, Holtzman wrote, "Having become secular and totally terrestrial, man is religiously bound to turn inside and outside into a unity again: a deeper penetration and interaction between self and universe, between all the centers of all gravitational pulls (all individuals events and people)…without separation or resulting schizophrenia."[253] In modernity, then, the biggest problem facing the individual is how to unify the self with the world, with others, with history. There is a tendency, however, for the hero who manages unification to make himself into a god, but once there are god-like pretensions, the hero loses his or her humanity and individuality. Holtzman saw this inclination as the reason for "the extraordinary resurgence and spread of interest in the most complete secular culture in human evolution, the Buddhist…. Here no man can be anything but his own hero. There can be no confusion within the individual in his communion of feeling inseparable from the universe."[254] Holtzman's hero accepts continuity so as not to foster separation or schizophrenia, and in doing so, the hero unites the inside and the outside, the individual and the social. The hero remains individual in communion with, and inseparable from, the larger world. The artist-hero is not one to be worshipped on a

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[252] Harry Holtzman, "The Sickness of the Cult of the Hero," *It Is*, no. 4 (Autumn 1959): 32-33. Towards the end of the essay, Holtzman wrote, "Here no man can be anything but his own hero." As the editor of *It Is*, Pavia solicited texts from artists, and since he saw this publication as an extension of The Club, it is not surprising that some of the articles were once talks delivered at The Club.

[253] Ibid., 33.

[254] Ibid.

pedestal but is, instead, like every person trying to navigate him or herself in the modern world.

In addition to the recurring theme of acceptance, Cage also spoke of action. Most strikingly in "Lecture on Something," Cage said, "[A]t the root of all this [categorization] is the idea that this work is a thing separate from the rest of life, which is not the case with Feldman's music. We are in the presence not of *a work of art which is a thing but of an action* which is implicitly nothing."[255] The work of art that is an action is the essential point of Rosenberg's conception of the Action Painter, and here it is expressed by the so-called anti-Abstract Expressionist. As Rosenberg wrote, "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."[256] The painting was not a depiction or rendering of an object but an encounter.

Cage's action that is nothing is not merely a negative statement, for that nothing is pregnant with meaning; it is the fullness of reality in the Bergsonian sense. Musicologist David Patterson has shown convincingly that Cage's ideas of artistic action were taken from the art historian and curator, Ananda Coomaraswamy, whom he discovered through Joseph Campbell.[257] Coomaraswamy used Eastern philosophy to counter Western ideals of artistic production. "Cage came to value the dynamic artistic process over any resultant product derived therefrom, and he explicitly [understood] this activity as inclusive of far more elements than the artist alone."[258] Cage was not

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[255] Cage, *Silence*, 136. Emphasis added.

[256] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 25.

[257] Patterson, "The Picture That Is Not in the Colors," 179 and 190ff.

[258] Ibid., 190.

interested in any sort of permanent art work. He explained to Irving Sandler that his talk in 1949 on sand painting was primarily about an impermanent art—"something that, no sooner had it been used, was so to speak discarded. I was fighting at that point the notion of art itself as something which we preserve."[259] And while Cage acknowledged that he was not surprised that Pollock, too, had been influenced by Indian sand painters, for Cage, Pollock was too permanent. Although he admired much contemporary painting, in many ways by its very nature, painting was too permanent for Cage in that it produced a material object that was meant to be hung on a wall.

Cage's production of his most famous work, *4'33"* illustrates his conception of action. The piece, written in the summer of 1952, consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of "silence." Part of the significance of the piece is to show that, in fact, there is never complete silence. Even if no music is being played, ambient noise still exists that contributes to the experience of listening to the piece. William Fetterman has argued that while this description of *4'33"* is perfectly satisfactory, it is also important to consider Cage's score for the piece and its performances.[260] In other words, the *act* of composing the piece, the *act* of notating the piece, and the *act* of playing the piece are central to understanding Cage's intentions.

Cage used Tarot cards to determine the lengths of time that made up each movement. Cage considered Tarot the western version of the *I-Ching* in the sense that

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[259] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

[260] William Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 72.

the cards were oracular and based on chance.[261] Cage said, "I didn't know I was writing *4'33"*. I built it up very gradually and it came out to be *4'33"*. I just might have made a mistake in addition."[262] While most of the Abstract Expressionists would deny that they were involved in chance—many, in fact, vocally contested such ideas—Cage's description of the action of composing the piece sounds similar to the intuitive process the painters used to describe the action of painting. Barnett Newman said that he did not know what he was going to paint until he stood in front of his canvas.[263] The conceptual aspect of *4'33"* is what is usually emphasized, but the action of its composition is key as is Cage's need to provide the musician with a composition to read while he was performing. Given Cage's penchant for impermanence, it should not be surprising that there are four different scores for *4'33"*.[264]

Many would argue that Cage's ideas about action are "too Zen" to be included in the dialogue with Rosenberg or the Abstract Expressionists, but as already shown, Zen was very much a part of the Abstract Expressionism discourse. Action Painting and Zen are intimately connected, despite the contrary claims by some.[265] Perhaps neither Rosenberg nor the painters would go so far as Cage to say the action was "nothing," but

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[261] Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, 72.

[262] Cage, quoted in Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, 72.

[263] Newman, "'Frontiers of Space' Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 248.

[264] For a discussion of the various scores and their performances, see Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces*, 69-96.

[265] Sandler says as much in his memoir (Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 41). Additionally, Pavia dismisses the importance of Zen to Abstract Expressionism (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 176; Undated note, Pavia papers, Emory University).

descriptions of the new art were built on both negative and active statements. Rosenberg wrote, "Lacking verbal flexibility, the painters speak of what they are doing in a jargon still involved in the metaphysics of things: 'My painting is *not* Art; it's an Is.' 'It's *not* a picture of a thing; it's the thing itself.' 'It *doesn't* reproduce Nature; it is Nature….' Art is not, not not not not…."[266] Rosenberg acknowledged that the language does not yet exist to talk about the act being the "object" because "along with the philosophy TO PAINT appear bits of Vedanta and popular pantheism."[267] The inability to express the import of the new painting is the inability of Western concepts to handle seemingly diametrically opposed ideas, the spiritual and the material, as well as the West's inability to imagine an individual outside of an all-masterful ego. Certainly Vedanta and Zen are not the same, but Rosenberg's ingredient list points to the currency that Eastern and vitalist ideas held in enunciating the foundations of Abstract Expressionism.

Rosenberg discussed the place of metaphysics within Action Painting in the section entitled "Apocalypse and Wallpaper." Rosenberg informed the reader that not only are the artists involved with pragmatism, Vedanta, and pantheism but that the new painters are also somewhere between Christian Science and Whitman's "gangs of cosmos."[268] Rosenberg posited "weak" and "serious" mysticism at either end of the spectrum. The section begins, "The most comfortable intercourse with the void is mysticism, especially a mysticism that avoids ritualizing itself."[269] This mysticism is one

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[266] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 32. Emphasis added.

[267] Ibid., 33.

[268] Ibid.

[269] Ibid. 33.

without the trappings of organization or spectacle, but one that is still fundamentally material. In his 1951 talk at the Museum of Modern Art, Robert Motherwell argued that abstract art was in fact a form of mysticism. "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."[270] During the question and answer period Motherwell was questioned about this mysticism. According to notes taken by William Seitz, Motherwell responded that he was not interested in deistic mysticism—that was a bad word—nor was he interested in the aesthetic, presumably a sort of art-for-art's-sake position. For Motherwell, mysticism was about beginning with the void, the "otherness of things; intense desire for bridge toward otherness…the felt, needed, etc. experience."[271] This was a mysticism that reached beyond the self, was related to what Rosenberg articulated in "The American Action Painters," and was in line with Cage's desire for a "non-spooky mysticism" that was down to earth.[272]

Rosenberg complained most about "weak mysticism," that end of the spectrum that he associated with Christian Science. These unnamed painters practicing the weak version robed themselves in vagueness in order to "protect [themselves] from

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[270] Robert Motherwell, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 18 (Spring 1951): 12. The symposium, published in the spring, took place on February 5, 1951, and other speakers included George L.K. Morris, Willem de Kooning, Alexander Calder, Fritz Glarner, and Stuart Davis.

[271] Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[272] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

disturbance while keeping [their] eyes open for benefits."[273] This disturbance is the one experienced when actually acting or being acted upon; shrouding the work in talk of mysticism and the Absolute saves the artist from having to experience will and risk. "His gesture completes itself without arousing either an opposing movement within itself nor the desire in the artist to make the act more fully his own."[274] The painter does not engage the Absolute in dialogue and instead becomes something like a transmitter of divine revelation, using the rhetoric of mysticism and revelation without any substance. As a result the painting becomes "apocalyptic wallpaper."[275]

Rosenberg did not elaborate the connection between weak mysticism and Christian Science, but the latter was an ancestor of the self-help craze that quickly gained ground after the War. In writing of the vitalist impulse of Harvey Fergusson's psychology, which influenced Pollock, Michael Leja very briefly discusses "another influential tradition in United States psychology, one in which the unconscious was represented as a 'storehouse of dynamic power' linked directly to the Divine."[276] Without going into tangential details, Leja includes in this tradition, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, the Transcendentalists, Franz Mesmer, Phineas Quimby, William James, the Emmanuel Movement, James Jackson Putnam, and finally Norman Vincent Peale. While Leja does not include Christian Science, it fits easily into the list,

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[273] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 33. It is unclear to me at this time who Rosenberg may have had in mind here.

[274] Ibid., 34.

[275] Ibid.

[276] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 190.

as Quimby was one of Mary Baker Eddy's original sources for her new religion. It is revealing that Leja ends the list with Norman Vincent Peale, the guru of positive thinking and self help in the 1950s.[277] Leja confirms the importance of this mystical, religious tradition, but he ultimately opts for "a version [of the unconscious] somewhat less spiritual and more physiological" in order to deal with Pollock.[278] If the model of integrating psychology and spirituality culminates in Norman Vincent Peale, most scholars would take another route, given Peale's mass appeal and sentimentality. This dismissal, however, only concerns one side of Action Painting as Rosenberg described it and, then, only the bad side.

If mysticism does not go the route of Christian Science or Norman Vincent Peale, what is its direction? Rosenberg did not give much guidance, just two short paragraphs describing "serious mysticism": "What made Whitman's mysticism serious was that he directed his "cosmic 'I'" towards a Pike's-Peak-or-Bust of morality and politics. He wanted the ineffable in *all* behavior—he wanted it to *win the streets*. The test of any of the new paintings is its seriousness—and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist's total effort to make over his experience."[279] The all-out commitment of the "cosmic I"—the individual connected with the world, just as Harry Holtzman described—informs all of one's actions. In American Transcendentalism of the nineteenth century, the self is the social.

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[277] See Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth, and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).

[278] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 190-191.

[279] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 33.

Henry David Thoreau's autobiography of his time at Walden Pond is wrapped up in the individual's relation to modern society. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" represents an image of the self continuously wrapped in the other:

> The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
> The living sleep for their time….the dead sleep for their time,
> The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife;
> And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
> And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.[280]

And when he describes his own body, he is describing another:

> If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my body;
> Translucent mould of me it shall be you,
> …
> Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you, …[281]

Whitman repeats this construction "of me it shall be you" for several lines. The self and other are necessarily entwined. Autobiography here is not just about Whitman but about all of us. The tendency to read Rosenberg's Action Painting as psychological biography must be realigned with the manner of Thoreau and Whitman—the autobiographical as communal.

Rosenberg presented mysticism wrapped in pragmatic American morality *and* politics. Perhaps given most art historians' avoidance of serious discussions about spirituality and modern art, it should not be surprising that this important section in Rosenberg's essay is continuously overlooked. Here is, arguably, one of the most

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[280] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass*: *The First (1855) Edition* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), lines 321-325.

[281] Ibid., lines 529-532.

important contemporary accounts of Abstract Expressionism that deals explicitly with the place of mysticism in the new painting, and the scholarship falls silent. That Rosenberg connects this mysticism to politics via the example of Walt Whitman underscores that integration of the individual and the collective is wrapped up in the melding of spirituality and politics in a way that was not uncommon during the Cold War.

In an essay on Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, critic Greil Marcus uses a play on Kenneth Rexroth's phrase, "the old free America," inserting "weird" after old, to describe the moment in the midst of the McCarthyist witch hunt and the Korean War when Smith "made his own country" as an alternative to what he was experiencing.[282] This longing for "the old free America" was wrapped up "in the inevitable betrayals that stem from the infinite idealism of American democracy."[283] By going back to Whitman's "old free America," where the melding of the individual with society, of politics with radical spirituality, could be articulated, Rosenberg was looking for a way out of the current state of affairs in Cold War America. In this way, Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" was an alternative way out of consensus driven, repressive culture, much in the same way that Gestalt therapy, Zen, Heideggerian existentialism, and vitalism were.

Conclusion

[282] Greil Marcus, "The Old, Weird America," in *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 89-92. I would like to thank Tom Williams for introducing me to this essay.

[283] Ibid., 89.

In excavating the intellectual history of Abstract Expressionism from the evening discussions at The Club, the story we tell ourselves about this movement must shift radically. Not only does this excavation provide a new understanding of the formative concerns of Abstract Expressionism, but it also generates a new picture of how and why the artists interacted and associated with one another. In many ways, the form and the content of The Club were seamlessly integrated. Understanding the various discourses with which the artists engaged takes Abstract Expressionism beyond the Marxist and Freudian frameworks that have been employed by previous scholars. Each of the intellectual frames highlighted—vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Gestalt therapy, and Zen, along with their synthesis in Action Painting—allowed an address to individuality and collectivity that refused to engage with the political status quo. In this refusal, a space was created in order to form an organic, anarchist community that defied the ideological rhetoric of the Cold War.

The Abstract Expressionists were not self-obsessed artist-heroes. They were concerned about determining their own place in society but also about figuring out their relation with the viewer of their paintings. In the following chapter, I will address the ways in which this newly reimagined intellectual terrain informed their artistic production. Vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Gestalt therapy, Zen, and Action Painting articulate worldviews that recognized the individual as intimately connected to the world and to others by the very nature of existence. Each takes up the common problem but expresses it in different vocabularies. They transform Marxist and Freudian

concerns into a new key. This transformation, as I will show in the final chapter, sets the stage for a new politics in the 1960s.

Chapter 3:
Toward a Social Aesthetics of Abstract Expressionist Painting

The paradox of Abstract Expressionism is that one of the most socially and intellectually cohesive artistic groups of the twentieth century produced the greatest plurality of styles. The defining emblem of Abstract Expressionism—the signature style—when considered on the level of the individual lends itself to the interpretation that it is a sign of sovereign individuality. The signature style becomes a trademark, a patented logo, a brand that signifies and affirms "the artist's original self."[1] Jackson Pollock's drips, Adolph Gottlieb's bursts, Barnett Newman's zips, Franz Kline's black and white crossbeams, Mark Rothko's diaphanous rectangles, Willem de Kooning's slashes, Robert Motherwell's elegies, Ad Reinhardt's black squares, and Clyfford Still's encrusted jaggedness are made to emblematize the self and encapsulate the artist's career. In order to assuage this multiplicity, scholars have resorted to catch-all classifications such as gesture and colorfield painting, connected only by the loosest concerns—"vague romanticism" or a general "concern for the self."[2] This ambivalence of grouping the artists together hides a deep understanding that these artists should be grouped together despite all of the caveats. One of the most important keys to understanding Abstract Expressionism is addressing directly this profusion of styles. Instead of understanding the works solely as individual attempts of self-expression, the works need to be understood in relation to and in dialogue with each other. The signature style is

[1] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, vol. 2, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 350-352.

[2] Sandler, *Triumph of American Art*, 154; Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 38.

not simply a sort of self-branding, an emblem of recalcitrant individuality, but is instead emblematic of a community structured by difference. That is, the signature style is an embodiment of the anarchist idea of separate-togetherness—autonomous individuals coming together and pursuing creative impulses without a repressive hierarchy, an imposed style.

This rereading of Abstract Expressionist painting takes the discursive frames discussed at The Club and the existence of the community instantiated by The Club as bearing on the work itself. If the artists were concerned with abolishing isolated individuality in recognition of the fact that individuals are connected and related to one another, it does not hold that the their styles would be completely predicated on an understanding of the artist's interiority, or his or her autograph. This psychoanalytic/biographic understanding of style that dominates the art historical discourse surrounding Abstract Expressionism assumes that the "artist's original self" is the defining aspect of Abstract Expressionism, without recognizing that this was not necessarily the way the artists understood style or hoped their paintings would be read. Newman told David Sylvester, "I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time, of his connection to others who are also separate."[3] Newman was not interested in transmitting his own individual self or even a general, absolute self but the viewer's particular individual self. Pollock told William Wright, "I think [viewers] should not look for, but look passively—and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they

[3] Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 257-258.

are to be looking for."[4] Of course, Pollock is saying that the viewer should not look for the representation of some thing in his painting, but he also emphasizes that the painting affects the viewer; that it has something to "offer" besides just a glimpse of the artist's unconscious.

Rothko wrote of the creative impulse in the early 1940s, "Men's sense collect and accumulate, the emotions and mind convert and order, and through the medium of art, they are emitted to participate again in the life stream where in turn they *will* stimulate action in other men. For art is not only expressive but communicable as well, this communicability imparts to it a social function."[5] Rothko couches the function of art not just in terms of interiority—emotions and mind converting and ordering—but in a vitalist understanding of artistic practice and reception. Emitting, participating, action, and life stream are all common terms within the vitalist discourse because they allow for the overcoming of pure interiority; that is, they allow for connection and not just isolation. If we continue to focus solely on the artist's interiority, we miss this crucial motivation of Abstract Expressionism—to move beyond the self in order to affect others. This scenario of communication necessarily entails a communitarian view; individuals by their very nature connect with others, maybe not all others, but at least a few others. I want to argue that Abstract Expressionist painting does not signify heroic individuality and interiority *but the very obverse*. The pictorial strategies used by the artists evoke—bring into being—a community of viewers, thereby abolishing isolated individuality. By looking at the artists' creative, material processes (the heart of Action

[4] Jackson Pollock, "Interview with William Wright," 21.

[5] Mark Rothko, "The satisfaction of the creative impulse," in *Writings on Art*, edited by Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 28. Emphasis in the original.

Painting) as well as their recourse to formal strategies such as abstraction, all-over composition, and scale, this affective dimension can be recovered. It is this communitarian impulse that acts as a collective "style" and allows us to see Abstract Expressionist painting as a site of being-with, connection, and communication.

It is not my argument that an interest in Zen or vitalism or Gestalt therapy or Heidegger paved the way for spontaneity, abstraction, all-over composition, and scale. Rather, I want to argue that the terminology of Zen, vitalism, et al. provided a vocabulary that one can use to describe the affective dimensions of Abstract Expressionist paintings, which is one of the reasons the artists chose to discuss these topics. Stephen Foster has written, "Creating a meaningful setting for work was the task of talking. Talking was everything, but there was nothing much to say. Best realized in the studio (where the paintings were present) and the Cedar where the facts of meaning…were shared, the years 1950-1955 could be viewed as the rise and fall of conversation."[6] Of course to the studio and the Cedar, one must add The Club. This verbal context, while not interested in making one-to-one correspondences or nailing down specific meanings, provided the parameters for speaking of the new work in ways that acknowledged that there was more than interiority at stake.

Rosenberg gave only one explanation of what constitutes an Action Painting: the image is the result of the encounter between the artist and his or her materials.[7] This dictum, if it can even be called that, refers to the fundamental material aspect of the art work—an individual puts paint on canvas. Here, Rosenberg most closely echoes Goodman, who wrote, "The important part of the psychology of art is…in the

[6] Foster, *Franz Kline*, 34.

[7] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 25.

concentrated sensation and in the playful manipulation of the material medium."[8] In the tendency toward classification, Action Painting is usually understood to mean gesture painting, as opposed to colorfield painting, with Pollock or de Kooning standing in as the quintessential Action Painters.[9] This equation of gesture and action is, however, a misreading of Rosenberg. The classification, as articulated by Irving Sandler, is determined by whether or not the artist's indexical trace of "action" is evidenced in the painting, by whether or not one can see that the artist physically touched the canvas. Implicit in this distinction is the suggestion that a greater or lesser degree of artistic involvement determines the artist's definition of the self. The gesture painter is existentialist hero, interested in probing his or her own psychological state; the self is an end in and of itself.[10] The colorfield painter, the non-Action Painter, is revelatory prophet announcing the absolute; the self is suprapersonal and transcendent.[11] In Sandler's recent reconsideration of Abstract Expressionism, he has revised his original schema, keeping gesture painting to characterize the work of de Kooning and Hans Hofmann but modifying "colorfield" to "field" painting in order to reclassify Pollock.[12] The differentiation for Sandler resides in Pollock's lineage from Surrealist automatism instead of Expressionist facture and in the fact that Pollock dripped his paint onto the

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[8] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 245. Also quoted above in chapter 2.

[9] In his textbook on post-1940 art, Jonathan Fineberg only classifies Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline as Action Painters (Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 34-35).

[10] Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 92-101; Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 38.

[11] Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 148-157; Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 38.

[12] Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*, 147.

canvas, thereby downplaying his autographic trace. This reevaluation, however, indicates less a prior misreading of Pollock and more that such a categorization does not get us closer to an understanding of what is at stake in the Abstract Expressionist signature style. It does not help us understand why in 1969, Tom Hess argued that Newman—not Pollock or de Kooning—was the exemplar of Action Painting.[13]

Additionally, this schema of gesture and colorfield painting has done a disservice to artists such as Reinhardt, who are made to fit uncomfortably within Abstract Expressionism. Reinhardt is liminally included because of his social ties—he was a founding member of The Club—but his work does not conform to the formal classifications. Being a vocal anti-expressionist, Reinhardt has been seen as too contrary to be part of the group, and his black paintings, which began their most famous incarnation in 1960, come too late to be considered in terms of Abstract Expressionist painting.[14] As a result, his black paintings are more often considered in relation to the minimalism of the 1960s despite their abiding concern with ideas of autonomy and community. I argue, however, that Reinhardt, like Newman, can be considered within the realm of Action Painting.[15] Every artist manipulates the material he or she works

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[13] Hess, *Barnett Newman* (1969), 68.

[14] In his discussion of the canon, David Anfam says of Reinhardt, "Reinhardt declared himself an outsider socially as well as aesthetically and often satirized his sometime colleagues. His faith in geometric design went against their principles, yet an emotive streak belied that apartness and at the last suffused his finest paintings. Hence his career traces, mostly from without, a kind of boundary line" (David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 15). Given Reinhardt's extremely active participation in The Club, one cannot call him a social outsider in this group. He may not have been always popular, but "outsider" does not adequately describe the situation.

[15] Lawrence Alloway, "Artists as Writers, Part Two: The Realm of Language," *Artforum* 12 (April 1974): 30. Reinhardt, of course, eschewed and ridiculed the term "Abstract

with; the point of Action Painting is not whether or not the artist leaves traces of this manipulation on the surface but is the simple fact that the artist manipulates. Of course, the affective dimensions of a painting with indexical traces and one without are quite different, but they do not lead to irreconcilable opposites, e.g. gesture and colorfield painting. In speaking of artistic process, I want to signal ways in which it can be recovered on the surface by a viewer, thereby establishing points of connection between the artist and the viewer.

Pollock's paintings construct legible maps of his process for the viewer. Take as an example, *Number 28, 1950*.[16] Pollock dripped and poured ordinary enamel paint from the ends of paint brushes and sticks onto the canvas on a floor. The viewer can follow Pollock's movements over the surface of the canvas by following the various skeins of paint interlaced on the surface. One can see he let the black paint flow more heavily than, say, the blue or pink paint and allowed it to pool in some areas, while the khaki paint seems more uniformly applied. Even more than following the skeins of paint, however, the mark making appears so legible that one might think, "I could do that." As Richard Shiff wrote of Paul Cézanne, "[I]ndexically, this mark does not seem especially difficult to make; it lacks distinction, connoting no hidden talents, rarefied skills or physiological refinements."[17] Allan Kaprow described Pollock's work in a remarkably

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Expressionism," so he would never have applied it to his work. This semantic argument, however, should not keep us from considering it within this context.

[16] For a reproduction of this painting, see The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2006.32.51.

[17] Richard Shiff, "Cézanne's Physicality: The Politics of Touch," in *The Language of Art History*, edited by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 167.

similar way, "[I]t is manifestly frank…unsullied by training, trade secrets, finesse…."[18] The implication here is that anyone can make the mark Pollock made. The clichéd response, "My five-year-old could do that," while cynical, speaks a certain truth. Such a statement usually reveals an exasperation with what is considered "important" art, but if one takes the statement at face value, without the exasperation, the power of abstraction is revealed. Abstraction's effectiveness of drawing in the viewer rests, in part, on the fact that the viewer can imagine herself, or her five-year-old child, engaging in the same actions as the artist.

Because we inscribe anxieties about individuality into the understanding of Abstract Expressionism, the universality, to use an old-fashioned word, is overlooked, or more precisely, universality is understood to be naïve and mythical. This is not to say there are not anxieties about individuality wrapped up in Abstract Expressionist painting, but they do not necessarily define it. Milton Resnick recalled a studio visit by de Kooning that illustrates the paradoxes and anxieties.

> I was all the way down on Spring Street in 1946. I was painting abstract at the time; Bill [de Kooning] was doing mostly figures. One day I just decided to do a figure. As I worked on it a number of things appeared that looked like de Kooning. I knew it and didn't think much of it. I was going to paint it out but I was having some fun with it. Unexpectedly someone rings the bell. It's de Kooning. So I let him in. He took one look at the picture and turned around and left. Not a word. We never spoke about it…. Most people who talk about originality and influence understand nothing. Back in 1946, nobody was thinking about being original.[19]

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[18] Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, edited by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

[19] Milton Resnick, quoted in Dorfman, *Out of the Picture*, 55.

The interviewer suggested to Resnick that maybe de Kooning was bothered by the fact that Resnick could paint like him. Resnick responded, "Maybe. But it wasn't hard." The fact that Resnick could "easily" imitate marks made by de Kooning, in essence, canceling de Kooning's "individual" mark, distressed de Kooning but not Resnick. The very possibility of this imitation, or replication, is the hinge between the artist and the viewer.

Perhaps more than any artist at The Club, Reinhardt took this idea to its logical end. He famously said that his black paintings were "the last paintings anyone [could] make."[20] This statement is usually taken as a reaffirmation of Greenbergian Modernism; that is, in the evolution of Modern art, a matte black canvas is as self-referential as a painting can be, but Reinhardt's statement moves beyond purely formal implications and engages a more democratic understanding of art making and art viewing.[21] In a 1966 interview, Reinhardt was pressed about the issue of originality; he said, "If someone paints my ideas, it is his painting…. This question of anonymity vs. personality, originality vs. copying. It isn't possible to be original and not possible to do something that isn't original. It isn't a real issue. I'm making a painting, not for me, but for everybody…what everybody should be doing."[22] The statement is typical of Reinhardt's negative pronouncements, but this negativity should not be read as pessimism. It is, rather, optimistic and affirming. Making a black painting was not entirely original—there

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[20] Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1981), 158.

[21] Greenberg would not necessarily agree with Reinhardt's place in the evolution of Modern art; he thought Reinhardt's paintings were "trite" (Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 255).

[22] Phyllisann Kallick, "An interview with Ad Reinhardt," *Studio International* 174 (December 1967): 272.

were Rauschenberg's black paintings in the early 1950s, Malevich's black squares in the nineteen teens, and even two centuries earlier a black page in Laurence Sterne's novel, *Tristram Shandy*—but Reinhardt's black paintings were original in the sense that Reinhardt himself, and not someone else, painted them.[23] But if someone else were to paint a black painting, that painting, too, would be original. This possibility was not a hypothetical or rhetorical flourish from Reinhardt's perspective; he felt that everyone should be making his or her own black paintings. This democratic notion of art making is not usually associated with Abstract Expressionism and is instead usually credited to artists such as Joseph Beuys or movements such as Fluxus, but it is a belief that many artists held. While Newman did not usually go so far rhetorically as Reinhardt, he did tell Hess, "I once wrote that the first man was an artist. I feel that in that sense perhaps every man is an artist…."[24] This abiding belief may also explain, in part, why so many of the Abstract Expressionists were teachers as well.[25] In democratizing the creative act, the artists necessarily reached outside of themselves toward others. This impulse is not one of artists concerned solely with their own interiority.

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[23] The best reproductions I have found of Reinhardt's black painting are in Gudrun Inboden and Thomas Kellein, *Ad Reinhardt* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1985). For Rauschenberg's early black paintings, see San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, "Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Glossy Black Painting)*, ca. 1951," http://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/25833. For Malevich's *Black Square*, see Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 254, fig. 149. For the black page in *Tristram Shandy*, see Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1768), 71.

[24] Barnett Newman, "A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 286.

[25] On October 26, 1951, there was a panel on "Teaching and the Artist," which was led by John Ferren with Robert Wolff, Robert Iglehoff, and Robert Rischenburg. Pavia described it as a "contemporary problem" (Pavia, *Club without Walls*, 164).

In a 1963 statement for *Artforum*, Reinhardt wrote, "This painting is my painting if I paint it. This painting is your painting if you paint it…. This painting belongs to anyone who wants it. This painting does not belong to anyone who doesn't want it."[26] Reinhardt's democratic view of the artist lay in the physical making of the painting, recalling the definition of Action Painting proposed by Rosenberg. In one of the many comments that was edited out of the published version of the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35, painter Ralph Rosenborg explained his attitude toward authorship: "The point is that anybody could paint the picture I paint instead of being a truck driver. I'm not an artist from the esthetic point of view. I'm just a practitioner with a manual point of thinking."[27] The egalitarian tenor of Rosenborg's statement demystifies the artistic act, reminiscent of Resnick's painting like de Kooning or everyone painting black paintings, and it calls attention to the fact that the production of art is not entirely cognitive nor is it entirely manual but is the intersection of the two—"a manual way of thinking." The hand is engaged in the world; the painting process is an encounter, a struggle, with the canvas and paint. With its pristine, matte, markless surface, it is easy to forget that a hand painted the canvas of *Abstract Painting* (1960-61). A photograph of Reinhardt painting shows him in paint-splattered pants and a smear of paint on his elbow, reminding the viewer that Reinhardt, too, encountered and struggled with his material even if he does not show the viewer that indexical struggle on the surface.[28] The very absence of the indexical trace on the canvas calls attention to the process. The viewer

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[26] Ad Reinhardt, "Abstract Painting, Sixty by Sixty Inches Square, 1960," in *Art as Art*, 84.

[27] "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," Wittenborn papers, Museum of Modern Art.

[28] For the photo, see *Life*, "Ad Reinhardt, photo by John Loengard, 1966," http://www.life.com/image/50542675.

is drawn in closer to the surface to examine the painting more carefully. The meticulousness and patience needed to create such a surface without leaving visible brushstrokes seems unfathomable, and the more carefully one looks, one becomes aware of the subtle surface differentiations in the shades of black. Again, by attending to the surface of the painting, the viewer is brought in and connected to the artist's process.

Perhaps more than any other Abstract Expressionist painter, de Kooning is infamous for his struggles with the canvas. The 1950 painting *Excavation* began as a composition of two or three women, and de Kooning reportedly scraped down and repainted *Woman I* at least fifty times over a period of almost three years before it left his studio.[29] Also perhaps more than any other Abstract Expressionist, de Kooning displayed this struggle on the canvas. The small work, *Woman*, dates from 1950, the time de Kooning embarked on his series of Women paintings.[30] De Kooning used a collaged element at the center of the painting: a woman's mouth taken from a Camel cigarette advertisement.[31] In the story we tell ourselves about Abstract Expressionism, such an intrusion of the outside world into the realm of painting is anathema. Much has been made of this mouth and its metaphorical and erotic meanings, but what of this mouth simply as material at hand and encountered? De Kooning said, "I cut out a lot of mouths," presumably indicating that there was a lot of cut-out photographs around the

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[29] For *Excavation*, see Richard Shiff, *Doubt* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 90; for *Woman I*, see Richard Shiff, "Water and Lipstick: de Kooning in Transition," in *Willem de Kooning: Paintings*, edited by Marla Prather (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1994), 34.

[30] For a reproduction, see The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1984.613.6.

[31] Shiff, "Water and Lipstick," 39.

studio.[32] The issue is not merely about "high" and "low" art, as some have suggested, but is that the collaged image makes a bridge between the artist and the viewer; it is a point of commonality. This mouth is from an advertisement that many people have seen, or at last it is evocative of countless other advertisements for cigarettes or toothpaste that we all have seen. This small piece of paper in the center of the painting denotes a common world shared by artist and viewer, and it became part of de Kooning's encounter with his materials by the fact that it was lying around like his paint or brushes. The artist's engagement with his or her materials, however indexed on the canvas, can offer a point of entry for the viewer. Whether one is looking at a painting by Pollock, Reinhardt, or de Kooning, the paintings, for all of their formal differences, force the viewer to do a similar kind of work—attend to the surface and materiality of the painting, moving beyond interiority.

There is another aspect of de Kooning's small painting that points to artistic process and exacerbates one of the emblematic attributes of Abstract Expressionist painting. Because of its small size, one could perhaps consider it a sketch for one of his larger paintings. In fact, de Kooning made several sketches for his Women series, but again, in the story we tell ourselves of Abstract Expressionism, such sketches are antithetical to the *spontaneity* of the painting process. Rosenberg, however, had quite a different understanding of sketches and spontaneity. He admonished one of the artists (maybe Pollock) for judging another painter "not modern" because he worked from sketches. Rosenberg wrote, "There is no reason why an act cannot be prolonged from a piece of paper to a canvas. Or repeated on another scale and with more control. A

[32] Willem De Kooning, quoted in Ibid., 40.

sketch can have the function of a skirmish."[33] Besides de Kooning, the most obvious points of reference here for Rosenberg were Motherwell and Kline. Because both Motherwell and Kline were known to have enlarged smaller sketches onto larger canvases, which initiated their mature styles, their styles are seen by some to be disingenuous.[34] Motherwell made a small drawing to accompany one of Rosenberg's poems for the second issue of *possibilities*, which was never produced. A year later, he found the drawing in a drawer and reproduced it on a larger canvas, titling it *At Five in the Afternoon*, the first in a series of elegies to the Spanish Republic.[35] Kline's story is somewhat similar, although it involved a projector, which he used to enlarge one of his smaller drawings.[36] The accusation that these acts are ones of disingenuous posturing fails to understand that any encounter with materials is a genuine encounter.

The experiences of both Motherwell and Kline, again, point to the "manual way of thinking" shared by so many of the Abstract Expressionists. In speaking of returning to a familiar motif, Motherwell said, "When you've done something a lot, it gets built

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[33] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 26. Fred Orton suggests Rosenberg was speaking of Pollock here (Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," 15, n. 53).

[34] Foster, et al., *Art Since 1900, vol. 2*, 352.

[35] David Rosand, "'My I': Toward an Iconography of the Self," in *Robert Motherwell on Paper: Drawings, Prints, Collages*, edited by David Rosand (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 20. For the drawing, see the frontispiece in Rosand, *Robert Motherwell on Paper*. There are three works entitled *At Five in the Afternoon* (Katy Rogers, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2010), one of which is in a private collection and one in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. For a reproduction, see Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, "Morris Bequest: Motherwell's *At Five in the Afternoon*," http://www.famsf.org/tours/tour.asp?tourkey=728.

[36] Harry Gaugh cautions the reader against assuming that this was a "conversion" moment for Kline, who he argues was already working toward abstraction by 1948-1949. Kline borrowed the projector from de Kooning, who had borrowed it himself to enlarge some of his own sketches (Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture*, 84).

into your arm and wrist and just comes out—in the way you might use a certain phrase habitually, though in wholly different contexts."[37] In Gestalt therapy, habitual movements indicate a minimum of awareness, but one of the goals of therapy is to make the individual fully aware of that movement. In recognizing that one is using the same movements in different contexts, there is a self-awareness, or rather, a self-actualization that is a crucial aspect of Action Painting. As Briony Fer has astutely argued, the signature style is predicated on repetition.[38] Rothko once told a friend, "If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over and over again—exploring it, probing it, demanding by this repetition that the public look at it."[39] Rothko's statement is crucial not just because it highlights the repetitive—habitual—act of the artist but because it also underscores the repetitive viewing of the spectator. It is in repetition—whether by artist or viewer—that one can find awareness.

What is assumed in this downgrading of Motherwell and Kline as somehow less authentic, or less genuine, is that spontaneity involves fast, quick action. In this sense, spontaneity is tied to something like Surrealist automatism, which involves a direct, unmediated transcription of the artist's unconscious onto the paper or canvas. For Rosenberg, while each action is discrete, it does not happen in an instant. In terms closer to Goodman and Gestalt therapy, spontaneity and style are wrapped in one's comportment, how one carries oneself and responds to the world, Motherwell's awareness of habitual actions. This concept of spontaneous action is closer to vitalist

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[37] Robert Motherwell quoted in Rosand, "'My I': Toward an Iconography of the Self," 21.

[38] Briony Fer, "Rothko and Repetition," in *Seeing Rothko*, edited by Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2005), 160.

[39] Mark Rothko, quoted in Ibid., 161.

spontaneity than it is to Surrealist automatism. The vitalist perspective moves beyond the psychoanalytic rubric of conscious/unconscious action, which translates formally to control/chaos, and beyond the artist's interiority in order to connect the artist with the world and with others.

Perhaps more than any other painter, Pollock embraced vitalist spontaneity. Leja was the first to connect Pollock to Harvey Fergusson's 1934 book, *Modern Man: His Belief and Behavior*, dedicated to the most famous early-twentieth-century vitalist, Henri Bergson, but it is Jonathan Katz's recent essay on Pollock that makes a compelling argument for understanding Pollock's paintings in light of his vitalist perspective.[40] Fergusson's description of spontaneity involves the artist finding "perfect equilibrium with the object of [the artist's energy]."[41] Further, the artist "has no more illusion of choice than a river on its way to the sea. His energy flows powerfully into its inevitable objective…. He and his environment are one, and for the moment he experiences the essential unity of being."[42] Fifteen years later, Goodman also used a similar Taoist metaphor to describe the self's proper state: "'like water,' assuming the form of the receptacle."[43] In other words, the artist does not engulf the object with his own being or impose himself on the object but allows the object to stand in and of itself—not as a simple means to the artist's end.

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[40] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 178-185; Jonathan Katz, "Jackson Pollock's Vitalism;" Harvey Fergusson, *Modern Man: His Belief and Behavior* (New York: Knopf, 1936).

[41] Fergusson, *Modern Man*, 258.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 427

Fergusson's description of the spontaneous creative act evokes Pollock moving around his canvas, wholly absorbed in the act of painting. It also echoes Goodman's description of creative spontaneity as "the graceful energetic movement that has rhythm, follows through, etc."[44] In this vitalist frame, spontaneity is not just about the artist's mental state but also his bodily engagement; the two are entwined. Pollock hinted at the inseparability of the mind and body when he said, "It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."[45] If Pollock could not get his hand and mind to work at the same time, he "lost contact" with the painting; he lost the equilibrium of which Fergusson spoke, the follow-through in Goodman's terms. Spontaneity invokes the here and now—both the prolonged moment of its creation and the here and now of its reception. The here and now does not exclude; it brings the viewer into the moment. There is an inherent communicability within spontaneity because it emits and stimulates participation, to borrow Rothko's vocabulary.

Goodman was not coming from a strictly vitalist perspective, but many of his pronouncements are reminiscent of vitalism. In *Gestalt Therapy*, he made an astute parenthetical observation, "It is curious that this feeling of impartiality or disinterest, testified to by creative persons, is analytically interpreted as loss of self, rather than as the proper feeling of self…."[46] As shown in the previous chapter, this understanding of the self as the "loss" of the self, or more properly the loss of the ego, comes closer to

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[44] Ibid., 231.

[45]Berton Roueché, "'Unframed Space,' *The New Yorker*, August 1950," in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, 18.

[46] Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 376.

the self described by Rosenberg in "The American Action Painters" than any psychoanalytic explanation. Detachment and impersonality are not words usually associated with spontaneity in the realm of Abstract Expressionism, but they allow for the opening up of a space in which the viewer can connect with the artist. In this way, vitalist spontaneity involves a communitarian ideal that allows the viewer a point of entry into the artist's world. In the previous chapter, I quoted Cage's experience of Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet*.[47] He explained this experience as a losing or a forgetting of the self—of the ego—but it is precisely this "loss" that must occur in order "gain" oneself and connect with others. It is through passionate detachment that one, either as artist or as viewer, is able to tap into the vital rhythm and to be accessible/receptive to others. It is a process of integration.

This immanence that is so important to vitalist thinking and the creative process can also be seen as an analogue for one of the most pervasive pictorial strategies used by Abstract Expressionist painters: the all-over composition. Paintings by Pollock, such as *Number 28, 1950* and de Kooning's *Black Untitled* of 1948 exhibit all-over compositions with no centers of attention.[48] The viewer's eyes move across and around the canvas, and while there are places where the eyes stop, for example at the heavier pools in *Number 28, 1950* and at the larger white portions of *Black Untitled*, these particular passages are not hierarchical in the sense that they are the primary focus of the paintings. With no center of attention and no hierarchy, it is more difficult to establish one's place in such a picture than, say, in a landscape or view of a room, where

[47] See page 80 above.

[48] For the Pollock, see The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2006.32.51. For the de Kooning, see Ibid., http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1984.613.7.

whatever the scale, one can imagine oneself in that place. Here, one loses one's footing and is made aware of the fact. While this language of loss and immanence has its place in the vitalist discourse, the descriptions "no center of attention," "no hierarchy," "the loss of self" also map onto many Buddhist concerns that were clearly circulating at this moment in New York City.

In an insightful discussion with Sandler, Cage spoke of his view of Abstract Expressionism. In speaking of the famed Ninth Street exhibition of 1951, Cage told Sandler that it "could be viewed as the work of unnamed artists who had brought about a new movement. There was a homogeneity to the whole show, at least to my eyes at the time; and one of the things that made me happy about it was that different people were doing the same thing."[49] Sandler insisted, however, that the artists did not feel that they were doing the same thing. Cage acknowledged these intentions, but felt they had failed to understand the implications of what they had done. "They were not really making a clear difference in individual images. They were actually taking advantage of a new discovery which was, basically, that you could have a painting without a center of interest."[50] For Cage, the social implications of this formal strategy was a society without a center of interest, or rather with countless centers of interest, without hierarchy. Cage explained to Sandler,

> [E]very thing and every body, that is to say every non-sentient being and every sentient being, is the Buddha. These Buddhas are all, each and every one of them, at the center of the Universe. And they are in interpenetration, and they are not obstructing one another…. And then

[49] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University. For photographs of the installation of the Ninth Street Exhibition taken by Aaron Siskind, see Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Abrams, 1994), chapter 9.

[50] Ibid.

> this doctrine of non-obstruction means that I don't wish to impose my feelings on other people. Therefore, the use of chance operations, indeterminacy, etc., the nonerection of patterns, of either ideas or feelings on my part, in order to leave those other centers free to be the centers.[51]

The centering of each individual is not supposed to lead to ego mania, or the fetishization of the individual, but rather, it is to lead to respect and mutuality because there is "interpenetration." Cage described, in Buddhist terminology, Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid.

The interrelatedness of all things—sentient and nonsentient, past, present, and future—is an important aspect of Zen. It is at the heart of Buddhist karma, an idea in which every action is believed to have consequences that will not only affect others but also oneself now and in future incarnations. This interrelatedness, when brought to bear on an all-over composition, helps to understand why one cannot untangle one of Pollock's paintings. While earlier I argued that there is a sense that one could follow exactly Pollock's movements in the painting, there is a moment when viewing *Number 28, 1950*, when one realizes that it is impossible to figure out the order in which the colors were dripped and poured onto the canvas. In the bottom left corner, for example, a wide swath of khaki goes both behind and in front of the skinnier black drip, confounding their order of application. This same interrelatedness can help describe the relationship between the white and black of a Kline painting like *Chief* of 1950.[52] Kline did not just paint black on a bare, or gessoed, canvas; he also painted the white. He said, "People sometimes think I take a white canvas and paint a black sign on it, but this

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[51] Ibid.

[52] For a reproduction of Kline's *Chief*, see The Museum of Modern Art, "Franz Kline, *Chief*," http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3148&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1.

is not true. I paint the white as well as the black, and the white is just as important."[53] By painting both the black and the white, Kline did not just set a black figure against a white background. The white stands up to the black in the sense that it does not remain in the background; it intrudes upon and overlaps with the black figure, creating a completely interconnected surface. Perceptually, we tend to see the black in front of the white, but Kline kept this hierarchy in check by painting the white surfaces "as well."

One could take this interrelatedness even further to describe an artist's entire oeuvre, his signature style. In Fer's essay on Rothko's repetition, she argues that this serial repetition cannot be ascribed to the Duchampian ready-made, as this repetition is grounded in difference.[54] Careful viewing reveals that there is a myriad of detail that makes each of Rothko's paintings different from one another, and it is through the repetition of basic forms that the details become apparent.[55] The individual, differentiated paintings are necessary in order to understand the oeuvre as a whole, while at the same time a group of paintings is necessary to grasp fully the nuances of a single painting. The interrelatedness of the single painting and the artist's oeuvre, across space and time, is a key element of all Abstract Expressionist painting.

Again, it is not my aim to connect Zen-informed intentions with certain Abstract Expressionists but rather to point to the fact that the languages of Zen, vitalism, et al. became a useful way to discuss the concerns of Abstract Expressionist painting. It is telling that in his 1958 essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Allan Kaprow suggested a "(perhaps) Zen quality" not only to Pollock's personality but to his engagement with his

[53] Franz Kline, quoted in Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 245.

[54] Fer, "Rothko and Repetition," 160.

[55] Ibid., 161.

materials and subject matter.[56] Kaprow was probably right to qualify his description with a parenthetical perhaps, but his pairing of Pollock with Zen attitudes attests to the deep abiding currents that ran through the cultural discourse in which these artists were submerged. It is this discourse, not yet fully articulated in 1948 when most artists developed their mature styles, that pushed the Abstract Expressionists towards ideas of action, materiality, spontaneity, non-hierarchical composition, and scale that they explored in their paintings.

The scale of much Abstract Expressionist painting is crucial for physically situating the viewer in relation to the all-over composition. Rothko and Newman both insisted on the importance of scale in their work. Rothko described his paintings as "intimate" and "painted in a scale of normal living rather than an institutional scale."[57] Rothko's state of intimacy was "an immediate transaction," not just between the viewer and the painter but between the viewer and the artist.[58] If a Rothko painting is hung properly, it is close to the floor and reaches just above a viewer's head. The viewer approaches this painting as she approaches another person. In fact, Newman likened an encounter with a painting to an encounter with another person: "The problem of a painting is physical and metaphysical, the same as I think life is physical and metaphysical. It's no different, really, from one's feeling a relation to meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also I do believe that there's a metaphysical thing in the fact that people meet and see each other, and if a meeting of people is

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[56] Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," 7.

[57] Mark Rothko, "Letter Katharine Kuh, September 25, 1954," in *Writings on Art*, 99.

[58] Mark Rothko, "Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958," in Ibid., 128.

meaningful it affects both their lives."[59] I would not go so far to say that the painting is to stand in as a surrogate person, but rather, one's encounter with an object in the world should not be so different from one's encounter with another individual.

There are two scales in Abstract Expressionist painting—big and not-so-big. Pollock's *Number 1, 1948* (5' 7" x 8' 7") and Kline's *Chief* (5' x 6' 6") are not as big as, say, Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* or Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which are both taller than eight feet and span seventeen and eighteen feet, respectively.[60] As T. J. Clark has observed of *Number 1, 1948*, "[I]t always looks small."[61] It is not so much the smallness but the fact that "it looks as wide as one person's far flung…reach."[62] This is not small scale but human scale. If I understand Clark, the issue of scale, or size, has to do with modernism's, or more specifically abstraction's, impulse to overcome the alienation of the modern world, to return to an unalienated state, when the individual was still connected to the world and the objects within it. He writes, "Because if abstract painting could finally dispose of its parasitic relation to likeness, then it might discover…some other means of signifying experience."[63] Human-scale could be one of the other means, one of abstraction's means to satisfy modernism's "continual two-

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[59] Barnett Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 259.

[60] For the best reproductions of Pollock, *Number 1, 1948*, see Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 309, fig. 180 and for *Autumn Rhythm*, Ibid., 343, fig. 203. For *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, see *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 228-229, no. 47.

[61] Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 310.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 333.

facedness—its inward-turning and outward reaching."[64] For the Abstract Expressionists, not just for Pollock, the painting was supposed to both turn inward and reach outward; it was not a matter of choosing one over the other.

Human scale and connection were sought not only by the artists but by those who were reimagining the political landscape. In "The Root is Man," Dwight Macdonald argued that Progressives, including the old New Dealers and Trotskyists, thought of people "in terms of classes or parties instead of in terms of individual human beings."[65] Past politics was about quantity, the "historical rather than the personal level of action." He and others were searching for something more human-sized. In November 1945, Macdonald published Simone Weil's "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force," in *politics*, which Weil had written in 1940, after the fall of France. In speaking of Weil's analysis of war, Macdonald wrote, "The Greeks were wise enough to treat scientific knowledge as a means, not an end; they never developed a concept of Progress. This wisdom may have been due to their flair for the human scale; better than any other people we know of, they were able to create an art and a politics scaled to human size. They could do this because they never forgot the tragic limitations of human existence, the Nemesis which turns victory into defeat overnight, the impossibility of perfect knowledge about anything."[66] Macdonald, Goodman, and others were proposing a politics based on human intimacy, a politics grounded in the specificity of human relations, a politics that understood that the individual was not inherently antagonistic toward the collective.

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[64] Ibid., 407.

[65] Macdonald, "The Root is Man, Part Two," 207.

[66] Ibid., 212.

This human scale was the possibility of a reimagined politics at the dawn of the Cold War.

Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, while bigger than many Abstract Expressionist paintings, measuring eight-feet tall and eighteen-feet wide, is still concerned with the human scale. For many, this painting, the title of which translates to Man, heroic and sublime, stands as the epitome of mid-century grandiose individuality, but it must be read in a more democratic way.[67] Newman said of this title, "[M]an can be or is sublime in his relation to his sense of being aware."[68] But of what is the viewer aware? When he first exhibited *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* in 1951 at the Betty Parsons Gallery, the only signage in the gallery implored the viewer to stand close to the painting, not far away as was customary.[69] The idea was that the painting would encompass the viewer's entire field of vision, making the viewer physically aware of him or herself in relation to the field of red punctuated with vertical lines, but this awareness of the self always contains the experience of one's connectedness to others. As Newman told Sylvester,

> One of the things that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself. In that sense he relates to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there…. To me, the sense of place not only has a mystery but has that sense of metaphysical fact. I have come to distrust the episodic, and I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality, *and at the same time* of his connection to

[67] Serge Guilbaut, "Voicing the Fire of the Fierce Father," in *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State*, edited by Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut, and John O'Brian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 139-152. Guilbaut writes here about Newman's *Voice of Fire*, but all of Newman's work seems to be at stake in the essay.

[68] Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," 258.

[69] Newman, [Statement, 1951], in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 178.

> others, who are also separate. And this problem of our being involved in the sense of self which also moves in relation to other selves…the disdain for the self is something I don't quite understand. I think you can only feel others if you have some sense of your own being.[70]

Individuality for Newman and other Abstract Expressionists was grounded in being connected to others. This connectedness—Newman's "at the same time"—is the part that scholars invariably overlook.[71] The experience of the painting is not about living vicariously through the artist's "moral" choices but about connecting to the artist on a physical level by standing in front of and looking at the painting that he also stood in front of and looked at, connecting in a shared physical space, separate yet together.

These paintings are deeply implicated in the project of recovering and recognizing community, not just the artists' immediate downtown community but also a larger community of viewers and neighbors. Newman told the filmmaker Emile de Antonio, "I feel that my zip does not divide my paintings. I feel it does the exact opposite. It does not cut the format in half or in whatever parts, but it does the exact opposite: it unites the thing. It creates a totality…."[72] The uniting of the painting, the uniting of individuals is what is at stake in Abstract Expressionist painting. Perhaps in an overly didactic moment, Newman staged a photograph in his Front Street studio after a photographer snapped a picture of two people in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* while it

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[70] Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," 257-258. Emphasis added.

[71] The one exception I am aware of is a recent paper given by Michael Schreyach at the 2010 annual College Art Association conference, "Barnett Newman's Self-Evidence."

[72] Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 306.

was exhibited at Bennington College in Vermont.[73] The staging emphasizes the degree to which Newman felt that his paintings were an attempt to connect people. In both of these photographs, two people are seen in front of a painting. Typically photographs of viewers in front of paintings only contain one viewer, unless it is the *Mona Lisa*; here we see two. It is not just that two people are in front of and engaged with a painting, but they are also engaged with one another. While Newman and the unidentified woman in front of *Cathedra* stand roughly even with each other in the same plane, the woman is slightly turned toward Newman. In the Bennington photo, the man stands nearer to the painting than the woman, but he, too, is turned toward her. In each, the widest, brightest zip on the canvas runs between the two viewers, not dividing them, but uniting them in Newman's estimation.

The viewer does not stand in front of a painting passively; the viewer is a participant, and the relationship is one of reciprocity.[74] The painting acts on the viewer while the viewer acts on the painting. When standing in front of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the painting bathes the viewer in its red glow, changing slightly the color of one's skin and clothes, and as the viewer moves along the length of the painting, surveying its surface, the red modulates depending on one's position and angle. There is a reciprocal relationship between viewer and painting. Hess described Newman's painting in a way that can be brought to bear on much Abstract Expressionist painting.

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[73] For the Bennington photo, see Ann Temkin, *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 327, fig. 94. For the Front Street studio photo, see Photograph Archives Catalog, Smithsonian American Art Museum, "Barnett Newman and unidentified woman standing in front of *Cathedra* in his Front Street studio," http://sirismm.si.edu/juley_a/J0112534_a.jpg.

[74] A. D. B. Sylvester, "Auguries of Experience," *The Tiger's Eye* 1 (December 1948): 50. This essay was part of a series on the sublime in art. Other contributors were Kurt Seligmann, Nicolas Calas, John Stephan, Barnett Newman, and Robert Motherwell.

He wrote, "The painting and the painter became, in a sense, integrated—as opposed to separate but equal. And the spectator, too, the artist felt, could enter into an intimate relationship with the big painting. It would be larger than he could read at first glance; it surrounds him left and right peripherally, urges him toward the surface."[75] It is striking that Hess used such charged political language here to describe the artist's intention, and it is difficult to know exactly what to make of it. Written just five years after the 1964 Civil Rights Act that abolished the rationale "separate but equal," Hess' rhetoric underscores the artist's intention to create a community, to integrate the viewer. The Heideggerian notion of *Dasein* as Being-with describes the foundational nature of the self that all of the Abstract Expressionists—in the broadest sense—were evoking.

According to Rosenberg, American vanguard art—Action Painting—had not been understood properly. "In our form of society, audience and understanding for advanced painting have been produced, both here and abroad, first of all by the tiny circle of poets, musicians, theoreticians, men of letters, who have sensed in their own work the presence of the new creative principle."[76] Rosenberg did not include other painters in his audience, but there was a deeply felt sense among the painters that they were painting for each other, given the non-response of the larger society at the time. The situation that Rosenberg described affirmed Goodman's call for advance-guard writers to reestablish community. In his 1951 article, "Advance Guard Writing, 1900-1951," Goodman summoned writers to return to occasional poetry in order to reconstitute community. The advance guard needed

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[75] Hess, *Barnett Newman*, 51.

[76] Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 39.

> to write for them [the group] about them personally…. But such personal writing about the audience itself can occur only in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake; in our estranged society, it is objected, just such intimate community is lacking. Of course it is lacking! The point is that the advance-guard action helps create such community, starting with the artist's primary friends. The community comes to exist by having *its* culture; the artist makes this culture.[77]

The existence of such a community insured survival in a repressive culture and fended off self-estrangement. And while the community is not built simply on moral or political grounds, as Goodman explained, it clears the way for a revitalized society. "An aim, one might say the chief aim, of integrated art is to heighten the everyday; to bathe the world in such a light of imagination and criticism that the persons who are living in it without meaning or feeling suddenly find that it is meaningful and exciting to live in it."[78] Art becomes, in a sense, the catalyst for enlightenment, the sudden awareness of meaning and feeling that is creative and critical of the repressive norms.

This sentiment that art can lead one to imagination and criticism is the sentiment Goodman expressed in his 1952 talk at The Club. He said, "Pollock's pictures should be all around you, not on the walls…. At [the] MOMA opening someone said people looked well in front of Rothko. Rothko, Newman, and Still are housepainters. They make the room worth living in. We will create a beautiful world and start by making the wall a beautiful red."[79] While the painters may have bristled at being called

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[77] Paul Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," 375-376. Emphasis in original.

[78] Ibid., 376.

[79] Notes taken at Goodman's talk, Sandler papers, Getty Research Institute. Goodman spoke on May 28, 1952. The exhibition that Goodman referred to is "15 Americans," which was at the Museum of Modern Art from April 9 to June 1, 1952. Rothko and Still

"housepainters," with its implication of interior decorating, Goodman was signaling what Rothko thought of his own work, that it was "painted in the scale of normal living." In a similar vein, Newman is reported to have said in 1950 on the opening of his first one-man exhibition that he "want[ed] to see art placed everywhere, made part of the public's daily routine [for] we like that with which we are most familiar—it's just that simple."[80] For Goodman, Rothko, Newman, and others, art provided the stimulus for the viewer to see society and the world anew, to reject "the corruption of self-alienation."[81] Goodman wrote, "Somewhere between this level and the level of shell shock and commercialized sentiment, there must be a border-line of subject matter felt by the artist and not quite devitalized in the audience."[82] Abstract Expressionist painting opened up a site where awareness, feeling, and criticality existed in the same moment.

I am not aware of any occasional poetry that was written at The Club, although Frank O'Hara, known for his poems dealing with everyday encounters, was an active member of The Club beginning in 1952. He remembered poets writing poetry at the Cedar Tavern while listening to the artists argue with one another, but he did not know of any painters who painted while listening to the writers argue at the San Remo.[83] In

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were included, but Newman was not (Dorothy Miller, *15 Americans* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1952)).

[80] "Call Board Reporter by Amy Freeman Lee (October 2, 1950)," Betty Parsons papers, box 40, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[81] Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," 375.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Brad Gooch, *The City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 202. The Cedar made an appearance in several of O'Hara's poems, including "Ode to Willem de Kooning," "Poem," "The Unfinished," and "L'Amour avait passé par la."

writing about the New York School of Poets, David Herd describes that the purpose of occasional poetry "is to hold the gathering together by focusing minds on the intricate complex of circumstances they have in common."[84] This shared moment does not have to be a privileged moment such as a wedding or a graduation; it is more often an everyday, banal moment. Because it is not a privileged moment, it is more accessible to the reader. The point of occasional poetry, as understood by O'Hara and Goodman, was to remind the reader of the fundamental, simple connections to others in order to instantiate those connections in life.

I would like to suggest that Abstract Expressionist painting operates in a similar manner. In a sense, Abstract Expressionist painting is occasional painting in that it brings artists and viewers together by evoking their commonalities—bodily movements, physical space, awareness. It was always a goal to move beyond the small community of artists, poets, and writers. Kline told O'Hara, "If you're a painter, you are not alone. There's no way to be alone. You think you care and you're with all the people who care, including the young people who don't know they do yet. Tomlin in his late paintings knew this, Jackson always knew it: that if you meant it enough when you did it, it will mean that much."[85] Every time one looks at a painting and takes time to see a painting, there is a moment of connection. That moment is possible because of the artists' insistence on the materiality and spontaneity of the process of painting as well as their use of abstraction, all-over composition, and scale. And it is in these moments—moments of awareness—as Goodman and O'Hara suggested, that a political and self-

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[84] David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 10.

[85] Frank O'Hara, "Franz Kline Talking," in Foster, *Franz Kline*, 157. Originally published in *Evergreen Review* 3 (Autumn 1958): 58-64.

critical culture can be kept alive in politically dire times. These affective qualities of Abstract Expressionist painting sound a distinctly political voice at a moment when neither Communism nor Capitalism offered viable options. As Newman repeatedly said, "if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism. Because to the extent that my painting was not an arrangement of objects, not an arrangement of spaces, not an arrangement of graphic elements, was an open painting, in the sense that it represented an open world—to that extent I thought, and I still believe, that my work in terms of its social impact does denote the possibility of an open society, of an open world, not of a closed institutional world."[86]

[86] Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," 307-08. For a discussion of Newman's anarchism and open situations, see Ann Schoenfeld, "An Art of No Dogma: Philosophical Anarchist Protest and Affirmation in Barnett Newman's Writings and Art," Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002.

Chapter 4: Rereading the Triumph

In 1970, Irving Sandler declared Abstract Expressionism "the triumph of American painting." For Sandler, it was the triumph over European, mostly French, avant-garde art. Already in 1973, however, Max Kozloff challenged this nationalist triumphalism, raising the possibility of the artists' unknowing complicity in United States' imperialism during the Cold War.[1] Serge Guilbaut expanded Kozloff's argument a decade later to suggest that the eventual enthusiastic embrace of Abstract Expressionist painting was wrapped up in the United States' quest for cultural supremacy. I would like to suggest, however, a different "triumph" for Abstract Expressionism—one outside of nationalistic, capitalist rhetoric. Abstract Expressionism's triumph is its establishment of a radical model of community that sidestepped such grandiosity and partisanship.

In 1966, John Cage told Irving Sandler about the Abstract Expressionists, "I never agreed with their intentions, if I know what they are, and I'm not really clear that I do know what they are. I recall a few incidents that would lead me to believe that we always disagreed."[2] This comment would seem to cement Cage's reputation of being the quintessential anti-Abstract Expressionist, but by the end of the interview Cage revealed that he mainly sympathized with the Abstract Expressionists' insistence on spontaneity, directness, and immediacy. The fact that Cage hesitated admitting these sympathies speaks to how quickly Abstract Expressionism had become codified even by

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[1] Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 11 (May 1973): 43-54.

[2] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

1966. To complicate matters further, Cage told Sandler, "To be perfectly frank, I think it's more recently the work of Newman and Reinhardt have impressed me deeply. The present exhibition of the *Stations of the Cross* I think is superb, and I see now that it makes quite explicit what I would think are the intentions of Abstract Expressionism. It would seem to me to be truly Abstract Expressionism."[3] In response, Sandler tried to downplay Newman's and Reinhardt's centrality to the group, but Cage's comments raise many important questions. If he agreed with the Abstract Expressionists' directness, spontaneity, and immediacy, what did he find disagreeable? After participating in The Club for so many years, how is it that Cage could not articulate the Abstract Expressionists' intentions? By the same token, after participating in so many discussions, why would Cage declare Newman's *Stations of the Cross* the exemplar of Abstract Expressionist intentions? What does it mean that the epitome of Abstract Expressionism comes in 1966, long after the declared "end" of Abstract Expressionism? The answers to these questions expose the deeply social nature of Abstract Expressionism that became more relevant in the 1960s but also begin to point to how and why Abstract Expressionism has been misunderstood almost from the beginning.

Cage's historical position as an active participant in the formulation of Abstract Expressionism at The Club and his subsequent misportrayal as hostile to Abstract Expressionism give his comments insight and make them disruptive of the standard narrative. The *Stations of the Cross*, a series of fourteen paintings painted over the course of eight years with the minimum of materials, can be considered Newman's most ambitious undertaking, but few have accorded it such prominence within Abstract Expressionism as Cage. The reason for this exclusion is because scholars end their

[3] Ibid. Underlined emphasis in the original.

studies of Abstract Expressionism somewhere between 1949 and 1952. By that time, most of the significant Abstract Expressionists had developed their mature styles, and according to Sandler by 1952, "The main tendencies in Abstract Expressionism had been established and accepted, at least by the artists themselves."[4] Guilbaut ends his study with the 1951 Ninth Street show, "the symbol of both the triumph and the decadence of the avant-garde."[5] While most studies begin in the 1930s, Michael Leja begins his in the 1920s after World War I with the beginning of "Modern Man" discourse, but he still ends around 1950 when this paradigm of human nature, this definition of "man," began to shift.[6] Only Dore Ashton pushes the timeline forward, ending in 1960 when most of the camaraderie between the artists had dissipated, which was intensified by the fact that in 1961 there were almost 300 galleries staging almost 4000 exhibitions per year, "[blurring] the outlines of an art community and [causing] confusion in the ranks."[7] Because of these narrative choices, Newman's *Stations*, begun in 1958 and exhibited in 1966, become a postscript in the annals of Abstract Expressionism.[8] Cage's enthusiastic response to them, however, points to a vitality and relevance that Abstract Expressionism still had in the 1960s that the scholarly narrative does not adequately address. As art historian Patricia Kelly explains, the 1960s saw a "growing demand that

[4] Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 2. Whether or not this is an accurate assessment of this moment is a point I will discuss below.

[5] Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 5.

[6] Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 203-209.

[7] Ashton, *The New York School*, 229.

[8] It is also significant that Mark Rothko's biggest undertaking—a chapel in Houston, Texas—also happened in the 1960s, opening to the public in 1971, after Rothko's death. The chapel is considered the premier example of Abstract Expressionist sublimity, well after the artists broached the subject in 1948 (Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 8-9).

art shed its detachment and directly engage politics—if not merge with life altogether."[9] Along with the paintings of Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland, Abstract Expressionism typified the detached, apolitical art against which younger artists reacted, but Cage's comments and Newman's *Stations of the Cross* allow for an opportunity to reexamine the historical situation.

Newman began painting what would become *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachtani* in 1958 after recovering from a heart attack; it was not until 1960, however, when painting the fourth painting of the series, that Newman realized he was painting *The Stations of the Cross*.[10] The series consists of fourteen black and white paintings, each about six and a half feet tall and five feet wide. Compositionally, the paintings consist of Newman's "zips," but in the different paintings, these zips are sometimes thin, sometimes thick, and sometimes nonexistent; sometimes their edges are loose and brushy, sometimes hard and straight. Depending on the paint, sometimes the black is dark and deep and sometimes more gray and matte; sometimes there is no black, just white paint on bare canvas. Each combination of formal elements enacts different juxtapositions and tensions within the composition and between different paintings. The title refers to the defining moment of Christianity, the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The Aramaic phrase, "Lema Sabachtani," recalls Jesus' last words on the cross addressed to God, "Why have you forsaken me?"

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[9] Patricia Kelly, "When Push Comes to Shove: Barnett Newman, Abstraction, and the Politics of 1968," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 1 (2008): 29.

[10] Barnett Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958-1960," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 189. For reproductions of the *Stations*, see *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 270-273.

Many critics grumbled over Newman's choice of such an overt religious theme; his goal, however, was not to use the religious metaphor for shock value. The religious reference speaks directly to his intentions of instantiating a communal experience with profound political implications. In his 1978 monograph on Newman, Harold Rosenberg argued for a completely secular understanding of Newman's idiosyncratic thought.[11] He argued unequivocally that because the subject of these paintings had been taken out of the context of the Christian faith by a Jew, the paintings could not be considered religious; they no longer contained the significance attributed to them by that faith. Rosenberg wrote, "The Stations become terms in the artist's personal vocabulary and should be seen exclusively in that light."[12] Rosenberg's reading of Newman's project as an unconventional selection of religious, popular, and secular thinking is correct, but what Rosenberg did not recognize was how religious references allowed Newman to imbue his subject with a deeper, more metaphysical sense that had important communal connotations. Using Jewish theology and one of the most powerful symbols of the Christian faith allowed Newman to communicate the fullness of his subject matter.

Newman was not alone in his recourse to theological subjects; Paul Goodman found that he always returned to theological language to express those ideas most important to him. He wrote in his diary, "I notice that I sometimes use the language of psychoanalysis and rarely a few terms from existential philosophy, but on the whole I prefer the language of orthodox theology to talk about the invisibles. Using words like

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[11] Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978). In some ways, Rosenberg's book can be seen as an attempt to counter Thomas Hess's earlier Kabbalistic reading of Newman's project (Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971)).

[12] Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, 71.

faith, hope, love, paradise, purgatory, nonattachment, vocation, Way, God, Karma, incarnation—mostly from the West, with a smattering from the East and Primitive religions. We must assume that they have met a need and they have certainly been polished by handling."[13] And Kenneth Burke, writing in 1961, argued, "The supernatural is by definition the realm of the 'ineffable.' And language by definition is not suited to the expression of the 'ineffable.' So our words…are necessarily borrowed from our words for the sorts of things we can talk about literally, our words for the three empirical orders (the world of everyday experience)."[14] In this de-analogizing process, as Burke termed it, the borrowed word used in the supernatural realm is not returned to its original (secular) meaning. Because the word has been used analogically, a new dimension of language has been added. The word has a new connotation, and that connotation cannot be taken away, even when it is "borrowed back" and used in a secular way, when it is "de-analogized."[15] Newman's recourse to religious themes and language is not at all extraordinary, and while Newman himself did not practice a particular religion nor adhere to religious dogma, we cannot ignore or disclaim his use of religious themes because it makes us uncomfortable or because it seems less substantial or too "personal."

For Newman, *The Stations* were not just about one man's agony but attested to the human condition. In his catalogue statement, Newman wrote, "Lema Sabachtani—

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[13] Paul Goodman, quoted in Stoehr, *Here Now Next*, 303.

[14] Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 14-15.

[15] Burke uses several examples of "de-analogized" words including "spirit." Originally its natural, or empirical, definition was "breath," but after being used analogically in the supernatural realm, it was borrowed back and used in a secular sense for "temperament" (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, 8).

why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why? This is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer."[16] Jesus called out to God, his Father, asking how He could allow this—the crucifixion—to happen, how He could allow Jesus to die. In this moment, we see Jesus not as divine incarnation but as a mortal man facing his death, with all of the anxiety that death implies. It is not just Jesus' agony one faces with the Stations of the Cross, but as Newman explained, the Stations allow pilgrims "to stand witness to the story of *each man's* agony: the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed—world without end."[17] Newman does not single out Jesus' particular experience but sees it standing in as an instance of universality. Agony here refers to one's existential realization of mortality, but more than that, the realization that mortality is universal in that every person will suffer and die, but the experience is particular, for each person. One experiences the universal in the particular. One could easily read *The Stations* autobiographically as another particular instance of the universal: after being neglected by the art world for most of the 1950s, Newman painted nothing in 1956 or 1957, and then he suffered a heart attack at the end of 1957.[18] The *Stations* were Newman's own outcry, but in many ways, Newman's project moved beyond the autobiographical, the confessional, in order to make a general experience that each person could understand. In part, the *Stations* present a moment of acceptance—the

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[16] Barnett Newman, [catalogue statement for *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachtani*], in *Selected Writings and Interview*, 188.

[17] Ibid. Emphasis added.

[18] Hess, *Barnett Newman* (1971), 93.

viewer accepts that human life ends in death, and while one might question it, it is a fact that exists constantly for every individual.

Newman's subject is accentuated by the ritual nature of the Stations of the Cross because the series engages the viewer in an active way that a single painting cannot. The Stations are specific events that correspond to the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. From Newman's statements, it was not the individual "anecdotes" that interested him. He was not illustrating Jesus' second fall or Veronica wiping Jesus' face. Throughout the year (not just on Good Friday), believers follow the priest on a procession around the church, stopping at each representation of one of the Stations. These representations can be simple crosses or more elaborate iconographic depictions, and sometimes they take place outside of the church in a landscape. In front of each Station, the faithful recite specific prayers before moving on to the next. The Stations are more than just reminders of a biblical story. They call the viewer to action, to physically walk to each representation, recite prayers, and to reflect. This activation of the viewer was fundamental to Newman's concept of the series. When the paintings were initially installed in the Guggenheim Museum, small groupings were hung in various bays, so the viewer had to proceed—along with other viewers—to see each of the *Stations* in sequence. At no point could viewers see the whole of the installation in one sweeping glance.[19] This configuration underscored not only the seriality of the group but also the mutuality of each painting. In order to have a sense of the whole, one had to keep individual paintings in mind while physically moving and looking at the others. The physical motion would also correspond to the mental reflection that Newman

[19] Currently, and for the last decade or so, *The Stations of the Cross* have been exhibited in a single room in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

hoped the viewer would experience. One begins with Jesus' suffering, then one's own suffering, and then "each man's" suffering.

The thing that Cage found so compelling about the *Stations* was the degree to which the series mobilized simultaneously the individual's relation to the work of art and the recognition that this relationship was set in a community. In the Jewish faith, community is paramount. For example at the Passover Seder, one of the most important rituals is the asking and answering of the Four Questions, which are permutations of the question, Why is this night different from all other nights? Each question is to be asked by the youngest child at the table, thereby involving the child in the ceremony. Significantly, the answer to each of these questions refers to the plight of the Jewish ancestors who fled Egypt, helping to remind everyone present of the bitterness of slavery and of eventual freedom. The point of this ritual is to remind us that we are all slaves in Egypt; we empathize with our forebears. In the Christian religion, this empathetic moment—the moment in which one realizes he or she is connected to others in a community—comes at the ritual reenactment of the Stations of the Cross.

Half way through painting the *Stations*, Newman composed a statement about his plan for a synagogue. He described the experience with which one is faced at temple. "The synagogue is more than just a House of Prayer. It is a place, Makom, where each man can be called to stand before the Torah to read his portion…. Here in this synagogue, each man sits, private and secluded in the dugouts, waiting to be called, not to ascend a stage but to go up on the mound, under the tension that 'Tzim-Tzum' that created light and the world, he can experience a total sense of his personality before the

Torah and His Name."[20] It is notable that Newman qualified his religious description by adding secular references about baseball dugouts and mounds, but Rosenberg criticized Newman for his peculiar characterization of temple: "This description [of temple] is a unique mixture of contemporary individualism, personal symbolic identifications ('dugouts,' 'the mound'), and traditional phrases. In no way can it be reconciled with an actual synagogue…. To close the list of Newman's nonconformisms, the Jew does not go to the synagogue to 'experience a total sense of his own personality' (this is Protestantism rather than Judaism). He goes to submerge his personality in his tie with the 'nation of priests' to which he belongs by birth."[21] While Rosenberg is correct that Newman's rhetoric was unconventional, it is surprising that Rosenberg misreads Newman's "personality" here, as it is not too far from Rosenberg's own in his essay "The American Action Painters." Newman's lighthearted and frequent references to baseball emphasize the individual, but that individual belongs to a team. The individual, even when alone on the mound, is tied to others.

For Newman, the individual is always in relation to others, whether the nation of priests, a baseball team, the artist, other viewers, or Jesus. It is in moments of self-awareness that one can "submerge" him or herself with others. Newman recognized the great need in the 1960s—and even before—that people had for togetherness. Newman told Father Thomas F. Mathews, a Jesuit priest, "All you need to do is go down to the Electric Circus at the Dome on a Saturday night to see hundreds of young people sitting and standing in the greatest spectacle of human piety I've ever seen…but

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[20] Barnett Newman, "From *Recent American Synagogue Architecture*," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 181.

[21] Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, 80ff.

I'm not sure whether it's a holy place. But it seems a holy place to the people there; they sit and stand as if they were in a church. Everyone is involved with quiet courtesy. The idea is to be together."[22] It is this courteous togetherness that was not only Newman's aim for *The Stations* but also The Club's aim.

As mentioned in chapter 3, Frank O'Hara and other poets were regulars at The Club, and O'Hara in particular was influenced by Goodman's call for the return of occasional poetry in order to instantiate community. In 1959, O'Hara wrote, somewhat mockingly, a manifesto entitled "Personism." Despite his facetious admission that it was brand new and nobody knew about it, "Personism" offered a vision of writing for the new community he and others envisioned that is not unlike how he understood Abstract Expressionist painting. O'Hara contrasted his Personism with the tendency toward abstract detachment, the removal of the poet in the poem; here, instead of detaching himself, the poet wrote about himself, his daily activities, his friends' activities, and their conversations. But this reinsertion of the poet, O'Hara declared, "is verging on a true abstraction for the first time…."[23] By reinserting the poet, O'Hara hoped to achieve a level of abstraction, of impersonality. While seemingly paradoxical, the point was that in writing about the everyday, one was not concerned with personality or "vulgar" intimacy but with making a connection through common experience, the particularity of the universal. O'Hara, while writing about the events in his day, aimed to write about relatable experience that would address itself to others. Certainly,

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[22] Newman, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," in *Selected Writings and Interview*, 288.

[23] Frank O'Hara, "Personism," in *Selected Poems*, edited by Mark Ford (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 248.

O'Hara's occasional poetry does not carry the heft of Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, but their intentions are not so different.

O'Hara wrote, "[O]ne of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself)…."[24] O'Hara had in mind writing a poem for a specific person, but that was just a minimum. The poem could address itself to others as well. He wrote, "It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person…. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages."[25] Terrence Diggory points out that O'Hara's emphasis on betweeness allows "the poem [to become] the space in which persons are mutually exposed in their separateness."[26] Diggory draws on French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Being Singular Plural," in which Nancy elaborates on Heidegger's notion of Being-with. In speaking of betweeness, Nancy emphasizes that "everything…passes between us," but "from one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity."[27] We touch each other, are next to each other, but we remain separate entities. We are together in our separateness. This separateness can never be overcome, but that does not leave us alone because we are always *with* one another. O'Hara's poem is not just words on a page but is addressed to someone. He even cheekily wrote, "While I was writing it [the poem] I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, so Personism was born."[28] This

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Diggory, "Community 'Intimate' or 'Inoperative,'" 25.

[27] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 5.

[28] O'Hara, "Personism," 248.

direct address—that could just as easily be spoken—creates a relationship, a community of two, but because it is written, it can include more. Whoever reads the poem is invited into the community that the poet is creating.[29] The poem becomes a moment of awareness of our separate-togetherness.

Given O'Hara's closeness with the Abstract Expressionists, it should not be surprising to hear him echoing the painters' own beliefs on the role of painting. Newman articulated it best when he said that he hoped his paintings would make viewers aware of their own selves but at the same time aware that they were involved with other selves.[30] As discussed in chapter 3, one way the artists instantiated this awareness is through the use of scale. Newman's *Stations* are hung fairly low to the ground, so each canvas is roughly the same height as an average-sized person. This humanly-proportioned painting addresses the viewer while the viewer addresses it, accentuating the personal address the artist is making to the viewer. *The Stations of the Cross*, more than any other work of Abstract Expressionism, embody a model of being-with that offered a real alternative to Cold War consensus and Red Scare rhetoric. After speaking of the hippies at the Electric Circus, Newman asked, "[I]s the rejection of the establishment and its nomenclature a sign of no religion? To me it seemed the exact opposite. And I think an attempt must be made to understand the hippies and to reach them before some politician grabs them."[31] Newman was speaking at a symposium, "The Problem of Religious Content in Contemporary Art;" he had been invited because the organizing priest was impressed with his *Stations of the Cross* exhibited the previous

[29] Diggory, "Community 'Intimate' or 'Inoperative,'" 18-19.

[30] Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," 257-258.

[31] Newman, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," 288.

year. This rejection of the establishment does not necessitate that the young people reject religion, or politics for that matter. In some sense, however, this being-with of the hippies, of the *Stations*, is pre-political or apolitical in that it describes fundamentally how human beings exist in the world, but Newman recognized that this state can be manipulated, or co-opted, by certain politicians.

Some anarchists, including Paul Goodman, insisted that they were not interested in politics; politics in the sense of a practice of a government or administration was of no concern to them.[32] They were more concerned with human interactions on a fundamental basis and how these interactions would engender a community, or a society. This reimagined society, based on notions of being-with and mutual aid, would give rise to a new politics that was not wrapped up in state authority and that did not look like what had come before. In writing on the poetry of the 1950s, literary critic Charles Altieri asks, "Does [imaginative writing] get beyond simply isolating and resisting what seems most oppressive in its cultural situation so that it can help reconfigure the dominant structures for defining values[?] During the fifties meeting this demand would require not only setting traditional understandings of the personal against the cultural pressures to conform but also providing alternative ways to understand the needs, desires, and powers that might be at stake in this struggle."[33] Art has to move beyond simple opposition in order to reimagine values, offering alternatives to the dominant structure. Both the New York School of poets and of painters were able to reconfigure the individual's relationship with the collective in order to foster a way to withstand the

[32] This is the second definition of politics given in the Oxford English Dictionary.

[33] Charles Altieri, "Contingency and Sociality in American Poetry of the Fifties," in *Freedom and Form: Essays in Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Esther Giger and Agnieska Salska (Lodz: Wydawnictwo University Press, 1998), 27.

conformity and complicity of the 1950s and 1960s. In refusing to play into the 1950s contradiction of the individual and the collective and in affirming the mutuality of the individual and the community, the Abstract Expressionists opened a space that operated outside of societal norms.

In 1952 shortly after the evenings devoted to "Abstract Expressionism," there was a panel, "The Problem with the Engaged Artist," which included Lionel Abel, John Ferren, Newman, Emmanuel Navaretta, Edwin Denby, Ray Handler, Elaine de Kooning, and Cage.[34] Pavia described it as more talk about Existentialism, but the conversation was a bit more far ranging and moved into the realm of political commitment. Abel asked and answered his own question:

> What would commitment mean today? New social ideas. Political parties, etc. Today such a commitment would involve ceasing to be an artist. Propaganda is so common today you cannot 'join.' You are either in or you are not. No declaration of political identification, etc. can have any meaning today. The former sense of political commitment is not possible today. Perhaps it is impossible today even to be a 'one-idea' politician, sponsoring little political journals, etc. Politics in this sense does not exist anymore. Engagement is not possible.[35]

Abel voiced here what Motherwell and Rosenberg had articulated already in 1947 in their introduction to *Possibilities* magazine: the political situation was such that one could not be an artist and politically committed at the same time without "the extremist faith in sheer possibility."[36] This statement is usually taken as a sign of the artists' turn away

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[34] The panel took place on April 25, 1952, and a partial transcript can be put together from Seitz's notes (Seitz papers, Archives of American Art).

[35] Notes dated April 25, 1952, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[36] Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg, [Editorial Statement], *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947/1948): n.p.

from political engagement, but in fact, it represents the realization that being "political" could no longer look like it used to in the 1930s. Politics would become possibilities. The politics of the old Left were outmoded and too narrowly focused. The situation was even more dire when Abel echoed his colleagues just five years later. There was no longer a real political choice because the choices had already been determined; there was very little room to maneuver within the anti-Communism of Cold War liberalism; one was either for or against, and the sense was that they both amounted to the same thing. It was no longer enough to substitute one politics for another; politics altogether had to be remade. During the discussion, the dance critic Edwin Denby said, "There are other means than politics of changing the social structure."[37] There was a sense among the artists and intellectuals that "to be political" looked a certain way—similar to what it meant to be a Leftist in the 1930s—but they were no longer interested in being political *in that way*.

The question that faced the artists and intellectuals of this moment was how to be engaged so that one was truly political. Certainly, some, like Abel, thought such engagement was impossible. But others, like Cage and Newman, were not so quick to shut down possibility. The Abstract Expressionists' view of the individual within the collective meant it did not look like the traditional Marxism of the Left; instead, it moved in the direction of Kropotkin's anarchism. For Cage and for the Abstract Expressionists, this engagement meant a politics and ethics based on empathy—the awareness of others through oneself—that was activated through the affective dimension of the art work. The art work opened up a space to allow individuals to come together.

[37] Notes dated April 25, 2952, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

To go back to Newman's *Stations* again, Cage told Sandler that he would have liked to see a fifteenth station so that the series "would not leave us in a void, but which would bring us back to the image which comes at the end of the ten ox-herding pictures in the second version of Zen Buddhism, namely the fat man returning to the village bearing gifts with a big smile on his face. Now this smile is largely missing from Abstract Expressionism."[38] The ox-herding pictures to which Cage refers represent spiritual development on the way to the enlightenment. Significantly, the picture-cycle does not end with the moment of enlightenment—the deep grasping of oneness, of connectedness—but ends with the enlightened fat man returning to society. Cage's proposition differs from the usual "fifteenth" station—the resurrection of Christ—but the sentiment is the same: the end is life. There is acceptance of the world as it is, and the smile on the fat man indicates that there is pleasure found in the world as it is. There is another painting that is often connected with *The Stations of the Cross—Be II*, which was exhibited with the fourteen paintings at the Guggenheim.[39] This painting differs in shape, although it is still roughly human-sized, and additionally, it uses color—a vibrant orange—along its right edge. When it was originally shown in 1962, gallerist Alan Stone gave it the title *Resurrection*, which Newman later disavowed.[40] Certainly,

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[38] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University. This humor is absent from the codified version of Abstract Expressionism but was ever present at The Club. One example is the party thrown for Newman on January 23, 1950, after the opening of his first exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Tom Hess described the party: "The main decoration consisted of about a dozen card-table tops put against the walls with stripes made out of old feathers tied down their centers. It was a lighthearted, mischievous reconstruction of the show." Newman realized they were poking fun at him, but he was flattered (Hess, *Barnett Newman* (1971), 87).

[39] For a reproduction, see *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 273.

[40] Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, 229.

when grouped with *The Stations of the Cross*, the literalness of such a title was not Newman's style. Its demand, "Be," does offer an answer to the suffering: one must accept it as it is and simply "be." It many ways it does move the viewer outside of the void that Cage lamented, and it is not clear why Cage would not have associated this painting with the fifteenth station along the lines of his own thinking. I would like to suggest that if a viewer understands Newman's paintings, he or she becomes Cage's smiling fat man, accepting suffering through the awareness of one's being-with-others. It should not come as a surprise that the anarchist and Cage's fat man have much in common in that they both recognize the autonomy of individuals. One person's solution need not be another's solution. There is no priority or hierarchy of solution; anarchy is not a creed that engenders a platform to follow, but it is an ethical system for carrying oneself in the world.

Cage felt that one should be able to use art in relation to one's daily life, to use art in order to change the way one sees the world. He told Sandler, "I wanted them to change my way of seeing, not my way of feeling. I'm perfectly happy about my feelings…. I don't want to spend my life being pushed around by a bunch of artists."[41] He explained the ways in which the paintings of Mark Tobey, the black and white paintings of de Kooning, and the paintings of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns all changed the way he saw the world. "[I]'m actually insisting on our using our daily experience in such a way that we can suffer it, and at any moment a metamorphosis [sic] into what it is that we're seeing—that is to say to become identified. First with the

[41] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

tree, then with the Coke bottle, then with this, then with that."[42] This "total involvement," as Cage described it, was not meant to be a mystical experience, but a "real down to earth experience, not as something spooky."[43] It was for this same reason that Newman put the pitcher's mound in the temple and requested simply that his viewers "be." Both Cage and Newman wanted art to give the experience of *grounded* involvement. If the viewer of Newman's *Stations* or any other Abstract Expressionist painting is the returning fat man from Cage's scenario, then those paintings were able to change the way he or she saw the world, which was exactly the goal of many of the Abstract Expressionists. In the same panel on engagement, Abel echoed what many of the artists felt, "The creative experience itself must change society."[44] Changing the way one sees was the first step to changing society.

In many ways, the possibility of change that the artists were articulating in the early 1950s at The Club echoed the ideas of the New Left in the 1960s, which is one reason why Newman's *Stations of the Cross* struck such a chord. The social critic C. Wright Mills addressed the New Left in an open letter in the spring of 1960 articulating what he understood to be the concerns of the new movement: "What needs to be understood, and what needs to be changed, is not merely first this and then that detail of some institution or policy. If there is to be a politics of a New Left, what needs to be analyzed is the *structure* of institutions, the *foundations* of policies. In this sense, both in its criticisms and in its proposals, our work is necessarily structural — and so, *for us*,

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Note dated April 25, 1952, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

just now — utopian."[45] Intellectuals such as Mills and Goodman, who began their critiques in the 1940s, understood that cultural problems like alienation and conformity had political roots.[46] Herbert Marcuse, another intellectual leader of the New Left, understood that there could be no meaningful social change unless individuals were "liberated from capitalist needs and consciousness."[47] For all of these thinkers, political change depended on a much deeper, more fundamental change in which individuals became aware of the fact that the ways in which one considers oneself, others, and one's relation to the group formulate the political realm—different understandings of these fundamental issues engenders different politics. There was a sense that "the New Left would resuscitate a conception of politics that went beyond simply allocating resources or choosing political representatives, one that truly encouraged 'self-actualization' and communal discourse via political participation."[48] One of the members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the main voice of the New Left, said, "The old left…wanted the capitalist system to change to socialism, while the new left desired people to change, to develop a 'radical consciousness,' which meant that individuals would become involved."[49] This vision of the New Left was not far from

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[45] C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," in *Contemporary Anarchism*, edited by Terry M. Perlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1979), 59.

[46] Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 117.

[47] Douglas Kellner, "Radical Politics, Marcuse, and the New Left," in *The New Left and the 1960s: Herbert Marcuse, Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, vol. 3*, edited by Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

[48] Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action*, 100.

[49] Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64.

how the Abstract Expressionists envisioned their own aesthetic projects. Just as Mills and Goodman, who articulated their social critiques in the immediate postwar years, are considered fathers of the New Left movement, Abstract Expressionism needs to be considered as a precursor. Its formation and formulation coincided with and drew on Goodman's critiques and so belongs within the postwar reformulation of Leftist politics.

In order to change the way one sees, to encourage "self-actualization," there was the recognition that one had to be committed to non-commitment, as Abel put it, "an active resistance of propaganda by not joining."[50] If one did not join, one could not conform. William Seitz elaborated on the artists' position, "By refusing to identify himself with materialistic and inflated values, by rejecting money-grubbing and the world of gadgets, the artist asserts, in the strongest way he is able, his belief in life, man, and the importance of art."[51] Instead of joining, of buying in, the artists chose self-actualization but always in relation to the communal, as I have shown.

Newman felt that one of the most important aspects of the *Stations of the Cross* was their non-institutional nature. They were not commissioned for a particular person or religious group. As many involved in the New Left were challenging the institutions of government and higher learning, a non-institutional call to action was not out of place in 1966. In December 1962—the mid-point of *The Stations'* creation—the SDS members unveiled their political manifesto, "The Port Huron Statement." As Terry Anderson summarized, "[T]hey called for 'participatory democracy' in which all Americans would decide national issues in a public forum and in which opposing views

[50] Noted dated April 25, 1952, Seitz papers, Archives of American Art.

[51] Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 144.

would illuminate diversity and choice in the Republic."[52] In following the thought of Goodman and Mills, these young people felt that individuals—not the group or power elites—should make direct decisions. It is not so much the specific politics that make the analogy, although both Newman and Goodman were adamant about Kropotkin's importance to the New Left, but the way in which SDS envisioned this form of politics—small groups coming together, making decisions. On a small scale, in the aesthetic realm, the Abstract Expressionists saw their paintings as a catalyst for bringing people together; and in the social realm, The Club was that public forum in which opposing views battled weekly, illuminating the divergent voices within Abstract Expressionism. It was at The Club where artists refused to allow critics, or even a handful of other artists, to decide their artistic fate. While there were no specific politics at The Club, the way in which it operated held political ramifications that were articulated more forcefully in the 1960s.

One of the issues that needs to be addressed with the new reading of Abstract Expressionism that I am proposing is why the artists and critics of the 1960s did not recognize Abstract Expressionism's radical political implications. I suggested earlier that Abstract Expressionism was taken as the exemplar of apolitical art, but it was not completely jettisoned. Allan Kaprow, drawing on Pollock's active painting process and his desire to put himself in his work, developed Happenings, the beginning of much performance art of the 1960s and 1970s. Newman and Reinhardt, too, were taken up

[52] Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 63.

by minimalist artists for their austere geometries.[53] Yet despite these formal influences, Abstract Expressionism, as a whole, was not accorded a radical position at this time. In 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art staged the exhibition, *New York School—The First Generation: Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s*. Newman complained that the organizers presented the work "as if we were all dead."[54] And Sandler's interview with Cage suggests that the attitudes toward Abstract Expressionism had already set. It would be interesting to see how the 1961 Rothko retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art as well as the de Kooning and Newman exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery in 1962 helped to further such attitudes. Clearly, these and other exhibitions point to the acceptance of Abstract Expressionism within the art world, but how were these successes viewed by colleagues and younger artists?

It seems to me that Ashton's "ending" of Abstract Expressionism in 1960 gets closer to the historical reality than the ones posed by Sandler, Guilbaut, or Leja, tying the demise of Abstract Expressionism with the rise of the art market and the exponential enlargement of the art world. In this context, it was difficult to sustain The Club as a viable, true community. If already the members were discussing in 1952 whether The Club was too big, certainly ten years later the situation was untenable.[55] Tworkov told Calvin Tomkins, "I felt it had completely lost what it had been

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[53] Frank Stella and other young artists thought of Newman as "a folk hero figure" (Frank Stella, quoted in Richard Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," in Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, 90).

[54] Barnett Newman, quoted in Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, 59.

[55] On May 11, 1952 a business meeting was held in order to discuss "whether to close the Club or not; whether it needs a new spirit; whether it needs organization; no lectures; whether it needs club and find new quarters" (Notecard in Sandler papers, Archives of American Art).

originally…. For a little while there was a real flowing together in terms of friendship and ideas. It existed before the ambitions connected with a career became manifested…. Going to The Club was a way for younger artists to make the right contacts. It wasn't any longer about a group of friends."[56] The Club ended in 1962 just as SDS was articulating its vision in The Port Huron Statement. This sense of careerism that Tworkov acknowledged went a long way toward unraveling the camaraderie that Ashton said was gone by 1961. By treating others as a contact or as a way to further one's own career effaced the other's autonomy, an effacement the community could not withstand.

A. Deirdre Robson's important essay on the market for Abstract Expressionist painting in the 1940s and 1950s is also helpful in assessing this situation.[57] It was not until the later 1950s, after Pollock's death in 1956, that the Abstract Expressionists began commanding higher prices for their paintings. Robson argues that this commercial success depended on linking the Abstract Expressionists with the masters of European modernism, like Picasso and Matisse. Additionally, Abstract Expressionist painting had to be "identified with the future and with American aspirations" in order to attract the growing number of younger collectors.[58] Certainly, Guilbaut's thesis that Abstract Expressionist painting was co-opted by political powers to further the United States' political and cultural hegemony is operative here. This market success at a time

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[56] Jack Tworkov, in Calvin Tomkins papers, IV.C.4, The Museum of Modern Art Archive, New York.

[57] A. Deirdre Robson, "The Market for Abstract Expressionism: The Time Lag between Critical and Commercial Acceptance," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate, second edition*, edited by Francis Frascina (New York: Routledge, 2000), 288-293.

[58] Ibid., 290.

with younger artists, who were highly critical of the capitalist system, came of age, may have done much to discredit the Abstract Expressionists in their estimation. This moment, however, needs more research in order to sort out why younger artists did not key into the radical political implications of Abstract Expressionism—implications that at least Cage gleaned in 1966.

Despite its dissolution, however, The Club in its earliest years served as a model of being-with, a model of community, in which each person went about the issues in his or her own way without imposing that way on others, precisely at the moment when the Left was reinventing itself under a similar rubric. I began this chapter noting the "end dates" of Abstract Expressionism. Sandler's assumptions are important for how subsequent scholars would write Abstract Expressionism's history. Sandler and subsequent scholars have felt that by 1952, all of the "main tendencies" had been settled and accepted, but this arresting of Abstract Expressionism eliminates precisely what made it so vital. Philip Pavia gave a different picture of 1952: "When anybody was called an abstract expressionist you thought they were joking…. For about six months [in 1952] the art world was in an upheaval over those words."[59] I have emphasized here overarching concerns, but it must not be forgotten that each artist had his or her own articulation of these issues. Rosenberg's famous article on Action Painting also attempted to articulate the main tendencies, but it was still one person's articulation. This cacophony of voices begins to explain why Cage felt he was not sure what Abstract Expressionist intentions were precisely because there were so many distinct Abstract

[59] Philip Pavia, quoted in Gruen, *The Party's Over*, 270. The composer Morton Feldman also echoed this sentiment (Morton Feldman, quoted in Foster, *Franz Kline: Art and the Structure of Identity*, 34).

Expressionist voices, but he was able to glean enough to determine that Newman's *Stations of the Cross* embodied those fundamental intentions of communitarianism.

Conclusion

This proposed rereading of Abstract Expressionism hinges on a reimagining of the relationship between the individual and the collective. This relationship not only colored the artists' own group formation but also the subsequent analyses and formulations of the New York School. In both instances, this relationship was seen largely in ideological terms. In the 1930s, collectivism was understood to be superior to Capitalist, ego-centered individualism, while in the 1950s, free and autonomous individuality was seen as the conqueror of collectivist totalitarianism. Abstract Expressionism was formed in the midst of these two ideological extremes, and it rejected both. Later scholarship carried the ideological implications forward without fully recognizing Abstract Expressionism's radical alternative to Marxist collectivism and Capitalist individualism—an anarchist community of autonomous individuals.

The excavation of the historical evidence necessitates the resituating of Abstract Expressionism in relation to the new sensibility of the 1960s instead of seeing it as an emblem of Cold War patriarchy. As described by Herbert Marcuse, the new sensibility affirmed "life instincts over aggressiveness" and sought to generate "a practice that involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a non-aggressive, non-exploitative world."[1] In advocating individual freedom and autonomy, the new sensibility understood the need for community and meaningful

[1] Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 23 and 6.

work. In many ways, The Club instantiated this "new sensibility" at the end of the 1940s and into the early 1950s.

Michael Leja is correct in speaking of a redefinition of subjectivity in the face of the horrors of war and the dehumanization of industrialization, but he and others have not recognized how this redefinition necessarily involved a reworking of the individual's relation to the collective. Despite their disavowals of being a movement or a school, the artists did not disavow their need for a community. The Club was the physical manifestation of that need. Cage told Sandler, "It was clear that [The Club] was a good thing, that artists should come together once a week and listen to the exposition of ideas. And then to have a period afterward during which they'd discuss these ideas. First—like a public discussion, and then subsequently sitting in groups. It made a life which I enjoyed."[2] It is not insignificant that the discussions held in the loft at 35 East Eighth Street continuously circled back to this need. The main intellectual frames that were debated—vitalism, Heideggerian existentialism, Gestalt therapy, Zen, and Action Painting—each allowed the artists to address the issue of the individual's relation to the collective and to do so in different vocabularies. Vitalism's connectedness, Heidegger's Being-in-the-world and Being-with, Gestalt therapy's organism/environment field, Zen's interrelatedness and oneness made way for a redefinition of the individual self always already in relation to other individuals and the world. This universality is not the vagueness of a loosely applied collective unconscious; it is a positing of universality, a universality experienced in the particular.

By 1948, many of the artists realized the particularity of the universal in canvas after canvas, developing their so-called signature styles, and in 1949 with the formation

[2] Cage/Sandler interview, Wesleyan University.

of The Club, they were able to come together to find the language that described what they had done on those canvases. Different languages resonated with different artists, but there was an abiding belief among them all that art was not just self-expression but also communication, an evocation of community, an action of sharing. Their art allowed for a moment of awareness, of connectedness, being-with, interrelatedness. With abstraction, all-over composition, and scale the Abstract Expressionists explored the new possibilities of how to understand the individual in relation to the world, to society, to community and in doing so provided a model for an anti-repressive society, an open society, to borrow Newman's phrase.

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