

THE PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS OF

***ABSTRACT
EXPRESSIONISM***

1940–1960

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DISCREDITING OF COLLECTIVIST IDEOLOGY

In his history of the term “totalitarianism,” Léon Poliakov has recounted its use first by Mussolini in 1922 to describe a society in which the state was the supreme and only concern of the polity. It acquired its pejorative tone in 1936, when Western political commentators applied it to the Third Reich after Italy’s attack on Abyssinia and Hitler’s violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Only after the Second World War and the dissolution of the West’s alliance with the Soviet Union was it used to describe the Stalinist state.¹ Poliakov has also noted that, in spite of the markedly different conditions in which totalitarian states have developed, Western commentary on them has consistently been defined by the subjectivity of its response.²

That such an observation more than accurately describes the reaction among American independent leftist artists and intellectuals to Soviet totalitarianism becomes evident if one considers that, of all political groups, the ideological challenge it presented was doubled for Marxists, for it represented to them not only a threat to democracy, but also the failure of Marxism-Leninism. As historian George Lichtheim pointed out, although Marxism developed as part of and in response to the liberal ethos pervasive in Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the erosion of the “liberal-humanist creed” of freedom, rationality, and democracy during the First World War was not a matter of concern for Marxists.³ Only when liberal civilization collapsed into fascism in Germany and Italy were Marxism’s confidence in the working class as a self-determining and socially responsible agent, and its tolerance of encroachments upon individual agency as one of the bourgeois casualties of dialectical progress, shaken. Consequently, it was not until the late 1930s that the Marxist was first confronted with the realization that: “If the history of Marxism . . . holds any lesson, it is

that a simple faith in the omniscience of 'positive science' can itself become a philosophical illusion."⁴

This "positivism" of Marxism-Leninism, also known as dialectical materialism and, by the late 1920s, as scientific socialism, would be subject to revision in the mid-1940s by the American and European thinkers whom we now refer to as the independent left and the Western Marxists, respectively. Challenging its understanding of historical events as explicable and, in some instances, even foreseeable by scientific reasoning in the same way as many natural and physical processes, these revisionists, in light of the realization that the Soviet Union had gone the way of fascist Germany with concentration camps of its own, had come to perceive the dialectic as not having reckoned the human cost of its ambitions.⁵

Clearly, a revival of humanist values was needed. And that the Americans' critique of Marxism-Leninism in the immediate postwar years would attempt this by admitting the intervention of subjectively guided, individual agency within Marxism's closed, theoretical worldview, relying heavily on the idea of the modern artist as this postdialectical form of socialist agency, was clear in their press from that time. This press, for the most part, was comprised of three magazines: *Partisan Review*, re-established in 1937, and *Politics*, formed in 1944; and *Commentary*, established in 1945. Sharing a stable of American and European contributors who were united in their concern to redefine Marxism in the totalitarian age, the sweeping realignment of the anti-Stalinist left which the joint inquiry of this press documents has widely been attributed to three events: the Moscow Trials (1936–1938), the Hitler–Stalin Pact (1939), and the Soviet invasion of Finland (1939), each of which triggered mass defections from the Communist Party of America and its affiliated organizations, including artists' unions.⁶ Consequently, this ideological realignment was an event in which, we shall see, some of the Abstract Expressionists were directly involved.⁷ Yet if this only suggests the possibility of these artists being engaged in their own postdialectical critique of Marxism, there were, however, formal links between the Abstract Expressionist group and the independent left that indicate these artists' clear awareness of their own role in this revision of Marxian ideology. It is useful, therefore, to take an overview of the points of contact between the independent left and the Abstract Expressionists before exploring them in depth in the course of this book. These contacts can be identified as Abstract Expressionism's sympathetic critics writing for the independent leftist press; the

editorial relationship between the independent leftist and avant-garde presses and, relatedly, the issues with which they both engaged; and finally, the actual participation of these artists in some of the initiatives of the independent leftist press.

The chief critical links between the independent left and the avant-garde in the mid- to late 1940s were Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Although they are generally remembered within historical and art-historical scholarship as art critics and as champions of the Abstract Expressionist movement, it is held here that they should be seen equally as political commentators within the independent leftist press in the 1940s and 1950s. For while it is true that Greenberg, for example, began his writing career with a piece on the relationship between politics and visual art, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" for *Partisan Review* in 1939, he was also the assistant editor of *Commentary* from 1945 to 1957.⁸ This magazine was established by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) with an aim to examining the causes and effects of the Jewish wartime experience through interdisciplinary research. Largely unconcerned with art and cultural issues, and publishing work predominantly of political theorists, philosophers, and sociologists, it would be a primary conduit for the work of both the Frankfurt School and, to a lesser extent, the French existentialists, to an American audience. Moreover, though Greenberg's published contributions to *Partisan Review* were art criticism and commentary, his place on its editorial board from 1948 to 1952 also indicates that he was conversant with the political debates in which that magazine was also involved. Consequently, although his own writing focused increasingly on art between 1940 and the 1960s, his long-standing editorial presence in the independent leftist press invites a reappraisal of the assumption that his work became increasingly apolitical during these decades. Often treated in art-historical scholarship as progressing to the alleged apolitical formalism of his "Modernist Painting" (1960–1965),⁹ Greenberg will instead be seen here as consistently bringing politics to bear on art, his political expectations of it evolving from a leftist to a postwar liberal aesthetic.

A similar case can be made for Harold Rosenberg as a political commentator, as he also frequently used art as a tool for political analysis. While not an editor, and consistently more visible in the avant-garde press during the 1940s, he was, however, a regular contributor to the independent leftist press on both cultural and political issues. A committed socialist since the 1930s,¹⁰ and a key figure in the

effort to define an ethical Marxism in the 1940s through his interest in existentialism – he even befriended Jean-Paul Sartre during the latter’s visits to New York City in the late 1940s – Rosenberg was to a large extent responsible for helping to establish Abstract Expressionism as an ideologically coherent movement by identifying it as an existentialist art, complete with French existentialism’s third-way leftist affiliations. This was in part through his art press publications, the most historically prominent of it being his exhibition catalogue essay for the *Intrasubjectives* show (1949), his *Art News* essay “The American Action Painters” (1952), and his editorship with the Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell of the short-lived *Possibilities* magazine.

In the 1940s, however, Rosenberg, like Greenberg, was also involved with *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*. And if, as we have seen, *Commentary* was foremost a political magazine, likewise *Partisan Review* was initially deeply concerned with politics; for it had been founded by former communist fellow-travelers William Phillips and Philip Rahv while they were members of the New York chapter of the John Reed Clubs, the American organ of the communist International Union of Writers and Artists, and was dedicated to proletarian literature.¹¹ Yet the magazine folded in 1936, in part due to financial difficulties, but also because of the doubts raised by the Moscow Trials and the political effectiveness of the proletarian cultural movement. Consequently, in spite of its Marxist-Leninist origins, it was reestablished in 1937 as a noncommunist publication with a distinct interest in the role of avant-garde culture in revising Marxism, and during the 1940s it would show a strong interest, first in German, then in French existentialism toward this end. Although it was remarked in hindsight, Phillips, who counted Abstract Expressionist painters Helen Frankenthaler, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, and Barnett Newman among his personal friends, recollected that *Partisan Review* did publish a number of sympathetic and influential essays about the movement during this time.¹² These were mostly by Greenberg; Rosenberg’s presence in the pages of *Partisan Review* was largely as a leftist political commentator, which enables us to view him as a link between revisionist Marxist theory and the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Politics, on the other hand, had no critical affiliation with the avant-garde. It was established in 1944 by Dwight Macdonald, also a communist fellow-traveler during the mid-1930s, who, like Phillips and Rahv, was repelled by the Moscow Trials. Yet, having been involved in the reestablishing of *Partisan Review* as an antitotalitarian offensive, he

left its editorial staff in 1943 because of its burgeoning interest in cultural issues at the expense of political ones.¹³ Committed to shaping postdialectical Marxism in the United States, his new magazine immediately became a disseminator of European postdialectical Marxist thought among the American independent left with this purpose. In its devotion to the recuperation of Marxism via theories of individual, ethically motivated agency, we shall see that *Politics* drew upon an array of American and European commentaries on this matter that would have been of definite interest to the American avant-garde, as the latter published related, if not the same, material in its own press.

That the political interests of the American avant-garde press should be seen as an extension of those of the independent leftist press is clear in most of its publications. For example, *Possibilities* and *The Tiger's Eye* were both forums for statements by the Abstract Expressionists in the late 1940s; these statements appeared alongside texts by and about the existentialists. *Instead*, while it did not publish artists' statements, was edited by Lionel Abel, an American playwright and critic who was also responsible for many of the translations of existentialist philosophy and literature that appeared in both the independent leftist and avant-garde presses. Although it did publish work by Rosenberg, the bulk of its material was written by French intellectuals involved with the existentialist movement such as Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Claude Bourdet, Nicola Chiaromonte, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, David Rousset, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean Wahl.

That the Abstract Expressionists' concern with the same political and ideological issues as the independent left was more than a literary curiosity was demonstrated by their direct support of its press and its activities from the late 1940s to the 1960s. For example, many of these artists participated in the auction conducted in the late 1940s by International Rescue Incorporated on behalf of the "survival of democracy in Europe," a program staunchly supported by *Politics*. It was chaired by John Dewey, and had a committee including what will become the familiar names of new liberal ideologists Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the latter of whom would become a regular contributor to independent leftist discussion on the definition of a postdialectical socialism. This auction sold works donated by most of the artists involved with the movement at this time – William Baziotés, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Jackson Pollock – along with the manuscripts of an illustrious collection of European third-way

writers and intellectuals whose work featured in the independent leftist press, including André Gide, Karl Kautsky, Arthur Koestler, André Malraux, Hans Mehring, and Ignazio Silone. The proceeds from sales were to aid dissident writers, artists, and “politicals.”¹⁴

Similarly, many of the same artists participated in a benefit sale conducted in 1961 on behalf of *Dissent* magazine to rescue it from bankruptcy.¹⁵ *Dissent* had been launched in 1954 by the prominent New York intellectuals Irving Howe and Louis Coser as a means of preserving “socialist thought and values,” and drew on an array of long-established leftists to do so.¹⁶ For example, Howe was a die-hard socialist, and Coser was a German-born leftist who had worked in Europe as a journalist under the name of Louis Clair in the 1940s, and who published primarily on the activities of the French existentialists and his own, related ideas on postdialectical Marxism.¹⁷ The editorial board, for its part, included the socialist Christian pacifist and organizer of the American Workers’ Party A. J. Muste, former Frankfurt School member Erich Fromm, and former fellow-traveler, art historian, and by the mid-1950s, advocate of Abstract Expressionism, Meyer Schapiro. The event on its behalf was organized by the editors and *Dissent*’s art committee, comprised of Willem de Kooning, the art critic and advocate of Abstract Expressionism Thomas B. Hess, Larry Rivers, William Fitelson, Robert Motherwell, Harold Rosenberg, and Meyer Schapiro; from a list of thirty participating artists, seven were core members of the Abstract Expressionist group, including Gottlieb, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Motherwell, and Barnett Newman.¹⁸

What these points of contact between the independent left and the Abstract Expressionists demonstrate is that the artists concerned can be seen to have been conversant with and actively supporting the political interests of the independent left throughout its period of ideological realignment. Given the extent of their contact with it, it is plausible that these artists likewise would embrace the role the independent left would assign to it in the course of its revision of Marxist agency. In order to make this argument, however, it is first necessary to consider the initial impetus behind the reconsideration of Marxism-Leninism among both the avant-garde and the independent left, which will show that there was from the outset a desire on both sides to develop a postdialectical theory of socialist agency for similar reasons, and along similar lines.

The Critical Link: Greenberg and Rosenberg from the Late 1930s to the Mid-1940s

Of the many critics who would write about Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg would be the first to popularize it in the late 1940s as the premier avant-garde in the United States and as the worthy successor to the School of Paris, which had been brought to an untimely end by the Nazi Occupation. Bearing in mind that their writing on political and cultural issues was not always and, in Rosenberg's case, seldom exclusive, their work from the late 1930s and early 1940s on the politics of modern art in the totalitarian era can be seen to have shaped the expectations they would bring to Abstract Expressionism. Thus, it is important to consider the evolution of this political framework in which they would situate Abstract Expressionism by the end of the forties, as it would determine the way in which it was disseminated by subsequent critics. The latter, such as Hubert Crehan, Thomas B. Hess, and Parker Tyler, wrote for mainstream art magazines such as *Art Digest* and *Art News*, and the popularity of the movement which their commentary engendered would, we shall see, play a large part in promoting the international success of Abstract Expressionism, as it helped bring it to the attention of the institutions that would sponsor it abroad.¹⁹ Therefore, the expectations Greenberg and Rosenberg outlined in the late 1930s and early 1940s for the new *international* modernism that Abstract Expressionism would help to define after the fall of the School of Paris are worth considering as, it will be argued, they formed the core around which the leftist identity of Abstract Expressionism would develop during the postwar period, one that was indebted to European avant-garde practices.

Clement Greenberg is widely recognized as having been closely involved in the anti-Soviet backlash within the independent left and, more contentiously, with Trotskyism, during the late 1930s.²⁰ This is largely because of his affiliation with *Partisan Review*, in which he published his first essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), on the heels of two publications by Trotsky and his cohorts that had appeared in its pages during the preceding year. These were the essays "Art and Revolution" and "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," which Trotsky coauthored with the surrealist ideologue André Breton and the Mexican muralist and communist-in-exile Diego Rivera.²¹ Central to these essays was the idea of radical sensibility beginning in the

exercise of imagination, the resultant creative act being the driving force behind radical agency. Trotsky's argument is therefore worth noting in some detail here, as this conception of agency, we shall see, was not far from the one that would soon be developed by the French existentialists in response to the abuses of the industrialized work forces under Hitler and Stalin, which would dominate discussions within the American non-Stalinist left on the future of socialist agency by the late 1940s. Trotsky's line of thinking on the artist as an agent of revolution can therefore be seen as introducing to American independent leftists like Greenberg one particular model for the future of socialism, which we shall see would be taken by the latter in a far less radical direction.

Trotsky's "Manifesto" called for a rejection of Stalinism's exploitation of the Soviet Union's industrial modernity and the masses that serviced it through a centralized authority, a situation which, in the eyes of many American leftists, would not be perceived as structurally dissimilar to industrial organizational practices in the postwar United States. And if Germany and the Soviet Union were now "reeling under the blows of reactionary forces armed with the entire arsenal of modern technology," it was again the creative individual – the philosopher, the sociologist, the scientist, or the artist – who, through his or her ability to bring "into play subjective talents to create something which brings about an objective enriching of culture," had the capacity to counteract its mechanization.²² Moreover, he or she was the natural ally of the revolutionary through his or her capacity to envisage an alternative or postrevolutionary society through the creative act, thereby giving the revolution an ideal to aim for: "True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time – true art is unable *not* to be revolutionary, *not* to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society."²³

Trotsky further explained the relationship between individual agency, the social conditions dictating it, and its role in instigating revolutionary fervor. In "Art and Politics," which focused specifically on the artist as radical agent, he noted that "protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work. Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion."²⁴ Noting that Cubism, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism all had failed to see beyond the disorder at the heart of the decline of bourgeois society, a new art was needed that would be both allied to a revolutionary movement and

operate in accordance with its own moral dictates. Derisive of Socialist Realism, Trotsky concluded with an exhortation to the editors of *Partisan Review*:

Artistic creation has its own laws – even when it consciously serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself. Poets, painters, sculptors and musicians will themselves find their own approach and methods, if the struggle for freedom of oppressed classes and peoples scatters the clouds of skepticism and pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind. . . . May your magazine take its place in the victorious army of socialism and not in a concentration camp!²⁵

It is clear in this passage that Trotsky's investiture of leftist sensibility in the creative act, and its realization in the ill-defined "own approach and methods" of artists, was in light of his realization of the unlikelihood of oppressed classes achieving this awareness on their own, but needing the guidance of the intellectuals. Thus, Trotsky never discarded a class-based theory of agency, and in 1939 renounced *Partisan Review* for having "nothing to say" because it swapped practical political concerns for what he described as a vague interest in cultural freedom.²⁶

If Trotsky saw art's contribution to political struggle as its capacity to destabilize a bourgeois society already in decline, thereby providing the necessary conditions for class struggle and the emergence of a socialist society, Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," on the other hand, can be seen as giving art a tellingly passive role in the struggle for socialism. For it was one that, ironically, was for an indeterminate period to be dependent on the bourgeoisie for its success. And, although Greenberg would not denounce the dialecticism of Trotsky's thought until 1942, it was already clear in 1939 that his views on art and revolution could easily have fuelled Trotsky's larger criticisms of *Partisan Review* as a whole because of its overreliance on the politically disengaged cultural act as the future of socialism.

Greenberg began his essay by explaining the avant-garde as part of the historical process, noting that the "birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically too – with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe," the advent of the Enlightenment engendering both free-market capitalism and Marxism in response to it. Yet the collisions between them formed the

ideological struggle that he saw the avant-garde as habitually transcending, preferring what he called the “absolute” – meaning utopia and abstraction in art – to ideology and its representation through Socialist Realism.²⁷ For, with capitalism in decline, as witnessed by international economic depression, it was not the role of art to represent a socialist culture, but simply to preserve culture for the inevitable socialism that would issue from capitalism’s demise. Consequently, no formal program was required of modern art, and its primary role at this time was to protect high art from kitsch. Kitsch, in this context, should not be understood as mass-produced, or “low art,” but as the academic styles that were being held up as the official culture in Germany and Russia and, to a lesser extent, Italy. As Greenberg explained, kitsch required “a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends.”²⁸ Any established art could potentially be turned into kitsch, therefore the job of the avant-garde was to keep ahead of this process by means of spontaneous formal innovation and lack of any systematic, foreseeable progression.

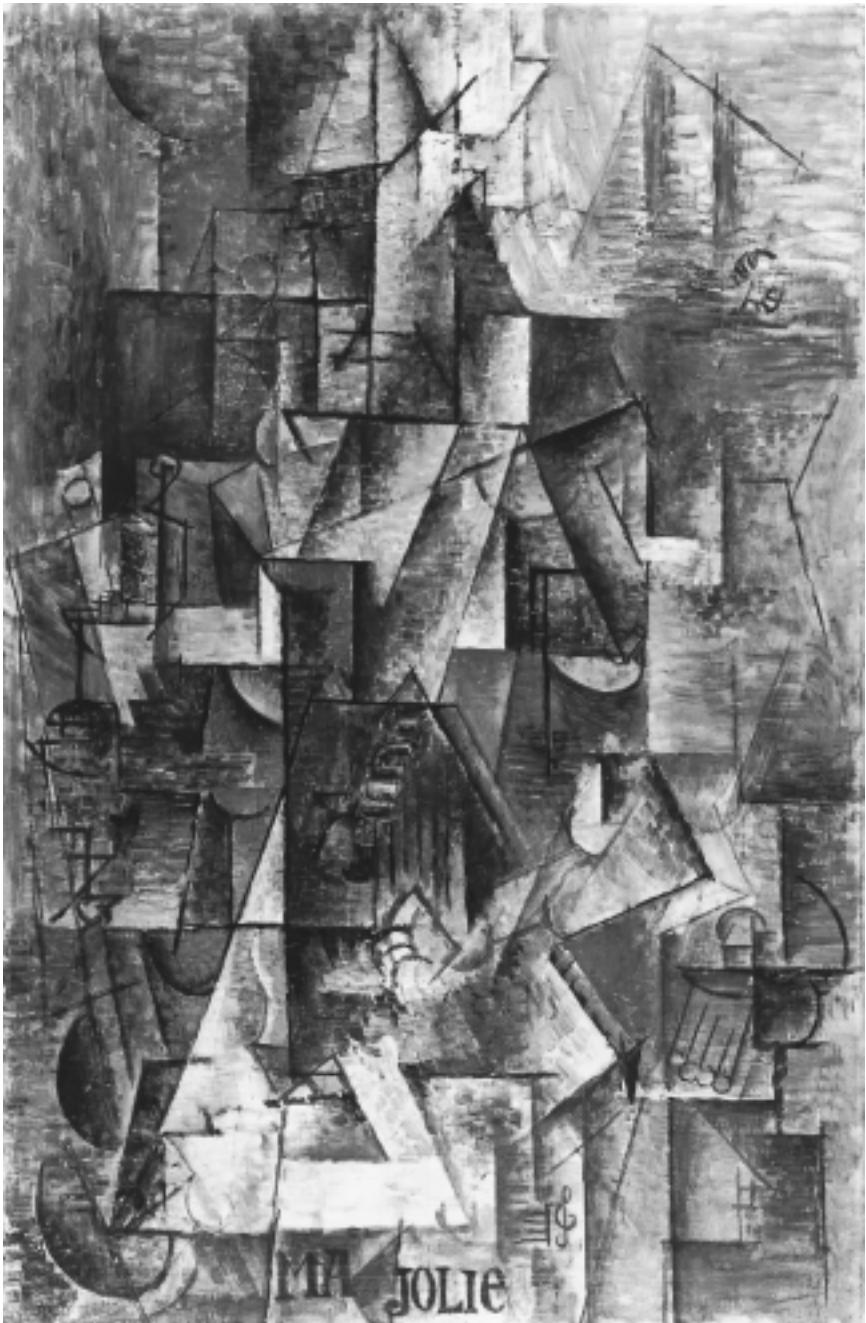
Underlying “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” however, was a somewhat shaken confidence in the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism and its succession by socialism. This was clear in Greenberg’s advocacy of the bourgeoisie’s support for avant-garde culture as the best hope of preserving high culture from the ravaging effects of kitsch. The doubt this betrays concerning the efficacy of Marx’s dialectic was to turn to renunciation by Greenberg in 1942, in his “An Inquiry on Dialectical Materialism,”²⁹ after which his views on leftist agency underwent a series of rapid liberalizing transformations. For example, by 1945, the year in which he would become assistant editor of *Commentary*, he would be engaging directly with the Frankfurt School’s critique of “Enlightenment society” – a society grounded in the belief in the infallibility of rational thought and scientific progress – which in its view inhibited ethical intervention in the historical process. While we will look in far greater detail at the Frankfurt School’s critique of Marxism and its recommendations for it later in this chapter, it is worth noting here that the amoral technocracy they believed to be the inevitable product of Enlightenment culture was also believed by its members to be avoidable through the introduction of an individual, ethically motivated agent into the historical process.

If his encounter with Trotsky’s work on the artist as revolutionary agent had initially stimulated his thinking on the revolutionary potential

of art, Greenberg's work from this later date showed another turn of thought concerning the individual as socialist agent. This is unsurprising given his position at *Commentary*, which would have exposed him to German Western Marxist theory. Yet he also relied on his own understanding of positivism in conceptualizing this "humanist" form of leftist political agency, which would lead him away from a dialectical conception of history. It is therefore important to clarify Greenberg's understanding of positivism, as it would ultimately bring his form of postdialectical critique into line with contemporary pragmatic, new liberal thought. His use of the term "positivism" was loose, often referring to logical empiricism, which technically is not a positivist philosophy, and certainly to logical positivism.³⁰ It was characterized by its embrace of rationality and scientific method conducted on a piecemeal basis, the knowledge gained from this approach having only limited applications. And Greenberg would bring this postdialectical theory of social development directly to bear on his political expectations of art. For example, in his essay "Abstract Art" (1944) for *The Nation*, Greenberg no longer described modern art as being transcendent of ideological struggle as he had in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," but as in dialogue with it. Having developed as a broader cultural "counterrevolution" to the Enlightenment dating back to the 1870s, when capitalist societies were showing evidence of rampant imperialism, modern artists had already realized that:

the earth could no longer afford to Western man, or his economy, indefinite space in which to expand; that verified facts were the only certainties; that each of the activities of culture could be exercised with assurance only within its own province and only when that province had been strictly defined. The age of specialization and of limited intellectual and spiritual objectives sets in. . . .³¹

For Greenberg, it was abstraction which best exemplified modernism's ongoing assessment of the limits of rationality and its practical applications. Freed from the object, it could exhaust the possibilities of its medium on a limited, experimental basis. This practice, which Greenberg referred to as a positivist one, now informed "the best philosophical and political intelligence of the time,"³² and had reached its fullest and most innovative form in the hands of the Cubists. Yet their nerve had failed, and they retreated to the represented object after having achieved their wholly abstract canvases between 1911 and 1912 (figure 1)³³. Cubism's failure to maintain a critique of the Enlightenment meant



1. Pablo Picasso, *Ma Jolie*, 1911–1912. Oil on canvas, 100 × 65.4 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Succession Picasso/DACS, 1999. Photograph © 1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



2. Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral*, 1947. Enamel and aluminium on canvas, 181.6 × 89.1 cm. Dallas Museum of Fine Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bernard J. Reis. © ARS, NY and DACS, London, 1999.

that a successor needed to be found. We shall see that for Greenberg, however, this would not happen until 1947, when he encountered what he described as the emotionally charged yet rationally controlled and highly individualistic, all-over “drip” paintings of Jackson Pollock. And it was to this artist, and subsequently the rest of the Abstract Expressionists, that he would ascribe the “counterrevolutionary” values of an individually based critique of system-based philosophy and the societies it sustained (figure 2).

Harold Rosenberg’s interests from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s followed more or less the same trajectory as Greenberg’s insofar as they increasingly focused on the work of art as an act of radical critique, yet his work more consistently related this to Marxist theory. He wrote frequently during this time specifically on the problems besetting the Marxian dialectic, and only seldom from the perspective of an art critic. Yet he, even more than Greenberg, conformed to the profile of the typical American independent leftist intellectual in the immediate postwar years. This is indicated by his reservations concerning the mass as socialist agent, and by his commitment to existentialism, with its interest in the creative individual as the agent who could provide an alternative to dialectical materialism.³⁴

Like Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Rosenberg outlined in his earliest essays the historical function of artistic modernism as, first and foremost, spontaneously to provide a humanist response to industrialism. Thus he saw the avant-garde as innately needing to challenge industrially based society’s propensity toward the mechanization and massification of human existence. Asserting in one of his earliest essays, “The Fall of Paris,” published in *Partisan Review* in 1941, that this had previously been the province of the School of Paris, it had been halted by the Nazi Occupation.³⁵ And if the occupation had scattered the first international modernism’s practitioners, a second international modernism was now needed to check the dehumanizing potential of Enlightenment society. Like Greenberg in 1944, Rosenberg was also looking for a new modernism to renew the old one’s essentially Western Marxist critique, its effort to preserve individual value and agency within an increasingly mechanized society. Because he viewed artistic modernism as the natural counterpart to industrialization, its vitality being commensurate with industrial strength, the place of its reemergence inevitably favored the United States at this historical juncture.³⁶ Yet at this time he did not name the artist or the movement that could fulfill this requirement, only vaguely defining it as an inter-

national movement which, free to take its inspiration from all modernist styles preceding it, would be nonetheless original and, above all, visionary.³⁷

Rosenberg wrote little on the visual arts during the early 1940s. He did, however, publish an essay in the Surrealist magazine *View* in 1946 entitled "Notes on Identity: With Special Reference to the Mixed Philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard," which provides more specific insight into the political expectations he was developing for the second international modernism. *View* was a forum for formerly Europe-based Surrealists currently in exile,³⁸ which would soon be supplanted by indigenous publications such as *The Tiger's Eye*. While engaging with Surrealism's preoccupation with psychoanalysis and the subconscious, Rosenberg mounted an existentialist critique of its collectivist tenets; we shall see that his interest in the relationship between art and leftist agency would soon follow the same course. Central to this critique was a growing belief that the postwar situation facing the left required a conception of individual as opposed to collective agency, one motivated by what was an essentially tragic consciousness of the importance of individual responsibility for the course of historical events. This tragic sensibility was heightened by an awareness of the unpredictable outcome of individual action.

Therefore, although in "Notes on Identity" Rosenberg described tragedy as analogous to psychoanalysis in that both germinated in the individual's struggle to conceal self-identity, he argued that it was necessary to move beyond the healing purpose of psychoanalysis in order to become a self-determining historical agent. For psychoanalysis was antithetical to tragedy in that it substituted active self-disclosure with passive disclosure through the help of an analyst. The latter would in turn normalize what the patient disclosed: "As a result, the 'cure' . . . consists in emptying him," noted Rosenberg. By this he meant that the patient was robbed of his or her capacity for action in relation to what was revealed.³⁹ In Rosenberg's estimation, this was a means of producing a mass identity, which was the "chief problem of the twentieth century" in that it challenged "the entire concept of individual existence."⁴⁰ Given what we shall see shortly was the widespread indictment of the mass mentality as the foundation of totalitarian culture, what was needed, in his assessment, was an assertion of individual self-knowledge and agency on the strength of it, against the disabling power of psychoanalysis and the "scientific" approach to the human psyche that guided it:

The problem of individual identity is the dilemma of philosophy. . . . If philosophy excludes identity – as it must if it is to harmonize its methods with those of science – it cannot reach the individual. . . . Scientific philosophy necessarily returns to the problem of human values only by way of the different types of ethics of “Adjustment.” Here philosophy sets out to trim the individual to the social, historical, moral, or other objective needs, rather than to know him as an individual.⁴¹

To reinstate subjectivity as the basis for philosophical and scientific thought was not a new undertaking, even in 1946. Rather, as John Rajchman tells us, it was a standard response of existentialist thinkers since the advent of the Industrial Revolution against the privileging of scientific knowledge above all others.⁴² Consequently, Rosenberg’s comments in “Notes on Identity” can be seen as resuming this existentialist effort. What was different in Rosenberg’s approach, however, was his doubt that the subjectively grounded knowledge capable of challenging the primacy of scientific knowledge could be communicated through philosophical discourse in its present form, since it was in essence a disclosure of self, and “communication of the self is impossible, except in so far as the process of his self-approximation is conveyed by suggestion.”⁴³ Consequently, its expression required another medium, one that could convey the idea in its pure, intuitive state before it was rationalized through language and other cognitive processes. While Rosenberg at this time could only list the specifications for such a vehicle of communication, we shall see in the next chapter that these requirements for a medium of tragic self-disclosure as the source of individual agency would be identified three years later in his essay for the Abstract Expressionists’ show *The Intrasubjectives*. This was the first group exhibition of their mature canvases, upon which Rosenberg would bring his existentially grounded political interests to bear, with what we shall see were lasting implications.

In summary, Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s views on modern art before their contact with Abstract Expressionism can be seen to have grown out of the same political circumstance: the breakdown of confidence in a dialectical, class-based conception of historical progress. Both looking for a successor to the European avant-gardes’ capitalist critique, they were more or less agreed on its formal properties: that it be abstract and based on subjective perception. At that time Greenberg was still publicly identifying himself as a socialist, an identity that Rosenberg never relinquished. Consequently, their growing support for Abstract Expressionism between 1947 and 1950 would lend it a partic-

ular kind of leftist cachet, and this would only amplify the ideological position that was intrinsic to the art itself. For, as we shall see next, the artists who would by 1949 form the Abstract Expressionist movement had little direct involvement with these critics in the early part of the decade. Yet in the few documents by these artists on this subject, it is clear that their own views on totalitarianism and its implications for modern art practice derived from the same intellectual climate as Greenberg's and Rosenberg's, leaving them with strikingly similar expectations of the antitotalitarian, postdialectical modernist painting that most of them would produce by 1947/48.

Rethinking Surrealism and Its Collectivist Aesthetic: Abstract Expressionism in the Early to Mid-1940s

The idea of art as a radical gesture was not unfamiliar to the Abstract Expressionists, and it is well known that many of the artists who became involved with the movement had a history with the left stretching back into the 1930s. Jackson Pollock, for example, worked as a studio assistant for the Mexican muralist and Communist Party member David Alfero Siqueiros while the latter was in exile in the United States early in that decade.⁴⁴ Barnett Newman was also making public arguments at that time for the artist as an autonomous political agent against the absorptive propensity of the Communist Party. For example, in his essay of 1933, "On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture," he lamented the "invisibility" of the intellectual within communist and socialist organizations.⁴⁵ This observation also formed the impetus behind his candidacy in the 1933 New York City mayoral election on an anarchist ticket.⁴⁶ And most of the Abstract Expressionists – Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko – were employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s.⁴⁷ Although the radicalism of the WPA as a whole is still a matter of historical debate, it did have bona fide leftist elements within it such as the Artists' Union (AU), of which Rothko was a member, and which James Breslin has described as the WPA artists' "collective bargaining agent." As such, it focused specifically on the relationship between art and politics: "beyond its concern with bread-and-butter issues . . . (it) envisioned a new integration between the American artist and his national culture."⁴⁸

Having been active participants in the debates around art and politics

during the 1930s, Gottlieb and Rothko, with the assistance of Newman, would be the earliest and most vociferous of the nascent Abstract Expressionist group in redefining the ideology of their art. This occurred when they swapped their Social Realist for a Surrealist practice in the early 1940s, the same time they helped to found the antitotalitarian Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors (FMPS) out of the ruins of the antifascist, but not anti-Soviet, AU.⁴⁹ Established in 1940 by artists representing a diversity of stylistic practices in order to promote the emergence of an antitotalitarian art in the United States, its cultural committee was chaired by Gottlieb and Rothko, with Newman acting as a curator and essayist for its exhibitions. Its concern with establishing a modernism of international caliber in the United States, as Serge Guilbaut has shown, marked an early point at which these three painters united in order to formulate a leftist political aesthetic within the antitotalitarian framework the FMPS provided.⁵⁰

The Abstract Expressionists' contact with the Parisian Surrealists while the latter were exiled in New York City during the early 1940s already has an extensive bibliography.⁵¹ The radical politics of Surrealism is equally well known.⁵² Yet it is difficult to comment with confidence on the political use of Surrealism by the nascent Abstract Expressionists simply because they had not yet coalesced as a movement. In the absence of manifestos and a public group identity, the case of each artist needs to be assessed on an individual basis. Consequently, although at least two of them, Motherwell and Newman, wrote prolifically throughout their careers, they cannot be treated as spokespersons for all of the Abstract Expressionists during the early 1940s. And, to further complicate matters, not all of the future Abstract Expressionists approved of, let alone practiced, Surrealism in the early 1940s. For example, Franz Kline and Clyfford Still were largely untouched by this movement, Kline moving from a Social Realist to his calligraphic signature style in 1947 without going through a Surrealist phase. Nor would he participate in any of the group activities of the Abstract Expressionists until 1951, when his work was included in the Sidney Janis Gallery's show "American Vanguard Art for Paris." Clyfford Still, for his part, openly rejected Surrealism. While, unlike Kline, he was a core member of the Abstract Expressionist group by the end of the 1940s, he remarked, in a private letter on his conversation with André Breton at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery during the autumn of 1945, that: "I was not of the Surrealist persuasion in either its theory or practice, especially in its dialectical apologia and its

political correlatives.”⁵³ What can be read into Still’s comment, however, is that Surrealism and what it stood for politically was at least well known, and, with the variety of publications available in New York in the early 1940s, it is doubtful that most of the future Abstract Expressionists would have been unaware of its political inclinations. For there were several Surrealist magazines launched in New York by Europeans – *V.V.V.* by Breton and Max Ernst, and *View* by Charles Onslow Ford in 1940 – and they by no means excluded work by local artists and intellectuals.⁵⁴

Kline and Still can, however, be viewed as anomalies in the history of Abstract Expressionism in the early 1940s, as the majority of the artists concerned worked in a biomorphic surrealist style at that time. Commenting on the ideological motivations underlying that majority’s conversion to Surrealism, Serge Guilbaut has convincingly interpreted it as a handy substitution for the aesthetics of the Popular Front, which had presupposed an alliance between the artist and “the people.”⁵⁵ Yet the recent events within the Soviet Union, as we have seen, had rendered class-based ideology suspect. Consequently, the Abstract Expressionists’ use of myth, automatism, and biomorphic surrealist forms enabled them to retain at least the Popular Front’s ideal of a wide audience – albeit now through a “universal rather than a class-based style” – promoted by the Parisian Surrealists, with all of its radical associations.⁵⁶

That at least some of the future Abstract Expressionists did have clear political expectations of their biomorphic canvases which they sought to situate within an international modernist tradition, emerged in the exchange surrounding an FMPS exhibition held in January 1943. Newman, who had helped curate the show, also wrote the catalogue. In it he made clear his contempt for the nationalism, isolationism, and political “irrelevance” of many of the American art practices currently being lauded in the rival “Artists for Victory” show at the Metropolitan Museum, at which the painting *Wisconsin Landscape* by Regionalist John Steuart Curry had just taken first prize.⁵⁷ Newman wrote:

We have come together as American modern artists because we feel the need to present to the public a body of art that will adequately reflect the new America that is taking place today and the kind of America that will, it is hoped, become the cultural center of the world. This exhibition is a first step to free the artist from the stifling control of an outmoded politics. For art in America is still the plaything of politicians. Isolationist art still dominates the American scene. Regionalism still holds the reins of America’s artistic future.

It is high time we cleared the cultural atmosphere of America. We artists, therefore, conscious of the dangers that beset our country and our art can no longer remain silent. For the crisis that is here hangs on our very walls. We who dedicated our lives to art – to modern art – to modern art in America . . . we mean to make manifest by our work, in our studios and in our galleries the requirement for a culture in a new America.⁵⁸

These lesser forms of painting which serviced “outmoded politics” were virtually all practices untouched by the Surrealist movement: American scene painting, social realism, and even the “purity in art” of geometric abstraction. These specific practices were identified by Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman in a letter to the *New York Times* later that year in defense of Gottlieb and Rothko’s submissions to the FMPS exhibition.⁵⁹ Their biomorphic surrealist canvases had been singled out for derision by that paper’s critic, Edwin Allen Jewell, who remarked that the show would be good if only they were removed.⁶⁰ Galled by Jewell’s further comment that their work had no content, Gottlieb and Rothko replied that it should be universally accessible because of their use of archaic myths and symbols: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess kinship with primitive and archaic art.”⁶¹

Yet these “basic psychological ideas,” while transhistorical and universal, were at the same time “tragic” and “brutal,” and in their assessment should have had particular poignancy in 1943.⁶² For in “times of violence,” Gottlieb noted in a radio interview four months after his exchange with Jewell, purely formal art – he gave as an example the geometric abstraction of Piet Mondrian and his American followers Burgoyne Diller, Carl Holty, and Harry Holtzman – was preoccupied with the “niceties of color and form” and therefore socially irrelevant.⁶³

This suggests that Gottlieb understood his biomorphic surrealism as a direct response to contemporary events. The nature of this response would be reconsidered during the next two years, however, and within a much more rigorously politicized discussion among the artists with whom he was involved. Although little commentary was produced by the artists in the nascent Abstract Expressionist movement, there were two essays in particular that clarified exactly what was seen to be lacking in Surrealism as a political aesthetic, and that enable us to glimpse the emergence of the lexicon that would define their still