

*Abstract Expressionism's Counterculture:
The Club, the Cold War, and the New Sensibility*

by Valerie Hellstein

In the popular and even scholarly imaginations, Abstract Expressionism is epitomized by the photographs of Jackson Pollock brooding over his canvas. Here, the isolated, genius artist empties his guts onto the canvas for all to see. The prevailing narrative, predicated on psychoanalytic and Sartrean notions of the self, interprets this depiction as a shift from the collectivism of the 1930s to the fraught ideological individualism of the Cold War. This narrative is bolstered by the artists' disavowals of group identity and vociferous claims of individuality. Willem de Kooning declared, "Personally, I do not need a movement," and the sculptor David Hare at the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 did not see the need for a community and suggested that "this group activity, this gathering together, is a symptom of fear."¹

In spite of these statements, beginning in the late summer or early fall of 1949, the artists procured a loft at 39 East Eighth Street in order to have a place to gather together. Instead of the isolated, tortured artist, today, I want to suggest a different picture of the Abstract Expressionist that includes artists visiting each others' studios and dropping by The Club several nights a week to share the news of the day and listen to a talk or participate in a panel discussion. In our incessant focus on the individual, we have overlooked the importance of the social milieu and the crucial role The Club played in the formation of Abstract Expressionism. Its very existence and the range of discussions held there point to a different narrative for Abstract Expressionism that provides an alternative trajectory for navigating Cold War politics and one that anticipates the new sensibility and the New Left politics of the 1960s.

Both Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg described the downtown scene populated by autonomous individuals. Rosenberg even went so far to say that the individual prevailed over the group, showing twelve individual artists on their individual stoops, yet both critics recognized that this community operated by way of anarchist mutual aid. Sculptor James Rosati recalled, "I can honestly say that as a group we were all terribly compatible. All of us were very much concerned about each other in many ways. There was an affinity. There was a comradeship that existed that came about naturally. It

wasn't a thing—there was no manifesto. Nobody was duty bound in any way. But this is the way it just really worked out, that's all....And it was very wonderful.”ⁱⁱ In concentrating on The Club, I don't mean to suggest that the Abstract Expressionists constituted a collective avant-garde movement with a unified style like Cubism, rather The Club established a different type of collectivity. The Club came about organically, developing from the artists' need for sociality. It was the physical instantiation of the idea that equal, autonomous individuals could come together and create a community without hierarchy, without a mandated style, and without a set agenda.

This model of collectivity stands in stark contrast to the typical understanding of groups during the early Cold War years. Groups dissolved differences, uniquenesses, demanded certain actions and thoughts, and eradicated individual agency. Such a group was equated with Soviet collectivism and totalitarianism—anathema to Cold War liberalism's model of free individuals—and certainly the Abstract Expressionists reviled the idea of such a group. But The Club, as I described, was not this kind of group. It was the embodiment of the advance-guard that Paul Goodman—a regular speaker in the Club's early years—described in his article, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950,” which he wrote after his experience at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1950, a place that is routinely cited for its radical avant-gardeness, but it is likely that Goodman also had in mind the artists at The Club.

Undoubtedly, Goodman reiterated many of the same ideas in a 1952 talk at The Club entitled “Vanguard and Popular Culture.” In the aftermath of World War II, Goodman wanted to figure out in a practical way how the artist is “to persist at all, being an artist,” a problem not unfamiliar to the painters and sculptors at The Club.ⁱⁱⁱ In order to persist, he argued, “the advance-guard tries to create a new relation of the artist and audience.”^{iv} Community had to be reestablished; Goodman wrote, “In our estranged society, it is objected, just such an intimate community is lacking. Of course it is lacking! The point is that the advance-guard action helps create such a community, starting with the artist's primary friends.”^v As literary historian Andrew Epstein explains, this intimate community would offer an alternative to the alienating, homogenous society of the postwar years.^{vi} The Club was precisely this community Goodman described, and whether the artists recognized its political implications, they

certainly understood its effect in their daily lives. This sense of communitarian kinship and its political possibilities would be most fully realized, of course, in the 1960s, but here it is in a nascent form at The Club.

This mutuality of the individual and the community, the collective, the society, was also articulated in discussion after discussion at The Club. During The Club's earliest years, from 1949 to 1955, artists discussed Zen more than any other single topic; on at least ten separate evenings, they explored Zen and its relation to music, art, and psychology. Of the six evenings devoted to Existentialism, at least five of them addressed specifically the thought of Martin Heidegger. Two of the founders of Gestalt therapy, Paul Goodman and Fritz Perls, led discussions on psychology, and neither was a Freudian or Jungian. Vitalism underlaid most of these discussions and surfaced early on at The Club with the showing of Herbert Matter's overtly vitalist film *The Works of Calder*. The Club became a testing ground for the artists to explore different vocabularies to help them articulate what had been going on in their studios since 1947 and 1948 as each developed his or her own style. These discussions at The Club should be seen as the animating frames of Abstract Expressionism, and they reveal the deeply social nature of the Abstract Expressionist project. The Abstract Expressionists continuously explored different models of selfhood, but the recurring topics at The Club enabled an address on individuality and collectivity that evaded the Manichean rhetoric of Red Scare America. The individual and the social, however defined, were necessarily mutual; that is, the individual was not pitted against nor made more important than the social. Each of these frameworks shares an abiding belief that one cannot speak of the individual without also speaking of society, of the world, of community. The reconstruction of this predominant theme at The Club allows for a reading of Abstract Expressionism that moves beyond the stereotypical heroic individualism and Cold War rhetoric usually associated with it.

Briefly, without going into too much detail, I want to sketch out the terms and the stakes for each of these intellectual frames as they were discussed at The Club. Vitalism, popularized in the early twentieth century by Henri Bergson, acknowledged a pervading, connecting rhythm throughout all of existence that could not be reduced to mechanistic or chemical explanation. Vitalism recognized that

“relatedness rather than isolated individuality” governed human existence, and after the horrors and betrayals of the Second World War, many felt that individuals were increasingly objectified.^{vii} Vitalism, then, reemerged at the moment when the individual’s connections to society were imperiled in order to offer an alternative, more inclusive view of the world, and it was taken up by such diverse artists as Jackson Pollock and John Cage to describe both the creative act and the viewer’s response to a work of art.

Perhaps more than any other philosophy, Abstract Expressionism is associated with Existentialism. Sartre was the public face of Existentialism, but it was more often his predecessor Heidegger who was discussed at The Club. Heidegger’s concepts of Being-in-the-world and Being-with take the individual outside of a psychoanalytic understanding of the self and place him or her in the world with others. For Heidegger, as one of his commentators explained, *Dasein*—literally Being-there—is not an ego with “a stream of private experiences” but “a moving center of pragmatic activity in the midst of a shared world.”^{viii} Additionally, *Mitsein*, or Being-with, is fundamental to *Dasein*; even if one supposes one has no need for others, one’s understanding of Being necessarily implies the understanding of others.^{ix} This model of the self undercut prevailing therapeutic notions and mitigated the enduring subject/object dichotomy.

The pervasive psychoanalytic understanding of the Abstract Expressionist is based on the theories of the unconscious put forth by Freud and Jung, but when psychology was formally discussed at The Club, the discussion was led by Paul Goodman and Fritz Perls, two of the founders of Gestalt therapy. Gestalt therapy combined Taoist wisdom, Wilhelm Reich’s attention to the body, and Martin Buber’s I-Thou relationship with American pragmatism in order to address the relational and communitarian aspects of human existence instead of personal neuroses. The self was not an all-masterful ego but rather could only be understood in its relation to the physical environment, internal appetites, historical and cultural constructs, and other individuals. Goodman and Perls built their theory on ideas of creative action and anarchism that were welcomed by the artists at The Club.

Goodman's references to Eastern philosophy would not have been out of place at The Club, for Zen Buddhism was discussed more than any other single topic, making it less tangential to Abstract Expressionism than some have argued. With its emphasis on the awareness of the here and now, Zen echoed the Abstract Expressionists' own concerns with spontaneity and awareness, and Zen, too, is invested in the communal. The act of meditation is the attempt to quiet the self so that one's relation to otherness is made clear, so that one may perceive the connectedness of all life. This oneness was crucial for operating outside of the Cold War mentality that seeded "us" against "them." I am not suggesting that the Abstract Expressionists were practicing meditation or mindfulness or that they were reading Heidegger, but the languages of Zen and the other philosophical models struck a chord with their own attempts in their studios to mediate their interests in interiority and their desire for a socially relevant art.

In fact, each of these frameworks found its place in one of the first articulations of the Abstract Expressionist project—Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters." Coming directly out of seven panels devoted to the "problem" of "Abstract Expressionism" in 1952, Rosenberg attempted to synthesize many of the discussions held at The Club. According to a partial transcript of January 18th, Rosenberg summarized the evening's discussion by stating that "Painting is a struggle between the artist and the canvas." The articulation of this struggle became the subject for his famous article. Rosenberg's description of the Action Painter has more in common with Goodman's Gestalt therapy and Heideggerian *Dasein* than it does with the image of an ego-centered artist slashing his feelings on the canvas, and Rosenberg recognized the importance of vitalism and Zen when he wrote that "along with the philosophy TO PAINT appear bits of Vedanta and popular pantheism."^x

There are numerous ways in which this essay has been misunderstood and mischaracterized, particularly in its use of psychology, but today I want to suggest that even here we find the beginnings of the new sensibility that would flourish in the 1960s. Rosenberg hints at this new sensibility when he writes about Action Painting's relation to mysticism. He melds mysticism and radical politics but not in the usual Cold War blending that attempted to fend off the godless communists. Rosenberg derides the "weak mysticism" that robes itself in talk of the Absolute without engaging in struggle, equating it with

Christian Science, an oblique reference to popular contemporary self-help mind cures that passed for spirituality in Cold War culture. “Serious mysticism,” however, which Rosenberg associates with Walt Whitman, is closer to the domain of Action Painting. He writes, “What made Whitman’s mysticism serious was that he directed his ‘cosmic ‘I’” towards a Pike’s-Peak-or-Bust morality and politics. He wanted the ineffable in all behavior—he wanted it to win the streets. The test of any of the new painting is its seriousness—and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist’s total effort to make over his experience.”^{xi} In many ways, Whitman’s “cosmic I,” his “gangs of cosmos,” is vitalist relatedness, Zen oneness, Heideggerian Being-with, and Gestalt therapy’s organism-environment field; it is the mutuality of the individual and the collective. Significantly for Rosenberg, this mutuality has political possibilities—it has the ability to change experience, to change actions, to “win the streets,” a possibility at the heart of the “new sensibility.”

When Goodman spoke on vanguard culture at The Club, an audience member noted that he sounded like Rosenberg in saying that art could change life. Goodman argued, “Pollock’s pictures should be all around you, not on the walls...At [the] MoMA opening someone said people looked well in front of Rothko. Rothko, Newman, and Still are housepainters. They make the room worth living in. We will create a beautiful world and start by making the walls a beautiful red.”^{xii} While the painters certainly would have bristled at being called housepainters with its implications of interior decoration, Goodman was echoing what many of them thought of their own work. Rothko suggested that he “painted in the scale of normal living,” and Newman told a reporter in 1950 at his first exhibition that he “want[ed] to see art placed everywhere, made part of the public’s daily routine [for] we like that with which we are most familiar—it’s just that simple.”^{xiii} For Goodman and for many of the artists, art provided the stimulus for the viewer to see society and the world anew, to reject, in Goodman’s words, “the corruption of self-alienation.”^{xiv} Newman was not interested in expressing his “original self.” He told David Sylvester, “I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time, of his connection to others who are also separate.”^{xv} Abstract Expressionist painting does not signify heroic individuality and

interiority but the very obverse. The pictorial strategies used by the artists were an attempt to abolish isolated individuality and establish the mutuality of individuals by addressing their viewers. Likewise, the goal of Goodman's vanguard was to grow beyond the immediate circle of friends to include others.

A key component of the new sensibility of the 1960s, articulated by Susan Sontag, Herbert Marcuse, and others, included the belief that art shaped perception and reality and in doing so could reconstruct society. Likewise, the New Left held that political change emanated from a change of perception, from self-actualization. One of the founders of the Students for a Democratic Society, the voice of the New Left, explained, "The old left...wanted the capitalist system to change to socialism, while the new left desired people to change, to develop a 'radical consciousness,' which meant that individuals would become involved."^{xvi} The Club did not harbor any pretenses of being a catalyst for social change, but I think many of the participants thought their art might help in that direction, that it could "win the streets," even if they were hesitant to turn their art into political fodder. As the dance critic Edwin Denby said during a discussion devoted to the "engaged artist" at The Club, "There are other means than politics of changing the social structure."^{xvii}

In encouraging self-actualization, Rosenberg and the Action Painters encouraged a democratization of the creative action. Certainly they did not go as far as Joseph Beuys or the Fluxus artists in critiquing and dismantling the institution of art making, but there are striking correspondences between Rosenberg's Action Painting and statements made by the proto-Fluxus composer John Cage. On February 9, 1951, Cage delivered his famous "Lecture on Something." He told the artists, "We are in the presence not of a work of art which is a thing but of an action which is implicitly nothing." Rosenberg and many of the artists would have been sympathetic to such a description. Typically, Action Painting is defined as gesture painting—the artist's action is evidenced on the surface of the canvas—but Rosenberg did not have just Pollock and de Kooning in mind. Action Painting is far more encompassing. Rosenberg defines the work of art in the most basic way—an individual puts paint on the canvas. And whether it is Pollock or de Kooning or Newman or Reinhardt, the artist acts. It is an act everyone can do without skill or training. Reinhardt encouraged others to make their own black paintings, and Newman told Tom Hess

that in saying that the first man was an artist, he felt that everyone was an artist.^{xviii} On a basic level, then, Abstract Expressionism represents a democratization of creative action and not an elitist branding of some original action.

In 1966, John Cage told Irving Sandler, “To be perfectly frank I think it’s more recently the work of Newman and Reinhardt that has impressed me deeply. The present exhibition of *The Stations of the Cross* I think is superb, and I see now that it makes quite explicit what I would think are the intentions of Abstract Expressionism. It would seem to me to be truly Abstract Expressionism.”^{xix} This statement is revealing, since throughout most of the interview, Cage dodged Sandler’s attempts to pin him down on Abstract Expressionism’s intentions; but Cage was certainly in a position to know. While perennially cast as hostile to Abstract Expressionism, Cage attended The Club every week for years on end and was actively engaged. Cage’s enthusiastic response to the *Stations* points to a vitality and relevance that Abstract Expressionism still had in the 1960s. Typically, Abstract Expressionism “ends” around 1951, and so Newman’s *Stations* become a footnote in its annals. But what does it mean that Cage sees the *Stations* at the apotheosis of Abstract Expressionism fifteen years after most would say Abstract Expressionism had run its course?

Briefly, with their minimal means, their serial nature, and their evocation of communal ritual, *The Stations* tapped into a sense of togetherness that was avidly sought in the 1960s. Newman told a Jesuit priest, “All you need to do is go down to the Electric Circus at the Dome on a Saturday night to see hundreds of young people sitting and standing in the greatest spectacle of human piety I’ve ever seen...but I’m not sure whether it’s a holy place. But it seems a holy place to the people there; they sit and stand as if they were in a church. Everyone is involved with quiet courtesy. The idea is to be together.”^{xx} Newman understood this need for togetherness—during the Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35, he was the one that brought up the issue of community, and he repeatedly said that he felt his paintings united, not divided, people. Much of Abstract Expressionist painting attempts to bring people together. By evoking the physical motion of putting paint on the canvas (whether one sees the indexical gesture or not), the viewer can imagine him or herself engaging in creative action. The human scale of much of Abstract

Expressionist painting evokes a shared physical space, and the experience makes one aware of others. Newman's *Stations of the Cross* and Reinhardt's Black Paintings epitomize these tendencies of separate-togetherness at a moment in the 1960s when the implications of such a community of viewers could be fully realized.

During the 1950s, many felt that political engagement was impossible, but others were not so quick to shut down possibilities. The Abstract Expressionists' view of the individual within the collective meant it did not look like the traditional Marxism of the Left and instead looked more like Kropotkin's anarchist mutual aid. For Newman, Reinhardt, Cage, and others at The Club, engagement meant a politics and ethics based on empathy—the awareness of others through one's self—that could be activated through the affective dimension of the art work. The art work opened up a space to allow individuals to come together in their separateness. Seen within the context of The Club and the artists' attempt to redefine the individual in relation to the community, Newman's infamous statement about his paintings meaning the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism begins to make more sense. In its social reality, its intellectual pursuits, and in its artistic production, Abstract Expressionism offered a way out of the Manichean, either/or politics of the Cold War culture. In 1969, Marcuse wrote that the new sensibility sought to generate “a practice that involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a non-aggressive, non-exploitative world.”^{xxi} At the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s and well into the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism provided a model for a new way of seeing, a model of a human-scaled project that recognized the mutuality of individuals and society, and for this reason it needs to be resituated as a harbinger of the new sensibility and New Left politics of the 1960s that worked towards an anti-repressive, open society.

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- ⁱ Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 18 (Spring 1951): 7; "The Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," in *Modern Artists in America*, 10.
- ⁱⁱ Oral history interview with James Rosati, April-May 1968, conducted by Sevim Fesci, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," *The Kenyon Review* 13 (Summer 1951): 370.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, 372.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 375-376.
- ^{vi} Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.
- ^{vii} Sheldon Cheney, *Expressionism in Art* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1934), 213.
- ^{viii} Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 164.
- ^{ix} Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 161.
- ^x Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 33.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 33.
- ^{xii} Notes in Irving Sandler papers, 1914-2001, bulk 1950-2000, The Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession no. 2000.M.43.
- ^{xiii} Mark Rothko, "Letter to Katharine Kuh, September 25, 1954," in *Writings on Art*, edited by Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 99; "Call Board Reporter by Amy Freeman Lee (October 2, 1950)," Betty Parsons papers, box 40, Archives of American Art.
- ^{xiv} Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing," 375.
- ^{xv} Barnett Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, edited by John P. O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 257-58.
- ^{xvi} Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64.
- ^{xvii} Note dated April 25, 1952, William Chapin Seitz papers, 1934-1995, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- ^{xviii} Phyllisann Kallick, "An Interview with Ad Reinhardt," *Studio International* 174 (December 1967): 272; Barnett Newman, "A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 286.
- ^{xix} John Cage, interviewed by Irving Sandler, [1966], John Cage Papers, Collection #1000-72, Special Collections & Archives, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT.
- ^{xx} Newman, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, 288.
- ^{xxi} Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 6.