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ART IN DARK TIMES: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM, HANNAH ARENDT,
AND THE "NATALITY" OF FREEDOM

by

STEVEN EZEKIEL ZUCKER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

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Abstract

ART IN DARK TIMES: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM,
HANNAH ARENDT, AND THE "NATALITY" OF FREEDOM

by

Steven Ezekiel Zucker

Advisor: Professor Mona Hadler

There is virtually no literature that explores the complex relationship which existed between the artists and critics of the early New York School and the unprecedented number of German scholars and artists then finding refuge in New York. Due partly to the early nationalist claims made for Abstract Expressionism and a cultural bias which has favored the study of French over German art, there has been an underestimation of the impact of German culture on mid-twentieth century American art and criticism.

This dissertation seeks no direct cause and effect between the German refugees and the advance of Abstract Expressionism, yet by utilizing Hannah Arendt's concurrent political philosophy as a case study, a lens with which to reveal meaning, a richer understanding of the art's concern with the questions of evil and freedom is achieved. Arendt offered a timely and reasoned philosophical structure with which to react to the immense violence of totalitarianism.

Her work has proven valuable in illuminating aspects of the early New York School that have otherwise resisted interpretation.

It is my thesis that Arendt's concurrent writings and lectures were as relevant to the work of principal Abstract Expressionists as they were accessible. Her conceptions of the *polis*, radical evil, and her analysis of those elements of freedom which remain accessible in the modern world, shed light on the artists' groups, on the abandonment of myth by certain artists, and on the achievement of abstraction as an enactment of freedom. This dissertation focuses, for the most part, on the artwork of Lewin Alcopley, William Baziotos, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Seymour Lipton, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and David Smith.

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My parents' encouragement laid the foundation for this study and to them I am very grateful. In addition, sincere thanks must be given to Millicent Koski who provided the most valuable of all commodities, time. Finally, I wish to express my deepest thanks to Susan Koski Zucker. Before this project I had never fully understood the acknowledgment of family members. I had assumed it was largely pro-forma. Nothing could be further from my present thinking. My wife's efforts on behalf of this project have been beyond measure. This dissertation is dedicated to Noah and Avery.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

. . . the problem of evil will become the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life.¹

Arendt's forecast was not borne out. In the years immediately following the Second World War, the former combatants were exhausted and sought, by and large, to reclaim the normalcy of peace rather than confront the terrors of the immediate past. Yet isolated individuals, including a number of Abstract Expressionists and refugee intellectuals, recognized and addressed the complex issues raised by the unprecedented violence linked directly and indirectly to the war.

One such refugee was the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). By using her various critiques of modernity and her related studies of totalitarianism as a central nexus, this dissertation brings together two intersecting circles which, in differing ways, sought to confront contemporary manifestations of evil.² These are, a

¹ Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," *Partisan Review* 12, number 2 (spring 1945): 259.

² Such usage of Arendt's writings is, I believe, both useful and justifiable. While the particular focus of this study, American art, lies outside of Arendt's realm of inquiry, the issues and individuals considered here were

number of the New York based painters and sculptors associated with Abstract Expressionism, arguably the first internationally celebrated American artists, and a number of émigré intellectuals, primarily from Germany, who had come to the United States to seek refuge from persecution in the era of European fascism.

The latter, while less recognized as a group, are individually, at least, celebrated for their enormous contributions to the sciences, humanities, and arts. These include, among others, such émigrés as Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, Albert Einstein, Max Ernst, Claude Levi-Strauss, Thomas Mann, Piet Mondrian, and Erwin Panofsky.³

Remarkably, while the artists of the early New York School and the émigrés from Germany have each been studied in-depth and in isolation, these contemporaneous, contiguous, and interacting groups have never been studied in direct relation to each other. This dissertation examines the complex relationship that existed between the artists and critics of postwar Abstract Expressionism and the rich infusion of intellectual capital that New York received primarily due to the widespread dislocation of Germany's academic elite during the Nazi era. Through the use of several of the interpretive

significant elements of her world and made up a part of the context to which she responded in her work.

³ For a more complete history see Lewis A. Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America: Their Impact and Their Experiences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) or Laura Fermi, *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

models developed by the émigré, Hannah Arendt (the case study upon which this dissertation focuses), a uniquely defined historical analysis of the provocative art produced during this, the most violent era in history, is possible.

Many of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism reacted in their work to the extraordinary violence of fascism and totalitarianism of the Nineteen Thirties, Forties and Fifties. In addition, Arendt's analysis of these events was both singularly relevant and accessible to these artists and their critical champions during the postwar era. At issue here are the artists' investigation of evil or, as it was more often posited, the negation of freedom. This dissertation explores this unique confluence of art and scholarship in a historical moment defined by extreme crisis.

As it has been ably demonstrated in past art historical scholarship, it is no coincidence that this was also a moment of dramatic artistic transition, when the teleological promise of nineteenth century French formalist modernism unexpectedly culminated in the mature abstractions of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and their circle. Conventional histories of Abstract Expressionism have documented and emphasized the debt these artist's owed to European refugees then in New York, most notably the French Surrealists and the Dutch painter, Piet Mondrian. What is largely ignored is the instrumental presence of Germans.

This study embraces the years of the Second World War, 1939-1945, and the years of reassessment immediately following. Thematics dictate that this study not engage the Cold War era in its entirety but only its nascent period when American focus shifted from the fascism of the extreme right to the Marxism of the radical left both at home and abroad, that is, until approximately 1952. It was up to this point that the most brutal aspects of the war—the possibility of systematic genocide and the emergence of atomic weaponry—were being confronted not as an historical event but as an aspect of the present.⁴

This study is largely formed from two distinct subjects. The first concerns a limited group of related works of art by a selected group of Abstract Expressionist's created during or

⁴ This excepts the tremendous recent interest in documenting, analyzing, and commemorating the Holocaust, a trend of which this dissertation may be seen as a tangential part. For a more detailed accounting of the phenomenon of recent Holocaust related art, see Andrew Weinstein, "Imaging the Shoah: Representation and Its Consequences in American Culture Since 1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Fine Arts New York University, forthcoming).

I have chosen to use the common word "Holocaust" despite misgivings regarding its Greek root *holokauston*. *Holokauston* means sacrifice by fire or burnt offering and thus Holocaust conveys the suggestion that a spiritual meaning can be wrested from this catastrophe. The usual alternative, *Sho'ah*, is a biblical Hebrew word also meaning catastrophe and while it too has a spiritual dimension (it appears in Isaiah 6:11, 10:3, and 47:11), the word is nevertheless generally considered to have a more minor spiritual connotation. Nevertheless, because of its origin, the latter term has been criticized for emphasizing the Jews as victims over other groups and for this reason has been rejected. For a careful consideration of this terminology see the "Names of the Holocaust," the fifth chapter of James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 83-89.

soon after, and in direct consideration of fascism, totalitarianism, and war. The second concerns the scholarship made available to the art community in New York by academic German émigrés such as Hannah Arendt which facilitated a visual discussion intent on comprehending the enormity of modern brutality.

The artists whose work will be discussed in depth are generally those figures who are central to common definitions of Abstract Expressionism. They include William Baziotes, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Seymour Lipton, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and David Smith. Lewin Alcopley, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Ad Reinhardt, Tony Smith, and Theodoros Stamos are also discussed, although to a lesser extent.

Although no individual could adequately represent the varied and often divergent work of the many émigré intellectuals in New York during and after the war, for the sake of brevity, clarity, and because of the particular focus of her work, namely totalitarian evil and the possibility of modern freedom, Arendt will function as the refugee most central to this investigation.

Hannah Arendt was born to Martha Cohn (1874-1948) and Paul Arendt (1873-1913) in Hanover, Germany.⁵ Theirs was a family of prosperous Jewish tea merchants originally from the capital of East Prussian, Königsberg. The family's moderate

wealth, in combination with Arendt's keen intellect, allowed her to enroll under the tutelage of several of the leading philosophers of the day, all of whom were German. As a graduate student, Arendt studied with both Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) at the University of Marburg and with the founder of Phenomenological philosophy, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) at the University of Freiburg.⁶ She received her doctorate in philosophy from the University of Heidelberg in 1929 where, at the instigation of Heidegger, she was advised by Karl Jaspers (1883-1969).

After being imprisoned for eight days by the Gestapo in 1933 for conducting research on the language of anti-Semitism, Arendt was able to flee stateless⁷ to France. In 1940 Arendt and her second husband Heinrich Blücher were each interned as "enemy aliens," Arendt at a camp at Gurs, Blücher at

⁵ The most complete biography on Hannah Arendt remains Elizabeth Young-Breuhl's *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

⁶ Although publicly revealed by Young-Breuhl's biography over twenty years ago, Arendt's interrupted affair with Heidegger has only recently become a scandal. At issue is Arendt's *rapprochement* in the late 1950s in spite of her lover's prewar affiliation with National Socialism and his postwar refusal to fully acknowledge what his critics consider the full ramifications of this affiliation. For a more complete consideration of this debate see Richard Wolin, editor, *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1993), Berel Lang, *Heidegger's Silence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), as well as the spark that ignited the present debate, Elzbieta Ettinger's superficial exposé, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁷ The condition of being stateless would be formative for Arendt perhaps giving rise to her emphasis on dislocation as an essential feature of modernity.

Villemalard, until the confusion of the French defeat allowed the separated couple to each obtain release papers (figure 1).⁸ The couple, reunited by chance, were able to evade the Vichy authorities and thus avoid deportation back to a German concentration camp.⁹ While her close friend Walter Benjamin disastrously could not, Arendt and Blücher were able, with the assistance of Varian Fry and the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, to cross the French frontier and by 1941 had landed in New York via Lisbon (figures 2 & 3).¹⁰

From the early 1940s Arendt continuously published political and philosophical essays in leading American journals. She played a role not only in bringing to light the immensity of the totalitarian crime, but also in offering an alternative philosophical structure with which to react to these events. The 1951 publication of her monumental study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* brought Arendt broad public

⁸ With stinging irony, Blücher passed the months in the camp reading, according to Arendt's biographer, Young-Bruehl, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Young-Bruehl, 151.

⁹ "Under paragraph nineteen of the German-French armistice, the French were required to surrender on demand any German in France." Young-Bruehl, 159.

¹⁰ According to a letter written by Sara Bloomfield, then Acting Executive Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Council, addressed to Ethel Schein at the Museum of Modern Art dated October 11, 1989 Fry's "clients" included Hannah Arendt, André Breton, Mark Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Jacques Lipchitz, André Masson, and Franz and Alma Mahler Werfel among others. The list of those thought to be at greatest risk of arrest had been partly compiled by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (who had known Fry as a student at Harvard) and Thomas Mann. See The Museum of Modern Art archive, "Notes from the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1940s" Folder.

recognition.¹¹ While the book is both idiosyncratic and actually ultimately fails to address the origins of totalitarianism it was enormously important and remains a valuable document today. Author Steven E. Aschheim has recently recalled the book's impact:

Its appearance satisfied a number of real, indeed urgent, through [sic] often unarticulated, . . . needs. It would be wise to recall that in 1951 (and for at least a decade after that), there were painfully few serious attempts to forge the theoretical, historical, and conceptual tools necessary to illuminate and explain the great cataclysms of the twentieth century.¹²

Writing soon after its publication, H. S. Hughes wrote in *The Nation*:

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: Dr. Hannah Arendt—a trained philosopher, a discerning critic, and a recognized authority on anti-Semitism—has produced what is without question a remarkable book. It is certainly the most important work on totalitarianism that has appeared since Franz Neumann's *Behemoth*.¹³

¹¹ More than twenty major newspapers and periodicals reviewed Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951) in its first year in print including: *The New York Times* (March 25, 1951): 3, *The New York Herald Tribune*, Book Review (April 8, 1951): 6, *The New Yorker* 27, (April 7, 1951): 121, *The Nation* 172 (March 24, 1951): 280 and *The Saturday Review of Literature* 34 (March 24, 1951):10.

¹² Steven E. Aschheim, "Nazism, Culture and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: Hannah Arendt and the Discourse of Evil," *New German Critique* 70 (winter 1997): 117-118.

¹³ H.S. Hughes, *The Nation* 172 (March 24, 1951):280. Quoted in *The Book Review Digest, Forty-Seventh Annual Culmination (March 1951-February 1952)*, edited by Mertice M. James and Dorothy Brown (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1952), 24.

And Dwight MacDonalD hailed it as "as the greatest advance in social thought since Marx; . . ." ¹⁴

In reaction to totalitarianism abroad and increasing mass conformity at home, Arendt emphasized the primacy of social plurality and the importance of the individual. For Arendt at this time, the "supreme expression of the human condition [was action]." ¹⁵ Yet these philosophical manifestations of the good were largely the result of her deep analysis of contemporary evil.

Arendt's conceptualization of evil must be understood as related and balanced by her interest in the good and specifically in the human capacity for freedom. This twining can be traced from her early interest in both Saint Augustine of Hippo's conception of love, her dissertation topic, and to her investigation of the language of anti-Semitism, which had caused her to be arrested by the Gestapo.

Arendt's most famous although widely misinterpreted phrase, "The Banality of Evil," is commonly traced to the subtitle of her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. This volume is a collection of reports originally written for and published serially by *The New Yorker Magazine* in 1963. It is an analysis of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a section head of the Nazi *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security) in Jerusalem in 1961. In a preface

¹⁴ Dwight MacDonalD, "Review," *The New Leader* (August 15, 1951. Quoted in Aschheim, 118.

¹⁵ Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking* (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, York University, 1984).

dated 1950 to her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt first notes in published form “. . . the truly radical nature of Evil.” These terms, “Radical Evil” and “the Banality of Evil” have been widely understood to express a transformation of her understanding of evil from one of mythic depth to one of bureaucratic shallowness.

Such a simplification polarizes these phrases, yet they are not in fact oppositional. In a 1946 letter to Arendt, her former doctoral advisor and friend, the philosopher Jaspers wrote to her:

You say that what the Nazis did cannot be comprehended as a ‘crime’—I’m not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of ‘greatness’—of satanic greatness—which is, for me as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the ‘demonic’ element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality, . . .¹⁶

Arendt replied to Jaspers:

the way I’ve expressed this up to now I come dangerously close to that ‘satanic greatness’ that I, like you, totally reject. But still there is a difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people who without considering the economic usefulness of their actions at all (the deportations were very damaging to the war effort) built factories to produce corpses. One thing is certain: We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible, . . .¹⁷

The terms “radical evil” and “banality of evil” are, then, not antithetical after all. Arendt does not define the former as

¹⁶ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, editors, *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), 62. Letter #46.

¹⁷ Kohler and Saner, 69. Letter #50.

mythic but rather as something of unparalleled breadth, versus depth.

Additionally, this specific use of the word "banal" may be traced back further. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt cites André Gide's "delighted" review of Céline's *Bagatelle pour un Massacre* in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (April 1938). Although not cited, it was in this review that Gide casts the word "banal" in this sense.¹⁸ Alice A. Kaplan suggests that Arendt might have been aware of a related letter written to Max Horkheimer by her friend Walter Benjamin on April 16, 1938 which states "*le mot banal en dit long*" (the word *banal* says it all).¹⁹

Through her criticism of such universal beliefs as the mythic demonic and her dissemination of the German variant of existentialism, the impact of her writing was felt beyond the boundaries of philosophy and politics, reaching into the realm of art at the mid-century.

The period being discussed is uniquely complex. Any study that undertakes the task of revealing meaning in this body of art work, imbedded as it is in its era's cultural circumstances, must take into account the international economic collapse of the 1930s, the consequent rise of fascism

¹⁸ The full quotation is filed in Arendt's papers in the form of a typed copy in "Excerpts and Notes: Anti-Semitism, France" Folder, Box 67, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*, Theory and History of Literature number 36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 48-49 and note #19, page 57.

in Europe, and similar though less developed social tendencies in the United States expressed in the rise of social conformity, xenophobia, and the recurrence of political isolationism. It is my contention that many of the most prominent artists of what was arguably America's first avant-garde art movement, were in fact, deeply indebted to European humanism, particularly the German tradition. Furthermore, by limiting this study to the issue of evil as embodied by totalitarianism and the Second World War, by using this idea of evil as a type of fulcrum, the art and the cataclysm can be presented as analogous in nature and time, and directly related rather than being regarded as fundamentally irrelevant to each other as much related literature erroneously concludes.

It is difficult from our present perspective at the close of half a century of Cold War politics to retrieve the extraordinary uncertainty that existed during the Second World War. The Cold War was a confrontation which, for all its fear and hatred, maintained for the major Western powers an extended period of relative calm and prosperity. The initial stage of this era was characterized by a desire for a uniform national ideology. These domestic forces formed the historical moment in which Abstract Expressionism emerged. The twice played role of reluctant cavalry to Western Europe's encircled wagon train, forged the age of superpower politics which must serve as a backdrop for contemporary art historical discourse concerned with this era. What has remained absent from this

discussion of the political context of Abstract Expressionism is not the American situation, but the repercussions of the broader international drama then unfolding.²⁰

Nations do not exist in isolation but react to the same international forces. The great depression which began in the Summer of 1930 may have been triggered at the New York Stock Exchange on October 24, 1929, but it was hardly a crisis known only in the United States. Its repercussions were evident throughout Europe. As for instance, in Weimar Germany's wild inflationary spiral which, when linked with the inherently destabilizing punitive strictures of the Versailles Treaty, undermined the viability of this brief democratic state. These events were of significant consequence even for the nascent New York School.

One month after securing dictatorial powers from a Reichstag purged of opposition, Adolf Hitler enacted into law what would be only the beginning of his campaign to ensure a racially pure nation, his "Law to restore the National Civil Service."²¹ As a direct consequence of this prohibitive statute

²⁰ Serge Guilbaut and David Craven have each explored and indicted Abstract Expressionism in the context of American Cold War foreign policy although at a later stage. See especially, 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 David Craven, "Myth-Making in the McCarthy Period," *Myth-Making: Abstract Expressionist Painting from the United States* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 7-45.

²¹ *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*. After gaining control of the Reichstag on January 30, 1933 the N.S.D.A.P. invoked article forty-eight of the German

sixteen percent or some 1,700 German faculty were removed from the universities primarily because of their Jewish identity or heritage but also for other perceived political or social inadequacies.²² These early and relatively tentative steps were of course succeeded by increasingly harsh measures such as the Nuremberg race laws which brought the total number of dismissed academics to thirty-nine percent by 1938. Without question though, the severity of these mass dismissals pales in comparison to the policies directed towards the Jews and other disenfranchised groups after the onset of war the following year.

The surprising willingness of the National Socialists to drain Germany's creative and even scientific pool to the profound benefit of the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—all adversarial if not yet outright enemy states—is thoughtfully considered by Alan Beyerchen in his essay, *Anti-Intellectualism and the Cultural Decapitation of Germany under the Nazis*. This essay was originally delivered at a colloquium honoring Einstein's one hundredth birthday held by the Smithsonian Institution in 1980 entitled "The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945."

constitution thereby declaring a national emergency. On February 4, 1933 the constitution was suspended and by March 1933 Adolph Hitler had absolute authority.

²² Claus-Dieter Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*, translated by Rita and Robert Kimber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pages 11 and 216. Originally published as *Wissenschaft im Exil* (Campus-Verlag, 1987).

Here Mr. Beyerchen reveals a picture which is antithetical to the standard characterization of prewar Germany as deeply supportive of its formidable intellectual tradition. Instead, he links Hitler's intention to purge its universities to a long-standing and broadly based national tradition of anti-intellectualism which was rooted in an elemental distrust of the rationalism of the enlightenment which had been imposed by force under the French imperial rule of Napoleon Bonaparte.²³ This line of reasoning gains force when Mr. Beyerchen recounts that the targets of Hitler's purge were assimilated Jews who owed their emancipation to the revolutionary ideals imposed on the German states under the French occupation less than a century before.²⁴

It is interesting to note a similarly romantic, if manifestly less malevolent, streak of anti-intellectualism in American culture. And to note as well that new world distrust of the mind played a significant role in much of the public posturing of Abstract Expressionism.

The new edicts of the National Socialists in combination with an increasingly intolerant society were successful in driving from Germany many of its most rigorous minds. Those

²³ Alan Beyerchen, "Anti-Intellectualism and the Cultural Decapitation of Germany under the Nazis," in *The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945*, edited by Jarrell C. Jackman & Carla M. Borden (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 31.

²⁴ Beyerchen, page 33. For example, the principalities of Baden in 1809 and Prussia in 1812. The Germany National Assembly proclaimed national emancipation in 1848.

lucky enough to have had international reputations were able to secure positions commensurate with those they vacated. Erwin Panofsky is a case in point. A professor at the University of Hamburg, Panofsky had begun lecturing every other semester at New York University in 1931. While in New York during the Spring of 1933 he received a cable informing him that he had lost his post at home. He had little problem securing a permanent position in Princeton at the Institute for Advanced Study which had been formed only three years earlier by the retail magnate, Louis Bamberger, who was willing to take advantage of Germany's newly dislocated Jewish academics.²⁵

In his book, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research*, Claus-Dieter Krohn cites a common analogy. He describes Germany's eviction of its intellectual capital as being comparable not only to the "exodus of the Greek leading class after the Osmaniian conquest of the Byzantine Empire" in the quattrocento but also the resulting renaissance enjoyed by the Italian city-states which received these exiles. In another parallel, just as Georgio Vasari discounts the Greek painters' influence as from the old order and of little consequence in Florence's sudden creative energy in the fifteenth-century (as if Italian humanism had burst full-blown on the scene like Athena from the head of her father), the early critics/

²⁵ The Institute for Advance Study, World Wide Web page <http://www.IAS.Princeton.edu/> (October 6, 1996).

champions of the New York School, abetted by the artists, acknowledge no meaningful German contribution. This is also true of most subsequent literature. In contrast, the contribution of the French exiles is commonly referred to.

Although historically incorrect, the Byzantine Empire is traditionally cast as the protector of the Western humanist tradition, whereas the Asians are excluded from this lineage. Similarly, by analogy then, Germany's European identity is revoked. The nation is stripped of its claim to the humanistic tradition, thereby shielding the allies from the need for self-examination, from a recognition of their potential for such atrocities. This dynamic by which a convicted compatriot is disavowed thereby exonerating the western democracies is thoughtfully analyzed by Alice Yaeger Kaplan in her book, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*. Concerning Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of French fascism and complicity with the Nazis in his essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?" she writes:

The gist of Sartre's argument is that the fascists are outsiders. . . . he insists that these men have no real ties with contemporary France, 'with our great political traditions, with a century and a half of our history and of our culture.'²⁶

Sartre's point is simple. Those who adopted Vichy ideology relinquished their claim to French identity and became alien.

The temptation to insulate oneself and one's cultural traditions by this means was very great in the United States

as well and took various forms during the war years. Examples range from the common vulgarity of patriotic jingoistic propaganda to the more subtle historical analogy outlined above. These issues directly concern the ways in which a number of Abstract Expressionist artists sought to structure their understanding of the era's violence and inhumanity.

In the final chapter of her book, *Antifascism in American Art*, Cécile Whiting explores the use of myth as a response to the war. Here, she develops the idea that the artists' interest was related to the Jungian notion of universalism and that this archaism was so fundamental that it differentiated itself from, and rebuked, the racially based myths offered by the National Socialists.²⁷ Yet, as will be shown, this was a distinction fraught with such ambiguity that it would collapse by the war's end. From 1947, the conceit of the mythic in its relation to violence, generally gives way to the artists' efforts to directly explore and take responsibility for their own potential for evil beyond the realm of myth.

The rise of totalitarianism, the grim violence of total war, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb—these were the consuming events that made the consideration of evil and the endurance of freedom prominent issues for the Abstract Expressionists. Each artist, individually engaging the

²⁶ Kaplan, 14.

²⁷ Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 187-188. These issues

problems of evil and all its inherent subsidiary concerns, while stylistically unique, underwent a common subject-based transformation. Certain artists such as Gottlieb may have lagged while others, such as Newman, seemed to have avoided this transformation by largely side-stepping such early solutions. That noted, this transformation becomes starkly apparent especially between the years 1945 and 1947.

The artists rejected their early interest in ancient legend, the broad embrace of both cultural and physical anthropological tropes, as well as an eclectic assortment of historically distant iconography as a method for signifying evil in the contemporary world. However, by 1947, most of these artists abandoned at least the overt use of those subjects customarily referred to as mythic in favor of a less narrative-dependent process of abstraction. This transition coincides with a crescendo of singularly violent episodes, or more to the point, with the recognition and absorption of these events by the American public.

This thesis contends that the transformation from mythology to a non-narrative abstraction is not, in fact, a rejection of evil as subject (as might be supposed) but rather, a recognition that the violence wrought by totalitarianism is beyond the scope of one of mythology's most basic and traditional functions—to contain, naturalize, and to some extent neutralize evil. These conclusions become evident when the work of the exiled intellectuals such as _____ have been further developed by Stephen Polcari. Each authors'

Hannah Arendt are used as a tool with which to understand the place of the art work in this complex historical moment.

* * *

Abstract Expressionism has been championed, derided, and intensely analyzed from numerous perspectives since its emergence over half a century ago. However, while recent studies have successfully begun to link the development of the New York School to the mid-century's social, economic, and political upheaval, to date there is virtually no literature that explores the complex relationship which existed between the artists and critics of this somewhat amorphous style known as Abstract Expressionism and the unprecedented number of German scholars and artists then finding refuge in and around New York. This is all the more remarkable considering the precisely matched chronologies—the emergence of the artists of Abstract Expressionism corresponds, not coincidentally, with the all but wholesale relocation of Germany's intellectual elite to the safe haven of New York, the result of massive faculty dismissals by the National Socialists.

Several issues underlie this scholarly reticence. Of central importance is the self-perpetuating character and decidedly anti-contextual nature of the critical literature which, until recently, framed the art of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Barnett

work is discussed more fully in the fourth chapter.

Newman, Mark Rothko, David Smith, et.al. The extraordinary tenacity of Clement Greenberg's and Harold Rosenberg's framing of this radically complex body of artwork has been widely acknowledged. Yet their enthusiastic championing of the New York School in collusion with the artist's own willingness to play along, that is, to not stridently demand that critical attention be paid to the subject matter in their works has complicated the analysis of this material by bringing the artist's intention into question. Can an artist be expected to disavow a positive interpretation if that critique is a vehicle towards broader recognition?

In addition, a partial explanation for this lack of attention may lie in the critic's early nationalist claims for Abstract Expressionism's unique American-ness. Over and over early criticism frames the postwar abstractionists in national terms. Perhaps ironically, even the former Marxist, Greenberg, succumbs to this patriotic spin in essays such as "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," where he calls Pollock, "radically American" or his "'American-Type' Painting."²⁸ Another answer may be the cultural bias which, until recently, has favored the study of French over German art as well as French artists over their colleagues from

²⁸ Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," *Horizon* (October 1947): 20-30. Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting." *Partisan Review* (spring 1955): 179-196. Both essays are reprinted in O'Brian, volumes 2 and 3 respectively, pages 160-170, for quote see page 166 and 217-236 for "'American-Type' Painting."

Germany.²⁹ Perhaps as a result of the pattern formed by this century's two world wars, France has been cast in a more heroic light as the victim (recent studies of Vichy have problematized this comfortable history³⁰), while Germany is seen as both the aggressor and the vanquished.³¹

Anti-Semitism as a historical factor may also play a role in this material being overlooked as many of the exiles were Jewish and encountered substantial intolerance in the United States.³²

The justified indictment of German racism and militarism has grown into a more generalized prejudice which has resulted in an underestimation of the impact of German culture on the

²⁹ These issues are discussed in Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Scholarship: Past, Present, and Future Directions," *German Expressionist Prints and Drawings: The Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Studies 1* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Prestel, 1987), 183 and 190-193.

³⁰ See especially, Michèle C. Cone, *Artists Under Vichy: A Case of Prejudice and Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

³¹ American examples of anti-German sentiment abound from the beginning of the First World War up through the shift of alliances precipitated by the Cold War. Local examples include the cancellation of German language instruction in New York City public schools and of German language libretti by the Metropolitan Opera during the Great War. Even the hamburger was rechristened the liberty sandwich. See Stanley Nadel "Germans," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 464.

³² Public opinion surveys taken during the war testify that fifty-six percent of Americans believed that Jews held "too much power in the United States" and that between fifteen and twenty-four percent believed that Jews were "a menace to America." David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 14-15.

art and art criticism of the United States. Examples abound. Certainly, German avant-garde groups such as The Brücke or The Blaue Reiter have never enjoyed the international favor accorded to French artists. Even Dada, has, until recently, been popularly associated with France in spite of its German and Swiss origins. The case of Marsden Hartley is particularly instructive. According to Gail R. Scott, when Hartley returned from Germany during The Great War with paintings to be exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery "291," he was forced, by virulent anti-German sentiment, to falsely deny the source and personal significance of these synthetic abstractions of German military regalia.³³ Such censorship in the aftermath of the Second World War could only have been more zealous.

For instance, while the recent literature surrounding Abstract Expressionism commonly refers to the influence of French Surrealism and French existentialism, no mention is made of possible German contributions such as the lectures given by Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher at the artist's "Club" on Eighth Street on Expressionist esthetics and *Existenz* philosophy in the late 1940s. Indeed, in his

³³ These paintings, such as *Portrait of a German Officer*, 1914 (oil on canvas, 68-1/4x41-3/8" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Alfred Stieglitz Collection 1949) were shown in April 1916. In the catalogue statement Hartley protests, "These forms are only those I have observed casually from day to day. There is no hidden symbolism whatsoever in them; there is no slight intention of that anywhere, . . ." Nevertheless, these images are thought to be memorials to Hartley's close friend Karl von Freyburg, a German officer who had been killed in one of the war's opening battles, while Hartley was still in Berlin. See Marsden Hartley, *On Art*, edited by Gail R. Scott (New York: Horizon Press, 1982), 33.

valuable book, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (1991), Stephen Polcari discusses the importance of a 1946 issue of *The Partisan Review* dedicated to existential thought and cites the literature of Jean Paul Sartre, Jean Genêt, and Albert Camus in the issue, while overlooking Arendt's piece, "What is Existenz Philosophy?"³⁴ While the novels and plays of the French school were doubtless less abstruse, being aimed at a popular audience, Arendt offered a far more direct response to the period's ubiquitous violence. What exists then, are two important and proximate cultural groups whose relationship has yet to be explored. Although it is not the intention of this dissertation to claim a simple cause and effect between the German refugees and the advance of Abstract Expressionism, by observing the relationship between these adjacent and in fact intertwined historical phenomena, a richer view of the period's art and ideas will be achieved.

The recent literature concerned with Abstract Expressionism has pushed well beyond the original and rather narrow parameters so compellingly defined by Greenberg and Rosenberg.³⁵ Building on the pioneering cultural framework

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, "What is Existenz Philosophy," *Partisan Review* 8, number 1, (winter 1946): 34-56.

³⁵ See Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, volume 1 and *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, volume 2, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, volume 3, and *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, volume 4, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: University

constructed in the early 1970s by Dore Ashton and Irving Sandler,³⁶ contemporary authors such as Erika Doss, Serge Guilbaut, Michael Leja, Stephen Polcari, Martica Sawin, and Cécile Whiting among others, have broadened the themes of previous scholarship to more directly address issues pertaining to the Second World War and the early Cold War.³⁷ Yet these authors make only the briefest mention of the German émigrés who made important contributions to the intellectual environment in which Abstract Expressionism was both created and received.

of Chicago Press, 1993); and Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1959).

³⁶ Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). An excellent early contextual overview of the web of relationships between artists and intellectuals. Irving Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). The earliest contextual overview, it remains surprisingly informative.

³⁷ See Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), an examination of the previously neglected relationship between these artists; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, an important, provocative, and flawed revisionist study; Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), a useful recent contextual history which focuses on the artists in relation to mass culture; Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), an excellent study linking art and culture in the context of the war; Sawin, Martica, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1995), a recent and well documented study of France's influence which nevertheless perpetuates the historical neglect of German influence; and Cecile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, one of the best studies of the relationship between American art and politics prior to the end of the war.

The abrupt cessation of the cultural pluralism that had thrived during Weimar Germany caused many leading German academics to look to the Allied nations and especially the United States for asylum. Many cultural studies exist tracing the migration of German academics. Though few address the impact on the visual arts in the United States.³⁸

Given the vast displacement of German intellectuals after the racial and ideological purges begun in 1933, a broad study, one that attempted to document the general impact of this cultural migration on American art, would prove unwieldy. However, having focused this inquiry on Hannah Arendt, I have included passing references to other principal figures such as Franz Neumann, Paul Tillich, and Franz Boas who, while not himself a refugee, was closely involved with the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars which helped a limited number of refugees by navigating the obdurate bureaucracy in Washington and by soliciting university postings and the required funding. Because of her background in the German academic tradition, her flight from

³⁸ These include among others: Franz L. Neumann, Henri Peyre, Erwin Panofsky, Wolfgang Köhler, and Paul Tillich, *The Cultural Migration: The European Scholar in America* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania, 1953); Robert Boyers, editor "The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals," *Salmagundi* (special edition) 10/11 (1969-70); Lewis A. Coser, *Refugee Scholars in America: Their Impact and Their Experiences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983); Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar en Exil: le destin de*

totalitarianism, and finally, because of her relevance to American art at mid-century, Hannah Arendt is an ideal subject with which to evaluate the impact of German culture on Abstract Expressionism's concern with evil and freedom and on the critics who framed its public reception.

Other disciplines have led the way in exploring this material. In his book, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research* (1993), Claus-Dieter Krohn assesses the impact that the émigrés had on American economic theory. In the field of history, Wilfred M. McClay's 1986 Doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins, *A Haunted Legacy: The German Refugee Intellectuals and American Social Thought, 1932-1969*, finds a receptive audience in the United States for writers such as Arendt. She has been discussed as an important figure in the closely allied field of architectural history. Arthur Drexler, Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art, has written that Arendt's work:

has had an enormous impact on the most serious architectural critics and historians. I have rarely attended any discussion at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, for example, which has not eventually turned to the ideas [she has] presented.³⁹

Indeed, her lasting significance is attested to by a continuing deluge of related publications such as, among

l'emigration intellectuelle allemande antinazie en Europe et aux Etats-Unis (Paris: Payot, 1988).

³⁹ From a letter dated October 22, 1971 addressed to Hannah Arendt from Arthur Drexler on Museum of Modern Art

others, Margaret Canovan's *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (1992), Phillip Hanson's *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship* (1993), Jerome Kohn's *Arendt, Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954* (1994), Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (1995), and most recently Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (1996) which includes the most comprehensive primary and secondary bibliography to date.

* * *

I have employed Arendt and her political philosophy in several distinct yet occasionally overlapping roles throughout this dissertation. First she is relevant as a Jewish German intellectual émigré. Given Arendt's study of and experience with anti-Semitism, her exile in France as a stateless person and her internment there, and finally her flight to the United States, she represents a condensation of the émigré experience and becomes a useful tool for schematizing the dynamics between Europe's refugees and the American artists.⁴⁰ Secondly,

letterhead. The Museum of Modern Art Folder, Box 20, Papers of Hannah Arendt, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁰ While Arendt is an ideal subject, as with any case study the particular nature of the individual must be accounted for so as not to falsely claim a broader significance. Arendt's particularity of thought is evident throughout her work and throughout this dissertation. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the paradoxes that shaped her political philosophy, namely her experience as an assimilated Weimarian Jew who owed a great debt to Heidegger while reversing his political blindness. For a detailed

and as prompted by the circumstances described above, Arendt's lucid writing and public lectures clarify fundamental issues of her day, such as evil and freedom, not only for the present study but for many of the artists and critics here discussed. In this regard, Arendt exemplifies the direct and significant influence that the uprooted German intellectual community in New York had upon the rise of American art in the postwar period. Finally, Arendt's political philosophy proves useful as a coincident resource, a useful critical tool for examining meaning in the art of the early New York School.

By exploring the early New York School within the parameters defined by a specific element of its content, namely the issues of evil and freedom, the discourse concerned with these icons of American abstraction is revitalized. By linking the art to broader cultural issues, by taking seriously the artists own, often emphatic exclamations that their subject matter was central to their abstraction, to investigate the production and criticism of Abstract Expressionism and its kinship to politics, philosophy, and literature neither furthers nor shores up its eroding and somewhat anachronistic heroism, but rather returns this exceptional body of work to a central position in contemporary critical analysis.

I have limited this study to the painting and sculpture of several of the key practitioners of Abstract Expressionism

exploration of the intricacies of this influence see Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

including William Baziotas, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and David Smith. Since the goal of this dissertation is to broaden the literature which considers the context in which the work of these artists was created and critically presented, the writings of John Graham, Clement Greenberg, Thomas Hess, and Harold Rosenberg will also be considered. It is worth noting that Rosenberg was a friend of Arendt and actually quoted her work in the short-lived artists' periodical, *Possibilities: An Occasional Review* (1947-1948), which he edited with Robert Motherwell. Arendt and Greenberg, on the other hand, had a less easy rapport stemming from *Commentary's* rejection of her 1944 article, "Zionism Reconsidered," a decision which Greenberg, who was an editor, defended on the grounds that it might be unfavorably misinterpreted by mainstream American Jews. However, like Rosenberg, Greenberg found Arendt worth quoting in his own writing.

Research priority has been given to primary sources, especially to interviews of the few artists and spouses who are living. These sessions have proved to be tremendously important. Although everyone approached had already been extensively interviewed, my somewhat unusual questions concerning evil, totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt, and other issues often reawakened dormant memories and broke new ground. Archives have also been an important source of primary material.

Although my dissertation strives for a contextual synthesis of art and political philosophy, a pairing that might suggest a disregard for the artworks' formal character especially given the contemporary bias towards theory, I have taken pains to anchor my analysis in the works of art discussed. For this reason, I have found it necessary to carefully examine the relevant artwork first-hand. These works of art constitute my most valuable primary source.

Finally, numerous publications have made primary source materials available. These include the collected writings of various artists such as Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and Piet Mondrian, in addition to periodicals edited by the artists such as *Possibilities: An Occasional Review* and *Tiger's Eye*, as well as the diverse miscellany of catalogue forewords, letters to the editor, radio interviews and otherwise recorded remarks. Certainly, published materials constitute a valuable store of primary works by the critics and émigrés.

* * *

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. the present introductory chapter begins by presenting an overview of the dissertation's thesis including evil and freedom as subjects in Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture and the value of using Hannah Arendt's work as a lens through which to study this complex and historically pertinent

subject. Next, the existing literature concerning the artists and their critics is briefly reviewed and considered as is the critical discourse focusing on the émigrés. Gaps are identified, as is the tendency to treat each group, the artists and émigrés, in isolation, distanced from the broader intellectual and creative community in which they both thrived and drew considerable support. Possible reasons for these lapses are cited and the *raison d'être* for the project is in this way established. Finally, sources and a methodological synthesis of contextual history and formalism is outlined and the chapter structure is mapped out.

Chapter two, "Abstract Expressionism and the Public Realm," begins with a review of recent scholarship which refutes the legendary portrayal of Jackson Pollock and his fellow artists as men whose primal emotive creativity is inversely proportional to their capacity for intellectual thought. This critique is supported by research which uncovered education, collegial associations, personal libraries, and most importantly, the profound complexity in the artists' oeuvres which attest to their inquisitiveness and intellectual competence. Several factors that underlie the conflicting popular early stereotypes are outlined.

Contact with Arendt and other intellectuals is documented as is the nature and depth of these relationships. By way of example, the often overlooked German exile and early New York School painter, Lewin Alcopley is discussed. In addition to being respected by Pollock, Barnett Newman,

and Willem de Kooning, Alcopley functioned as an important bridge between the artists and philosophers like Arendt with whom he maintained a close lifelong friendship. In the 1940s and early 1950s Arendt moved in a social and intellectual circle that was linked to the critics of Abstract Expressionism and in fact to the artists themselves. The second chapter chronicles these nexuses, especially the numerous forums in which the artists exchanged and developed ideas. My thesis, therefore, contends that Arendt's writing was as relevant to the work of the principal Abstract Expressionists as it was accessible.

Inevitably, these issues lead to the questions often raised in recent scholarship regarding the artists' and critics' concern with politics and especially the artists' appetite or even tolerance for intellectual discourse. The second chapter reviews the continuing critical debate that concerns the issue of intellectualism and the artists of early Abstract Expressionism. This focus has gained an unexpected degree of prominence in recent scholarly investigations as a distillation of the more broadly divisive methodological approaches brought to bear on the art of Jackson Pollock, et.al.⁴¹ This is a debate which has inescapable ramifications for any serious study of Abstract Expressionism. At stake are the problematic issues of the artists' intention and the authority of meaning.

⁴¹ See especially Stephen Polcari's *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*.

Although I find the historically contemporaneous formal arguments of the largely anti-contextual partisans a rich and productive line of investigation, in my judgment, the all too narrow schematic parameters of this methodology disregard the broader complexity of the context within which the art was created and which can subsequently aid in developing meaning. Indeed, those who have continued to defend the rhetoric of the artists' anti-intellectualism are inevitably inheritors of the tropes of extremist formalist criticism or base legend, are ironically themselves rallying to an analytical tool, reductionist formalism, that was itself formulated by the ideological (a.k.a. contextual) issues of the middle of the twentieth century. Having once secured, against this entrenched and influential opposition, the artists' intellectual credibility, their broad range of associations with other artists, critics, researchers, theologians, philosophers, and others falls logically into place.

Chapter three, "The Abstract Expressionist Forum and the Arendtian *Polis*" applies Arendt's contemporaneous theory of the Aristotelian *polis*, an arena which fosters creative and political action thus laying the foundation for freedom, to Studio 35 and a selection of other forums in order to understand the environment in which the artists exchanged ideas not only amongst themselves but also with various intellectuals, including Arendt herself. These formal and informal liaisons treated within the context of Hannah Arendt's concurrent conception of the *polis* of Greek

antiquity provides both an important example of how the artists' concerns parallel those raised by Arendt and offers a valuable analytical approach for historical analysis.

The fourth chapter, "Radical Evil: The Ambiguity of Myth and the Inadequacy of Representation," links the artists' rejection of overt mythological imagery, at least in part, to a re-evaluation of evil prompted by the disclosures of the fanatical nature of contemporary violence that culminated at the end of the Second World War. The chapter begins by documenting the ubiquity of myth amongst the avant-garde during the middle of the century. Next, the common use of mythic imagery in the formative work of the New York School is found to be, at least partly, a response to the evil of fascism. Arendt's effort's to discredit myth within the context of her early investigations of totalitarianism is then used as a framework with which to understand the artists' sudden rejection of mythology in the wake of the powerful revelations caused by the liberation of the Nazi death camps in 1945 and the use of atomic weaponry. Jackson Pollock's *War*, circa 1943-45; Mark Rothko's *Tiresias*, 1944; Adolph Gottlieb's *Evil Omen*, 1941; Seymour Lipton's *Moloch III*, 1946; David Smith's *Perfidious Albion: The British Empire*, 1945-1946; and William Baziotis's *Dwarf*, 1947 are each analyzed as are others.

The fourth chapter considers the basis upon which the artists' mature abstraction developed and the prerequisite rejection of mythic representation. This abandonment of the

mythological framework, previously used in an attempt to express and mediate the terror of the profoundly violent modern world, was paralleled by Arendt's early conception of the unprecedented "radical evil" of totalitarianism. Under the influence of the famous Scottish classicist and anthropologist Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941), the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustave Jung (1875-1961) and others, the artists had, however temporarily, been content to perceive contemporary political evil and its countless individual manifestations as an inherent characteristic of the mythic human drama—a necessary component without which the human psyche would be impotent. This, in effect, acknowledges, accepts, and even romanticizes evil. It was seen as an inevitable and natural presence, rather than an act of personal responsibility, or something about which a judgment can be formed.

Finally, the fourth chapter considers the varied approaches utilized by the artists in their initial response to the unprecedented horrors disclosed at the war's end, something Arendt termed, "Radical Evil." So prompted, the artists sought more contemporary solutions, sources that grappled directly with the issue of evil in the modern era, and that might point to a strategy that would remain relevant even in the aftermath of the war.

The fifth chapter, "Abstraction and the Space of Freedom," focuses on postwar abstraction and its parallels to Arendt's concurrent formulation of freedom as dependent on space and action. The chapter opens by briefly considering and

contrasting European artistic responses to the war. It then reviews the American artists' and art critics' well known pronouncements concerning space, action, and freedom. Now common assumptions are reconsidered and contextualized when paired with the content of Arendt's lectures of this period. The imagery of imprisonment is also examined. Lastly, consideration is given to the increasingly complex abstraction being produced by 1946 and 1947. This is tied to the artists' statements concerning the tangled ambiguities their art then confronted. The works of art examined include: Robert Motherwell's *The Spanish Prison Window*, 1941-44 and his *Elegy to the Spanish Republic #1*, 1948; Pollock's *Totem Lesson II*, 1945 and *One (Number 31, 1950)*, 1950; and Barnett Newman's *Onement I*, 1948 and *Concord*, 1949.

From the 1940s Arendt sought to discredit the notion of a primal racial and mythologically based justification for evil and proposed instead a structure where judgment and personal responsibility were paramount. She defined evil as the suppression of freedom and in turn understood freedom through the body, its surrounding space, and thus the potential for action. For Arendt, the totalitarian state and especially its concentration camps achieved the complete restriction of space required for action and freedom, a particularly resonant thought during the early Cold War.

Arendt's conception of freedom and its relationship to space and action is especially pertinent to the art being produced at this time and will be examined in the fifth

chapter as well. Jackson Pollock's very method of painting has been defined as dependent on space as an arena for action. Pollock could clearly have been aware of Arendt's work. She and Rosenberg were close and she was known by Greenberg, Newman, and Alcopley. Further, according to Francis V. O'Conner and Eugene V. Thaw's monumental study, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*, Pollock had a twelve year subscription to *The Partisan Review* of which he kept every issue for the eight years during which Arendt was a continuous contributor.⁴²

Finally, the sixth and concluding chapter reflects on Arendt's themes within the context of Cold War rhetoric. It considers Arendt's place in the growing body of scholarship that links Abstract Expressionism and American postwar ideology. Arendt's personal circumstances are discussed as is her political influence. The themes developed throughout the dissertation, those of regarding evil and freedom both for the artists and Arendt are unified and shown to offer a unique and valuable contextual interpretation of the complex body of art known as Abstract Expressionism.

⁴² Francis V. O'Connor & Eugene Victor Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). This issues of *Partisan Review* remains in the collection of the Pollock/Krasner House in The Springs, East Hampton, New York.

CHAPTER 2

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE PUBLIC REALM

Only contemplated experience becomes real experience¹

This chapter establishes direct connections between the artists and their critics and Hannah Arendt and a number of other intellectual émigrés. These connections are found to be embedded within a broader cultural and political community which flourished in Greenwich Village in the early postwar era. Such relationships as between Abstract Expressionism and Arendt are presented in connection with the forums such as Studio 35, the Artists' Club on Eighth Street, and the New School for Social Research which the artists prized for fostering just such interdisciplinary dialogue.

Yet, these documented connections have remained largely unexplored. Only recently has scholarship begun to challenge the long held assumption that Abstract Expressionism is primarily emotive and lacks a significant intellectual component.² This turn away from a reliance on formal or

¹ Hans Hofmann quoting Benedictus de Spinoza in "Painting and Culture," *The Search for the Real and Other Essays*, edited by Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr. (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1948), 56.

essentialist readings of the artwork has been fostered by an increasing willingness on the part of art historians to recognize Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture as one element of the broader cultural sphere in which it was a part.

Yet certain scholars continue to reject this revisionist approach. For instance, during a recent symposium, the moderator Barbara Rose, suggested that to allow for an element of political engagement in an analysis of Abstract Expressionism would diminish the heroic achievements of Pollock and the others which she understood rightly to be rooted in the artists themselves.³ My thesis requires no direct causal link between painted or sculpted form and the philosophical concerns prompted by the dire political conditions of the day, but rather seeks to acknowledge the

³ Many authors have contributed to this revision of Abstract Expressionism. The following sources are of particular value to issues discussed here: Matthew Baigell, "Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take," *American Art* 8, number 2, (spring 1994): 33-44; Anna Carruthers Chave, *Mark Rothko Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Ann Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47, number 3, (fall 1988): 208-214; Mona Hadler, "David Hare: A Magician's Game in Context," *Art Journal* 47, number 3, (fall 1988): 196-201; Nancy Jachec, "The Space Between Art and Political Action: Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-50," *The Oxford Art Journal* 14, number 2 (1991): 18-29; Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*; John P. O'Neill, editor, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*; Stephanie Terenzio, editor, *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Cecile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*.

importance of the subjects of evil and freedom to the artists' work. Indeed, towards the close of the Second World War Newman affirms this, thereby undermining previous assumptions which deny the role of the artist in the philosophical sphere:

[The new painter is] declaring that art is an expression of the mind first and whatever sensuous elements are involved are incidental to that expression. The new painter is therefore the true revolutionary, the real leader who is placing the artist's function on its rightful plane, the plane of the philosopher and the pure scientist who explore the world of ideas, not the world of the senses.⁴

Further, in 1947 Rothko wrote that art was "a means of philosophic thought," an idea shared by Newman and Lassaw.⁵ Such statements, while perhaps a bit grandiose, contradict the notion that these artists were solely interested in formal issues, that a contextual reading of Abstract Expressionism is a misreading.

Recent scholarship has begun to refute the legendary portrayal of Jackson Pollock and his fellow artists as men who engage a sort of primal emotive creativity and disdain intellectual thought. These conclusions are based on research which has uncovered their educations, collegial associations,

³ "New Scholars/New Ideas," symposium held at The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, March 1993.

⁴ Barnett B. Newman, "The Plasmic Image," part 6, (1945) in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 147.

⁵ Mark Rothko and Clay Spohn, "Questions to Mary Rothko," 1947. According to Polcari the source of this quote is a questionnaire in the collection of the National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, D.C. Quoted in Polcari, 117 and 381, note #1.

personal libraries, and most importantly, their profoundly complex oeuvres which attest to the artists' inquisitiveness and intellectual competence.⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, and as is elsewhere well rehearsed, such a-contextual readings of Abstract Expressionism can be retraced in large part to Clement Greenberg's championing of the self-reflexive in art. Yet Barbara Rose's argument was based, as she herself acknowledged, on personal memories of the artists efforts to distance themselves from the trappings of intellectualism. Indeed, the image of the artists compiled from the copious interviews and other records that have accumulated over the past half century, conforms to this picture. In their studio's, at the Club's parties, or at the Cedar Street Tavern, the idea of the artist as virile, brooding, and explosively violent, is cited again and again.⁷ Ironically, such mythologizing of the heroic and creative iconoclast, is never successfully wedded to Abstract Expressionism's rigorous expansion of visual form.⁸

⁶ See Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), *passim*.

⁷ The Cedar Street Tavern was located at Twenty-four University Place between Eighth Street and Ninth Street.

⁸ The idea of the brooding painter can be found in the ever popular sport of posthumously diagnosing artists. Worse, these broad generalizations seem to be an effort to explain, in measurable terms, the creative impulse. A striking example is found at the end of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of American Psychiatric Association:

Thus, in bringing the Abstract Expressionist artists into direct and lonely confrontation with the ultimate

Jackson Pollock is the artist inevitably offered almost sacrificially as evidence of the Abstract Expressionists' utter lack of literacy. A favored subject of the popular biographies, Pollock has been ruthlessly caricatured to a degree where his art, which is simultaneously heralded as brilliant, is utterly divorced from the mind of the artist. Taken at face value, such characterizations force a choice, one must either accept the Surrealist notion of automatism or somehow allow that the creation of Pollock's art was a wholly emotive and physical act.

For example, B. H. Friedman, Pollock's friend only during the last year of his life, amplifies the artist's famous aggression in the opening pages of his influential biography, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible*. Here, Friedman describes his first meeting with Pollock in the Spring of 1955 by using a highly charged vocabulary. In a brief passage Friedman binds the artist with such words as "power," "lurch," "drunk," "lumbered," "seize," "fight," "loud," "thick," "belligerent," and "shit."⁹ Friedman further

existential question, whether to live or to die, depression may have put them in touch with the inexplicable mystery that lies at the very heart of the "tragic and timeless" art that they aspired to produce. See Joseph J. Schildkraut, M.D., Alissa J. Hirshfeld, A.B., and Jane M. Murphy, Ph.D., "Mind and Mood in Modern Art, II: Depressive Disorders, Spirituality, and Early Deaths in the Abstract Expressionist Artists of the New York School," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 151, number 4 (April 1994): 487. There is also a parallel here to the mythos which surrounded Pablo Picasso. See John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

⁹ Bernard Harper Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1995), xvi-xvii.

fuels this caricature by quoting James Johnson Sweeney's 1943 catalogue entry to Pollock's first one-man show with the New York dealer Peggy Guggenheim. "Pollock's talent is volcanic. It has fire."¹⁰

I isolate these descriptions, not to suggest that they are in any way inauthentic portrayals of Pollock, but rather, that this image of Pollock has been selectively privileged. Certainly, a biographer needs less justification to emphasize the sensational. However, the art historian must conform to a different set of guidelines.

To bolster this image, Friedman links Pollock's brutish personality to a strange, almost heroicized disinterest in literature. Speaking of both Lee Krasner and Pollock, he writes that "[n]either was a great reader," although no documentation is given in support of this claim.¹¹ The author goes further still, condemning Jackson and Lee's remaining shreds of literacy by remarking that their reading was "exceptionally physical, a matter of turning pages, recording images, tracing them with the hands as one 'reads' art books."¹² While conceding that Pollock had read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and*

¹⁰ Friedman, 59.

¹¹ Friedman, 91.

¹² Friedman, 91.

Form,¹³ Friedman dismisses the former as only dimly remembered while conjecturing as regards the latter that Pollock "never read past the introductory chapter."¹⁴ Friedman has expanded and intensified a fragment of Pollock's public persona, a trait that had gathered its own momentum, largely cloven from the man—a reductionist spectacle—a byproduct of his fame.

Overlooked is the fact that Pollock and Krasner's library, while not extensive, nevertheless included a number of significant books and journals that bore on issues of modernity and thus related to their art. The writing of Dante Aleghieri, Samuel Beckett, Ruth Benedict, Nikolai Bukharin, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sir James Frazer, Erich Fromm, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, Carl Jung, Franz Kafka, Suzanne Langer, André Malraux, Thomas Mann, Herbert Read, Paul Tillich, a copy of the issue of *The Marxist Quarterly* that included Meyer Schapiro's important contextualist response to Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s formalism, and a dozen years of *Partisan Review* somehow escaped notice. Yet these volumes remain on the build-in shelving on the first floor of the Pollock/Krasner house in The Springs.¹⁵ Friedman simply states that "he [Pollock] was not a literary man and he was

¹³ This book was a gift of Tony Smith, who recalled its importance to both himself and Pollock. Interview with Jane Smith conducted by the author August 1, 1995.

¹⁴ Friedman, 92.

¹⁵ The library is more fully, although still incompletely listed in Francis V. O'Connor & Eugene Victor Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works*.

not an intellectual" and that Krasner was involved in protecting his "mythic reputation."¹⁶

In this endeavor, Friedman, was a significant accomplice. Again, in no way do I mean to completely reverse Friedman's statements. It would be yet another unsubstantiated assumption to contend that Pollock had carefully studied the books in his library and that he then applied the derived knowledge directly to his art. However, in the absence of actual evidence to the contrary, there is no reason to accept the contention that Pollock and Krasner were intellectually unable or unwilling to read their own books. At the very least, these books bespeak considerable intellectual curiosity.

In addition, Greenberg stated that, "Jackson had a huge respect for intellectuals."¹⁷ This appraisal is supported in part by Pollock's close friendships with Tony Smith, Barnett Newman, and Lewin Alcopley during the 1940s and 1950s (figure 4).¹⁸ Smith had received a classical Jesuit education and was a voracious reader of both classical and modern literary and

¹⁶ B.H. Friedman in Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (Wainscott, New York: Pushcart Press, 1987), 78.

¹⁷ Potter, 182.

¹⁸ In an 1965 interview, Tony Smith recalled meeting Pollock by 1940 but that they did not become friends until Pollock had his first show at Betty Parson's gallery in 1948. By 1950 or 1951 they had become close. J.P. interview, 26 "Abstract Expressionist/New York School" Box, Tony Smith Estate.

philosophical texts (the former were often read in the original Greek and Latin).¹⁹

Barnett Newman had majored in philosophy as an undergraduate at City College under Morris Rayfield Cohen who had "interested him greatly in Spinoza."²⁰ Newman was also well versed in the political philosophy of Kropotkin although Annalee Newman recalls that he distrusted Nietzsche and later Marcuse and she remembers her husband saying "there is nothing I can't talk about with Jackson."²¹ Alcopley had received an enviable classical German education and had studied with Heidegger before receiving two medical degrees. Further, Robert Motherwell in his eulogy for Tony Smith recalled that the sculptor and Rothko were "[t]wo of the deepest minds of the Abstract Expressionist generation." He recalled that Smith would often recite Joyce and that "[h]is reading was universal, his appreciation too."²² Smith himself noted that "all the talk about [Pollock] being nonverbal was

¹⁹ Interview with the artist's widow, Jane Smith, conducted by the author August 1, 1995 and in a memorial address given for Tony Smith by Robert Motherwell (Tony Smith Estate, "New York School" Box). Also see The artist's vast library (Tony Smith Estate).

²⁰ Interview with Annalee Newman conducted by the author, February 3, 1996.

²¹ Interview with Annalee Newman conducted by the author, February 3, 1996.

²² *In Memoriam: Anthony Smith*, 1-2, "Abstract Expressionist/New York School" Box, Tony Smith Estate. Interview with Annalee Newman, February 3, 1996. Also see Barbara Cavaliere "Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*: Building the 'Idea Complex'" *Arts Magazine* 55, number 5, (January 1981): 144-152.

false. When he had something to say, he said it."²³ As for Motherwell himself, he received an A.B. in philosophy at Stanford University in 1936 after which he enrolled in the graduate Philosophy department at Harvard. In 1940 Motherwell joined the graduate Art History program at Columbia University and studied with Meyer Schapiro. Additionally, Anna C. Chave has noted a Rothko quotation in which he recalls, "Aeschylus . . . had meant so much to me. . . ."²⁴

Why then the persistence of the trope of the brutish, anti-intellectual artist? In their defense, neither Rose, Friedman, Potter, nor any other critic or biographer could have, nor would have cause to support this idea of the raw intuitive expressionist (indeed, the term "Abstract Expressionist" itself perpetuates this vision), had this not been an image generated and perpetuated by the artists themselves.

The Abstract Expressionists, for the most part, did not fashion themselves as ideologues nor as wry dandies cloaked in irony as the Americans then often viewed the French exile artists associated with Surrealism. Instead, this generation that had come of age in the Great Depression and had been employed by the Works Progress Administration would not, at least outwardly, distinguish them as independent of the broader domestic society a guise adopted by the beats in the

²³ J.P. interview, page 29 "Abstract Expressionist/New York School" Box, Tony Smith Estate.

²⁴ Chave, 82.

following decade.²⁵ For the most part, the artists maintained their socio-economic habits and the attire and demeanor of the blue collar worker (exceptions include Motherwell and Bradley Walker Tomlin).

For example, in sharp contrast to Marcel Duchamp who disdained work and emotive art, the Americans placed a great deal of emphasis on both the act of work and the expression of direct emotion, even to the point where they are criticized for being too earnest.²⁶ Such criticism is generated by artists and critics of a later more privileged culture which had not been confronted in adulthood by the century's earlier upheavals when the peculiarly American ethic of production had reached its zenith.

Yet, in spite of their disregard for imported pretense, the painters who pushed American art beyond its provincial confines had an enormous appetite for the exchange of ideas and methods, both with fellow artists and critics but also

²⁵ Brooks, de Kooning, Gorky, Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Charles and Jackson Pollock, Rothko, and David Smith all worked for the Federal Art Project. See Francis V. O'Conner, editor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Arts Project* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975).

²⁶ In 1966 Duchamp said:

I consider working for a living slightly imbecilic from an economic point of view. . . . Also, I haven't known the stain of producing, painting not having been an outlet for me, or having a pressing need to express myself.

Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, *The Documents of twentieth century Art*, edited by Robert Motherwell, Bernard Karpel, and Arthur A. Cohen, translated by Ron Padgett (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 15.

with thinkers from beyond the visual arts. The Abstract Expressionists actively sought out such dialogue and even went so far as to create such possibilities when they were deemed too scant. Such forums as Studio 35 and the Club were such inventions.

Pairing the early New York School and Arendt is not arbitrary. The existing literature notwithstanding, the artists of the New York School were clearly aware and often interested in the work of émigré intellectuals and the reverse was, at times, also true.

Since contact between Arendt and the early New York school was not only public but also personal, it is difficult to confirm the full extent of this relationship. However, it is possible to chart a number of significant links. There were clear relationships between Arendt and the most influential critics of Abstract Expressionism including Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Arendt and her second husband, Heinrich Blücher, were on a first name basis with Greenberg from at least January 1945 when the critic was an editor at *Commentary*. Greenberg was very enthusiastic about writing which she had submitted to the progressive Jewish periodical and on at least one occasion invited her to lunch.²⁷ Arendt even warranted published attention from

²⁷ In correspondence to Arendt dated January 16, 1945, Greenberg writes, "I can't tell you how satisfied I am with your article on stateless people, etc. It exhausts the problem. And my impression is that it needs very little cutting, if any at all." In another note, Greenberg calls her work, "wonderful." See notes postmarked January 16 and March

Greenberg. In a 1947 article for *Commentary*, he quotes Arendt on the plight of Jews during the Holocaust. He wrote:

The Jewish joke may have been, paradoxical as that sounds, the one way aside from Zionism in which the Jew divined the future that awaited him at Auschwitz. Not only did it divine, I feel, the fact that he was living in a historical trap in East Europe, it was also, in a sense, the only appropriate answer to a fate that, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, was incommensurable, entirely out of relation with, and radically disproportionate to anything that any group of human beings could possibly have deserved.²⁸

The recent reprinting of this review is a vivid example of the value of studying art within its broader historical context. Taken in isolation, the essay in which Greenberg mentions Arendt proves little beyond his interest in and respect for her political philosophy. Yet this political side of Greenberg remains divorced from his role as champion of Abstraction Expressionism. The recently published collection of Greenberg's essays remedies this disciplinary segmentation. The editor, John O'Brian, organizes the writing chronologically, an appropriate format given Greenberg's predilection for teleological structure.

The advantage is that parallels between various subjects are not obscured by thematic divisions. For instance, while at first glance it would appear that this article is of little consequence to the present study, the very next essay

8, 1945. *Commentary* Folder, Box 25, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

²⁸ This book review, "The Jewish Joke: Review of Róyte Pomerantzen" was originally published in *Commentary*, December 1947 and was reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, volume 2, 186.

Greenberg published was "Review of Exhibitions of Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb" in *The Nation*. Here, the critic praises Gottlieb's talent but questions the artist's continuing reliance on a universal symbolism of the unconscious and its "racial memories, archetypes, [and] archaic but constant responses."²⁹

This admonition gains a greater moral scope in the context of Greenberg's previous mention of the evil that befell the Jews. Greenberg would have known that Arendt decried the popular concept of archaic racial identity because she linked it to the National Socialist ideology of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil).³⁰ In *Commentary* only a year earlier, Greenberg had published a discussion, by Arendt, of these very issues. She wrote of the archetype not as a positive unifier, but of Alfred Rosenberg's racial science which saw:

the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy; . . .—but brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality. . . .³¹

²⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb" *The Nation* (December 6, 1947). Reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, volume 2, 187-189.

³⁰ Whiting understands Gottlieb and Rothko's paintings of the middle 1940s as a reclaiming myth as based on the Jungian concept of a universal archaic which directly opposes the racial ideology trumpeted by the National Socialist's Greco/Aryan mythology. Whiting, page 192. The problem lies in the fact that the Nazi ideologues also spoke of universal nature of myth.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, "The Image of Hell," *Commentary* 2, number 3 (September 1946): 291-295. Reprinted in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Uncollected and*

However, Arendt and Greenberg's relationship had never firmly developed at least in part due to a 1944 essay, "Zionism Reconsidered" in which Arendt criticized the Zionist platform of 1942 for condemning the majority of the inhabitants of Palestine, the Arabs, to the status of a minority. The article was not printed by *Commentary*. Arendt had pressed for an explanation and was told by Greenberg that it, "contained too many anti-Semitic implications—not in the sense that you intend them as such implications, but that the unfriendly reader might intend them as such."³² Arendt was unwilling to play along. She continued to disregard this unwritten prohibition against serious public criticism of Jewish policy in the post-Holocaust era even when it cost her dearly. The most divisive example of such criticism was her provocative reiteration of Jewish compliance in the administration of the Holocaust. The furor that followed continues to make her a pariah among many Jews to this day.³³

Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 198 and 202.

³² Letter to Arendt from Greenberg, dated February 28, 1944, *Commentary* Folder, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Also quoted in Young-Bruehl, 223.

³³ For much of the American Jewish community, Arendt's discussion of the Nazi appointed *Judenräte*, Jewish Councils, remains her gravest error. According to Arendt (she cites both Raul Hilberg and Eichmann), these powerful and somewhat autonomous boards composed of Jewish community leaders accurately recorded inventories of property to be confiscated and made orderly deportation to the concentration and death camps possible. Although still widely misinterpreted, a careful reading reveals no broad indictment, no automatic charge of guilt for the *Judenräte*. Arendt recognized the

By contrast, her friendship with Harold Rosenberg was close, long lived, and much cherished.³⁴ According to Barnett Newman's widow, Annalee Newman, just after the war, Arendt became a great friend of Rosenberg and was known by Newman who had met her through him.³⁵ Nevertheless, Newman would have known of Arendt from her essays in *Partisan Review* which, according to Mrs. Newman, he habitually read.³⁶ Rosenberg is

inherent tragedy as well as the consequences for disobedience. Yet in Arendt's estimation, the "darkest chapter of the whole dark story, . . . offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society . . . not only among the persecutors but also among the victims." Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 117 and 125-126. In an insightful letter to Jaspers, Arendt recounts:

The Israeli consul here came up to me after a lecture, and we spoke for several hours. He said over and over again: 'Of course everything you said [regarding the *Judenräte*] is true. We know that. But how could you as a Jew say this 'in a hostile environment?'

Kohler and Saner, 535-536. As Aschheim points out, what underlies this controversy is Arendt's post-assimilationist willingness to adopt a self-critical Zionism. Aschheim, 121.

³⁴ Arendt's biographer describes the extent to which both Arendt and Rosenberg sought to safeguard their friendship even when confronted with sharp philosophical disagreements. Young-Bruehl, 352.

³⁵ According to Patia Yasin, Rosenberg's daughter, Arendt and he were "great friends" and would often discuss their work with each other. Yasin also recalled that her father was particularly fond of Blücher. Interviewed by the author, New York City, December 6, 1996.

³⁶ Interview with Mrs. Annalee Newman conducted by the author, February 3, 1996. In the 1940s and early 1950s Arendt was regularly published in *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, *Jewish Frontier*, *Jewish Social Studies*, *Kenyon Review*, *Menorah Journal*, *The Nation*, *Review of Politics*, and *Sawnee Review*. Good bibliographies of Arendt's writing can be found in Young-Bruehl's biography and Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and The Jewish Question* (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996).

said to have treasured his regular and extended discussions with Arendt.³⁷ Rosenberg, like Greenberg, also made use of Arendt's work, although he did so in a forum directly aimed at the artists.

Rosenberg and the painter Robert Motherwell were co-editors of the short lived art magazine, *Possibilities: An Occasional Review*, a title attesting to the increasing importance of existentialism after the war.³⁸ The magazine's single issue was published during the Winter of 1947-1948 and included the following passage in a disjointed essay by Harold Rosenberg:

A magistrate in a totalitarian country was quoted recently as being shocked at the insistence of some women on tracing their condemned husbands: 'When the husband is arrested, the wife sues for divorce and looks for another man.'

Although not credited, the latter section of Rosenberg's sentence is a quotation. The same phrase appears in a review

³⁷ See Elaine O'Brien, *The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg: Theaters of Love and Combat* (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1997), 72.

³⁸ *Possibilities* was conceived as part of a series entitled "Problems of Contemporary Art." The back cover states:

The series is planned as an open forum for 20th century artists scholars and writers, the word 'art' being taken in the broadest sense. A medium for exchanging work and ideas, it is to be controversial in nature.

Although only a single issue of this periodical was published it provides a rich source of artists' statements. For an analysis of this and other similar endeavors see Ann Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals*, *Studies in the Fine Arts: The Avant-Garde*, number 66 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990).

which Arendt had published in *Jewish Frontier* half a year earlier in July of 1947. In it, Arendt wrote:

The most common and most important motive of the system of concentration camps is not even to inflict suffering. The main purpose is to make people disappear, and to make those left behind forget that they ever existed.

Concentration camps cut off their inmates more definitively than death ever could; since they are established invariably for innocent people, whom accident rather than any specific deed chooses. The Soviet police [who] used this system since their birth could only stare in amazement at those Polish people who tried desperately to keep in touch with their families or friends under arrest. One examining magistrate [Soviet], genuinely at a loss, exclaimed to the wife of a [Polish] prisoner 'what extraordinary women you are here! In our country when the husband is arrested, the wife sues for divorce and looks for another man.'³⁹

By directly inserting Arendt's concerns into this artists' forum Rosenberg has confirmed not only Arendt's relevance to Abstract Expressionism but also that of totalitarian evil. What Rosenberg reiterates then, is his friend's argument that there has been a break with our historical understanding of evil. This issue will be explored in relationship to Abstract Expressionism in the following chapter as here I am only establishing connections and the forums designed to foster them.

Other artists too, remembered Arendt's contribution to the mix of ideas which shaped the postwar era. In an interview in 1978, the sculptor David Hare related his interest in her work on evil and called her ideas

³⁹ Hannah Arendt, "The Hole of Oblivion," *Jewish Frontier* (July 1947): 23.

"sophisticated."⁴⁰ Additionally, the painter Carl Holty (1901-1973), an original member of American Abstract Artists, was a close friend of Heinrich Blücher.⁴¹ Another example of the complex web of associations that linked Arendt to Abstract American art is the now largely forgotten artist, Lewin Alcopley (1910-1992) who was close and long time friend of Blücher and Arendt.

In spite of his almost total neglect in art historical scholarship, Alcopley was a significant Abstract Expressionist painter. Because of this neglect and his value to the following discussion (his German background and his immigration to the United States mirror Arendt's experiences but, importantly, in the circle of the Abstract Expressionists), I have included the following brief biographical sketch.

⁴⁰ From an unpublished interview conducted by Dr. Mona Hadler, April 29, 1978.

⁴¹ Young-Bruehl includes Holty as one of Arendt and Blücher's "tribe." Young-Bruehl, 239 and 269. The couple owned the book Holty co-authored with Romare Bearden, *The Painter's Mind*, and a retrospective catalogue of his work (both are contained in the Arendt library, Bard College). Holty was a central figure in the formation of the American avant-garde in the mid-twentieth century. According to Dore Ashton's book *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, Holty had studied with Hofmann in Germany. He was a co-founder of Abstract American Artists and was a friend of Gorky and de Kooning whom he would often meet at the studio of Lassaw. Along with Baziotes, Gottlieb, and Motherwell, Holty was represented, for a period after 1945 by Samuel Kootz. While in Kootz' stable, Holty participated in the famous 1947 exhibition at Galerie Maeght in Paris, "*Introduction à la Peinture Moderne Américaine*," with Baziotes, Romare Bearden, Byron Browne, Adolph Gottlieb, and Robert Motherwell. Additionally, Ad Reinhardt had been Holty's student and later a colleague. Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, 13, 75, 101, and 168.

Alcopley was close to de Kooning and was friends with Pollock, Krasner, Kline, Newman, and Rosenberg, and he knew Baziotes, Gottlieb, and David Smith.⁴² Kline and de Kooning co-authored a short essay published in Japan in 1952 on Alcopley's drawings which, in spite of an awkward re-translation, clearly expresses their admiration for his work.⁴³ Alcopley was one of the twelve founding members of the Eighth Street Club in 1949 and in 1951 he participated in the Ninth Street Show.⁴⁴ The artist continuously and internationally exhibited his lyrical calligraphic paintings and drawings which stylistically recall the late work of Bradley Walker Tomlin and early imagery of Ad Reinhardt. Arendt owned several of his paintings and drawings including a small abstract untitled ink drawing (figure 5).

⁴² Ibram Lassaw remembered Alcopley as a "fine man" who would, in his capacity as a medical doctor, write prescriptions for him and de Kooning. Interview conducted by the author, New York City, February 2, 1996. Ethel Baziotes, the painter's widow recalled "casual conversations between William Baziotes and Alcopley." Interview conducted by the author November 11, 1995).

⁴³ They wrote "we have been extremely moved by these spontaneous drawings . . ." Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, "On Works by Mr. Alcopley," translated by Patia Yasin, *Bokubi—The Beauty of Black and White* 16, Kyoto (July 1952): 11.

⁴⁴ According to Irving Sandler, sixty-one artists exhibited in an empty storefront at 60 East Ninth Street in the Spring of 1951. It was organized by charter members of the Club and by Leo Castelli and unexpectedly attracted a good deal of attention. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 269 and 276 note #1.

Alcopley was himself a Jewish émigré.⁴⁵ He became a medical doctor in 1935 at the University of Heidelberg. In 1936 he enrolled in medical school in Switzerland where he received a second doctorate and became acquainted with Dada. Here, he began his co-career as a research scientist and artist. Alcopley is credited with smuggling books targeted by the Nazis for destruction out of the university library in Heidelberg until he was warned by a German border guard of his immanent arrest while returning from his studies in Switzerland. Much of Alcopley's family was murdered in the Holocaust. He, however, managed to enter the United States in 1937. Once here, Alcopley divided his time equally between painting and scientific research.

In addition to friendships with many of the period's most prominent artists, Alcopley was a close friend of Arendt and Blücher. Through them he came to know Jaspers and rekindled an acquaintance with Heidegger with whom he had studied before the rise of German fascism.⁴⁶ Arendt and Blücher owned several of Alcopley's paintings and through

⁴⁵ The pseudonym, Lewin Alcopley, was used by Alfred Lewin Copley in his career as an artist. He was, however, called "Al" by all of his friends including Arendt.

⁴⁶ Arendt was introduced to Alcopley by Alice Maier, the wife of Josef Maier. Una Dora Copley, interview conducted by the author, March 9, 1996. Alcopley participated in a colloquy titled "Art and Thinking" on May 18, 1958, moderated by Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiberg im Breisgau. Alcopley would eventually write and illustrate a book with Martin Heidegger and the Japanese Zen master Hōseki Shin'ichi Hisamatsu. See Lewin Alcopley, *Listening to Heidegger and Hisamatsu* (Kyoto: Bokubi Press, 1963).

their friend, each was invited to speak on a number of occasions at the artists' Club on Eighth Street.

In addition to these direct links, a number of less direct though no less intriguing connections exist. For example, according to B. H. Friedman, the seventeen paintings which Pollock exhibited in his first one-man show at Betty Parson's gallery in January 1948 had been titled using suggestions made by the artist's friends and neighbors Ralph Manheim and his wife. Manheim was also Arendt's preferred translator at the time. In a January 1949 letter she wrote, "I know [Manheim] well."⁴⁷ He had worked for Arendt and in 1948, he had translated Jaspers' "Die Achsenzeit der Weltgeschichte" as "The Axial Age of Human History: A Base for the Unity of Mankind." In a note to Arendt, Jaspers wrote:

Mr. Manheim is doing me a great service—and obviously for primarily intellectual reasons. Tell him when you have the chance that I know what this kind of work means, that I am happy to have him as my translator, and that I am grateful to him.⁴⁸

In addition to such private connections, the Abstract Expressionist circle and the émigré intellectuals also came into contact in public forums. Among the most well known of accounts of the Artists' Club is Irving Sandler's 1965 *Artforum* article which opens with a warning regarding the willful "myth-making," and more innocent "lapses of memory,"

⁴⁷ Kohler and Saner, Letter #84, January 28, 1948, 129, also Note #1, Letter #70, 710.

⁴⁸ Kohler and Saner, Letter #88, March 15, 1949, 134.

that have impeded his narrational goal of "authenticity."⁴⁹ He has however, and by his own account, and with the aid of copious interviews and a piecemeal collection of documentary records, formed a narrative of "what really happened."⁵⁰

What does seem certain is that the artists who would constitute the Eighth Street Club's early membership had been meeting variously at the south-west corner of Washington Square park or when the weather made it necessary, as it often did in the late evening, at the Waldorf Cafeteria between Eighth Street and Waverly Place on the east side of Sixth Avenue.⁵¹ But as the extended late night gatherings of frugal artists was a largely unwelcome phenomenon in the eyes of the Waldorf's staff, once described as "hard eyed and ketchup hoarding," several artists met one evening in late 1949 at Ibram Lassaw's studio loft and decided to found the Club.⁵² Lewin Alcopley one of the Club's charter members recalled that:

⁴⁹ Irving Sandler, "The Club," *Artforum* 4, number 1 (September 1965): 27. Reprinted in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, David and Cecile Shapiro, editors (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1990), 48-57.

⁵⁰ Irving Sandler, "The Club," 27.

⁵¹ Lewin Alcopley, "The Club: Its First Three Years," *Issue, A Journal for Artists* 4 (1985): 45. The artists' preferred locale was below the broad canopy of the park's infamous "hanging elm." According to local tradition, the ancient tree at the corner of Waverly Place and MacDougal Street was used as a gallows when the marshy fields cut by Minetta brook was a potter's field. General Lafayette is reported to have seen 20 highway-men hanged from it.

⁵² This essay by Thomas Hess, "When Art Talk was a Fine

In the summer of 1949, Franz Kline learned about a loft that would soon become available. Kline, Bill de Kooning and a few others had already seen the loft and considered it suitable . . . but the problem was how to raise \$500 [key money], for us a very large sum. Some, among whom were Bill and Franz, were so poor that they could not advance any amount of money . . . we collected only about \$50. We persuaded Philip Pavia to take the \$50 and advance \$450 by the following day.⁵³

As Sandler points out, although independent, the Club did have two immediate antecedents which helped provide evidence of interest, feasibility, and something of a structural model.⁵⁴ These were the school, The Subjects of the Artist, and Studio 35.⁵⁵

Art," *New York Magazine* about the Club was found as an undated clipping (pages 82 and 83) in Clippings Folder (1948-1975), Box 73, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.. Hess puts down Philip Pavia, Milton Resnick, Landes Lewitin, Canrad Marca-Relli, and Elaine and Willem de Kooning as the founders. It is worth noting that this clipping was found in Arendt's own papers suggesting that she found Abstract Expressionism and her relationship to it worth following.

⁵³ Alcopley, "The Club: The First Three Years," 45-46.

⁵⁴ Sandler, 28. This was also discussed by Elaine de Kooning in an interview conducted by Phillis Tuchman: . . . the Club was totally separate from the Subjects of the Artist group. The Subjects of the Artist, that was something that was formed I guess by Motherwell, Reinhardt, I guess Rothko and Barnett Newman. And they had discussions and Friday night panels. Mark Rothko and His Times, Oral History Project (August 27, 1981), Archives of American Art, Reel #4937, Frame #4.

⁵⁵ Although the Abstract Expressionists are often discussed in discrete isolation from earlier American artists, Greenwich Village had been home to numerous earlier and initially at least equally informal art associations. These include the Salmagundi Club at Forty-seven Fifth Avenue since 1917 (members included Hassam, Chase, LaFarge, St.Gaudens, Tiffany, Moran, and White); the Tile Club at Fifty-Eight West Tenth Street (members included St.Gaudens, French, Homer, Chase, and White); the Tenth Street Studio Building just across the Street at Fifty-one West Tenth

Existing for only from the late Autumn of 1948 until the Spring of 1949, The Subjects of the Artist was organized by William Baziotés, David Hare, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman (who joined a bit later), and Mark Rothko (figure 6).⁵⁶ Still is said to have assisted as well. Unfortunately, little documentation referring to the curriculum, method, or program of the school itself exists. The school's name was intended to assert, correctively, that subject matter was indeed central to contemporary abstraction (in spite of common

Street (tenants included Hunt, LaFarge, Church, Bierstadt, de Forest, Chase, and Heade); and The Whitney Studio Club at Eight West Eighth Street (over 400 members including Sloan, Lawson, Glackens, DuBois, Sheeler, Hopper, Joseph Stella, Davis, and Marsh). Whitney's own studio was in the rear on MacDougal Alley which was known as "Donatello Court" because of the number of studios converted from carriage houses. Here worked Gaston Lachaise and in #9 Alfonso Ossorio in whose home Pollock and Krasner lived during their frequent trips in from the Springs from the Winter of 1949 until 1951 when Ossorio returned from an extended stay in Europe. And of course since 1938, Hans Hofmann's studio school was on the third floor of Fifty-two West Eighth Street, a building designed in 1929 by Frederick J. Kiesler. Hofmann, a German émigré who had fled Munich in 1933, had enrolled Lee Krasner in 1937. Krasner soon after invited Greenberg, whom she came to know through Rosenberg, to one of her teacher's Friday evening lectures. Barbara Rose, *Lee Krasner: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 19 and 23. This program was another antecedent of the Club's Friday evening talks.

⁵⁶ The school was one of many that opened in the wake of the G.I. Bill. Gibson, 49. Note that in unrelated notice beside the advertisement for the Subjects of the Artist school (see figure 2), several émigré artists and scholars are mentioned. These include an announcement for the Ozenfant School of Fine Arts on East 20th Street, mention of Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, and a brief article on the seventeen art and art lecture courses offered at the New School for Social Research. Seymour Lipton, Rudolf Arnheim, Meyer Schapiro, and Paul Zucker are among the instructors listed. *The Art Digest* 22, number 20 (September 15, 1948): 38.

misconceptions to the contrary).⁵⁷ The following year, Bradley Walker Tomlin even went so far as to call such translations as "No-objective [sic], . . . vile."⁵⁸ In a 1969 interview, Betty Parsons remembered, "They gave me a scholarship in this school. There was Motherwell and Bradley, and Barney and Rothko. It was a marvelous school."⁵⁹

The one aspect of the Subjects of the Artist that is documented concerns the Friday evening lectures and presentations which became its most important feature. When the school was dismantled in the late Spring of 1949, the loft at Thirty-five East Eighth Street was offered to Tony Smith, Robert Iglehart, and Hale Woodruff all teachers from nearby New York University who dubbed the space Studio 35 and made it available to their art students. This trio continued the successful Friday evening lecture series. The speakers would begin at eight-thirty in the evening and according to a flyer were:

⁵⁷ Sandler believes that the school was named by Newman, page 213. The problematic translation of the German *gegenstandslos* as non-objective, or without object is perhaps the most notorious example of this misconception. For a more complete treatment of the terms *gegenstandlos* and non-objective including their origin, use, and misuse see Rose-Carol Washton Long's article "Non-Objective" in *Guggenheim Museum A to Z*, edited by Nancy Spector (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 200.

⁵⁸ "Artists' Session, Studio 35 (1950)," edited by Robert Goodnough, *Modern Artists in America*, edited by Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1951), n.p. Ross, 225.

⁵⁹ Betty Parsons interviewed by Paul Cummings, June 4-9, 1969, typescript, 17, Archives of American Art.

well known artists or critics who are invited to speak on any topic which currently interests them. During the present season the speakers have included Mark Rothko, Herbert Ferber, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Jimmy Ernst, Robert Wolfe, Nicholas Calas, Joseph Cornell, Barnett Newman, Peter Busa, Weldon Kees, Harold Rosenberg, and Ad Reinhardt.⁶⁰

One of the New York University graduate students involved with Studio 35, the painter Robert Goodnough, was responsible for what is among the richest records of an Abstract Expressionist forum.⁶¹ The occasion, was a three day round table discussion to mark the closing of Studio 35. It was held on April 21-23, 1950 from four until seven in the afternoon. In a letter dated April 8, 1950, Goodnough invites Tony Smith to participate in the event in order:

to express your views on your own work and on contemporary American painting and sculpture. The purpose of this forum is to yield information which will be published, and which, it is hoped, will cover all the important phases [sic] of expression that are now in process.⁶²

⁶⁰ Flyer entitled, Friday Evening Forums at Studio 35, Abstract Expressionism/New York School Box, Tony Smith Estate.

⁶¹ "Artists' Session at Studio 35 (1950)," n.p. Another transcript exists from Studio 35, see Willem de Kooning's "The Renaissance and Order," *trans/formations* 1, number 2 (1951): 85-87.

⁶² Abstract Expressionism/New York School Box, Tony Smith Estate. According to this letter the following artists were invited, William Baziotest†, Janice Bialat†, Louise Bourgeois†, Fritz Bultman, Alexander Calder, Mary Callery, Joseph Cornell, Jimmy Ernst†, Herbert Ferbert, Adolph Gottlieb†, Willem de Kooning†, Morris Graves, David Haret, Hans Hofmann†, Richard Lippold†, Seymour Liptont†, Loren MacIver, John Marin, Robert Motherwell†, Barnett Newman†, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart†, Ad Reinhardt†, Theodore Roszak, Ralph Rosenborg†, David Smith†, Tony Smith, Theodoros Stamos†, Hedda Sternet, Clifford Still, Mark Tobey, Bradley Walker Tomlint. The moderators were Richard Lippold, Alfred Barr, and Robert Motherwell (dagger "†" indicates

That this event was expected to produce "a valuable document," is made clear by Goodnough's notation, in the same letter, that a stenographer and photographer would be present (figure 7).⁶³

The forum most famously associated with Abstract Expressionism was the artists' Club on Eighth Street. Irving Sandler writes of the Club, "The early lectures covered many facets of modern culture. Among the speakers were the philosophers Hannah Arendt, Heinrich Blücher [her husband] and Joseph Campbell."⁶⁴ Speakers and members of the Club included Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Ibram Lassaw, Jackson Pollock, Harold Rosenberg the critic, Louise Bourgeois, Herbert Ferber, Adolph Gottlieb, David Smith, Franz Kline, and many others. In 1952 Jack Tworckov called the Club "an

acceptance). The actual number of participants was at least twenty-seven several of whom were not on the original list above. These included at least, James Brooks, Robert Goodnough, Peter Grippe, Weldon Kees, Ibram Lassaw, and Norman Lewis. This roster of actual participants was determined by cross-referencing the artists whose statements were retained in the final edited version of the stenographic record published in *Modern Artists in America* with the photographs, by Max Yavno, of those in attendance. It should be noted that this process has produced a list that does not exactly accord with the one provided in Clifford Ross' *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics, An Anthology* (Harry N. Abrams (New York, 1990), page 225 which also includes Weldon Kees and Theodore Stamos but does not count Robert Goodnough as among those present.

⁶³ Letter, Abstract Expressionism/New York School Box, Tony Smith Estate. The results of which may be seen in the single issue of *Modern Artists in America*.

⁶⁴ Sandler, "The Club," 30.

unexcelled university for the artist [for] philosophy, physics, mythology."⁶⁵

Simple contact implies but does not prove interest nor for that matter, comprehension on the part of the artists. However, contrary to the opinion that these artists were somehow unwilling or intellectually unable to grapple seriously with the literary and philosophical issues they drew upon, Thomas Hess recalls that when Blücher spoke at the Club in 1949 on the subject of expressionist aesthetics:

a young man got up and in a stylish stutter, began: 'your ontological premise . . .' and he went on to 'teleology, [and] eschatology.' I was startled and looked around the room to see how my new-found, hard-boiled, hard-drinking, poetry-loving artist-friends would take this vocabulary. To my surprise, they were beaming with delight. The artists doted on the talk, the more intellectual the better. At the Club [and] in bars [we] talked about Henry James, Kierkegaard . . . Camus, Hegel, [etc].⁶⁶

This view is confirmed by James Brooks who stated that "The Club was "never anti-intellectual at all but [that] there was a deeply felt need to confront things in a purer way, without bias, or as innocently as possible."⁶⁷ The artists' non-academic and somewhat idiosyncratic discourse seems to have gently vexed some of the speakers.

William Barrett, a Professor of Philosophy at nearby New York University and an editor for *Partisan Review*, recalled his evening lecturing on existentialism at the Club:

⁶⁵ Sandler, "The Club," 30.

⁶⁶ Hess, "When Art Talk was a Fine Art," 82.

⁶⁷ Archives of American Art, Oral History Project, James Brooks interviewed by Dorothy Seckler, June 12, 1965, 30.

The folding chairs would be lined up, the members took their place as serious and intent listeners, and their discussions afterwards were heated and lively, though not always directly to the point. . . . [My] invitation came from Elaine de Kooning. I don't think I've ever spoken to a more attentive audience, yet I wasn't sure they heard what I said. That is, they listened to my words, but I'm not sure they heard their meaning. Ideas, abstract ideas, have a way of bouncing off the minds of artists at curious angles and ricochets that are a marvel to behold and a puzzle to try to follow.⁶⁸

There was clearly an interest in existentialism at the Club. In addition to Arendt, Blücher, and Barrett, Herbert Kappel gave a talk entitled "Heidegger and the Creative Attitude" on January 4, 1952.⁶⁹

For his part, Blücher had come to speak at the Club by chance. Alcopley had invited him to come hear Joseph Frank and Meyer Schapiro discuss André Malraux' book *The Psychology of Art* which Blücher had read. When the speakers failed to arrive, Alcopley suggested to Rosenberg and Motherwell that Blücher lecture instead. Arendt's husband took umbrage at having first to wait for speakers who never arrived and then at suddenly being asked to replace them. However, he did reluctantly accept with the proviso that the impromptu situation was made plain to the audience. He was a success

⁶⁸ William Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1982), 132. According to Philip Pavia's notebook of Club records, Barrett spoke on June 1, 1951 although the year 1951 is not indicated and therefore is possibly inaccurate. In 1958 Barrett would publish one of the most popular and accessible books on existentialism, *Irrational Man*, (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

⁶⁹ Archives of American Art, Reel D176, Frames 1198 and 1226.

and was invited to speak several times, as was Arendt, which they did.⁷⁰

In addition to The Subjects of the Artist school, Studio 35, and the Club, the New School for Social Research was a gathering point for the artists and émigrés such as Blücher and Arendt who both lectured there regularly from at least 1951.⁷¹ The New School for Social Research was founded on West twenty-third Street in New York City in 1919 by several professors from Columbia University who had resigned under pressure because of their anti-nationalist politics during the First World War. The early faculty included the anthropologist Franz Boas, the American educator, John Dewey,

⁷⁰ Young-Bruehl, 249 and a conversation with Irving Sandler (November 21, 1992). According to Philip Pavia's record book (see "Phillip Pavia Club Papers," Archives of American Art), subsequently Joseph Campbell spoke on "Myth and Creative Art" on April 27, 1951 (Reel D176, Frame 1198), Blücher spoke on Malraux again at the end of May 1951 (Reel D176, Frame 1203) and February 8, 1952 on "Art & The Absolute" (Reel D176, Frame 1226). That night Rosenberg was in attendance as there is a record of his having paid "\$5-" in dues (see Irving Sandler's uncatalogued "Personal Papers" Archives of American Art warehouse, Washington. Additionally, Blücher is mentioned twice in conjunction with Alcopley (Reel D176, Frames 1227 and 1246) and in Sandler's records as speaking on June 8, 1952. Arendt spoke on March 23, 1951 (Reel D176, frame 1205). Arendt is listed again five pages later with another group of lecturers but while her name is underlined, the notation is undated (Reel D176, Frame 1207). Interestingly, on a sheet of paper which pre-dates 1952, headed with, "Regulars On Mailing List," "Heinrick [sic] Bluecher" is first on the list followed by Clement Greenberg, Alfred Barr, Frederick Kiesler, John Cage and others. The list also includes William Barrett (who had translated Arendt's scathing attack on Heidegger), Nicolas Calas, Elaine de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Lionel Abel, William Seitz, John Sweeney, Hans Hofmann, and Theodore Stamos, among others (Reel D176, Frame 1473).

the social reformer Thorstein Veblen, and Alvin Johnson.⁷¹ From its inception, the school's progressive open admission policy, in sharp contrast to traditional university quota systems, and its focus on older students (the school offered many evening and weekend courses), made the school a refuge for academically inclined women and minorities, especially Jews.⁷²

Under the direction of Alvin Johnson the New School moved into its present location at Sixty-six West Twelfth Street on January 2, 1931. The new building which had been designed by Josef Karl Maria Georg Urban (1872-1934) had a startlingly modern appearance (figure 8). Its alternating courses of dark gray brick and glazing which pushed even beyond the building's span by wrapping around the cantilevered façade, created an imposing exterior. It was one

⁷¹ Arendt lectured part time at the New School from at least 1951 and taught History part time in the graduate division of Brooklyn College from 1942-1947.

⁷² For general information see the university's institutional biography by Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *The New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

⁷³ According to Rutkoff and Scott a "relatively large number of persons who had what appeared to be Jewish surnames, from 25 to 30 percent of the students [attended]. At a time when other educational institutions openly discriminated against women and Jews, the New School solicited both." Rutkoff and Scott, 26. At the New School, anyone in New York, by paying a modest fee, could attend lectures by such distinguished speakers as jurists Roscoe Pound, and Felix Frankfurter, poet Robert Frost, art patron Leo Stein, art historian Meyer Schapiro, painter Thomas Hart Benton, writer Thomas Mann, essayist Lewis Mumford, composer Aaron Copland, philosopher Bertrand Russell, political theorist Sidney Hook,

of the earliest large scale modern buildings erected in New York and was made even more stark by the modestly scaled and warmly hued nineteenth century row-houses which it still dramatically interrupts. Even now, after more than sixty years, the building remains an icon of progressive modernism, its original impact must have been considerable.

The building's interior attests to the school's dedication to the visual arts as a fully integrated component of the academic program. Originally:

the upper floor contained a penthouse art studio. Throughout the rest of the building, a surprising emphasis was placed on arts and artistic activities. Urban provided for a 600 seat auditorium, a dance studio, three art studios, and an exhibition gallery. Even in the dining and seminar rooms he set aside wall space for full, ceiling to floor murals.⁷⁴

Johnson, who had cleverly financed this new facility in the first years of the Great Depression was in no position to commission an artist to compose these expansive murals. The solution he found speaks to New School's intimate although overlooked relationship with the artistic avant-garde.

Alma Reed, of the gallery and imprint Delphic Studios (which would publish John D. Graham's influential book *System and Dialectics of Art* six years hence) read of Urban's plans and approached Johnson, via Lewis Mumford, on behalf of one of her artists, the Mexican muralist, José Clemente Orozco.

educator John Dewey, and the anthropologists Franz Boas and Margaret Mead. Rutkoff and Scott, 48.

⁷⁴ Rutkoff and Scott, 50. For a more complete discussion of Urban's New School design see Randolph Carter and Robert Reed Cole, *Josef Urban: Architecture, Theater, Film* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994).

Because of the artist's obscurity in the United States and the perceived importance of the project's environment, an agreement was reached for Orozco to create a series of murals in true fresco which gave the painter absolute freedom, while the school would only be required to cover the cost of materials (figure 9). Reed's eclectic stable of artists also included Thomas Hart Benton who, on hearing of the Orozco commission, asked his friend, Ralph Pearson, who taught art at the New School, to speak with Johnson on his behalf. An identical arrangement was reached (figures 10 and 11).⁷⁵

Ralph Pearson is also credited with organizing the New School's sponsorship of the first American Artists' Congress held there in 1936 (figure 12). The Congress was an umbrella

⁷⁵ Rutkoff and Scott, 50. Five panels were completed by Orozco during the Winter of 1930-31. According to the New School's curator, Kathy Goncharov, they are titled, *The Table of Brotherhood*, *Homecoming of the Worker of the New Day*, *The Struggle in the Orient*, *The Struggle in the Occident*, and *The Creative Man*, and they remain at the school. Their heroicizing of not simply the worker, but through portraiture, also Lenin and Stalin surely must have tested Johnson's commitment to, "assure [Orozco] freedom." Ibid., page 50. Benton worked on his murals simultaneously. His fresco cycle, *America Today* comprised of a series of ten linen mounts has been restored and conserved and is currently in the collection of the Equitable Life Assurance Company of America. The titles of the distemper and egg tempera murals are *Deep South*, *Midwest*, *Changing West*, *Instruments of Power*, *Coal*, *Steel*, *City Building*, *City Activities with Subway*, *City Activities with Dance Hall*, and finally *Outreaching Hands*. See Emily Braun, *Thomas Hart Benton: "The America Today Murals"* (The Equitable Life Assurance Company of America: New York, 1985). It is worth noting that at this time, Benton was teaching at the Art Students League and had there befriended two of his students, Jackson and Charles Pollock. The latter recalled that his brother Jackson assisted Benton in his work on the murals and modeled for the figure playing the fiddle in the panel *The Arts of the West*. Benton also taught painting at the New School.

organization formed in order to project a united front against war and fascism and was an early and overtly political response to the rising global nationalism that would culminate in the Second World War.⁷⁶ With like minded daring, one of the New School's two galleries inaugural exhibition was entitled, "The Société Anonyme" and was presented by Katherine Dreier. It included paintings by Fernand Léger, Vasily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Man Ray, Piet Mondrian, William Zorach, Max Weber, and Max Ernst.⁷⁷

While this exhibition focused primarily on the European avant-garde it nevertheless illustrates the school's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary discourse.⁷⁸ Indeed, many of the most prominent Abstract Expressionist's took advantage of the New School's programs and employment opportunities and often found it an important experience.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ See Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, editors, *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

⁷⁷ Rutkoff and Scott, page 54. According to *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Robert L. Herbert, et.al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), This exhibition was proposed when the school asked Katherine Dreier to teach a twelve lecture course on modern art the following year, which she did. Herbert, 761.

⁷⁸ In her book, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1995), 152. Martica Sawin notes Matta and Kurt Seligmann exhibitions there in 1940.

The main point of contact came through Stanley William Hayter, an English born graphic artist who had fled the German occupation of France in 1940 and moved his print studio to the New School's Twelfth Street building in the process.

In October 1940, Hayter arranged to have his Paris based print workshop, Atelier 17, placed under the auspices of the New School. His workshop was housed on Twelfth street for five years until the cramped quarters prompted Hayter to relocate to a loft at 41 East Eighth Street (although even then he retained the workshop's link with the New School).⁸⁰ However, this affiliation with an academic institution, even one as innovative as the New School, should not suggest that Hayter placed himself in the role of teacher. Quite the contrary, Hayter was "more of a guiding expert and consultant than an academic teacher. He doesn't correct; he advises" remembered Alexander Watt, who had worked at Atelier 17.⁸¹ Joann Moser, frames her discussion of Hayter by stating that

⁷⁹ According to Patia Yasin, Harold Rosenberg's daughter, lectures at The New School for Social Research were popular with the artists. Interviewed by the author December 6, 1996.

⁸⁰ From an interview with Stanley William Hayter conducted by Paul Cummings March 11, 1971, Archives of American Art, Reel 4210, 3. Also see Joann Moser's "The Impact of Stanley William Hayter on Post-War American Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 18, number 1 (1978): 2-10. Sawin notes that Atelier 17 was just across the street from Pollock's apartment at 46 East Eighth Street and therefore also the Club at #39, 370. Hayter also taught at Brooklyn College from September 1, 1949 until January 1, 1951 see Mona Hadler & Jerome Viola, *Brooklyn College Art Department: Past and Present, 1942-1977* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn College Art Department, 1977), Appendix.

he even refused to categorize Atelier 17 as a school and that, "the relationship Hayter wished to establish with the other artists was one of fellow researchers working under the same roof [. . .]"⁸²

His studio became one of the rare situations where both European and American artists would gather to work side by side. The list of artists related to Abstract Expressionism who worked with Hayter in New York includes Lewin Alcopley, William Baziotos, Dorothy Dehner, Peter Grippe, Carl Holty, Willem de Kooning, Matta, Robert Motherwell (here there must have been further contact as Hayter appears in the periodical *Possibilities: An Occasional Review* which was co-edited by Motherwell), Mark Rothko (Hayter called him "a great friend"⁸³), Anne Ryan, Theodore Stamos, and most famously, Jackson Pollock.⁸⁴

Hayter appears often in the literature devoted to Pollock. The painter, who is reported to have become a close friend of Hayter was introduced to the printmaker's work by their mutual friend John Graham as early as the late 1930s.

⁸¹ Moser, 2.

⁸² Moser, 2. Also see Dore Ashton, "Hayter's Atelier 17," *The Art Digest* 26, number 1 (October 1, 1951), 16 and 33.

⁸³ Cummings, 4.

⁸⁴ According to Joann Moser, *Atelier 17: A 50th Anniversary Retrospective Exhibition* (University of Wisconsin: Madison, 1977), 44, Baziotos, Motherwell, and Rothko remained with Hayter for only a short period. Some of the other artists involved with Atelier 17 at the New School included Isabel Bishop, Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Wilfredo Lam, Reginald Marsh, André

However, Pollock only met Hayter in 1943 through his friend the sculptor Reuben Kadish who was at that time working as an assistant at Atelier 17. Pollock began to make prints at the studio the following year. Hayter and Pollock are thought to have remained close friends until the former's repatriation to France in 1950.⁸⁵

It has been argued that Pollock found in Hayter, a conduit through which to gain insight into Surrealist concepts of automatism. It is even argued that the intaglio plates Pollock made with Hayter might be understood to function as a precursor to his later breakthrough paintings created against a similarly unyielding horizontal surface (this in spite of the vast shift of scale and use of a very different medium).⁸⁶ Nevertheless, what is certain is that Pollock made close to a dozen plates at Atelier 17 although none were printed in their final state until a posthumous edition was struck in 1967 by William S. Lieberman (figures 13 and 14).⁸⁷ As Bernice Rose points out, Lieberman traced Pollock's increasingly "autonomous line . . . probably . . . to Pollock's handling of the burin for printmaking under the guidance of Stanley William Hayter at Atelier 17. . . ." She

Masson, Louise Nevelson, Kurt Roesch, and Yves Tanguy who had also worked with Hayter in Paris).

⁸⁵ Moser, 6.

⁸⁶ Moser, 7 and 8. Also Sawin, 370.

⁸⁷ Moser, 11, note #32. These untitled plates are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Several proofs are in the collection of the Pollock/Krasner House, Springs, New York.

then suggests an affiliation with Masson's prints made there.⁸⁸

In order to get a sense of Atelier 17's place in the broader context of the New School, all one needs to do is open a course catalogue from the 1940s.⁸⁹ To do so locates Hayter and his fellow researchers in equally extraordinary if more varied company. The New School Bulletin for 1939-1940, the first in which Hayter appears lists his workshop as course #128. This catalogue also lists Seymour Lipton, Erich Fromm, Alfred Kazin, and Claude Lévi-Strauss as lecturers.⁹⁰ The following year Amadee Ozenfant and Leo Strauss joined the faculty. By 1951 Arendt and Blücher were lecturing at the New School on philosophy and specifically the existential thinking of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre.⁹¹

The school had been able to collect many of the most brilliant scholars and artists of the period. Johnson was able to accomplish this not because of any great institutional legacy or largess but because of the school's

⁸⁸ Bernice Rose, *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 15.

⁸⁹ Hayter's Atelier 17 appears in the New School for Social Research Bulletin continuously from 1940-1949. See the New School for Social Research archive.

⁹⁰ Several of the latter figures were interested in modern art. For instance, Lévi-Strauss, in a 1959 interview spoke on abstraction and the future of painting. See George Charbonnier, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* translated by John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 132-133.

⁹¹ Box 4, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

non-prejudicial philosophy, his broad knowledge of the European social sciences and his humane haste.⁹²

In 1933, Adolf Hitler, having just won election to the Chancellorship of Germany and having swiftly legislated a broad expansion of his powers, undertook to enact into law his campaign promise to purge the nation of its Jewish, Socialist, and subversive academics, artists, scientists, and civil servants. One consequence of statute 34953, the previously mentioned racial purity law was the draining of many of Germany's best minds from its internationally recognized universities and research institutes.⁹³ While Hitler's political motivation is transparent regarding the removal of economists, political scientists, and humanists, his insistence on the removal of scientists and engineers speaks to the totality of his anti-Semitic vision.

In a lecture titled, "Anti-Intellectualism and the Cultural Decapitation of Germany under the Nazis" given at a symposium held at the Smithsonian Institution to celebrate

⁹² Johnson had co-edited the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* with Edwin R. A. Seligmann of Columbia University in the 1920s. This fifteen volume lexicon had been underwritten by a \$1.25 million dollar grant from the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations. Krohn, 60.

⁹³ The full impact of this resurgent anti-intellectualism can only be appreciated when the canonical Germanic academy of the modern era is recalled. Such figures as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Immanuel Kant, Lessing, Schiller, Karl Marx, Hegel, Hermann Hesse, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger stand in sharp contrast to Nazi anti-enlightenment sentiment. Our own discipline's debt to this tradition includes Erwin Panofsky, Heinrich Wölfflin, E. H. Gombrich, and Alois Riegl.

the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Albert Einstein, himself a refugee, Alan Beyerchen, recounted that:

from the Nazi viewpoint, losing the talents of intellectuals . . . was no great cause for concern. As Hitler was reputed to have said to a leading scientist when the latter protested against the damage being wrought by the expulsions in 1933: 'Our national policies will not be revoked or modified, even for scientists. If the dismissal of Jewish scientists means the annihilation of contemporary German science, then we shall do without science for a few years.'⁹⁴

The assumption that Hitler's determination to rid German institutions of Jewish and socialist thinkers would prompt the academy outside Germany to vie for this intellectual windfall is, amazingly enough, for the most part inaccurate. While a limited number of such people were able to find employment on their own outside of Germany such as the previously cited example of Erwin Panofsky, by and large, American universities actively resisted offering even temporary posts to these scholars. The situation was exacerbated, for the potential émigrés, by the fact that while early National Socialist policy sought to rid Germany of Jews by way of emigration, providing a valuable avenue of escape before the onset of the Holocaust, immigration to most

⁹⁴ Beyerchen, 38. Beyerchen posits that Germany's ardent anti-intellectualism, which paralleled its shining achievements was based in a centuries old contempt for the enlightenment, which he notes was largely imposed on Germany by Napoleon's occupying army and which consequently resulted in the emancipation of German Jews. Beyerchen, 32. Certainly it is possible to find in German culture, celebration of the mythic racial originary condition, that is the antithesis of enlightenment universalism. Wagner is an obvious example. In addition, Donald Haas developed these ideas in relation to German folk tales in a paper given at Harvard University in 1994 entitled "German Fairy Tales and America's Culture Wars:

western countries including the United States required a confirmed offer of employment. Herbert A. Strauss has speculated on the motivation of Hitler's early pro-emigration policy:

After 1933 Hitler declared his policy of dumping the impoverished Jews of Germany [in order] to [. . .] stimulate additional anti-Semitism and thus export sympathy for Germany's policies of persecution. There is enough evidence to substantiate the partial success of these tactics.⁹⁵

In the nadir of the Great Depression resurgent isolationism effectively closed America's borders even to those seeking political asylum. The economic pressures which conspired to bring Hitler to office in Germany may also be cited for fueling American xenophobia at this particularly critical juncture.⁹⁶ According to David S. Wyman, American resistance to Jewish refugees was personified in the powerful State Department official Breckinridge Long.⁹⁷

Long, it has been suggested was enamored of Italian fascism, he had recently served as Ambassador to Italy, and failed to differentiate between, "communists, extreme radicals, Jewish professional agitators, [or] refugee

From Grimms' 'Manual of Manners' to William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*."

⁹⁵ Herbert A. Strauss, "The Movement of People in a Time of Crisis," *The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945*, edited by Jarrell C. Jackman & Carla M. Borden (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 52.

⁹⁶ An estimated 2,000 American University professors had lost their jobs during the 1930s. Krohn, 22.

⁹⁷ Wyman, *passim*.

enthusiasts."⁹⁸ In an official memorandum written to American consuls around the country, Long instructs, "nobody has a right to come into the United States" and "to put every obstacle in the way and resort to various administrative devices which would postpone and postpone the granting of the visas."⁹⁹

Similar resistance could be found at America's pre-eminent research institutions, which, in spite of public comments to the contrary, commonly sought to "attract as few Jews as possible."¹⁰⁰ In spite of such xenophobia, acute anti-Semitism, and anti-Socialist policies which not only made immigration impossible for nearly all German Jewish refugees but has been linked to the internment of countless persons in German death camps, a handful of Americans did understand both the crisis and opportunity Hitler had presented the United States.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Breckinridge Long Diary, February 6, 1938, Long Papers, Box 5, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Quoted in Krohn, 87.

⁹⁹ Breckinridge Long Memorandum, October 31, 1940, Long Papers, Box 212, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Quoted in Krohn, 87 and 225-226 note #55.

¹⁰⁰ See Laura Fermi, *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 78. I quote the economist Joseph A. Schumpeter who had been recently hired at Harvard and was forming a committee there to direct aid to German colleagues. J. A. Schumpeter to W. C. Mitchell, April 22, 1933, Schumpeter Papers, 4.6, Box 6, Harvard University. Quoted in Krohn, 23.

¹⁰¹ Only 21,000 refugees were granted asylum in the United States from 1941-1945 or less than ten percent of those eligible under then current quotas. Wyman, 100.

Largely funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German/Foreign Scholars reviewed desperate applications from refugees stranded on the continent.¹⁰² Applicants such as Albert Einstein, Amédée Ozenfant, Lionello Venturi, Arnold Hauser, Rudolf Arnheim, Leo Strauss, Herbert Marcuse, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Wilhelm Reich, Raymond de Saussure and of course Hannah Arendt eventually were able to make it to the safe if somewhat inhospitable shores of the United States thanks to this organization. Unfortunately, most were not so lucky.¹⁰³

In direct response to the catastrophe in Europe and such intense resistance by the American government and academy, Alvin Johnson in cooperation with the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German/Foreign Scholars, formed a graduate

¹⁰² The Rockefeller Foundation contributed 1.4 million dollars, more than half of the money raised by the Emergency Committee domestically. See Krohn, 29-31 for a breakdown of the Rockefeller Foundation Aid Program for Displaced Scholars by nationality and academic field. The breadth of American anti-Semitism encountered by the émigrés can be discerned from two examples noted by Krohn. The Rockefeller Foundation's own staff in Paris, charged with monitoring the effect of the racial purity laws wrote "that during the past fifteen years the Jewish liberal element has been definitely favored in Germany . . . [and that] the leaders in the fields are Jews and Social Democrats, or worse." Krohn, 24.

¹⁰³ It must be noted that these highly esteemed intellectuals form a tiny and very select group who should not be construed to represent the much broader refugee population left behind. This ugly selectivity was not lost on those who reached safety because of their prominence. Bertolt Brecht after fleeing first to Denmark and the Soviet Union wrote from Hollywood, "Accidentally I have been spared." quoted in Alfred Kazin, *The European Writers in Exile*, in *The Muses flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945*, edited by Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 125.

program at the New School which he dubbed the "University in Exile."¹⁰⁴ Johnson's surprisingly isolated effort, to fund positions "from the debris of the German purges," became a solitary beacon.¹⁰⁵ At one point, the New School's University in Exile was receiving as many as 5,000 applications per year from those desperate for political refuge. And "by the late 1930s they [the Graduate Faculty] considered themselves to be engaged in a desperate defense of enlightenment humanism."¹⁰⁶

Even before the war actually began the school's catalogues reveal a growing political concern. Course titles such as "Critical History of German Nationalism" become common. Yet the catalogues are only loosely organized by

¹⁰⁴ The Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German/Foreign Scholars under the direction of Stephen Duggen functioned as a type of clearing house for refugee intellectuals. It would solicit, analyze, and, develop lists of suitable candidates and then attempt to place them in American Universities. Additionally, The committee would fund fifty percent of the cost of the university posting, up to \$2,000 for up to two years. This program was largely funded by the Rockefeller Foundation which eventually spent some 1.5 million dollars on some 300 scholars. For more detailed information on the files of perspective candidates see the Papers of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German/Foreign Scholars, Rare Book and Manuscript Division, The New York Public Library and the Rockefeller Foundation archives.

¹⁰⁵ From a letter dated April 24, 1933 (only 18 days after the passage of Germany's racial purity statute, to his former Professor Edwin Seligmann. Rutkoff and Scott, 92.

¹⁰⁶ Rutkoff and Scott, 127. The list of scholars involved with the Emergency Committee include Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, etc. and those eventually aided by the University in Exile numbered at least 182 including Rudolf Arnheim, Marcel Barzin, Josef Frank, Alexander Koyré, Claude Levi-Strauss, Adolph Lowe, Amédée Ozenfant, Wilhelm Reich, Kurt Roesch, Raymond de Saussure, Leo Strauss, Leonello Venturi, Max Wertheimer, and Paul Zucker.

discipline, revealing, I think, the school's wish to approach the building international crisis by fostering a broadly varied interaction across categorical boundaries. This is especially evident in courses such as "The Plastic Arts and the War," given Tuesday evenings during the 1943 Spring semester with lectures by Camilo Gas, Berenice Abbott, Alexey Brodovitch, Stuart Davis, José de Creeft, Hayter, Kuniyoshi, and Paul Zucker.¹⁰⁷ But as mentioned, interaction went beyond even this. Moser suggests that Hayter's ideal, a workshop of fellow researchers instead of students, is the result of his scientific background. This is well illustrated by his collaborative investigations at the New School concerning viewer perception with fellow Professor Max Wertheimer, the noted Gestalt psychologist and German émigré.¹⁰⁸ Indeed Sawin notes that:

Hayter was particularly responsive to Wertheimer's suggestions for experiments in visual perception. They exchanged ideas and even lectured in each other's classes, and the dialogue continued with Rodolf Arnheim, a student of Wertheimer, when he began teaching at the New School.¹⁰⁹

The commitment to the arts as central to the school's ideology of freedom of belief and expression is clear. But as Rutkoff and Scott note, Urban's physical

¹⁰⁷ #88, New School for Social Research Bulletin, 1942-43, New School for Social Research archive. Interestingly, the catalogue notes that this course was offered free as it was "given in response to government request."

¹⁰⁸ Moser, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Sawin, 154.

integration of the arts also furthered this dialogue between disciplines:

The rich mixture of painters, sculptors, dancers and composers, conducting classes simultaneously in the same building and then, after classes, gathering together over lunch or coffee, offered each of them an unusual chance to talk with and observe artists in other disciplines and to attend lectures by scholars outside of the arts. For example, sculptor Seymour Lipton considered Morris Cohen's lectures in legal philosophy at the New School profoundly important to his own ideas.¹¹⁰

By establishing the connections between the artists, critics, and Arendt within the context of the matrix of downtown forums it has been possible to further dispel the bias of anti-intellectualism that still hangs over these artists and to have shown the breadth and depth of their discourse within the dramatic context of the international crisis that was then unfolding. And this desire for a broad cultural and political view results at least in part from the artists' engagement with that crisis.

¹¹⁰ Rutkoff and Scott, 63. Coincidentally, Morris Rayfield Cohen had also been Newman's professor at City College see footnote #20, chapter 2.

CHAPTER 3

THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST FORUMS
IN RELATION TO THE ARENTIAN *POLIS*

While Arendt was a participant in the matrix of intersecting forums associated with the Abstract Expressionists it is also possible, and indeed fruitful, to apply her contemporaneous work to these very same groups in order to establish their historical meaning. The New School for Social Research like its smaller bohemian neighbor the Club and Studio 35 can be understood not only as a link between the refugee intellectuals and the early New York School but also parallels, to a degree, the political realm of the *polis* which Arendt resurrected in her seminal philosophical study, *The Human Condition* (1959). The *polis* model provides a means to explore and define the Abstract Expressionists as a group—a thorny issue that many scholars have sought to clarify.

The logic behind the pairing of the concept of the *polis* as defined in *The Human Condition* and the painters of the early New York School can only be justified in the value borne out in this union. This logic is supported by a number of clear historical links that establish Arendt both directly in, or more commonly as proximate to, the artists' community. Therefore, Arendt's work can be addressed as a model of

investigation not arbitrarily, but as an historically appropriate tool whose relationship to the artists and their critics is a matter of record.

This chapter begins with a description of *The Human Condition's* tripartite structure of being: labor (*animal laborans*), a state of enslavement to the cycles of nature; work (*homo faber*), the condition in which Arendt places the artist; and action (*vita activa*), the condition of freedom and the condition to which, in my estimation, a number of the Abstract Expressionists sought to achieve. The latter two states, that of *homo faber* and the *vita activa*, are applied here to the artists and their forums with an eye to Arendt's implicit critique of modernity and its threat to freedom. In this way, the forums which the artists created or participated in, Studio 35, The Artists' Club of Eighth Street, and The New School for Social Research are seen, at least in part, as the artists' response to the desperate political moment.

Art history has become increasingly critical of commonly cited yet ill-defined groupings of artists and often rightly so. The use of such generalizations as "Abstract Expressionism" can obscure individually defining traits and inconsistencies even in the case of relatively cohesive stylistic movements. Nevertheless, while a monograph can be provocatively enriched by drawing categorical distinctions between associated artists, it would be unwarranted to disregard all such alliances. This might not be the case if

the formation of these groups was the invention of critics and historians who like the early researchers of the Italian primitives contrived authorial personages based on formal interpretation in order to lend structure to a field with few demarcations. But clearly this is not the case with the group that has come to be known, however imprecisely, as Abstract Expressionism. As there is no "Master of the Large Unprimed Canvas," Abstract Expressionism is not a wholly arbitrary grouping of artists. While artists are rarely responsible for the epithets that refer to their work nor the particular stylistic emblems that become the common shorthand for identifying the members of a specific group, like most rubrics, such ideas are generally rooted in an actual intrasubjective dynamic.

The highly problematic term "Abstract Expressionism," is a case in point. The various names that competed to describe postwar American abstraction by the famous group of largely New York based artists, Pollock, Rothko, Kline, Still, Tomlin, Gottlieb, Motherwell, etc. and a host of lesser known painters to say nothing of the sculptors has vexed recent histories of this era.¹ Robert M. Coates, an art critic for

¹ For a history of the term, "Abstract Expressionism," see Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 2; the introduction to Ann Gibson, "Issues in Abstract Expressionism, 1-7; Michael Leja, "The Formation of an Avant-Garde in New York," *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (Harry N. Abrams: New York, 1987), 13; and importantly David Smith, Robert Motherwell, James Brooks, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Barnett Newman, and Willem de Kooning's answers to Alfred Barr's question, "What is the most acceptable name for our direction or movement? (It has been called Abstract-Expressionist, Abstract-Symbolist,

the *New Yorker Magazine* is credited with first applying Alfred Barr's "ism" for pre-First World War German painting to post-Second World War New York art in 1946.² Indeed, in the Spring of 1950 Robert Motherwell himself asked his colleagues, "What then exactly constitutes our community?" His assumption of the existence of a "community" is evident in his phrasing even if the answers which he prompted do nothing to clarify any such definition.

This community can be profitably reinterpreted and successfully defined using as a model the concept of the *polis*. As defined by Arendt, the *polis* does not require common methods, subjects, nor even an uniting historical event but rather fosters the unique individual action of each participant and the unanticipatable result of their collisions. These ideas are developed by Hannah Arendt in what is arguably her most important book, her 1958 philosophical critique of modernity, *The Human Condition*.³

Intra-Subjectivist, etc.)," Robert Goodnough, editor, "Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*, reprinted in Ross, 225.

² Coates first used the term "Abstract Expressionism" in reference to the work of Hans Hofmann exhibited at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958). Much of this book had been conceived by 1953. See Arendt's September 21, 1953 letter to Carl Jaspers translated in Kohler and Saner, 734, Letter #148, note #9, which confirms that The Gauss Lectures which Arendt delivered at Princeton University as well as lectures given subsequently at New York University's division of General Education, "on November 23rd and 30th respectively. These lectures were titled "The Breakdown of Authority in the Modern World" and "The Rise of Labor" and were part of the series "Authority and Freedom" (see also New York University

Arendt's model acts as a lens through which to broaden the study of the artists and their works of art by reviving a set of emphases neglected even amongst the multiple models of interpretation currently in use.⁴

This chapter's intent then, is to consider Arendt's book, *The Human Condition* and its exploration of the conditions of freedom, which she finds most tenable in the frail and unlikely community she defines as the *polis*, as a reaction to the barbarism of modernity. Barbarism, whose most evil manifestations, the violence of totalitarianism, was also at this moment directly affecting the contiguous sphere of the Abstract Expressionists.

This is not meant to convey the idea that Arendt's political philosophy was in any way actively guiding the hand of the artists nor did it set any particular creative agenda among them. No written source or discourse directly

Folder, Box 36, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. This early date is also confirmed by a letter dated July 13, 1953 in the Yves R. Simon Folder, Box 14, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress which describes in detail Arendt's division of labor and work, takes Karl Marx to task for his confusion of these categories and holds artistic production up as an ideal example of such work. All of which constitutes much of the foundational structure of the later book.

⁴ By pairing a given model of investigation and a given body of artwork, it is not my intention to suggest a hierarchy of meaning, or to invalidate existing notions but only to enrich by addition, the means of investigation. Additionally, it is not within the scope of this project to address the consequences of selecting among various methodologies and the issue of that methodology's bearing on the topic of study. It has been possible to sidestep these issues in this case only because there is here, I believe, an inherent logic to the choice. Hannah Arendt was both a

formulated or determined these artists' production. Roland Barthes's eulogy for the discrete singularity of authorship must be applied cautiously.⁵

Nevertheless, Arendt's parallel and concurrent concerns, in particular much of *The Human Condition*, can be profitably applied to the paintings and sculptures of the early New York School. Her book sheds light on the issue of community, which in the case of these artists is often alluded to in existing literature though just as often undervalued. And, importantly, here Arendt directly considers the role of the artist in the modern world.

In contrast to Marx's strategy of emphasizing the practical and applicable in his theory, Arendt's work remains largely abstract and resistant to removal from its idealist framework. *The Human Condition* defines a philosophical structure at once firmly rooted in the historical and yet concerned with a system of categorization that seemingly defies practical application in contemporary society, except, for the example of the artist whom Arendt singles out. Arendt explores a number of possible existential divisions, which, while comprehensive within the confines of her cartographic

participant in and author of the definition of community applied here.

⁵ For a concise explanation of his concept of the death of authorship see Roland Barthes, "De l'oeuvre au texte," in *Revue d'Esthétique* 3 (1971): 225-232 or in English Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Art and Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, translated by Stephen Heath, edited by Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 169-174.

analysis of being, claim no absolute authority.⁶ Arendt's largely abstract structure is framed by chapters which attempt, somewhat awkwardly, a timely critique of modernity. This structure, laid out in the core of the book, defines three possible modes of existence—labor, work, and action (art, as will presently be discussed, is located by Arendt in the realm of work).

At the bottom of Arendt's hierarchical structure the *animal laborans* is broadly linked not simply with physical labor but with necessity as well, that is, with biological subsistence and its modern variant, mass consumer culture. Here is the cyclical engagement of man within nature on the latter's terms in order that man as a physical animal may survive. The products of labor must be consumed in order for them to have value and they therefore have no place of permanence in the world.

Arendt conceived of this lowest realm of human activity as private, which she linguistically reveals to be associated with privation rather than refuge as it is now commonly understood. For Arendt, labor is limiting; it is a state of virtual enslavement. With neither the autonomy nor arena for the interaction necessary for freedom, Arendt condemns the

⁶ See Peter Fuss's superb exegesis of *The Human Condition*, "Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Community," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, edited by Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 157-176.

animal laborans as having no access to the intrasubjective or to use her term, the political realm.⁷

Interestingly, Arendt sees the structure of the private household as a paradigm of the historically "despotic" organization of the state, which again is outside this ideal political arena. She writes of the *animal laborans* as being defined by:

coercion: labor is never a free activity, not only or primarily because it depends on matter, but because it is necessitated by our body, whose needs have a quality of coercion which no other human need has. Labor is necessitated by daily life and therefore daily repeated does not necessarily result in any lasting product. It exhausts itself in the activity itself; its products are consumed immediately.⁸

This condition of labor is to some extent a burden to all but is unequally distributed thus allowing some to enter the public and ideally the political world unencumbered by necessity.⁹ As Arendt describes it, the modern trauma of fascism, totalitarianism, and war can be linked to the increasing dominance of the *animal laborans*, this lowest of her three possible human conditions. She suggests that this supremacy of labor has resulted in a loss of worldliness and in a waning appreciation for freedom.

⁷ Arendt's use of the term political derives its meaning from Aristotle's definition of the *bios politikos*, an arena for action and speech, rather than the modern concern with the violence of law. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24-26.

⁸ Letter from Arendt to Yves R. Simon, July 13, 1953, Yves R. Simon Folder, Box 14, Hannah Arendt Papers, Collection of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, chapters five, eight, and part three *passim*.

Arendt is concerned by what she sees as a escalating cycle of wage-based consumption. A situation fostered by our modern industrial economy which, she writes, has increasingly replaced work with labor and has laid the foundation for the mass society that, having compressed the space of freedom, can no longer check its own destructive urges. As will be developed below, it was precisely these forces which formed the backdrop against which Abstract Expressionism was created in part as a corrective action.

The second possible condition of existence, and one that is increasingly threatened in the modern world according to Arendt's thesis, is that of *homo faber*. This maker of the constructed world, of "human artifice," is differentiated from his more common relation, the laborer, by the relative durability of his work.¹⁰ Further, the realm of work is dependent upon a degree of autonomy which is unavailable to the *animal laborans* being too closely tied to the rhythmic dictates of nature.

Implicit in this arrangement is the artist who is cast by Arendt in the starring role of creator of the human world. Traditionally, the work of art is as nearly divorced from biological need (labor) as possible and ideally, its production is beyond the immediacy and vulnerability of the what Arendt terms the "use object." As such, artwork best describes the essential characteristic of work, duration. In

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 136.

section twenty-three of *The Human Condition* entitled, "The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art," Arendt states:

Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangibly things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent purpose—as the purpose of a chair is actualized when it is sat upon—can only destroy them. Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages. . . . It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen. . . .¹¹

Arendt finds this permanence of work a vital anchor in humanity's search for an objective mark against which an identity which is not wholly subjective can be formed.¹² Art, and particularly, avant-garde works of art (that is, production which while reified has not yet found a place in the exchange market and thereby avoids the corruption of utility, overcomes the meaningless subjectivity of a means/ends interpretation) serves, according to Arendt as the best possible example of such an objective anchor. In our wage based, consumer driven society, Arendt sees human pursuits increasingly subsumed by labor, that is, towards livelihood, the "only exception society is willing to grant

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167-168.

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 137.

is the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the only 'worker' left. . . ."¹³

The sculptor Richard Lippold seems to have agreed with Arendt's concept of *homo faber* as the condition inhabited by the artist, at least in his statement to a gathering of artists in 1950. Here, he emphasized the transition of the artist from *animal laborans* to *homo faber*:

The job was a great deal easier, in any period but our own. The idea of what to paint was already pre-determined. . . . I believe that in our own time the discipline that is enforced upon our work must come from ourselves. . . . The job of the artist is only the job of the craftsman.¹⁴

In response to Lippold, Willem de Kooning agreed, "I think we are craftsmen." But he added a statement which goes to the core of Arendt's definition of the artist as a creator of artifice which stands outside the usual worldly realm of the use-object. He continued, ". . . we have no position in the world—absolutely no position except that we just insist on being around. . . ."¹⁵ It was just this isolation from the world, or in the case of work, from the exchange market, that Arendt addresses in her subchapter, "The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art." As mentioned, her categorization for the artist is beyond the usual boundaries of the use object.

¹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 127.

¹⁴ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 218.

¹⁵ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 219.

The following year, de Kooning clarified his earlier statement using Arendt's very terminology, now addressing not only his disillusion with the condition of "labor" but also with that of "work." Paralleling Arendt's definition of *homo laborans* he writes, "Man's own form in space—his body—was a private prison . . ." This recalls her discussion of "work." He continues in the same essay:

latter-day artists were bothered by their apparent uselessness. . . . They knew that they were relatively freer than before because of the indifference, but . . . freedom to them meant to be useful in society. . . . To achieve that they didn't need things like tables and chair. . . . They needed ideas instead, social ideas. . . .¹⁶

The third, and for our present purposes the most important, though also the most fragile and rare of Arendt's three possible human conditions is action. Such a state of being, according to Arendt, is possible only in the context of a plurality. Because action creates the potential for memorializing or as Arendt writes, "Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition . . . for history."¹⁷

In relation to Abstract Expressionism, this feature of the *polis* as defined by Arendt can be used to shed light on the topic that has been singled out by the Abstract Expressionists as among those most central to their mutual

¹⁶ Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 18, number 3 (Spring 1951): 6.

¹⁷ Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," 8-9.

discussions in the postwar period. In interviews, statements, and transcripts New York School artists confront the question of when a work of art is finished. For example, in an interview dated 1960, Motherwell is asked by David Sylvester, "[At] What point do you feel a painting is finished . . . ?" To which the artist notes that, "[This] was a big issue with American painters ten years ago."¹⁸

Motherwell's memory was quite sharp, exactly ten years earlier, he was co-moderating the closed three day Artists' Session held to mark the closing of Studio 35. One of the main topics, if not the primary focus of discussion, assuming the transcript as edited by Robert Goodnough and approved by the artists accurately reflects the themes of the session, was phrased by Motherwell as a question, "The question then is, 'How do you know when a work is finished?'"¹⁹ Unusually direct responses from Lippold, Brooks, Baziotes, Gottlieb, Ferber, Lassaw, Newman, de Kooning, Reinhardt, Hofmann (who sparked the query), and even Motherwell are recorded.²⁰ These range from Lippold's confidence in, and reliance on, the unwavering fulfillment of his original intention, to Newman's statement that "a 'finished' picture is a fiction."²¹

¹⁸ Robert Motherwell, "Interview," BBC (October 22, 1960). Reprinted in Ross, 111.

¹⁹ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 212.

²⁰ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 212-215.

For artists who had replaced traditional forms of subject matter with the processes of painting itself, who had shifted the core of the art from the completed object to the act of creation, the question of completion was vital. For an artist like de Kooning, who had been so driven by process that little of his painting—the artifacts of his natality—survived. The polis as described by Arendt, was a means to increase the potential for preserving such action. According to his friend and fellow painter, Alcopley, during a visit to de Kooning's studio in 1952 he said, "In about the past three years I have seen on the same canvas . . . some 80 paintings [of the Woman series]."²²

Given de Kooning's continual obliteration, this scraping down of his canvases, the discussion at Studio 35 would have had real significance for him. In the session he seems encouraged by Newman's remark that "The question of stopping is one of moral considerations."²³ de Kooning is the next to speak, "I refrain from 'finishing' it. I paint myself out of the picture, and when I have done that, I either throw it away or keep it."²⁴ He suggests then, that the intention is not located in the eventual result, but in the formative

²¹ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 214.

²² Lewin Alcopley-Alfred Lewin Copley, *One Man, Two Visions: Artist and Scientist* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993), 101

²³ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 214.

process. This discussion which seeks to clarify the issues surrounding the preservation of the artwork, the remnants of the act of painting and sculpting from the continuous impulse of creative natality, parallels not simply Arendt's concept of the political realm but also its *raison d'être*—the preservation of heroic action and the making of history.

However, for Arendt, action's importance is not defined primarily by memory but by its relation to natality. To act is to initiate and in doing so to reveal the true nature of its source, of its creator, the character of the author. Here Arendt anticipates Barthes when she develops the idea of the author's lack of sovereignty over the intention that precipitates an action.

For Arendt, natality, that defining human trait which seeks to begin, can not anticipate the result of that initiating act. The creator is never in control of more than the initial impulse, as the act immediately collides with the unanticipatable complexity of the world. In order to define and most completely fulfill her criteria for the *vita activa* Arendt finds it necessary to return to the initial Greek example, where she locates the origin of freedom.

In the section of the chapter *Action*, entitled *The Greek Solution*, Arendt attempts to rescue from the oblivion of antiquity a particular notion of a community of political discourse termed, the *polis* which:

²⁴ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 214.

grew out of and remained rooted in the Greek pre-polis experience and estimate of what makes it worthwhile for men to live together (*syzēn*), namely, the 'sharing of words and deeds,' (*Logōn kai pragmatōn koinōnein*, as Aristotle once put it, [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1126b12]), had a two fold function. First, it was intended to enable men to do permanently, albeit under certain restrictions, what otherwise had been possible only as an extraordinary and infrequent enterprise for which they had to leave their households. The polis was supposed to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame,' that is to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show how in deed and word who he was in unique distinctness. The second function of the polis, again closely related to the hazards of action as experienced before its coming into being, was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech; for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten, that it would actually become 'immortal', were not very good.²⁵

In spite of the suggestion of place embodied in the word, polis, Arendt specifically noted its non-contiguous, non-physical nature:

The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.²⁶

Here is a political structure which points to a solution for a problem which often confounds historians of this

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 196-197. Note that here, as in many other sections of *The Human Condition*, Arendt reveals her debt to her former Professor Martin Heidegger. In this instance it was Heidegger who must be credited with first resurrecting the Periclean concept of the polis so long dormant in political philosophy. Interestingly, it is during the 1950s, when these ideas are framing Arendt's thinking, that these two philosophers tentatively approach each other after his affiliation with National Socialism and her scathing critique of his work in her essay, "What is Existenz Philosophy?" (34-56). It may simply not be possible to reconcile Arendt's debt to Heidegger, the symbolism of his actions, and her rapprochement.

²⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

troublesome grouping of artists. The terms Abstract Expressionism and early New York School are often criticized as containing incongruous styles yet which are, nonetheless, engaged intellectually with each other.

* * *

Having briefly laid out Arendt's schema of labor, work and action, I will now offer a reading of the Abstract Expressionists within this framework and by doing so suggest that these issues constitute for the artists a model of freedom against growing international totalitarianism. The artists, for all of their blue collar machismo clearly do not belong to the species *animal laborans*. Not only did they not labor at their works of art, that is, did not toil in response to a predetermined cyclical need for biological sustenance. That they did not, early in their careers in the late 1930s and early 1940s, harbor expectations of frequent sales, (like a farmer who produces corn for market) has been one of the over-told truisms of the early New York School.²⁷ Their occupation was within the category of *work* as defined by Arendt. And so one could suggest that their paintings and sculptures evaded America's deep rooted cultural dogma of utility and attempted to grapple with issues of objective

²⁷ "In fact, for the . . . artists, monetary rewards were not only virtually nonexistent but were thought to be in the world of fantasy, unobtainable in the future as well as the

existence outside the finite web of our modern wage earning society. It was that same mass society of the twentieth century whose loss of any secure objective measure, had, according to Arendt, led to the most malevolent episode in history.

Arendt locates the production of art in the condition of work. The cyclic metabolic necessity of the *animal laborans* is clearly contrasted to the art object's enduring permanence. She classifies the artist as *homo faber*, as literally, one who makes with his hands.²⁶ Yet once we move from the general conception to the specific artists with whom Arendt had direct dealings, the Abstract Expressionists, issues arise that complicate her discussion. Simply put, a

present." Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters & Sculptors of the Fifties* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 17.

²⁶ Arendt bases her unique distinction between labor and work not on any historical definition in the realm of philosophy or labor theory but curiously and in my opinion convincingly on etymology. She notes that, "every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words . . ." which she contends have become, at first glance synonymous. Upon examination however, these words remain distinct in important ways. She cites, *laborare* and *facere* (*fabricari*), *travailler* and *ouvrier*, and *arbeiten* and *werken* and observes that only in the words related to labor is suffering a common meaning. In other words, pain is commonly associated with the word labor and its foreign equivalents, but not with the word work. Further she points to the fact that in each case labor's equivalent when used as a noun is not used to signify the product of the labor, a function reserved for work. Finally, Arendt offers that "the nouns 'work,' *oeuvre*, and *Werk*, show an increasing tendency to be used in conjunction with art." This, as noted above stems from the her belief that our consumption oriented culture has progressively undermined many of the disciplines where work was previously possible, leaving the artist as idealized worker. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 80-81.

number of these artists transcend the categorization of *homo faber*.

Arendt's misjudgment becomes apparent when her discussion of another aspect of *homo faber* is addressed, namely, instrumentality and the artist. Work, for Arendt, is the process of degrading materials as a means towards an end product to which the raw material is subservient. Here, Arendt's conception of the artist is revealed as classical:

It was for no other reason than this attitude of *homo faber* to the world [that of means end] that the Greeks in their classical period declared the whole field of the arts and crafts, where men work with instruments and do something not for its own sake but in order to produce something else, to *banausic*, a term perhaps best translated by 'philistine,' implying vulgarity of thinking and acting in terms of expediency.²⁹

Arendt is arguing that the art object ultimately corrupts its worth by the activity of destroying the intrinsic value of the raw materials, whether mineral, cotton, etc. towards a mimetic end. That is, the image is allied to the process of devaluing the external world which finally subsumes the artwork itself. "Because they do not present the reification that comes from [the] work [itself]."³⁰ Yet, this issue is central to Clement Greenberg's

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 156-157. Note the use of the word "vulgarity." Taken out of its present context, that is its association with means-end mimesis, it has been recently been called upon in an antithetical argument, to bolster the originality of Abstract Expressionist painting. See Timothy J. Clark, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *October Magazine* 69 (summer 1994), 23-48.

³⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 156. Here Arendt is quoting from *Das Kapital, III* (Zurich: Marx-Engles Gesamtausgabe, Abt. II, 1933), 698.

formalist definition of Abstract Expressionism. That the art is not in the violence done to the medium, in other words denial or effacing of its presence, in order to wrest from it some unrelated iconic sign, but rather that a work of art is most successful when it is primarily a reification of its essential material nature. In his essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Greenberg is quite clear, stating that "in the hands of lesser talents. . . . All emphasis is taken away from the medium and transferred the subject matter."³¹

In keeping with the book's theoretical perspective, Arendt's discussion of art and the condition of work is not targeted to an specific period or style. And any further attempt to pursue this identification between Abstract Expressionism (which is not directly mentioned) and *homo faber* as laid out by Arendt reveals awkward stresses. First, Arendt concludes that *homo faber's* products are "always produced in isolation," which she sees as required to bring to concrete fruition something from "the mental image of the thing to be."³² Yet, contrary to the common totalizing readings of Abstract Expressionists as tyrannical individualists, the artists seem at times to have starved for

³¹ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7, number 4 (July-August, 1940): 296. Reprinted in O'Brian, 25. Although it remains conjecture as no documentation exists, it is provocative to consider the extent to which Arendt drew upon her friends, the artists and critics of Abstract Expressionism, when formulating this thesis.

³² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 161.

camaraderie.³³ Simultaneously, and in a seeming contradiction that has caused a great deal of scholarly ambivalence, these artists remained deeply committed to the isolation of the creative originary act. Arendt writes that *homo faber's* natality can only be achieved in solitude.³⁴ Indeed, while the artists' gatherings are legendary; the Irascibles, the Intra-subjectivists, the Subjects of the Artist school, Studio 35, the artists' Club, no one has considered the underlying meaning of such forums (figure 15).

³³ Michael Leja mapped this seemingly contradictory trait. He wrote:

Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko were undoubtedly the most inveterate joiners and organizers. Their affiliation impulse appeared first in 1935 with The Ten, a group of expressionistic modernists. That impulse peaked in the first half of 1943, in the six months preceding the 'globalism' controversy, when both exhibited as members of three different organizations—American Modern Artists, New York Artists Painters [sic], and the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. Bradley Walker Tomlin was also a member of the FMPS. David Smith and Ad Reinhardt belonged to the united American Artists. William Baziotas, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock flirted with the idea of joining Roberto Matta's proposed group of American surrealists, but the project failed to materialize. Willem de Kooning, Smith, Ashile Gorky, Krasner, and Reinhardt were all associated with the American Abstract Artists.

Leja, "The Formation of an Avant-Garde in New York, 16-17.

³⁴ Robert Motherwell spoke of the creative act brought out of the isolation of the studio and into the public realm. Speaking of four murals by Matisse and Picasso, he wrote:

Doubtless both painters have made even greater works in the studio's solitary inspiration; but still, what a triumph these four commissions represent as an effort to reach beyond that solitude! A solitude that has become traditional in modern society.

Robert Motherwell, "The Painter and the Audience," *Perspectives* 9 (Autumn 1954): 107-12. Reprinted in Ross, 107.

Histories of Abstract Expressionism commonly contain a narrative describing the artists' meeting places. They also tend to enumerate the relationships that developed between teacher and student, such as between Thomas Hart Benton and Pollock, between friends, as between Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, and between like-minded activists as between the Irascibles. This emphasis on community begs a careful re-evaluation of the notion of individualism that has been both taken for granted and used to summarily dismiss this "ism" on the basis that its preoccupations with the self are transparent and have already been determined.

Arendt speaks to this dichotomy. "Human plurality, the basic condition of . . . action . . . has the two fold character of equality and distinction."³⁵ She understands this community of equals, this *polis*, to be the forum that best allows men to "distinguish themselves."³⁶ Perhaps the word "community" is too weak an appellation as Arendt considers the *polis* a political entity, a realm where actions are initiated among those who can fully appreciate such achievements. The pertinence of the constellation of forums on and around Eighth Street in Greenwich Village can be clarified using Arendt's philosophical construction of the *polis* as a method of analysis.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175.

³⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, page 176. Robert Motherwell posed the question, "What then exactly constitutes the basis of our community?" "Artists' Session at

The artists' forums are clear reminders of the isolation of the studio, the brooding disconnectedness that is the shadow of individualism. However, these forums provided more than simple camaraderie.³⁷ Arendt's construction of the *polis* speaks to the artists attempt to reach beyond the isolation of *homo faber* and constitute an intrasubjective arena which colludes to a remarkable degree to those aspects of Periclean Athens that Arendt isolates as constitutive of her ideal. It is within this restrictive, frail, and consequently fleeting *polis* that the foundation of freedom is found. Arendt resurrects this political ideal in reaction to a contemporary culture, which, in her estimation makes such freedom increasingly unlikely.³⁸

For Arendt, the basis of the freedom possible in the political realm was equality. "To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessities of life or the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself."³⁹ In various statements the artists referred to the sense of liberation achieved ironically in the near communal poverty of the late

Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 212.

³⁷ Irving Sandler offers that, "The Club was formed to provide a place where artists could escape the loneliness of their studios, meet their peers to exchange ideas of every sort, including tips on good studios and bargains in art materials (a perpetual topic)." Sandler "The Club," *Artforum*, 29. Reprinted in Shapiro, 50-51.

³⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 31.

³⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32.

depression.⁴⁰ Even through the 1940s the painters could harbor no realistic expectation of financial success given the very limited market in New York for advanced American art. The artists' obdurate nature removed them in a manner, from the realm of necessity. The old saw about the artist's desperate poverty can then be integrated into a larger and more meaningful structure. Thomas B. Hess wrote of the effect of the depression:

The whole question of money suddenly disappeared and everybody could do as he pleased. De Kooning and Gorky both violent anti-Stalinists, cheerfully built May Day floats for the Party on the orders of Stuart Davis, whom they revered as the senior American modernist. It was one of those rare moments in history when nothing interfered with the discussion; there were no sales, exhibitions, careers. A sense of collegiality and mutual respect marked the community.⁴¹

The second prerequisite cited by Arendt for the formation of the equality necessary for freedom was that the hierarchy of position be abolished. That the organic system of dominance in nature and in the traditional household (the private realm) be abolished so that true peers may gather together in a mutual arena for action. Remarkably, this was achieved.

Just such a political realm was constructed by the artists. Aspects of the Subjects of the Artist school, Studio

⁴⁰ For example, noting society's disregard for the artist Rothko wrote, "Yet this very hostility can act as a lever for true liberation." "The Romantics were Prompted," *Problems of Contemporary Art: Possibilities, An Occasional Review*, winter 1947-48, page 84.

⁴¹ Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 18.

35, the artists' Club, the periodical *Possibilities: An Occasional Review*, and parts of The New School for Social Research meet this criteria. Although these forums have been mentioned in numerous scholarly studies, they have rarely been treated as more than an aside, a curiosity that conflicted with the dominant notion of the artist as individual—as modern genius. My research has yet to find a study that considers these alliances as constitutive of anything beyond mere camaraderie and of art historical value only in regard to influence. Nowhere are these activities considered as attempts on the part of the artists to create a nurturing political sphere along the lines defined by Arendt's *polis*. However, distinctions do exist. Unlike the classical *polis* the artists' forums lacked the structure and critical mass required for self-perpetuation:

[This] required the boundaries drawn around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself.⁴²

The forums such as the Artists' Session at Studio 35 can be interpreted as the artists' attempt to push beyond the state *homo faber* and recover the ancient ideal of a politicized public realm in which action might be celebrated and preserved. Several of the artists' comments engage the criteria set forth by Arendt as she defines the *polis*. The artists' session, a non-hierarchical plurality, was intended to provide a forum which would memorialize the isolated

⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

actions of the artists beyond the eclipsing present. Moreover, one session theme in particular parallels Arendt's basis of action, namely natality.

At the Artists' Session Baziotes noted that the artist ". . . does something on the canvas and takes a chance in the hope that something important will be revealed."⁴³ Further, Tomlin confirmed de Kooning's analysis of the act of creation by asking, "Would you say that automatic structure is in the process of becoming, . . . ?"⁴⁴ To which de Kooning answered affirmatively. Sterne then defined the essential issue saying that her "painting begins to function by rules of its own, often preventing me from achieving my original vision. . . ."⁴⁵ These sentiments are echoed by Rothko who wrote:

I think of my pictures as dramas. . . . Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated, or described in advance. They begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space.⁴⁶

This admission of the lack of the artist's sovereignty, the diminishing direction provided by the artist's original intention is likewise an element of Arendt's analysis. But, significantly, her analysis is embedded in political philosophy.

⁴³ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 218.

⁴⁴ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 221.

⁴⁵ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 221.

⁴⁶ Rothko, "The Romantics were Prompted," 84.

Arendt equates the inherent freedom and responsibilities of action with the uncertainty of democratic rule and in contrast to the certainty of dictatorship. She writes of the historical temptation "to seek . . . shelter from the action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end."⁴⁷ This recalls Lippold's dissenting statement in the Studio 35 transcript:

The title for me exists at the beginning and all through the piece, and it keeps me clearly on the road, I believe, to the conclusion of the work. The only thing that I am interested in resolving is that intent with which I begin . . .⁴⁸

Arendt would prefer de Kooning and Sterne's acknowledgment of the unpredictable nature of the originary act. She considers, as do these artists, that the act of creation discloses one's essential uniqueness. One could no more have control of that action than could we control who we are. Such an expression of essential uniqueness recalls Greenberg's formalism while recovering the sense of extraordinary possibility which his early criticism fostered and which is too often omitted from boilerplate characterizations of his thinking. Arendt, for her part quotes an older source for these issues, Dante Alighieri. "*Nihil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri*

⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220.

⁴⁸ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 218.

debet" (Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self)."⁴⁹

The violent wave of fascism and totalitarianism then sweeping the globe can be viewed as a prompt to which the artists were responding in their bid for freedom in the context of the *polis*. In this regard the New School's extraordinarily distinguished faculty sets an especially pertinent example. As with a number of his fellow artists, Lipton had initially been drawn to the New School by its open lectures.⁵⁰ By 1939 he was offering his first studio course there.⁵¹ Lipton would teach at the New School continuously for twenty-five years. The catalogue entry accompanying his course is straight forward, factual, and not particularly revealing, however in a 1981 interview Lipton elaborated on his regard for the New School:

I worked all day by myself, and found it entertaining to be with a group of people who were intelligent, were able to ask intelligent questions . . . in the kind of

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175.

⁵⁰ Rutkoff and Scott, 234. According to the painter Robert Goodnough, he and a number of his fellow artists commonly attended lectures and took courses at the New School on subjects ranging from philosophy to psychology (from an interview by the author October 15, 1995). Additionally, Tony Smith's papers contain a schedule for lecture series held at the New School Monday evenings at eight during the Spring of 1950. These were organized by Rudolf Arnheim and titled, "Isolation of the Arts?—A Symposium with lectures by Peter Blake, Heinrich Blücher, William Phillips, and others (see "Isolation of the Arts?" in Biographic and Bibliography Box, Tony Smith Estate. Sawin also notes that Baziotes heard Onslow-Ford lecture there. Sawin, 157.

⁵¹ Course #49, New School for Social Research Bulletin, Spring 1939, 55.

environment that gave rise to polemics, to discussion, to search, to adventure.⁵²

Lipton continues, speaking of his "excitement" in interacting with the class.

These comments continue to parallel Arendt's definitions of the condition of work and action. For as mentioned above, while the artists had clearly attempted to remove themselves from the repetitious activity of labor they also sought to defy or at least counter-balance, through these associations, an aspect of Arendt's definition for work, namely isolation. She writes:

The point is that *homo faber*, the builder of the world and the producer of things, can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs, because these products themselves are always produced in isolation.⁵³

This conflict between solitude as a requisite for work and the urge towards political affiliation is clarified within the Arendtian categories of work and action.

Among her criteria for the *homo faber*, the condition Arendt most closely correlates with the art making, is the proviso that such work can only be undertaken in isolation. And while it is a given that the artists of the New York School were normally engaged in the actual process of art-making in the isolation of their respective studios, the various forums outlined, The Subjects of the Artist, the Club, Studio 35, and some aspects of the New School are

⁵² Rutkoff and Scott, 233.

⁵³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 160-161.

evidence of a reaction against the privation that characterizes the creation of human artifice. An imperative prompted by the era's political turmoil and the artists subsequent search for political consequence.

Thus just as the American painters sought contact with a broader cultural matrix, the New School for Social Research made readily accessible many of Europe's foremost thinkers and thus fostered the possibility of valuable cross-fertilization or as Lipton said, "the kind of environment that gave rise to polemics, to discussion, to search, to adventure."⁵⁴ And American artists' were directly involved in this campaign, Motherwell for instance, remembers contributing to an:

international album of prints for the benefit of the International Rescue Committee that got so many gifted artists and intellectuals, Jewish and gentile alike, out of Nazi Europe during World War II.⁵⁵

Michael Leja has suggested that one of the commonalities shared by the artist's associated with Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and early 1950s was their engagement with "bourgeois paradigms of human nature, mind, and society which were [then] in flux and under pressure." and that the artists sought, "[p]owerful new ideas from the realms of psychology,

⁵⁴ See footnote #51, chapter 3.

⁵⁵ Robert Motherwell, "The Universal Language of Children's Art, and Modernism," address to the "International Exchange in the Arts" conference of the Institute of International Education, April 29, 1970. Ross, 118.

anthropology, and philosophy . . . to help rebuild them and to make comprehensible the sequence of global cataclysms."⁵⁶

Arendt, who had both experienced such cataclysm first hand and had developed just such "new ideas" as those to which Leja refers, was an active participant in the intellectual community with which the Abstract Expressionists were affiliated. Further, her work provides valuable models for reconstructing the context in which their art was produced. In her lectures such as "The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism," given at the New School for Social Research, March 18-April 22, 1953, Arendt defines many of the essential components found in her later book, *The Human Condition*⁵⁷ with which this chapter has been concerned.

The idea of the *polis* as Arendt reclaimed it was a direct response to the increasing restrictions on freedom which she had witnessed. The artists' forums, the Subjects of the Artist, Studio 35, the Club, and aspects of the New School can each be defined in this context as an attempt to construct a polis-like structure and thereby attempt to achieve the freedom which may result from an intrasubjective *vita activa*.

⁵⁶ Leja "The Formation of the Avant-Garde in New York," 23.

⁵⁷ Notes for Nine Lectures Folder, Box 75, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

CHAPTER 4

CONFRONTATIONS WITH RADICAL EVIL:
THE AMBIGUITY OF MYTH AND THE INADEQUACY OF REPRESENTATION

If we profess a kinship to the art of primitive man, it is because the feelings they expressed have a particular pertinence today. . . . That these demonic and brutal images fascinate us today, is not because they are exotic, nor do they make us nostalgic for a past which seems enchanting because of its remoteness. . . . All primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life.¹

The progression of a painter's work [is] toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer. As examples of such obstacles, I give (among others) memory, history, or geometry, which are swamps of generalization from which one might pull out parodies of ideas (which are ghosts) but never an idea in itself.²

These antithetical analyses on the value of myth and memory in the realm of painting were authored by Mark Rothko (the former statement with Adolph Gottlieb) less than six years apart. The first is a broad embrace of what these painters considered to be the powerful creative wellspring of myth. In 1943 terror and fear were indeed present and

¹ Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, "The Portrait of the Modern Artist," broadcast on WNYC radio October 13, 1943. Quoted in Whiting, 172.

² Mark Rothko, "Statement on His Attitude in Painting," *The Tiger's Eye* 9 (October 1949): 114.

immediate. Totalitarianism, firestorms, and the ravages of total war must have seemed to result from some global pathology. Carl Gustav Jung's conception of Myth as a foundation of memories, could help make sense of the world's violence and was quite a popular theory during the Second World War.³ Myth was, after all, the traditional structure with which evil was understood and this was especially true in the visual arts.

In the context of Abstract Expressionism myth must be understood in the broadest sense. The idea of myth common in the United States in the 1940s was that it was international, trans-historical, and interdisciplinary. It was not tied only to the classical tradition, although the Greeks played an important role, but also encompassed the Jungian idea of a universal archaic. This conception of myth can be understood to be an amalgamation of psychology mixed with both cultural

³ Jung's importance to the Abstract Expressionists has been carefully documented. Polcari quotes Gottlieb: Oh, we were all interested. First we discovered Freud, and then Jung." Polcari also documents that "Newman, Still, Lipton, Parsons, Krasner, Rothko, and John Graham were all familiar with Jung . . ." (Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 43 and 376, note #58).

Gottlieb owned a copy of Jung's *Integration of the Personality*, translated by Stanley Dell (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939) which Lee Krasner had also read (Rose, 50). Tony Smith owned a copy of Jung's *Psychology and its Social Meaning*, translated by Ira Progoff (New York: Grove Press, 1953), Pollock owned Jung's *The Myth of the Divine Child*, 1949 (see O'Conner & Thaw, 191). Finally, just before his death, Pollock declared in an interview, "I have been a Jungian for a long time" (Leja, 122). The artist had earlier been in analysis from 1939-1940 with the Jungian, Dr. Joseph L. Henderson and later with Dr. Violet Staub de Laszlo.

and physical anthropology, an integration of popular authors such as Freud, Jung, Frazer, Benedict, and Boas.⁴

Scholarship exists which documents and analyzes the Abstract Expressionist's interest and use of mythology in the broad definition of the word current in the 1940s. Myth, among American intellectuals was then nearly ubiquitous. While Jung remained in Europe, several of the most important popularizers of the mythic were not only in New York, but were a part of the artists' circle including Joseph Campbell, Franz Boas, and others.

Yet by 1947, many of the Abstract Expressionists had reconsidered the efficacy of the "primitive" as an expression "of the brutality of the natural world." Having been witness to the unparalleled crescendo of violence revealed at the war's close, faced with confirmed knowledge of the Holocaust and the destructive force of atomic fission, Rothko's earlier willingness to accept evil in the romantic literary context of myth was no longer a viable option. Primitive "memory" and "history" were now recognized by several artists as "swamps of generalization," which, aside from moral considerations, imposed barriers to expression.

Much of the literature which treats Abstract Expressionism and its embrace of myth traces the debt owed by the artists to the French Surrealist refugees then in New

⁴ A valuable and coeval outline of the development of the meanings of the word myth may be found in Erich Kahler, "The Persistence of Myth," *Chimera* 4, number 3 (spring 1946): 2-11. This thematic issue is devoted to myth and was well known by the artists.

York. These émigrés are often credited with fracturing America's cultural provincialism and introducing such foundational psychoanalytic concepts as automatism.⁵ For its part, myth was seen as a preparatory phase which, because of Abstract Expressionism's formal development, gave way to the style's signature abstraction by 1946 and 1947. An assessment of myth's usefulness and limitations in the political environment of the 1940s is usually absent.

Several significant exceptions have been published over the past decade. Cecile Whiting's valuable book, *Antifascism in American Art*, considers the theme of mythic tragedy in the work of Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman. Whiting notes that Rothko had read Aeschylus⁶ and that the mythic narratives upon which these artists concentrated were, as Newman pointed out, of value during the present international crisis. In 1948 Newman wrote:

The Greek notion of tragedy was not ontological, but a social notion, a statement concerning the chaos of individual action. Contrary to the prevailing psychological interpretations—that it was concerned with individual frustration, with the problem of human failure and success—Greek tragedy constantly revolves around the sense of hopelessness: that no matter how heroically one may act, no matter how innocent or moral that action may seem, it inevitably leads to tragic failure because of our inability to understand or

⁵ For a recent example see Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Cambridge, 1995). André Breton speaks of new myth at the conclusion of his wartime essay, "Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not" (1942). Reprinted in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 294.

⁶ Whiting, 176.

control the social result; that the individual act is a gesture in chaos, so that we are consequently the helpless victims of an insoluble fate.

Whiting suggests that the individual's inability to impact fate explains, "perhaps . . . why [Newman] Rothko, and Gottlieb rejected direct political action or propagandistic imagery as a means of affecting world events."²

In a further acknowledgment of the relation of myth and the war Stephen Polcari suggests that:

Gottlieb and many of his colleagues adapted wide-ranging literary, psychological, and allegorical representations of struggle, trial, and redemption to the ordeals of their time. They created parallels for the vegetation rites and fertility gods of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, [and] for the unconscious processes of Carl Jung's semi-religious psychology. . . . In other words, Gottlieb, representing a central thrust of Abstract Expressionism, partly imposed a mythic structure of ancient rite, medieval romance, and ritual quest on his vision of struggle and affirmation in a time, in Churchill's words . . . of "tormented humanity." Gottlieb allegorized and ritualized contemporary history.³

Finally, in his book, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism:*

Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s, Michael Leja writes:

[R]ecourse to talk of the primitive was the effort to comprehend the barbarism of twentieth-century history. . . . In the late 1930s and early 1940s, as Fascist terror and brutality began to become widely known, the discourse on primitivism became a receptacle in which Fascism was contained and analyzed.¹⁰

⁷ According to John P. O'Neill this essay was intended for *Tiger's Eye* but was not published due to its length. Barnett Newman, "The New Sense of Fate (March 1948)," *Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 164 and 168.

⁸ Whiting, 177.

⁹ Stephen Polcari, "Adolph Gottlieb's Allegorical Epic of World War II," *Art Journal* 47, number 3 (fall 1988): 203.

However, what remains to be considered is the question of why myth was abruptly abandoned. It might be tempting to presume that the war's end negated the need for such themes, but it should be recalled that the Second World War did not end in the exhausted hopelessness that characterized the armistice signed at Versailles in 1918. In vivid contrast, the century's second global war was not only longer, larger, and far more lethal than the first, but it was driven by more extreme ideologies. The result was that the Second World War ended in an escalating crescendo of violence. The slaughter that resulted from the German invasion of the Soviet Union pointed to the end of Europe's war, but it was only with the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers that the full extent of Nazi barbarism became known.¹¹

It has taken almost half a century for the liberator's films of the death camps to be broadly addressed, their initial impact must have been considerable. And then, even for a world numbed by years of total war and genocide, the destructive force of the atom heralded the potential for a new level of violence that fostered fears so great they led to half a century of Cold War brinkmanship.

¹⁰ Leja, 65.

¹¹ Italy declared war on Germany on October 13, 1943; Germany formalized its defeat on May 7, 1945; Japan capitulated September second less than one month after atomic bombs hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet Union declared war on Japan.

In August 1945, Dwight MacDonalld wrote of the atom bomb drop, "This atrocious action places 'us,' the defenders of civilization, on a moral level with 'them,' the beasts of Maidanek."¹²

Nonetheless, the development of the artists' signature styles by about 1947 has remained a sufficient explanation for the demise of myth.¹³ That is, the formal result has been confused as the motivation. In his early contextual history, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, Sandler puts it this way. Immediately following his chapters on "The Myth-Makers," which includes Gottlieb, Rothko, Pollock, Baziotes, Stamos, Hofmann, Still, and Gorky, in which he too links myth to the era's violence, Sandler makes a clean break by stating:

However, it was not until 1947 that the Abstract Expressionists began to arrive at independent, mature styles that could no longer be subsumed under existing categories. They address themselves to a difficult formal problem: If they eliminated representation . . .¹⁴

¹² Majdanek (Maidanek) Poland was the site of one the Nazi's four most effective extermination factories. In August 1944 the camp was liberated by the Red Army which allowed American journalists in to report what had been found. The subsequent press reports were both graphic and widely disseminated. Quote from Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 233.

¹³ Nancy Jachec's essay, "Myth and the Audience: The Individual, the Collective and the Problem of Mass Communication by the Early 1950s," in *American Abstract Expressionism*, Critical Forum Series 1, edited by David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1993), 129-145, opens by addressing this issue but then frames it in an analysis of mass audience thus sidestepping the issues of subject inherent in the works of art themselves.

¹⁴ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 92.

For their part, the three authors, noted as exceptions earlier, also conform in varying degrees to this view, that is, they do not directly address the demise of myth. Whiting's thesis does not advance past the mythic images of Rothko and Gottlieb but suggests that they were a bridge to the artists' post-war styles. Neither Polcari nor Leja acknowledge any break with the mythic unconscious as an underlying source for artists like Rothko, Pollock, and Gottlieb although they point out that myth became less obvious. Again, what is missing is an evaluation of those aspects of myth that, in light of historical developments, became unacceptable.¹⁵

What is absent from the critical discourse is an evaluation of the motives which led many of the artists to dismiss myth by 1947. Far from being a simple rejection of the last traces of narrative as much scholarship has been content to suggest, an understanding of this broad turn must also take into account myth's function in American art at this time and its striking limitations.

It may be useful here to take note of this chapter's structure and thesis. First I will establish both the common

¹⁵ Erica Doss does develop the idea that Pollock and his colleagues emphasized individuation as a strategy for emerging from mass culture. She cites Hollywood's attention to such issues in *Sorry Wrong Number*, 1948 and *Beyond the Forest*, 1949 and quotes from David Reisman's sociological study *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), "Americans . . . had lost 'their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other.'" David Rieman, *The Lonely*

use of literary mythology as a pictorial and structural subject for many of the Abstract Expressionist painters and sculptors in the early and mid-1940s and its subsequent and abrupt abandonment by some of these artists immediately after the war. Several aspects of myth will be considered as are the literary and scientific sources which made these ideas desirable and accessible to the artists.

While the subsequent waning of interest in the mythic by the artists is often seen as a passive discarding which resulted as the artists' painting matured formally, and which was replaced by their triumphant breakthrough to a purer abstraction, in fact, mythology presented serious moral dilemmas and was consciously rejected.¹⁶ The problems mythology posed for the artists are analyzed within the context of the increasing duration and intensity of the war.

Finally, Hannah Arendt is reintroduced. Her early documentation and theoretical treatment of totalitarian violence is traced. Her essays and lectures rejecting mythology's adequacy as a method for understanding radical evil are considered in relation to the painters' concurrent abandonment of this historical model.

Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 349 quoted in Doss, 338.

¹⁶ Exceptions to this exist. A number of artists continued to regularly draw upon myth well into the 1950s and beyond. William Baziotes, Seymour Lipton, Theodore Stamos, and Theodore Roszak among others continued to create artwork dependent on a broad definition of myth. Even Gottlieb retains elements of his earlier pictographic grid archigraphs into the 1950s. But importantly, evil is not the focus of these later images.

Myth offered the artists a structure with which they could directly engage the violence of World War Two—the primary reality of their era—without having to resort to illustrative documentation which would have undermined the authority of their art's abstraction. Within the universal themes of myth, the struggle of good against evil was primary and enjoyed a cultural acceptance that has since dissipated.

In New York's academic and cultural communities in the 1940s, myth's relevance was touted as a basic truism. Spurred by the popularization of physical and cultural anthropology and psychology, myth in the broadest sense was warmly embraced by a wide swath of American culture which Leja classifies as the "modern man" writers.¹⁷ Indeed, for Rothko, Gottlieb, Bazliotes, Pollock, and others, myth seemingly provided a solution to the challenge of developing subjects relevant to the current global crisis. This occurred while they also continued to satisfy their thirst for the heroic and avoided the mundane mimesis by which the Regionalist painters portrayed the world.

The controversy surrounding the recognition and treatment of subject matter and more specifically those aspects of a work of art indicative of the presence of the mythic has been widely and divisively debated. Such internecine conflict among art historians became a matter of public comment when, in 1979 and 1980 a flurry of magazine

articles and rebuttals, the Jungian interpretations of Pollock's art came under sharp attack.¹⁸ William Rubin, then a curator at The Museum of Modern Art, defending the essentialist position in the face of Pollock's disarming assertions that he sought access to the unconscious, could only disparage the hopelessly narrow psychoanalytic readings offered by the weakest of the Jungian interpreters.¹⁹

Still, Rubin sought to undermine the study of subject matter even when more broadly applied. Rubin did this by offering, with a degree of feigned empathy, his own "misreading" of Pollock's painting *Pasiphaë*, 1943 while a student (figure 16). At issue was Pollock's willingness to exchange the two titles, *Moby Dick* and *Pasiphaë*.²⁰

Rubin was correct in his assertion that for Pollock the title was secondary. After all, the artist would soon

¹⁷ I refer here to the work of Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, Sigmund Freud, Carl G. Jung, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Margaret Mead, and Suzanne Langer.

¹⁸ Leja provides an illuminating summation of this episode, Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 124-126.

¹⁹ Rubin became a curator in 1967, he became director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art in 1973. One facet of this debate was carried out over the course of a year, see William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism," *Art in America* 67, number 7 (November 1979): 104-123; William Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism, Part II," *Art in America* 67, number 8 (December 1979): 72-91; Donald E. Gordon, "Department of Jungian Amplification, I: Pollock's 'Bird,' or How Jung Did Not Offer Much Help in Myth-Making," Irving Sandler, David Rubin, Elizabeth Langhorne, and William Rubin, "Department of Jungian Amplification, II: More on Rubin on Pollock," *Art in America* 68, number 8 (October 1980): 43-67.

substitute titles with numbers. But this does not mean that the themes implied by the titles were of secondary importance, only that the process of titling, which took place after a painting was complete and during Pollock's reflective post-painting assessment, was more akin to an addendum than to a process integral to the act of creation.²⁰ What Rubin de-emphasized was the common tragic theme in the stories of *Moby-Dick* and *Pasiphaë*, while admitting that Pollock "would have rejected a title that did not have some metaphoric significance in regard to the image." Instead, Rubin stresses the "elliptical relation between image and title. . . ."²²

Thankfully, the artists themselves can rescue us from relying too heavily on secondary evaluations. The subject of titles was important to them and it arose during the Studio 35 Artists' Session. Here, Hedda Sterne raised the issue of titles as a common means by which artwork is falsely classified. Reinhardt responded, "If a title does not mean anything and creates a misunderstanding, why put a title on a

²⁰ Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism, Part II," 73-74.

²¹ This process of assessment and naming after the act of painting and beyond the isolation of the studio calls to mind Arendt's *polis* as developed in the third chapter. Friedman writes that Pollock "frequently encouraged people close to him, those whose sensitivity he trusted, to free associate verbally around the completed work." Friedman, 94.

²² Rubin, "Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism, Part II," 74. Also see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 254.

painting?"²³ To this Brooks, Gottlieb, Pousette-Dart, Motherwell, de Kooning, Lassaw, Ferber, Lippold, and Newman all offered their own varied thoughts. Yet there was a degree of unity, a general feeling that titles can be misused by both the artist and the viewer. To this, Newman countered:

I think it would be very well if we could title pictures by identifying the subject matter so that the audience could be helped. I think the problem of titles is purely a social phenomenon. The story is more or less the same when you can identify them. I think the implication has one of two possibilities: (1) We are not smart enough to identify our subject matter, or (2) Language is so bankrupt that we can't use it. I think both are wrong. I think the possibility still exists, and I think we are smart enough. Perhaps we are arriving at a new state of painting where the thing has to be seen for itself. . . .²⁴

The discussion at Studio 35 next turned its focus to the related issue of subject matter in painting which has already been analyzed in the previous chapter. It is important to recognize this connection between title and subject and to accord it the same attention that the artists did. This then, allows for the following analysis of the artists' rejection of certain aspects of myth within the context of what Arendt called radical evil.

* * *

All mythology masters and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through the imagination; hence

²³ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 216.

²⁴ Artists' Session at Studio 35," *Modern Artists in America*. Reprinted in Ross, 218.

it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature.²⁵

The unprecedented horror of totalitarianism which came to light during and after the Second World War required a cultural redefinition of evil. The extremity of the violence necessitated a new interweaving of evil into the fabric of contemporary human thought.²⁶ Malevolence came to be recognized as a primary and ineluctable human characteristic. Slowly, even in the splendid isolation historically afforded by America's oceans, it became necessary for Americans to grapple with the meaning and consequences of this escalation of aggression. Artists at mid-century were clearly struggling to contend with this re-assessment dictated by the sheer magnitude of these radical developments.

Historically, mythology has been the forum for artists in which the heinous could be comprehended and thus made bearable. While the use of myth in American art at mid-century has been explored in depth, especially in regard to Jung and Joseph Campbell, this bid to place all but incomprehensible contemporary events into a standardized pattern of human activity gains a new dimension in the context of Arendt's own concurrent investigations, albeit in

²⁵ Herbert Read (quoting Karl Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*), *Art and Society* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 65. First published 1936.

²⁶ An estimated fifty-five million people were killed as a direct result of the Second World War. Causes of death included mass extermination, battle, air raids, starvation, disease, partisan fighting, and other forms of cruelty.

the political and philosophical rather than the artistic sphere.²⁷

Arendt's theories can be used to understand the shift by prominent Abstract Expressionists from what was basically a Surrealist conception of evil to that of a more existential one. This is an extreme and fundamental change since the two outlooks are very much in opposition. The former system as transformed by psychoanalysis is founded upon the idea that, as Polcari has written, "the Collective Unconscious refers to and reveals psychic contents deeper than, prior to, and more fundamental than mere individual personality."²⁸ In sharp contrast, existentialism posits that an individual bears the full burden of responsibility for a meaningful existence regardless of innate genetic or racial influences. In other words in spite of any romantic notions concerning the culpability of an archaic *id*.

War has long prompted artists to explore the subject of evil. In early visual expressions, evil exists within some form of structural framework, be it religious or allegorical, and this context renders it in some sense tolerable. This is due, at least in part, to western culture's traditional moral

²⁷ For a further discussion of the uses of myth during the war see especially: Kirk Varnedoe, "Abstract Expressionism," *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, volume 2 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985); Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern*; and Ann Gibson "Editorial Statement," *Art Journal* 47, number 3, (Fall 1988): 177-173.

²⁸ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 43.

foundation, the basic underlying assumption of divine justice.

For example, in Albrecht Dürer's woodcut, *Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* c.1497-98 (figure 17), evil incarnate sweeps across the sky—but within a religious context governed judiciously by the angel who presumably ensures the administration of the ancient laws of sin and virtue. In her study of the radical nature of evil in the concentration camp Arendt compares normative visions of evil:

The one thing that . . . made the traditional conceptions of hell tolerable to man: the last judgment [was] the idea of an absolute standard of justice combined with the infinite possibility of grace.²⁹

In his fresco, *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*, 1820-22 (figure 4), the Spanish Romantic Francisco Goya, also frames his image of evil in a pre-established mythology. Here, the huge gaunt figure of Saturn (Cronos/Time), one of the Titans, son of the Earth and Heaven is portrayed with an insane malevolent focus as he devours one of his children, a God, and thus "brings an end to all things that have had a beginning."³⁰ This is one of the principal organizational themes of mythology as understood by Joseph Campbell.³¹ Goya's

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, "The Concentration Camps," *Partisan Review* 15, number 7 (July 1948): 751.

³⁰ Thomas Bullfinch, *Bullfinch's Complete Mythology* (London: Spring Books, 1964), 9. In 1948 Theodoros Stamos painted a clearly related image, *The Sacrifice of Chronos*. Oil on masonite, 48 x 36", The Phillips Collection, Washington.

³¹ Joseph Campbell spoke at the Artists' Club on "Myth and Creative Art," April 27, 1951. See his contemporaneous

image of evil shocks—an emotion expressed by the brilliant reds that seep from the mutilated carcass and are offset by the dark roughly painted formless depth which surrounds the figures. Yet mediating this violent infanticide is the structure of myth, in which the inevitable dramatic cycle, as predictable as the seasons and rooted in the human psyche, within which evil is as necessary as good.

More contemporary representations of myth which functioned as something of a guide for the Abstract Expressionists in the visual representation of evil include Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937 (figure 19). Reacting to the Nazi bombing during the war against fascism in Spain, Picasso furnished his painted response with agonized references to the myths of antiquity such as the Minotaur, religious references such as the massacre of the holy innocents, and references from the modern era such as Goya's *The Third of May, 1808*, *The Shootings of La Moncloa*, 1814.

Picasso was a potent, almost paternal figure for the Abstract Expressionists and especially for Pollock as is commonly pointed out.³² The painting *Guernica* has been linked specifically to Pollock by many authors. Its impact on David Siqueiros, with whom Pollock had worked with his brother Sandy in the Mexican Muralist's experimental workshop in New

book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press/Bollingen, 1949).

³² See, for example, Ashton, *The New York School*, 102.

York in 1936, is important.³³ Rosalind E. Krauss has recorded the impact of Picasso on Pollock:

That Pollock had begun by 1938 to imitate Picasso's current style as well as his image repertory—something that would intensify after the 1939 appearance of *Guernica*—has long been the stuff of art-historical accounts of Pollock's work. What has tended to be increasingly stressed more recently, however, is that this imitation had at its deepest goal a desire for what Pollock understood as Picasso's desire, namely to access the unconscious.³⁴

Lee Krasner recalled:

Picasso's *Guernica* floored me. When I saw it the first time at the Dudensing Gallery, I rushed out, walked about the block three times before coming back to look at it. And then later I used to go to the Modern everyday to see it.³⁵

And William C. Seitz has written that Motherwell believed that:

Picasso's *Guernica* . . . reversed the historical trend toward substituting 'lesser' genres of still life, landscape, or the arbitrarily isolated figure for the crucial religious, historical, and ethical themes.³⁶

³³ Peter Fuller, "American Painting since the Last War," *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, edited by David and Cecile Schapiro (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1990), page 172. Characteristically, Greenberg acknowledged this influence as purely morphologic.

³⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993), 281.

³⁵ Dudensing directed the Valentine Gallery in 1939 when the painting was first exhibited in New York while touring to raise money for the Spanish Civil War. Interview with Grace Glueck, quoted in Ellen C. Oppler, editor, *Picasso's Guernica* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 111. In her essay Oppler notes this inheritance by pointing out that the exhibition space in the Museum of Modern Art that once held *Guernica*, the *Charnel House*, 1944-1945, and related drawings were, when these works of art were sent to Madrid, replaced by Pollock's seminal painting, *One (Number 31, 1950)*, 1950. Oppler, 113.

³⁶ William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 113.

Thus Picasso's representation of evil remained dependent on religious and mythological structures.

Other contemporaneous images of evil available would include those in popular culture, those associated with Regionalism, and the solutions developed by the émigré Surrealists then in New York. The Abstract Expressionists found each of these groups wanting. In the mid-1940s Newman wrote:

The long-standing inhibiting position that made New York a mirror of Paris disappeared in 1940, and suddenly the artists of New York had to stand on their own feet. At the same time the international character of the war had the effect of muting, if it did not completely silence, the professional Americanists who have spent the last two decades trying to foster a cheap popular art under the guise of an isolationist political slogan.³⁷

Newman may have been reacting in part to a scathing indictment of Regionalism published in 1946 by the eminent art historian H. W. Janson in which he equates the prominent nationalism of American scene painting with German nationalism.³⁸ Newman may, however, have been reacting more generally against popular representations of war that included racially loaded graphic propaganda which commonly turned the Germans into a Paleolithic horde and the Japanese into diabolical simians. Other heavy-handed popular representations of the war could be found in the American military itself.

³⁷ Barnett Newman, "The Plasmic Image," 150.

³⁸ For a critical assessment of this essay see Doss, 363.

Ironically, an artist who would later be associated with west coast Abstract Expressionism, Edward F. Dugmore (1915-1996), a Marine private first class, produced during the war just the type of American scene realism that the civilian artists in New York sought to avoid.³⁹ Their aversion was based both on formal considerations attributable to notions of the avant-garde and their search for a method that could begin to accommodate the moral complexity they had begun to explore.

Dugmore's drawing, *Finale*, n.d. rather awkwardly displays a foreground of receding crosses each presumably a grave marker (figure 20). The forward most cross is draped with a tattered flag emblazoned with a swastika and on each is perched a helmet of the Wehrmacht. In the distance is desolation—a few dead trees and a bombed out city.⁴⁰

Perhaps the best example of an American Regionalist representation of the war was Thomas Hart Benton's painting *Again*, 1941 (figure 21), from his "The Year of Peril" series. Here, Pollock's teacher and long-time friend depicts the Axis leaders (Adolf Hitler, Hideki Tojo, and Benito Mussolini) in

³⁹ For a further information regarding realist American art and the Second World War see, Greta Berman and Jeffrey Wechsler, *Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American Painting, 1940-1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981).

⁴⁰ See Aimée Crane, editor, *Marines at War* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1943), 57. Also see Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 128-129 and 251. Also see Stephen Polcari, *From Omaha to Abstract Expressionism: American Artists Respond to World War II* (New York: Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, 1995).

the guise of Roman soldiers as they re-martyr Christ. The effort to devise an allegorical context for present circumstances is unmistakable.

Finally, even the illustrative Surrealist representations of the war offered little for the Abstract Expressionists in their search beyond the conceptual framework upon which their prewar work had been based, namely accessing the unconscious.

All such images relied on a religious and mythological structure for meaning, and as Arendt noted above, for creating boundaries with which to limit evil, to make it function as part of a larger system. Given this historical precedent it is not surprising that early on, many of the Abstract Expressionists had favored mythology as a framework for the expression of evil. This is not to suggest that interest in mythology was solely the result of an attempt to comprehend contemporary violence. Rather, myth offered a coherent and familiar structure that could rationalize chaos through its very sanction of the irrational.⁴¹

This virtual celebration of the irrational was an idea that had most recently been developed by the Surrealists. As Mona Hadler has illustrated in her article, "David Hare: A Magician's Game in Context," Hare, a sculptor, felt that evil was largely dependent on the Surrealist concept. He

⁴¹ This is not to suggest that myth was completely rejected. It was not. Outside the realm of evil, myth remained of great interest to both the artists and even to Arendt.

understood evil as "essential for the imagination."⁴² These ideas are also referred to by Louise Bogan in her essay, "The Secular Hell." She writes of the value of the mythic yet acknowledges that, "Malice and envy walk freely abroad. No force is available to confront Evil but more Evil. It is a time of Demons, as well as of new—unrecognized—'mythmaking' power."⁴³ These ideas were echoed by the artists. Gottlieb wrote:

Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and the times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality.⁴⁴

This was recognized by Polcari who noted that, "several Abstract Expressionists employed [myth] to come to terms with, structure, and point a way out of the crisis that dominated their time."⁴⁵ In essence, the folkloric provided a

⁴² From an interview of David Hare conducted by Mona Hadler April 29, 1978. Cited in Mona Hadler, "David Hare: The Magician's Game in Context," 198.

⁴³ Louise Bogan, "The Secular Hell," *Chimera* 4, number 3 (spring 1946): 14. This is a special issue devoted to myth.

⁴⁴ Adolph Gottlieb, "The Ides of Art: The Attitudes of Ten Artists on their Works' Contemporaneousness," *The Tiger's Eye* 1, number 2 (December 1947): 43.

⁴⁵ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 41. Polcari has carefully documented the sources of the mythology utilized by the Abstract Expressionists, these include: anthropology, Franz Boas was at Columbia and his daughter was a friend of David Smith and Dorothy Dehner; the book, *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer was owned and/or read by Motherwell, Still, Newman, Pollock, Stamos, and Hare as was *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell which was widely read as was Jung. Polcari lists Pollock, Gottlieb, Newman, Still, Lipton, Krasner,

degree of comfort through familiarity. Campbell believed that at the conclusion of what he terms the "mono-myth" or the universal narrative is either final redemption and resurrection, or reunification and forgiveness, either way the certainty of the triumph of good over evil.⁴⁶

This dynamic can be seen in Jackson Pollock's drawing *War*, c.1943-45 (figure 22) which offers an example of Abstract Expressionism's use of the mythic. Pollock, who had studied with Benton until 1932 and visited his former teacher's studio in the early 1940s, would certainly have been familiar with the painting *Again* and its conflation of ancient allegory and modern strife. Pollock's drawing which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is catalogued with the date 1947, and it is so inscribed. However, Bernice Rose, in her catalogue, *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting*, writes that although later inscribed 1947 the actual date is c.1943-44.⁴⁷ This is important since

Rothko, and Graham as all familiar with Jung. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 38 and 43.

⁴⁶ Campbell, 245-6.

⁴⁷ The 1944-45 date is supported by two Museum of Modern Art labels adhered to the back of the framed object. The first reads "Museum of Modern Art/Jackson Pollock: Works on paper/WAR.(1944), subsequently inscribed 1947). Brush pen and ink and crayon/Artist's Estate/Museum no.67. 1314, Box no. 1" The other reads "Museum of Modern Art/Jackson Pollock/WAR, (1945, subsequently inscribed 1947)/ Brush pen and black ink, and crayon on paper/1979.121/Box no.5. Further, in the catalogue Rose places *War* next to an untitled drawing (CR 741 inscribed "Jackson Pollock 43" that shares distinct formal characteristics with the work of art in question. See Bernice Rose, *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 13, 34, and 35.

by 1947 Pollock had rejected such overt symbolism. Polcari reads the pyre as suggesting "death and rebirth," and as a "mythic and ritual[istic]" response to the war.⁴⁶

The drawing itself is on a large uncut sheet of stiff deckled paper, the sort used for printmaking. It is perfectly possible that the paper came from Hayter's Atelier 17, then still housed in the New School building on Twelfth Street. Pollock had met Hayter in 1943 through his friend Rueben Kadish who worked for the printmaker. In fact, and as mentioned in the second chapter, by 1944 Pollock had begun to work with Hayter. The leaf is torn at each of the upper corners by tacks suggesting that the page was not worked horizontally—as a print—but upright.

The pyre is central. It engulfs numerous angular forms which jut out of the dense and variously drawn center. These "limbs" are interrupted by skull-like forms all of which are on fire. At ground level, the pyre is surrounded by supernatural forms including, on the left, a large round face seen full front and of the sort seen in Pollock's so-called psychoanalytic drawings. To the right is a large six legged beetle-like creature which has been upended and a totem with arms outstretched rising from a complex of dense and ambiguously drawn forms. Finally, as if from a Mother Goose rhyme, the two largest figures in the composition, a nude and a cow with a feed bag, leap over a crescent and onto the

⁴⁶ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 249-50.

bonfire. Pollock's image is of a terrible rite. Yet the violence is framed by references to the archaic, the fairy tale, the idol, and the fire itself as sacred symbol.

Similarly, Mark Rothko draws on the ancient classical tradition in his paintings from this period including *Tiresias*, 1944 (figure 23). The Thebian hunter, blinded by Athena (upon his witnessing her bathing nude) is recompensed with knowledge of the tragic future of Oedipus and his sons and half brothers Eteocles and Polyneices.⁴⁹ The seer is an unusual subject in that he is not a major figure in Sophocles' Oedipus cycle. Nevertheless, it is Tiresias who reveals to the king that Laius was his father and Jocasta his mother and so reveals the efficacy of his father's curse to the great tragic hero. In a sense, the seer functions as the abstractionist whose subjects are not immediately apparent. Oedipus says of him, "Teiresias, whose soul grasps all things, the lore that may be told and the unspeakable, the secrets of heaven and the low things of earth."⁵⁰ In his seminal 1922 poem, *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot, makes reference to Tiresias and particularly to the predetermined nature of Greek tragedy with, "(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all . . .)"⁵¹

⁴⁹ Campbell, 154; Bullfinch, 131.

⁵⁰ Sophocles, "Oedipus the King," *The Complete Greek Drama*, edited by Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., translated by R. C. Jebb (New York: Random House, 1938), volume 1, 377.

⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), line 243. Also see lines 228-229:

Rothko's treatment confines the highly abstracted standing figure in a close vertical space. There is a sense of entrapment, and yet the enormous single eye of the blind seer seemingly pierces the picture plane. The paint and the forms it defines are very similar in style and color to Rothko's other biomorphic paintings of this period such as, *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea*, 1944.

In Adolph Gottlieb's painting *Expectation of Evil*, 1945 (figure 24) there is, as in the Rothko painting, a predestined future, a drama governed by inescapable, unalterable, universal truths. This is a pictograph, a grid painting containing isolated almost arbitrary forms both iconic and abstract. In a 1967 interview Gottlieb linked his use of the grid, which structured all of his pictographs of the 1940s, to the aprons and predellas of early Italian altar pieces:

Well I'll tell you how the idea of compartmentalization occurred to me. I was looking for some sort of a systematic way of getting down these subjective images and I always admired, particularly admired the early Italian painters who preceded the Renaissance and I very much liked some of the altar pieces in which there would be, for example, the story of Christ being told in a series of boxes, starting with the Nativity and ending with the Resurrection. So I made boxes but then I put the images in with no sequence and no rational order. Well I was influenced by the early Italians.⁵²

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—. . .
T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1934), 38.

⁵² Adolph Gottlieb interviewed by Dorothy Seckler, transcript, Archives of American Art, 23.

Polcari has also illustrated this relationship noting that, ". . . the Pictographs resemble medieval depictions of the Harrowing of Hell . . ." ⁵³ This is perhaps overly specific. The Harrowing of Hell refers to Jesus' decent. But there is indeed a formal similarity with late medieval Italian images of the Last Judgment which may contain a harrowing scene. ⁵⁴

Whiting notes that, "Gottlieb's depictions of Greek myths served as expressions of universal emotions," in this case, one of profound tragedy. Oedipus is an unfortunate player in a predetermined saga, an individual who, though innocent, is fated to patricide, incest, and eventually self-mutilation. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell refers to myth's "marvelously constant story", the well worn paths, and "the thoroughly known" labyrinth. ⁵⁵ For the Abstract Expressionists mythic tragedy provided a pattern, reassuring in its predictability and against the backdrop of contemporary evil. But their images were not intended to function as mere illustrations of these ancient narratives, but rather their intention was deep evocation. In a 1943 radio broadcast Gottlieb said:

⁵³ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 171.

⁵⁴ See for example the eleventh century, *Last Judgment* mosaic in the Torcello Cathedral. Torcello is an island about seven miles beyond Venice. According to Polcari, Rothko was very fond of the church baptistry at Torcello which may have influenced the design of his chapel in Houston. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 148.

⁵⁵ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 25.

I think anyone who looks carefully at my portrait of Oedipus or at Mr. Rothko's Leda will see that this is not mythology out of Bullfinch. The implications have direct application to life.⁵⁶

In a further example of mythic evil, Seymour Lipton's sculpture, *Moloch III*, 1946 (figure 25), made reference to the Canaanite god of fire to whom children were sacrificed by burning. Lipton wrote, "Moloch became important to me in terms of hidden destructive forces below the surface of man. War always seemed to break out against the logic and necessity of peace."⁵⁷ The subject is chosen out of the need for "logic," though that very "logic" may be of a hidden primal narrative.

The roughly surfaced two foot tall sculpture, which is made of sheet lead and poured stone, resembles the ferocious skull of some primordial beast such as the artist may have seen at the American Museum of Natural History on one of his visits. In his book *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur suggests that myth offered a means for humanity to conceive of its place in the world. He wrote, "the first function of the myths of evil is to embrace mankind as a whole in one

⁵⁶ Radio script with Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist (1943)." Reprinted in Ross, 209.

⁵⁷ Albert Elsen, *Seymour Lipton* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970), 27. Quoted in *Flying Tigers: Painting and Sculpture in New York, 1939-46*, edited by Kermit Champa (Providence: Bell Gallery, Brown University, 1985), 113.

ideal history," thereby supporting the position that evil is a necessary balance in an ideal whole.⁵⁸

The use of myth as a structure with which to explicate contemporary evil caused problems for the Abstract Expressionists. These were two-fold. First, there was the problem of myth's entanglement with the National Socialists in Germany and second, the increasing awareness by artists that the events of the recent past were so vast and so radically different from previous experiences of violence that the mythological vocabulary historically used was no longer an adequate container. The magnitude of the evil perpetuated during the Second World War could no longer be embraced by the old codes, necessitating an entirely new philosophical system. Hannah Arendt played a role not only in bringing to light the immensity of the totalitarian crime but also in offering a new alternative structure to react to these events and which these artists did, in fact, at least partially adopt.

The shifting meanings of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm offer a useful example of the Nazi's engagement with myth. Donald Haase has written on the German fairy tale's adoption by the National Socialists. He points to the romanticism implicit in the tales gathered and revised by the Grimm brothers in the mid-nineteenth century and their later adoption by the Third Reich which came to revere them. But in

⁵⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, translated by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 5 and 162.

his 1993 essay, "The Politics of the Exile Fairy Tale," he traces the revision of the fairy tale by anti-fascist exiles who sought, by analyzing these stories, to deconstruct and undermine the roots of Nazism.⁵⁹

Haase cites Ernst Bloch's 1937 indictment not only of the Nazi abuse of folklore but also of Wilhelm Grimm himself. Bloch was specifically concerned with Grimm's assertion that "fairy tales are valuable as collected fragments of Germanic myth."⁶⁰ Finally, Haase pointed out the irony that in America, fairy tales regained their cultural stature when Bruno Bettelheim, himself a German exile, used them not as a subversive tool, but "as a means of re-establishing the old world."⁶¹

German interest in myth is perhaps most often linked to Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872 and earlier to Richard Wagner's operatic cycle "The Ring of the Nibelungen" (begun 1848) based on the ancient Norse saga, the *Eddas*. Like Wagner, Nietzsche conceived of a return to the archaic. He called for a "rebirth of German myth. Man today stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and

⁵⁹ Donald Haase, "The Politics of the Exile Fairy Tale," *Wider den Faschismus: Exilliteratur als Geschichte*, edited by Sigrid Bauschinger and Susan L. Cocalis (Franck Verlag Tübingen, 1993), 61-75.

⁶⁰ Haase, page 63. See Ernst Bloch, "Originalgeschichte des Dritten Reichs," *Das Wort* 12, number 2 (December 1937): 54. A decade earlier and before the rise of National Socialism, Bloch celebrated the Grimms brothers work.

⁶¹ Haase, 72. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities."⁶²

Nietzsche's ideas were known to the American painters although they held disparate opinions about them. Nietzsche had been linked to Jung by Joseph Campbell who was well known to the artists.⁶³ In his 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell writes:

As Dr. Jung points out (*Psychology and Religion*, p.89) the theory of the archetypes is by no means his own invention. Compare Nietzsche: 'In our sleep and in our dreams we pass through the whole thought of earlier humanity. I mean, in the same way that man reasons in his dreams, he reasoned when in the waking state many thousands of years. . . . the dream carries us back into earlier states of human culture, and affords us a means of understanding it better' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human* volume 1, number 13).⁶⁴

Alcopley had studied Nietzsche as a student in Germany, Newman "hated him and the superman conception which he linked to the Nazis," while Tony Smith had read most of his work.⁶⁵ According to Polcari:

Nietzsche was an important Philosopher on both sides of

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 137-38.

⁶³ Campbell was invited to speak at the Artists' Club and had co-written, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*. He also wrote several articles that would have caught the artists' attention including, "Finnegan the Wake," *Chimera* 4, number 3 (spring 1946): 63-80.

⁶⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 18, note #18.

⁶⁵ Interviews conducted by the author with: Una Dora Copley, March 9, 1996; Annalee Newman, February 3, 1996; and Jane Smith August 1, 1995. Tony Smith's library contains: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, and *the Birth of Tragedy*.

the Atlantic in this period. Many Abstract Expressionists read his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy of the Spirit of Music* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*), originally published in 1872, which seemed to address many of their interests: the cultural weakness of the West; the superiority of the natural and the primitive; the importance of myth; . . . *The Birth of Tragedy* was one of Rothko's favorite books in his youth. Nietzsche was crucial to Still. . . . According to Annalee Newman, Newman liked *The Birth of Tragedy* but disliked Nietzsche's other writing. Ferber and Lipton read Nietzsche.⁶⁶

Julian Young's book *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* addresses a number of key issues concerning the use of archaic myth as a method for illuminating modern political upheaval. After defining Nietzsche's division of the Apollonian and Dionysian approaches toward the "horrors of life," as expressed in the *Birth of Tragedy* and the German philosopher's preference for the latter, Young writes:

In Dionysian art, in Greek tragedy in particular, the destruction of the tragic hero is presented in a way that is exalting: though forced to witness the tragic catastrophe 'we [the audience] are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of changing figures. We really are, for a brief moment the primordial being itself' (BT17)[my italics]. In *The Birth [of Tragedy]* Nietzsche admits: that the 'artistic taming of the horrible' is, he says, 'the sublime' (BT 7). Our tragic joy consists in at least momentary escape from the terror of individual human existence, in an intimation of our 'higher,' suprahuman destiny.⁶⁷

This celebration of terror within the realm of the mythic, this assumption of a degree of "suprahuman" divinity was, at the war's end no longer an option for the artists.

⁶⁶ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and The Modern Experience*, 54.

⁶⁷ Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45.

The Holocaust made this approach intolerable. The Holocaust as moral demarcation was vividly expressed by Alfred Kazin who remembered seeing one of the first newsreels of the liberation of the concentration camp at Belsen:

sticks in black and white prison garb, an enormous pile of bodies, piled like cordwood, from which protruded legs, arms, and heads. It was unbearable. People coughed in embarrassment, and in embarrassment many laughed. The faster time carried us away from the it, the closer the gas came. It was *total*, the inescapable crime lying across the most documented century in history. The abyss was at our feet . . .⁶⁸

In the context of the Holocaust one could no longer assume, as Nietzsche had, the power of a remorseless God. Finally, Young reminds us that the German philosopher's intent was that such:

barbaric [Dionysian] impulses are not to be *eradicated* (as Christianity would like) but rather *sublimated* or as Nietzsche puts it, 'spiritualized,' transmuted into, for example, art. 'Evil,' the later Nietzsche insists, is something we need, is inseparable from 'greatness.'⁶⁹

The adaptation of this thesis by the National Socialists—that "evil is inseparable from greatness"—insured that Arendt and Jaspers (quoted in the first chapter, footnote #30), would carefully distance themselves from just such

⁶⁸ Quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, "The Responsibility of Peoples: Dwight MacDonal and the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies Annual: America and the Holocaust*, edited by Sanford Pinsker and Jack Fischel, volume 1 (1983), 33-34.

It should be noted that Kazin had been deeply affected by Arendt's writing. In *New York Jew* he writes:
 Hannah Arendt became vital to my life . . . it was for the direction of her thinking that I loved her, for the personal insistencies she gained from her comprehension of the European catastrophe.
 Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Alfred N. Knopf, 1978), 299. Quoted in Aschheim, 118

⁶⁹ Julian Young, 156, note 10.

characterizations of "greatness," from a heroicizing or demonizing of evil which grants it a supernatural aspect.⁷⁰

The distinction must be made that for Arendt in 1945, it was this thesis as adopted by the Nazis that was at issue, not Nietzsche himself. She was careful to note that:

Nazism owes nothing to any part of the Western tradition, be it German or not . . . Luther, or Kant or Hegel or Nietzsche . . . they have not the least responsibility for what's happening in the concentration camps. Ideologically, speaking, Nazism begins with no traditional basis at all . . .

Indeed, Hitler, in his opening address for the "Great Exhibition of German Art" held in Munich in 1937, spoke of an art of "eternal value . . . founded not on time, but only on peoples." This emphasis on a communal history was a central feature of that regime's ideology. Denis de Rougemont wrote of this in 1939:

And just as the Romantic forgot his despised "I" by losing himself in the festivals of the dream, the German man-in-the-street was able to forget his misfortunes and the humiliations of his country by losing himself for hours at a time in the collective soul, in the hypnosis of the sacred rites organized by the Führer to slow, spell-binding rhythms of parades and drums.⁷¹

The swastika offers an example of National Socialism's reliance on the visual emblems of myth. In his essay "Abstract Expressionism" contained in the 1985 Museum of Modern Art catalogue, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, Kirk

⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Approaches to the German Problem," *Partisan Review* 12, number 1 (winter 1945): 95. Arendt would soften this stand by the late 1940s. This shift is evident, for instance, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

⁷¹ Denis de Rougemont, "German Romanticism," *Chimera* 4, number 1 (autumn 1945): 38.

Varnedoe describes the Nazi emblem as "this ancient cosmological symbol [that] testified to a frighteningly successful revivification of the power of archaic myth."⁷² Among the oldest of signs, the term "swastika" is of Aryan/Indian origin perhaps explaining its attraction to Hitler. In this pre-Nazi context it was a symbol of the sun wheel, a sign of resurrection.⁷³

The Nazi myths of *volk* and *blut und boden* were, of course, only narrowly inclusive. Discussing art of the Third Reich Peter Adam writes:

each soldier, woman and child in painting was meant to elevate one group of people to the status of demi-gods, while condemning the rest to death. The evil of the National Socialist regime lay in the fact that, as Hannah Arendt observed, it decided who had the right to live. And art was used to drive this message home.⁷⁴

Artists in New York were aware early on of arts' role in developing a mythic guise for totalitarianism. During the first American Artists' Congress, held in 1936 at the New School, an unidentified German artist spoke on the iconography of race, blood, and soil in a paper entitled, "Art in Nazi Germany." He described images of:

fair girls with blue eyes, joyful workers carrying the swastika—who is not joyful in Germany today?—marching

⁷² Varnedoe, 652.

⁷³ Steven Heller, "Symbol of the Century," *Print* 46, number 1, (1991): 39-47. Also see the chapter entitled, The Power of the Swastika, in Wilhelm Reich, *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, translated by Vincent R. Carfagno (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970). Originally published in 1933.

⁷⁴ Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Abrams, 1992), 110.

soldiers, old Wotan surrounded by his valiant heroes, portraits of handsome leaders—these and similar national themes have the smell of the soil . . . the Nazi critics call it 'steelblue and hard romanticism.'⁷⁵

Yet this celebration of a pre-enlightenment past was ambiguously tethered to the dramatic industrialization that made Hitler's rapid rearming of Germany possible. This conflict between an agrarian past idealized as a model for the socially destabilized present is revealed in a statement made by the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, "This is the task of our time: from the new myth about life to construct a new man."⁷⁶

While the Nazis used myth to prove racial superiority inside Germany this same structure was also used as proof of that country's innate national aggressiveness by its enemies. Thus the idea of the primitive was manipulated to serve a spectrum of political positions. In his book, Leja notes myth's "immense ideological malleability," but then invokes Adam Kuper and Marianna Torgovnick to advance his conclusion

⁷⁵ Anonymous, "Art in Germany" from *The Papers of the First American Artists' Congress, Artists Against War and Fascism*, edited by Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 168.

⁷⁶ Alfred Rosenberg, director of Nazi Foreign Policy was the author of the infamous book, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts eine Wertung der Seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* [Myth of the 20th Century: An Evaluation of Conflicting Mental and Spiritual Types of Our Time] (München: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1930). He is quoted in Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China*, translated by Robert Chadler (Harper Collins: New York, 1990), 198.

that the primitive was inherently neutral.⁷⁷ It is an oversimplification to presume, as does Leja, that because the structure of myth was used both by the right and left in the 1940s, it did not assert its own philosophical characteristics.

For instance, Sir Robert Vansittart, chief diplomatic advisor to the British Government, published a pamphlet in 1941, *The Black Record: Germans Past & Present*, that sought to prove that Germany was inherently aggressive.⁷⁸ Vansittart asserted that the Germans sought out war, "Germans have made five wars in the last seventy-five years, besides four 'near misses.'" ⁷⁹ Then ever so loosely borrowing the scientific methods of anthropology, Vansittart applies a quasi-historical/mythic reading:

Hundreds of years ago there seemed nothing surprising about German barbarism, since the world was full of savages in these early days. In the thirteenth century a great part of Europe was overrun by Mongols known as the Golden Horde, who committed the most appalling atrocities. Germans in the plural are the Brazen Horde. The Brazen Horde remained savages at heart.⁸⁰

He then goes on to discuss Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen as evidence of Germany's archaic nature.

⁷⁷ Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 64. See also Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 240 and Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 9.

⁷⁸ Sir Robert Vansittart, *The Black Record: Germans Past & Present* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1941). This is a compilation of seven BBC overseas broadcasts.

⁷⁹ Vansittart, iv.

⁸⁰ Vansittart, 20.

This sort of sweeping indictment was also quite common in the United States during and even after the war.⁸¹ For example, in 1945, immediately following the German surrender, Frank Capra and Theodor Seuss Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss) wrote and directed a film for the United States Army. The film, *Your Job in Germany*, was shown to the American troops who would occupy the American sector of Germany. Like the *Black Record*, this extraordinary example of Allied propaganda stated that Germans were inherently evil. That beginning with the Franco-Prussian War, through the two World Wars, the German people presented themselves as a happy, culturally rich nation that masked their insatiable military drive. The film warns the soldiers not to be taken in by the Germans' guile by interspersing a festive Tyrolian costumed dance with a menacing shadowy assassin.

This debate was widely, if briefly, reignited in 1996 after Daniel Jonah Goldhagen published *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*.⁸² The study redocuments the familiar though still chilling breadth of the complicity with barbaric Nazi policy even among the common German citizenry. Goldhagen posits that this broad support for the final solution was rooted in Germany's particular

⁸¹ For more on such dehumanizing race-thinking see Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 115-129.

⁸² Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

historical anti-Semitism. The book's broad indictment vilifies Germans as a nation, almost as a race, in effect employing the very identity thinking that made the Shoah possible.⁸³

Arendt, perhaps in part because of her continued regard for German culture, dismissed this notion of collective national guilt. She defended her friend Paul Tillich in *Aufbau* in 1942 after he repudiated the idea that a German 'national character' existed.⁸⁴ And in 1945, *Partisan Review* published the article, "Approaches to the German Problem" in which Arendt stated, "The talk of the 'eternal Germany' and its eternal crimes serves only to cover Nazi Germany and its present crimes."⁸⁵ In a book review published in the spring of 1945 in *Partisan Review* Arendt wrote, "The reality is that 'the Nazis are men like ourselves'; the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what man is capable of."⁸⁶

The idea that the framework of the mythic as composed of innate traits removes free will and thus to some extent responsibility became an important issue for the Abstract

⁸³ For a valuable study of the issues underlying the ways in which Nazism is represented, see, Saul Friedlander, editor, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁸⁴ The complexity of their relationship and of this exchange in particular is discussed in Young-Bruehl, 241.

⁸⁵ Arendt, "Approaches to the German Problem," 94.

⁸⁶ Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," 259. A review of *The Devil's Share* by Denis de Rougemont.

Expressionists. In addition, by debunking this nationalistic jingoism, Arendt disallows the differentiation of Axis and Allied myth.

In "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*, Varnedoe wrote that the Abstract Expressionist's loose conception of Jung included, "a belief in an innate 'racial memory.'" This understanding of Jung which Varnedoe links to John Graham may well have begun to seem uncomfortably similar to Germany's mythic *volk*. In Graham's 1937 essay *Systems and Dialectics of Art*, art was described as a means to "revivify contact 'with the primordial racial past.'"⁸⁷

This terminology was later adopted by the Abstract Expressionists. Even after the Holocaust was widely known, Gottlieb continued to defend art based on "race memories."⁸⁸ In contrast, Newman had already reconsidered these issues. In a heavy handed indictment Newman equates Charles Lindbergh and Thomas Craven with Hitler, writing:

Isolationism, we have learned by now, is Hitlerism. Both are expressions of the same intense, vicious nationalism. . . . Craven's methods and the methods of his friends were the methods of Hitler. They used all of them: the 'great lie,' the intensified nationalism, the false patriotism, the appeal to race, the calling names, the reemphasis of home and homey sentiment.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Varnedoe, 617.

⁸⁸ Adolph Gottlieb, "Forum: The Artist Speaks (May 5, 1948)," *The Museum of Modern Art*. Reprinted in Ross, 54.

⁸⁹ Barnett B. Newman, "What About Isolationist Art? (1942)," *Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 22-24.

Arendt's attack on the concept of an aggressive German national character helped to undermine the Allied conceit of innate righteousness. Not even the Allies were absolved from the need to address their own potential for evil. By perceiving evil as an inherent characteristic of the mythic human drama, a necessary component without which the fable would be impotent and meaningless, Arendt believed there was an acceptance, an acknowledgment, even a romanticizing of evil. It was seen as an inevitable, and thus natural presence, rather than an act of personal responsibility, something about which a judgment can and must be formed. Evil, in this scenario, remained below a certain threshold where it may simply be punished. It was, in essence, tolerated in the broadest view. In her essay, "The Concentration Camps" Arendt notes:

There is a great temptation to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalizations . . . wheedling us with the voice of common sense. We attempt to understand . . . in recollected experience that [which] simply surpass our powers of understanding. We attempt to classify as criminal such a thing which, as we all feel, no such category was ever intended to cover. What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?⁹⁰

Arendt posited that the recent development of totalitarianism had produced "radical evil," a term she credits to Immanuel Kant in her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁹¹ However, although Arendt points to Kant's

⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt, "The Concentration Camps," 745.

⁹¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, page 459. Immanuel Kant used the term in book one "Concerning the

first use of this term, radical evil, she immediately undermines his view:

It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a 'radical evil', that is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a 'perverted ill will' that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.⁹²

She outlined three recurrent characteristics of this evil. It is unpunishable since nothing is commensurate, it is

Indwelling of the Evil Principle with the Good, or, On the Radical Evil in Human Nature," in his treatise, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 15-39. As Arendt points out she borrows Kant's term but in most respects, not his definition. Kant, like Arendt, speaks of evil as an absence of the good and as the result of free choice even though he understands it as inherent to all mankind, his illustrations of radical evil are simply violent and unjust, lacking the extraordinary nature of Arendt's definition.

⁹² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 459. Arendt's conception of the singularity of totalitarianism has generated substantial criticism over the years. For a balanced survey of these issues see Aschheim, 134-139. One of the critics Aschheim cites is Ernst Gellner who states that Arendt's "depiction of totalitarianism, . . . is used to exculpate romanticism . . ." (Ernst Gellner, "From Königsberg to Manhattan (Or Hannah, Rahel, Martin and Elfriede or Thy Neighbour's Gemeinschaft)," *Culture, Identity, and Politics*, edited by Ernst Gellner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 85. Quoted in Aschheim, 128). Yet while Aschheim takes Gellner to task for "chronological and conceptual distortion" he agrees that she used the "inherited and problematic tools of romanticism and existentialism; . . ." (Aschheim, 129). This is simply incorrect. While Arendt's characterizations of Nazi brutality bare witness to her shock she never waivers in her utter contempt for the demonizing and romanticizing of evil.

unforgivable, and it is rooted in base motive. She wrote in

The Human Condition:

The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene.⁹³

Arendt posited that the radical evil of totalitarianism was definable in that it was consistently unpunishable, unforgivable, and that it could not be explained away by mere self-interest.⁹⁴ Yet, Arendt felt that totalitarian evil was vast but superficial, "possess[ing] neither depth nor demonic dimension."⁹⁵ This idea has more recently been articulated by Tzvetan Todorov in the second section of his book, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* titled, "Neither Monsters nor Beasts."⁹⁶ Arendt also rejected the idea that evil was primordial. Accepting instead the Augustinian

⁹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241. For a synopsis of the development of Arendt's understanding of evil see footnote #34, 33, in the introductory chapter.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, 459.

⁹⁵ From a 1963 letter by Arendt to Gersholm Scholem. Originally published in *MB*, Tel Aviv, August 16, 1963 in German, 3-4. Reprinted in, and translated by Young-Bruehl, 369.

⁹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, translated by Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1996).

anti-Manichean concept that evil is the absence of good.⁹⁷ Further Arendt wrote that only the act of thinking could result in judgment, the arbiter between good and evil, and that thoughtlessness can result in the gravest evil.⁹⁸ In the introduction to her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt traces our culture's understanding of evil and the contradiction presented to her by Adolf Eichmann:

Evil, we have learned, is something demonic; its incarnation is Satan, a 'lightening fall from Heaven (Luke 10:18), . . . Evil men we are told, act out of envy; this may be resentment at not having turned out well through no fault of their own (Richard III) or the envy of Cain, who slew Abel because 'the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.' Or they may be prompted by weakness (Macbeth). Or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred wickedness feels for sheer goodness (Iago's 'I hate the Moor . . .'), or by covetousness, 'the root of all evil' (*radix omnium malorum cupiditas*). However, what I was confronted by [in Eichmann] was utterly different and still undeniably factual. I was struck by the manifest shallowness of the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer . . . was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior . . . was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Arendt, *Der Liebesbegriffe bei Augustin* (Berlin: J. Springer, 1929). Reprinted, revised, and translated as *Love and Saint Augustine*, edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 60.

⁹⁸ Thinking becomes for Arendt a primary focus in her last works and is the title of the first volume of her project, *The Life of the Mind*, of which the third volume, *Judging* was only begun at the time of her death in December 1975.

⁹⁹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, edited by Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 3-4.

The goal of totalitarianism was, as Arendt understood it, to change human nature, to strip the basic fundamental humanity of the individual who is remade into a simple component of the state, one without conscience or sense of responsibility.¹⁰⁰ Arendt saw totalitarianism as the complete denial of the spatial and temporal requirements of freedom. Its mythology universalized both past and future by creating a heroic past that pointed to a pre-destined future. The totalitarian state abolishes the possibility of freedom by eradicating the prerequisite space. In this way the freedom for action and thought is negated as inward manifestations of external deprivation.¹⁰¹

Arendt argued that totalitarian or "radical evil" advanced beyond the threshold of evil's historical boundaries thereby rendering the mythological structure too inadequate to contain the concept. It is seen as too forgiving. Arendt wrote that until the totalitarian state of the twentieth century, "never, neither in ancient nor medieval, nor modern history, did destruction become a well-formulated program or its execution a highly organized, bureaucratized and systematized process."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, 459.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, 466. Chapter 13 "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," was added to the 1958 edition of *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. It was originally published in the *Review of Politics* 15, number 3 (July 1953): 303-327.

¹⁰² Hannah Arendt, "Approaches to the German Problem," 95.

By the late 1940s, artists began to abandon their use of mythology (with its moral implications) as it related to evil.¹⁰³ Aside from such moral and ideological considerations, it seems reasonable to assume that given the immensity of the totalitarian crime, mythic symbols simply lost their ability to convey horror of the necessary magnitude or as the writer, Hamida Bosmajian put it, "[myth was] reduced to clichés."¹⁰⁴ In 1946 Newman stated:

Surrealist art under its realistic and ideal surfaces contains all the weird subject matter of the primitive world of terror.

But that time is over. The war the surrealists predicted has robbed us of our hidden terror, as terror can only exist if the forces of tragedy are unknown. We now know the terror to expect.¹⁰⁵

In 1952 Clyfford Still wrote, "We are now committed to an unqualified act, not illustrating outworn myths or contemporary alibis. One must accept total responsibility for what he executes."¹⁰⁶

With the demise of the myth as a viable structure with which to confront contemporary evil, a new series of subjects can be recognized, largely replacing the artists' earlier

¹⁰³ Until the end of the war the American public had been protected from the most graphic images of carnage and torture by military and government censors. See George H. Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁴ Hamida Bosmajian, *Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), 19.

¹⁰⁵ Newman, "The New Sense of Fate, 169.

¹⁰⁶ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries, 1958-1959* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), v.

acceptance of the value of the ancient and the primitive. For the most part, after the end of the war the painters seem to have sought to distance themselves from their earlier approaches and all that brought with it. The mythic as popularized by Frazer, Jung, and Campbell gave way to explorations of literary models that were aligned with Arendt's call for an re-examination of the effects of demonizing of evil.

Abstract Expressionism was responsive to such political issues. Many of the artists, had, at times, been predisposed toward political activism and interest in political theory was also evident.¹⁰⁷ And some, such as Newman and David Smith, remained politically engaged. According to the 1985 catalogue *Flying Tigers*, Smith's *Perfidious Albion (The British Empire)*, 1945-46 (figure 26), "details the evils of colonialism and imperialism." The catalogue entry's author reads the sculpture as a collection of literal symbols:

The toothed base implies (perhaps) the tenacity with which 'mother countries' hold onto their colonies, The pitcher-shaped body curvaceously suggests the Queen of England, the figurehead of authority, power and tradition. The trident symbolically recalls the sea power upon which the strength had traditionally been based.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ See Ashton, *passim*.

¹⁰⁸ This reading is dependent upon Stanley Meltzoff, "David Smith and Social Surrealism," *Magazine of Art* 39, number 2, (February 1946): 100. J[Joan] P[achner], "Catalogue entry 77," *Flying Tigers: Painting and Sculpture in New York, 1939-1946*, [edited by Kermit Champa] (Brown University: Providence, 1985), 120.

The title, "Perfidious Albion" has a rich lineage. It has been linked to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Joyce, was of course, a staple for these artists.¹⁰⁹ The term *la perfide Albion*, traditionally refers to England's treacherous policy towards foreigners.¹¹⁰ The sculptor Dorothy Dehner, Smith's first wife, suggested that Smith clearly blamed England's imperialist history and continuing policies for helping to lay the foundation for fascism.¹¹¹

An additional source for Smith may have been Varian Fry. In 1939, the year before Fry sailed for Marseilles on behalf of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German/Foreign Scholars and saved numerous artists and intellectuals, including Arendt, from forced deportation to Germany's death camps, he had written a pamphlet entitled, *The Peace That Failed: How Europe Sowed the Seeds of War*.¹¹² The heading on

¹⁰⁹ See Evan R. Firestone, "James Joyce and the First Generation New York School," *Arts Magazine* 56, number 10 (June 1982): 116-121.

¹¹⁰ The Oxford English Dictionary traces the term back to the Marquis de Ximenès (1726-1817), but states that it became more common after W. M. Thackeray used it in the June 1841 edition of *Fraser's Magazine*. Thackeray wrote, "Ferocious yells of hatred against Perfidious Albion were uttered by the liberal French Press."

¹¹¹ From a telephone interview conducted by the author on November 14, 1992. Dehner also offered a useful account of a related series of sculptures. See Dorothy Dehner, "Medals for Dishonor—The Fifteen Medallions of David Smith," *Art Journal* 37, number 2 (winter 1977/1978): 144-150.

¹¹² Varian Fry, *The Peace That Failed: How Europe Sowed the Seeds of War* (New York: Headline Books #21/The Foreign Policy Association, 1939).

page seventy-one reads, "Perfidious Albion?" This is followed by:

Having joined France and Italy in condemning Germany's repudiation of the military clauses of the Versailles Treaty, the British then turned about and connived with the Germans repudiating the naval clauses. In June 1935 they made an agreement with Germany in which they said it would be all right with them if the Germans built a navy up to 35 per cent of the tonnage of their own. They also agreed to let Germany build submarines, forbidden her in the Treaty of Versailles.

In explanation the British said the Germans would build a navy anyway—had already begun, in fact—and that it was better to have that navy limited than to have no limit on it at all. But why Britain didn't act through the League, or at least consult the French before going ahead, is a question which has never been answered.

Finally, it is worth noting that by 1945 much of the second section of Arendt's book *Origins of Totalitarianism* titled "Imperialism" had been written and published as essays in various publications. Here, Arendt directly addresses the economic roots of nineteenth century British imperialism and particularly the issue of Ireland (recalling Joyce) as part of the foundation that made possible the political chaos of the twentieth century.¹¹³ While Arendt may not have been the immediate source for Smith, the strikingly coincidental dates in conjunction with the precisely matched subject suggests a community of interests and a receptivity by artists to Arendt's ideas. In fact, Varnedoe writes that Smith's focus on "capitalist exploitation [and] fascist totalitarianism—offered an implicit critique of the primitivizing idealism which sought a 'natural/universal.'" That is, he sought to

¹¹³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 124-27.

critique myth.¹¹⁴ In relation to this community of ideas, the breakdown of the mythological structure is evidenced. While, Smith's overt political imagery is the exception, even within his own oeuvre, a number of other artists sought to re-evaluate the issue of evil in their art work and its relation to the demonic.

For example, by 1947 William Baziotes had forsaken the dynamic skeins of paint that had characterized his earlier imagery and began to produce more simplified figural compositions. On first glance these paintings such as *Dwarf*, 1947 (figure 27) may well seem a continuation of the mythic tropes fast being abandoned by his colleagues, but on a closer examination of the multiple meanings that arise when the painting is situated in its literary context, the possibility arises that mythic demonization itself is at issue.

The painting *Dwarf* by Baziotes is arresting. The figure is clearly not human and so any concern that one is seeing a natural physical defect is off the mark. This is an entity, at least in part, which inhabits the unconscious self and it is evil. Baziotes has given it spikes for teeth, stumps for limbs, one eye that may be read as either deeply embedded in the head or telescoping towards us. The massive genitalia is

¹¹⁴ Varnedoe, 649. In another interesting correlation, according to Polcari, *Finnegans Wake's* structure relates to Giambattista Vico's concept of political organization. Vico's *Scienza Nuova* states that, "myth expresses the collective mentality of a given age." Alasdair MacIntyre "Myth" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, volume 5-6 (New York: Macmillian, 1967), 435.

also ambiguous. The Dwarf's soft flesh is sharp green and yellow made all the more vivid by the deep plum background against which the figure is set. Yet its frayed edges move past the weak contours creating in the end an amorphous form.

Mona Hadler has uncovered and examined several themes that underlie the painting which the artist acknowledged was dense with associations.¹¹⁵ There was yet another association. It is a 1944 novel which focused on the theme of the dwarf, and would likely have attracted Baziotes's attention at this time. Just two years before the painting was made, the Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist published, in English translation, his most renowned novel, *The Dwarf*.¹¹⁶ The book generated considerable critical and popular attention and its themes concerning the nature of evil and war even in the context of triumphant High Renaissance humanism would have appealed to Baziotes.¹¹⁷ In addition, Leonardo da Vinci, after

¹¹⁵ For a careful analysis of the *Dwarf* and its sources see Mona B. Hadler, "The Art of William Baziotes" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1977) and Barbara Cavaliere, Mona B. Hadler and Michael Preble, *William Baziotes: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Newport: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1978).

¹¹⁶ Pär Lagerkvist, *Dvärgen* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag AB, 1944). Reprinted as *The Dwarf*, translated by Alexandra Dick (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953 [1945]). Lagerkvist, one of eighteen members of the Swedish Academy, had already published thirty books.

¹¹⁷ According to Ethel Baziotes, during this period her husband "haunted the New York Public Library at forty-second Street." Interview November 30, 1995. Reviews of Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf* appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*, *The New Yorker Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Saturday Review*, *The New York Post*, *Newsweek*, and seventeen other periodicals. It was distributed by the Book-of-the-Month-Club as of January 1946 whose review stated,

whom Baziotes had recently named a painting (*The Butterflies of Leonardo da Vinci*, 1942), is a leading character (figure 28).

The novel is narrated in the first person by the court dwarf, Piccoline, who, remorseless of the murder he has committed, his extreme malevolence, war mongering, and unflagging worship of his prince and the city state the crown represents, is drawn as a festering symbol of evil. Reviewers generally noted that the novel was an exploration of the duality of good and evil and that authors plundered by Lagerkvist, included: Hitler, Céline, Kafka, Nietzsche, and Machiavelli.¹¹⁸

Upon close reading, Piccoline, like Baziotes's *Dwarf*, remains unresolved. The diminutive courtier is drawn from a series of contradictory allusions. In this, each dwarf fits Theodore W. Adorno's concurrent indictment of myth as rooted in ambiguity. In his book, *In Search of Wagner*, Adorno writes "This stratum, where all is undifferentiated, is that of myth. Its sign is ambiguity; its twilight is a standing invitation to merge irreconcilables . . ." ¹¹⁹ Lagerkvist's dwarf is "descended from a race older than that which now

"The evil in the dwarf's nature is in ours, too—is universal. . . ." quoted in Ray Lewis White, *Pär Lagerkvist in America* (Humanities Press: Atlantic Highlands, 1979), 22-23.

¹¹⁸ White, 22.

¹¹⁹ Theodore W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: NLB/Verso, 1981), 115. *In Search of Wagner* was written in London and New York between

populates the world," he despises what he calls, "our tribe" and offers that "We dwarfs have no homeland."¹²⁰ The references to Judaism, anti-Semitism, and even Jewish anti-Semitism are obvious and yet ambiguous. This suggests yet another source for Lagerkvist and one the Abstract Expressionists were aware of as well, Richard Wagner.

It is common knowledge that the great originator of *gesamtkunstwerk* was a vicious anti-Semite and that before their famous falling out, was a close friend of Nietzsche's with whom the composer shared a deep interest in the revivifying possibilities of pagan myth. Hitler's adoption of the Wagner festival at Bayreuth as a spiritual wellspring for Nazi ideology is also well documented. During a conference at Columbia University in 1995 entitled, "Wagner and the Consequences," Marc A. Weiner delivered, "Reading the Ideal" in which he noted another possible source for the figure-type of the evil dwarf. Weiner developed the idea that Wagner's famed dwarf artisan Mime could not forge the great sword *Nothung* because it was the embodiment of all that was German. According to Weiner the duplicitous and murderous Mime, whose very name indicates that he cannot create anew, functions as the Jew in the opera *Siegfried* which itself was a corollary

1937-1938 and was first published as *Versuch über Wagner* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1952).

¹²⁰ Lagerkvist, 6, 14, and 15.

to Wagner's anti-Semitic tract, "German Art and German Politics."¹²¹

Yet, for Lagerkvist the dwarf is also akin to the Anti-Christ. He was baptized as part of a ceremonial charade and reveals, "I eat my own splenetic flesh. I drink my own poisoned blood. Everyday I perform my solitary communion as grim high priest of my people."¹²²

Hadler has noted that Baziotes linked his painting to a childhood experience where "something beautiful or even commonplace . . . unexpectedly reveals a hidden morbidity or terror."¹²³ Lagerkvist also explores the relationship between beauty and terror. The novel like the painting is spare, confrontational and informed by psychoanalysis. Central to each is the presence of evil in spite of the great beauty of the humanist revival and the recognition that evil is not an external demon but rather an interior potential. And so there is a realization that the dwarf is not a differentiated monster, against which others are contrasted as good (as the Nazis used the Jews) but instead it is an internal agent. Piccoline says that people are frightened by him, "they think it is I who scare them, but it is the dwarf within them, the

¹²¹ *Siegfried*, Act I and II. Marc A. Weiner, "Reading the Ideal," *The New German Critique* 69 (fall 1996): 69-83. *Siegfried* is also the title of a 1958 painting by Franz Kline.

¹²² Lagerkvist, 28.

¹²³ Hadler, *The Art of William Baziotes*, 162. The original source is a letter from Baziotes to Alfred Barr dated May 13, 1949.

ape-faced manlike being who sticks up its head from the depths of their souls."¹²⁴

As the book ends, the dwarf, or as I have alluded, the *id* is chained in the dungeon, having undermined the Prince, he reflects, "on the day when they will come and loosen my chains, because he has sent for me again."¹²⁵ These were ideas to which Baziotes was attracted. In a statement published in 1949, he wrote "I am a strange creature, and strange most of all to myself. Evil tempts me as much as good."¹²⁶ This recognition that evil is not external mythic demon, but instead an internal and collective potential parallels Arendt's regard for the primacy of reason, the agent by which evil can be checked.

A similar literary model can be found in the Abstract Expressionists' consideration of Herman Melville's 1851 novel, *Moby-Dick*. Many critics have explored the numerous paintings and sculptures that have explored the novel's themes.¹²⁷ Such works of art include, among others: Jackson Pollock's *Pasiphaë*, 1943 and (*Blue(Moby Dick)*), c.1943; Robert Motherwell's *The Tomb of Captain Ahab*, 1953; Seymour

¹²⁴ Lagerkvist, 29. According to Weiner, "in a draft . . . Alberich had referred to Mime as an 'ape.'" Weiner, 71.

¹²⁵ Lagerkvist, 228.

¹²⁶ William Baziotes, "The Artist and the Mirror," *Right Angle* 3, number 2 (June 1949): 2.

¹²⁷ See Evan R. Firestone, "Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the Abstract Expressionists," *Arts Magazine* 54, number 7 (March 1980): 120-124. and Elizabeth A. Schultz, *Unpainted to the Last: Moby-Dick and Twentieth Century American Art* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

Lipton's *Moby Dick* #2, 1948; Theodore Roszak's *The Whaler of Nantucket*, 1952-53; Paul Jenkins's *Hommage à Melville*, 1953; William Baziotes's *Moby Dick*, 1955; and Sam Francis's *The Whiteness of the Whale*, 1957 and *Moby Dick*, 1958 (figure 29). Each of these relate to the mythic symbolism and sublime majesty of this quintessential American novel. What *Moby-Dick* chronicles and what made it such an important book in the postwar period, is the displacement, in the reader's mind, of the source of evil from the great whale, to Ahab, from a Manichaeian sense of absolute external evil, to an acknowledgment of degree and of the complexity of good and evil.

Ahab is a reference to a king of Israel punished by God for his worship of Baal and other transgressions.¹²⁸ In Melville's novel, the whale becomes for Ahab, evil incarnate—a fixation, mythic in dimension. Thus Ahab fosters evil within himself eventually destroying his crew, his ship, and himself. The story functions as a condemnation of that aspect of myth-making which creates an entity of primordial evil as the Nazi's would define the Jews in the next century.

Secondly, the story locates the seed of evil in the self, suggesting, as does Arendt, that if evil is not restricted to a primordial Satan, then each person must assume responsibility for their actions. As Arendt's great inspiration, Saint Augustine of Hippo had argued against his

¹²⁸ Kings I, chapters 16-22. Ahab was also the name of one of Pollock's dogs.

former affiliate, the Manichaeans, evil was not an opposing force outside of the good but rather a vacuum created in its absence and springing from free will.¹²⁹

Abstract Expressionism's continued interest through the 1940s and 1950s in Melville's novel is indicative not of the artists' continued regard for the value of primordial myth as a means to confront evil, but antithetically, it is a reflection of their postwar re-evaluation of evil as subject to judgment. Lagerkvist and Melville are of value, not because they celebrate myth, as the artists had done earlier, but, in accord with Arendt's coeval condemnation of myth's ambiguity and moral vacuity, the artists focused on literary models that exposed the profound dangers intrinsic to archaic conceptions of evil.

¹²⁹ This was largely the subject of Arendt's dissertation, *Der Liebesbegriffe bei Augustin* (1929).

CHAPTER 5

ABSTRACTION AND THE SPACE OF FREEDOM

It is decisive that society, on all levels, excludes the possibility of action. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalize' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action and outstanding achievement.¹

In the aftermath of the "mass actions of war"² both in democratic and totalitarian nations, whether by the weight of social expectation or more severely by political ukase, individual action within a plurality became in that era's drive towards normalcy, an increasingly rare occurrence. Any such action would tend to be scorned rather than nurtured and thus was unlikely to have any historical effect. For Arendt, and, I believe, for a number of the Abstract Expressionists who, as artists, retained an exceptional measure of autonomy, the imperative of action within this repressive political environment was conceived of as the means by which freedom could be achieved and preserved. In 1959, Paul Tillich, another German émigré, wrote in the preface to *The Museum of Modern Art's* catalogue, *New Images of Man*:

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40.

² Arendt, "The Mob and the Elite," *Partisan Review* 17 (November 1950): 811.

If we listen to the more profound observers of our period, we hear them speak of the danger in which modern man lives: the danger of losing his humanity and becoming a thing amongst the things he produces.³ Humanity is not simply something man has. He must fight for it anew in every generation, and he may lose his fight. There have been few periods in history in which a catastrophic defeat was more threatening than in ours. One need only look at the dehumanizing structure of the totalitarian systems in one half of the world, and the dehumanizing consequences of technical mass civilization in the other half.⁴

And a decade earlier in 1949, Hans Hofmann, himself a German émigré, stated:

It is the privilege of a democracy like ours that it expects the artist to be, through his art, the personification of its fundamental principles in being the highest example of spiritual freedom in the performance of unconditioned, unrestricted creativeness.⁵

The expectation that the Allied victory had secured an era of peace and freedom was true only in part. The ideological war against the extreme right had been won only to lay the groundwork for a much more intractable confrontation with the extreme left during what would come to be known as the Cold War. Arendt for her part, sought to break down the ideological distinction of the National

³ Note the parallel to Arendt's thesis regarding the rise of the condition of labor and the demise of *homo faber* in *The Human Condition* also published in 1959.

⁴ Paul Tillich, "A Prefatory Note," *New Images of Man*, edited by Peter Selz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 9. For more on this exhibition see Dennis Raverty, "Critical Perspectives on *New Images of Man*," *Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America Art Journal*, edited by Mona Hadler and Joan Marter 53, number 4 (winter 1994): 62-64. Also see Joan Marter, "Recollections of *New Images of Man*: An Interview with Peter Selz," *Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America Art Journal*, edited by Mona Hadler and Joan Marter 53, number 4 (winter 1994): 65.

⁵ Quoted in Seitz, 111 and note #45, 177.

Socialists and the Soviets under Stalin believing that these totalitarian regimes had more in common than their partisans cared to admit.⁶ Her 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* finds the roots of twentieth century totalitarianism in nineteenth century imperialism. She then pairs the terror states of Stalin and Hitler under the rubric of totalitarianism which was both the cause of the book's early celebration by liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and its most serious criticism by western Stalinist holdouts.⁷

The outcome was that the West had dispatched one foe in battle only to find that another, larger, and more alien enemy threatened. Had that threat ever been consummated in direct engagement, not only would the enlightenment tradition be imperiled, as it had been by the Nazis, but in the glare of nuclear proliferation, humanity itself would be at stake. The consequence was that Western culture too, desperately sought protection in a type of cooperative reaffirmation or conformity that suppressed individual risk which is the basis for action, thus shutting down to an extent, ironically, the

⁶ This is a primary thesis of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

⁷ The book would eventually come under more general attack in the 1970s for its generalizations about the Soviet regime, although this would be in an era when much more information about that system had become available. Critical analyses of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* have more recently undergone a shift away from perspectives forged during the Cold War. See for example, Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996) and Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*:

very possibility for freedom.⁶ These pressures were expressed across a broad political spectrum. On the extreme right, artists were confronted by the ideologue, Representative George A. Dondero of Michigan who railed against contemporary abstraction as seditious propaganda in much the same way that the Soviets did, a manifestation of Cold War conservative patriotism that brooked no deviation. Yet Dondero's opposition also sought the security of the mean, of consensus if not conformity. In his book, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, the liberal theorist, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. espoused a defense of individual freedom as the essential component of the current international struggle against totalitarianism.⁷ Still, Schlesinger emphasized the value of collective pressure on the individual writing that, ". . . arrogant forms of individualism sometimes discredit the basic faith in the value of the individual."⁸

A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁶ There is a substantial literature that explores the issue of social and political conformity in postwar America. These include among others the fifth chapter of Erika Doss's *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, entitled, "From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism: Modern Art and Consensus Politics in Postwar America," 311-363 and the second chapter, entitled "The Cultural Climate in America after World War II," in Sidra Stich's *Made in the U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, The '50s & 60s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 6-13.

⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949).

⁸ Schlesinger, Jr., 248. Quoted in Doss, 336.

In distinction to the previous chapters, the following section is largely organized around the mature abstractions for which Pollock, Newman, de Kooning, and Motherwell have become so well known. The chapter opens with a review of the artists' and art critics' well known pronouncements concerning Abstract Expressionism's engagement with space and action. These now common reflections are reconsidered and contextualized when paired with the content of Arendt's lectures and writing of this period on the relationship between not only space and action but also freedom which Arendt believed was dependent on these two conditions.

Arendt draws a distinction in her understanding of then current philosophies of being. She differentiates between German *Existenz* philosophy (her term) and French existentialism. This sets up a model with which to differentiate the postwar artwork of Giacometti and other Europeans and the artistic developments in New York. Likewise, the imagery of imprisonment is examined first as a Surrealist motif and then as a postwar American theme in the wake of the liberation of the concentration camps. The inter-related themes of prison, labyrinth, entombment, and memorial are then explored and defined. Lastly, consideration is given to the increasingly complex abstraction being produced after the war by Pollock and by Newman in relation to the ideas developed throughout the dissertation.

Through the 1940s and early 1950s, Arendt published and lectured on *Existenz* and existential philosophy.¹¹ As demonstrated, a number of the Abstract Expressionists were increasingly disenchanted with the Surrealist/mythic structure and were incorporating into their work certain aspects of existential thought. While this turn to existentialism has been documented, it has been explored largely in relation to the French authors Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Jean Genet. It is likely however, that Arendt also encouraged the spread of existential thought in the United States in the 1940s and early 1950s. And that given her record of lectures and publications on the subject she was perhaps as accessible to the Abstract Expressionists as were the French, although the latter was aimed at a more general audience.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in his exhibition catalogue, *The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958-1959*, significantly points to the structure that replaced the mythic drama. He writes, "Confronting a blank canvas they attempt 'to grasp authentic being by action, decision, a leap of faith,' to use Karl Jaspers' existential

¹¹ Arendt's use of these as separate terms maintains the distinction between the German tradition, *Existenz*, of which she became a part through her study with Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers and, existentialism, the French popularization directed by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Jean Genet. William Barrett, who had translated Arendt's 1946 *Partisan Review* essay, "What is *Existenz* Philosophy," recalled, "The German word she insisted had to be kept in the title." See William Barrett, *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), 102.

phrase."¹² Jaspers was Arendt's doctoral advisor at Heidelberg and a very close friend. Whether Barr's knowledge of Jaspers came from Arendt remains unresolved. However, Barr did visit the Club frequently and certainly read the periodicals in which Arendt published.

In her useful if abstruse article, "What is Existenz Philosophy?," Arendt explains the term. "As distinct from existentialism, a French literary movement of the last decade, Existenz philosophy has at least a century old history."¹³ She then lists its framers, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Scheller, Heidegger, and Jaspers. Important, but outside this group, she emphasizes the influence of her former professor Husserl's phenomenological approach.

In her lecture notes titled, "The Answer of the Existentialists," given at the New School in early 1952 Arendt again sees a division between the French and German schools. She understands Sartre to say, "engage yourself and produce meaning. Meaning exists only as your product." For Jaspers in contrast, thought is the consequential element. Freedom is predicated on reason, on the ability to judge.¹⁴

¹² Barr, v.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, "What is Existenz Philosophy?," 34-5.

¹⁴ "The Answer of the Existentialists," for the course, *The Spiritual Quest of Modern Man* (Spring 1952), "Notes for Nine Lectures" Folder, Box 75, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

This is not to suggest that Sartre was unimportant. Newman had heard Sartre speak in the 1940s and David Hare and Sartre were friends. In fact, the French philosopher played a primary role in the Abstract Expressionist "evolution . . . from a surrealist to a more Existentialist orientation."¹⁵ Indeed, Polcari notes a 1946 issue of *Partisan Review* dedicated to existential thought and cites writings by Sartre, Genet, and Camus.¹⁶ However, he omits the previously mentioned article by Arendt which appeared in the same issue, as well as her extensive publishing record on the subject of philosophy, first in Germany in the 1930s and then in the United States, through the 1940s and 1950s.

The basic elements of existentialism are well known and need only to be treated in direct relation to the artwork.

¹⁵ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 354; Hadler, "David Hare: A Magician's Game in Context," 197.

¹⁶ Arendt is rarely discussed in art history beyond the inadequate space of the footnote. One exception is Christopher Lyon, "Art of the Forties, A Unique Loneliness: The Existential Impulse in Art of the Forties," *The Members Quarterly of the Museum of Modern Art* 6 (winter 1991): 4-5.

Partisan Review had been started by William Philips and Philip Rahv as a periodical of the communist party. At the end of 1937 it splintered from the party and, as many Americans formerly associated with the party had done, it became more closely affiliated with Trotsky's less authoritarian principles. Barrett, an editor recalled:

In the process it had now acquired a few more editors: Dwight MacDonal, Mary McCarthy, Fred Dupree, and George L. K. Morris. . . . They were dissident Marxists, Trotskyists in their sympathies, fighting the Stalinist tide that had taken over both the Left and the Liberals in this country. . . . The magazine would be guided by a policy to advance the cause of Modernism in art against the dictates of social realism then proscribed. Barrett, 4, 5, 7, and 9.

Indeed, by the middle of the 1940s and as a direct consequence of her inquiry into the causes of totalitarianism, Arendt had reformulated existential theory so as to incorporate issues which appear to be parallel to the changes concurrently taking place in Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture.

* * *

Until the 1940s the Swiss born artist Alberto Giacometti had worked in Paris in association with the dissident Surrealists Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris.¹⁷ However, with the war came a transformation in his work that has often been linked to existentialism and specifically to Sartre who had written about his art. Rosalind E. Krauss writes about the early sculpture, *Project for a Passageway (Labyrinth)*, 1930-31 (figure 14) explaining some of its sources and meanings,

Labyrinth. If art began in the caves, its starting point was not the space of architecture, with light differentiating vertical pillar from horizontal slab, but that of the labyrinth, with no light, no differentiations, no up, no down. Its master image is the Minotaur, not Narcissus.¹⁸

¹⁷ André Breton had dismissed the artists associated with the periodical *Documents*. See the "Second Manifesto of Surrealist (1930) in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972).

¹⁸ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993), 168.

Krauss's emphasis on the importance of the transformation from the horizontal to the vertical as a phenomenological enactment of the standing viewer in space is a key issue here.

In Sartre's 1955 essay, "Giacometti in Search of the Void" for *Art News*, the author begins with a discussion of distance as an invention and then recounts the source of Sartre's empathetic reading:

I understood distance one evening in April 1941: I had spent two months in a prisoner-of-war camp—in other words, in a sardine box—and I had experienced the most total proximity. The boundary of my personal life-space had been my skin; day and night I felt against me the warmth of another shoulder, another thigh.¹⁹

Giacometti's distance is celebrated. For Sartre, space speaks of isolation, of the void surrounding each figure. Sartre characteristically indulges in the dark pessimism that made French existentialism so popular in the 1950s. Yet the image of the cage became, for many European and American artists, a direct means of confronting totalitarianism. Indeed, such imagery is frequently treated in postwar sculpture. Here was a representation of the upright figure who by such distinction has an expectation of free movement. Here the

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Giacometti in Search of the Void," *Art News* 54, number 5 (September 1955): 26. Originally published in Paris as Jean-Paul Sartre, "La Recherche de l'absolu" *Les Temps Modernes* 28 (January 1948). For more on postwar imagery of entrapment see Joan Marter, "The Ascendancy of Abstraction for Public Art: The Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition," *Sculpture in Postwar Europe and America Art Journal*, edited by Mona Hadler and Joan Marter 53, number 4 (winter 1994): 28-36.

mythic labyrinth of the demi-gods has been replaced by a man-made cell.

Giacometti's artwork, as transformed by the war, can function as a model for the American artists' move away from notions of myth only to a point. Note the distinction. Giacometti returned to the traditional focus on the free-standing figure (figure 31). His sculptures do convey the sense of the figure in space dictated by existentialism but at such a remove that the potential for the intrasubjective plurality which Arendt optimistically holds out as attainable (and is outlined in the third chapter), is, in Giacometti's sculpture, and generally in French existentialism, too remote to be feasibly reached. In Giacometti's paintings and drawings too, the figures remain motionless as the artist erases their solidity/their singularity and they dissipate into the surrounding architectural space. This formless nihilism is largely an issue with the French: Sartre, Camus, and Genet, but less with Arendt.

Adorno's often repeated statement: "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"²⁰ is useful here. Any attempt to portray, especially the condition of imprisonment, would be to participate in the very sort of identity thinking which

²⁰ *"Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch."* Theodore W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft (1949)," *Prismen* (1955), translated as *Prisms* by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1981), 34.

made the Holocaust possible.²¹ That is, to represent the victims of genocide with the formal means available to the artist, no matter how honorable the artist's intention, would be an exercise in establishing the limits of representation. The explicit postwar paintings of Jean Fautrier, Francis Gruber, Rico LeBrun, and Boris Taslitzky are a case in point (figure 32).²² In the catalogue, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism, 1945-55*, Frances Morris remarks on the political debate surrounding the figural and the abstract form. "Now in its aftermath, the renewed debates between abstraction and figuration were especially vocal, fanned in 1947 by promulgation of an official Soviet policy advocating a Socialist Realism."²³ In the United States *Partisan Review's* early anti-Stalin and pro-Trotsky position included more than a hands-off attitude towards style with the publication of essays such as Greenberg's, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in 1939. This stance against Social Realism had been earlier broached in the United States by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in his 1936

²¹ Andrew Weinstein, "Art After Auschwitz," *Boulevard* 9, number 1/2 (1994): 187.

²² Each of these artists produced images, some eye witness accounts, of Nazi atrocities during or immediately after the war. They are painted as earnest expressions of grief but they raise complex issues. Are these paintings too beautiful, too moving, or simply too burdened with history to express the singularity of these events? Sarah Wilson begins to address these questions in her essay, "Paris Post War: In Search of the Absolute," *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism*, edited by Frances Morris (London, The Tate Gallery, 1993), 25-52.

²³ Frances Morris, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism, 1945-55* (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), 16.

catalogue, *Cubism and Abstract Art* for The Museum of Modern Art.²⁴ Twenty-three years later the museum reversed (at least temporarily) its position and embraced the figural although certainly not that of the fascists. Peter Selz wrote that his 1959 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, "New Images of Man," was not a simple "return to the figure," but a response to "what Nietzsche called "the eternal wounds of existence."²⁵ Yet Selz then connects the artists in his exhibition to some of the great traditional representations of evil: the painter of the Campo Santo, Hieronymous Bosch, Grünewald, Goya, Picasso, and Beckmann and thus identifies the usual link between myth and evil upon which most figuration is dependent and which the Abstract Expressionists sought to move beyond.

Further, according to Harold Rosenberg's daughter, Patia Yasin, Pollock, Newman, and Rothko in particular, were especially cognizant of the Mosaical prohibition against the graven image in light of the Holocaust.²⁶ In contrast to Giacometti, these Americans would eventually seek not to illustrate the figure in space but rather to actually reclaim

²⁴ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

²⁵ Peter Selz, *New Images of Man* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art), 11-12.

²⁶ She did not mean to suggest that these artists were devoted to abstraction because of Exodus 20:4, "Thus shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." But that they were aware that they had independently found a format that did not ignore this command. Rosenberg, Rothko, and Newman shared a Jewish heritage. Pollock's wife, the painter Lee Krasner, came from a devout Jewish family.

that state of being themselves. They were to become that figure in space. Or as Rosenberg noted, "A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist."²⁷

In 1944 Motherwell wrote:

Modern art is related to the problem of the modern individual's freedom. For this reason the history of modern art tends at certain moments to become the history of modern freedom."²⁸

That same year the artist completed the abstract painting, *Spanish Prison Window*, 1941-44 (figure 33). A stark but decorative play of color and form. Alternating vertical bars of yellow and white jostle for spatial primacy but are finally locked in place by the short red horizontal rectangle that unnervingly arrests the viewer's experience of depth as such a cage actually would.

Motherwell was not alone among American artists. Gottlieb, Lipton, and others were also interested in such entrapment imagery (figure 34).²⁹ And for many artists, the Surrealist trope of the labyrinth maintained its fascination after the war.³⁰ The labyrinth is an useful example of

²⁷ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959), 27. Rosenberg will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

²⁸ Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painter's World." *Dyn* 1, number 6 (November 1944): 9-14. Quoted in Seitz, 108.

²⁹ See Gottlieb's *The Prisoners*, 1947, 36x48 o/c, Adolph and Esther Gottlieb foundation and Lipton's *Imprisoned Figure*, 1948 wood & sheet lead 85 x 27 x 22", The Museum of Modern Art.

³⁰ See Baziotes *The Web*, 1946 (Johnson Museum, Cornell University); Gottlieb, *Labyrinth #3*, 1954 84x192" (Adolph and

Surrealism's seductively ambiguous use of myth. But in contrast, for Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, et.al., the problem of myth's ambiguity in the face of the horrors of war and the Holocaust forced a turn towards the freedom of abstraction and its ability to accommodate great complexity. Adorno's earlier indictment of myth's ambiguity (in relation to Wagner) suggested that the treatment of evil required an acknowledgment of its extraordinary complexity which the spectral labyrinth simply could not support.³¹

In 1948, while illustrating a poem by Rosenberg for the planned second issue of *Possibilities*, Motherwell produced the earliest in the long series of paintings titled *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (figure 35).³² In 1963 Motherwell wrote:

The 'Spanish Elegies' are not 'political,' but my private insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot. They are as eloquent as I could make them. But the pictures are also general metaphors of the contrast between life and death and their interrelation.³³

The bold alternation of black rectangles and ovoids hanging against the crisp white ground cannot be interpreted as

Esther Gottlieb Foundation); de Kooning, *Study for Labyrinth*, 1946 (The Museum Of Modern Art).

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*. According to Seitz, ambiguity was the topic of discussion at the Artist's Club on April 11, 1952, Seitz, 105.

³² See E. A. Carmean, "Robert Motherwell's Spanish Elegies," *Arts Magazine* 50, number 10 (June 1976): 94-97.

³³ Robert Motherwell interviewed by Charles Cheatham (November 1962). Originally published in *Robert Motherwell* (Northampton: Smith College Museum of Art, 1963) reprinted in Ross, page 112. Note that Ross incorrectly dates the interview to 1963, the year of its original publication.

relating mimetically to the Spanish war against fascism. Instead they are intended as an act of humanity, of commemoration.³⁴ Yves-Alain Bois has suggested that this theme of mourning is inherently present in all abstraction.³⁵ Since burial is associated with memorial, these issues may, to some degree, be relevant to the work of Pollock.

In a lecture held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1995, Timothy J. Clark considered the transitional painting, *Totem Lesson II*, 1945 (figure 36) by Jackson Pollock.³⁶ He noted that it was visible with remarkable regularity in photographs of the Springs studio in the 1940s and 1950s and that it must therefore have been of importance to the painter. During his discussion Clark pointed to the broad gray mass which surrounds the central figure and its attendant forms and stated that this functioned as "erasure." He observed that Pollock's erasing had reduced and clarified the painting's previous state of complexity.

This analysis is somewhat perplexing. To choose the word erasure to describe the deadcoating of battleship gray suggests that the process was reductive, like a postwar

³⁴ One year earlier Motherwell had written in the form of a typescript that his abandonment of collage for oil painting resulted from his desire for "a greater involvement in the human world. A shift in one's human situation entails a shift in one's technique and subject-matter." Untitled page of type dated April 1947, Abstract Expressionist/New York School Box, Tony Smith Estate.

³⁵ See Yves-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990), 229-244.

³⁶ This lecture was held December 5, 1995.

Giacometti drawing. As if Pollock removed forms—erased by scrubbing out, perhaps with a turpentine-soaked rag—the forms that encumbered the image he sought. But this is a mischaracterization of the painting. The deadcoat of heavy gray paint is not the muddied result of rubbing away. It is clearly painted on top of forms which remain a pictorial presence, though largely buried.

Pollock's process was not reductive, it was additive, resulting likewise is an added layer of meaning. Pollock used the gray paint to isolate and accentuate the remaining elements. The central form, a vertical totemic figure, is itself re-contoured by the aggressive flat gray. Pollock has not erased but buried the multitude of teeming archetypes below leaving instead a determined clarity. Out of the chaos of the mythic Pollock has begun a search for distinction and self determination. He has laid down a barrier obliterating ambiguity. Here is the artist wresting control and acting into the world. If erasure is akin to excavation (of the unconscious) Pollock has instead willfully buried.³⁷

* * *

In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt understands the issue of freedom through the body, its surrounding space,

³⁷ The idea of burial would have been particularly resonant in the era of mourning at the close of the war.

and thus the potential for action. For Arendt, the totalitarian state and especially the concentration camp, achieves the complete restriction of the space required for action and thus freedom. Not surprisingly, Hitler's conception of totalitarian space was antithetical to such autonomy. In 1943 he said:

Individual liberty is not necessarily the sign of a high degree of civilization. On the contrary, it is the limitation of this liberty within the framework of an organization which incorporates men of the same race, which is the real pointer to the degree of civilization attained.³⁸

The goal of totalitarianism was, as Arendt understood it, to completely eliminate "free action" through the use of terror so that the "suprahuman force [of] Nature or History" as construed by ideology could "race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action."³⁹ For this reason the basic fundamental humanity of the individual was striped away so that he or she could be remade into a simple component of the state, one without conscience or sense of responsibility.⁴⁰ Arendt saw totalitarianism as the complete denial of the spatial and temporal requirements of freedom.

³⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-1944; His Private Conversations*, translated by Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 423. Translation of the Bormann Vermerke.

³⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 465.

⁴⁰ See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, chapter 12 *Totalitarianism in Power*, section 3, *Total Domination*, 437-459.

Its mythology universalized both past and future by creating a heroic past that pointed to a pre-destined future.

Arendt's conception of freedom is based on the union of Immanuel Kant's "definition of freedom as autonomy and spontaneity," and the issues raised by her teacher, Heidegger that only the creative force of action produces meaning.⁴¹ Here then is what Robert Goldwater refers to as the "existentialist hero" who has constructed meaning from the void through the will to define space and in turn establishes the potential for action and freedom.⁴² In the final chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt wrote:

By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them. It destroys the one essential prerequisite for all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space. . . . [Thus] in the perfect totalitarian government all men have become One Man.⁴³

It was precisely this idea of the "One Man," the unified collective, that Arendt so stridently argued against. Her own direct experiences with anti-Semitism and totalitarianism in conjunction with her understanding of existential theory, helped to transform Abstract Expressionism's reliance on the mythic collective unconscious into that most fundamental expression of humanity, the voice of the creative individual.

⁴¹ Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: Being and Politics* (dissertation abstract: Princeton University, 1987).

⁴² Robert Goldwater, "Reflections on the New York School," *Quadrum* (Brussels) 8, (1960). Reprinted in Shapiro, 133.

⁴³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466-67.

For Arendt, freedom and its relationship to space is especially pertinent for the painting and sculpture being produced at this time. In Pollock's very method of painting, action, dependent on space, becomes the vehicle for freedom. Although at some remove, it was in reaction to modernity's accelerating compression of the political space necessary for action that Pollock addressed in his work. Similarly, Doss writes that "Pollock's abstract pictures proposed personal and political reform. . . ." in reaction to "postwar conformity" and towards a greater degree of "self-determination."⁴⁴

In a similar vein, James Thrall Soby reacted in 1949 to the increasingly aggressive charges leveled against abstract art by Congressman Dondero by writing, "Those of us who believe that freedom of expression is not a helpful condition but an absolute requirement of art *must* stand together against reactionary irresponsibility."⁴⁵ In seeming answer to Soby, the painter Robert Goodnough, wrote that Pollock's painting:

results from years of an unrelenting struggle to establish his freedom and the right to create. All else is sacrificed in terms of the desire to make a new thing. . . . This thing is the result of intensity,

⁴⁴ Doss, 347-348, 356.

⁴⁵ James Thrall Soby, "The Fine Arts: A Going in the Mulberry Trees," *The Saturday Review* (July 2, 1949): 30-31. A clipping of this article is contained in the Adolph Gottlieb Papers, Reel N/69-49, frames #453-454, Archives of American Art.

. . . and we react, actually, only to its evidence."⁴⁶

It is within this idea of the work of art as evidence that I wish to resurrect Rosenberg's 1952 essay, "The American Action Painters."⁴⁷ The ready image evoked by this title quickly became a fixed catchword in the public mind, leading too many critics and art historians of the 1960s and 1970s to cast aside the contents of the essay as readily as the title.⁴⁸ Rosenberg wrote:

Getting Inside the Canvas

At a certain point the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which

⁴⁶ Clipping from a 1951 article in *ARTnews*, Jackson Pollock Papers, Reel #3048, Frame #551, Archives of American Art.

⁴⁷ This article originally appeared in *Art News* 51, number 8 (December 1952): 22-23, 48-50. Rosenberg was well respected by the artists as is evident in this letter to Barnett Newman from Mark Rothko (postmarked August 10, 1946. The Springs):

All in all we find Bob [Motherwell] a gracious and interesting guy and Baziotes a swell and vivid person. Pollock is a self centered & a sustained advertising concern and Harold Rosenberg has one of the best brains that you are likely to encounter, full of it, humaneness and genius for getting things impeccably expressed. But I doubt that he will be of much use to us.

Barnett Newman Papers, Reel 3481, Archives of American Art.

⁴⁸ This dismissal was also the result of the apotheosis of Greenberg's formalism in the 1960s. See, for example, Michael Fried's (an acolyte of Greenberg) essay, "Jackson Pollock," *Artforum* 4, number 1 (September 1965): 14-17. This article is an excerpt from the introduction to Fried's catalogue, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965) which featured the paintings of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitsky, and Frank Stella. He writes of the failure of Rosenberg's criticism and his "tendency

. . . to regard Pollock as a kind of natural existentialist," obscuring the artist's "subtle questing formal intelligence." Fried, 14. The brazen certainty of Fried's polemic echoes the confrontational politics of the cold war.

to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.⁴⁹

Then in reference to Hegel and Kierkegaard, Rosenberg warns that to recognize the action as key is fraught with existential risk.⁵⁰

Note, for example, Pollock's gestural definition of space within the canvas arena as he paints in his studio in the Springs, East Hampton in 1950 (figure 37). Such poured paintings have been misconstrued as illustrating the labyrinth, as paradoxically, exitless "snarls of yarn." But this is misleading.⁵¹ The fluid paint is a reflection of the various velocities of Pollock's actions. And it is this action that is the subject, not a symbolic representation of Greek myth. The lines and splatters and pools only indexically represent the trajectory of the wet paint as it moved through space. It is a web certainly and of many layers but it is not a labyrinth. Here, Pollock's space is very dense. It is much too overwrought to be inhabitable.

If Goodnough and Rosenberg are taken seriously, if the painting *One (Number 31, 1950)* hanging in the Museum of Modern Art is not in actuality the art but only the beautiful

⁴⁹ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994), 25.

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 32.

⁵¹ See Parker Tyler, "Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth," typescript, Jackson Pollock Papers, reel 3048, frame 547, Archives of American Art. It was published in the *Magazine of Art*, March 1950, 92-93.

fossil or "evidence" of the moment of natality in which the art is located, then Pollock's paintings have not been approached correctly (figure 38). In paleontology, a fossil is used to recreate a given specimen. If, as Goodnough and Rosenberg compellingly suggest of the action painters, the painting is an artifact, then it can be used to re-enact the original moment of natality—the condition of freedom. As the art historian Claude Cernuschi has pointed out, the viewer does this already to a limited extent. "The act of painting is recreated by the viewer through visual analysis of the lines' velocity and direction, its thickness and thinness."⁵² Indeed, it is all but impossible to stand before a Pollock drip painting and not vicariously redraw the lines according to the speed and arc each suggests.

What remains missing though, is the artist's point of view. When I look at Pollock's painting *One (Number 31, 1950)*, it is spread before me with a remarkable degree of compositional balance. The density of no one section overweighs the composition as a whole. But this is not what Pollock experienced in the act of painting. If in contrast, the painting is approached as the painter did when the canvas lay unstretched on the floor of his studio in the Springs, that is, if we reclaim Pollock's vantage point and approach the previously horizontal surface as a ground plane once

⁵² Claude Cernuschi "Cognitive reading of Metaphor," a paper given at a symposium on the 50th anniversary of Pollock and Krasner in the Springs, *Jackson Pollock: Myth, Meaning and Metaphor*, Pollock and Krasner House, July 9, 1995.

again, then the canvas loses all such uniformity of mass and instead increasingly gains density as one moves into the canvas arena both from the side and from above (figure 39). As the eye enters, there is a greater degree of clarity in the foreground than when the viewer is enveloped by the entire vertical canvas simultaneously. As the eye continues to move forward towards the center of the canvas, now at an angle of less than forty-five degrees, the tangle of skidding paint coalesces into a unified mass where definition is lost but for the most assertive and primary thrusts.⁵³

Naturally, the viewer's experience is not an authentic return to the ordinary moment. For Pollock, each layer of paint was added sequentially and the total image was certainly not conceived a priori but instead in controlled stages of pure invention and risk. Nonetheless the viewer can begin to recapture the degree of complexity which Pollock faced by giving up the vertical curtain of Cubism—that position of analysis—for the artist's more intimate and active position within the canvas.

Pollock himself offers support for this repositioning. First, the painter could not have been clearer than in his

⁵³ This interpretation is conceptual, it is not a call for Pollock's canvases to be actually unstretched and returned to the floor. Rosenberg's is only one reading and since there is no evidence to suggest that Pollock thought otherwise, it must be assumed that it was his intent that the paintings be exhibited vertically. Nevertheless, Pollock's painting, *White Cockatoo: Number 24A*, 1948 (CR 194, collection American Broadcasting Corporation) was hung horizontally at his 1955 exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery.

declarations regarding the significance of his occupation of the canvas arena:

My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or floor. I need the resistance of the hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the Indian sand painters of the West. . . . When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. 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.⁵⁴

Not only does Pollock emphasize the importance of being in the painting (the italics are his), but he also makes reference to American Indian sand painting rituals. This reference has two important aspects. First, there is a spiritual element connected to Pollock's work and second, for the American Indians, painting's value was in the process of creation and not in its preservation. The paintings are, in fact, traditionally blown away (except when an image is intended as a commercial object).⁵⁵ Finally, Pollock notes that it is only after the initial act of painting, the "get

⁵⁴ Jackson Pollock, *Problems of Contemporary Art: Possibilities, An Occasional Review* 1, edited by Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg (Winter 1947/1948): 79.

⁵⁵ Alfonso Ossorio recalled that Pollock, "had a very down to earth knowledge of American sand painting." Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (New York: Putnam, 1985), 106; Sandler, 113. Also see the subsection, "Sand Paintings and Drip Paintings: Ritual Art" in W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 186-190.

acquainted' period," that he can begin the distancing process of assessment and "see what I have been about." His use of "I" in this context suggests a condensation of Arendt's division of the act from its subsequent analysis in the context of the broader historical narrative:

the story which, as the result of action, begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past. In contradistinction to fabrication [note parallel to Lippold] where the light by which to judge the finished project is provided by the image or model perceived beforehand by the craftsman's eye, the light that illuminates the process of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end,
 . . .⁵⁶

The photographs taken by Hans Namuth and Rudy Burchardt of Pollock working in his Springs studio in 1950 document this division between the freedom expressed in action and its later assessment (figure 40). When engaged in the active process of painting, Pollock's body is held low. He moves around and through the space of the canvas looking simultaneously forward and down so that his line of sight is before him, not under him. It is only in the photographs where Pollock has put down the brushes, sticks, and cans of paint, when he is still, that we see the artist view his painting straight down, that is, from the perpendicular angle the museum viewer is accustomed to.⁵⁷ This is the angle of

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191-192.

⁵⁷ As has been pointed out by Krauss, Rose, Fred Orton, and Griselda Pollock, these photographs are subjective and interpretive renderings and should not be accepted innocently as objective documents. Pollock was acting upon the stage defined by the photographer. Still, while the work of Namuth and Burkhardt can distort, emphasize, de-emphasize, and even

assessment, not creation. Pollock, with arms now at rest on his hips, begins the process of determining what he, in the act of doing, had "been about." Pollock thus supports Arendt belief that action can not be preconceived and is self-revelatory.⁵⁸

When the Museum of Modern Art displays Pollock's *One (Number 31, 1950)* on the wall it offers only a remnant of an action subsumed into history which can refer to, but not preserve the freedom momentarily created in the natality of that act. Krauss has collected a few critical responses to this transition:

This trajectory, moving ineluctably from disorder to order, can be tracked through the statements made by the journeyman critics at the turn of the decade [1940s to 1950s], as one after another they reversed themselves on the subject of Pollock's work. . . . Which is to say that before, it was on the floor: 'a child's contour map,' 'a flat, war shattered city, possibly Hiroshima, as seen from a great height,' 'dribblings,' 'droolings,' 'a mass of tangled hair.' And now, it's on the wall. Where it takes on order, and the sophistication of tradition . . .⁵⁹

Krauss especially singles out Greenberg, whose "mission" she believes it was to:

obscure, it can not make present that which was absent. See Hans Namuth, *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock, essais de Rosalind Krauss and Francis V. O'Conner, Les Textes de Jackson Pollock* (Paris: Macula/Pierre Brochet, 1978) and Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Jackson Pollock, Painting and the Myth of Photograph," *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1996), 165-176. Originally published in *Art History* 6, number 1 1983): 114-122.

⁵⁸ These issues are treated in chapter three.

⁵⁹ Krauss, 245. Krauss notes Steinberg's distinction between the vertical and the horizontal, as between culture and nature (page 327) as well as Freud's (page 324).

lift the paintings Pollock made from off the ground where he'd made them, and onto the wall. It was in that location and at that angle to gravity that they became 'painting.'⁶⁰

In other words, these paintings were joined to the historical narrative by being fully separated from the context of their fleeting act of freedom. Greenberg's and Rosenberg's theories of painting was antithetical. One celebrated painting primarily as a noun, the other primarily as a verb.

Pollock's paintings reify space and action defiantly . reclaiming freedom as a modern possibility. But even with this said, it may be tempting to maintain the position that an aspect of the mythic, or at the very least an element of the Surrealist mechanism of automatism remains central to Pollock's creative process. After all, to the end of his life Pollock insisted on the importance of the unconscious in his work. But this is not the discredited automatic game the Surrealists had themselves become critical of years before. Rather, it is the act of natality, the freedom that is achieved in the confrontation between the individual exposed and the indeterminate complexity of the world.

Paradoxically, Newman, the artist who wrote most prolifically about art's role in the world is also the artist whose work, among the Abstract Expressionists, is the most difficult to write about. Newman understood this and would divide himself between the roles of citizen, that part of him that was free to expound, and the artist who was considerably

⁶⁰ Krauss, 244.

more reserved, at least linguistically.⁶¹ The difficulty rests in Newman's subject. His paintings are not illustrations as was much of Surrealism and to some degree the American myth painting, nor are they a visible reification of action as was Pollock's painting. In contrast, Newman's art actualized the process by which thought becomes being.

In 1947 Barnett Newman wrote that in Herbert Ferber's sculpture, "mock" heroism was replaced by the "free splendor [of] open masses."⁶² In the same year he wrote that the truly elemental act was not social and therefore not of the mythic drama but rather was an expression of "self-awareness . . . before the void."⁶³ If Pollock sought to avoid the ambiguity of myth and confront the complexity of the modern world directly, in this respect Newman was emphatic. In 1951 he wrote:

One thing is certain: ambiguity as a deliberate act, as a program for either art or life, is an anomaly and an evasion that can lead only to some form of slavery. Clarity alone can lead to freedom.⁶⁴

⁶¹ See Newman's remarks to the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference, 1952. Published in O'Neill, 242-246.

⁶² Barnett B. Newman, "Ferber (1947)," catalogue forward, Herbert Ferber at Betty Parsons Gallery December 15, 1947-January 8, 1948. Reprinted in O'Neill, 110-111.

⁶³ Barnett Newman, "The First Man was an Artist," *Tiger's Eye* 1, 59-60.

⁶⁴ Barnett B. Newman, "Review of *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* by Thomas B. Hess." *Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 123. This review was commissioned by *Partisan Review* in 1951 but was never printed.

Matthew Baigell has interpreted Newman's zips as the primordial God of the first chapter of Genesis and Adam "the first being to emanate from this light."⁶⁵ In Baigell's Faustian analysis, Newman assumes the "God-like" role of the Creator.⁶⁶ He suggests that the artist lost sight of the chasm which separates the creative possibility of man and the absolute potential of God.⁶⁷

While the essential interpretation is sound, I find this reading too narrow. Baigell quotes Hess on the painting *Onement I*, 1948 (figure 41) who relates the painting to:

a complex symbol in the purest sense, of Genesis itself. It is an act of division, a gesture of separation, as God separated light from darkness with a line drawn in the void. The artist, Newman pointed out, must start like God, with chaos, the void. . . .⁶⁸

What Baigell misses is that the foundation of Newman's post-1947 painting is the optical condition of being. As such, Newman's creation is rooted in the experience of the individual and while profound, is nonetheless contained by being in the world and thus negating the possibility of claiming any greater scope or divinity.

In Bois's essay, "Perceiving Newman," the author asks how the two paintings, *Moment*, 1946 and *Onement I*, 1948,

⁶⁵ Baigell, 33. The artist's widow, Annalee Newman disagreed with Baigell's thesis and responded in a letter to the editor which itself prompted a reply from the author. Both letters are contained in *American Art Journal* 9, number 1 (spring 1995): 117-118.

⁶⁶ Baigell, 34.

⁶⁷ Baigell, 36.

⁶⁸ Baigell, 34.

while compositionally so very similar, could in fact be separated by the "radical break" that the latter painting constitutes.⁶⁹ Before coming to this question, the essay recounts the act, on Newman's birthday (January 29, 1948) in which *Onement I* became, and in so doing, constituted what Hess calls Newman's "conversion:"

he prepared a small canvas with a surface of cadmium red dark and fixed a piece of tape down the center. Then he quickly smeared a coat of cadmium red light over the tape, to test the color. He looked at the picture for a long time. Indeed he studied it for some eight months.⁷⁰

The act of putting the cadmium red light onto the tape, rather than working up the surface of what he had planned as a base coat (the dark red field), was an action both singular and frail and unlikely to survive. Hess wrote of this moment, "For Newman to leave *Onement I* in its naked, raw state necessitated a tremendous act of will. . . . He had to break loose from circumstances; to invent a gesture of freedom."⁷¹ Arendt, too had tremendous respect for the freedom generated by action. She wrote, "Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom."⁷² The act was frail because had Newman not had the presence of mind at

⁶⁹ Yves-Alain Bois, "Perceiving Newman," *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990), 187-213, 309-312.

⁷⁰ Bois, 187. Here Bois quotes Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 51.

⁷¹ Hess, 65.

⁷² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 479.

that decisive moment to recognize that here was something of great value, and had he not given himself the time to evaluate and understand his originary impulse, than this action would not have entered into the historical narrative. In the section, *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*, in *The Human Condition* Arendt defines the nature of thought as action:

Traditionally, thought was conceived as the most direct and important way to lead to the contemplation of truth. Since Plato, and probably since Socrates, thinking was understood as the inner dialogue in which one speaks with himself; and although this dialogue lacks all outward manifestation and even requires a more or less complete cessation of all other activities, it constitutes in itself a highly active state.

Newman places before the viewer a painting of broad and narrow expanses of color. These surfaces are activated only through our perceptual will. Whether we engage the phenomenon before us and in this way begin to reconstruct the artist's own action is, I think, central to the work's expression of the heroism of the perception of our being in the world. What Bois calls, "the abolition of the opposition containing/contained." In other words the "outward manifestation" of Newman's "inner dialogue" regarding the visual reification of being.

Bois's focus on the zip in *Onement I*, is instructive:

its meaning lies entirely in its co-existence with the field to which it refers and which it measures and declares for the beholder. . . . *Onement I* fulfills the goal Newman set for his works, that of giving a 'sense of place' to its beholder.⁷³

⁷³ Bois, 193.

As Bois points out, his reading is informed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's whose analyses posit that the bilateral nature of vision is constitutive of the 'sense of place.'⁷⁴ What is not mentioned is that the foundation for this inquiry was developed previously by Arendt's mentor, Heidegger, in his analysis of *Dasein's* spatiality in his 1927 masterpiece *Being and Time*.⁷⁵ According to Heidegger:

[*Dasein*] shows the characters of *de-severance* and *directionality*. 'De-severance' amounts to making the farness vanish. If *Dasein*, in its concern, brings something close by, this does not signify that it fixes something at a spatial position with a minimal distance from some point in the body. Bringing close is not oriented to the I-Thing encumbered with a body, but towards concerned Being-in-the-world—that is, towards whatever is proximally encountered in such Being. *Dasein* is essentially *de-severance*—that is it is spatial. *Dasein* has likewise the character of *directionality*. Out of this directionality arise the fixed directions of right and left. *Dasein* constantly takes these directions along with it. *Dasein's* spatialization in its 'bodily nature' is likewise marked out in accordance with these directions. Directedness with regard to right and left is based upon the essential directionality of *Dasein* in general, and this directionality in turn is essentially co-determined by Being-in-the-world.⁷⁶

What Heidegger addresses then are issues which are central to *Onement I* and many of Newman's subsequent, post-"conversion" paintings. That is *Onement I's* reassuring ("concerned")

⁷⁴ Bois refers to Jacques Lacan, "De nos antécédents," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), translated by Colin Smith (Routledge: New Brunswick, 1962).

⁷⁵ "Dasein" is inadequately translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson as "being-there" in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 508.

⁷⁶ Heidegger, 138, 142-144.

reification of the viewer's proximate orientation in the world even if that sense of belonging is ultimately not dependent on the painting but rather is solipsistically the result of the viewer's own bi-lateral directedness.

This 'sense of place'—man's position vis-à-vis the universe—was something which Newman, like Heidegger, believed contemporary science, which the painter generalized as geometry, had eroded. While Newman clearly held geometry in contempt he was speaking emblematically of a discipline that he understood as preconceived and certain, where human experience has been eliminated. In his paintings *Euclidean Abyss*, 1946-47 (figure 42), Newman's dismissal of the rational grid as a structure with which to confront "the terror of the unknowable," agrees with aspects of the thesis then being developed by Max Horkheimer and Adorno, namely that "rational culture" born of the enlightenment was in fact responsible for the irrational violence the world had just endured.⁷⁷ It is important to distinguish between Horkheimer and Adorno's position which implicates western and especially

⁷⁷ See Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cummings (New York: Herder and Herder, 1944). And a useful commentary, by Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", translated by Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 26 (1982): 13-30. Annalee Newman recalled how gravely Newman had reacted to the Second World War and especially the Holocaust. She recalled that:

He felt as if the world was coming to an end, he stopped painting. 'How could you keep painting girls on beaches,' he asked. And he was angry at the Surrealists for not allowing their work to be affected by [the] violence.⁷⁷

German culture and Arendt's view that totalitarianism is the negation of that tradition and so preserves the value of culture. These paintings then are a requiem for specific aspects of the promise of the enlightenment including the myth of progressive scientism which Newman clearly held accountable:

It is precisely this death image, the grip of geometry, that has to be confronted.

In a world of geometry, geometry itself has become our moral crisis. And it will not be resolved by jazzed-up kicks but only by the answer of no geometry of any kind. Unless we face up to it and discover a new image based on new principles, there is no hope for freedom.⁷⁸

This statement is somewhat misleading. Since Newman's paintings are nonetheless disciplined explorations into the perceptual space that we inhabit. Newman's paintings are in this way definitively related to "geo" and "metry." In other words, these paintings are rooted in our worldly experience of measure although not the cold dead series of proofs Newman despised. De Kooning put it this way:

That space of science—that space of the physicists—I am truly bored with now. Their lens are so thick that seen through them, the space get more and more melancholy. There seems to be no end to the misery of the scientists' space. All that it contains is billions and billions of hunks of matter, hot or cold, floating around in darkness according to a great design of aimlessness. The stars I think about, if I could fly, I could reach in few old-fashioned days. But physicists stars I use as buttons, buttoning up curtains of emptiness. If I stretch my arms next to the rest of

Interview with Annalee Newman conducted by the author, February 3, 1996.

⁷⁸ Barnett B. Newman, "The New American Painting (n.d.)," *Selected Writing and Interviews*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 179.

myself and wonder where my fingers are—that is all the space I need as a painter.”⁷⁹

Arendt, of course had also considered the issue of man's alienation, the loss of the “sense of place” in the modern world, which is central to existentialism. But her reading of the modern situation is not one of utter hopelessness. As is clear in her exegesis on the subject in *The Human Condition* which she called, the discovery of the Archimedean point.

By this, Arendt refers to the conceptual revolution that resulted from the invention of the telescope (with the assistance of Nicolas of Cusa, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton) and that “had challenged the finite, geocentric world view that men had held since time memorial” and that had reached an unbearable intensity by the mid-twentieth century.⁸⁰ It was here in Galileo's “confirmation” of earth's movement and the subsequent conceptual fulfillment of Archimedes's desire (dating from the third century B.C.E.), that we have a point of view beyond our own from which to come to know the world, that Arendt places the origin of man's sense of homelessness “. . . the Cartesian doubt by which modern philosophy—that ‘school of suspicion,’ as Nietzsche once called it—was founded. . . .”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Willem de Kooning, “What Abstract Art Means to Me,” delivered at a symposium at The Museum of Modern Art, February 5, 1951 and published in *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 18, number 3 (spring 1951). Reprinted in Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 146.

⁸⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 258.

⁸¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 260-261.

Newman wanted to retreat from this displacement, this sense of homelessness, to borrow Arendt's usage. He stressed that the artist must journey back in time. He sought through his paintings to recreate man's originary condition—a figure that does not cower before the firmament but stands, occupies, and establishes space and in so doing the basis for being in the world. The creation of *Onement I* was just such an originary act. As Newman noted in an interview with Dorothy Seckler in 1962:

I feel, however, that one of its implications is its assertion of freedom, its denial of dogmatic principles, its reputation of all dogmatic life. Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes.⁸²

Newman's pronouncement that his works of art mean an end to state capitalism and totalitarianism has often been cited, but because of the seeming incongruity of political science and visual abstraction, this claim has just as often suffered a critical response of feigned tolerance. In other words, Newman is not taken seriously. I do not mean that his sentiment is thought to be ingenuous, but that the apparent gap between his paintings and their political agenda recalls the formal brilliance and political impotence of so many members of the avant-garde.

⁸² Barnett Newman interviewed by Dorothy Gees Seckler in "Frontiers of Space," *Art in America* 50, number 2 (summer 1962): 87.

Yet, the statement addressed to Rosenberg was not fantastically over-optimistic, since it was not Newman's intention to imbue his paintings with actual political agency. Rather than act as such an agent of political transformation, Newman's paintings simply reclaim the perceptual state of individual being from the historical model of displacement. Thus, while Newman's statement is sweeping, it is nevertheless congruent with his concern for directness and authenticity.

The following example sheds light on the political implications of Newman's spare images. Newman painted *Concord*, 1949 one year after *Onement I* and four years after the world was confronted with unimpeachable evidence of the totalitarian concentration camp. This profoundly disturbing knowledge, which has taken our culture years to begin to directly confront caused Newman to seek a visual statement that was at once an acknowledgment of culture's and even art's culpability and could also declare the fundamental uniqueness of the individual experience of being. This was the state which Arendt extolled as the condition required for freedom and which, in that way, proclaimed a negation of the conditions under which totalitarianism is possible. Amazingly, Newman succeeded, if only in the sphere of his art work.

The painting *Concord* (figure 43) is a large vertical canvas, unevenly, though consistently painted with a deep green wash of oil paint. Two wide strips of masking tape run

parallel to each other down the length of the canvas at its center. The tape is partially obscured by the translucent wash of green that covers the whole field. When confronted by this seven and one-half foot tall painting, the viewer is enveloped. The field of vision, while not completely filled is nonetheless overwhelmed. The painting is a mirror, not a the mimetic reflection of a full length self-portrait, but rather an echo of the vertical and bilateral essence of the viewer's sight. The essential nature of Newman's rendering, its spareness, prompts a recognition that the subject is ultimately not found in the canvas's "depiction" but in that which it reflects, the viewer's own being as oriented by perception. In all this, *Concord* is similar to *Onement I*.

And like *Onement I*, *Concord* retains masking tape. In both instances these paintings are idexical signs of the originary moment, the trace of an act of natality—of freedom at least as Arendt understood it. But unlike the earlier painting, *Concord* contains two zips. Newman spoke of geometry's death grip. Geometry is the imposition of arbitrary measure in undifferentiated space. In the realm of painting, such measure is best expressed in the rationalism imposed by linear perspective, first, in fifteenth century Florence. On the opening page of "Book One" of *On Painting*, the first published model of linear perspective, the author, Leon Battista Alberti, immediately notes the painter's dependence on geometry. "Mathematicians measure with their

minds alone the forms of things separated from all matter."⁸³ Similarly, in his essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky, a German émigré, notes that perspective is the "objectification of the subjective" and that:

the Renaissance succeeded in mathematically fully rationalizing an image of space which had already earlier been aesthetically unified. . . . This entailed abandoning the [Aristotelian] idea of a cosmos with the middle of the earth as its absolute center and with the outermost celestial sphere as its absolute limit; the result was the concept of an infinity. . . . the same view that will later be rationalized by Cartesianism and formalized by Kantianism.⁸⁴

Panofsky's remark predates Arendt's concern, shared also as we have seen by Newman and de Kooning, that the radical conceptual shift that led to this infinity, fostered the homelessness, the alienation, and the violence of the modern world.⁸⁵

⁸³ Leon Battista Alberti, *Della pittura* (1435-36). Reprinted as *On Painting*, translated by John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 43. Michael Baxandall has linked the rise of capitalism in Florence to the development of perspective and proportion in painting. See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 86-108.

⁸⁴ Erwin Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form, Perspective as Symbolic Form'" *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1924-1925* (Leipzig), 1927. Reprinted as Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, translated by Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 13, 63, 65 and 66.

⁸⁵ Alfred W. Crosby has written a thoughtful and engaging, albeit uncritical, general history of the development and impact of quantitative measure in Western culture. He argues that the unprecedented success of Western imperialism, science and culture can be traced to "the epochal shift from qualitative to quantitative perception." Writing of this "New Model," he quotes Galileo Galilei:

The political imperative of *Concord* is no more than this. Newman has dismantled Brunelleschi's visual pyramid. He has reoriented the perspectival orthogonals to resist the illusion of geometric measure by adhering them to the surface of the canvas. And in this way these lines deny the arrogant conceit of objective measure and can only represent the subjective orientation of the individual. The title, *Concord*, is a reference to correspondence, simply the agreement between the visual experience of the viewer and the reflection of that experience in the painting.

Pollock's exuberance stands in sharp contrast to Newman's declaration of the resolute binocular presence of the viewer. While Pollock claimed freedom through the physical act of energizing the space of his horizontal canvas, Newman reasserted the primacy of being in the world through his ability to create on the vertical plane, definitive perceptual reflections of spatial existence. Nevertheless, each artist sought in common to reclaim through

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze, but the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.

Three hundred years later Newman, who did not share Crosby's admiration for quantification, sought to extract himself, not from Dædalus's labyrinth, as had Galileo, but from the analytic grid such Renaissance rationalists had measured from Theseus's string. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), n.d. and 240.

a conceptual shift the ordinary freedom that Arendt called
natality.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, and like Ixion I did revolve. Till gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over and floated by my side.¹

So begins Melville's brief epilogue to *Moby Dick*. During President Clinton's centrist bid for re-election in late 1996, he borrowed a phrase from this epilogue although by way of a circuitous route that saw the phrase first embraced by Schlesinger, Jr. and then John F. Kennedy.² Here I would like to once again borrow Melville's "the vital centre" and again in the context of the Cold War, but this time for both Arendt and Abstract Expressionism.

This dissertation has attempted to bring a new set of meanings to the paintings discussed by expanding the

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, edited by Alfred Kazin (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1956), 432. This volume of *Moby-Dick*, one of several in the Arendt and Blücher library, is inscribed, "Hannah & Heinrich, love from Alfred Sept 1956."

contextual field in which they are studied. The area of this expansion has been largely political and philosophical. In past scholarship this has meant that much attention has been paid to the factional intrigue of the American left. It is my opinion that this dissertation does not need yet another such account. This is not because the pressures on the American Left of the Hitler-Stalin pact and the Cold War were not important but because these issues have been dealt with previously and in the end, because they are not central to the thesis presented here.

That is not to say, however, that Arendt and the artists were politically disconnected but rather that the political issues which have directly concerned this dissertation have either been of a general philosophical nature or, in the case of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* have sought political centrality—Schlesinger's "vital centre."

Arendt's centrist position was conditioned at least in part by her political predicament. In 1933 she had fled Germany for France and at that moment had become stateless. Without sovereign protection she was eventually forced into an internment camp where she was nearly forcibly repatriated (to a death camp). She remained at risk even after her arrival in the United States in 1941. The 1940s marked the beginning of America's regression to the earlier paranoia of the prewar red scares.

² He quotes Arendt on the subject of concentration camps in Schlesinger, Jr., 77 and 87.

Intellectuals were of course immediately suspect and Arendt, who did not gain her citizenship until 1951 had been a contributor to periodicals linked with the Communist Party. Worse, her husband was a professed Socialist. Any such insecurities on Arendt's part were well founded. She saw the lives of colleagues ravaged of Senator Joseph McCarthy. As was previously noted, one of Arendt's closest friends was the painter Lewin Alcopley. According to his daughter, Una Dora Copley, Alcopley's Icelandic wife, Nina Trygvadottir was falsely accused of being a communist. The result was swift deportation.³ With Congressman Dondero's threats hanging in the air the artists were of course well aware of these issues. In the case of Alcopley, the Artists' Club gave a farewell party to their departing friend on November 12, 1952.⁴ And finally, according to David Craven, several of the artists had files kept on them by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.⁵

³ The couple moved to Paris and were unable to return to New York for almost a decade when the United States found that the evidence against them had been faulty. Interview with Una Dora Copley conducted by the author, March 9, 1996.

⁴ Artists' Club records, Irving Sandler personal papers (uncatalogued), Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Through the Freedom of Information Act he uncovered files on Reinhardt (begun 1941, 123 pages, classified as "SM-C" which Craven explains as security matter-c "a potential collaborator with foreign agents due to communist or socialist sympathy), on Rothko (begun early 1960s, 21 pages), and on Gottlieb (begun early 1960s, 5 pages). See David Craven, *New Documents: The Unpublished FBI Files on Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb*, *American Abstract Expressionism* edited by David Thistlewood, Tate

Arendt's evolving critique of our labor and consumer based society and her isolation of those endangered elements of freedom which remain available was based on her background as a Jewish German existentialist scholar. Using this unique perspective it has been possible to locate the artists of the early New York School in a far more complex historical and theoretical matrix than is common. This has been accomplished by first recognizing the affiliated concerns of two contiguous although heretofore seemingly segregated communities, that of the émigrés and the artists, and then documenting and analyzing the significant social and professional connections that linked them. The recognition of this nexus has allowed for a unique and fruitful re-examination of Abstract Expressionism both in regard to its social and political dynamics and even in relation to the art's formal development.

This approach begins to bridge the divisions that have isolated academic disciplines and have too often hobbled our understanding of the spectrum of intellectual communities such as that which the Abstract Expressionists were a part. Such intellectual circles sought to further a broad and eclectic array of intersecting subjects that push far beyond the traditional boundaries of art history.

Abstract Expressionism, while broadly celebrated, has been the target of a sustained critical attack over the past decade. As has been tirelessly pointed out, the artists are

Gallery Liverpool Forum, volume 1 (Liverpool: Liverpool

inopportunately homogenous, being primarily white and male. This, in combination with the artists' reputed espousal of Greenbergian formalism, has provided a convenient target. Nevertheless, these men and women represent a rare collaborative search for meaning in an era of darkness.

The question arises, what do we make of such claims of formalism if, as has been shown, the artists are actively engaged in a reconsideration of culture's moral responsibility? In spite of Adorno's negation of the possibility of poetry in the shadow of Auschwitz, the artists continued to make use of the critical tools of culture, adopting elements of the historical avant-garde, in order to explore, like Arendt, the nature of evil and finally to take action against it.

Beyond simply locating the artists in their intellectual circle, the insertion of Arendt's understanding of freedom in the modern era has offered valuable historical insights. As was developed in the third chapter, the complex of meanings with which Arendt imbued the conditions of work, action, and the *polis* offers more than a novel reading of the artists and their groups, it begins to affix meaning where mere description and generality has been the rule.

Similarly, Arendt's exceptional consideration of evil in the war's immediate aftermath offers the historian an invaluable aid in the task of understanding and differentiating between the various methods employed by the

University Press, 1993), 41-52.

artists as they sought to confront the issue of modern evil. Her twining of the issues of evil and freedom when applied to the artists, suggests that perhaps the rejection of mythic imagery and the subsequent achievement of abstraction were related developments that represented a thematic continuity not simply a formal apotheosis.

In the fourth chapter, the abrupt abandonment of myth was considered in regard to Arendt's position yielding a broader context with which to understand what had previously been considered, a priori, a function of the artists' advance to abstraction. Arendt's complex viewpoint, a synthesis of philosophy and political science, has illuminated aspects of the early New York School's struggle with the subject matter of evil and freedom within a broader political and intellectual context, issues that have largely resisted interpretation. Finally, Arendt's work has prompted an expansion of the underlying meaning of abstraction and a re-evaluation of the phenomenological assumptions brought to bear on the paintings themselves.

In his essay, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," Dana R. Villa wrote:

Arendtian aestheticism, an aestheticism predicated on a love of the world and which admires great action because it possesses a beauty that illuminates the world, is critically different from Nietzschean aestheticism, the aestheticism of the artist. The artist is, according to Arendt, a species of *homo faber*, who characteristically views the world in terms of means and ends. He is unable

to conceive praxis independently of poesis: the work always retains priority over the activity itself.⁶

This entrapment in the condition of *homo faber* is precisely what Pollock and Newman sought to breach. Prompted by the war to recognize, as had Arendt, that freedom was increasingly jeopardized, these artists sought to emerge from the traditional role of maker and instead foster the conditions in which action would preserve freedom. It is Abstract Expressionism's reification of action over mimetic image making that Arendt had not considered when she categorized the artist as *homo faber* and it was at least in part the era's political crisis that led the artists to reject that historical condition and strive to achieve what Arendt believed was largely unattainable, the condition of *vita activa*.

Finally, Arendt recognized the dangers inherent in human freedom and in 1959 wrote:

The reason we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end. . . . All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom. . . . Nowhere, in other words, neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life, nor fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom
⁷

⁶ Dana R. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory* 20, number 2 (May 1992), 299

⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 233-234.

And we as art historians and audience to the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists constitute the plurality that ensures this irony.

**Les femmes
ressortissantes allemandes
doivent se rendre
au centre de Gurs
(Pyrénées-Orientales)**

*La préfecture nous commu-
nique :*

Les femmes de nationalité allemande ou originaire des territoires de l'Empire allemand — tel qu'il était délimité avant le 1^{er} mars 1939 — doivent, si elles sont âgées de plus de 17 ans et de moins de 56 ans, se rendre avant le 1^{er} juin, au Centre de Gurs (Pyrénées-Orientales).

Celles qui contreviendraient à cet ordre, seront mises en état d'arrestation.

Les étrangères visées ci-dessus pourront, à leurs frais, prendre le chemin de fer ou tout autre moyen de transport public pour rejoindre le centre de rassemblement assigné.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Dr. Royal B. Farnum, formerly of the Rhode Island School of Design and now consultant for Cooper Union, president; Ernest Pickering, dean of the School of Applied Arts of the University of Cincinnati, vice-president; Gordon L. Reynolds, president of the Massachusetts School of Art, secretary; and Dana P. Vaughan, dean of Cooper Union, acting treasurer.

Norman L. Rice of Syracuse University, Warren T. Mosman of the Minneapolis School of Art and John E. Alcott of the Rhode Island School of Design will serve as chairman, respectively, of the committees on admission, program and publicity, and definitions

of their commercial art training, while instructors are drawn exclusively from practicing members of fine and commercial art professions. Classified as an "educational institution of collegiate grade" the School's courses are accepted by the University of California and many other colleges.

Brooklyn Museum School

The Brooklyn Museum Art School announces registration open for the 1948 fall term, which begins Sept. 28. New courses offered among a wide variety of full and part-time sessions held days, evenings and weekends, will be a Picture Clinic, weekly seminars of criti-

New School Art Courses

The New School for Social Research will offer 17 art workshops and nine art lecture courses during the 1948-1949 academic year, beginning Sept. 27. The workshop faculty includes Camillo Egas, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Abraham Rattner, Stuart Davis, Julian Levi, Robert Gwathmey, Louis Schanker, Mario Carreño, Seymour Lipton, Adja Yunkers, Hans Jelinek, Johannes Moltzahn, Edmund Marein, and Alexey Brodovitch.

Art study courses will be given by Rudolf Arnheim, Victor Zuckerkandl, Meyer Schapiro, Hanna Deinhard, Mortimer Borne, Paul Zucker, and Margaret Bieber.

Mrs. Moholy-Nagy Named

Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, educator and widow of the late László Moholy-Nagy, has been appointed visiting professor of art at Bradley University, Peoria. She will conduct combination lecture-workshop courses in Analysis and Creation of Contemporary Art. For many years Mrs. Moholy-Nagy headed the humanities division of her husband's New School for Design in Chicago.

Beatrice Winsor Memorial

Friends of the late Beatrice Winsor, who served so long at the Newark Museum, have formed a fund-raising committee toward setting up a memorial to her in the Museum. Chairman of the committee is Paul B. Sommer, president of the American Insurance Co. and vice-president of the Newark Museum Association. All wishing to contribute may send their checks to the Newark Museum, 43 Washington Street, Newark, N. J. Checks should be drawn to the order of The Newark Museum Association.

Dodge Appointed Curator

The board of directors of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts has announced the appointment of Vernon Montgomery Dodge as curator of its schools, succeeding Mrs. Louise Bowen Ballinger who resigned the post held by her for the past five years. Mr. Dodge assumed his duties on July 1.

Amagansett in Florida

The Amagansett Art School, formerly located in Amagansett, Long Island, will open its second season in Sarasota, Florida, on October 4. Director Hilton Leech will teach landscape painting in watercolor and oil, and Dorothy Sherman will instruct in oil portrait and figure painting.

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Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

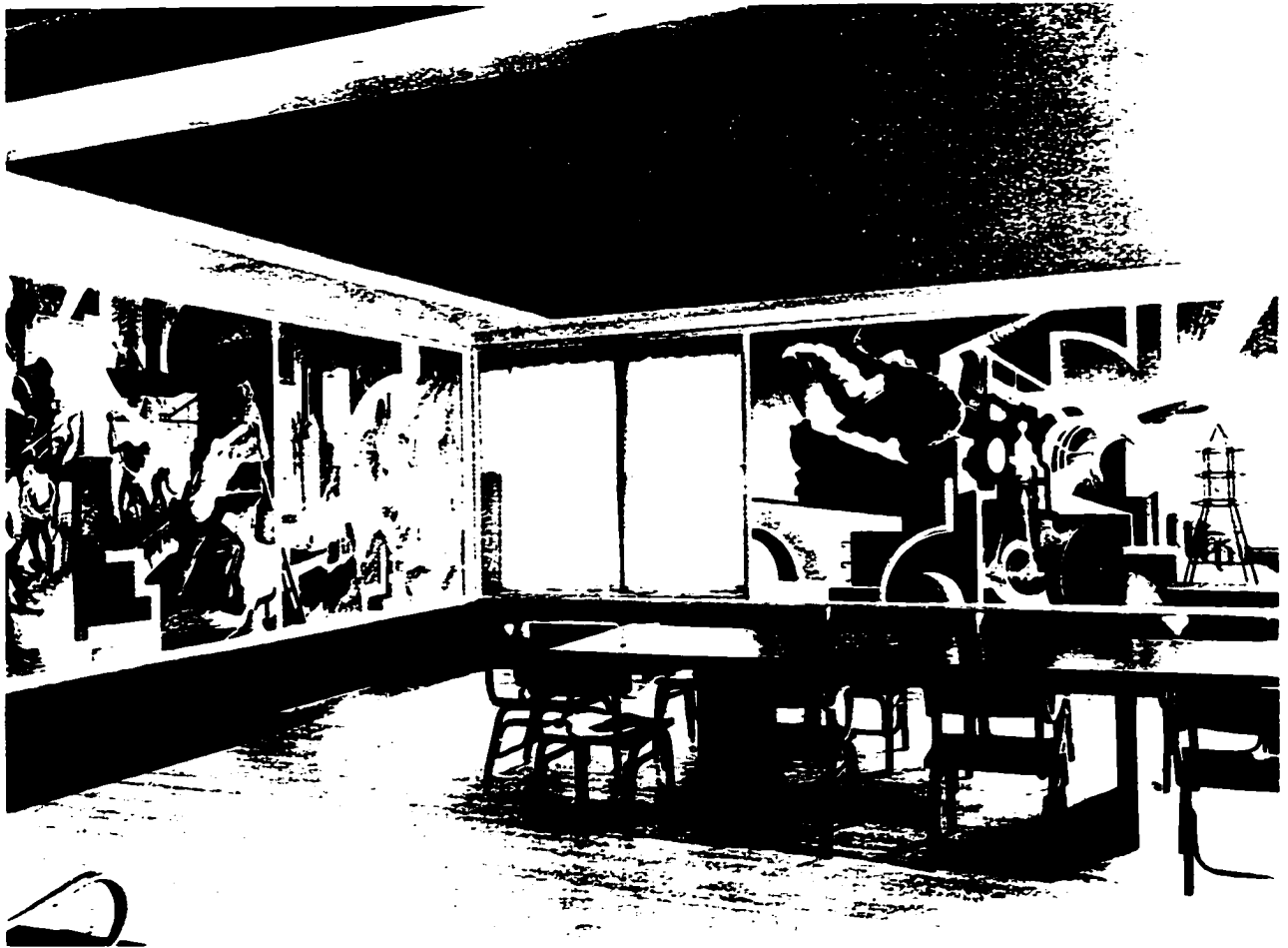


Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

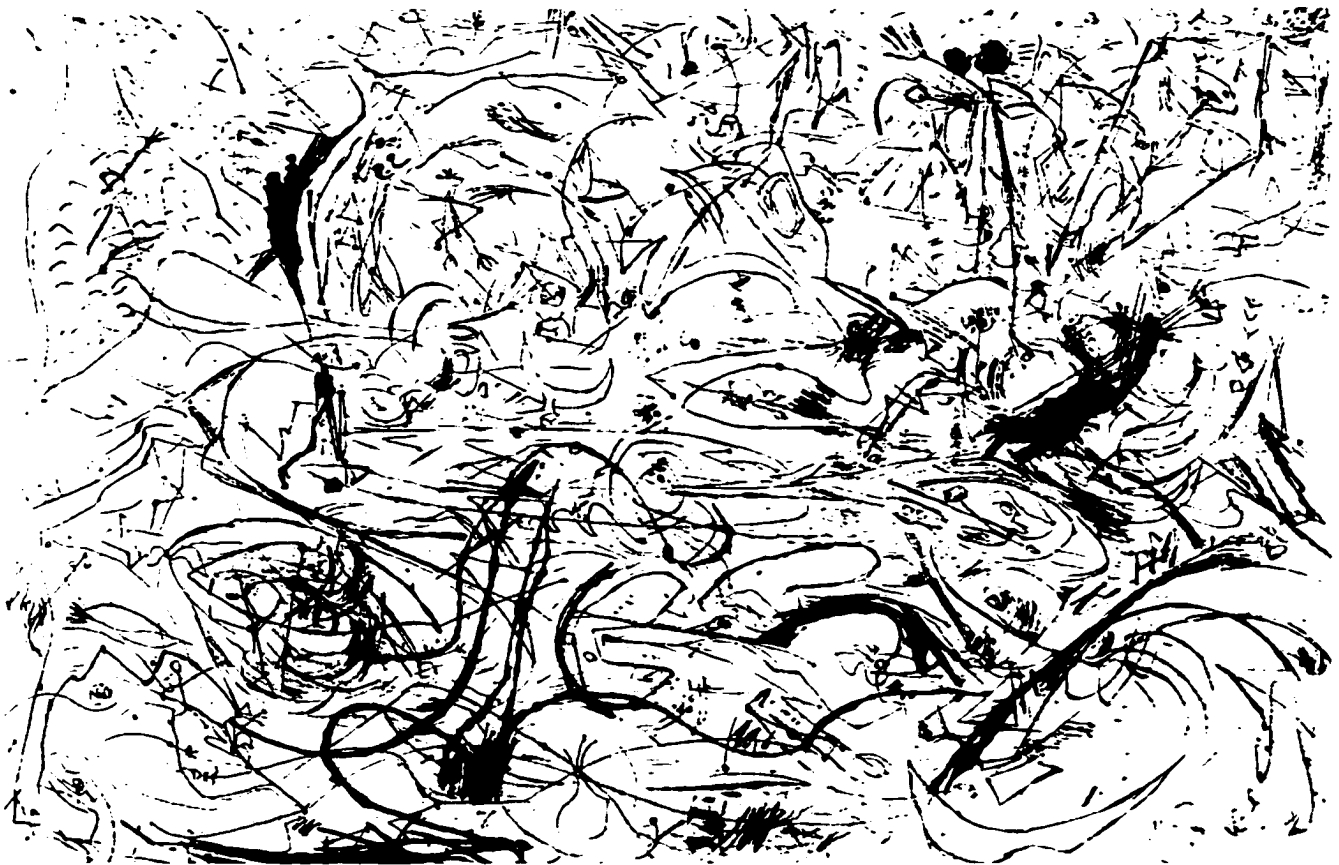


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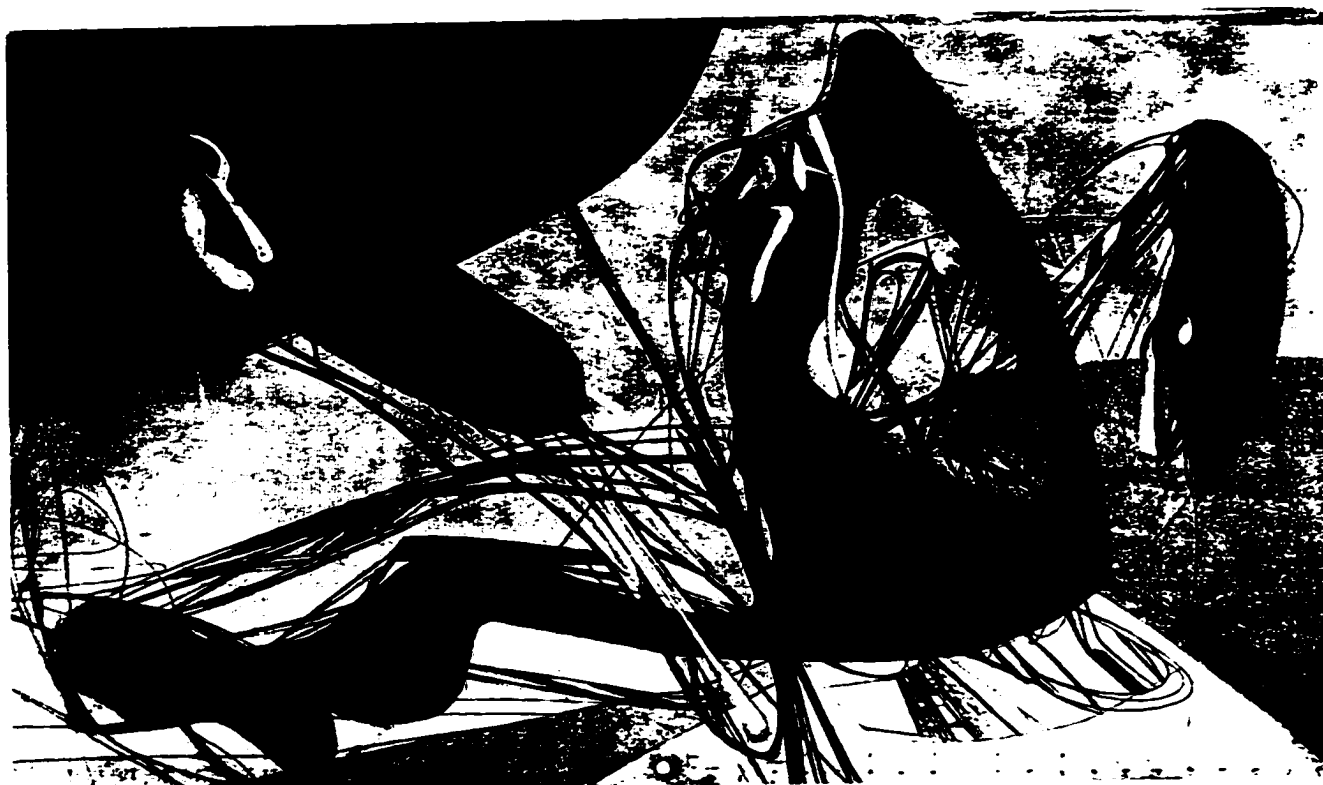


Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

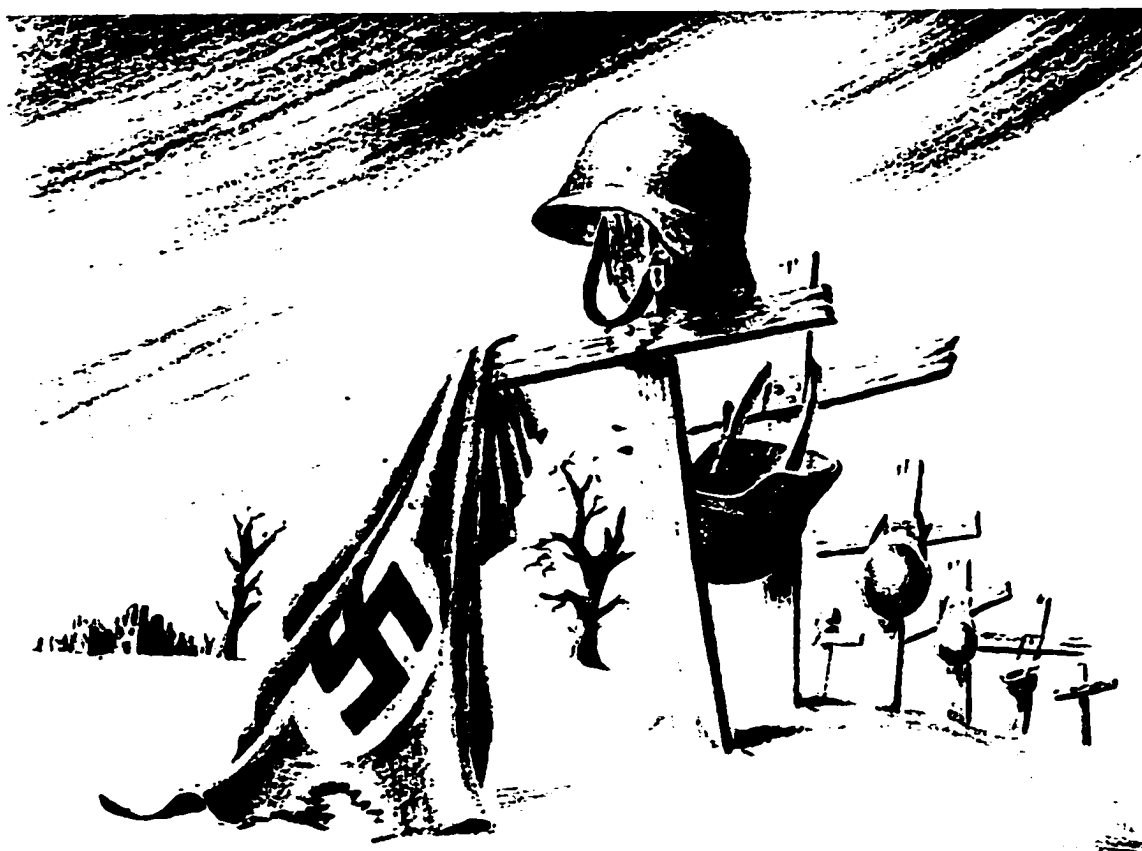


Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23

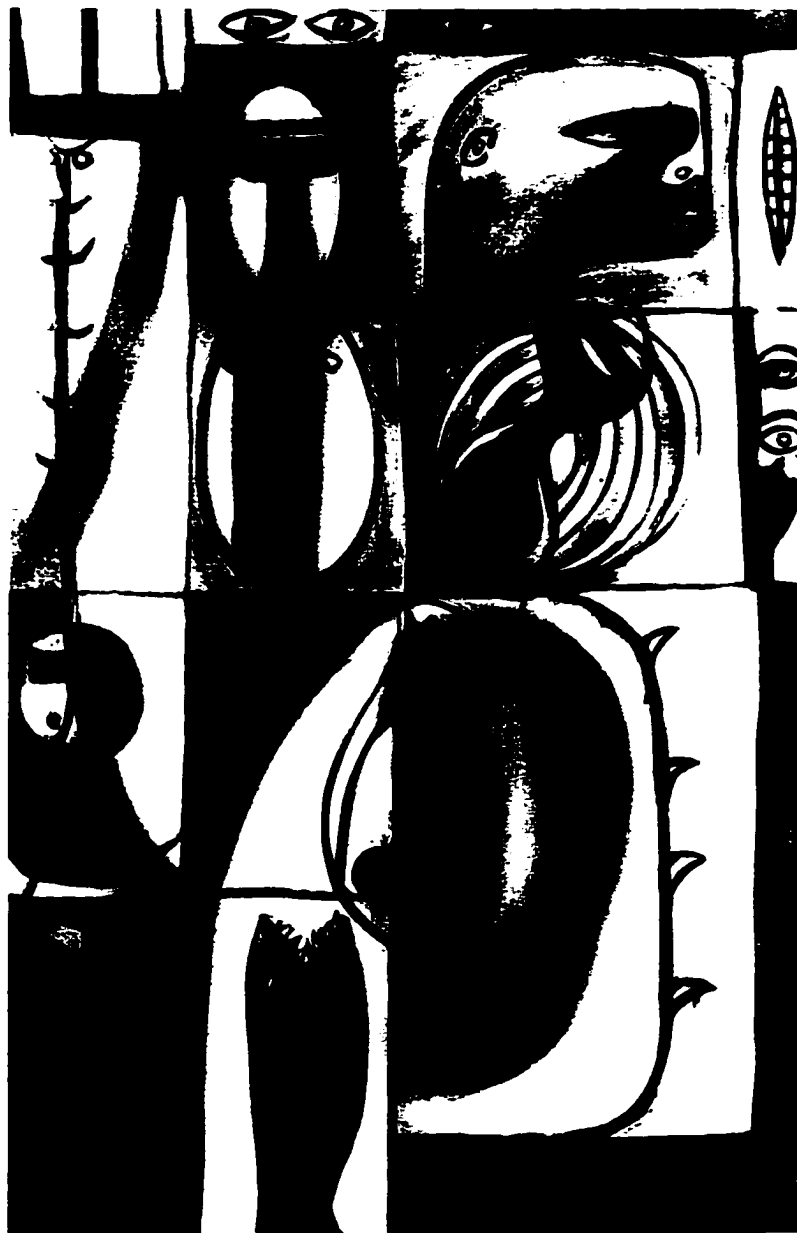


Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32

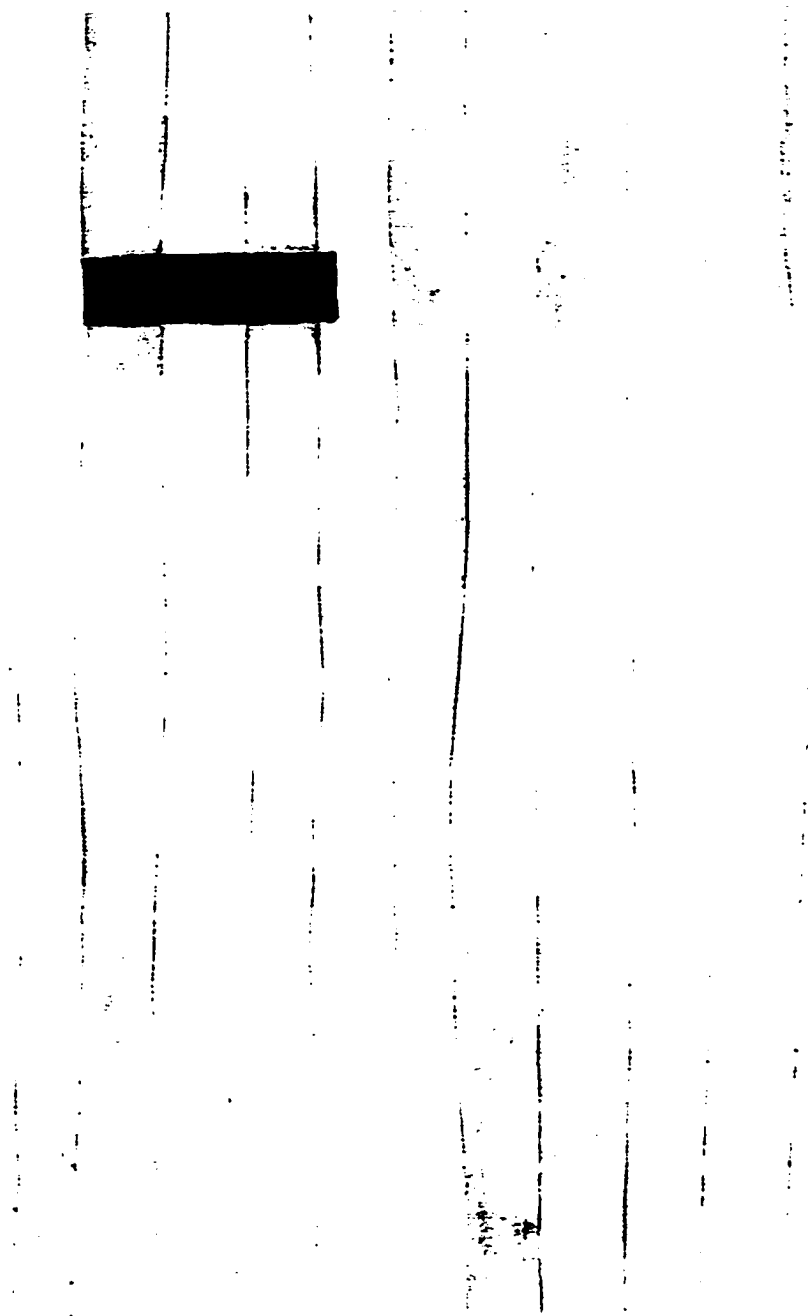


Figure 33



Figure 34



I know who had sent them in those
green cases.
He doesn't lose his mind will never
like me

That were in my neck up to the ear.

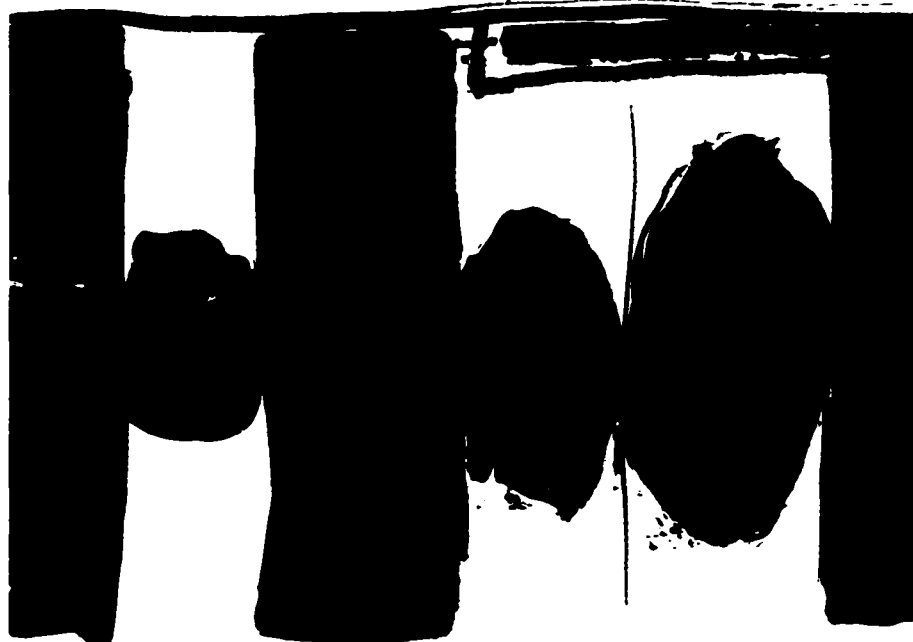


Figure 35



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38

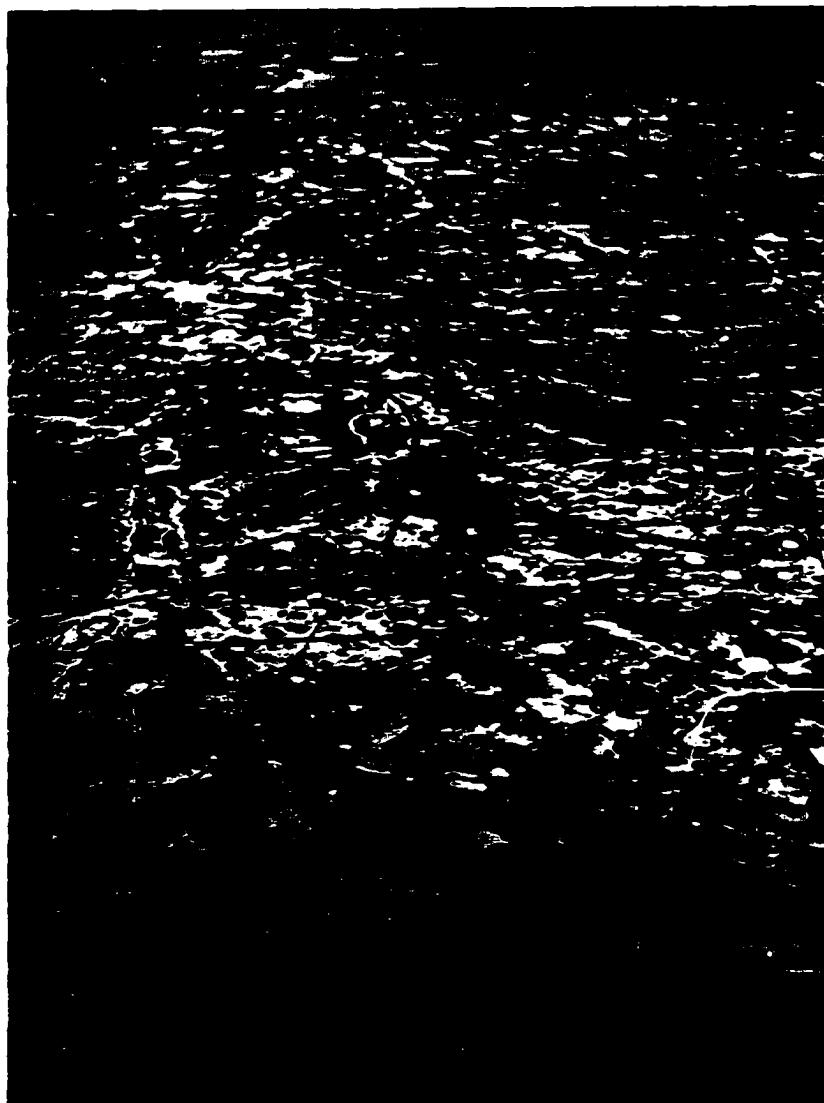


Figure 39



Figure 40

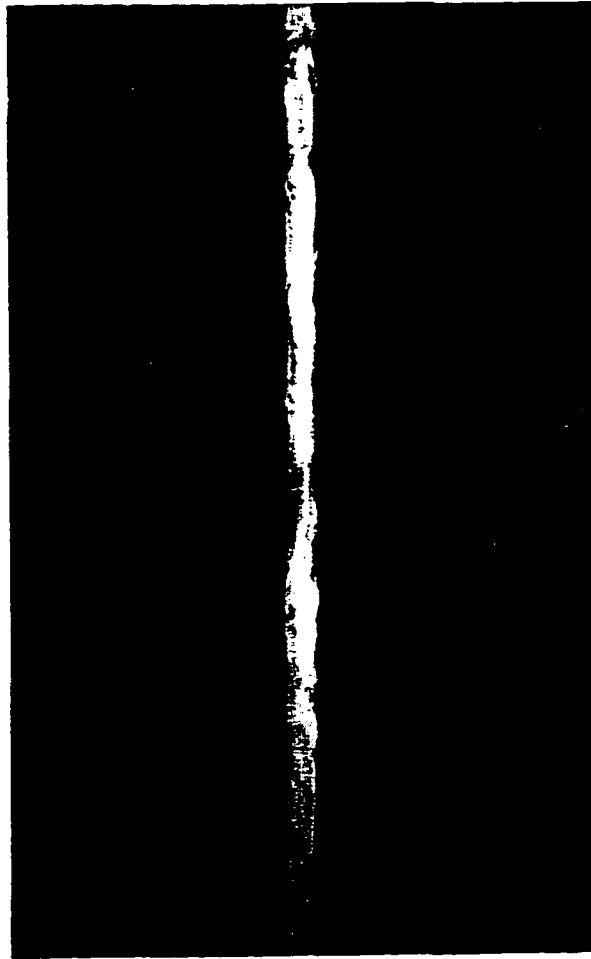


Figure 41

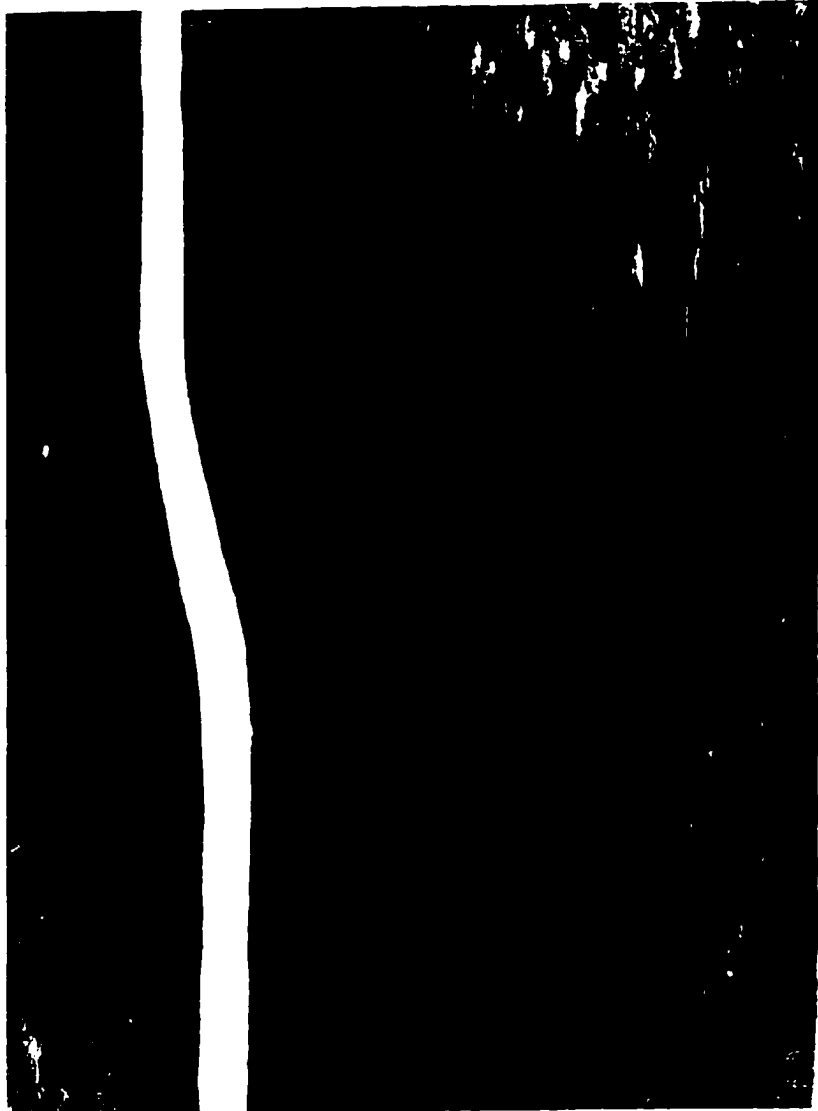


Figure 42

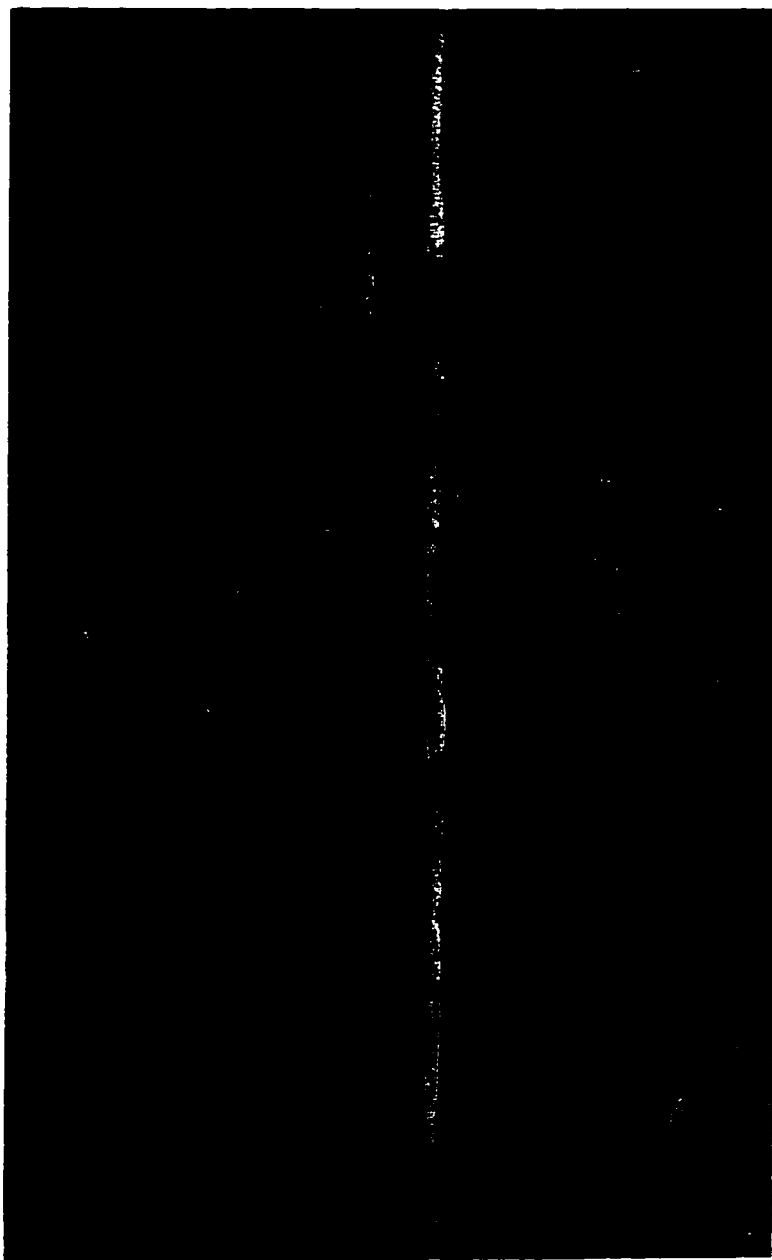


Figure 43

ARCHIVES CONSULTED

Archives of American Art, New York City regional office and Washington, D.C. warehouse.

Archives of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York City.

Archives of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, Special Collections, The New York Public Library.

Archives of The Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Archives of the New School for Social Research, New York City.

Archives of the Tony Smith Estate, New York City.

Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Hannah Arendt Library, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson.

The Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, Springs, East Hampton.

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