Space to Paint

John Elderfield

One thing nice about space is that it keeps on going . . . —Willem de Kooning, 1959[1]

Conrad Marca-Relli: "Once I remember [Willem de Kooning's lawyer] Lee Eastman said to me on the beach, 'Isn't it wonderful how a guy like Bill, so simple and so timid, could get all this success?' I looked at him and said, 'Are you joking?'"[2]

There were two sides to de Kooning's ambitiousness. Marca-Relli, a fellow painter, spoke of the first: how de Kooning came to the United States from Holland as a stowaway, showing his drive to make it; and how quickly he learned what it took to succeed in the art world, encouraging the critics Thomas B. Hess, Harold Rosenberg, and his own wife, Elaine de Kooning, to promote his work.

The second side of de Kooning's ambitiousness, his ambition as an artist, is integral to what follows in this essay; and given the long-standing mutuality of the ambitious and the original, his originality as an artist is also. But as the painter and critic Lawrence Gowing observed, originality often gets caught in "a history of inveterate misunderstanding."[3] Gowing was thinking of Paul Cézanne, and of how the modernist history of increasingly refined abstraction that artists, critics, and art historians constructed after Cézanne's example would have been unacceptable to that nineteenth-century painter. For de Kooning, that same history, which *preceded* him, was unacceptably confining; and its continuing influence has impeded appreciation of his own originality.

De Kooning reluctantly accepted being called an Abstract Expressionist, saying, "You are with a group or movement because you cannot help it."[4] In fact he became the most celebrated and influential of all of them, especially during the half-decade after Jackson Pollock's death, in 1956. In the early 1960s, though, an adjustment occurred: Pollock's paintings, together with Barnett Newman's, Mark Rothko's, and Clyfford Still's, seemed to speak more articulately to the interests of materiality and the nonrelational, stripped of imagery, in the new, Minimalist art. There is truth in the frequent observation that de Kooning's canvases, especially his Woman paintings, do not hang well on gallery walls with works by such Abstract Expressionists. (This has long posed problems

WILLEM DE KOONING IN HIS STUDIO, SPRINGS, LONG ISLAND, 1971.

at The Museum of Modern Art.) The conclusion sometimes drawn from this observation, however, is improperly disadvantaging: that his paintings are lesser because they do not fit easily with those works thought to maintain a history of an increasingly refined abstraction.[5]

Nonconformity has its advantages. Owing to their unexpectedness, de Kooning's canvases can appear less firmly attached than those of his contemporaries to the historical moment of their creation, and therefore more present and immediate to us many decades after they were made. Still, it will not do to take them from the race of their time—de Kooning's virtues were far from fugitive and cloistered, being shaped and having flourished within the public critical climate of mid-twentieth-century modernism in New York. "There's no way of looking at a work of art by itself," he said in 1959. "It's not self-evident. It needs a history, it needs a lot of talking about . . . it is part of a whole man's life."[6]

This essay offers an abbreviated account, its main but not sole aim being to trace the development of the conception of pictorial space that de Kooning invented. The shaping of pictorial space, I shall argue, was the motivator and most original part of his art, whose painterly and representational innovations followed in its wake; and the versions of a new space to paint that he invented are what most distinguish his works from those of other Abstract Expressionists. The first part of the essay traces the creation and refinement, through 1950, of his new conception of pictorial space; the second, its elaboration through the remainder of his career. Over this long evolution, I shall further argue, de Kooning opened radical options for painting that ask us to reconsider how its modernist history should be told.

LOST IN SPACE

The first critic to grasp not only the *extent* of de Kooning's ambition but also the *form* of his originality, namely in spatial construction, was one who has been reviled for speaking so strongly against their results. Clement Greenberg, a definitive voice in the codification of modernist history, quickly grasped that de Kooning's originality and ambition had taken the painter outside the boundaries of modern art as he, the critic, conceived them.

Greenberg wrote of this most perceptively in 1953, after seeing de Kooning's recent, notorious Woman paintings (see pp. 238–303).[7] Five years earlier, he had praised to the skies the black-and-white paintings in the artist's first solo exhibition,[8] and his 1953 essay speaks both to recently completed works, like *Woman I* (1950–52; plate 92), and to earlier ones, like *Painting* (1948; plate 56). His point was simple: "De Kooning strives for synthesis" in two complementary ways. First, "He wants to re-charge advanced painting, which has largely abandoned the illusion of depth and volume, with something of the old power of the sculptural contour." Second, "He wants also to make it accommodate bulging, twisting planes like those seen in Tintoretto and Rubens." With the two things together, "he wants in the end to recover a distinct image of the human figure, yet without sacrificing anything of abstract painting's decorative and physical force. Obviously this is highly ambitious art," Greenberg concluded, "and indeed de Kooning's ambition is perhaps the largest, or at least the most profoundly sophisticated, ever to be seen in a painter domiciled in this country."[9]

Discomforted by the Woman paintings, the critic brought his insights to rest on "a distinct image of the human figure." Yet those insights pertain not to de Kooning's figuration but to his shaping of pictorial space, in both abstract and figurative canvases. A simple, demonstrative example of the implications of Greenberg's revelation can be made through

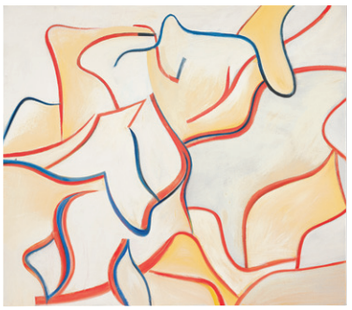

FIG. 1. WILLEM DE KOONING. *STILL LIFE*. 1916/17. OIL ON CARDBOARD, 13 1/2 X 15 IN. (34.3 X 38.1 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION

FIG. 2. WILLEM DE KOONING. *UNTITLED I*. 1985. OIL ON CANVAS, 70 IN. X 6 FT. 8 IN. (177.8 X 203.2 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION, GERMANY

two pictures that de Kooning painted nearly seventy years apart, the first when he was twelve or thirteen and the second when he was eighty-one. In the first, *Still Life* (1916/17; fig. 1), sculptural volumes stand in illusionist space on a table in front of a flat patterned cloth; in the second, *Untitled I* (1985; fig. 2), which comprises a canvas that is itself a flatly patterned cloth, the patterning additionally twists and bulges to evoke the illusion of depth and volume.

Space and Place

The young de Kooning's *Still Life* stood at the very beginning of his exacting training in representational skills—skills that he maintained into the early 1940s, making exquisitely beautiful, detailed drawings with a fine, hard pencil (e.g., plates 11, 12.) In these same years, however, he is recorded as having complained regularly of his difficulty in achieving such precision in his figurative oil paintings, most especially in the modeling of knees or shoulders when they projected forward of the plane of the torso. He would therefore avoid the problem by setting these features in parallel to the plane of the torso, itself set in parallel to the surface of the picture. He also had difficulty in his oil paintings in getting the separately colored areas to mesh together: juxtaposed areas of color advance and recede in space according to their degree of warmth and coolness, and therefore can float free from the drawn spatial position of the forms on which they are placed. So de Kooning also avoided this problem, first by not using high color, then by not directly juxtaposing colors; or by juxtaposing flat and shaded colors; or by keeping color and drawing apart; or by not finishing his paintings. (Examples of these strategies appear in plates 13–22.)

These problems of modeling and color are problems of space-making on the picture surface—that is to say, are problems in the creation of a *picture plane*. Since this term is sometimes used erroneously to refer to the literal surface of the canvas or other support, it is as well to be clear—this being critical to what follows—about what the term does refer to: the virtual, illusionary plane, nominally parallel to the literal surface, that the painter invents in the execution of a work and that shapes the pictorial space in which the represented visual activity (abstract or figurative) takes place. The function of the picture plane is actually to disengage the visual activity from the flat, material support, so as to spatialize that activity.[10]

In 1953, Greenberg said that de Kooning wished to recharge modernist painting with bulging, twisting planes and the power of sculptural contours, yet without sacrificing its decorative and physical force. De Kooning, he implied, wanted to fit the bulk of such planes and contours within a modernist picture plane that needed to be shallow in order to partake of the decorative and physical force of the literal surface. It was the accommodation of modeled volumes and spatialized colors within a shallow picture plane that caused the artist such problems in the years around 1940. His successful evasion rather than solution of these problems told him that his traditional training in representational draftsmanship was expendable for his future painting. Skill was not redundant, but skill that aimed at representational perfection was. To put this in more current terms, he had been trained to interact with a perfect interface, and needed to learn what it meant to work in a medium, improvisatory oil painting, that you can subject to stringent control but cannot, without vitiating it, just make it what you want it to be.

De Kooning had already imposed exacting control on oil paint to create his abstractions of the mid-to-later 1930s, such as *Father, Mother, Sister, Brother* (c. 1937; fig. 3), a beautifully original version of the carefully made, geometric/biomorphic abstract style of painting that was ubiquitous in Europe and the Americas in the 1930s through the 1950s. Like many such works,

it is perceived to be abstract in a quite particular sense: it is abstract rather than figurative because the artist has represented abstract rather than figurative forms. The paintings that de Kooning made next, like *Summer Couch* (1943; fig. 4), grew out of the earlier ones, but they are abstract in an importantly different sense. The c. 1937 painting allows the interpretation that its forms have been abstracted from visible reality and then represented upon the pictorial surface, their contours and their positioning somewhat adjusted in that process of representation. The 1943 painting suggests that its forms have been made-and-found through a process of painting in which the creation of form creates the potential of representation. Both works display abstract painting's decorative and physical force, but the physicality of the later composition is enhanced by its quality of being freely made; and that quality additionally confers the suggestion of greater potential momentum in the relationships among its forms. Not only may pictorial elements be thought to advance and recede in space, in plane with the picture surface, but their contours have something of the sculptural power of which Greenberg would write a decade later, and as a result, their flatness may be experienced, against all odds, if not quite as bulging and twisting, then as striving to do so. This is characteristic of the first, rudimentary version of de Kooning's new form of spatial construction.

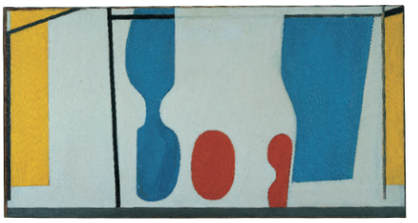

FIG. 3. WILLEM DE KOONING. *FATHER, MOTHER, SISTER, BROTHER*. c. 1937. OIL ON BOARD, 12 X 22 1/2 X 1 1/2 IN. (30.5 X 57.2 X 3.8 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK. CARE OF MICHELLE ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK

FIG. 4. WILLEM DE KOONING. *SUMMER COUCH*. 1943. OIL ON COMPOSITION BOARD, 31 1/4 X 52 1/2 IN. (79.4 X 133.4 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION

What I have proposed thus far allows the familiar conclusion that a "representational" painting may be composed through "abstract" manipulation of the medium of painting; and also the less familiar one that an "abstract" painting may be created through acts of "representation." However, when writers on de Kooning say, as they often do, that the artist alternated from period to period between representation and abstraction, they do not use these terms as I have done. They refer to his alternation between making paintings that do and do not picture external reality—between "figures" and "abstractions," I shall call them, for nearly everything that is not an abstraction, in this sense, is a figure.

To claim that de Kooning alternated from period to period between figures and abstractions, however, is to speak of the exception rather than the rule. Until 1950, he made both types of works simultaneously most of the time. Although he knew that the two modes were then widely considered antithetical (one reason for the furor over his Woman paintings of the early 1950s), they were not so in his practice. Antithetical for him were paintings that described space and volume, like his own, and paintings deficient in these qualities, which he deplored. Although pictorial composition that invoked space and volume had been identified immemorially with the representation of figures and scenes, de Kooning pursued these qualities in both his figures and his abstractions—and initially found them more readily achieved in the latter. The contouring in his female figures of the early 1940s (plates 17–22) is liberated in its description of form, but to an effect more decorative than sculptural. And his complex figure compositions on paper of 1947–48 (plates 38–45) are flat and crisply graphic compared to the "sculptural" abstractions of that period (plates 46–56).

In 1948–50, the boundaries between the two different modes were often, and increasingly, blurred. The paintings of these years most likely looked abstract until figurative elements were added close to their completion—*Woman* (1948; plate 62) is a good example of this—or else looked figurative until completed as putatively abstract compositions, the most striking example being *Excavation* (1950; plate 72). Thereafter, de Kooning did alternate between figures and abstractions until the late 1960s, when the two modes merged for good. It would be wrong to claim that before then the two modes fulfilled the same purposes for him: to the contrary, each opened its own particular opportunities. However, they were never isolated from each other. As Hess observed in 1968, "The point is that unlike Picasso, for example, whose 'periods' follow each

other in a chronological sequence, . . . de Kooning keeps as many possibilities going at the same time as he can, each feeding the other, each in a sense inhabiting the other."[11] The word "inhabiting" is particularly fine, suggesting that the inhabitants, both "abstract" and "figurative," of one type of work that he built would often take up residence in another.

If place-building was consonant with space-building, then shape-building produced the inhabitants. When the artist was making figures and abstractions simultaneously, he would often adapt a shape used in one work to fit into another, refitting a figural shape to make it work within an abstraction, or vice versa. He would directly copy the shapes by tracing them from one work to another, thereby producing a recurrence at the same size, or would freely draw the same shape at different sizes. Shapes alike in the latter way—de Kooning's art is full of them—may be said to exhibit self-similarity, recurrence at different points or on different scales.[12] He also used self-similarity as a means of working to and fro between figures and abstractions, thereby relaxing the boundaries between them. One example of this is how the torso shape in *Seated Figure (Classic Male)* (c. 1941/43; plate 15) becomes the long red "couch" shape in the hybrid figure-cum-abstraction *Summer Couch*, which becomes the long, black, unnamable shape at the bottom of the abstraction *Dark Pond* (1948; plate 57). "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness," the artist said,[13] and this single, mutating shape has a likeness to a torso, a couch, or who knows what according to its use, but without quite surrendering any other.[14] In this instance, and there are many others, it is possible to follow the migration and mutation of a single shape throughout the artist's entire career—here, until it takes up residence to left of center in the garden of *Untitled VI* (1986; plate 193).

De Kooning was very interested in the unity within the multiplicity of place-building, and on one occasion he tried out on Mark Rothko, to Rothko's obvious astonishment, the idea of different but adjoining rooms within an artistic practice. To compliment his colleague on his 1961 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, "I told him," de Kooning recalled with a straight face, "it's like Jesus said it, 'my house has many mansions,' and I thought maybe he doesn't care for Jesus, but I meant the saying is very nice in relation to his work . . . all those paintings became like one with many mansions."[15] It is also nice in relation to his own work, only what he called "mansions" others called "situations."

Situations

When de Kooning's painting, like that of many of his colleagues, was in major transition at mid-century, he made three public statements—two in 1949, the third in 1951—that laid out his purposes in a forceful albeit periphrastic manner.[16] The first of these, "A Desperate View," made clear that the subjects of desperation and spatial invention were closely connected:

> *In Genesis, it is said that in the beginning was the void and God acted upon it. For an artist that is clear enough. It is so mysterious that it takes away all doubt. One is utterly lost in space forever. You can float in it, fly in it, suspend in it and today, it seems, to tremble in it is maybe the best or anyhow very fashionable. The idea of being integrated with it is a desperate idea.*[17]

A desperate idea: a despairing or reckless one, or an option of last resort? De Kooning does not tell us. In fact we have to wait almost to the end of his statement to learn a little more about space: how "the idea of space is given [to the artist] to change if he can. The subject matter in the abstract is *space*. He fills it with an attitude. The attitude never comes from

himself." We have to wait because de Kooning, after telling us that "in art, one idea is as good as another," gives a brief catalogue of trembling—from Michelangelo, who "starts to tremble," down to Cézanne, who "was always trembling but very precisely"—and then devotes the middle of his talk to the tyranny of an art with one idea: "Art should *not* have to be a certain way." "Style is a fraud. I always felt that the Greeks were hiding behind their columns. It was a horrible idea of [Theo] van Doesburg and [Piet] Mondrian to try to force a style." "To desire to make a style is an apology for one's anxiety." "The reactionary strength of power is that it keeps style and things going." So, you oppose the power base: "Order, to me, is to be ordered about and that is a limitation." Besides, "in art, one idea is as good as another," and "it is obvious that [art] has no progress." "The only certainty today is that one must be self-conscious."

My reordering of sentences from the central part of "A Desperate View," and my separation of it from earlier and later parts, creates a relatively cogent argument that is not so apparent from a sequential reading of the text. Read sequentially, the text instead provides an account of de Kooning's artistic principles that is also a demonstration of them. Moving from desperation while working, to being lost in space, to the idea of trembling, to the tyranny of style, and back to space, de Kooning models an art of assembly.

As in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, from whom de Kooning took the motif of trembling,[18] this play with a narrative point of view and with contrasting, partitioned sections of text aims at the creation of a whole from parts in an unsettled and unsettling relationship. The same thing had been happening in de Kooning's paintings of the later 1940s. We have already seen how he enjoyed working with self-similar forms, recurring at different scales, from one picture to the next; in the mid-1940s, he also began to trace forms more or less precisely from one work to another, creating a shift in scale when he chose a host canvas different in size to the donor canvas, or when he altered the orientation of a form while transplanting it. The result was often a deliberate discontinuity. *Special Delivery* (1946; plate 37) incorporates a traced copy of another, smaller painting, *D* (1946; p. 141, fig. 9); *Secretary* and *Night* (both 1948; plates 48, 49) are versions of the same composition, one copied upside-down to begin the other, within which separately conceived images shake around as if within a box. In these and similar works, the suggestion of "scaling"—of the coexistence of multiple forms, both similar and different, of extremely varied scale—is very strong.[19] The art historian Stephen Polcari has nicely described such works as "portmanteau" paintings,[20] and this is also a good term for the conception of space that they reveal, for this second and fully realized version of de Kooning's space-making created places of packing and assembly.

Unsurprisingly, his paintings that deploy assemblage have been associated with the work of friends and acquaintances of his, photographers and poets of the city such as Rudy Burckhardt, Edwin Denby, Frank O'Hara, and Aaron Siskind,[21] for a place of assembly implies an urban space as well as a workshop or studio. Such paintings were created from a lengthy process of shuffling and juxtaposing images worked out in drawings, some cut apart, and traced or copied onto the canvas, to produce abrupt visual jumps from one to the next that were readily associated, as we shall learn, with collision and cacophony on the streets of New York. Denby, however, remembered de Kooning saying that he wanted the sense of "a wind blowing across the surface," which the poet Bill Berkson understood to mean that the artist wished "to keep the parts off kilter while the overall composition settled in."[22] The metaphor brings to mind earlier images of cross-currents, including Albrecht Dürer's famous print *The Sudarium Held by One Angel* (1516; fig. 5), whose shallow space is both encouraging of intertwining, to bind the parts, and allowing of dispersal, where the intertwining is halted. And this image,

FIG. 5. ALBRECHT DÜRER. *THE SUDARIUM HELD BY ONE ANGEL*. 1516. ETCHING. 7 1/8 X 5 1/8 IN. (18.2 X 13 CM). MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS

FIG. 6. WILLEM DE KOONING. *CONVERSATION*. 1987. OIL ON CANVAS, 6 FT. 8 IN. X 70 IN. (203.2 X 177.8 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION. COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK

in turn, is invoked not only by de Kooning's early windswept images, like *Woman, Wind, and Window II* (1950; plate 74), but also by such very late ones as *Conversation* (1987; fig. 6).

Hess spoke of how "de Kooning often paints 'jumps,'" meaning, "there is a leap from shape to shape . . . a concept which comes from collages, where the eye moves from one material to another in similar impossible bounds."[23] He could well have said "a leap from place to place," for the viewer's eye moves across what are experienced as spatial divisions of a single painting. The artist continued to work not in this style but with this approach almost to the end of his career, enjoying the disparity of the parts and the continuum of instability that substituted for order in the result.

The term first commonly used for this approach was "situational": "Instead of painting objects, he paints situations," the painter Louis Finkelstein wrote of his friend's work in 1950.[24] He meant that de Kooning painted whatever it was that associated or disassociated objects rather than the objects themselves. In 1954, Greenberg referred to "situations" in his essay "Abstract and Representational." Since the opaque surface of the modern, abstract or quasi-abstract picture blocked the spectator's "escape" into its pictorial space from his own space of "brute literalness" in front of it, such a picture could deceive the eye of the spectator in only two ways: "by optical rather than pictorial means, by relations of color, shape, and line largely divorced from descriptive connotations, and by 'situations' in which foreground and background, up and down, are interchangeable."[25]

Greenberg did not put names to the ways, but the first, "optical" method was obviously Pollock's, whom he mentions by name elsewhere in the essay. He was obviously thinking of this artist (as well as of Newman, Rothko, and Still) when he wrote of how the modern picture "has lost its 'inside' and become almost all 'outside,' all plane surface." And he can hardly have been speaking of de Kooning when he wrote that "often we cannot distinguish centers of interest within the abstract picture's field and have to take the whole of it as one single, continuous center of interest, which in turn compels us to feel and judge it in terms of its over-all unity to the exclusion of everything else." Greenberg refers to what nowadays are called "random networks," networks without hierarchies because their constituent "nodes" have a similar power and number of connections. As the painter Terry Winters has observed, de Kooning's mature conception of pictorial space is akin to what is nowadays called a "scale-free network";[26] this is to say, a network that may be as much an "allover" one as a random network is, but whose topology is of a fluctuating density held together both by nodes of a similar power and connectivity and by large hubs, or larger "cliques," of a greater power and connectivity. (Airline and social networks are "scale free.") De Kooning's spatial network was designed precisely to accommodate distinguishable centers of interest within the abstract picture's field, as well as bulging and twisting contours and planes.

FIG. 7. PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA. *LEGEND OF THE TRUE CROSS: VICTORY OF HERACLIUS OVER THE PERSIAN KING CHOSROES* (DETAIL; POST-RESTORATION). c. 1450–65. FRESCO. SAN FRANCESCO, AREZZO

FIG. 8. DE KOONING'S *MAILBOX* (1948; DETAIL). SEE PLATE 52.

De Kooning is nowhere named in "Abstract and Representational," but Greenberg gave his readers a clue that this was whom he was thinking of in his "situational" reference by illustrating his essay with a detail from Piero della Francesca's fresco *Victory of Heraclius over the Persian King Chosroes* (1460; fig. 7), which resembles a comparable detail from a late-1940s de Kooning like *Mailbox* (1948; fig. 8).[27] If this was meant to suggest that for all the spatial interchangeability possible in de Kooning's situations, more of the body and its brute literalness may be imagined in them than in Pollock's optical webs, the suggestion was right, for even when de Kooning would limit the number or prominence of strongly distinguishable centers of interest, as he would in his abstract paintings of 1948–50, the embodiment remained.

So-called "allover" painting, with its weight of incident more or less evenly distributed across the surface, looks backward to early modernist perceptual painting—to the modular uniformity of Impressionism and Analytical Cubism—and forward to post–Abstract Expressionist, Minimalist painting of literal flatness, painting that, having become all "outside," all "plane surface," is truly without any "inside." Poised in the middle of this modernist history, de Kooning, I believe, found it confining in its continuing utopianism—its cultural dream of a coherently bounded "one-ness" (witness the titles of critical paintings, Pollock's *One* [1950] and Newman's *Onement* [1948]), part primal, a prelapsarian fantasy of art "before" or "beyond" figuration,[28] and part modern American, a political fantasy of one nation indivisible in a postwar period of optimistic growth yet still gripped by segregated division.[29] I do not say that de Kooning painted in conscious response to this background, only that the provisions then conventionally attached to homogeneity could not be absent from any representation of either commitment or refusal of commitment to oneness. I do say, however, that he painted in conscious response to another consequence of the homogeneously allover: its great, immobilizing liability.

Unification was the easy part of picture-making. What was more difficult was to loosen its hold, and, through place-building and the deployment of sculptural contours and planes, create spatial rhythms and fluctuations that made a painting *unexpectedly* altering in the process of its viewing. To this end, de Kooning made himself the master of the well-enough unified, within which he could calibrate an expressive pacing of pictorial space inseparably connected with the perception of time—time, again, not as something that runs smoothly into one single continuum, but as something that splits and splinters into a mosaic. (New York, he once remarked, is a Byzantine city.)[30]

"I was reading Kierkegaard," the artist recalled, "and I came across the phrase 'To be purified is to will one thing.' It made me sick."[31] No purity means no oneness. But de Kooning's will to impurity, to many things rather than one—which is to say, to something incomplete in its unification—was not a doctrine either; it was simply that the "desire to make a style is an apology for one's anxiety," and better to make a picture that trembles with anxiety than one that is static because stylistically pure.

The artist "begins with nothingness. *That is the only thing he copies.* The rest he invents," Rosenberg wrote in 1949 in his catalogue introduction for the *Intrasubjectives* exhibition at the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.[32] This sounds like a French Existentialist's version of "In the beginning was the void," de Kooning's sly misquotation from Genesis,[33] although the artist would never so glibly distinguish a copy from an invention, knowing that his own "attitude never comes from himself alone."[34] But de Kooning's desperate artist has good Existentialist credentials: the stress on extreme inner emotions; the idea of one's nature being determined not by an external goal but by a fortuitous process of becoming; and, of specialized relevance for an artist, the belief that an individual has no essential nature, no self-identity, other than that involved in the act of choosing and the "leap of faith" it required.[35] Put bluntly in a Dutch accent, this came down to a simple formula: "What you do when you paint, you take a brush full of paint, get paint on the picture, and you have fate"—or did he say "faith"?[36]

What happens, though, as brushstroke follows brushstroke? An ideal answer is the elementary principle of all successful painting, which de Kooning read in a review of his work by Fairfield Porter: "Nothing gets in anything else's way, and everything is at its own limit of possibilities." Porter himself, when he wrote this, probably had in mind some sentences of Rainer Maria Rilke's: "painting is something that takes place among the colors, and . . . one has to leave them completely alone, so that they can come to terms among themselves"; "It's as if every part were aware of all the others"; and "in this hither and thither of mutual and manifold influence, the interior of the picture vibrates, rises and falls back into itself, and does not have a single unmoving part."[37]

"Writing Fair"

But what was it that brought the smallest individual parts of a picture together so that all moved in mutual and manifold influence? De Kooning's two most prominent early supporters, Greenberg and Rosenberg, at loggerheads about most things, were in close agreement on this point: the basis of so felicitous a form of pictorial construction was spontaneous mark-making.

Greenberg's two-column review of de Kooning's first solo exhibition, in 1948—the first extended discussion in print of the artist's work—had this to say on the subject. He is speaking of such works as *Painting* (1948; fig. 9).

> *De Kooning, like Gorky, lacks a final incisiveness of composition, which may in his case, too, be the paradoxical result of the very plenitude of his draftsman's gift. Emotion that demands singular, original expression tends to be censored out by a really great facility, for facility has a stubbornness of its own and is loath to abandon easy satisfactions. The indeterminateness or ambiguity that characterizes some of De Kooning's pictures is caused, I believe, by his effort to suppress his facility. There is a deliberate renunciation of will in so far as it makes itself felt as skill, and there is also a refusal to work with ideas that are too clear. But at the same time this demands a considerable exertion of the will in a different context and a heightening of consciousness so that the artist will know when he is being truly spontaneous and when he is working only mechanically. Of course, the same problem comes up for every painter, but I have never seen it exposed as clearly as in De Kooning's case.*[38]

There is great good sense in this extraordinary prose, and this statement has been widely adopted by those for whom modernism itself is identifiable by its disconnection from

a skilled past.[39] Yet does not Greenberg say that facility, the product of learned skills, leads to easy satisfactions gained by working mechanically, that is to say, repetitively? And that emotion, in contrast, demands *singular*, original expression, found only in being truly spontaneous? These general assertions, albeit said to de Kooning's advantage, are not supportable; it takes only a moment to think of the many historical exceptions, and only a careful look at *Painting* to see that the artist did not renounce "will . . . felt as skill," but that he summoned the will to produce a skill that was unconventional but no less the product of great facility than one more conventional.

FIG. 9. WILLEM DE KOONING. *PAINTING*. 1948. ENAMEL AND OIL ON CANVAS, 42 5/8 X 56 1/8 IN. (108.3 X 142.5 CM). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE

Greenberg was correct in saying that de Kooning was attracted to ambiguity and resistant to "ideas that are too clear," espousing, rather, what the poet John Keats called "negative capability . . . capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts."[40] As we have learned, it was the precision, the perfection, and the predetermination associable with conventional skill that was the problem. The artist would speak of this later:

> *I never was interested in how to make a good painting. . . . I was interested in that before [presumably meaning, in his work through the 1930s], but I found it was not my nature. I didn't work on it with the idea of perfection, but to see how far one could go—but not with the idea of really doing it. With anxiousness and dedication to fright maybe, or ecstasy, like the* Divine Comedy*, to be like a performer: to see how long you can stay on the stage with that imaginary audience.*[41]

"To be like a performer." The phrase recalls Rosenberg's term "action painting," put forward in his essay "The American Action Painters," of 1952, written with de Kooning in mind. In its most famous paragraph, and a later one outlining its consequences, he claimed,

> *At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which 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.*
>
> *A good painting in this mode leaves no doubt concerning its reality as an action and its relation to a transforming process in the artist. The canvas has "talked back" to the artist not to quiet him with Sibylline murmurs or to stun him with Dionysian outcries but to provoke him into a dramatic dialogue. Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question. By its very nature, action painting is painting in the medium of difficulties.*[42]

Rosenberg's bête noire, therefore, was the preliminary sketch, now made redundant: "If a painting is an action, the sketch is one action, the painting that follows it another. The second cannot be 'better' or more complete than the first."[43] Action painting, in his interpretation, effectively substitutes for drawing in that medium's traditional understanding as the quintessential art of self-expression. It is so named because "what matters always is the revelation contained in the act."[44]

But de Kooning's "performer" is not quite the same person as Rosenberg's "action painter." Performances are actions, but they are also imitations of actions. As actions, they

cannot express the entirety of a character yet may have a summary, revelatory quality; and that is what Rosenberg's "action painting" invokes. As imitations of actions, however, they cannot be guaranteed to be in character at all. In order to become true to character, they have to be repeated, the repetition attempting to discover what is constant. The second action, in fact, can be "better" or more complete than the first. This is why de Kooning painted by repetitively redoing the same strokes, waiting for the self-consciousness of the performance to collapse in the arduousness of its rehearsals, and for the epiphany to come.[45]

Greenberg and Rosenberg agreed not only on the need for spontaneity but also on a model of the process of painting, with which de Kooning too would have agreed, as a continuing alternation between the placement of a decisively spontaneous, nonwilled mark and a moment of consideration both to judge its veracity and to prepare for the next one. Unlike Greenberg, however, Rosenberg does not allow that the moment of consideration "demands a considerable exertion of the will," for that would sully the existential freedom of self-revelatory action. And neither critic is able to explain how a mark can be humanly directed *without* the exercise of will; we are left with the assumption that they mean something akin to the chance procedures of Surrealist automatic writing. What neither considered, however, was the possibility that the spontaneous mark itself could begin with and then surrender will, even as it was being made.

De Kooning, who uniquely among the major Abstract Expressionists was little affected by Surrealism, had learned precisely this in 1946 from Arshile Gorky, who "said that at the last second he misplaced the line" from where he had planned to set it on the surface. De Kooning would have understood what his friend Milton Resnick said of Gorky: "He's no longer faithful to what his mind is telling him. That's a very important step. The next step is you make comparisons to what other things are doing: a brushstroke, a smudge, what paint is doing."[46]

Will is exercised, then it is willfully surrendered. And then this process of exercise and surrender of will becomes a habitual part of painting. The surrender is not, however, the passive submission to chance of, say, Marcel Duchamp dropping a straight horizontal thread that twists as it pleases to fall on a horizontal plane.[47] It is the decisive impulse of a sudden, last-second release from a strictly learned and structured system into the instinctual unknown; but not a release from human agency itself. De Kooning's ability to perform quick gearshifts between the rational and the transrational should not be confused with what has been called "de-skilling." When moving into a state of negative capability, he did *not* surrender skill along with will, but relied on it in order to trust what could be gained by being in uncertainty—and the ability to shift gears required its own kind of skill, which de Kooning made into a habit.

Both Greenberg's and Rosenberg's models of the pictorial process are framed by the simple dichotomy of spontaneity and will. What is missing is habit, which completes the triangle, as the great nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin had understood. "Speaking truth is like writing fair, and comes only by practice; it is less a matter of will," he said, "than of habit."[48] For de Kooning, too, veracious mark-making cannot be willed but must become habitual. Habit will teach how to shun what Ruskin called the "display of dexterity and ingenious device" to embrace a truth that "breaks and rents continually," embracing difficulty, resistance, and ambiguity as it does so.[49]

Rosenberg speaks of difficulties. What Greenberg presents as de-skilling is in fact resistance, both found and made: found in the predictable stubbornness of the most mundane and customary subjects; made in making the medium unpredictable—changing a willed decision at the last moment; scraping off a finished passage to discover a more potent one beneath;

tracing or otherwise transferring an image from one work into another; drawing with eyes closed; turning a picture upside-down; painting when exhausted, or when a bit, or more than a bit, drunk; subjecting his finicky carefulness to the pressure of a disobligingly messy materiality. All of these things, done over and over again, became ingrained skills and the breeding ground of ambiguity. They do, in principle, have what Ruskin would have called an air of "legerdemain and trickery about them,"[50] except that their greatest trickery is to make their results seem the very model of the most honestly gained of any discovery.

No-environment

Both the painter Finkelstein and the critic Greenberg spoke of the mobility of "situations": the former of de Kooning "tearing apart or scrambling together . . . the commonly held integrity of the object," the latter of how "foreground and background, up and down, are interchangeable."[51] The artist himself, however, spoke not of the topsy-turviness of the painted situation but of what in the external world he intended his newly conceived space to capture: "an occurrence," or "an encounter."[52] He meant by these terms the effect of suddenly catching sight of something—while crossing the street quickly, for example, or coming into a room, or glancing out of the window.[53] In 1959, he said he had "got interested in painting that [was] like frozen glimpses," and the following year that "content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash."[54] His continual talk of glimpses, even to calling himself a "slipping glimpser," would become famous.[55]

"Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*?" asked Roland Barthes. "It is this flash which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance."[56] De Kooning has been called "probably the most libidinal painter America has ever had,"[57] and this portion is certainly a part of what he was glimpsing. But it was everything erratic as well as erotic, everything that flashed by, appearing-and-disappearing, that attracted him; everything that could be taken off guard when he allowed himself to be taken off guard. Being specific to the experience of meeting suddenly with what was external to himself: that was the essential thing. It required an acceptance of disequilibrium to be able to picture what de Kooning called a "no-environment."

Hess and Rosenberg were fascinated because puzzled by what de Kooning meant by the term "no-environment," and kept returning to it in their discussions with the artist and in their own writings. The earliest mention of it appears to be in Hess's famous essay on the making of *Woman I* (plate 92), "De Kooning Paints a Picture," of 1953. After remarking that the subject of this painting could be seen as placed in either an inside or an outside space, or in an inside-outside space like a porch, Hess characterized this ambiguity as a "state of anonymous simultaneity (not no-specific-place but several no-specific-places)." The description, including its recourse to hyphenation, makes us think of the artist's earlier, quasi-abstract interiors of the mid-to-later 1940s (e.g., fig. 10), each of which comprises several hyphenated-together no-specific-spaces. They must be no-environments. Hess writes,

FIG. 10. WILLEM DE KOONING. *SECRETARY*. 1948. OIL AND CHARCOAL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON FIBERBOARD, 24 3/8 X 36 3/16 IN. (61.9 X 91.9 CM). HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C. GIFT OF JOSEPH H. HIRSHHORN

> *De Kooning claims that the modern scene is "no-environment" and presents it as such. To make his point, he opened a tabloid newspaper and leafed through its illustrations. There was a politician standing next to an arched doorway and rusticated wall, but remove the return of the arch—the wall might be a pile of shoe boxes in a department store, or "nothing." . . . The modern image is without distinct character, probably because*

of the tremendous proliferation of visual sensations which causes duplicates to appear among unlikes. . . . our brains become numb to their differences. Distinctions weaken. . . .

But note that the reasoned lack of identity of objects adds another major ambiguity to the painting—each object is purposefully shown as liable to many interpretations.[58]

"In its way," Hess concluded, this is "social comment," and he elaborated upon this aspect in later descriptions, speaking of "the American urban scene and its lack of specificity," where "everything has its own character, but its character has nothing to do with any particular place. Nor with any scale."[59] Just as "the parts of the city are envisaged as interchangeable," so are the parts of the body when seen "intimately," he said, referring to de Kooning's term "intimate proportions": "the feeling of familiarity you have when you look at somebody's big toe when close to it, or at a crease in a hand or a nose or lips or a necktie."[60] Hess associated this with de Kooning's "experiments with drawings cut apart and refitted together,"[61] and this Cubist, fitting-in association is certainly among its implications: space seen to be constructed from details, as in, we heard earlier, the topographical work of the urban poets and photographers.

But all this city talk seems too social and insufficiently individual. De Kooning is even more interested in how a close-up view of the body—which, for him, means the female body—is just like, and often in fact is, a slipping glimpse, often of a fleeting affair. And the feeling of familiarity to which he alludes is not simply an experience of having already *seen* what looks like the same thing somewhere else. It is not only a matter of *looking* familiar, like Hess's modern images "without distinct character . . . our brains become numb to their differences." It is also a matter of *feeling* familiar; it is the experience of having already had the same experience (from having already seen what looks like the same thing somewhere else). The same, polymorphously perverse pleasure induced by details of the body may be recalled by glimpses of details of *things*, even by the resemblance of bricks in a wall to a pile of shoe boxes in a department store. It was from such visions of self-similarity, of placeless, scaleless details—duplicates appearing among unlikes, alikes seeming unlike, and all colliding together—that de Kooning built his "scale-free network," his no-environmental space. As in such a network, the connectivity of its components gains attention precisely because the strength of that connectivity varies. The warmest parts of an anecdote, Barthes said, "are always at its articulations."[62] A big toe when close to it, and most of the other body parts on Hess's list, qualify as articulations of varying strength. In de Kooning's space, the warmest articulating parts are the drawn lines cut to produce "leaps of space" from part to discombobulating part of the situation.

What Hess and Rosenberg never quite grasped was that, for de Kooning, the no-environment offered a dynamic model of instability within subjective experience. It was Existentialist, but it was also neo-Romantic—a neo-Romanticism without the sentimentality, and attached to the urban, not the rural, world: Gerard Manley Hopkins on 10th Street. The artist's critic friends wanted the no-environment to be about visual or affective analogy. True, de Kooning was very interested in analogy, in the visual resemblance of especially the smallest of details, and in the associated strangeness of things experienced as unfamiliar.[63] But the no-environment was composed of the ecumenical equivalence of anything seen and then admitted into subjective experience in the process of picture-making; and anything seen, either in a picture or in external reality, was at once reality and illusion, because the reality was the empirical creation of the conditions under which it was seen:

De Kooning: *If you open your eyes with your brain, and you know a lot about painting, then the optical illusion isn't an optical illusion. That's the way you see it.*
Rosenberg: *The way you see something doesn't mean necessarily that that's the way it is. That business of putting a stick in water so that it looks as if it's broken. . . .*
De Kooning: *Well it is. That's the way you see it.*
Rosenberg: *What do you mean, it is broken? If you pull it out of the water it's not broken.*
De Kooning: *I know. But it's broken while it's in the water.*
Rosenberg: *The break is an illusion. . .*
De Kooning: *That's what I'm saying. All painting is an illusion.*[64]

The broken stick in the water, an instance of no-environment, is also an allegory of it—a demonstration of how, and according to what, truth "breaks and rents continually." Reality requires interested attention; you have to "open your eyes with your brain." "I see what I see," the artist said, "and if I have no interest in it, I don't see it." On the other hand, "You see. You meet something. That's no-environment. I can see it in this ashtray. There's no difference between [it and] the famous mountain in Tokyo. You experience something . . . like this table was in this room and the moon in the universe. I take that for granted." "Whatever I see becomes my shapes and my condition."[65]

"You meet something," he said. Finkelstein believed that "what binds [de Kooning's] pictures together is a sense of gesture, of dramatic purpose animating all the picture elements—the actualizing, so to speak, of the pathetic fallacy of romantic poetry."[66] The artist's actualizing extended to his placing himself within his compositions:

I am always in the picture somewhere. The amount of space I use I am always in, I seem to move around in it, and there seems to be a time when I lose sight of what I wanted to do, and then I am out of it. If the picture has a countenance, I keep it. If it hasn't, I throw it away.[67]

Speaking of space in "A Desperate View," de Kooning concluded that "the idea of being integrated with it is a desperate idea."[68] To imagine himself moving within it, however, was neither despairing nor an option of last resort, but it was thrillingly reckless: like actually being within uncertainties, mysteries, doubts. It was also possible to imagine being in a space that "is so mysterious that it takes away all doubt." And as de Kooning envisaged himself in the space of the picture, he envisioned that space in himself: "The only certainty today is that one must be self-conscious." This, the certainty advanced in "A Desperate View," coming after its descriptions of trembling, means being frighteningly conscious of the self in the process of painting. This therefore means that painting is conceived as a closed-circuit process of working from the reactions that a canvas in progress produces, and from actively imagining yourself working within the space that it produces. Henri Matisse once spoke of this, saying, "To give yourself completely to what you're doing while simultaneously watching yourself do it—that's the hardest of all for those who do work by instinct."[69]

Watching yourself also means watching out for yourself, which means separating yourself from the *juste milieu* of received opinion. This has two parts. First is to avoid what Samuel Beckett called "living at the expense of the conquered countries,"[70] that is, to avoid the staple and customary points of reference; and this was the principal subject of de Kooning's

FIG. 11. NICOLAS POUSSIN. *THE TRIUMPH OF PAN*. 1636. OIL ON CANVAS, 53 1/2 X 57 1/2 IN. (135.9 X 146 CM). NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON. BOUGHT WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE NATIONAL HERITAGE MEMORIAL FUND AND THE ART FUND

FIG. 12. PABLO PICASSO. *BACCHANAL, AFTER POUSSIN*. 1944. WATERCOLOR AND GOUACHE ON PAPER, 12 X 16 IN. (30.5 X 40.6 CM). LOCATION UNKNOWN

FIG. 13. WILLEM DE KOONING. *ATTIC*. 1949. OIL, ENAMEL, AND NEWSPAPER TRANSFER ON CANVAS, 61 7/8 IN. X 6 FT. 9 IN. (157.2 X 205.7 CM). THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. THE MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN COLLECTION, GIFT OF MURIEL KALLIS NEWMAN, IN HONOR OF HER SON, GLENN DAVID STEINBERG

second public statement, "The Renaissance and Order," of the autumn of 1949. He sounds historicist when he says, "There is a train track in the history of art that goes way back to Mesopotamia."[71] But he laid out the track not to place himself at the end of it, the inheritor of what history has delivered to him, but to project himself back to the Renaissance—"not out of regret or because I think that we lost something. . . . But when I think of painting today, I find myself always thinking of that part which is connected with the Renaissance. It is the vulgarity and fleshy part of it which seems to make it particularly Western." From what he calls his "ever-moving observation car" on his "own [train] track" through history he can make his own choices of what to look at, and he is attracted to the vulgar and fleshy—this is the occasion on which he made his famous statement "Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented," of which more later—but he can and does look where he pleases. "Old and new are just one thing."[72] "Being anti-traditional is just as corny as being traditional."[73] "I don't think any modern artist—Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and the rest—has been as great as the great of the past—Rubens or Velasquez or Rembrandt."[74]

The art of the past was greater especially because it was not reductive and prescriptive, as modernist movements tended to become; and avoiding those failings was the second part of how to stay separate from the *juste milieu*. This was the principal subject of the last of de Kooning's early public statements, delivered at a symposium, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," at The Museum of Modern Art on February 5, 1951.[75] By then, however, he had already answered that question, in the summative abstract works of the first half of his career. These works, among them *Attic* (1949; fig. 13) and *Excavation*, transformed the mature form of spatial construction that he had developed in the mid-to-later 1940s into a further, third stage, one that was cool and exacting—less neo-Romantic than neoclassical.

Neoclassical Conclusions

It was not a critic or art historian but a dealer and friend of the artist, Allan Stone, who most concisely demonstrated the synthesis between the Renaissance and the modernist in de Kooning's art at mid-century. In the introduction of one of his catalogues, Stone illustrated *Attic* as the final panel of a triptych (figs. 11–13), in which it was preceded by Nicolas Poussin's *Triumph of Pan*, of 1636, and Pablo Picasso's homage to this painting, *Bacchanal, after Poussin*, of 1944. "In these three works," Stone observed, "we see classical realism, Picasso's distortion of that realism, and de Kooning's abstraction of these same compositions which achieves fluidity, a continuous time-space movement."[76] Stone called this process "liquefying cubism."

"Liquefying" is not quite the right word, though, implying as it does something sluicy and runny that cannot easily be constrained in a careful manner. De Kooning would get to this point in the 1960s, in works that Stone, ironically, dislikes—"he ran out of gas and

FIG. 14. PABLO PICASSO. *GUERNICA*. 1937. OIL ON CANVAS, 11 FT. 5 3/8 IN. X 25 FT. 5 7/8 IN. (349 X 777 CM). MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE ARTE REINA SOFIA, MADRID

FIG. 15. GRADIVA. 1ST CENTURY B.C.E. RELIEF. MUSEO CHIARAMONTI, VATICAN MUSEUMS, VATICAN STATE

the work became soft and flabby"[77]—the soft and flabby tending to occasion dislike, and therefore to form an impediment to the appreciation of works composed with their assistance. But at mid-century, de Kooning, even at his most fluid, was in no more than a treacle mode; and he never just trickled the paint down onto the surface, but sited it there. The literary critic Geoffrey Grigson once deplored Keats's style as one of "*oozy* neo-classicism."[78] De Kooning at mid-century may now seem neoclassical but can never be called oozy. (When, in the 1960s, he does become oozy, he stops being neoclassical.)

The neoclassicism of *Attic* and *Excavation* is not, of course, one of columns and pilasters, although de Kooning's fascination with Picasso's *Guernica* (1937; fig. 14) indubitably lay in its substructure of colonnade, which parcels its openings onto space, as much as in its figural fragmentation, which disguises that substructure. His art of this moment may be called neoclassical for its harking back to the classic severity of Cubism—not, in the familiar sense of the term, to the classical art of Greece and Rome, but there is an oblique connection to that familiar meaning. The artist chose the word "attic" for the first work's title, his wife Elaine said, "because you put everything in it."[79] However, by for me a happy coincidence, "Neo-Attic" is the art historian Friedrich Hauser's 1889 term for the earliest neoclassical art in the Western tradition, a Hellenistic movement, beginning in the second century B.C.E., that produced bas-reliefs looking back to canonical classical models but favoring a "wet" drapery style to exploit the expressive and ornamental possibilities of folds of patterned, fluttering costumes (fig. 15).[80] De Kooning's *Attic* is Neo-Attic in its enjoyment of wet, expressive, and ornamental patterning, at once concealing and revealing parts of the body. It and its companion works are also neoclassical in the perfected control of their idiom; in the confidence they exude of belonging to a high, mainstream tradition; in their reserve, which tempers their aggressiveness; in their chill images of morbidity, which appear alongside sexual ones with the alarm of the memento mori; and in the allover sheet of a combined life-and-deathliness that cloaks the beauty of these extraordinary paintings: like anything neoclassical, they speak of a futile desire to regain what is slipping away. Bringing *Excavation* to completion, de Kooning painted a small rectangle at the bottom, which Rosenberg described as a door by which the artist could leave.[81]

"When you have achieved what you want to do in a certain area, when you have exploited the possibilities that lie in one direction, you must, when the time comes, change course, search for something new." This is Matisse writing in 1919 about why *he* had abandoned Cubist-influenced abstraction, and a part of de Kooning's own justification for what he was about to do after painting *Excavation* must have been the same: if he had continued, he would, as Matisse went on, "have ended up as a mannerist."[82] Yet de Kooning did not so much abandon his reliance upon Cubism as alter its terms. The Cubism that he had made his own in the 1940s was built on the Synthetic Cubism that Picasso and Georges Braque had developed

after their invention of collage in 1912, a style of juxtaposed and overlapping planes tightly jigsawed together in an illusion of shallow space. With *Excavation* and its affiliated compositions, de Kooning created even more precisely calibrated jigsaws. To do so, he went back to the traditional oil-painting method of working from larger to smaller areas, progressively developing an overlay of more detailed forms—only it was not in his painterly hard-wiring to develop this in a homogenous manner. He would later use the term "fitting in" for filling the surface of a painting with tightly interwoven forms: "Fitting-in," he would say, was "where modern art came from," referring to Cubism and its source in the work of Cézanne.[83]

Fitting-in was what the process of painting became for de Kooning as the 1940s came to a close. As this happened, he multiplied the number of each painting's distinguishable centers of interest almost to the point of their indistinguishability—but not quite: while we can, in Greenberg's words, "take the whole of [the painting] as one single, continuous center of interest," this does not "in turn compel us to feel and judge it in terms of its over-all unity to the exclusion of everything else." As in certain works by Matisse, the effect is of competing attention among multiple centers of interest, and therefore of continual distraction, of vision being shuttled about the surface, so that it may rest anywhere but can settle nowhere. This is to say: vision is claimed everywhere; and therefore, everywhere it is denied. In the act of looking, in the very activity claimed for looking, the cognitive act of *seeing* is denied, and slipping glimpses are massively multiplied.[84] De Kooning said that Rubens was closer to our time than Rembrandt because Rubens "doesn't particularize," since to particularize "leads to a disturbing quality in the paint, to 'hot' spots."[85] *Attic* and *Excavation* are full of particularized moments—hot spots—yet the eye finds it hard to pause long on any one of them; they are all fitted-in so very precisely that their particularity is allayed.[86]

Speaking on "What Abstract Art Means to Me," de Kooning was scathingly ironic on the supposed beneficence of abstract art: "Man's own form in space—his body—was a private prison," and art once mirrored "this imprisoning misery" until abstract art came along "to compose with curves . . . and angles, and [to] make works of art with them could only make people happy."[87] This is vintage de Kooning, so enjoyable that it is easy to rush onward from that first declarative phrase "Man's own form in space—his body." One large question raised in *Attic* and *Excavation* was whether separating the parts of the body, and fitting them into a composition of curves and angles, scattered these parts or gathered them together. Both, is the answer, but with a qualification: with rare exceptions, no separate, painted part of the body invites the viewer to imagine a whole, living body. The ellipsis is a display of incompletion—of bodily parts in suspended animation within the continuum of the paint.

The critic David Sylvester, arguing against the conventional perception of de Kooning's art as presenting a dichotomy between abstractions and figures, offered the de Kooning-esque response that "the so-called figures are figures and the so-called abstractions are jumbled fragments of figures." But he did concede that there is "a radical distinction between the works that show bodies with heads on and the works made up of bits of bodies and bits of heads," because "when any image is topped off by a head, the head becomes a magnet to the viewer."[88] It is true that the head is the strongest of such magnets, but precisely for that reason it attracts wherever it is placed, closely followed by isolated mouths, eyes, hands, breasts, crotches, limbs, feet, and shoes. Being so alluring, such features, if displaced, draw attention to their displacement as they draw attention to themselves—and de Kooning used them purposively in this way in *Excavation* and its immediate predecessors. His works

composed entirely from such jumbled fragments—not only these, but also canvases from the late 1960s through the late '70s—often confront the viewer with bodily parts of varying magnetic visual force distributed over the picture surface, a bit like the figures partly visible in the forests of Northern Renaissance paintings. The bodies with heads on—whether from the mid-1940s, the early 1950s, or the mid-to-late 1960s—are different, and while de Kooning sometimes surrounded them with jumbled fragments of figures, they offer the possibility of *single* face-to-face confrontation with the viewer: man's own form in space—his body—facing the viewer's own form in space, his or her body.

NOT FITTING IN

Speaking on "What Abstract Art Means to Me" in 1951, the closest de Kooning came to answering the question given to him by the symposium title was, "If I *do* paint abstract art, that's what abstract art means to me"[89]—disingenuous, if "do" is taken to be in the present tense, for he was then fully engaged in *not* painting abstract art. He was working on *Woman I*.

In his two previous public statements, "A Desperate View" and "The Renaissance and Order," both of 1949, de Kooning had made clear his dislike of the purity and prescriptiveness of modernist abstraction; and he was known as a painter of figures as well as of abstract works. But in this, his final early statement—and the most public, because delivered at The Museum of Modern Art—he raised the stakes. For abstract artists, he complained, "the question, as they saw it, was not so much what you *could* paint but rather what you could *not* paint. You could *not* paint a house or a tree or a mountain. It was then that subject matter came into existence as something you ought *not* to have." As a result, the "pure form of comfort became the comfort of pure form," which "they generalized, with their book-keeping minds, into circles and squares." For myself, de Kooning said, "Art never seems to make me peaceful or pure. I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."[90]

De Kooning did possess that indispensable skill for a great artist in the public eye, an indifference to disappointing people; and this statement was a warning shot to his public about what to expect. An underlying theme of all three of his early statements was how to be a modern painter without surrendering the past—or, rather, without surrendering *a* past chosen by the painter for himself. And the past that he chose (as no other Abstract Expressionist could conceivably have done) was "the vulgarity and fleshy part" developed in sixteenth-century Venice by Titian, the inventor of paint made flesh;[91] transmitted to Rubens and Rembrandt, de Kooning's Northern ancestors; and represented in a modern version by the work of Chaim Soutine, the subject of an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1950.

De Kooning recognized this quality in Soutine's painting, speaking of "a certain fleshiness" there.[92] As it turned out, it was not the fleshiness in his own work, but how savagely he was thought to have dissected it, that came as a shock when his Woman paintings were exhibited in 1953.

Savage Dissections

Hess's "De Kooning Paints A Picture," published in the March 1953 issue of *Artnews*, made a sensation of *Woman I* even before it was exhibited, but also unwittingly provided language to condemn what the essay praised. Describing the artist's *preliminary* process of shaping the painting from a sequence of "cut apart, reversed, exchanged and otherwise manipulated" figure

drawings, Hess compared him to the mythical robber Procrustes, who "cut or stretched travelers to fit his bed."[93] This language soon became attached to the appearance of the *finished* work, even the usually careful Greenberg neglecting its patently additive and continuously painterly form of composition to speak of the artist's "savage dissections."[94] In repetition, as so often, the analogy grew more extreme, even respected art historians losing all sense of proportion: *Woman I* is "a sado-masochistic drama of painting as a kind of intercourse,"[95] its artist resembling "a rapist attacking resistant flesh."[96]

By now, far more has been written about the *response* to the Woman paintings than *on* the Woman paintings, which is telling about not only the priorities of art historians but also these paintings' resistance to fitting in. Two things are important to keep in mind: first, as David Cateforis, Marla Prather, and Katy Siegel have shown, the conventional story that the reception of the paintings' first exhibition, at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, in 1953, was utterly negative is myth.[97] Second, while neither de Kooning's supposed relapse into the figure nor his new looseness of facture seemed to bother too many people, it was when the two topics were brought together that they unleashed the charge of misogynous assault. For the charge of misogyny to arise, and for it then to be judged mistaken, depended and still depends on how the subject and the pictorial language are understood to relate to each other. The literary critic Christopher Ricks has observed that there is no great religious art that does not—as crucial to its enterprise—raise the question of whether or not it is blasphemous; similarly, the need for a charge of some form of sexism to arise was crucial to de Kooning's achievement of greatness in making the Woman paintings.[98]

Late in 1952, having seen the Woman series close to its completion, Rosenberg had kindled the flame to be fueled in *Artnews* by Hess when he asserted that, in the work of "the American action painters" (he was thinking chiefly of de Kooning), "a painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist."[99] The Woman paintings readily supported, and still support, an understanding of them as composed of muscled, masculine strokes—angry strokes that reflect an inner turmoil. It was as such that they have invited the charge of misogyny—and have also invited the consideration of whether this charge is mistaken, insofar as the very freely made need no more be a sign of disquietude than an undifferentiated surface (by Giorgio de Chirico, say) may be a proof of untroubled impersonality.

FIG. 16. DE KOONING'S *WOMAN I* (1950–52; DETAIL). SEE PLATE 92.

It will not help, I suppose, to notice that in painting *Woman with Bicycle* (1952–53; plate 95) de Kooning may be thought to do more violence to the bicycle than to the woman; even though, to my knowledge, nobody has yet said that he then hated what would become his own favorite form of transportation. For the problem lies in the suggestion of violence itself. Recognizing this fact, one early defender, Leo Steinberg, insisted that it was simply wrong to see hatred and ugliness in the paintings. Indeed he saw "a fierce generosity" in them, recalling Rubens's wife, the subject of a number of the artist's paintings, and arguing, "it takes a manly heart, like that of Rubens if you like . . . to love Helen Fourment for all her puckered, sag-flesh knees."[100] This is acute to "the Netherlander in De Kooning," and to his links to "the Dutch painters [who] alone had the stomach to love real things, to accept men and women without idealizing, Platonizing, and Italianizing them."[101] Still, the paintings are less real than grotesque, a quality, as Ruskin pointed out, that is "composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful."[102] While the latter has always been more noticed than the former, de Kooning himself acknowledged both;[103] and my own informal poll tells me that in *Woman I* it is the grody snarl (fig. 16) that is thought most obviously to combine Ruskin's two elements.[104] A "hot spot" in

the painting, more puzzling than the ferocious grins in some others, it has a specific pictorial function as well as an expressive one: the elastic, space-and-volume-making torque of the surface, uniquely possible to the mouth, is a synecdoche for the work's overall construction.

The most serious impediment to understanding the Woman paintings, as with other de Kooning works, has been the rarity of any attention to their visual medium rather than to their expressive or iconographic content. A notable exception came, ironically perhaps, from a feminist art historian, Linda Nochlin, who in 1998 observed of the Woman paintings that "although the imagery retains its startling jolt, it is the delicacy and, yes, elegance of the facture that, after the passage of time, is most striking."[105] To sense disconnection between the imagery and the facture is, I think, a superb and uncommon perception; and it takes nothing away from it to say that the dichotomy it suggested to Nochlin, of startling image and elegant treatment, should be qualified. While the artist's treatment is at times elegant, delicate, indeed affectionate and admiring, it remains mostly as startling as the image onto which it is laminated.

"Far from being sexualized icons of feminine seductiveness on offer," Nochlin concludes, " . . . these are fierce and well-defended creatures, even their pneumatic bubble-gum pink breasts suggesting a kind of armor against potential aggression. What *is* seductive . . . is the paint surface itself."[106] The surprise of that last sentence is amplified by the realization that it paraphrases something Greenberg wrote in 1953, the very year the Woman paintings were first shown, saying of Matisse's painting *White Plumes* (1919; fig. 17), "What is really seductive . . . is the paint, the disinterested paint," which has "an independent beauty" in the face of which the model's "sex-appeal is so solemn as to contradict itself."[107] With de Kooning, though, it is at once harder to conceive of the paint as disinterested in its mode of representation and easier to see it independently of what it represents—while the representation itself remains just as vividly present. This makes the coincidence of Greenberg's praise of Matisse's painting and his dislike of de Kooning's Woman paintings of particular interest.[108]

I wrote earlier that paintings with and without space and volume were antithetical in de Kooning's practice, but that representation and abstraction were not. I now need to turn around and say that certain individual works, and related groups of such works, do offer the suggestion that representation and abstraction are separate, opposite, even contrary—although not necessarily antagonistic—qualities within the composition of the work itself. I was referring to this when, after recording Nochlin's insight of disconnection between imagery and facture in the Woman paintings, I agreed that the paint can be seen as independent of what it represents—as abstract, that is to say—without the representation itself seeming any less vividly present.

"Homeless Representation"

Greenberg spoke of this subject in 1962 in the context of what he called "homeless representation," which he defined as "a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones."[109] He was referring to de Kooning's abstract paintings of the mid-1950s, works like *Gotham News* (1955; plate 104) and *The Time of the Fire* (1956; plate 103), in which the painterly handling of the surface shades an illusion of space and volume such as traditionally would serve to produce something explicitly representational but is only covertly or obliquely representational. Arguing with canny perceptiveness that representational paintings by Jasper Johns such as *Device Circle* (1959; fig. 18) were influenced by de Kooning, Greenberg observed that the "de Kooningesque play of lights and darks" in Johns's

FIG. 17. HENRI MATISSE. *WHITE PLUMES*. 1919. OIL ON CANVAS, 28 1/2 X 23 1/8 IN. (72.39 X 58.74 CM). THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS. THE WILLIAM HOOD DUNWOODY FUND

FIG. 18. JASPER JOHNS. *DEVICE CIRCLE*. 1959. ENCAUSTIC AND COLLAGE ON CANVAS WITH OBJECT, 40 X 40 IN. (101.6 X 101.6 CM). ANDREW AND DENISE SAUL

FIG. 19. WILLEM DE KOONING. *WOMAN VI*. 1953. OIL AND ENAMEL ON CANVAS, 68 1/2 X 58 1/2 IN. (174 X 148.6 CM). CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART, PITTSBURGH. GIFT OF G. DAVID THOMPSON

work, as in de Kooning's mid-1950s paintings, also served abstract ends, and with fascinating consequences:

> *Everything that usually serves representation and illusion is left to serve nothing but itself, that is, abstraction; while everything that usually serves the abstract or decorative—flatness, bare outlines, allover or symmetrical design—is put to the service of representation. And the more explicit this contradiction is made, the more effective in every sense the picture tends to be.*[110]

What Greenberg did not say, though, is that precisely the same thing may also be said of, say, *Woman VI* (1952–53; fig. 19). This painting too may be thought to comprise a painterly surface laminated onto the flat, bare outlines of an allover, near-symmetrical design. De Kooning himself said that painting an isolated figure

> *eliminated composition, arrangement, relationships, light—all this silly talk about line, color and form—because that was the thing I wanted to get hold of. I put it in the center of the canvas because there was no reason to put it a bit on the side. So I thought I might as well stick to the idea that it's got two eyes, a nose and mouth and neck.*[111]

To this he added, "It was a new thing, to place the woman in a frontal position; it was as if you had to change your own orientation, and all the ABCs of art were changed with it."[112] A work that eliminates composition, arrangement, relationship, light, and so on, and whose orientation repositions the viewer, does sound a lot like what, in 1965, the critic Barbara Rose would call "ABC Art" and is now commonly called Minimalism.[113] Except that the visible surface of de Kooning's Woman paintings—and of most of his paintings for the next thirty years—is built on top of such a design. The artist is imprecise in his claim that depicting an isolated, centered figure eliminated the traditional pictorial concerns that he names, but it did allow him not to dwell on them to the extent that he did before. He was now painting one thing in the middle of another thing, one figural design on one delimited surface—placing paint upon a surface not primarily to compose, arrange, or relate parts of his figural design, or to describe light cast upon it, but the better and more forcibly to display it. As in Johns's work, the surface displays the design even as it seems to be laminated upon the design; but it is not simply that a painterly surface follows the shaping of a graphic design: a surface composed of "everything that usually serves representation and illusion" is laid out on a literal support with the quality of "everything that usually serves the abstract or decorative." Greenberg had written in "Abstract and Representational" of how the new abstract or quasi-abstract picture "has

lost its 'inside' and become almost all 'outside,' all plane surface." De Kooning reversed the equation, setting "inside" on top of "outside" to truly radical effect.

He built a picture plane in quite a new way, as one that first presents itself as literal, material, and substantial; that can open to fill with representation and expand with illusion; and that suggests the presence of a hard, resistant surface behind it. The first two of these three attributes were endemic to the painterly art of the past that de Kooning admired; the first and the third to the collage-based Cubism that had hitherto guided him. The three had never previously been brought together as de Kooning did in the new version of spatial construction that he discovered during the creation of *Woman I*; the painting took him two years to complete not because he was teaching himself dissection but because he was reinventing pictorial space—doing so, in fact, for now the fourth time in his career.

As Greenberg said of Johns's work, "When the image is too obscured the paint surface is liable to become less pointedly superfluous; conversely, when the image is left too prominent, it is liable to reduce the whole picture to a mere image."[114] This may be why de Kooning, after making the Woman paintings, did not immediately pursue the lead of works like *Woman as a Landscape* (1954–55; p. 281, fig. 1), in which the opposition of image and painterly surface is less pronounced; it is certainly why it is the most graphically clear of the Woman paintings that are most eagerly claimed to be pictures of Marilyn Monroe. And the artist's inclusion, at times, of details that are patently mere images—mouths cut from magazines and pasted on the surface—makes it more than clear that the paint roiling around them disassociates itself from the task of mere image-making.

If we adopt this suggestion of contrariety between a flatly "abstract" representational image and, at its most effective, what Greenberg called an "exhibitedly and poignantly superfluous" painterliness,[115] it alters the terms of the most-often-asked question about the Woman paintings: how does the gendered means of de Kooning's handling intersect with the conventional provisions that attach to the long-standing "Theme of the Woman," as Janis advertised the subject of the 1953 exhibition, and of whose centrality to ambitious painting from Renaissance to modern times the artist was well aware?[116] In fact, are we to look at each of these works as "a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of [de Kooning's] life," as Rosenberg would have it, conjuring up some anxiously hyperbolic snapshot of a degraded hedonism?[117] The conventional provisions that attach to any such charged subject are bound to be somehow incorporated into any representation of it—not necessarily surviving untouched in the representation, however, but possibly merging in it and being altered there, and possibly, Johns's art informs us, being distanced from it.[118] It would clearly be wrong to attribute to de Kooning the attitude of irony toward his image-subject that is a commonplace in discussion of Johns. But I do not think it would be amiss to see distance, proportionate to the contrariety of image and treatment, in de Kooning's attitude. This would join his approach to, say, what Robert Rauschenberg quickly made of it to produce his controversied *Bed* of 1955.[119] Those who have objected to de Kooning's treatment of the "Theme of the Woman" speak as if he chose it because its conventions answered his artistic purposes. But if his treatment of the subject, and not the subject itself, is what is at issue, it would be better to say he chose the subject because its conventions supplied him with a medium, no less than his paint did, in which—and in contrast to which—his purposes could be worked out.[120]

This brings us to what I think was the main reason why Greenberg, and many others after him, were shocked by the Woman series: the superfluous power of the paint—the intensity of the discharge into paint of intention so excessively strong as to seem unwarranted

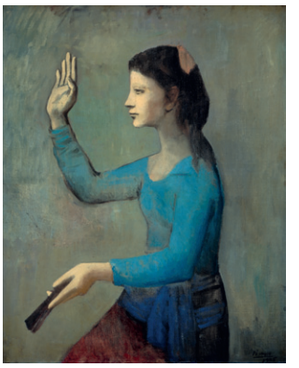

FIG. 20. WILLEM DE KOONING. *WOMAN SITTING*. 1943–44. OIL AND CHARCOAL ON COMPOSITION BOARD, 48 1/4 X 42 IN. (122.6 X 106.7 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION

FIG. 21. PABLO PICASSO. *LADY WITH A FAN*. 1905. OIL ON CANVAS, 39 1/2 X 31 7/8 IN. (100.3 X 81 CM). NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON. GIFT OF THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN FOUNDATION IN MEMORY OF MARIE N. HARRIMAN

FIG. 22. PAVEL TCHELITCHEW. *HIDE-AND-SEEK*. 1940–42. OIL ON CANVAS. 6 FT. 6 1/2 IN. X 7 FT. 3/4 IN. (199.3 X 215.3 CM). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. MRS. SIMON GUGGENHEIM FUND

by and therefore finally indifferent to its subject—which therefore, it is assumed, de Kooning just has to have thought tyrannical enough to demand such treatment. But Nochlin said that the Women "are fierce and well-defended creatures." In agreeing with her, I would go further in noticing how far de Kooning has come since the paintings of women as melancholy, introspective figures, inviting of our sympathetic attention, that he made in the years before 1945. Compare, for example, the beautiful *Woman Sitting* (1943–44; fig. 20) with *Woman VI*: in both sentiment and treatment, the former belongs to a "peaceable kingdom" of culture that is still distantly connected to the "rosewater Hellenism" of early Picasso (fig. 21) and Puvis de Chavannes, and to the attitudes to women that it expresses.[121] In this comparison, it is the earlier work that is a trifle condescending.

Since 1945, de Kooning had been struggling to escape such quiescence in images of women, and had quickly found that it was easier to do so with figures in movement than not, as we see from his compositions of dancing women of 1947–48 (plates 43–45). The danger was that the manipulation of posture and gesture could turn into an unwelcome kind of action painting—an illustration of expression—that also belonged to the past. Hence the figural fragmentation in such works: the shaping and disposition of the fragments swarm with energy across the surface. But even as the fragmentation increased in the climactic allover abstractions of 1949–50, their alloverness introduced its own hint of quiescence, so readily did the "pure form of comfort become the comfort of pure form"—albeit punctuated by glimpses of tumult within.

The result went centuries beyond Pavel Tchelitchew's painting *Hide-and-Seek* by (fig. 22), completed as recently as 1942 and immediately acquired by The Museum of Modern Art; nonetheless, de Kooning was effectively doing hide-and-seek painting. Seeing what happened, we understand why, even before he made *Excavation*, he had begun his own process of lifting up through the crusts of such works whole characters pieced together from fragments, to produce the great trio of Woman paintings of 1948–50 (plates 62, 63, 65). The figural image was no longer within but on the surface crust—*was* the surface crust. "I get the paint right on the surface," the artist would boast later, "nobody else can do that"[122]—meaning, nobody among his contemporaries. Paint put flatly on the surface was fundamental.

Anne Hollander has written of how the nude in the Western tradition is usually not naked but unclothed; that is to say, the represented body carries the impression of the shapes and the materials of the body's normal covering.[123] The truth of this assertion may be tested by noticing the changing proportions and surface embellishments of the female nude in paintings through the ages as they follow fashions in clothes. But the intimacy of the relationship between painted canvas, clothing, and bodily surface may go even further than this, to the extent that these three elements are perceived as all referents of a single work.

FIG. 23. REMBRANDT VAN RIJN. *FLORA*. c. 1654. OIL ON CANVAS, 39 3/8 X 36 1/8 IN. (100 X 91.8 CM). THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ARCHER M. HUNTINGTON, IN MEMORY OF HIS FATHER, COLLIS POTTER HUNTINGTON

FIG. 24. PABLO PICASSO. *LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON*. 1907. OIL ON CANVAS. 8 FT. X 7 FT. 8 IN. (243.9 X 233.7 CM). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. ACQUIRED THROUGH THE LILLIE P. BLISS BEQUEST

FIG. 25. WILLEM DE KOONING. *INTERCHANGED*. 1955. OIL ON CANVAS, 6 FT. 7 IN. X 69 IN. (200.7 X 175.3 CM). COLLECTION DAVID GEFFEN, LOS ANGELES

FIG. 26. PETER PAUL RUBENS. *HELENE FOURMENT IN HER WEDDING DRESS*. 1630. OIL ON OAK, 64 1/2 X 53 7/8 IN. (163.5 X 136.9 CM). ALTE PINAKOTHEK, BAYERISCHE STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN, MUNICH

The Venetian approach, initiated by Titian, was to affirm the common materiality of painted canvas, clothing, and bodily surface. Rembrandt took this further when, in the mid-1650s, he began to position his figures frontally, offering the costumed body as a field in parallel to the picture plane. In his *Flora* (c. 1654; fig. 23), the woman's gaze and gesture turn away from the viewer but her white chemise drops down the surface to form a plane that merges costume, body, and canvas support in and through the act of painting. As the art historian David Rosand has observed, "It is as though the painter, in applying the pigment, was actually brushing the white chemise."[124] The sequence of broad, rough, vertical white strokes shaped an abstracted corporeality of painted cloth that reverberated down the centuries to reappear in de Kooning's Woman paintings, weaning the artist from the overall look of a collaged figure. He spoke of associating the material surface of the paint in these works with an experience of the body—his own body as well as his subject's—as squeezed and compacted into a pictorial rectangle.[125]

If the individual, static figure had previously been a liability, because quiescent, it turned into an advantage when pictured in turbulence because pictured in coterminous alignment with a turbulently disturbed and disquieting surface. Michael Brenson has written of how, compared to de Kooning's pre-1945 figures, "there is no sense of a substantial life inside the big women, no necessity to scrutinize them for a hidden self"; adding, "However we look at the paintings, they look back harder. The viewer does not command these paintings; control is in the hands of the work."[126] The comparison with Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; fig. 24) is inescapable, but what de Kooning did was more extreme: what he said of his Woman paintings—"I look at them now and they seem vociferous and ferocious"—is what many have said of the *Demoiselles*,[127] but insofar as his are grotesque, they are ludicrous as well as fearful. "I think it had to do with the idea of the idol, the oracle, and above all the hilariousness of it," the artist remembered—which is itself an oracular statement, suggesting, perhaps, that he had had the idea of painting a fantasy goddess, some Sphinx-like woman, and it had kept turning into something boisterously funny.[128] So perhaps it had to do not with power but with the failure of power—or with a power that survives failure. Gone now, certainly, is not only the stupor of absorption that we see in the pre-1945 Women but also the Picasso-like shrillness and shrieking of their 1948–50 successors. Instead, the figures in the new paintings have a more elemental but elusive expressiveness, something between untiring wakefulness and uncontrolled amazement. "Like the Mesopotamian idols," the artist said, "they always stand up straight, looking to the sky with this smile, like they were just astonished about the forces of nature, you feel."[129] This is the primal without the liability of the primitive: a frightening and a hilarious sort of cave painting,[130] in spirit rather than style, which makes the ideographic figures popular in New York painting in the late 1940s look sentimentally archaic.

Paint Made Flesh

De Kooning came up close to the figure in the mid-1950s, so close that its boundaries vanished from view, internal contours and curving planes becoming the elements of pictorial composition. A transitional work like *Two Women* (1954–55; plate 100) is exemplary of the process. But when that process was concluded—in canvases like *Gotham News* and *Easter Monday* (1955–56; plate 105), which Hess called "abstract urban landscapes"—the disappearance of the image of a whole figure, and the indecipherability of the fragments of it that remained, necessarily meant that the contrariety of image and painterly surface characteristic of the Woman paintings also disappeared. Nonetheless, the quality remains of an illusionistic painterliness spread thickly over and across a resistant plane surface.

In *Gotham News* and, more conspicuously, in *Easter Monday*, de Kooning predicted a different form of opposition between representation and abstraction. Following the lead of *Attic*, he transferred fragments of texts and images from newspapers to the surfaces of his canvases by pressing them onto the wet paint. Earlier, to maintain Greenberg's terminology, "a plastic and descriptive painterliness" associable with the "inside" of representational art had been spread "outside," on top of images of a flatness, simplicity, and symmetry associable with abstract art. Now, briefly, de Kooning reversed the relationship of image and painterly surface yet again: the image is outside, on top, and the painterly is inside, beneath.

At this point the temptation is irresistible to think of such mid-1950s canvases not as works of homeless representation but as works to which representation, like a prodigal son, has returned home. In fact, though, because the newspaper images are indexical transfers, they declare themselves to be imported as surely as the stenciled lettering does in Analytical Cubist canvases (fig. 28); and they are therefore not entirely at home.

The term "homeless representation" properly tells us that representation is without a home because it has been evicted by abstraction, but fails to tell us that the home was originally built from the *means* of representation as well as for the *purposes* of representational occupation. "A plastic and descriptive painterliness" will not, *pace* Greenberg, merely *suggest* the representational; ineluctably it will *be* representational. It will not necessarily be figurative, descriptive of bodies or anything else, and will not necessarily involve a figure-against-ground form of the representational, but as a matter of mere tautology, a painterliness that is plastic and descriptive is one that will describe forms in space. To say that an abstraction descriptive of forms in space may be called representational may seem to stretch Greenberg's words too far, but that is precisely what the critic allows, and what he sees in de Kooning's paintings, and rightly so. Indeed, de Kooning offers us, for example in a work like *Interchanged* (1955; fig. 25), an abstraction that is also a representation, its plastic and descriptive painterliness being descriptive of form in space—and also of space as form, as bodily form. In this instance the title tells us of space and form having been interchanged, the dense channel down the center being conceived as a space *between* two figural forms. (Compare it with *Two Women* of 1954; plate 102.) It also tells of interchange between this envelope of space and form and the paint that at once covers and reveals it, as the channel of paint describing Helena Fourment's wedding dress both covers and reveals her body in Rubens's famous canvas (c. 1630–31; fig. 26).

This complexity (but not complication) in de Kooning's deployment of space-form-surface relationships is characteristic of the version of spatial construction that he shaped in the mid-to-late 1950s, the fifth version we have seen thus far. Like every version

since the first, it builds on what went before. Even as de Kooning was casting his lot with the neoclassicism of a collage-based, Synthetic Cubist spatial construction in works like *Attic* and *Excavation*, he was pondering a less tightly bound alternative based in the painterly chiaroscuros of Analytical Cubism. Sylvester has sketched a plausible lineage that runs from the late Cézanne to the Analytical Cubism of Picasso and Braque to Mondrian's 1913–14 version of Analytical Cubism to a painting like *Zot* (1949; plate 66), a smaller, more open cousin to *Attic* and *Excavation*.[131] What the critic does not say, but is worth saying, is that de Kooning—just like Picasso, Braque, and Mondrian—was unable to carry a version of loose Analytical Cubism across a large composition as he could across a small one: its small, hand-and-wrist-made marks were inhibiting of extension.

Sylvester, like Greenberg before him, saw Analytical Cubism's painterly face in the Woman paintings.[132] It is true that these works are not Synthetic Cubist, and therefore, if Cubist even so, must reach instead toward the Analytical version of the style;[133] but the broad swathes of multicolored paint tracking the movements of the artist's arms in the life-size Woman paintings reach away from Cubism to Soutine, and hence to Venetian painting. In 1955, however, once de Kooning went up close to the figure, and to the spaces between figures, that intimacy made Analytical Cubism available to him. As shown by a work like *Palisade* (1957; fig. 27), what he could attach to was not the small, hand-made marking of the style but its corporealized monochrome, which he found congruent with, not opposed to, the tradition of Venetian painting. The curator and art historian William Rubin's words on Picasso's "*Ma Jolie*" (1911–12; fig. 28) apply also to *Palisade* and its companions: "The Rembrandtesque way in which the spectral forms emerge and submerge within the brownish monochromy and the searching, meditative spirit of the compositions contribute to making these paintings among the most profoundly metaphysical in the Western tradition."[134]

FIG. 27. WILLEM DE KOONING. *PALISADE*. 1957. OIL ON CANVAS, 6 FT. 7 IN. X 69 IN. (200.7 X 175.3 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION

FIG. 28. PABLO PICASSO. "*MA JOLIE*". 1911–12. OIL ON CANVAS, 39 3/8 X 25 3/4 IN. (100 X 64.5 CM). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. ACQUIRED THROUGH THE LILLIE P. BLISS BEQUEST

Palisade, although named after either a fence or a landscape, is also, like "*Ma Jolie*", a figure painting. Richard Shiff, a seasoned critic of de Kooning's work, claims that "nearly all of de Kooning's 'abstractions' either began with a reference to the human figure or incorporated figural elements along the way."[135] The note of caution is justified: while figures are indeed the principal inhabitants of de Kooning's many mansions, there are some works, like *Palisade*, where to ask whether they are figure or landscape invites us to imagine de Kooning as Apollo watching Daphne transform into a tree in Bernini's great sculpture at the Galleria Borghese. In the paintings that followed the "abstract urban landscapes"—those that Hess called "abstract parkway landscapes," such as *Park Rosenberg* (1957; plate 109), and especially the "abstract pastoral landscapes," such as *Door to the River* (1960; plate 117)[136]—the process of metamorphosis was much further advanced. And the black-and-white paintings that de Kooning made on his second visit to Rome, in 1959–60 (plates 113–15), refer so generally and nondescriptively either to the figure or to the landscape (if they do at all) that they may truly be called abstract. But they, of all of these works, may with equal truth be called representational, comprising, as they do, the representation of dark, planklike, but fray-edged planes, to which we are discouraged from giving any other name, within an illuminated pictorial space.

Through the second half of the 1950s and into the early '60s, the sequential intensification of de Kooning's art is as noticeable as it was a decade earlier. But whereas, in the years before 1950, elements from one type of work inhabited other types of work being made in the same period, from 1955 to around 1963 his work developed through elements mutating as they inhabited one type of work after another. It was over this roughly eight-year

span of unfolding stylistic momentum that de Kooning's critical acclaim, financial success, influence among younger artists, and rock-star unsteadiness in his personal life were all firmly established. The work made then both created and reflected his status, being ruthlessly intrepid, declaratively public, and willfully canonical. His biographers speak confidently of *Easter Monday* as his "first truly mainstream painting," with de Kooning "no longer a tormented explorer . . . but an artist in control of his time, place, and style."[137] For almost a decade thereafter, he seemed incapable of not remaining in control, at least in his art, and thereby produced some of his most perfected works.

Over the years, they moved inexorably toward a greater simplification, at once getting closer to the body's internal contours and taking an ever more distant view onto simple divisions of landscape. By the end of the 1950s, their vocabulary of picture-making was rudimentary and elemental, composed of overlapping frontal flats that surrender the old bulging, twisting planes for the sake of graphic clarity. It was now fully in character for the intrepid artist that in 1959, as his old friend Franz Kline began more consistently to use color, de Kooning grabbed hold of Kline's former, all-black-and-white format to enhance that graphic clarity in his own Rome paintings.

The turn to black and white, like that little more than a decade earlier, was a decisive moment of pause. In this case it gave de Kooning pause about the wisdom of his pursuit of dramatic contrasts. And perhaps the brightness of Rome's light and the darkness of its urban shadows, which may well have turned him to black and white, also cautioned him that the landscapes in the vicinity of New York City, which had been influential upon his recent paintings, did not display such contrasts. In any event, he became conscious that the color of these New York paintings was not really landscape color but told of having been mixed in a city studio. It was, first, *relational* color, individual hues put together in a system of balances, each with its own role to play;[138] and second, it was most often *found* color, little mixed and comprising basic, nominal hues—such was the continuing influence in his art of the planar, relational methods of Synthetic Cubism. Returning from Rome, he realized its limitations.

"I felt in New York that I was using colors just prismatically: yellow, blue, black, white," he would explain later. "I had no way of getting hold of the tone of the light of a painting."[139] After 1960, he sought to evoke color as it variously appears in natural light. The result was as major a change in his art as had happened with the Woman paintings; in fact it completed what they had started, moving his work well beyond the confines of part-to-part, relational Cubism, or at least extending it in an unforeseen and surprising way. This transformed his treatment of the figure, to which he returned in 1963, retrieving the decade-earlier contrariety of a flatly "abstract" representational image and, at its most effective, an "exhibitedly and poignantly superfluous" painterliness spread over the surface—now almost to the point of dissolve into a whiter shade of pale.

"Soft Pulpy, Slushy, Oozy"

The works of the decade or so after 1963 produced almost as great a storm of disapproval as the Woman paintings had. The disapprobation was partly to do with the sudden collapse in esteem that all painterly abstraction suffered in the early 1960s with the appearance of hard-edged, flatly and often vividly colored painting and sculpture, including Pop art, Minimalism, and Color Field painting.[140] De Kooning, ironically, had just abandoned something not so different, but that did not matter: his reputation, which had become enormous by the end of

the 1950s, fell away in the 1960s. As often happens, the paradigm became the anomaly, and vice versa: the hitherto neglected Newman rose in esteem. As early as 1964, the ever-faithful Rosenberg was writing that "like Western civilization, like humanity itself, Willem de Kooning is constantly declared by critics to be in a state of decline, if not finished for good."[141]

The purported decline, it was and still is commonly proposed, was in the artist's control of his medium. It is ironical again, then, that what had previously been mistakenly praised, his supposed de-skilling, was now mistakenly condemned, for de Kooning remained very much in control. (Of his art; he was now a binge drinker on a prodigious scale, making regular recourse to physicians to whom, thankfully, the concept of de-skilling was unknown.) Even before he settled permanently on the East End of Long Island, in 1963, just a year short of his sixtieth birthday, he had begun to pitch his color to the mid-tone level he observed in the island's watery landscape: "When the light hits the ocean," he told Rosenberg in 1972, "there is kind of a gray light on the water. . . . Indescribable tones, almost. I started working with them and insisted that they would give me the kind of light I wanted."[142] This begins in works like *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point* (1963; plate 118). And even as he returned to the figure, his paintings remained keyed to the gray light long favored by plein air landscapists. The landscapists, however, had taken this color pitch from earlier figure painters, from Veronese to Rubens to Delacroix, and it was the artists of the Venetian tradition whom de Kooning emulated.

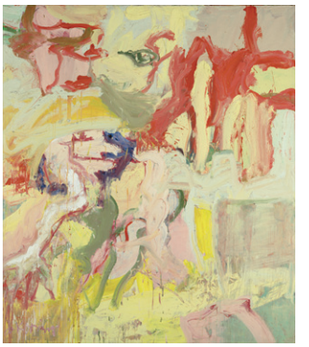

FIG. 29. WILLEM DE KOONING. *MONTAUK I*. 1969. OIL ON CANVAS, 7 FT. 4 IN. X 6 FT. 5 IN. (223.5 X 195.6 CM). WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART, HARTFORD. THE ELLA GALLUP SUMNER AND MARY CATLIN SUMNER COLLECTION FUND

Like them, in works like *Clam Diggers* (1963; plate 120) he wrapped his figures in color mixed to a mid-tone level and largely avoided the principal hues, blacks, and dense earth colors lest they break the gray envelope. His concern now was not the relationship of colors but the unity of color, of color in the singular—color that was rarely allowed to delineate or confine form but was encouraged to spread in areas that seeped into each other. This meant working wet-in-wet to a far greater extent than before, and often for a much longer period—another reason to avoid earth colors, which dry more quickly.[143] It also necessitated other technical changes as his paintings increased in size, from small works like *Clam Diggers* to the tall, six-and-a-half-by-three-foot "door" paintings like *Woman, Sag Harbor* (1964; plate 127) and hence to the big broad compositions leading up to *Montauk I* (1969; fig. 29), at eighty-eight by seventy-seven inches the largest painting he had made since *Easter Monday*. De Kooning spoke of "working for weeks and weeks on end on a large picture" by scraping it down to the canvas, "so that I can change it over and over, — I mean, do the same thing over . . . and over . . . [so that] it will look fluid . . . and fresh.—as if it was really a small picture."[144]

We will remember the artist's difficulty in achieving the Analytical Cubist painterliness of *Zot* at the large size of *Attic* and *Excavation*; he was now revisiting the problem. His transposition to large canvases of qualities traditionally belonging to small oil sketches brought a concomitant confusion of scale: when these canvases are seen at a distance, which visually reduces them to the size of small works, the tactile evidence of their freshness and fluidity is invisible; when that evidence becomes visible as they enlarge with closer viewing, the sheer extent and variety of their materiality can be a shock, precisely because it is associable with much smaller canvases. Moreover, because the paintings have been done "over and over," as de Kooning said, often in their entirety, the sense of their creation's temporal duration and sequence, evident in earlier works, is not there to the same extent. The huge material mass that enlarges in our sight has an immediacy, an instantaneity, of physical, pigmented presence that is utterly unfamiliar in works of this size. The effect can be extremely disconcerting, particularly when allied with a figural subject, and the question that works like *The*

Visit (1966–67; plate 139) or *Montauk I* raise for their critics has been the usual one: whether the discomfort will be endured until the unfamiliarity abates, or whether the critic will ease the discomfort by pronouncing the work a failure.[145]

All too many have opted for easement, bothered by the pink, juicy, slippery, sleazy, voluptuousness of the figuration, especially at life size. In fact nobody really argues about the aptness of such adjectives in describing de Kooning's paintings of the 1960s; the question is whether they are used to describe or also to blame. They are too rarely used to praise, but that is what I think needs to happen.

The gooey paint on these canvases is seen to have slid, even appears still to slide, across their surfaces. The artist's fondness for vellum not only to transfer images but also to lay on his canvases to paint upon speaks of his enjoyment in a surface—smooth as silk and unhindered by a weave pattern—across which his brush, loaded with pigment made rich with medium, could wander, skate, and skid—not gripped by the support, as the dragged, resistant paint was by the heavy canvases of the early and mid-1950s. In his paintings of the mid-1960s through the '70s, de Kooning revisited the laminated structure of those earlier canvases to create a revised form of spatial construction, his sixth. The picture plane is now a plenum floated like a veneer upon an unstable support—and the artist often invoked reflections upon water for what he was attempting. "I've always been fascinated by water, you see. It reflects while you are reflecting," he said in 1967, and (remembering the stick-in-the-water illusion) we may imagine the Montauk paintings, made that year, as figures broken to sight in a reflective medium.[146]

But paint is thicker than water, and needs to be to evoke flesh. So there are failures. But these are actually easier to take than the successes. The failures are inert, glugged up, and merely disappointing. The successes implicate us in muculent fields of eroticism, and the challenge that each of the great successes "most triumphantly contains is not a challenge *to*, but the challenge *of* pleasure: the demanding challenge that a full and lively imaginative apprehension of the pleasures of others cannot but make upon us."[147] This is Ricks on Keats, asking us not to feel repelled, because embarrassed, by the imagining, but rather to accept the challenge in any initial distaste at being asked to imagine immersion in such a gummy sort of pleasure.

De Kooning, we heard, used the term "slipping glimpses" to describe the fragmentary, passing manner in which the content of his paintings presents itself, of which reflections on water were now the pastoral provider. Keats used the phrase "slippery blisses" to describe the content that he himself loved: carnal sensations that were "soft pulpy, slushy, oozy."[148] We don't know whether or not de Kooning read any Keats, though during his first, very short visit to Rome, in 1959, he made a point of visiting the poet's tomb, and in 1975 adapted the inscription on it for the title of one of his paintings, . . . *Whose Name Was Writ in Water*. In any event, I know he would have liked the rhyme of "slipping glimpses" and "slippery blisses," for such rhyming abounds in the great paintings of the later 1960s: from those with almost whole figures, like *The Visit*—a gloriously fetid image, dripping in gelatinous substance—to those, like *Montauk I*, whose bright, wet, sticky meadows conceal one or more figures. (We may be reminded of Frenhofer's finally completed painting in Honoré de Balzac's novella *The Unknown Masterpiece*, of 1831, in which all viewers could see was part of a foot lost in the swirl of colors.) What de Kooning, along with his Existentialist-minded friends, had certainly read was Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which had first appeared in English in two installments, in 1953 and 1956; and Sartre's extended paean to *le visqueux*, "the slimy," had to have caught his attention. Parts of it read like the ekphrasis of these paintings:

I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me. Its mode of being is neither the reassuring inertia of the solid nor the dynamism like that in water which is exhausted in fleeing from me. It is a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking, it lives obscurely under my fingers, and I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me. There is something like a tactile fascination in the slimy. I am no longer the master in arresting *the process of appropriation. It continues. . . .*

But at the same time the slimy is myself, *from the very fact that I plan an appropriation of the slimy substance. That sucking of the slimy which I feel on my hands outlines a kind of continuity of the slimy substance in myself.*[149]

De Kooning had always courted out-of-control moments, and to work paint into a slimy substance could make the feeling of getting out of control become the subject of a painting that is in fact very highly controlled. It was like Cézanne, for de Kooning "always trembling but very precisely," but with an added touch of Raphael's trembling, "languid and nasty."[150] Making sculpture felt nasty to the artist at first; he apparently flinched at the touch of the slick and gooey clay, which he kept very fluid, and he worked in gloves—sometimes more than one pair, to enlarge the reach of and the marks made by his hand and fingers—the better to shape in three dimensions a "fluidity . . . in slow-motion."[151] Drawing became more important than ever, to rehearse the bodily lines that would turn into tracks of paint with "a sticky thickness in its liquidity,"[152] most conspicuously in the canvases of 1975–77 (plates 166–68, 175–77), among de Kooning's greatest works.

FIG. 30. WILLEM DE KOONING. *SCREAMS OF CHILDREN COME FROM SEAGULLS*. 1975. OIL ON CANVAS, 6 FT. 5 IN. X 7 FT. 4 IN. (195.6 X 223.5 CM). GLENSTONE

FIG. 31. PETER PAUL RUBENS. *HAGAR IN THE DESERT*. AFTER 1630. OIL ON OAK PANEL. 28 7/8 X 28 3/8 IN. (73 X 72 CM). DULWICH PICTURE GALLERY, LONDON

Some of these big abstract compositions have fanciful titles: *Screams of Children Come from Seagulls* (1975; fig. 30), . . . *Whose Name Was Writ in Water* (1975; plate 167). Most were accepted by the artist, not chosen by him, but they do catch the mood of the works: the uncertain source of something screaming; Keats's gravestone words floating away. The pictures they name and their many companions, the majority horizontal in orientation, were begun, like the Montauk series, with explicitly figurative images that then fragmented in the process of painting, to produce a new version of the compositions of body parts of the mid-to-late 1940s. But whereas earlier, most conspicuously in black-and-white works like *Painting* of 1948, the binding agent of the composition was drawing, now color assumed that role—color, though, that was itself drawn in threads, in luminous strands and ribbons of varying weight. Each thread remains itself, its own color, yet all are woven to form sometimes ordered, sometimes disheveled, and sometimes disobligingly messy skeins of color—of color in the singular—caught between meshing and unraveling.

The linearity of these works, this is to say, looks back to Soutine's brushstrokes without boundaries that had so captivated de Kooning in 1950: line for direction but not for delineation. The tactile density of the paintings, which absorbs their linearity and with it their figuration, follows and exceeds that of Soutine's work in causing them, the artist and critic Sidney Tillim wrote, to "hover . . . on the brink of arbitrariness, between manner and matter."[153] And they look further and more specifically back to paintings of the female figure in landscape, like Rubens's *Hagar in the Desert* (c. 1635; fig. 31), in which the veined and fleshy settings that surround the figure (the model again being Fourment) are there to evoke, as much as is the costume these settings resemble, the physical, sexual bodies concealed by layers of indivisible costume and paint.[154] De Kooning layers tangles of paint on bodily forms resemblant of

landscape forms, paint whose physicality affords an unloitering recognition of the body's slippery blisses, and the tangles of the paint a treaty of wrestling and nestling in their exploration.

"Flesh was the reason why oil paint was invented." And "the more painting developed . . . the more it started shaking with excitement. And very soon [people] saw that they needed thousands and thousands of brush-strokes for that."[155] Flesh is beneath the skin, and gives it its shape; and painting needed a visible, material skin—an epidermis, Delacroix called it—so marked as if it were describing the flesh beneath.[156] The nineteenth-century painter knew that actual bodies are no more sprinkled with brushstrokes than they are outlined with contours.[157] But the skins of paintings needed to be visibly marked to make what they illustrated seem real—or de Kooning would say, needed to be excited to be real. He paints not merely the skin but, by painting the skin, the soft substance beneath: the subcutaneous amalgams that we call by the single name "flesh," although they comprise skeletal muscle; nerve bundles; fibrous tissues like ligaments, tendons, and fasciae; blood vessels, most visibly the capillary bed and the superficial veins; and, of course, fat. All of this connects, supports, or surrounds other, deeper structures and organs of the body, both solids and spaces, and is itself connected or supported, and surrounded, by what we call "skin." De Kooning does not, of course, literally picture the inside of the body, but the result reaches inside, for that is where there is space to paint, and where the networks of forms to paint are imaginatively to be found.

Nothingness, Emptiness

A problem of cause and effect is that a powerful description of cause can find credulous welcome as an analgesic for a worryingly unfamiliar effect. This, regularly an impediment to the appreciation of de Kooning's art, became a much larger one in the 1980s.

Except for those who had already given up on de Kooning, the still very painterly paintings of 1980–81 (plates 178–81) and, to a slightly lesser extent, of 1982–83 (plates 182, 83) did not prove troublesome: they are not a bit slimy, and admirers of the artist's much earlier canvases can rightly see in them a reprise of mid-1950s abstractions—of *Interchanged*, for example, in *Pirate (Untitled II)* (1981; plate 180). At present, such 1981 paintings are the artist's last for which a popular consensus exists that they include masterpieces. It was the "white paintings"[158] that began in 1983 and continued through 1985, canvases with typically red, blue, and yellow drawing laid out over open white grounds, that left many admirers behind (most especially the too many who judged them from photographs, for few paintings are more distorted, flattened and simplified by reproduction than they are). As had happened two decades before, admirers and detractors alike broadly agreed on what was novel in the new paintings, this time their spareness of composition, absence of painterliness, restriction in color, and so on; and once again, detractors saw in the results the artist's loss of his control. This time, though, his loss of his control was attributed by his detractors to his declining health and, eventually, advancing dementia, and to the control supposedly exerted by his studio assistants.

These charges have been reviewed and satisfactorily answered by Gary Garrels and Robert Storr in 1995 and by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan in 2004.[159] Some controversial topics nevertheless require mention here, however, since they are integral to critical changes in de Kooning's artistic practice.

Contrary to uninformed accounts, until some time in 1987 de Kooning had no more studio help than is customary for most productive artists who employ assistants. At that point he came to require additional support, but still less than many such artists are

accustomed to employ.[160] A principal reason for his use of such help had to do with his wish that his canvases not look overworked or overcorrected.[161] That wish, expressed in a search for freshness and fluidity, had led him to repaint time and again his paintings of the later 1960s and '70s, often in their entirety, thereby effacing the sense of temporal creation evident earlier on. In *Pirate* and similar works, he went back to allowing the extended process of painting to show, which accounts for these works' popularity; but as the 1980s advanced, once more seeking the appearance of freshness and fluidity, he slowly but surely reduced the painterliness of the surface, beneath which all earlier work on the canvas was concealed. And the more painterliness was reduced, the more frequently it was assumed that there was in fact no earlier work on the canvas beneath the surface at all. The surprise of the large amount of underdrawing and -painting scientifically revealed beneath the surface of *Rider (Untitled VII)* (1985; see p. 483) is the unexpectedness of so graphically clear a surface having possibly been produced in the same way as the earlier, visibly painterly surfaces had been.[162]

I hope, however, that we can avoid valorizing *Rider* for this reason—that is to say, simply for how much work went into it. We would do better to recognize that de Kooning, like his compatriot Mondrian, now wished to create surfaces that were demonstrably handmade yet did not make a display of the temporality of their creation, so as not to look overworked or overcorrected.

An eventual consequence of this wish was actually *not* to overwork or overcorrect them. This meant that the amount of work that went into each painting was in fact reduced, the artist moving on to a new canvas rather than reworking too much. His output of paintings accordingly increased, and more assistance was needed in the studio to prepare them.[163] However, if all de Kooning had done was reduce his revision of each painting, he would merely have produced a lot of unfinished paintings. The diminished amount of work and correction on a canvas went hand-in-hand with a desire not merely for simplification, not merely for freedom from the masses of painterly material that he was accustomed to work with; this letting-go was not an aging painter's self-justifying release from the past. In refining his means, he was actually in pursuit of something more elaborate.

De Kooning did simplify and eventually abandon his complex processes of tracing and moving drawn or painted images over the surface. Instead, certainly by 1985, he began to use an opaque projector to transfer the outlines of a reproduction of a drawing or painting onto a canvas;[164] and then he went over the lines with colored paint, and added color and variously tinted whites in the areas between them, often multiple times in both cases. This meant that he frequently revisited his own earlier work.

Soon, the assistants were doing the initial image transfer and putting in the first application of white. The artist usually obliterated both in what he did next, but does it matter if he did not?[165] To put it another way, why would we wish to begrudge him his finding of a frictionless way of painting, given the resistance of the impairment against which he was working?

As mid-decade approached, de Kooning painted in a state of progressively increasing physical and mental dysfunction. But he was no stranger to working with dysfunction. I refer not only to his earlier alcoholism but to what I spoke of near the beginning of this essay, his long-rehearsed, unconventional skill in making paintings under conditions of planned impairment. So, when he simplified his practices in the 1980s, he compensated somewhat for a new burden of impairment that was *not* planned, and drew upon his long-developed habit of "writing fair." He had long been an artist of rehearsed, repeated, and ingrained practices, with a

FIG. 32. WILLEM DE KOONING. *UNTITLED XIX*. 1983. OIL ON CANVAS, 6 FT. 5 IN. X 7 FT. 4 IN. (195.6 X 223.5 CM). THE DORIS AND DONALD FISHER COLLECTION, SAN FRANCISCO

FIG. 33. WILLEM DE KOONING. *UNTITLED (RECLINING FIGURE)*. c. 1947. OIL AND CHARCOAL ON MASONITE, 13 3/8 X 19 3/8 IN. (38.1 X 50.4 CM). PRIVATE COLLECTION

huge mental and motor workshop of skills and habits; it is unsurprising, therefore, that he had a high level of "cognitive reserve" against the effects of dementia on his artistic practice.[166] He had also long been an artist with a relatively restricted number of subjects and formats, which he regularly revisited, the better to be able to revise his practices on familiar terrain. Now, reliance on indelible artistry was locked into the process of revisiting old ground.

At moments, the result is a breathtaking synthesis. With *Untitled XIX* (1983; fig. 32), for example, he revisits a drawing from the later 1940s, *Untitled (Reclining Figure)* (c. 1947; fig. 33): it is as if Mondrian and Joan Miró had been working with de Kooning in collaboration. As this great canvas, one of the glories of his late work, reveals, he is looking back as he approaches the end—but how much richer, more sumptuous, more spatially and volumetrically voluptuous is the result. We might do well to recall Greenberg's words from thirty years earlier, speaking of de Kooning's wish "to re-charge advanced painting, which has largely abandoned the illusion of depth and volume, with something of the old power of the sculptural contour . . . to make it accommodate bulging, twisting planes like those seen in Tintoretto and Rubens . . . yet without sacrificing anything of abstract painting's decorative and physical force."

It is noteworthy that Greenberg does not mention space, only what de Kooning needed space for—that is to say, he needed space for what it was that would *fill* space. In these last years, however, de Kooning does *not* fill space: he shows us space that has no need to accommodate bulging, twisting planes because it itself bulges and twists, being caused to do so by the use of sculptural contours. These evoke the edges of so-called "nonorientable" surfaces such as Möbius strips, and function as if they were contour lines in maps of an imaginary volumetric terrain that is warping and deforming, collapsing and inflating continuously.

Something as surprising as this is bound to inspire a search for precedents; and conceptually what de Kooning was doing was certainly reminiscent of the Cézanne who said that "light does not exist, at least not for the painter," meaning that it had to be created out of each painter's own pictorial means.[167] The same, de Kooning knew, was true of space, of space that "keeps on going"—and for an abstract painter, "the subject matter in the abstract is *space*."[168] Suggestions of affinity with the negative spaces in Cézanne's late paintings and watercolors, or in Matisse's late cutouts, have the advantage of placing de Kooning's late canvases with works that have been said (whether plausibly or not) to reflect a spirit of harmony and resolution acquired late in the careers of great artists. They have the disadvantage, though, of associating his canvases with works of a spatial homogeneity in which the separateness of things is reconciled. Moreover, de Kooning takes Cézanne's and Matisse's objectification of negative space to the point where the term must be retired:[169] there is no permanently negative space, or space between, since every area is objectified at the instant that its boundaries are perceived—and then released from its objectification as its boundaries are passed. And if any

FIG. 34. PAOLO VERONESE. *RAPE OF EUROPA* (DETAIL). 1580. OIL ON CANVAS, 7 FT. 10 1/2 IN. X 9 FT. 11 1/4 IN. (240 X 303 CM). PALAZZO DUCALE, VENICE

FIG. 35. WILLEM DE KOONING. *THE CAT'S MEOW*. 1987. OIL ON CANVAS, 7 FT. 4 IN. X 6 FT. 5 IN. (223.5 X 195.6 CM). COLLECTION JASPER JOHNS

area is so readily objectified by our attention to it and deobjectified by our distraction from it, what is called "space" may as well be called "solid," except that its substantiality is as illusory as its spatiality.

Suggestions of affinity between de Kooning's late works and his early compositions of the 1930s have the advantage of completing the circle, something that has also been said (again, whether plausibly or not) to characterize many an *Alterstil*. De Kooning encouraged this view when recalling in the early 1980s that Stuart Davis had said to him, "Keep it scarce, keep it scarce";[170] and it is true, he needed to do so in order to achieve what he wanted. This lends support to the suggestion, made most admiringly by the art historian T. J. Clark, that de Kooning was returning to his roots: bringing to the surface of his canvases a reinvented style of conventional early-modernist drawing, and thereby finally escaping what Clark, taking an overwhelmingly minority position, finds the cloying "rhetoric" and "anxiety" of his earlier revisionary processes.[171] But do the roots not go deeper, reaching through modernist drawing into the Renaissance and Baroque past? It is surely there that we come much closer to what we find in de Kooning's late style: its bulging and compressing, twisting and turning, slow-motion spatial movements are those of opulent Venetian paintings such as Veronese's *Rape of Europa* (1580), famously described by Henry James as "the happiest picture in the world" (figs. 34, 35).[172] High-modernist old age meets High Renaissance joy.

Clark is exceptional, though, in going deeper than the mere fact of de Kooning's late refusal of revisionary processes (or rather, his refusal of the appearance of them); and it does not require agreement with Clark's impatience with their past use to agree that there were advantages to the artist's emancipation from them. "So why not reveal the map [of the body]?" Clark asks. "Why not have the map be the painting?"[173] It should be clear from all I have written that I think it has long been that. There is more than one kind of map, and this artist from a nation of explorers excelled in the invention of many. But his seventh, final version of his mapping of space is indeed very new, for the bodily subject is now disappearing from the objective map that traces it. "The emancipation of the subject to objectivity in a coherent whole of which subjectivity was the origin": what the philosopher and musicologist Theodor W. Adorno wrote of Bach speaks eloquently to the new objectivity of late de Kooning.[174]

In the 1960s and '70s, de Kooning would tell visitors of his admiration for the entanglement of the underbrush of scrub oaks close to his house,[175] and his paintings of these years have a thicket quality to them. One reason he wanted change in his art in the late 1970s was that this quality reminded him of the old Cubist method of "fitting-in."[176] It is of interest, then, that in the 1980s he spoke often of sand dunes,[177] and that his paintings from the middle of that decade evoke these patterned, substantial natural phenomena, which can shift and mutate, their patterns changing—water, too, obviously. Except that their substantiality, like their spatiality, is illusory. The paintings also evoke the movement of tendons, fibrous tissues, and

superficial veins in aging hands, the closest objects to the artist as he was painting. The threads of drawing are rarely upon the surface, but slide and crawl pictorially—and sometimes in reality—to various depths within the layers of thin, laminated paint, rich with medium, varied in its alabaster tints, and sometimes glazed over with varnish. Except, again, that the drawing and layering do not seem to lie beneath but to constitute an epidermis, and a fragmented one at that. This is an art no longer of paint made flesh, no longer of corporeal presence, but of its absence, of subjectivity departing. Adorno's may be the best words on de Kooning's late works ever written not about them:

> *The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the works themselves, it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself. Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the "I confronted with Being," are its final work.*[178]

The artist had long been interested, he had said in 1967, "in nothingness, emptiness, empty spaces and places."[179] The articulation of vacancy became his final, eventually oblivious task. With rare exceptions, the newly conceived pictorial envelope, the picture plane, which contains so rich a parcel of activity as I have described, initially appears to be set frontally, in parallel to the literal surface upon which it is displayed. However, if we accept the encouragement provided to the mobile play of our perception by the drawing, in the first place, and the shading of the whites, in the second, that initial appearance changes: with our collaboration, parts of the picture plane can buckle and turn in depth. This we are familiar with from many earlier paintings, except that we have not seen it happen in such an agitated way, tearing and fissuring areas of the surface into morphing parcels of full and then empty space. And what we have not seen at all before is how the picture plane in its entirety can slip from side to side in its moorings, the whole spatialized envelope seeming to be mobile in its relationship to its literal support. In fact it was so in its making: since the design was traced or projected onto the canvas, it could be set down anywhere within the surface. But this was not so readily noticeable until canvases started to appear in which the design was set down in such a way that it did not fill the entire surface—by running asymmetrically over one, or more than one, but not all of the work's edges—or else more than filled the surface, exactly by running over all of its edges. (Plates 184–95 give an indication of how many permutations were possible.) It is the combination of these two forms of spatial movement—which, of course, unfold not separately but simultaneously in our perception—that gives de Kooning's late work its radically elaborative form.

The beauty of this unsettlement may be imagined to be the wake of the departing power of subjectivity; and the interchangeability of substance and space, adrift together, to form a liminal representation. We must be careful not to pathologize these paintings—whether to diminish them or, to the contrary, to either valorize or sentimentalize the artist by association with others who have struggled with physical or mental dysfunction.[180] But would we deny de Kooning a place among the very few artists able to picture their own disappearance?[181] Yes, "the idea of being integrated with [space] is a desperate idea," but "one thing nice about space is that it keeps on going. . . ."

Notes

1. De Kooning 1959a:14.

2. Conrad Marca-Relli, quoted in Stevens and Swan 2004:388, also the source of the paraphrase in the following paragraph.

3. Gowing 1977:55.

4. De Kooning 1949b, in Hess 1968:16.

5. Most egregiously, a popular college textbook, maintaining a Greenbergian taste, dedicates only one paragraph—and a derogatory paragraph at that—to de Kooning in a thirty-five-page account of American art at mid-twentieth century: Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh 2004:348–444.

6. De Kooning, in de Kooning 1959b:4, Snyder 1960:n.p.

7. Greenberg 1953a. Quoted here from *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, *Affirmations and Refusals, 1950–1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 122.

8. Greenberg 1948a:448.

9. In 1955, when Greenberg expanded upon the subject of de Kooning's ambition, he observed of the artist's attempted synthesis of modernism and tradition, "It would seem that there was even more Luciferian pride behind de Kooning's ambition: were he to realize it, all other ambitious painting would have to stop for a while because he would have set its forward as well as its backward limits for a generation to come." Greenberg 1955:183. This is peculiar insofar as Lucifer, rather than halting progress, wanted to change the established order, however heavenly it was, and put the future in human hands. Was Greenberg perhaps acknowledging—without acknowledging to himself that he was doing so—that de Kooning wanted the critic's established modernist order to change, its doctrinal constancy overthrown, and the future put into the fallible hands of human agency?

10. See Elderfield 2001:18.

11. Hess 1968:26.

12. On "self-similarity" see Alpers and Baxandall 1994:148.

13. De Kooning, quoted in Hess 1968:47.

14. See Hess 1959b:15.

15. De Kooning, quoted in Liss 1979:43. De Kooning is remembering John 14:2: "In my Father's house are many mansions," in the King James Version.

16. As not only the earliest but also the artist's *only* written and then publicly delivered explanations of his art, these texts occupy a privileged place in its critical appreciation. Their composition appears to have been aided to varying extents by Harold Rosenberg and especially Elaine de Kooning (see Shiff, in Butler, Schimmel, Shiff, and Wagner 2002:165 n. 9, 167 n. 71). De Kooning 1949b, however—a manuscript of "A Desperate View," handwritten and pieced together by the artist—and his own patterns of speech as revealed in his many interviews, suggest that their improvisatory indirection was very much his own, and all the more striking when we know that it was contrived for a considered delivery, to form a designed complement to his messages of refusal of a prescribed place in contemporary art.

17. De Kooning 1949b, reprinted in Hess 1968:15. The quotations from "A Desperate View" that follow are from the same source.

18. Stevens and Swan 2004:277.

19. On "scaling" see Alpers and Baxandall 1994:145.

20. Polcari 1991:277–84.

21. We await a full study of the intersections between painters, photographers, poets, and New York City itself in this period, but Ashton 1972 and Perl 2005 provide, respectively, summary and much more developed accounts, the latter nicely embedding de Kooning at the salient points. Although primarily interested in somewhat later artists, Chassman 1974 remains a useful study of "poets of the cities," which includes visual artists, while Shannon 2009 is illuminating on New York City's rapid physical transformation, and its artistic ramifications, in the years around 1960.

22. See Berkson 1989:240.

23. Hess 1968:47.

24. Finkelstein 1950:205.

25. Greenberg 1954:7.

26. Elderfield and Winters 2011:334, and Winters in conversation with the author.

27. Why did Greenberg choose a detail from this hardly well-known fresco? In the legend of the Exaltation of the Cross, the victory of Heraclius succeeded in regaining a relic of the True Cross that had been stolen from Jerusalem by the Persian king Chosroes. The event is associated with the fall of the king of Babylon as recounted in Isaiah 14:12–15, in which that king—in the legend's retelling, King Chosroes—is seen to be modeled on Lucifer. Is it possible that Greenberg was aware of this when choosing this de Kooning-like detail? As recounted in note 9 above, he would compare de Kooning to Lucifer the following year in his essay "'American-Type' Painting."

28. See Clark 1990:179–80, 191–96, 199–201. See also Fried 1965:14 for the classic, post-Greenbergian summary of the "optical" escape from figuration; Joselit 2011:356–59 for the persistence of the priority afforded by critics to unification in first-generation Abstract Expressionism; and Siegel 2011:49–54 for space, transcendentalism, and the visual continuum.

29. See Siegel 2011:48–58 on race in relation to the black-and-white paintings.

30. See Sylvester 1968:51.

31. De Kooning, quoted in Hess 1958:27.

32. Rosenberg 1949:n.p.

33. De Kooning conflates Genesis 1:2 ("And the earth was without form, and void") and John 1:1 ("In the beginning was the Word"). In the artist's accented delivery, "void" and "word" would have been difficult to distinguish.

34. De Kooning 1949b, in Hess 1968:16.

35. An account of de Kooning's Existentialist parallels and influences is beyond the scope of this essay, and has yet to be written. Those familiar with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, however (Sartre 1953, Sartre 1956), will notice many points of similarity to it not only in the list of credentials given here but also in statements by de Kooning quoted throughout the essay, most importantly, perhaps, in those on his critical conception of "no-environment," to be discussed later.

36. De Kooning, quoted in Burckhardt 1989:224.

37. Porter 1959:520; Rilke 1907:66, 71–72.

38. Greenberg 1948b:448.

39. See Clark, in Clark, Tanner, and White 1996:5; Wagner, in Butler, Schimmel, Shiff, and Wagner 2002:169.

40. John Keats, letter to his brothers, December 1817, in Rollins 1958:1:192–93.

41. De Kooning 1963:47. Originally from an interview with David Sylvester recorded in New York in March 1960 and broadcast by the BBC, London, on December 3, 1960. A monologue excerpted from this interview was published as de Kooning 1963. Sylvester 2001b contains, with minor changes, the version edited for the BBC broadcast.

42. Rosenberg 1952:22, 49.

43. Ibid., p. 22.

44. Ibid., p. 23. "Without the disclose of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others," Hannah Arendt would write a few years later (Arendt 1958:180). The intimacy she claims, more fully and brilliantly, for action and speech (ibid., pp. 175–93) is what Rosenberg claims for action and painting.

45. On "performances" see Elderfield 1997:107–8.

46. De Kooning, as reported by Milton Resnick, in Dorfman 2003:25–26.

47. See Temkin 2008:110–15.

48. Ruskin 1880:(II.1) p. 55.

49. Ibid., (II.10) p. 103, (II.1) p. 52.

50. Ibid., (II.10) p. 102.

51. Finkelstein 1950:205; Greenberg 1954:7.

52. De Kooning 1959a:3, Snyder 1960:n.p.

53. Ibid.

54. De Kooning 1959b:4, de Kooning 1963:47.

55. See ibid., and Shiff, in Sylvester, Shiff, and Prather 1994:53–54.

56. Barthes 1975:9.

57. Hughes 1994:62.

58. Hess 1953:66.

59. Hess 1968:78–79.

60. De Kooning, quoted in Hess 1953:32.

61. Hess 1968:79.

62. Barthes 1975:11.

63. Hess 1959b:15.

64. Rosenberg 1972:56.

65. De Kooning 1959b:n.p.; de Kooning, quoted in Rodman 1957:101.

66. Finkelstein 1950:205.

67. De Kooning, 1950, quoted in Goodnough 2009:19.

68. De Kooning 1949b, in Hess 1968:16, and for the following quotations.

69. Henri Matisse, letter to Amélie Matisse, March 31, 1912, quoted in Spurling 2005:115.

70. Beckett 1948:137.

71. De Kooning 1949c, in Hess 1968:142. The de Kooning literature usually dates "The Renaissance and Order" to 1950, but documents in the Willem de Kooning files, Museum Collection Files, at MoMA suggest an earlier date. De Kooning sent a typescript of the lecture to Alfred H.

Barr, Jr., then Director of The Museum of Modern Art Collections, who replied by letter on January 26, 1950. On the typescript itself, in Barr's handwriting, appears the note "de Kooning paper read fall 1949."

72. De Kooning, quoted in Hess 1958:27.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., p. 56.

75. See de Kooning 1951.

76. Stone 1994:iii–iv.

77. Ibid., p. v.

78. Geoffrey Grigson, quoted in Ricks 1974:134. Ricks's source is *The Listener*, April 25, 1968.

79. See Elaine de Kooning 1988.

80. Hauser 1889.

81. Rosenberg 1974:23.

82. Matisse, quoted by Ragnar Hoppe in 1931, quoted here from D'Alessandro and Elderfield 2010:318.

83. De Kooning, quoted in Wolfe 1981:16.

84. See Elderfield 1992:38.

85. De Kooning, in Rodman 1957:104–5.

86. There is no record of de Kooning using the term "fitting-in" until 1981 (see Wolfe 1981:16), but whenever he did, it could hardly have escaped this enjoyer of puns, malapropisms, and portmanteau words that "fitting-in" means conforming as well as precisely placing.

87. De Kooning 1951:6.

88. Sylvester 1995:229.

89. De Kooning 1951:8.

90. Ibid., p. 7. In the passage on "book-keeping minds," de Kooning seems especially to be attacking the American Abstract Artists group, which he had refused to join, he said, because they told him what he could not paint. See Sandler 2003b:50.

91. I borrow this phrase from the title of an exhibition; see Scala 2009.

92. De Kooning, quoted in Staats and Matthiesen 1977:70. On de Kooning and the reception of the Soutine exhibition, see Zilczer 1993:47–49, Nochlin 1998:141, and Kleeblatt 1998:53–56.

93. Hess 1953:31.

94. Greenberg 1955:184. Perhaps the most preposterously literal suggestion was that red smears on the chest of *Woman III* were either bullet holes or stab wounds. As David Cateforis discovered, however, there was apparently an equally literal explanation for these features. Writing to William Theophilus Brown in an undated letter of 1953, in the Archives of American Art, Elaine de Kooning recounted that art students visiting the 1953 exhibition had claimed that "the bullet holes" conclusively proved that de Kooning was a homosexual who hated women; and then she explained, "The bullet holes, be it known, are very chic rubies which stick to the skin unaided or abetted by pins or chains—a device de Kooning saw in *Harper's Bazaar* and never forgot." Quoted in Cateforis 1991:161–62.

95. Wagner, in Butler, Schimmel, Shiff, and Wagner 2002:169. This comment is cleverly distanced by being offered as implicit in Hess 1953, which is a reach.

96. Rosenblum 1985:100.

97. See Siegel 1990, Cateforis 1991, Prather, in Sylvester, Shiff, and Prather 1994:131–33.

98. Ricks 1993:165, expanded in discussion with the author.

99. Rosenberg 1952:23.

100. Steinberg 1955:46.

101. Ibid.

102. John Ruskin, quoted in Greenberg 1948d:42. Greenberg is citing Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, vol. III, chapter iii, and *Modern Painters*, vol. III, chapter vii.

103. "I like the grotesque. It's more joyous," he said; quoted in Stevens and Swan 2004:341.

104. *Woman I*, joked Robert Hughes, "has the worst overbite in all of Western art." Hughes 1994:63.

105. Nochlin 1998:107–8. A distinction between imagist structure and painterly facture, and a suggestion of lamination between them, in the Woman paintings appears to have been made first in Seitz 1953:86, to reappear in Greenberg 1962:24–27, as discussed below. See also note 108 below.

106. Nochlin 1998:107–8, 111.

107. Greenberg 1953b:commentary to plate 14.

108. Unaware of this coincidence, and of Nochlin's suggestion of lamination, T. J. Clark believes that Greenberg disliked the paintings (as he himself does) because de Kooning attached the "male braggadoccio" of his handling to "an Other, a scapegoat," whereas, to succeed, that braggadoccio "had to be a manner in search of an object," as it became when he "found a way to half-project it onto cliché landscape or townscape formats, which were transparently props," as with the "abstract parkway" paintings of 1958–59. Clark 1999:393–94. Like Greenberg's and Nochlin's, my own understanding of the laminating process requires handling bonded to an image bonded to a support, and it is unclear, since the concept is unclearly stated, whether handling "half-projected onto a format" fulfills that condition.

109. Greenberg 1962:25.

110. Ibid., p. 27.

111. De Kooning 1963:46.

112. De Kooning, quoted in French in Hunter 1975:69, Eng. trans Prather in Sylvester, Shiff, and Prather 1994:130.

113. See Rose 1965. Another Minimalist parallel lies in the startling similarity of de Kooning's anticompositional statement to observations made in the now famous "Questions to Stella and Judd" of 1964—questions from Bruce Glaser answered by Frank Stella and Donald Judd, published as Lippard 1966:55–61.

114. Greenberg 1962:127.

115. Ibid.

116. Nochlin 1998:106–7 correctly draws our attention to the modernist "tradition of experimental freedom featuring the female figure . . . the arena in which the anxiety of influence still played itself out in the middle of the twentieth century." But she is, I think, wrongly accommodating in saying that we can therefore set aside "de Kooning's specific 'attitudes' toward specific women or women in general."

117. Rosenberg 1952:23.

118. On "conventional provisions" see Elderfield 1995:7–12.

119. On the symbolism of the body in this work see Leggio 1992. Robert Rauschenberg visited de Kooning while the Woman series was in progress; see p. 256 below.

120. See Cavell 1976:276–77, Elderfield 1995:11, 52–53 n. 7.

121. "Peaceable kingdom": Steinberg 1955:46; "rosewater Hellenism": Blunt and Pool 1962:26–27.

122. De Kooning, to Emilie Kilgore, quoted by Sylvester in Sylvester, Shiff, and Prather 1994:16.

123. Hollander 1993:85–86, and passim.

124. Rosand 2000:12.

125. See Shiff, in Sylvester, Shiff, and Prather 1994:45.

126. Brenson 1990:C22.

127. De Kooning, in Sylvester 2001:51; Steinberg 1988:15.

128. De Kooning 1963:47.

129. Ibid.

130. Terry Winters refers to even later paintings, like *Montauk I* (1969; plate 142), having "a cave-art feeling to them." Elderfield and Winters 2011:335.

131. Sylvester, in Sylvester, Shiff, and Prather 1994:20–21.

132. Ibid.; Greenberg 1962:27.

133. De Kooning did seem to refer to Analytical Cubism when he spoke in 1951 of the Cubism he liked as having "that wonderful unsure atmosphere of reflection—a poetic frame where something could be possible, where an artist could practice his intuition." De Kooning 1951:7.

134. Rubin 1972:68.

135. Shiff 2002:164 n. 1.

136. See Hess 1968:26.

137. Stevens and Swan 2004:381.

138. For "relational color," and the discussion of color that follows, I am indebted to Riley 1995:222–48.

139. De Kooning, in de Antonio and Tuchman 1984:55–56.

140. I have spoken of de Kooning's anticipation of the anticompositional in Minimalism; conversely, the influence of Pop art on certain of his canvases of the 1970s awaits discussion. See, for example, the works illustrated in Pace Gallery 2011:nos. 11, 14.

141. Rosenberg 1964b:147.

142. De Kooning, in Rosenberg 1972:58.

143. See Shirey 1967:80, de Antonio and Tuchman 1984:55.

144. De Kooning, letter to Joseph and Olga Hirshhorn, quoted in Zilczer 1993:167.

145. See Greenberg 1950:490–92.

146. De Kooning, quoted in Schierbeek 1968:n.p.

147. Ricks 1974:97.

148. "Slippery blisses": Keats, *Endymion*, book II, line 758; "soft pulpy, slushy, oozy": Keats, letter to C. W. Dilke, September 22, 1819, quoted and discussed in Ricks 1974:104–5, 125–28. See more generally pp. 69–142 for a broad and brilliant discussion of aspects of Keats that is also illuminating for de Kooning.

149. See Sartre 1953:180–81, 182–83, and 168–99 for the full, lengthy text on "the slimy" in *L'Etre et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*.) These selections were omitted from Sartre 1956, an abridged translation of *L'Etre et le néant*, to be reinstated in later editions. Ricks 1974:139 calls Sartre's account (in phrasing I borrow later) "the best criticism of Keats ever written not about him"; the same may be said of it with respect to de Kooning's paintings of the 1960s and '70s.

150. De Kooning 1949b, in Hess 1968:15.

151. Sartre 1953:176. On de Kooning's use of gloves, see Jennifer Field, "Sculpture," p. 411 in the present volume.

152. Sartre 1953:176.

153. Tillim 1984:53.

154. A more recent painting of the same subject, which could well have caught de Kooning's attention, is Edvard Munch's *Inger on the Beach* (1889; Rasmus Meyers Samlinger).

155. De Kooning 1949c, in Hess 1968:142.

156. Eugène Delacroix, journal entry, January 25, 1857, in Wellington 1951:377.

157. See Delacroix, journal entry for January 13, 1857, in ibid., p. 357.

158. The term is the gallerist Robert Mnuchin's, in conversation with the author.

159. Garrels and Storr 1995:passim, Stevens and Swan 2004:589–630. See also Clark, Tanner, and White 1996 and Pissarro 2007. Journalistic literature on de Kooning's late work, especially the writing prompted by the exhibitions of 1994 and 1995, is very extensive; copies of most of it can be found in the archives of The Museum of Modern Art and of The Willem de Kooning Foundation. The 1980s paintings were well received when groups of them were first exhibited, shortly after they were made. After the petition filed in New York State Supreme Court on February 11, 1989, to have the artist declared mentally incapable of looking after his affairs, the subsequent publicity about his physical and mental condition, and assistance while working, initiated retrospective condemnation of paintings made since 1982-83 that continues to this day. When the history of the reception of these paintings is written, as it should be, such literature will be shown to be contemptible for its reliance on rumor and presumption to attribute the appearance of paintings to medical causes of which the authors were ignorant.

160. The studio assistants laid out colors—and eventually chose images (see note 162 below)—that seemed most to motivate the artist. His acceptance, by mid-decade, of not making color and image choices himself does speak of a significant alteration in his practice, but it may fairly be argued that the degree of a painting's success represents the extent of his endorsement of their choices. In 1985, Elaine de Kooning, concerned about the number of red, white, and blue paintings the artist was producing (quite why she had this concern has never been satisfactorily explained), encouraged an enlargement of the palette, which the artist at times accepted, but not always as proposed to him. Then, sometime in 1987, new studio assistants again enlarged his palette to include colors he had rarely used previously, leading to the paintings with multiple colors that he painted in 1988–89. This does seem intrusive upon his practice; but the most striking development of these works in his last years of painting—more loosely brushed elements in tangled webs (see p. 481, fig. 3)—cannot be ascribed to the influence of anyone except the artist himself. On these developments see Garrels and Storr 1995:31–32, 53–57.

161. Tom Ferrara, one of the artist's studio assistants in the 1980s, remembers him talking of not wanting to overwork or overcorrect; see ibid., p. 53.

162. Ferrara told Jim Coddington of The Museum of Modern Art that de Kooning sometimes reused earlier, rejected canvases that the assistants sanded down; this is another possible explanation for the underdrawing and -painting revealed by scientific examination of *Rider* (see p. 483), but there is no way to prove it either way.

163. In 1980, de Kooning's painting production all but came to a stop, but he made fifteen works in 1981 and twenty-eight in 1982. In 1983, his output jumped to fifty-four paintings, to be followed by fifty-one in 1984, sixty-three in 1985, and forty-three in 1986. In 1987 it dropped to twenty-six, and continued to wane until 1990, when de Kooning stopped painting. For the four years 1983–86, however, he was making, on average, slightly over a painting a week. See Garrels and Storr 1995:51–52.

164. In 1982, de Kooning said he had had an opaque projector "for years" but had not yet used it (see Berman 1982:71). According to his studio assistants, he began using it regularly in 1985 to project photographs of old drawings whose lines he then would trace (Garrels and Storr 1995:47). The projector was kept in the studio's low-ceilinged basement, and as the artist's physical mobility worsened, he preferred to have the assistants do the tracing because of the cramped conditions. (Robert Motherwell made the same decision as he aged.) At times, in order to increase de Kooning's motivation by avoiding repetition, the assistants chose sections of two or more drawings to combine for projection onto canvas, effectively following his own earlier practice of combining two or more vellum transfers in creating compositions.

165. On occasion in works from 1985 and more often from 1986 onward, the assistants' less-than-nuanced drawing is noticeable beneath or just adjacent to de Kooning's painted lines, which in very spare works can prove bothersome. It was his decision to work in this way, however, and his painted lines maintained their verve, even as they slowed in fluidity in step with his fading concentration.

166. Accompanying the petition of February 11, 1989, that de Kooning be declared mentally incapable of managing his affairs was an affidavit stating that he "appeared to be suffering from Alzheimer's Disease" (Stevens and Swan 2004:624). Since such a diagnosis can only be confirmed by autopsy, and no such information is available, it can, at best, be said that he suffered from Alzheimer's-like dementia. The commonly accepted notion of a "cognitive reserve" against the brain damage caused by Alzheimer's and like forms of dementia derives from the repeated observation that there does not seem to be a correlation between the degree of brain damage and the clinical manifestation of that damage; and that such a reserve appears to be greatest in those who have long maintained a high level of intellectually stimulating activity or occupational attainment. I am grateful to Professor Paul Greengard for discussion of this subject, and for his succinct and nontechnical summary: "Things done well and automatically are the last to go."

167. "La lumière n'existe, donc pas pour la peintre." Paul Cézanne, letter to Emile Bernard, October 23, 1904, in Doran 1978:44.

168. De Kooning 1959a:14; De Kooning 1949b, in Hess 1968:16.

169. I am indebted here to the discussion of negative space in Stein 2011:5–9.

170. De Kooning, quoted in Berman 1982:73.

171. Clark, Tanner, and White 1996:4, 31
.
172. James 1909:31.

173. Clark, Tanner, and White 1996:9.

174. Adorno 1955:142; discussed in Said 2006:127.

175. See Rosenberg 1972:57.

176. Wolfe 1981:16.

177. Ferrara, quoted in McEwen 1986:40.

178. Adorno is speaking of the late works of Ludwig van Beethoven. See Adorno 1937:566, quoted and discussed in Said 2006:9–10. The latter, pp. 52, 55, is fascinating in this respect on the subject of the Mozart of the final Da Ponte opera, *Così fan tutte*, which has been found lacking in gravitas when compared to its deeply serious, subjective predecessors, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*.

179. De Kooning, quoted in Schierbeek 1968:n.p.

180. Pissarro 2007:10–13 has interesting things to say on Vincent van Gogh in the context of de Kooning's pathology.

181. I observe here that de Kooning withdraws, is progressively in withdrawal, from self-representation—not entirely, because how then would he depict the withdrawal, but enough. I do not, I need to stress, subscribe to the common idea that his late paintings depict an artist who is simply losing grip on his own existence. Even the more thoughtful presentations of this idea are simply nostalgic for, rather than analytical of, the departing subjectivity. (Clark, in Clark, Tanner, and White 1996, is a tonic in this respect.) Among these is Cooper 2004:264, discussed but not judged by Joachim Pissarro in Pissarro 2007:10–13, who rightly prefers it over those who ignore de Kooning's dementia entirely (Pissarro's example is Shiff 1997) and those who only reluctantly acknowledge it (his example is Schjeldahl 1997:55). Pissarro's analysis of the critical dilemma is to the point, although his own text does not pretend to offer a fully argued answer to it.