

New York School: Another View

*It is not surprising that the definitive history of Abstract Expressionism has yet to be written.*²

New York School: Another View does not attempt a definitive history. Such a history would be a fiction offering limited truths. Irving Sandler acknowledged this when he wrote in the Introduction to his 1970 book, *The Triumph of American Painting*, '...it soon became clear that there was not one "truth" but many.'³ The artists realized this multiplicity of truths all along. Drawing on a series of 1952 panels at the Club⁴, Philip Pavia's "The Unwanted Title: Abstract Expressionism," published in the Spring 1960 issue of *It is*, attempted an explication of the many facets of the "American Abstract Art movement." In the introduction to that essay, Pavia notes "The American movement of abstract art is not the fireworks of one or two artist personalities but is a deeply-rooted idea clawing the only strong perch for art in the second half of this century."⁵

Early in the development of this project, Rae Ferren noted that 'School of New York' would be more apt than either New York School or Abstract Expressionism. The School of Paris was diverse, including Cubists, Fauvists, Surrealists, photographers, and others. Artists working in New York were very aware of this variety, and in some ways felt kinship. New York City was the living environment which nurtured and energized artists. The growing community of voices and sensibilities in one place provided the material from which the amazing variety and vitality of work was created that came to define American avant-garde culture.

New York artists drew inspiration from the accomplishments of advanced European artists. They simultaneously respected and were skeptical of the European avant-garde. They mistrusted manifestos and theory which seemed essential to Europeans. They were also suspect of any attempt to define their efforts. "Anyway, these artists dislike labels and shun the words 'movement' and 'school'."⁶ Inevitably, those who made their living by words attempted to define the new art in New York. Thomas Hess, Harold Rosenberg, and Clement Greenberg were among the most articulate. Most artists seemed to prefer Hess and Rosenberg both of whose writings appeared in *It is*. "The downtown painters liked the impatient sweep of Rosenberg's rhetoric. They liked his assumption that New York painting was now crucial to its moment."⁷

Many of these artists specifically resented Greenberg and his theory. They both disagreed with his analysis and felt antipathy for his prominence and influence. Ann Gibson remarked: "I'd asked a number of people why he (Greenberg) was not represented in most of their magazines, and the answer was 'because we didn't like him or think he was right most of the time.'"⁸ It was a time when artists felt they had to fight for respect and recognition. They were very suspicious of those who were not artists who were thought to have authority. Kay Larson

observed: "My sense is that the first generation Abstract Expressionists had a love-hate relationship with all authority, particularly that close up and deeply felt, e.g. European modernism, including any people who had a direct connection to the artists' success or failure, e.g. museum curators, and so on."⁹ Rae Ferren told me of John Ferren being very direct about this, once remarking about Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art: "Who the hell does he think he is? He's just a museum man!"¹⁰

The artists of the New York School, though interested in theories, were wary of them. While the Abstract Expressionists rejected the Surrealists' reliance on Freud, there was also some ambivalence towards Jungian theories (even though Joseph Campbell was a speaker at The Club and Pollock saw a Jungian therapist). "The nearly uniform insistence among Abstract Expressionist artists that they operated with no preconceptions sounded to me like a key to what they refused to call 'theory.'"¹¹ Existentialism was "in the air" and it seems if there was a shared philosophic sense it was a certain affinity for aspects of Existentialist theory¹². Pavia admits that he thought the name *It is* as an Existentialist statement.

The artists of the New York School saw ideas as triggers while theories were viewed as constricting constructs. This is maybe most clear in the often stated dictum "Ideas not theories." This fundamental premise differentiates artistic endeavor of the New York School artists from both that of the School of Paris and contemporary artists. Simply put, the former proceeded from ideas whereas the latter's artistic endeavor emerges out of theories.

Pavia speaks of 1948 as a watershed year. "In one year, there was the sacrifice of a great artist (Ashile Gorky) and the beginning of a great new art, an American invention."¹³ This year is the most common referenced by these artists as the date of significance. Most often 1948 is seen as the start of things.¹⁴ Rarely does one sense the recognition that it may have been the beginning of the end of things, except the end of European hegemony in art. Reading the pieces published in *It is* through the end of the 1950s, one senses a continued sense of mission. The articles in the Spring 1960 issue are both historic, such as *The Unwanted Title* and engaged in contemporary polemics – *The Battle of Paris*¹⁵. Many of the pieces written specifically for *It is* have a certain bravura, such as *Advice to Future Polemicists*¹⁶.

It is was, in many ways from its inception, an historical document. This is evident in its inclusion of transcripts of earlier Club sessions, as well as the topics of many of the essays. Pavia was trying to simultaneously situate the New York School in an historical/philosophical continuum and assert its viability in the present. Starting with the first issue, there is a plethora of statements by artists addressing and defending the nature of the art created at the time and during the previous ten years. As Helen Harrison remarked: "I think *It is* was an effort to regain at least a measure of credibility for the artists' voices and views."¹⁷

Despite the Abstract Expressionists' unease with aspects of the European avant-garde, the New York School artists emulated the Europeans in organizing their activities, via the Club¹⁸, and publishing their ideas and polemics in such journals as *It is*¹⁹. The Abstract Expressionists appear to be the last notable group to do so. They may have been the last artists to work under the assumption that they were central to the culture.

"There were few American artists, critics, or modernist art historians on the 1950s and early 1960s who did not cut their teeth on Abstract Expressionism."²⁰ Yet, it is Greenberg's ideas that thinkers about post World War 2 art most often feel they must address. Henry Geldzahler noted "Clement Greenberg...has been the most acutely perceptive observer and commentator on American painting and sculpture..."²¹ The Greenberg entry in the index of Arthur C. Danto's *After the End of Art*²² is longer than any other. Its only close rivals are those for Abstract Expressionism and the History of Art. Greenberg was a skilled propagandist. His ideas were simple, easily graspable. He buttressed them persuasively with considerable knowledge and command of semantics. Though extraordinarily influential, he failed to recognize the essential nature of the art of his times.

The dialectic of trying to make art and nature the same (starting with Courbet and clearly stated by Cezanne²³) while asserting autonomy for the artwork and artist established a core tension in Modernism. As long as art becoming more like nature (read experience and/or reality) was akin to matter approaching the speed of light, there was a driving energy that kept art and artists searching and creating new approaches. Harold Rosenberg prematurely asserted in 1952; "The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life."²⁴ Abstract Expressionism was the last significant manifestation before Cezanne's goal would be substantially realized. Modernism required that tension, required the dialectic. Our current perspective illuminates the nature of the end of Modernism and the seeds of Post-Modernism.

The Canon

At the time of Jackson Pollock's death in 1956, the accepted 'canon' of New York School artists was in formation. Often the 1951 *Life* photo, by Nina Leen, of the 'Irascibles' was a touchstone for canonical lists²⁵. The Museum of Modern Art started including Abstract Expressionists in group shows in 1951 with *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. The exhibitions organized by Dorothy Miller, mounted by the Museum of Modern Art²⁶ played a major role in the recognition of the new art and informed the evolving canon.

Irving Sandler chose the 'Irascibles' photo as the frontispiece and rear dust jacket for his 1970 landmark book *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*. (Though two of the artists in said photograph, Jimmy Ernst and Hedda Stern, appear nowhere else in this book.) This book "defined

Abstract Expressionism for a generation of scholars."²⁷ In his 1978 *The New York School*, Sandler expanded on the fifteen artists included in the previous volume to include twenty-one in his list of "First-Generation Painters..."²⁸ Though convenient for students and casual scholars, this selective all male list was the subject of argument from its first publication. This second volume also included a list of "Second Generation Artists..."²⁹ including six women among the fifty-three artists enumerated. (*New York School: Another View* includes thirty-nine artists with birthdates ranging from 1896 to 1928. There are fifteen women, and four artists of color among those included.)

Such generational distinction was not commonly seen in the artists' own endeavors. The annuals arranged by artists from 1951-1957 made no attempt to designate 'generations.'³⁰ Pavia's magazine, *It is*, was very much an artists' publication. As such it is a particularly valuable source. The first five numbers were published Spring of 1958 to Spring 1960. These issues, along with number 6 published in 1965, provide an almost overwhelming panoply with little note or recognition of a distinction between generations. More than one hundred and eighty individuals' art or writing appeared within the covers of *It is*. The previously noted exhibitions mounted by MoMA in the later 1950s³¹ also included artists Sandler assigned to both generations without resort to such distinctions.

The years of birth for Sandler's first generation ranged from 1880 to 1922, for the second generation birth years ranged from 1907 to 1935 with most being in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century. Sandler thus made concrete the notion of a distinction between first and second generation artists of the New York School that was not reliant on birth date but other criteria. Sandler's distinction was based on his assessment that the art of those of the second generation evolved from that of the first. Originality and vanguard status were assigned to the 'first generation.' Sandra Kraskin referred to this as *The Myth of the Second Generation*: "Later, however, the designations of 'first generation' and 'second generation' often assumed a qualitative meaning that served to exclude artists and to protect the ongoing myth."³²

"The New York School constituted a loose community which was primarily an open network based on personal relationships."³³ These "artists had a great deal in common and form a loose culture."³⁴ There have been many attempts to open or redefine the canon of the New York School. *New York School: Another View* builds on these previous efforts and hopes to dispel or weaken the very notion of a canon. "Like all momentous tendencies in art, it (Abstract Expressionism) exceeded any verbal or phenomenal definition of itself, making room for a variety of 'deviations' and even 'contradictions.'³⁵ This now legendary era of the maturation and acknowledgement of American art came about through the work of many individuals who shared locale and ideas. Possibly, the most important idea they shared was the significance of their endeavor.

¹ This essay owes a great debt to conversations and email exchanges, spanning 2001 through 2004, with Terence Diggory, Natalie Edgar, Rae Ferren, Ann Eden Gibson, Helen A. Harrison, Kay Larson, Philip Pavia, and Esther Tornai Thyssen.

² Michael Preble, James Brooks, Paintings and Works on Paper, 1946-1982, Portland Museum of Art, 1983, p.5

³ Irving Sandler, The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism, Praeger Publishers, NY, 1970, p.2

⁴ Also known as 'The Artists' Club' and '8th Street Club', the Club was founded in 1948 by Philip Pavia and others. It immediately became the focus of New York School artists. By 1952, according to Pavia's ledger, the first year's membership of 20 had grown to exceed 125. The Club organized panel discussions, invited guest speakers, and mounted parties. It continued into 1962.

⁵ Pavia, "The Unwanted Title: Abstract Expressionism," *It is*, No. 5, Spring 1960, Second Half Publishing, p.8

⁶ Alfred H. Barr, Jr, The New American Painting, Museum of Modern Art, 1958, p.16

⁷ Carter Ratcliff, The Fate of A Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1996, p. 113

⁸ Ann Eden Gibson, email to the author, April 01, 2003.

⁹ Kay Larson, email to the author, April 02, 2003.

¹⁰ Rae Ferren, in conversation with the author, May 22, 2001.

¹¹ Ann Eden Gibson, Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997, p. x

¹² Dore Ashton, The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning, 1973, Viking Press, NY, pp. 174-192

¹³ Philip Pavia, Philip Pavia Talks on the War Years and the Start of The Club, New York Artists Equity Association, Inc. 55th Anniversary Awards Dinner Journal, 2002, p. 20

¹⁴ Pollock's first poured or 'drip' paintings were done in 1948. De Kooning's black and white paintings were first exhibited and MoMA purchased his *Painting, 1948* this year.

¹⁵ Thomas B. Hess, "The Battle of Paris, strip-tease and Trotsky," *It is*, no. 5, Spring 1960, Second Half Publishing, p.29

¹⁶ Pavia, "Advice to Future Polemicists," *It is*, No. 5, Spring 1960, Second Half Publishing, p.82

¹⁷ Helen A. Harrison, email to the author, June 11, 2001.

¹⁸ "From its commencement the Club functioned, as all its members agreed, as a surrogate Parisian Café." Dore Aston, p. 198

¹⁹ "Pavia continued the ideas of the 1948-55 Club in his magazine, *It is*." Natalie Edgar, *The 8th Street Club 1948-1956*, unpublished undated manuscript.

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- ²⁰ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism: New and Improved*, Art Journal, Vol. 47, No. 3, Fall 1988, p. 174.
- ²¹ Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*, E.P. Dutton & Co., NY, 1969, p. 27
- ²² Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*, Princeton/Bollingen, NJ, 1997.
- ²³ Emile Bernard: "But aren't nature and art different?" Cezanne: "I want to make them the same." As cited by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Cezanne's Doubt, Sense and Non-Sense*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 1964, p.13
- ²⁴ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ArtNews*, LI, NY, vol. 51, no.8, December 1952, p.22. While Abstract Expressionist painting may have been, in Rosenberg's terms, "an act...inseparable from the biography of the artist," it was actually a record or representation of the artist's activity or experience. The first significant art object that was indistinguishable from 'life' was Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* in 1964. That object was a piece of life (reality) whose existence as an art object was wholly reliant on context and theory.
- ²⁵ This photograph appeared in the January 15, 1951 issue. Artists included were: Willem deKooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Stern, Richard Pousette-Dart, William Baziot, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Theodoros Stamos, Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, James Brooks, Mark Rothko.
- ²⁶ *12 Americans* in 1956, *The New American Painting* in 1958, which traveled to eight European countries through 1959, *Sixteen Americans* in 1959.
- ²⁷ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, p. xxix
- ²⁸ Sandler lists the "First-Generation Painters" as: William Baziot, James Brooks, John Ferren, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Willem deKooning, George McNeil, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Jack Twokov, Esteban Vicente.
- ²⁹ Sandler's list of "Second-Generation Artists" includes: Leland Bell, Ronald Bladen, Nell Blaine, Norman Bluhm, Paul Brach, Ernest Briggs, Gandy Brodie, John Chamberlain, Elaine deKooning, Robert deNiro, Richard Diebenkorn, Jim Dine, Mark diSuvero, Edward Dugmore, Friedal Dzubas, Miles Forst, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Jane Freilicher, Michael Goldberg, Robert Goodnough, John Grillo, Red Grooms, Grace Hartigan, Al Held, Jasper Johns, Lester Johnson, Wolf Kahn, Allan Kaprow, Alex Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, Alfred Leslie, Morris Louis, Joan Mitchell, Jan Muller, Kenneth Noland, Claes Oldenburg, George Ortman, Raymond Parker, Felix Pasilis, Philip Pearlstein, Fairfield Porter, Robert Rauschenberg, Milton Resnick, Larry Rivers, Jon Schueler, George Segal, Leon Polk Smith, Hyde Solomon, Richard Stankiewicz, Frank Stella, George Sugarman, Robert Whitman.
- ³⁰ The best documentation of these shows currently available is Marika Herskovic's *New York School, Abstract Expressionists: Artists Choice by Artists*, New York School Press, Franklin Lakes, NJ, 2002.
- ³¹ *12 Americans* in 1956 included: Ernest Briggs, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Fritz Glarner, Philip Guston, Raoul Hague, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton, Jose de Rivera, Larry Rivers. *The New American Painting* in 1958, which traveled to eight European countries through 1959, included William Baziot, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Willem deKooning, Robert

Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Jack Tworkov. *Sixteen Americans* in 1959 included J. De Feo, Wally Hedrick, James Jarvaise, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Alfred Leslie, Landes Lewitin, Richard Lytle, Robert Mallary, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, Julius Schmidt, Richard Stankiewicz, Frank Stella, Albert Urban, Jack Youngerman.

³² Sandra Kraskin, Reclaiming Artists of the New York School, Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, 1994, p.37

³³ Irving Sandler, The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties, Icon Editions, Harper & Row, New York, 1978, p.1

³⁴ Stephen Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, NY, 1991, p.xix

³⁵ Clement Greenberg, *After Abstract Expressionism*, New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970, *ibid* p.366.