

LIVING WITH THE NEW AESTHETIC

By *Paul Rodgers*

Prologue

A roaring noise / Silence / Silent roaring noise.

Forms set in motion / Mobility suspended / Suspension set in motion.

From the vantage point of December 1999, we can say that the twentieth century gave itself over, mind and body, to a fascination with the forces of negation. From Nietzsche's grand declaration at the century's threshold that God was mortal, by way of Freud's oft quoted statement that he had brought religion down from its high room in the mansion of human culture, across genocidal conflicts which culled 20 million lives in the first World War and 60 million more in the Second, to the advent of nuclear war, to Antonin Artaud's hallucinatory declaration that atoms are the microbes of God, we have undergone a rude apprenticeship in the forces of cultural destruction. For those who are interested in modern and contemporary art, the question that must be asked now is, how has art responded to this ubiquitous and pervasive force of negation?

Abstract Expressionism

Nowhere is the impact of negation more crucially present than in the art of the American Abstract Expressionists. This was an art which developed during and immediately after the Second World War and in large part, perhaps, in response to the terrible destruction of that conflict. The artists themselves seem to have been very conscious of this dimension. They spoke retrospectively of having been faced with a 'moral crisis' during those years. Not only were they receiving the news of the military destruction of European society and of how the chilling implications of totalitarian ideology were playing themselves out in genocide, but they could not avoid the doubt that events were bringing about the collapse of the European model of culture and art itself and that, further perhaps, this cultural model had to be held responsible for the disaster. Barnett Newman, no doubt, spoke for the movement in general when he stated "in 1940, some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope – to find that painting did not really exist" and when he invoked the need "to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before."

When considering the thinking of these artists, it should be borne in mind that, broadly speaking, it is related to the outlook of the American left-wing intelligentsia of the period at large, founded as it had been on the Hegelian-Marxist tradition. The philosophical motor of this tradition is the concept of the dialectic and its crucial component of negation. In Hegelian philosophy the negation is confined to the realm of ideas but with Marx it crosses over to real life. The Abstract Expressionists began to think of themselves in terms of their relation to the social system. However, this relationship was not experienced as an identity of commonly shared values but rather the opposite. The cultural establishment and the public had for long been intensely hostile to 'Ellis Island Art', as the modern movement had been derisively called in some quarters. In return, the artists spoke of the 'unfriendliness' of society and their sense of 'alienation.' They complained of a 'remoteness' of feeling from their contemporaries. They perceived a 'break' between the artist and society and they claimed to reject contemporary values.

For the Abstract Expressionists, therefore, the relationship of the artist to society was based on a negation. However, they could not be considered advocates of a Marxist panacea by any stretch of the imagination. By the forties the whole notion of a sociologically based intellectual outlook had become suspect with the revelations of how the Bolshevik revolution had turned out in Russia. The Marxist dogmatism

of the 1920's and 30's no longer had meaning for these artists. The realization had dawned that the Totalitarian phenomenon included the Communism of the Left as well as the Fascism of the Right. Again, it was perhaps Newman who best caught the mood of his colleagues when he wrote that, "In the twenties and thirties, the din against libertarian ideas that came from shouting dogmatists, Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist and Trotskyite alike, was so shrill it built an intellectual prison that locked one in tight. The only free voice one heard was one's own."

If these artists were conscious, as perhaps few before them, of the particular status of the modern artist in society, it was in terms of a negative model. They conceived of themselves as belonging to an avant-garde which stood apart from society and was critical of its value system. This meant first of all hostility to what was termed 'provincialism' in art, taken to be the cultural counterpart of nationalism in politics, and the isolationist aesthetic of the 'American Scene' and 'Regionalist' currents in American art. It further led them to a broad rejection of existing styles. Realism of any kind was suspect because of Stalin's promotion of the 'Socialist' version in the Soviet Union. The view began to prevail that, after Cubism and Fauvism, modern art represented a break with Naturalism. However, the abstract art of the day, represented by the American Abstract Artists group and founded on the utopianism and faith in rationalism of Neoplasticism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus was also found wanting in the face of their prevailing cultural disillusion. They adopted a similarly polemical attitude to contemporary criticism, repudiating in particular the 'Anglo-Saxon' formalist school of Fry and Bell, whose leading advocate in the United States was Clement Greenberg.

A discarded Marxism had left the Abstract Expressionists with a sense of alienation and a powerfully negative animus born of despair. They were also profoundly influenced by that other pessimistic world view, Freud's psychoanalysis, together with a parallel current of 'Existentialist' thought which had its roots in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. The common theme shared by all these different thinkers was an insistence on the subjective sphere of human experience. Again, the negation was a potent force in this tradition. However, negation here represented less an element of the philosophical system, as in Hegelianism and Marxism, so much as a means of overturning systematic thought itself. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche explicitly began the task of destroying the symmetry of the Hegelian system and of ushering in the age of anti-systems of thought. Perhaps not surprisingly, they held the position of the artist in high esteem and sought to move philosophy closer to artistic intuition, in a manner which the Abstract Expressionists found to be both congenial and fertile.

The writings of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were well suited to the outlook of Abstract Expressionism. Doubt and anxiety prevailed. There was an urge to turn inwards in order to discover the truth of human experience. Again, one sees a fascination with the power of negation in this inquiry. They spoke of the chaos at the origin of creation, of a spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art and of a desire to explore wonder and terror in the mystery of life. There was a widely shared interest in myth. Above all, they spoke of a crisis of subject matter in contemporary art, of the need for the painter to replace the model of the external world and traditional subject matter with a new subject drawn from inner experience. One artist after another began to speak of how they could no longer work with the human figure, of the compulsion to 'mutilate' or 'strike out' its image.

Freud's heuristic construct of the 'Unconscious,' perceived as a reservoir of negative impulses and drives, of an unconstituted human subject incompatible with rational and social norms, is the perfect model for the art envisaged by the Abstract Expressionists and it surely provides the inspiration for their mature work. It is also a sophisticated model of how negation plays out in psychic life. The Abstract Expressionists found a vehicle to access this realm of unconscious life in a technique borrowed from André Breton's definition of Surrealism, to be found in his 1924 Manifesto, named 'psychic automatism.' Breton writes: "I categorically define it (Surrealism): Pure psychic automatism by which we propose to express, be it verbally,

in writing, or by any other means, the real functioning of thought; the dictation of thought, absent all control of reason, and outside all aesthetic and moral concern.” Ironically, Breton and his supporters distanced themselves from ‘psychic automatism’ early on and insisted that, in the realm of painting, pictorial imagery had to be transposable into language. This issue provoked a profound disagreement between the Surrealists and the Abstract Expressionists, who strongly objected to what they saw as ‘literary’ encroachment on the prerogative of visual art. The Abstract Expressionists adopted ‘psychic automatism’ as their own, making it “the creative principle” of their art and believing that it could show them how to, in Robert Motherwell’s words, “free the imagination in concrete terms.”

‘Psychic automatism’ can be held to represent an authentic aspiration to achieve a kind of ‘negative composition’ on the part of Abstract Expressionism. Neither the figure, nor any external model, can serve as its subject because the automatic impulse constantly undermines and dissolves recognizable form. It should be noted that psychic automatism does not undertake to express the ‘self,” as is often erroneously assumed. The ‘Unconscious’ should not be identified with the self. Rothko was particularly explicit on this issue, going so far as to say that if anything he wanted to express his ‘not-self.’ Nor, perhaps, should it be assumed that psychic automatism provides for an ‘abstract’ art. It is rather an effort to acknowledge the veracity of negation as a principle of human life and to give shape to it in art. Out of this ‘negative composition’ the artist could hope to overturn the traditional relationship with his painting and release a new experience of art. The painting would be a record of ‘concrete thought’ or, perhaps ‘philosophical experience,’ surging out of the unconscious. It would introduce something of somatic life, “intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic” to borrow Motherwell’s words, into the symbolic order of art and in doing so it would seek to resurrect that order on different foundations.

Emergence of the New Aesthetic in the Sixties

What I am proposing, therefore, is that over time the Abstract Expressionist artists developed a very sophisticated and complex cultural identity based on the notion that art represents a kind of ‘negative thought.’ Their achievement made an enormous impression on succeeding generations of American artists, starting with the one that burst on the scene in the late fifties and early sixties. This has not perhaps always been apparent because the movements of Pop and Minimalism that took the art world by storm in the sixties had a very different look from Abstract Expressionism. However, the proponents of this new art appear to have detected, and to have identified with, the force of negation at large in Abstract Expressionism and its influence runs deeply within their work. With hindsight, we can perhaps begin to recognize that this negation had a profound effect on later art, to the point that it can be taken as constituting the most powerful legacy of Abstract Expressionism.

The American school of art that emerges in the sixties reveals itself on inspection as being suffused with negative impulses and the twists and turns that this force has since taken in contemporary art are often quite surprising. To begin with, paradoxically, it took the guise of a repudiation of the Abstract Expressionist movement itself. Passions ran high in this extraordinary effort to undercut the authority of the previous generation. From a Freudian point of view, the phenomenon could be explained by reference to the myth of the murder of the father by his sons at the origin of the communal bond. However, there seems to have been a tacit awareness that it was precisely this type of intellectual frame of reference, with its search to express a complex cultural experience reaching back into the distant past, that had to be proscribed. It was asserted that painting was a visual art and that the ‘eye’ should prevail over the mind’s appreciation. Painting should be looked at ‘on its own terms,’ so to speak, simply as ‘painting’ or ‘art.’ The intention of the artist could be taken as secondary at best, if it was not downright misleading. In this way, Abstract Expressionist art became cut off from the intellectual discourse of its makers, to their very considerable frustration.

The sixties are remembered as a period of cultural radicalism and anti-establishment protest, much of it against the war in Vietnam. Artists, therefore, tended to see themselves in the context of these societal relations. One channel for the drive of negation took the form of social and political engagement. However, in the microcosm of the art world, the dominant values of the Establishment were assumed to be represented by the senior generation of Abstract Expressionists and so younger artists sought to overthrow them on that account. Abstract Expressionism came to stand for a tradition of 'modernism,' understood as 'high' art with links to the great European tradition of Picasso, Matisse, and Cezanne, when what was being called for was a genuinely 'American' art on its own terms. Further, Abstract Expressionism was difficult to appreciate. It earned the reputation of being 'intellectual' and 'elitist.'" What the new art public wanted was a popular art that reflected the world around it and that could be communicated by the photographic image in the media. Abstract Expressionism seemed strange, foreign and menacing. Such were the ideological suspicions of the time and such was the wedge that had grown up between government and a large section of the electorate that, in a latter day twist, a case has even been made for how Abstract Expressionism surreptitiously represented the evil force of American cultural imperialism during that period.

In a curious manner, the negative drive here took the form of a realignment with social norms and popular values. The demand that art should be closer and more in tune with contemporary conditions in society made the new work in the sixties tend to take on the appearance of the mass production/consumption equation of the post-war boom and measure its value against market recognition. Whether or not this new art endorsed or offered a critique of the new consumer society remains ambiguous. Irony became a central trope, with its master, Jasper Johns, painting the American flag in ways that could be understood on different levels. Intellectuals could take his flags as a sophisticated, and arguably subversive, exercise in perception, while the less arcane could simply identify with the national emblem and a Made-in-America trade mark. Similarly, Andy Warhol adopted a mask of emotional neutrality, which could be interpreted as either a critique of commercially packaged existence or a cynical exploitation of its promise.

It had become accepted in 'avant-garde' art that originality consisted in rejecting what had gone before. For artists in 1960, this meant defining their work in terms of its difference from Abstract Expressionism and this ushered in a period of virulently negative polemic in art criticism. In spite of the fact that the Abstract Expressionists had never agreed with the tenets of Clement Greenberg and had frequently rejected his interpretation of their work, his ideas were now taken to represent the movement. In the time honored tradition of democratic negative politicking, Greenberg was set up in order to knock them down. Abstract Expressionism was condemned as a 'formalist' art, without relevance to everyday life. It was asserted that art should attempt to get closer to that life, to approximate it in some way. Robert Rauschenberg spoke in a celebrated statement of 'working in the space between art and life,' while Allan Kaprow, making the case for an art of 'Happenings,' argued that Pollock's technique heralded the end of painting and prompted the artist to project out into real time and space.

The insistence of the Minimalists that art should consist of objects in real space, not only represents the center-piece of their rejection of Abstract Expressionism, it also testifies to an aesthetic ideology where negation is so completely dominant that it transforms itself into positivism. The Minimalist aesthetic reads like a fundamentalist litany of all that must be excluded or eliminated from the experience of art. First and foremost, it was explicitly anti-painting. Painting, it was felt, was contaminated by 'humanistic' values and identified with the old European culture of the past. The Minimalists intended to propose a new culture based on an eternal present, the present of 'structures' or 'objecthood.' Painting was suspect for its 'illusionism,' its 'internal relations' and its 'balance,' all qualities that allowed the viewer to entertain the conceit, in Frank Stella's words, that "there is something there besides the paint on the canvas." The Minimalists wanted, above all, to negate that 'something else.' So, summing up, Stella made what became the extraordinarily influential pronouncement that, when standing in front of one of his paintings, "What Mel

Bochner termed “the externality of meaning.” Once again, it is the power of negation at work, only now it has become a negation that must be denied at all cost by insisting that its inner world, the world of negation itself, does not ‘in fact’ exist.

Living with the New Aesthetic

Much time has elapsed since those formulations of the sixties and the art world has changed its face over and over. However, if this essay suggests that contemporary art should be considered in the framework of ideas playing out between Abstract Expressionism and this ‘New Aesthetic,’ it must be admitted that today the dynamic is no longer the same. In truth, Abstract Expressionism does not exist in the contemporary consciousness of the art world. It has been kicked upstairs into art history, which is what the New Aesthetic intended. Today, we are confronted with the hegemony of the New Aesthetic as a fact of life.

A case in point is the issue of Europe today. European art has been back on the agenda for two decades now, proving that it is in no way incompatible with the New Aesthetic, as the Minimalists once believed. Contemporary Europe has joined the United States in the pursuit of the New Aesthetic. On the other hand, Europe never had extensive exposure to Abstract Expressionism, beyond some traveling exhibitions and a few great masterpieces such as the Rothkos in London, Newman’s Shining Forth (to George) in Paris, and the great Dusseldorf Pollock, and art historians have always maintained that post-war European artists did not understand Abstract Expressionism. As a result of this failure on the part of Europe to come to grips with Abstract Expressionism, the force of negation that can also be traced through European post-war art, be it Manzoni, or Bacon, or Beuys or Richter cannot think itself through in relationship to what I have termed above as ‘negative thought.’

There are, of course, exceptions during the 1960’s and ‘70’s on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, Simon Hantaï, and in the United States, Robert Smithson, come to mind. However, by and large, it is difficult not to conclude that the ‘negative thought’ contained in Abstract Expressionism has been transmuted into an aggressive positivism of objects everywhere and that the New Aesthetic reigns. As to whether this situation can change in the future, it will depend on whether a new generation of artists and critics emerge with an interest in looking back on their complex heritage with fresh eyes and understanding.