Brushes, Sticks and Stains: Addressing some Cultural Issues in New York and Paris after World War II

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"Among the people I have met have been Éluard, Sartre, Hugnet, Man Ray, Virgil Thompson, Hans Arp, and several others. They're all crackpots, every one of them."

Clement Greenberg, postcard to his mother, May 13, 1939

"It is pleasant to realize that near to us, just across the fast-narrowing Atlantic, is a new world inhabited by people whose eyes have neither seen nor read too much and whose intellect is relatively innocent."

Jean Cassou, "A French Viewpoint," November 28, 1954

"If he (Harold Rosenberg) and others could read it (his work) properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism."

Barnett Newman to Dorothy Gees Seckler, 1962

"This art should be protected because after all this is *artistic free enterprise*."

Alfred Barr and Nelson Rockefeller to Henry Luce about Abstract Expressionism in a letter of 1949

Joe Rosenthal
Raising the flag on Iwo Jima,
1945

To my mind, these four quotes pretty well define what the period from the Liberation of Paris to the acceleration of the Cold War after the repression in Hungary in 1956 was all about. On the one hand we have Clement Greenberg, who by 1939 already has a fairly good idea that France has nothing of real quality to offer to the world. His acquaintance with the surrealist world seems too far removed from his philosophical interests for him to understand the complexities of the French intellectual scene. It appears that the feelings unveiled in this short postcard to his mother had indeed become deeply rooted in his mind, as he would, for the rest of his life, try to replace all those crackpots with serious and/or hedonistic artists from New York. This misunderstanding of other cultures and politics is not, interestingly enough, reserved to Clement Greenberg. One has only to read an article by Jean Cassou, director of the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris,

as late as 1954, to see the incredible gap between the two cultural establishments. Cassou sees the Americans as innocent and naïve, not burdened with intellectual experience. This battle of clichés has been functioning for some time, and is still, strangely enough, very active today. Force, violence and the expansiveness of American works are still contrasted advantageously to the small, precious and weak French paintings. Even the French have bought into this idea, seeing the Americans as 'rough and ready'. It goes without saying that these clichés will be targeted in the exhibition.

The second set of quotes, by Nelson Rockefeller and Barnett Newman, also encapsulate something at the core of the period: the difficulty of accepting, making sense of, even discussing, the production of an art trying to define the anxiety, hopes and desires of a new generation coming out of the war. Artistic language in France as well as in the US has been confronted with an ensconced tradition of seeing, with established canonical formulas and strong ideological ideals. That is why so many artists, and some very good ones at that, active between 1945 and 1956, were often not perceived at all or were quickly forgotten by art history and museums alike, victims of a strong formalist ideology concocted out of Clement Greenberg's often very astute writings in the US that had been formulated to present a unified nationalist front, often going against proclaimed artists' goals (Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still).

De-colonializing the Eye

To decolonialize the Western eye is one of the major goals of this exhibition. The idea is to let us finally wander around the immediate post-war culture without those formalist blinders designed in downtown New York—or Paris for that matter; blinders which are corralling the amateur gaze within a very limiting framework. What the exhibition will hopefully do is not to reconfigure the canon by adding new names to it, but to offer a space where one can comprehend the extraordinary cultural diversity produced in cities like Paris and New York, while the West was reorganizing itself, rethinking national identities after the Second World War (1944-56).

The exhibition documents this very specific period, which moved from the elation of liberation and reconstruction to the gloom and fear of the Cold War, ending up with glee or disgust, depending on your

political coloration, in a nascent consumerist culture, followed by a de-Stalinization that radically transformed Europe and America after 1956.

As this period was crucial to national reconstruction and social reorganization in France as well as in the US, artistic production became a key site for ideological debates during the Cold War, and since the Bomb was unusable, art and culture in general became the weapons of choice. Picasso and Newman would fervently agree on this.

The project of the exhibition is, then, not only to present on the walls of the museum a succession of works by well-known and successful artists, but also to immerse them in the vital debate in which those artworks were directly or indirectly involved. Artworks are put *in situ*, so to speak, breaking the sanctity of the white cube and the straitjacket constructed by a powerful formalist or connoisseur tradition. By bringing into the discussion other discourses than painting and sculpture in the museum space, it is hoped that the artworks will be seen and understood as a vital part of a large and exciting dialogue about national identity, individual and social positioning, at an important moment of general reorganization. Films, newspapers, archives, interviews and radio programs are confronted with artworks in order to articulate ideas about the construction of early post-war modernism. Avant-garde activities and pronouncements are purposely juxtaposed with official and traditional propositions to show how crucial aesthetic choices came about during the Cold War, when symbolism and propaganda took center stage.

What the show proposes to do is: first, to reanimate many of the pictures that today are frozen in a meaningless space where their celebrity status has emptied the vital earlier meanings from the works themselves, to be replaced by a commodity signature. But it is also important to show the historical significance of other propositions, which have been forgotten and erased from canonical linear history. But let's be clear about one crucial thing: the purpose of critical juxtaposition is not to create another revisionist reversal, but rather to raise a discussion of some of the reasons why certain choices made under heavy cultural and political pressures became central and dominant in France as well as in the US. This phenomenon, encouraging certain things to become visible, rapidly eclipsed the complete understanding and magnitude of other aesthetic possibilities. To explain the mechanics of choice will be the central purpose of this presentation.

The exhibition is, then, about a short historical moment, 1944-56, during which cultural production had a vital social and political importance. The chronological framework used here allows us to keep in mind the many battles art was involved in, and the context in which painting and art criticism were produced. Key events, like the 1946 exhibitions, the Boston Affair (1948-1950) or the US propaganda push in Europe (around 1952), and reactions to it, became important parts of the reception and construction of art. Art and historical events run in tandem in this exhibition, not as cause and effect but as symbiotic. Fashion, film, radio, art and politics are called in to alert the viewer to the high level of integration of aesthetics and politics at a time of reconstruction of national identities and international recognition.

Paintings presented this way, in dialogue with their own particular history in relation to the problems of the period, become sensitive landmarks in the chaos of everyday life, enabling the historian not only to analyse the parameters of a site of discourse, but also the characteristics of a culture able to produce such images. In other words, they articulate, crystallize, express specific issues echoed and often manipulated in turn by art criticism. Just as visual knots in an all-over painting by Jackson Pollock give coherence to the *inform,* so do pictures to the apparent chaos of everyday life. Pictures are immersed in their time, speaking it and being spoken by it, aware, but not totally formed yet, forever in a process of becoming. They not only give something to see but also something to read and to think about.

But to avoid the pitfall of over-interpretation, the artists' desires and strategies should be taken into account. Initially artists weren't prepared to accept any meaning attributed to their art by a perverse reception they could not control (see the violent letters written to Greenberg by Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko). That's why the show doesn't shy away from presenting artworks simultaneously with the diverse art-critical discourses they triggered, to alert the viewer to the important intellectual and political diatribes in which visual culture was involved—and, by the same token, was ultimately the real force behind. This was particularly true during that intense period of the Cold War when artists were producing images based on specific positions whose goal was to confront others, making in the process specific aesthetic and political points. The detailed analysis of the images and strategies of discourse are crucial to an understanding of the diverse

array of artistic productions, and the violence fuelled by their aesthetic positions.

It is interesting to note that new ideas reflecting an array of different understandings of the role of artists were first published in a series of magazines, journals and newspapers which participated fully in Western reconstruction. I am thinking here about *Les Lettres françaises*, *Combat*, *Art d'Aujourd'hui*, *Rixes*, *Phases*, *Les Deux Soeurs*, *Arts* and *Cimaise* in Paris, and *Partisan Review*, *Possibilities*, *Tiger's Eye* and *The New Iconograph* in New York.

Reading post-war pictures in a show like ours, then, should be the opposite of consuming them. It should be an active, interpretive task, not just an obsession with the clever articulation of the internal logic of construction in artworks. This logic, in itself crucial, should also be connected to a strategy of production tied to historical possibilities, complemented by a study of its utilization in the culture at large. It is this framework that the exhibition provides. The artist, by choosing certain options rather than others available to him/her, makes certain aesthetic choices highly meaningful in the context of production. That is why we decided to offer, in the course of the exhibition, rooms empty of context where artworks are presented in dialogue, if not confrontation, with each other. The rhythmic reappearance of neutral museum space will let the works speak, as we usually say—but this time, they will speak to visitors with some background knowledge of the reasoning behind them, gathered in preceding rooms. These "reflection rooms" will allow the viewer of today to read and evaluate the messages and issues put into images by individual artists in reference to their own time and the history of their trade, in all their complexities and contradictions, and the eye of the beholder will hopefully be surprised and enchanted by new discoveries and possible interpretations.

A reassessment of the powerful French and US art scenes now seems finally to be possible, when a developing global world is finally questioning and ideologically deconstructing centralized and canonical discourses. Indeed, 1950s' cultural production has been assimilated to such a degree that in academic circles the art produced during the immediate post-war period has been considered almost exclusively according to criteria developed during the Cold War by smart but partial art critics, who built a new path towards quality by riding Alfred Barr's torpedo almost

blindly through his own very precise formalist map. The point here is to allow aesthetic choices made then under specific conditions to be re-evaluated, so as to grasp the quality of certain expressions which for a long time have had no chance to be seen, due to the rigid regime of art criticism and museum practices in general. Let us then analyse this process of configuring culture and taste.

Reconstruction in France and the 1944 Salon

The immediate post-war period was marked by a long and difficult re-creation of a lost paradise at a time when international relations were disintegrating, and artistic and cultural productions becoming crucial in East-West foreign policy as the Cold-War set in. It was in this area—the artistic—that France could find something to root for. Her cultural image was seen as a help in putting the country back on the international stage. The crucial question was what kind of image was appropriate for this international re-inclusion. It was not going to be easy, despite France's high hopes, because factional divisions were not only severe in the political sphere but also violently present in the cultural one. Art critics, writing from politicized newspapers, were defending and trying to impose different aesthetics according to their political vision for a new postwar world, and France, like Italy, became a crucial site for propaganda, coveted as a convert by the two new major defining forces, Russia and the US.

Caught between the two, French culture was like the red ribbon on the middle of the rope in a tug-of-war contest, passing alternately from one side to the other in a deadly but often subtle competition. What was at stake for France—having lost almost everything, including a large part of her honor, during the occupation—was her image, her cultural past and present; but she often presented it in baffling ways. For example, the French government sent two symbolic exhibitions to the US right after the liberation: a big fashion show, *Le Théâtre de la Mode* in 1945, and one of paintings in 1946. If the presentation of 228 27-inch-high mannequins in the fashion show was an unmitigated success, the art exhibition became a major embarrassment for the French, due to the over-traditional nature of the establishment choice. US critics like Greenberg took the opportunity to declare French art moribund, and claim that American Art had the upper hand in the race for world cultural supremacy.

Eric Gaillaud
Pau libéré le 21 août par nos braves FFI, 1944

But it wasn't that simple, since the US congress simultaneously made a major blunder by recalling, for political reasons, a brilliant exhibition of US modern art touring Europe. This story is by now well known, but let's add that this total incomprehension of cultural issues triggered the US's abandonment of state cultural promotion, and its replacement by the private sector. France and the US, in their respective desires to show the world that each of them was the uncontested cultural leader, both began with major strategic mistakes.

In 1944, the Salon d'Automne organized in Paris was maybe the first event signaling the beginning of a new era, a new civilization after many years of suffering and occupation. This was an important signal, because not only did it celebrate a series of works by young French artists, who developed a renewed Parisian modern style during the occupation, but also because, as a symbolic gesture, the Salon paid homage to a new Communist follower: Pablo Picasso. A whole room was devoted to his latest work—a clear sign that the France emerging from the Resistance, spearheaded by the Communist Party, was definitively breaking away from Vichy France, and re-engaging with the values of progress.

This treatment set Picasso apart, as a symbol of the new era, from other important masters like Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, Raoul Dufy, Marcel Gromaire and Maurice Brianchon, also represented in the Salon. More than a homage to a painter, it was, rather, the signal that victory over the forces of evil and collaboration had finally come, and it had a face, an international modern face: that of Pablo Picasso. This message was so strong, and for some so overwhelming, that there were violent outbursts in the Picasso room at the opening, so the police had to be called to protect the works from being destroyed. From the press reports, it seems that the crowds were immense and at times totally uncontrollable; some paintings were taken off the walls, and others slashed.

One reason for the anger was that some of the pictures vividly recalled the awfulness of the Occupation; picture after picture (74 in all, plus five sculptures) showed the claustrophobic psychological suffering of those silent years. But it also demonstrated a reaction against collaboration, and Picasso's stature grew in this context. The fact that for many years this type of art had not been publicly available, and young art students were not accustomed to it, also had something to do with the uproar. But more to the point, it seems,

was the fact that a triumphant modern Picasso meant, in the codified art scene, a triumphant left, a powerful resistance.

All in all then, this show, and the enormous visibility of Picasso in it, was symptomatic of the new violent divisions in the Parisian art world. At the center of the Salon a fairly large and symbolical painting was enthroned: *L'Aubade*. This tale of a woman/muse/country asleep, ready to be awakened by a musician, spoke volumes to a knowing public well versed in double talk. The painting talked about violence, alienation, waiting, confinement, lassitude, suffocation, oppression and pregnant silence—it screamed all this, but through silence, a kind of introspection well-known to the occupied French.[1] Picasso talked loudly, through silence in painting, or volubly in his wartime poems. Both were able to create a psychological liberation. He became a hero, a Jacques Louis David of his time, culminating in his appointment as head of the "épuration" (purification) committee.

By putting Picasso at the center of the Salon, 'le Paris Résistant' hit several targets simultaneously. The French state was recognizing the heroic stature of this great avant-garde artist, whose art had been vilified by Vichy. In fact Picasso, according to Louis Parrot writing for the *Les Lettres françaises*, was like a phoenix reborn out of the ashes of war: 'He is the symbol of purity, the one whom anybody who needs to rediscover an equilibrium in these uncertain times will reach towards, this stable force of nature nevertheless bursting with culture. His presence alone fortified the world around him during the Occupation ... He gave back hope to those who were starting to wonder about our chances of salvation. His confidence ... that better days were ahead, brings gratitude from all intellectuals, all our country's artists.'[2]

Picasso also represented France's new energy after the war, which is why he became the poster boy of the Communist Party after his commitment to them, well publicized in newspapers in October 1944. He was the perfect archetype the progressive French intelligentsia was looking for to give the country a modern international image.

The Salon also showcased a more traditional France, as Braque, Matisse, Bonnard, Gromaire and Vuillard were also presented, alongside younger painters like Tal-Coat, Fougeron, Pignon and Gishia. It recognized French modern art in general, an art that continued the tradition without being academic. But though all those artists, including the "Jeunes Peintres de Tradition Française," who became famous during the Occupation, were represented, their art full of maternities, rural views and still lives quickly became a soft background to the work of Picasso—which, simultaneously somber, tonic, acerbic, joyful, secret and formally dazzling, almost literally became the heart of France.

The strategy of Francastel, who published a landmark book called *Nouveau Dessin, Nouvelle Peinture: L'École de Paris*, and of the French cultural establishment, seemed like a kind of "great leap backward" in order to reconnect with a brilliant past, thus erasing four dreadful years of occupation and collaboration. This therapeutic occultation could not cope with the huge ideological and emotional transformations of the post-war age: its tragedy was that the curators of the arts were still trying to fight an old war, without seeing that the targets were now vastly different; they fought a national war, when the stakes had become international.

For those who supported Francastel, there seemed no hope outside the values of the School of Paris. Gaston Diehl and Bernard Dorival, for example, in a special issue of a magazine *Confluences*, defended traditional painting representing the values of an idealized France, a Cartesian, classical one, as if the war had changed nothing. "Deliberate, reserved, intellectual in its sensibility, logic and reason, our modern French painting seems to continue, to prolong that of the past. Like that, it merits the name classic. What does that mean? It means that an art which merits this name has a universal appeal and ... value [that] can only come from an intellectual and rational content ... It has always been the purpose of French art to give to all movements, including the most baroque ones, their classical and universal modalities."[3]

If France, the theory went, had two complementary geniuses in Picasso and Matisse, wouldn't it be wonderful if the young generation could combine both their qualities? It was this utopia the establishment was looking for, and found in artists like Marchand, Gischia, Estève or Pignon. But these manipulations of aesthetic genes produced not a series of giants but a deformed, if colorful and amusing, series of hybrids. These artists were exhibited abroad as early as 1946 in one of the most tragic tactical errors of the cultural post-war era, since Clement Greenberg used this show at the Whitney Museum to lambaste the quality of French

1 This painting played a similar role to the famous novel by Vercors, filmed in 1947 by Jean-Pierre Melville, called *Le Silence de la mer*, which also talked about silence, internalization, alienation, fear, but above all about a proud France.

2 Louis Parrot, "Louis Parrot, 'Hommage à Pablo Picasso qui vécut toujours de la vie de la France'," *Les Lettres françaises* (October 7, 1944), p. 1.

3 Michel Florisoone also said something similar in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* in an article called "Le Patrimoine artistique." "There is a cycle of French art like there is a cycle for water, and for the rivers to flow, it is imperative that clouds coming from far away, from the sea, from foreign lands, swell the springs. French art perpetually transforms itself, reproduces itself, disperses, but it grows on a humus wet with rain. It needs a vital minimum of imported products."

art and dismiss post-war French culture altogether—but for, surprisingly, Jean Dubuffet and de Kermadec.[4]

The Good, the Bad and the Pretty

The reconstruction of France's image was, of course, like every national cliché, based on self-promotion, construction and (mis)perception. This image was crucial and very sensitive. Witness the problems Django Reinhardt encountered when he played a mild jazz version of the *Marseillaise* in 1946 after reuniting with his friend Stephane Grappelli: the recording was censured as disrespectful, and banned. So fragile were those national symbols that even the heavenly fingers of those two elegant musicians could not be allowed to play with them, even touch them.

In 1945, the world had indeed changed forever, and France had great difficulties in adjusting. Cities were destroyed, the economy was a shambles, food was sparse and despite hopeful feelings—after all, Marianne Michel was still singing *La Vie en Rose* and Jacques Hélian and his orchestra was swinging *Fleur de Paris*—life was difficult.

In the almost Hollywoodish super-production that was the Cold War, images, symbols, culture and art became paramount, the weapons of choice as soon as it became apparent that the reuse of the atomic bomb was unthinkable. In this dangerous game of hide and seek, it was understood in America that the US was the Good, the Bad was the Soviet Union, and France was—well, the Pretty. In many other parts of the West, in particular Italy and France, this construction did not always stand up. The Good and the Bad were often switched. But the Pretty stayed the same: France was pretty!

It was a difficult concept, mainly constructed after the war by American media, art and cultural critics keen to twist one of the powerful characteristics of traditional French culture (high culture, high fashion, etc.) out of shape in order to align it not with beauty and desire, but with weakness. This strategy was very successful, and to some extent is even still operative. Witness the way French artists were portrayed in opposition to somebody like Jackson Pollock, swirling around with sleek moves and vitality, compared to the image of Matisse lying in bed using scissors, like a child, to produce paper cut-outs. Even Georges Mathieu, who made a name for himself as the speedy soldier of abstraction, painting on stage his huge abstract battle scenes, was portrayed in *Time* magazine as a languorous odalisque.

In a new ruthless Cold War world, this, of course, was the kiss of death. But France nevertheless saw her past glory drenched in luxury as the ticket for a revamped future, which meant her next century had to be scintillating. France had, after all, been the symbol of good times, of high culture and the high point of civilization. Paris was, or should be, still the center of Western quality, and the destination of choice for tourism. That is why, as early as 1945, the *Théâtre de la Mode* was created and sent to New York and San Francisco, with great popular success. This success, however, had ambiguous and perverse results, keeping the image of France as a pretty but weak female forever frozen in American minds, as Clement Greenberg's 1946 description of French art shows.

In Paris though, from the start, fashion and women were actually symbolic of resistance rather than passivity. Listen to Lise Deharme, who was the Communist newspaper *Les Lettres françaises's* fashion critic in 1944, speaking about Parisian women during the Occupation: "Yes, Parisians, the real ones, during four years … had the elegance of a racehorse, not that of the carthorse. These women, a tear in their eyes but a smile on their lips, pretty and made-up, discreet and profoundly insolent in their impeccable suits … yes, they did exasperate the Germans. The beauty of their hair, of their complexion, of their teeth, their slimness … this really got on their nerves. Those Parisiennes were resistant. Rich or poor, their adorable presence disinfected the streets and the smelly subway. Young like flowers, ripe like fruit, these 'bicycle maniacs' brought back smiles to the faces of many disenchanted men."

At the Liberation, then, fashion was seen as a major arena of discussion and of identity politics. But when Christian Dior presented his first postwar collection called the New Look in February 1947 with huge success, things had changed somewhat for the Communist Party. This was, after all, the year of the beginning of the Cold War, when Ramadier dismissed all his Communist ministers from government. Dubbed "the Terrible Year," 1947 saw a violent series of strikes and profound social

4 See his "Review of an Exhibition of School of Paris Painters," *The Nation* (June 29, 1946). Cited in John O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949.* Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 87-90.

turmoil. At first, though, even the Communist Party applauded the effort put into the fashion industry, as they saw at first not the expression of a class struggle, but of a national superiority in the face of commercial American attacks: "Open your eyes, young Parisian milliners! They don't want you to stay the best in the world. They want your title, which is a crucial thing for our country. While fear grows in your ranks, mannequins from California are coming for the first time to France to present ridiculous American designs. It is an insult to good French taste." For the Communist Party, the economy and national pride were more important than the struggle of the milliners, who, like everybody else in 1947, were on strike. But the general public apparently found it harder to accept obscene displays of luxury. A near riot occurred when photographers were taking pictures of the Dior collection in the poor streets around Montmartre. According to reports in *Life* magazine, which restaged the event in order to photograph it, some leftist women, outraged by the display of beautiful models and expensive clothing, ripped apart the New Look, which contrasted too much with the deteriorating walls of the old *quartier*. Photographers and models had to move downtown to the *rive droite* of the Seine river, where the models felt more at home. The event interested *Life* magazine because it represented the arrival of a modern sophisticated feminine taste in a land still marauded by dangerous, unappreciative working-class women. This was the essential battle for this new age.

In any event, what was clear to many French intellectuals from 1947 onward was that the political situation was becoming more desperate every day. Here is the historian Maurice Duverger writing in *Le Monde* in September 1948: "Between a sovietized Europe and the Atlantic empire, the second solution is clearly preferable, because in the first instance slavery would be certain, whereas in the second case war would only become probable. Should circumstance dictate this dilemma, we would choose the least terrible alternative. But since we are not conclusively locked in, a third solution remains: that of a neutralized Europe."

This pragmatic position was also taken by the "Surréaliste Révolutionnaire": Communist poet Dotremont, when asked what he would do if Soviet troops arrived in Paris, answered in his famous dialectical fashion: "Of course I'd take the first plane for America."

If popular culture was so important to the cultural war, imagine how furious the jockeying for the Western soul would be around high art production . . .

After the Fall: New Modern Painting by Fautrier, Wols and Dubuffet

In October and November of 1945, two different shows were presented to a surprised Parisian public: Jean Fautrier's *Otages* series, and Jean Dubuffet's work at René Drouin. If both were questioning the notion of taste and proposing an alternative way to represent the world, Fautrier's was the one closely connected to the memory and unsettling guilt of the French public. He became the talk of the town, so redolent was his work of the grim new world the end of the war was uncovering. André Malraux wrote a short introduction to the catalogue, in which he tried to pinpoint the importance of such a dialogue about the horror of war and torture still profoundly present in people's minds.

When the newspapers started to publish photographs of the death camps in late 1944, the catastrophe became a central preoccupation in France. Picasso, always in tune with the times, reacted rapidly and produced a fairly large picture called *Le Charnier* (1945), intended as a public scream against Nazism, but maybe more importantly also against the crime of collaboration. Retribution was around the corner. The picture, recalling his *Guernica*, was a violent exposition of torture and killings, metaphorically set in a private interior, distancing the viewer, arranged as a modernist labyrinth where virility and strength had been crucified and put on display for everybody to see and feel, next to an agonizing Goyaesque woman transported, so it seems, with "petite mort." An entire community had been terrorized and tortured, but not vanquished, as the Communist clenched fist clearly announced a happier future, a new beginning (even if the final version was not as hopeful as it could have been, according to the preliminary drawings).

Fautrier's project, presented at the Galerie Drouin in 1945, unlike many others dealing with this painful topic of death and violence in realistic ways like André Marchand, Tal-Coat or Music, is kept on a personal level, shoving the horror into our faces through the intimate size of the works and the texture of their surfaces. The viewer finds him-

self/herself in front of a mirror, to emphasize, as the poet Francis Ponge discovered, the fact that we were all complicit with this historical violence. Indeed, those still, seemingly peaceful images of decapitated heads and torsos produced by Fautrier float on the surface of the paintings, expanding slowly into the space of the viewer until they slowly but deeply penetrate into our minds. Our imagination is irrevocably invaded by these flat-faced shapes, until those severed heads become ours, sheathing our profiles, until we feel our own flesh becoming sweaty and wrinkled, experience the decay. It is understood that we will be leaving the room with those moon faces attached to ours like a mask. Obviously we are all guilty. This bodily relation with the viewer seemed for many, at the time, to be the only way to represent this unnamable horror even if, and maybe because, it created an irrepressible fascination.

But as soon as the images of the Holocaust hit the news-stands, it was clear that there was a danger of sensationalizing the carnage, as the chilling photograph shot by Lee Miller for *Vogue* attests. Being there at the opening of the camps in Germany, Lee Miller presents us with an astonishing image of a group of tourists/soldiers gazing at a pile of bodies neatly packed in a shape of a cube: they don't just look, but chatter, laugh and wonder, while a friendly GI takes a picture of this exotic new environment. Fautrier's use of an abstracted vocabulary manages to avoid sensationalism while suggesting sensuality to a viewer virtually stuck in the mud and mire along with the remnants of the violated bodies. The return of the body to dirt, to an ooze somewhere between a powder and a fluid, is something one cannot quite grasp, the region of the indeterminable. That is the moment Jean Fautrier chooses to present in his series of *Otages*. Those bodies were treated not as objects to be described and studied, but instead as bodies to be individually experienced through an epidermic rather than intellectual relationship. In fact here, the bodies are often plump, freshly killed, and suddenly robbed of their lives, rubbed off the surface of the earth and ingrained into it in front of our very eyes. Here the viewer is not a scientific voyeur, but a person profoundly and physically immersed in the raw and shivering fleshy impasto.

Fautrier, as the story goes, never saw the atrocity himself. He heard shots, moaning, and other people's accounts: it was all auditory. He had to visualize the scene, which he did with pleasure and not without a dose of fantasy.

Already in 1943, Charles Estienne, reviewing the show, noticed the discrepancy between the seriousness of the subject matter depicted in the *Otages* and the almost forced cheerfulness of the color renditions. Estienne insisted that, despite some allegations to the contrary, those paintings were actually really charming, thanks to an accomplished art of the cuisine whose purpose was obviously to make us salivate (a feast already pinpointed by an embarrassed André Malraux in his first text on Fautrier). What bothered Estienne was that he felt manipulated by all the colorful technical artifices, charmed into forgetting the underlying theme; as a *coup de grâce* he announced that the hostages had been lost in the shuffle, and superseded by a libertine sumptuousness—which, he added, was in keeping with the Galerie Drouin, nestled in the very Parisian jewelry box of the Place Vendôme. The issue was more complicated than kitsch versus high art; it was in fact about the redefinition of a modern sensibility, a new way to tackle the old issue of representation in a world horribly splintered, politically and morally.

If Giacometti is the man walking against the grain of Arno Brecker, Fautrier's women are the remnants of fascist destruction. By simply being there, by opening their wounds to the public, they seem to put to shame the acceptance by a broad French public of Arno Brecker's virile system of representation. These flattened images of broken bodies made with plaster and thin layers of paper stand as a wilful gesture against the destructive strength of Greek-influenced marble Nazi sculptures. Here, plaster opposes marble; outflow contradicts erection and verticality. The tortured women stand painfully against the New Fascist Man, a far cry from the plump, fleshy sculptures of women produced by Maillol that were popular in Paris during the Occupation. Brecker's men were made in the image of the virile German conqueror, and Maillol's women came to stand as a symbol of occupied France, abandoned and available. This gendering was not, of course, innocent. When one remembers that Robert Brasillach published a virulent article praising collaboration on February 19, 1943, while Fautrier was working on his new series, one realizes how highly connoted and dangerous art still was. In his article Brasillach described his emotive relation to Germany in unambiguous terms: "If you want to know my entire opinion, I will say that I was not a Germanophile before the war, nor even at the beginning of the politics of collaboration; I was only looking for reasons. But now, things have changed; I've formed a liaison with the German genius, and I will

never forget it . . . Like it or not, we have lived together; thinking Frenchmen will have more or less slept with Germany during these few years, and the memory of it will remain sweet to them."[5] After this, the plump Maillol sculptures of women start to make sense, as do Fautrier's antagonistic pictures, about the effect on the women of France of the terrible metaphorical alliance described in the article (which cost Brasillach his life at the liberation). The feeling of vengeance against those who let this tenderness for the invader grow was deep and ferocious. In fact, to be too close to the Germans cost Frenchwomen at the liberation the symbol of their femininity: their hair.

It is, then, through the image of woman that Fautrier speaks of the loss of humanity. The display in Fautrier's first show was tight, rhythmically organized around two larger works of torsos facing each other, interrupting the flow of a series of faces lined up against the wall as if facing a firing squad: the audience. For dramatic purposes it was presented on the lines of the traditional Christian Calvary (Stations of the Cross), with all the traditional violence, pain, redemption and sensuality easily accessible. The presence of several faces containing a series of duplicated eyes gave the feeling of witnessing the collapsing, slumping of bodies while touring this cathedral of pain. But they speak in a very specific way, the opposite of Picasso, as the poet Francis Ponge recognized: "After Picasso—masculine, solar, virile member, erection, lines upright, generous, attacking, exteriorized—Fautrier represents the feminine and feline side of painting: moon-like, meowing, slack water, swampy, attracting, withdrawing (after tentative provocation). Attracting you toward him, inside him, the better to scratch you."[6]

Fautrier's mud, such a deadly, malleable surface, sign of the torture of the land, is replaced in Dubuffet's work of 1946 by the urban macadam. Indeed if Fautrier's work is full of deliquescence, seriousness and even some pomposity, Dubuffet expresses the humor and critical restlessness of the Parisian "titi" through the reutilization of simple means and popular techniques like simplicity of drawing and graffiti. Physical violence is replaced by violence against tradition. Fautrier and Dubuffet stand at two opposite poles of the reconstruction spectrum. Dubuffet got attention very early in the US due to a series of shows at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, and especially due to the fact that, not without qualifications, Clement Greenberg decided that he was the best post-war French painter. Other French painters who

5 "Lettre à quelques jeunes gens": reprinted in Robert Brasillach, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12, Paris: Club de l'honnête homme, 1963-1966, pp. 610-614, quoted in Alice Yaeger Kaplan; *Reproductions of Banality, Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 27.

6 Ibid., p. 30.

also showed in New York quite early, like Bram van Velde and Wols, were never seen nor discussed. In fact it was only in 1950 that the American public could have a partial idea of what was being produced in Paris, thanks to Sidney Janis. Using formalist criteria, Janis presented a series of similarities in coupling American and French artists like Wols/Brooks; de Kooning/Dubuffet; Kline/Soulages; Pollock/Lanskoy, without highlighting the differences in content. If he had done so, he would have realized that in France not only were many artists interested in continuing the grand tradition of modern painting, like Pollock or de Kooning, but some were also interested in questioning it, its power, often by describing through paint the impossibility of continuing the task of modern art. This was the case with Wols, who was tearing the great tradition apart, deconstructing thoroughly the dream of modern representation. Soulages similarly, far from being a gestural painter, as often described, preferred to analyse the tools of painting, their qualities, the language of the brush; to capture the essential act of the painter, trying to cleanse it of so many years of mannerisms. His was an art profoundly analytical, almost structuralist *avant la lettre*: a study of the art of painting, so to speak, with patience, depth and intelligence.

Wols felt, unlike Fautrier or Soulages, unable to construct an oeuvre, to retool modern painting for these new times. What was needed in those days, mired in so many catastrophes, was to possess the 'rage of expression' as Francis Ponge described it, which enabled you to struggle against the material and to win over matter. If Fautrier literally builds up a monument to modernism, Wols cannot help but defile painting completely. When Fautrier rebuilds expressivity from the ground up through objects and matter, Wols produces images that tend to disappear from the canvas through a process of entropy. Wols's abstract pictures were also done on a flat surface, but not on the hard surface of a table, or the vast concrete slab of the studio like Pollock, but on the soft one of his warm bed. His pictures are almost always deposed at the center of the canvas, caught into a centrifugal force which gives the viewer a sense that the fluid material laid on the canvas will not stay, will disappear as if being sucked into the canvas itself. And no amount of scratching will keep it on the surface. Wols's' pictures are about instability, about disappearance, about the inability to keep himself together, about the uselessness of the painting project. He created this space in a special way, with the traditional effects of his trade (line and color) but by looking for life rather than its representation. To this end,

he inverts the traditional language. That is why lines do not define anything in particular, the drawings unravel like an old pullover, line wilts, erases itself, gets lost in the sandy surfaces of his granulated canvases. Wols paints in order to demystify, to question the grand tradition. He scratches, takes out the matter, the paint, rather than depositing it. He exhausts himself trying to show how impossible it is to compete with the masters of the past, with Matisse, Picasso, Miró, etc. There is no attempt in his work to capture the past, to deal with history. All is in the personal present, quite understandable after spending four years in French camps. "The first thing that I chase out of my life," he said once, "is memory." The direct and authentic experience of the moment surpasses the manipulated memory. His project was a radical rejection of historicism, miles from the complex construction about private and public spheres at the heart of Fautrier, whose phantasms and desires were located inside the mechanism of public historical representation. Wols did not believe in all that, not even in an unproblematic masculinity, as a photograph taken at the Dieulefit camp attests. There he is relaxing, seated on a doorstep with an interrogation point on his forehead and the word "apatride" (stateless person) written next to him, the word "wind" on the side of the photo. Wols insists here on his extreme marginality. The Dieulefit photograph is literally attacked by the pen, his sex is striated, redesigned, transformed into a vagina through the addition of angrily drawn lines, as if sutured, just as he did in the painting *Aile de papillon*. The artist here has lost his power in a symbolic castration which reframes the shape of the modern artist into the cliché of a passive receptacle, incapable of controlling even his own life. A passivity which has been retooled by Wols, who in many of his aphorisms prefers to identify with the termite rather than with the butterfly, as the butterfly is only beautiful for one day, while the termites, who create their beautiful castle out of their own emissions, are more pathetically profound. His paintings are emissions from his life as well. What he gives us to look at is not a well-organized world like in Bissière, nor chaos, not even a well-mastered chaos like in Jackson Pollock, nor a pretty and savvy piling up of layers of plaster and paint like in Fautrier. Wols starts from the understanding that the studio language, the painter's oeuvre, will never be able to express the effect life has on the individual. In many ways one can say that his work constitutes an assassination of painting—this being of course seen positively, as a desperate move still to talk and practice painting, but without the foolish illusion that it can express the world. For Wols, after his experience of modern warfare and as a refugee, history had

Wols
Aile de papillon, 1947

to be lived as experience, no longer as memory or even as knowledge. This is far from Fautrier's or Pollock's pursuit.

Fautrier exalts painting while Wols humiliates it. Fautrier is the conductor of our emotions, while at the same time being the chef of our dreams and desires. Both violate painting, but Fautrier struggles with the form, squashes it and wins, while Wols exhausts himself and disappears.[7] Despite superficial formal similarities, the works of many painters working during the period were drastically different. Pollock's drips reconstruct the modernist project, while Wols erases it. Kline comments on the vitality of the city, while Soulages comments on the profound significance of basic elements of paintings through pre-historical models. And Hans Hartung, far from being an action painter as so often described, was on the contrary a classical organizer of feelings à la Delacroix, meticulously reworking his personal sketches in order to create a controlled, somewhat toned down public statement, where all his first outburst of private emotional excess can be monumentalized and calibrated for public consumption, like an opera or a classical concert.

7 Fautrier won the 1960 Venice Biennale Prize. Wols died of food poisoning and alcoholism in a small avant-garde garret in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. He was 38 years old.

A Call for a New Abstraction

It seems ironic as well as fascinating to see that during the year 1946, while the famous art historian Francastel was trying to defend these young artists from the attacks of anti-modernist academics, some intellectuals in the field of Surrealism could find nothing of value in these outworn aesthetic recipes. With a few very well-chosen words, they succeeded in projecting them into the darkness of a faraway past. The future, the Surrealists said, should start today, with today's problems rather than with the recycling of past solutions.

This was the message that Édouard Jaguer, the para-Surrealist poet and art critic, put forward in an article, "Les Chemins de l'Abstraction," published in 1946 in a socialist newspaper called *Juin*. This very important, but not well-known, article pushed Bernard Dorival, Pierre Francastel and Gaston Diehl's nationalist artistic concoctions into limbo. The article did not look backwards like Francastel's connection with Romanesque art, but ahead, toward a new art with an international flavor, in step with the Surrealist tradition. What Jaguer was searching for was an

international idiom which could reflect the new abstract age, the new post-atomic environment.

This article was crucial because it defined fairly accurately what many new young artists were debating then: how and what to paint after authoritarianism, after the Holocaust and Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

What institutions were protecting was an idealistic image of pre-war France, as if the defeat, Occupation and the new atomic world divided into two blocs did not really have any bearing on the production of art in Paris. It was certainly present, they acknowledged, but it was not the role of Paris to talk about it. Paris's role had always been to civilize the mad world, not to describe it. It is really this old cultural dream which Paris was still oozing that prevented her from recognizing and defending in her institutions the art of decrepitude and despair that artists like Wols, Bram van Velde or even the reconstructing art of Soulages and Hartung were producing at that precise time, which were more in tune with international/western questioning. This institutional (art criticism and museums) ideological blindness, of course, does not mean that everything was quiet on the artistic front: quite the contrary. It was in fact very clearly the beginning of an aesthetic trench warfare, which was being developed through a new network of galleries in Paris—a network which demonstrated that since 1945, a series of new artists and not so new recycled painters were producing works antithetical to the values of the still-prevalent School of Paris, but nevertheless poignantly relevant to the post-war world.

Back to Basics: The Return of the "Primitives" under Atomic Fear

On July 25, 1946, a second atomic bomb was detonated on Bikini atoll, after the natives who had lived there for centuries had been displaced to another island for the "good of mankind." as *Life* magazine reported. The event was documented thoroughly, as if this visual autopsy could convey not only the unbelievable destructive power of the bomb, but also the fact that modernity could also mean a backwards move towards oblivion. This event, which for many would be another entertainment outlet (films, cartoons, songs) or a way to make some money (atomic rings, Atomic beauty

pageant, Atomic cocktails), was for some artists the proof of what a number of them had been articulating since the war: that humanity was retreating into a very pessimistic and fearful atmosphere in a world full of primitive anxieties. This was expressed in different ways in the US. Phillip Evergood, for example, in a realistic and cartoonish way, was showing humanity going back to the ape age. Ralston Crawford, using an abstract vocabulary, was trying in his paintings and drawings for *Fortune* magazine to pinpoint how difficult it was to represent such a conflagration and its impact on everyday life. Several other artists from New York were more interested in looking at primitive experiences (Rothko, Gottlieb, Newman, Stamos, Baziotes) in order to comment on this threatening new world. Michael Leja has analysed the strong connections then existing between artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock and the notion of "the Modern Man," which was the conviction that modern man was still directed by totally uncontrollable primitive instincts and unconscious impulses. Hollywood *films noirs* succeeded in presenting this new age of anxiety beautifully.

The "One World" dream defended by Wendell Wilkie after the war lay defeated after Winston Churchill's famous announcement that the 'Iron Curtain' was dividing the world along two political ideologies. The Bomb and Communists aggressively coexisting did not presage anything good for the future. A kind of primordial anxiety became suddenly the essential condition of modernity. If artists, following Surrealism during the war, were working with universal concepts discovered through archaism and prehistory, soon their interest shifted toward the artistic production of American-Indian traditions. If Francastel during those years tried in France to rekindle the scene through a return to specifically French Romanesque values, in the US, artists like Barnett Newman, along with the writers of the avant-garde magazine *Iconograph*, would theorize American-Indian artistic traditions for their own use in order to provide tools or even weapons for modern artists in their search for a new "American" expression of that constant contemporary fear. The shift in 1946 from a socially oriented art influenced by Mexican fresco painters, toward an abstract vocabulary based on Amerindian imagery, clearly shows a shift towards a renewed importance of the individual and the nationalistic in this new existential crisis.

Painters like Steve Wheeler, Howard Daum, Will Barnett, Oscar Collier, Gertrude Barrer and Peter Busa, loosely connected with an

interesting magazine called *Iconograph*, published in New York in 1946 by Kenneth Lawrence Beaudoin, use the metaphysical vitality of line in space in alliance with native Indian art, to propose a national reworking of contemporary modern issues in line with other contemporary attempts. These artists, well aware of the history of modern art (Surrealism and Cubism), saw in Indian Art a way to replay, using native Amerindian forms, the tactic used by Cubism to reactivate modern art through the discovery and use of African art. Gertrude Barrer, for example, managed, through a critique of Surrealism and Breton, to recompose complex statements about modern anxiety filtered through her knowledge of Amerindian plastic designs. The Indian Space Painters, as they called themselves, used North West Coast representation or Peruvian pre-Columbian accents to produce abstract patterns which created a certain American flavor, using First Nation images as the notion of American cultural specificity became central after the war. For Steve Wheeler, in particular (and he wrote much about it), this was an important factor for the understanding of the contemporary situation. These paintings were trying, through compact, tense and complex interlocking patterns, to bring the abstract experience of the period to the fore with an indigenous American accent. The salute to their American roots, though, was not always accepted, and at times seen as formally too close to the model for comfort. The work of the group was full of great visual activity, of witty visual puns and great doses of humor, as Wheeler acknowledged, but this was precisely what did not play quite well in those tense post-war days. By then existence and responsibility were key words which often excluded the possibility of humor and insolence.

For Barnett Newman, who was also interested in a shift toward local traditional cultures, what was at the heart of "primitive" culture was the terror it felt confronting the world. But, Newman insisted, if "primitive" terror was the result of the confrontation with nature, every culture had a specific significance, according to its environment and history. If Mexican art was the result of confrontation with political power, Oceanian art the result of terror in the face of the power of nature and mysterious abstract forces, nor was modern man immune from that type of anguish: "All life is full of terror. The reason primitive art is so close to the modern mind is that we, living in times of the greatest terror the world has known, are in a position to appreciate the acute sensibility primitive man had for it."[8] As Newman was well aware of the power of destruction of atomic bombs, he added: "Modern man is his own terror." One could say, then, that Newman understood the modern artist as being a crucial component in the articulation of this deeply felt anguish which was so difficult to express or represent, as it was such a diffused and impalpable thing. Art's role was to arouse this feeling in our group psyche without fixing it too clearly in realism (which would transform it into voyeurism) or in Surrealism (which would transform it into entertainment, or game). Newman wanted to work with concrete experiences and not with phantasmagorias or illustrations of primitive magic.

What Newman was establishing here was an original signifying system, deeply rooted in an American past, which cleverly replaced history with "stories," anecdotes and events which had been described in the art of the frescoes, but without ever reaching the deep meaning of the self.

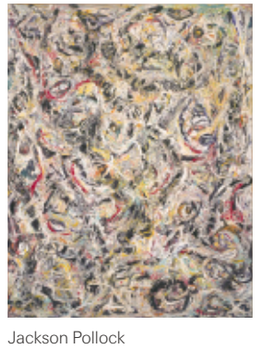
By 1946, then, several groups of artists in both New York and Paris were attracted to the intricacies and depth of American-Indian art and culture seen as a liberating force, but were all using it in different ways. Bram van Velde, for example, fascinated by the North West Coast Amerindian masks brought by Georges Duthuit and André Breton from the US after the war, utilized them in the production of his painting, but in a very cautious and deconstructive way. Recognizing the exploitation of African culture which had happened in the grand modern tradition, he was careful in his work to introduce North West Coast masks but simultaneously rob the viewer of the pleasure of recognition and possession. The shapes of the masks are incomplete; they are visually very unstable, seeming to slide out of vision as soon as we think we have secured them in our gaze. Like the real ones, they constantly transform themselves in our mind: a beak starts, an eye seems to pop up, but all rapidly dissolves into an array of other possibilities. The painter refuses to give us the totality of the object for contemplation, and shows this refusal in gorgeous colors.

By so doing van Velde was separating himself from the two major fathers of Parisian art: Picasso and Matisse. This unstable way of painting, though, made him almost completely invisible; his paintings were too elusive to be of immediate use. The Indian Space Painters, on the other hand, suffered from an opposite problem. Their closeness to the original model and their wit prevented the art scene from recognizing their reinvention of modernism with a local flavor.

8 Barnett Newman, *Art of the South Seas*. Exhibition held at MoMA in early 1946; the article was published in Spanish in June 1946 in *Ambos Mundos*, republished in *Barnett Newman: Selected Reviews and Writings* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 100.

Jackson Pollock as well, until the summer of 1946, used the tradition of Indian art filtered through a Jungian imagery in order to articulate his energy and relation to the unstable post-war world. But the momentous event of that summer made him rethink his relation to Cubism, Surrealism and Amerindian traditions.

In the summer of 1946 Jackson Pollock started a new life. He left New York City with Lee Krasner, whom he had just married, for The Springs in East Hampton. There, in a bucolic environment, he spent the summer fixing an old barn, transforming it into a studio where he would work hard at his next show programmed for early 1947 at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. This exhibition is important because it documents a radical shift of direction in the artist's manner of working. The paintings shown in January 1947 are clearly of two types, sorted according to two classifications: the *Accabonac Creek* series, from the name of the little stream crossing his property, and the other, *Sound in the Grass*. The *Accabonac* series regroups those works using Surrealist automatic motifs as springboards for psychological studies. These are paintings like *Blue Unconscious* or *The Key*, in which truncated forms struggle to impose themselves amidst a tempest of signs, of attempts, of scratches, uncertain arabesques, leaving much to the imagination, allowing the viewer, in a rapid confrontation with seemingly unfinished shapes, to develop an ongoing chain of signification. *Circumcision* or *Blue Unconscious*, for example, manage to associate, in a non-linear manner, the Mexican fresco tradition with Surrealism in order to trigger some psychoanalytical space where the violence of the historical moment and the personal are blended in a narrative exposition, even if broken. The other series, *Sound in the Grass*, radically breaks with this well-established tradition. Suddenly, Pollock finds a way, I think under the pressure of the media coverage of the Bikini explosion, to continue, like Fautrier, the task of painting the modern actuality and history in the making, and the place of the individual in it. I am not saying that pictures like *Eyes in the Heat* or *Shimmering Substance* are a direct illustration of Bikini, far from it: but they should be seen as a reflection on the representation of modern life under those new and scary circumstances, when conditions, for many artists, seemed so dire that past simple aesthetic solutions could not suffice to record modernity. This was still one of the major issues for modern artists: how to continue the task of painting when all one's illusions have been shot down by history or by theory? Pollock, as a modern painter, had



Jackson Pollock
Eyes in the Heat, 1946

to testify to this new world, a world confronted with such momentous dangers, even of total annihilation. Just as André Masson tried to cope during the war by looking closely at the luxurious and dangerous life in the grass (*The Earth Soaked in Blood*, 1943),[9] in Connecticut Pollock seems, under the threatening cloud, to rethink his role as a painter and look closer to home, look down to earth, so to speak, by describing a micro-world surrounding him, listening closely, almost religiously to the wind, looking closely, in an almost hallucinatory way, at the grass around his studio in this new peaceful place called The Springs in East Hampton. It was in this new pastoral environment that Pollock discovered a way, through nature, to paint the new world situation in a more moving and deeper way than through a predictable Jungian manner. It was as if Jung was not allowing enough space to reach larger issues than the personal, as if symbols were tired of signifying over and over again the same problems. Now, the issues to be confronted seemed larger, deeper, more threatening. For a few months Pollock, like Masson in New Preston, Connecticut, in 1941, manages by painting the microcosm of the earth to talk at the same time about the unimaginable threat of total atomic annihilation. Like Masson, who realized that landscape could be "a state of the soul" and "a supreme means of joining the unutterable,"[10] Pollock found with his macro close-ups into the earth the means to talk about "universal" problems and fears unreachable through Surrealist Jungian technique. The earth helped him to superimpose two visions, the summer heat and noises of the earth with the news of Bikini from magazines and popular culture. Masson's way of talking about the war and violence through the violence of nature is, with Pollock, redirected through the violence of the painting gesture which was able to get rid of the ritual figuration. The summer of 1946 helped Pollock to withdraw from figuration, to signal, like some were doing in France, that another system of representation had to be devised in order to salvage a modern art confronted with a totally new and frightening contemporaneity. By telescoping the infinitely small with the macroscopic picture, those experimental images like *Eyes in the Heat* and *Shimmering Substance* and others in that series became the starting blocks for a rigorous new system of expression, beginning from nature but aspiring as well to touch the anguishing relation the individual now had, enormously, with history. With this in mind, Pollock's famous utterance "I am nature" seems to make more sense. After a year of discussion about the atomic era, Pollock, bombarded by images through the media, apparently was in accord with Dwight MacDonald, who was critical of the meticulous descrip-

9 Martica Sawin characterizes this picture as: "a pastoral landscape turns convulsive." *André Masson in America*, catalogue Zabriskie Gallery, New York, 1996, p. 8.

10 André Masson, "Notes on Landscape Painting," in the catalogue of Buchholz Gallery, New York, 1949, p. 2.

tion of the atomic horror produced by John Hershey in his new book on Hiroshima. For MacDonald, the indescribable monstrosity of the event was exactly that: no words could convey this new situation; the only thing this realist text could do was sensationalize the event, playing on voyeuristic tendencies which had been exclusive to popular art, the opposite of the modern art tradition. It was through the structure of language itself that modern art was able to be a witness of the times. During the summer of 1946, under the jolt of Bikini and the displacement from New York City, Pollock seems to have doubted the importance of questions about the self which he had been dealing with earlier in the year in works like *The Blue Unconscious* or *Something of the Past*. Those questions were losing their attraction, as if the bursting of everyday life onto the scene had shaken a creeping nonchalance which the comfort of those Jungian images were now producing in him. This critical unconscious, so productive earlier, seemed now to be programmed, as if the painter knew too well all the corners of the labyrinth, unable to lose himself in it in order to find himself again. Ariadne was everywhere.

These new pictures were covering up the concept of figuration under layers of shimmering signs related to contemporary meanings, but sending the message that the essence of the day, so to speak, could not be expressed through old systems. There is, in their desire to save modern painting from meaninglessness, more similarity between Pollock and Fautrier, the myth-makers and Indian Space Painters, than meets the eye.

The Automatist Solution

To be comprehensive about the new plastic events taking place in this crucial year 1946, we have to mention the work produced by Surrealist artists in Montreal who, around their professor and friend, Borduas, managed to articulate a body of work which would be recognized and shown in Paris as early as 1947.

The Surrealist experiment, even more than the Communist Party, which was quite active in Montreal at the time, gave Riopelle, Gauvreau, Barbeau and Leduc the opportunity to rebel and assert their individualities. It opened the doors of freedom for them, liberated them from a world hedged about by religion, rules, and social conventions, allowed them to pour out their desires and flout social taboos: they freed themselves with pleasure, but without any real preconceived goal. To mark the paper or canvas with the dazzling signs of an interior effervescence was an insult to propriety that caused mayhem in the city, and to many people, automatism made no sense. But it was precisely this absence of meaning which attracted to Montreal those who wanted to live life to the fullest. Automatism in Quebec broke the chains and defied the petit-bourgeois power structure that had smothered individual freedom.

Riopelle's sketches and canvases of 1946, for example, are exercises in pure automatic writing that explore the limits of the procedure while maintaining a certain finesse, and an ease that was the envy of many of his friends. The series of watercolors he produced during this period has a quality of extreme lightness, yet their light and rapid lines spread across the entire surface concealed an almost physical aggressiveness. He employed a direct vocabulary so light of touch, and penwork so rapid, that the overall effect was of a great impatience to unloose and hurl aside the landscape obsessions present in the background. His canvases, with their complex tangle of lines, reveal a breathless style of writing that seems to have lost its meaning and is trying to recover it through rapidity of execution. Unlike the work of Roberto Matta or Arshile Gorky, these forms—and this is important—evoke no sense of the biomorphic. The associative process is stopped short, and the viewer is constantly returned to the individual, the painter and his impatient violence scratched on the canvas or paper.

Here, Surrealist automatism was taken at its word. Unlike the Americans, these painters' violent explosions did not even attempt to recreate harmony, which for the Americans was concentrated on a modernist grid. Not even André Breton could recognize his own kind. When Riopelle, on a visit to Paris, fervently showed Borduas's automatic drawings to the poet, who was preparing the 1947 *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Breton saw only nothingness—or rather he saw a void, precisely where the automatists had filled the works with their individual identity. He rejected them with a wave of his hand, completely incapable of comprehending that ineffable dimension in which a scratch becomes art. Breton recognized the importance of this expression only in the early 1950s when, with Charles Estienne, he opened the Galerie Étoile Scellée in order to represent a new form of abstract French art, dismissed by the American art critics. In the meantime,

though, some new avant-garde spaces in Paris (Galerie Breteaux, Galerie du Luxembourg, Colette Allendy, etc.) were opening their doors to abstract extremists.

The Geometric Direction

The other side of the abstract coin in Paris was of course Geometric Abstraction. This had been a powerful language in Paris before the war, but had lost almost all its glitter due to its scientific image in an age interested in expressionism and existentialism.

Confronting the strong presence of the art assimilated into the old School of Paris, several currents were simultaneously trying to be visible. Again, 1946 was a key year for this nascent trench war. For many it was primordial to retrieve the modern force of abstraction. Denise René opened her gallery to this progressivist style in opposition to the "Jeunes Peintres de Traditions Françaises" who continued to cover figuration with all-over abstract patterns, often laced with spiritual overtones as in the works of Bazaine and Manessier. This aesthetic compromise was not always accepted in the most advanced circles, as the critic Léon Degand mockingly pointed out: "Figuration was their wife and abstraction their mistress." Duplicity and corruption were precisely what were rejected in those post-war days; the watchwords purity and authenticity were coming to define to a large extent the aesthetic and political debate. Thus very soon, even in the most abstract circles, a split occurred between those who, like Herbin, wanted a complete adherence to abstract geometry, and those who thought it important to accept a dose of lyricism in order to reflect the newly discovered importance of the individual, who was being squeezed out by the authoritarian control not only of Communist and Fascist regimes, but also of the nascent consumerist culture. But this was a very complex task, due to the fragmentation of the political and cultural scene. If the early exhibitions of abstract art at the Denise René Gallery in 1946 presented a wide array of abstract expressions (from Dewasne, Deyrolle and Marie Raymond to Hartung and Schneider),[11] it soon became impossible to sustain such a liberal eclecticism, because it became politically important to differentiate between an abstraction signifying an individualistic expressionism and another expressing an ideal reality, rationally constructed to propose a coherent utopian common social space. The new Salon des Réalités Nouvelles reflected this dilemma. When

11 In June 1945 the Galerie René Drouin had already tested the water by presenting a show called *Art Concret* organized by Nelly van Doesburg, who took the same title as Theo van Doesburg in 1930 to signal a continuation. But this was also in clear opposition to the group Cercle et Carré (against Michel Seuphor and Piet Mondrian) in order to try to delimit, without too much success, the borders of post-war abstraction.

it opened in 1946 it allowed a multitude of abstract experimentations, but it rapidly became the stage for the presentation of radical geometric concrete art, which some found too dry and authoritarian, since August Herbin's regime denied the inclusion of any curvilinear shape in geometric expression. This prescriptiveness soon disenchanted many young artists, who saw it as a creeping academicization—which was finally formalized in 1950 with the creation of an academy of abstract art by Edgard Pillet and Jean Dewasne. This was violently denounced by Charles Estienne in his pamphlet *L'Art abstrait est-il académique?*, rejecting the notion of atelier and schooling in abstraction, on the grounds that the emphasis on technical mechanisms rather than the poetics of painting stifled creativity. He proposed inner life, rather than happy decoration, as a way to talk about the contemporary world. Impersonal and clean geometry seemed to be codes for the old illusion of cultural coherence. Quoting Kandinsky at length, Estienne attacked those who wanted to codify personal feelings into universals. The pamphlet seriously shook the Parisian world of abstract art and opened new avenues, or at least made it possible to take the new fashionable individual and expressionist tendencies more seriously.

In the art critic Léon Degand's definition, one needed to have simplicity of mind as well as of heart to understand abstract painting, to be able to access the new language without preconceptions, without automatically wanting to read nature into it. In other words, it was a sort of fresh start. Degand, in his quest to develop a new idiom to represent the new era, really felt that the work of his friend, the painter Alberto Magnelli, was the epitome of modern painting. Magnelli was fond, for example, of explaining to Degand that the stain at the core of the work of Schneider and Deyrolle was too romantic. "We need," he used to say, "a classical form like abstract painting." A clear classical form, as distinct from those fashionable smudged "stains." Magnelli used clean shapes, without exuberance but with humor, with oil but without the dreaded spilling. "Magnelli," said Degand, "speaks for himself, far from any kind of visual propaganda." This type of abstraction, classical but still intuitive without being wild, was the art of the "present" because it generated optimism without being enslaved to a pure geometry. "In abstraction," Degand continues in one of his personal notebooks, "one utilizes uselessness, the superfluous, like cigarettes, sleep and love." By 1947, it seemed that all the vitality the liberation had promised was stuck in an

Alberto Magnelli
Untitled, 1947

all too familiar French quagmire, and the dreams of the rapid modernization of the country were fading fast. And to add to this decrepitude, as its sign, so to speak, Jean Cassou opened the Museum of Modern Art in 1947 without presenting Surrealism or abstraction, or any kind of expressionism.[12]

The Problem of Modern Art in the US: The Boston Affair

The recalibration of the concept of modernity, of the modern, was also at the center of debates in the US, and rapidly became a politically charged issue for a Congress dominated by a form of populism triggered by attacks from Senator Taft, and later by the Congressman from Michigan, George A. Dondero.

Thinking that the word "modern" was difficult for the general public to understand, and believing that the contemporary experience was expressed in other ways than through modernism (abstract art), the director of the Boston Institute of Modern Art, James Plaut, decided to replace the word "modern" with "contemporary". This triggered what could be called "the Boston Affair," which became a *cause célèbre*, a long and painful battle between MoMA, the Whitney Museum in New York and the Boston Institute. (The Boston Institute lost the fight when, under heavy pressure from MoMA, Plaut had to change his name back to the original one in 1950.) On February 17, 1948 Plaut decided to respond to attacks on modern art from the press, who considered it opaque, elitist and incomprehensible. This rehash of the debate surrounding the withdrawal of the *Advancing American Art* show of 1946 demonstrates how strong the populist press was and how politicized the scene had become. Liberals saw this violent feeling against modern art as a form of Americanism rooted in the old isolationism; modern abstract artists, in particular those interested in automatism as a tool for personal and social liberation, felt literally embattled, defended only by MoMA, which held similar views. Indeed, the museum understood that to defend modern art was in fact to protect democracy as well as the "new liberalism" made popular by Arthur Schlesinger after 1948. Due to the support of realist and expressionist art by right-wing isolationists and traditionalists, modern art fast became the style of choice for progressives well aware of the importance of cultural signs. The freedom of expression obvious on the surface of modern paintings became a sort of logo to throw in the face of Communism, to make it recoil and squirm as a fistful of garlic would do to Dracula.

12 See the exhibition of modern French art sent to the Whitney Museum New York in spring 1947, where all the new generation of young Parisian artists were presented with an alarming result. Clement Greenberg wrote about the mediocrity of the show, as did several art critics in France (Charles Estienne and Léon Degand). This demonstration, along with the disappointing Surrealist show of the same year, triggered a series of questions from the critics about the survival of Paris as a hegemonic center.

The victory for modern art in the US was narrow, and therefore crucial. Modern art, in fact, arrived *en masse* in America by accident. The movement had been there, of course, since the Armory show, but it was not considered vital to American society. During the war, because of its rejection by the Nazi as degenerate, modern art was defended in New York through the European émigrés, helped by Peggy Guggenheim, who used to say that if it was rejected by the Nazis it must be good, and therefore protected. But when a new, large, confident middle class transformed the cultural fabric of the US after the war, it became clear that a consensus about the notion of art, good American art able to define the identity of the country, did not exist. Art became the center of violent diatribes in 1948 when the middle class realized that what they had enthusiastically supported and helped save from the Nazis was in fact something they did not really like nor understand: a modern culture with all its negativism, sharp and complex questioning. But modern art had always aspired to be an international movement, and that became quite important when the liberals in the US developing the Marshall plan in 1947-1948 saw themselves at the forefront of international politics, in opposition to isolationists like Senator Taft.

As freedom to experiment was automatically equated, in certain quarters, with liberal freedom and opposition to totalitarianism, the most advanced modern art produced by the new generation of painters interested in automatism had to be defended, even if this rejection of "craft" and direct communication with the "general public" were hard for the majority of American art critics to accept. Modern art had been for a long time a sign of internationalism, and was then in clear opposition to nationalism and the rampant isolationism that was threatening the international stature of post-war US. So for some new liberals, to be suspicious of the most experimental art of the day amounted almost, at times, to treason. MoMA and Alfred Barr in particular understood the importance of this type of aesthetic trench warfare, where modern had to be defended on American soil while Europe was, again, giving signs of wavering in the face of socialism. Remember the sentence proffered by Barr to Henri Luce, who was defending a form of realist expressionism in the pages of *Life* magazine: "You should defend modern art because, after all, it is free enterprise painting."[13] So by 1948-1949, when Barr goes all out to insist on the importance of experimental abstraction, one can say that the abstract expressionist way of painting had already won, if not yet the market, at least the ideological battle.[14] It is inter-

13 Alfred Barr continues: "As you know, this reaction is strongest at present in the USSR, which attacks modern art socially on the grounds that it is individualistic, bourgeois and decadent; politically on the grounds that it is international in style and un-Russian in spirit. The commissars insist on realism, and increasingly on romantic nationalism. No one, of course, would suggest that reactionary art criticism in this country, except in the *Daily Worker*, is pro-Soviet. Yet there is in this country to some degree a similar spirit of intolerance, a fear or hatred of the new and strange in art, an insistence upon conformity, conservative or official taste, coupled with a calculated chauvinism. Our museum was founded partially to counteract this spirit … We believe that such articles do really serious damage to American culture. We now have a flourishing school of younger painters who many of us believe show great originality and vitality. In fact, some of us believe that within their generation, their work is more than a match for the painting of any other country … It seems to us that *Life* has a very grave responsibility toward the arts. If it cannot deal with the arts fairly, it ought not to treat them editorially." The letter, written by Barr, was also signed by John Hay Whitney, Chairman, and Nelson Rockefeller, President. Letter of A. Barr, Whitney and Rockefeller, March 24, 1949, Alfred Barr Papers, Letter 165. Let us mention, as well, that the same argument was broadcast to France by the Voice of America network (relayed in French by the French network) on April 3,

esting to note that the French, involved in deadly internal disputes after 1947—when the post-war alliance between liberal and Communist forces collapsed due to Cold War pressures—were not aware of these debates in the US and were generally oblivious to the development of American art. They were more interested on the one hand in revamping their traditional pre-war image, and on the other in fending off a strong push by the Communist Party for a new realist popular art. The misunderstanding and incomprehension between the two allies were almost total, as Pierre Schneider alluded to as late as 1955 when reviewing a show of American art in Paris: "To the French, who eye the dubious shade with a good deal of tolerance and have never taken to buying their steak in cellophane wrappings, it has all seemed a bit cool and antiseptic."[15]

Vehement Confrontations

By 1950, the modern art scene in France had become extremely polarized. Degand, writing for the new magazine *Art d'Aujourd'hui*, was defending rationalism, geometry and formalism; Charles Estienne, in clear opposition, moved towards a new expressionist type of abstraction he saw coming out of automatic surrealism; and Michel Tapié, who was influenced by Dada, was trying to put together a group of unaffiliated artists under a generic, but well-marketed, title like "informel" or "Art Autre". Like in the US, the artistic field in France was also changing under the pressure of the Cold War. The result of that battle was less predictable in France, due to her stronger cultural and political environment. Indeed Picasso, "old hat" as he was apparently called by the American press,[16] was still in a fighting mood. All through the early 1950s, the master was firing rounds of images violently denouncing a US ever more deeply involved in the Cold War, his voice still strong and even violent. After celebrating Stalin's birthday with a resounding *À ta santé, Staline*, he showed a disturbing painting *Les Massacres de Corée* at the Salon de Mai 1951, in a direct anti-war message borrowed from Goya's *3rd of May*, which made US modernists despair. Not only that, but the salon was also showing an interesting diversity of political artistic possibilities. Dewasne, a Communist painter, was showing a very large abstract work *Hommage à Marat*, in praise of that most revolutionary individual, making a rejection of his work by the Communist Party impossible, while Fernand Léger, also a Communist, preferred to use a modernist vocabulary

1950, after the publication of the joint manifesto on Modern Art by the three museums, "Statement of Modern Art: A Declaration on Modern Art." The speaker/anchor was the artist Amédé Ozenfant. Alfred Barr Papers, no. 2, 171, frame 67.

14 Lately some art historians (Nancy Jachec, Deirdre Robson, David Caute) have proposed that the victory of American art internationally came in the late 1950s. This interpretation is based on measuring sales and international visibility through exhibitions abroad; I prefer to understand success as symbolic success.

15 Pierre Schneider in "Summer Events: Paris," *Art News* (Summer 1955), p. 49.

16 See "Picasso is old hat," *New York Times Magazine* (January 8, 1950).

to highlight his attachment to the working class in his painting *Les Constructeurs*. It seemed that the entire spectrum of aesthetic choice, from abstraction to realism, was in the hands of the Communist Party, which may be why Paris itself counterattacked. At the sitting of the executive committee of the Congress for Culture on May 15-16, its president Nicholas Nabokov proposed a program of cultural manifestations in Paris to counter-balance the ongoing success of Soviet cultural propaganda;[17] he suggested a musical festival and a large retrospective of modern painting for June 1952.[18]

Meanwhile, Michel Tapié was hastily putting together an exhibition of artists he deemed important in a new world which he felt was stuck in old references. The new world had to be exciting, young, forward-looking and if possible fun. His exhibition and catalogue became an important marker for the success and vitality of a new type of abstraction emphasizing the individual. His strategy, crucial for the image of Paris Tapié was defending, was to be largely open to international voices. *Véhémences confrontées* presented Camille Bryen, Wols, Georges Mathieu, Capogrossi, Hans Hartung, Jackson Pollock, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Alfred Russell at Gallery Nina Dausset during the month of March 1951. The strength of the catalogue, printed on two sides of a large folded poster, lies in its violent tone, in the Dadaist-inspired phrases which appeared to bring new life to the idea of a total individual subversion which Surrealism no longer managed to produce.

This definition of the contemporary artist, the individualism so relentlessly favored by Tapié, became clearly positioned during the Cold War, just at the time when Western culture was obliged to choose between those who defended freedom (the West) and those who defended peace (the East). Tapié was inclined to defend a mythical sort of individualism against any incursion by social concerns. He considered that the Dada revolt had given modern art its true direction, while others, like Charles Estienne and certain Surrealists, who were more utopian, preferred to defend a more socially responsible individualism. Tapié's stance thus ran counter to a powerful school of thought in Paris which used the political awareness of artist—amid a wide variety of means—to raise the public's (or at least the artistic public's) consciousness. We must recall here that the idea of the public, and even of public service, was one of the key features of post-war culture, although it remained a totally alien concept to Tapié,

17 See Pierre Grémillion: *Intelligence de l'Anti-Communisme: Le Congrès pour la liberté et la culture à Paris, 1950-1975.* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 72.

18 After the collapse of the socialist group RDR in which Sartre was involved, the Gaullist magazine *Liberté de l'Esprit* published by Claude Mauriac became the point of entry for the congress for cultural freedom groups into the French establishment. It was a leftist Gaullist, the poet and director of the Lyon magazine *Confluences*, René Tavernier, who, after the installation of Nabokov/Josselson in Paris, would connect the French section with the International Congress. Pierre Grémillion: *Intelligence de l'Anti-Communisme*, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

who resolutely defended individualism versus the "great public herd which is always wrong."[19] What Tapié intelligently provided was an alternative reality to the one proposed by the Communist Party through the art of André Fougeron: "But here too realities are specific and original: there exists no system that has not shattered as soon as it was confronted by a *reality* stripped of the thousand and one realisms which envelop and misguide the spirit."[20] Any shape could be incorporated into his vision, which ignored the endless discussions of abstract versus figurative art that had been going on since the thirties, so long as the painter was as exceptional a being as Tapié himself. An exceptional being, well-bred and cultivated, who made no concessions to the inert and mediocre public that unquestioningly accepted the most banal values of a traditional culture. These were the basic criteria in his art criticism. Tapié sought distinction, and this was the trademark of his "stable".

> However, such a movement, like everything which becomes a movement, has its authentic painters, its dialecticians, its adventurers; if it is particularly difficult to see clearly, it is for all that no less certain that at this very moment some are living the epic; they have found extremely exciting points of departure because they are arduous and perilous, implacable and almost inhuman. They work in the dionysiac rapture of high liberty, they discover unlimited horizons in which they are capable of unleashing the most dazzling significations of Force, they put themselves in the most unknown conditions, with the most lucid courage, "to go where we do not know" with every possible chance bound to Living and Becoming.[21]

With this text Tapié succeeded in placing himself in the front line of contemporary art, claiming to integrate and represent all that was new and therefore incomprehensible to common mortals. The corollary to this was that it was not necessary to attempt to explain anything, but only to reveal the representatives of the "Future" who symbolized the "Now" whom only Tapié, a virtual Marcel Duchamp of art criticism, was able to recognize, and at times to interpret. By rejecting the idea of stylistic schools, the critic became a cultural impresario branding certain practices, suggesting different "possibilities," for that gigantic coexistence which automatically embraced everything that "amazes us." These marvels were brought to our imaginary shores by true "pioneers" or, better still, "conquerors," who created what was essential to their era and approach and struck out to find the

19 See catalogue *Véhémences confrontées*, 1951. Text reproduced in this volume in pp. 540-553.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

degree of freedom that suited them. In the chaos of his writing and his choices, in the midst of the generalities and mystification that marked his style, his rage poured over certain works of art which flourished thanks to the storm he stirred up, at times quite against his will.

But as Michel Tapié's goal was to impose a new expressive individualism in Paris, to represent this new post-war sensibility developing rapidly all across the Western world, he continually looked for international allies to integrate into his system. The vitality, individuality, and excessiveness of Jackson Pollock were the perfect match. Tapié's title of his essay for the Pollock show he organized at the Maeght gallery in 1952 was illuminating: it was called *Pollock avec nous* (Pollock with us). Tapié wanted to show that, in opposition to political and humanistic realisms as well as rational geometric abstraction, a looser international abstract movement was developing, and Paris should pay attention to it. In his mind Pollock, this provider of mythical total freedom, could be used to help Paris wake up. Tapié, somewhat misreading Pollock's latest project of the black-and-white paintings, emphasized in the catalogue the free individual side of the Pollock myth, rather than the modernistic dialogue with tradition. The American, according to Tapié, was the perfect candidate because he was totally unaware of Parisian sectarianism, only confronted with a clean slate, with his own pure and virgin individuality. This was also what American criticism was to a large degree proposing to Europe, which Tapié uncritically, if not naively, included in his introduction as an individual force, able to testify about the contemporary world through such a strong personal experience that he escapes collectivity to become the sign of total freedom.[22] The battles of words (collectivity versus freedom) in the midst of his diatribe were indeed nicely coded and tilted towards the West at this particularly hot moment of diatribe against the USSR. For Tapié, Paris still had the power to universalize culture, to mold the international scene with Tapié himself presiding at its center, sipping a drink at some Latin Quarter café. The problem was that the timing for reinstating Paris as the fountain of modern universal art was actually pretty bad. Hoping to use Pollock for his own purposes, Tapié actually brought him in at the worst possible moment, since Pollock's visit coincided with the first controversial large-scale American cultural propaganda of the Cold War. To shout in public *Pollock avec nous* the way Tapié did in the introduction to his catalogue, while many people were actually chanting and writing on walls, "US Go Home," was a form

22 In the exhibition catalogue Studio Paul Facchetti, Michel Tapié, *Jackson Pollock avec nous*, February 1952. See this article in pp: 528-530 of this volume.

of provocation in an artistic scene still suspicious of kitsch American imperialism.[23] Certainly Pollock's title show was intended to participate in the avant-garde struggle Tapié was involved in along with Georges Mathieu, by delimiting a new liberated and liberating space, but by doing so, it unambiguously signaled support for an American type of liberal freedom.

In Tapié's thinking, because his art acted like a wedge planted between humanistic Parisian realisms and rational geometric abstraction, Pollock was the perfect candidate in 1952 to help him redefine the international quality of Paris. It is also important to note that by 1950 there were a large number of American artists in Paris. Besides jazz musicians and writers warmly welcomed by Boris Vian, Juliette Gréco and *Les Temps Modernes*, American painters of all sorts were still coming to Paris, some through the GI Bill (taking classes in a Biarritz art school, where Mathieu taught for a while), others by creating groups around galleries like Galerie 8 and Galerie Arnaud, where an active bohemia developed. Galerie 8 in particular was giving, through a co-operative structure, many young artists the opportunity to learn about the art world and artistic development. Artists around the Galerie Arnaud managed to publish a very vibrant magazine called *Cimaise* where critical discussions were articulated around important voices like Michel Ragon, Herta Wescher, R.V. Gindertal and Julien Alvard. It was through *Cimaise* (which became bilingual in 1955) that in 1953 an alternative to the violence and rough gestures of the New York School was launched, in the form of a new entity: the Pacific School. This was, of course, an attempt to counterbalance the New York scene, an alternative partly based in Paris, pieced together with American expatriates like Sam Francis, Claire Falkenstein and West Coast American artists like Mark Tobey. Their interest in Eastern philosophies was supposed to give a softer and more intellectual look to American art, an art propelled by and discoursing with a sophisticated Paris. Galerie Arnaud was interestingly trying to construct bridges between the US and France/Europe in the hope of derailing the mounting chauvinism on both sides of the Atlantic.

Franco-American Cultural Dance in the 1950s

The tradition of opposition, negation, and subversion of the status quo, which was a large part of modern art heritage and

23 Indeed, Pollock's exhibition arrived in the middle of a strong American cultural and propaganda push in Paris. To put it mildly, not everybody felt happy about this sudden invasion of the cultural sphere by American shows: *Regards sur la peinture américaine*, Galerie de France, February 25 - March 15, 1952 (Albers, Baziotes, Brooks, de Kooning, etc.); May-June: large exhibition *L'Œuvre du Vingtième Siècle*, organized by J. J. Sweeney, a show which was prolonged by the Paris Festival, financed by the propaganda arm of the US government, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom; November 12: book translation program from the State Department financed the publication of *L'Art et la vie aux États-Unis* by Olivier Larkin.

avant-gardist posture, was transformed during the Cold War into a new weapon in the fight against Communism. This re-centering of American cultural life was made concrete in the pages of the famous radical intellectual magazine *Partisan Review* as avant-garde art rapidly became a part of American mainstream culture.

Few people in France knew about this new take on an old subject, and few either heard about the new book by Thomas Hess, who successfully attached the School of New York to the tail end of the tradition of modernism in his 1951 book *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, in which New York painting was heralded as the "new tradition." The design of the book itself was self-explanatory—all twelve color plates were of painters from the new American generation; European artists were illustrated in small black-and-whites.

New York was able, thanks to a careful re-reading of the history of early modernism, to put the art produced in downtown New York at the apex of a chain of formal events which transformed a local production into a universal canon, the way the Parisians had managed to do in the nineteenth century. By so doing, they were forced to ignore many interesting experiments and attempts made by "expressionist" artists or by painters like the "Indian space painters." Similarly in France, many artists who did not fit the established framework, resulting from the desire for reconstruction or connection with its glorious past, were isolated or dismissed. The point was also to juxtapose the two cities, so as to learn about their intense and complicated art scenes, producing by the same token not only some of the most exciting political and cultural debates of the twentieth century, but also some of the most brilliant and meaningful artworks.

If political relations between the US and France were at times difficult during the Cold War, it is fair to say that the knowledge of each other's new developing culture, despite some efforts by Mathieu and Tapié, was not very good. A few shows held in New York presenting the contemporary avant-garde French production at the private Kootz, Janis, Matisse and Carré galleries, plus a few articles in art magazines about the other art scene, was the norm until 1952, when the US started a campaign in France to counteract a very successful Soviet cultural offensive in Paris. Similarly, in Paris very few examples of American art were seen,

despite some attempts like the Kootz show at the Galerie Maeght in 1947, the Sidney Janis show in 1951, and the large and important survey of American art published in *Art d'Aujourd'hui* by Michel Seuphor; a survey which presented fairly well the different productions, including the type he favored, geometric abstraction, which was rapidly losing ground in New York.[24]

To convince the French of the importance of the new exuberance in America, however, was particularly difficult because, while the American anti-Soviet propaganda had been deployed in France since 1947, a wave of anti-Americanism developed simultaneously. French soil was not particularly fertile for such propaganda, since the French Communists and their cultural allies had never missed a chance to vilify the crass American lifestyle and its oppressive regime for minorities and the poor. This situation accelerated even more with the start of the Korean War and the excesses of the McCarthy era. The war of words for the hearts and minds of the French reached a crisis in 1952, when Franco-American relations hit bottom as the US cultural offensive in France took off.[25] To counteract French suspicions and the acrimonious atmosphere, the American Congress for Cultural Freedom organized in Paris in 1952 an important cultural festival complete with ballet, theatre, exhibitions, music, etc.[26] The major and most publicized event, though, was the presentation at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris of the exhibition *L'Œuvre du XXe Siècle*, a prestigious exhibition which aimed to prove to a French connoisseur public that all the great works of art from Impressionism to Picasso were and could only be created in a liberal environment of the type defended by the US. James Johnson Sweeney chose a series of modern masterpieces which had hopefully not been seen often or lately by the Parisian public, and artists rejected by Communism were again displayed in force (Duchamp, Chagall, Rousseau, the Russian avant-garde).

The French press in general was impressed and somewhat overwhelmed by the size of the demonstration, but also often irritated by the vivacity of the propaganda and the arrogance of the discourse. For example, the very popular Parisian newspaper *Combat* was critical of the fact that many artists were Americans, complaining that many excellent French musicians and singers were forgotten: "probably because they have never been heard of in Alabama or Idaho. And as for the honored persecuted guests, they should have been accompanied by other persecuted ones

24 See also an interesting article published by *Art News* in 1949 about GI student artists in Paris: "GI Students Show the Left Bank," by Arnold Herstand (Summer 1949), pp. 20-21, 64.

25 What triggered a new round of suspicion was the transformation of the economic aid given by the Marshall Plan into a beefed-up military aid program. See also Eloise A. Spaeth: "America's Cultural Responsibilities Abroad," *College Art Journal* (Winter 1951), Vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 115-120; and Dick Fitzpatrick: "America's Campaign of Truth Throughout the World," *Journalism Quarterly* (Winter 1951), pp. 3-14.

26 The idea of an important American festival in Paris was already in the works in 1949-50. The Embassy in Paris and MoMA tried to organize it but failed. A request for a show of American art in Lyon was also discussed through Darthea Speyer, US Cultural Attaché in Paris. Letter from M. d'Harnoncourt to Alfred Barr, (December 1, 1950), Rockefeller Archive Center, Box 125, Folder 1216.

living in the United States, like those friends of lynched blacks or those oppressed by the committee of Un-American activities." The article closed by comparing the festival to a political circus: "The value and interest of these events do not need the help of an *inspired* Barnum, nor an *Atlantic* flag. And the twentieth-century masterpiece festival, with its showy and inaccurate publicity, should have been quite plainly called NATO's Festival." It was clear that the defense of modern art in these dangerous days had become the private domain of the United States, one of her "vital interests."

The frustration of many Parisians at the fact that so many French paintings were owned by American interests was symbolically played out in the Museum of Modern Art itself. While the exhibition was still on display, two young Frenchmen snuck into the museum one May night and, due to the lack of security, were able to free what they considered to be cultural hostages held by America. Pierre Abenstern (student) and Michel Pamygeres (bar owner) easily cut several canvases out of their frames. Bonnard, Renoir, Gauguin and Picasso were liberated for a while from their ideological prison, before being returned to their owners by a shamefaced French administration, forced to admit that not only was Paris unable to defend modern art on the theoretical level, but could not even protect it physically within her own walls. It was a bitter lesson, but what could Paris do? In the end, the initiative of a few private galleries made it possible for contemporary art (a very select sample) to be part of an international exchange, to gain visibility.

By 1954, some French painters were being shown in the US in very few American venues (Betty Parsons, Samuel Kootz, Sidney Janis). Mathieu and Soulages in particular became signs of the new trend called *informel* created by Tapié. American dealers, who now, like the French, needed the international label, created this connection. The problem with contemporary French painting was that it was not very well understood by art critics of either country, still hanging on to very traditional concepts.[27] When Soulages was presented at the Kootz Gallery in New York, for example, on May 16 1954 (the day Dien Bien Phu fell), the catalogue had been written by Bernard Dorival, who was not very aware, to say the least, about contemporary critical and theoretical discussions. He described Soulages's work in terms of a religious experience, in language full of religious references (sacred aspect, sepulchral unity,

27 The market implementation was not an easy task, if we recall Clyfford Still's reaction to an article in *Art News* showing, in a famous series called "Mathieu paints a picture," the way the French painter was producing his paintings: "Is *Art News* really so desperate that it has to devote its pages to the cynicism and lies of its Mathieu feature, or has it just become its way of life to grope in swerves of journalism for its ethics and performers? I blush with the embarrassment all artists must feel when viewing this sordid parody—especially those sincere men who in the late 1940s went from here and the West Coast to Paris and exposed their work to this parasitical and antic 'tramp.' *Art News* the back of my hand." Let us recall that Mathieu had been one of the first defenders in Paris of the new American generation of painters. Clement Greenberg, in an interview for *Art Monthly* in 1984, was less critical of Mathieu's work: "I made the distinction between Europeans and Americans only in the early 1950s when I thought our painters were getting better. Saying that was a reaction to circumstance, because the modern museum was then readier to buy a Mathieu than it was a de Kooning. And I think Mathieu is good, by the way, and underrated. He's fallen off lately, I know, but he was damn good when he was good." In "A Conversation with Clement Greenberg, Part II," by Charles Harrison, *Art Monthly* (March 1984), p. 10.

Golgotha, etc.) that was almost anathema to the American professionals, smacking too much of certain French traditions that had already been radically questioned by Pollock or de Kooning. The writer for the French paper *France-Amérique* noted Dorival's strategic mistake: "Rather than to discover religious implications as Bernard Dorival does, in his hierarchic compositions in which the intense chiaroscuro evokes the conflicts of the spirit, one can find in them an attempt to return to primeval realities. A religious aspiration comparable to that which guided the Gothic sculptor or the Romanesque fresco-painter seems today rather unusual or anachronistic. On the contrary, this need to return to the foundations of life and to rediscover the surging vitality of primitive cultures may well appear to be symptomatic of a hypertrophied civilization."[28]

Suffice it to say that the established French art critics were not very helpful in advertising the new Parisian vocabulary being forged by a series of abstract painters.

During all those years of Cold War, what was primordial for the French, and somehow missed by the US administration—from ambassadors to ministers—was the protection of what was understood as French identity. That is why the victory of the boxer Marcel Cerdan over the American Tony Zale in 1948 was so important: perceived as a triumph of will, technique and finesse over pure force, it was quite a powerful symbol. When Cerdan died in a plane crash on his way to a rematch in New York, the pain and sorrow were national and produced, in some political quarters, suspicion that this might have been a successful plot to stop the boxer from winning again.

For the French, it was important to define a specificity *vis à vis* the United States; so that difference had to be produced and demonstrated in sport, fashion, culture and the arts. What had to be avoided at all costs was to become … well, American! And this was particularly important while McCarthyism was rising. Where America was fearful of foreigners and her political debates were confined to center-right positions, in France debates ranged from extreme right to extreme left, and foreigners were actually needed to produce the proverbial universal France, a France which could embrace newcomers, civilize them, and integrate them into a rational, balanced framework;[29] this had been Paris's role for the arts in particular. It was also important for the French to show the new master of the West that Americans really did not understand nor relish the great art produced in their own backyard. In fact France's intellectual public figures never hesitated to tell the US what to like and what was good for America—which was everything that Middle America found uncomfortable, everything which was not pushed by US propaganda. That is why the Latin Quarter and a large number of intellectuals (Sartre, Camus, Vian, even Aron) loved Steinbeck, violent pulp fiction, African-American writers**,** the citizen of the world Garry Davis, gay culture and in particular jazz music. It was in Paris, after all, that intellectuals were debating the separate and contradictory qualities of bebop and cool jazz. Paris was able to connect cool jazz with ancient poetry and classical music, to locate it in a long-developing tradition culminating with Miles Davis.[30] Miles Davis became a hero, the representative of black intellectual America (as well as Juliette Gréco's boyfriend), showing the world and conservative America that Paris was cool, all right, open to experimentation and to mixed adventures. France, at least the Latin Quarter, was against the racism the US became known for, through, in part, the famous bestseller and fake American novel by Boris Vian called *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, in which lynching defined American culture. At every turn, France was supposed to be cool, open, anti-racist and civilized, with a better understanding of American culture than the Americans themselves. On the other hand, in the US France was perceived as weak, divided, unreliable, and most of all *passé*. Misunderstanding ran high.

This, of course, came through in the arts and in American art criticism. Responding to a questionnaire called "Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated?" run by the magazine *Art Digest* (September 15, 1953),[31] Greenberg answered unambiguously: "Do I mean that the new American abstract painting is superior on the whole to the French? I do." This is the famous article in which Greenberg dismisses the new French abstract painting through a traditional formal analysis. The French are inventing, sure, but they "finish" their paintings: the Americans are rougher, bolder and tougher. According to Greenberg, the Parisian productions were "tamed," rather than "disciplined," as the French preferred to say. The difference was crucial, because "tame" entailed a notion of enslavement, castration: Paris, like a lion that had lost his teeth, was now a purring cat, which was not the image the Western world needed to face up to the Communist hordes.

In Paris, two art critics in particular were trying, in very different, even conflicting, ways, to redefine the role and status of Paris

28 In *France-Amérique* (May 1954), anonymous.

29 See Antoine Marès and Pierre Milza: *Le Paris des étrangers depuis 1945*. Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 1994.

30 This is what was publicly announced in the introduction to his concert with Tadd Dameron in Paris in May 1949: "Each country, each epoch, has its particular styles, as music, just like architecture, bears perpetual witness. The plainsong of the cathedral, inheritance from the ancient renaissance polyphony, Jean Sebastian Bach's fugues, the spiritual sensibility of Mozart: all these reflect the history of the spirit, and the folklore of all countries reflects the history of man … " The speaker could not continue, as Miles Davis came on stage and started to blow his trumpet. From the DVD *From Cool to Bop: The Anthology*, Stardust Records, Marina Del Rey, California, 2002.

31 Text reproduced in this volume in pp. 639-640.

for this new post-war world. As on the political scene, the criticism was divided along pretty well-defined lines. On the one hand, as we have seen, Michel Tapié was developing a modern international field based on total freedom of expression, believing in the artist's total immersion in the present and the complete liberation of the individual, and on the other Charles Estienne, by resizing Surrealist concepts in order to recoup a forgotten basic human revolt if not revolution, was trying to salvage the concept of the School of Paris. He saw this, as he put it, as "the only path between the *political Messianism* of the Communist Party and the pessimism of the philosopher of the absurd."[32]

The international/national dichotomy created wide disagreements without managing to declare a winner; both situations were impossible. The international one was rapidly becoming dominant, but was not controlled by Paris: despite Tapié's many trips to Japan, South America and Italy, New York and MoMA had the monopoly. And the nationalist card could not be played because it was perceived as provincial, without clout, too ensconced in self-interest and the past.

By 1953, there was so much buzz about the new abstract art that Robert Lebel published a book called *Bilan de l'art actuel*, in which he investigated and compared the art produced all over the Western world. However, this revealed that his hopes of discovering the "magical," heretical works he said he wanted were dashed by the discovery that they had been co-opted into the safe world of museum or bourgeois interiors.[33] Nevertheless, the study made clear that abstraction was everywhere to be seen, even if victory had blunted some of its edge and aggressive quality; he wrote: "Today, artists are to their pre-war predecessors what troops of parachutists are to Icarus."[34] The sheer numbers of good abstract painters in Paris was a sign that the French capital was still important, but a nagging question crept in at the end of Lebel's essay: the "apparition du continent Américain"—even the influence of the Pacific School, pretty much invented for French consumption—was simultaneously seen as a tribute to Paris (in its opposition to New York), but also as a threat (now there were two American cities producing great art).

While Tapié, Estienne and Lebel were interested in proclaiming the triumph of a new abstract avant-garde over the forces

32 Charles Estienne, *Terre des Hommes*, no. 1 (September 29, 1945).
33 Robert Lebel, *Premier bilan de l'art actuel, 1937-1953.* (Paris: Soleil noir, 1953), pp. 12-13.
34 Ibid., p. 14.

of tradition, believing in a renewed supremacy of Paris—and while they were ready to reap the riches of this success—anguish invaded their writings. Was it a Pyrrhic victory, after all? Were all those rumors of New York's achievement in painting to be taken seriously?

This doubt was obviously becoming a factor in the evaluation of post-war cultural supremacy. In an article published in the Catholic liberal magazine *Esprit* in 1953, Camille Bourniquel bluntly asked the question everybody was wondering about: "Has the Succession to Paris Begun?" Carefully trying to avoid the pitfalls of cultural arrogance, Bourniquel displayed a keen understanding of the workings of international culture. Discussing the symbolic importance of avant-garde as a factor in recognition on the international stage, he ultimately decided that nowhere in the world was such an important center as Paris. In so doing, he could not help sending a few barbs toward America and its "protectionist cultural behavior," scorning what he perceived as American suspicion of French artistic production. He could see, though, that America's traditional reception of French culture as *the* universal culture—as he puts it, "a fact of civilization"—was evaporating. His ambiguous conclusion, wondering about a possible American cultural offensive, was right on the button, but was still not taken seriously enough. As the rest of Europe was in such terrible shape, both economically and in terms of morale, and America was so traditionally tied to kitsch, it was thought that there was no real threat to the Parisian monopoly of high culture. But by1953, after a year of intensive showing of American art in Paris following Truman's "psychological offensive," some Parisian institutions were beginning to wonder anxiously whether the celebration of the success of the new abstract avant-garde was premature, or even misplaced.

French Counterattack

Now that loose abstraction was becoming the style of choice, the personal and political feud between two Parisian art critics intensified: Michel Tapié and Charles Estienne fought a series of famous paroxysmal battles in the press. What was at stake, as Charles Estienne understood it, was the need for a new French identity, rooted in her long glorious past, but armed with contemporary clout. For this he needed, but did not quite find, a present open to an international future, but obviously developed

from a French base. Yes, Estienne knew the Americans were dripping, and Pollock mildly interested him, but what fascinated him more was the fact that the most advanced French artists in his mind were "staining": doing "taches," a softer and deeper alternative to the violent American version. Indeed, "Tachisme" was a French parallel version of Abstract Expressionism, a type of painting created around the Galerie Étoile Scellée (Degottex, Duvillier, Loubchansky, Messagier) to counteract the publicity people like Michel Tapié were giving the Americans by inviting Pollock.

"Un Art Autre," orchestrated from 1951 by Michel Tapié and advertized by the painter Georges Mathieu, was an international structure in which a stable of modern artists from around the world, including contradictory ones like Pollock and Tobey, were grouped under the umbrella of a rekindled Paris. Together they published the magazine *The United States Lines Paris Review* for a luxury transatlantic liner, on which Tapié and Mathieu lectured on "the vitality and grandeur of our Western civilization on both sides of the Atlantic." This deluxe magazine, aimed at well-to-do travelers, defended a very abstract vocabulary based on contemporary research and complicated philosophical constructions. For Mathieu, the past—what he called classicism—was over, and a new world was opening up, based on a sharp consciousness of the present, which was emerging simultaneously in the US, the modern country *par excellence*. The magazine included an article by Thomas Hess analysing abstract art in America (mostly New York abstract expressionist painters, plus Mark Tobey) to alert the public to the creative force of liberalism. Conversely, Charles Estienne, with the help of André Breton, was digging deep into France's past to find a connection between, surprising as it may sound, Celtic art and Tachisme.[35]

It seems that both Charles Estienne and André Breton were really vying over an independent space, where the critic from Britanny, Charles Estienne, proudly displaying his roots, vaunted French tradition, symbolized by his small sailboat, against the gigantic transatlantic liner supported by the aristocratic Tapié and Mathieu, who seemed to him to have sold their souls to the most powerful interest of the moment: America**.** This was a losing battle, of course, and Estienne rapidly abandoned what he felt was a corrupt art world for the Breton coast where, between trips in his sailboat, he wrote popular lyrics for the anarchist singer Léo Ferré. André Breton and Charles Estienne in their stubborn utopian independence looked a lot like Asterix and Obelix, or José Bové, who refuse to buckle down under the powerful mechanization of the Empire, knowing full well that victory was out of the question, but that for self-preservation, cultural difference had to be protected.

35 See my article: "The Year the *Gaulois* Fought the *Cowboy*," *Yale French Studies: The French Fifties*, no. 98 (2000), pp.167-182.

Confronted by the slick American model, the French Communist Party reacted like a bull to a red rag, which soon led a violent counterattack. Picasso painted the *La Guerre et la Paix* pseudo-frescoes to decorate a deconsecrated church in Vallauris (not far from, and in response to, Matisse's church in Vence), as a critique of the American involvement in the Korean War, and a denunciation of the horror of germ warfare they were allegedly conducting there, according to a false rumor propagated by the Communist Party. Similarly, the Communist painter Fougeron was condemning many facets of American culture in a picture he facetiously dubbed *Civilisation atlantique*. It depicts a culture enjoying the death penalty, racism, war, fat cigar-smoking capitalists and McCarthyism, while the "belle Américaine" as the American car was then dubbed, is predominantly displayed as the symbol of total capitalist decadence. Notwithstanding the ire of Aragon, who didn't like the unreality of the composition compared to social realism, Fougeron knew what he was doing with this picture: symbols of all the ills of American culture are clustered around the American car, the object of desire which was supposed to make others desire the American way of life. The car was fast becoming the sign of sexy free enterprise. When one compares that American dream to the reality of the flimsy 2CV Citroën coming off French assembly lines, one understands the French anxiety about their own future, and their difficulty in believing that they could continue to dictate universal taste.

This hold of consumerism on the population was one of the crucial ingredients in US foreign propaganda, showing clearly the difference between the US free enterprise system and a slow-moving socialist country. The free-enterprise system seemed to produce more, far more, goods to enjoy, and produce them faster.

In 1953, the USIS (United States Information Service) was restructured in accordance with the wishes of President Eisenhower, who was by now, following MoMA's advice, campaigning for modern art: a new thing for the US presidency. Since the institution of the Marshall Plan, American politicians were used to being able to "influence" or "convince" French politicians of their rectitude

in the Cold War debate. But with the arrival of the socialist Pierre Mendes-France as Prime Minister in 1954, things changed drastically, as his independent-minded policies led to two things the Americans did not want: negotiation with Indochina, and the rejection of the European Defense Community (EDC). In this context of change and uncertainty, the US government decided to translate their traditional propaganda into another cultural sphere, in recognition of the importance of such activities to the European way of life. To counteract the campaign against the US being orchestrated in France around sites like the underground magazine *Potlatch*, the Marxist Surrealist group of Nougié and Magritte around the *Les Lèvres nues*, and the growing policy of neutrality among newspapers like *Le Monde* and *L'Observateur*, the US produced a very powerful new coalition in 1953, between the State Department and the private interests of the Rockefeller family and their Museum of Modern Art. For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the creation of the Museum of Modern Art, President Eisenhower issued a press release called "Freedom of the Arts" reinforcing the work done by MoMA for so many years: the defense and propagation of modern art and culture. He took a very different tone from Truman's famous phrase about modern art in 1949: "If this is art, I am a Hottentot." The text reads, "To me, in this anniversary, there is a reminder to all of us of an important principle that we should ever keep in mind. This principle is that freedom of the arts is a basic freedom, one of the pillars of liberty in our land … As long as our artists are free to create with sincerity and conviction, there will be healthy controversy and progress in art … But, my friends, how different it is in tyranny. When artists are made the slaves and the tools of the state; when artists become chief propagandists of a cause, progress is arrested and creation and genius are destroyed. Let us therefore on this meaningful anniversary of a great museum of art in America make a new resolve. Let us resolve that this precious freedom of the arts, these precious freedoms of America, will, day by day, year by year, become ever stronger, ever brighter in our land."[36] This issue was a hot one not only as it related to the Cold War and the USSR, but also because it addressed McCarthy's attempts to curtail the freedom of expression in the US.

Clement Greenberg, in his forceful defense of modern art, had to admit that this type of "free" abstraction had appeared almost simultaneously in Paris and New York, but argued that American abstraction was better because New York "had the advantage of having

36 Dwight Eisenhower, "Freedom of the Arts," (October 20, 1954), 25th anniversary of MoMA.

established Klee and Miró as influences before Paris did, and of having continued (thanks to Hans Hofmann and Milton Avery) to learn from Matisse when he was disregarded by the younger painters in France."[37] This argument was a very bold one, but based on false or incomplete knowledge of the French art scene. In fact Klee and Miró had been since the late 1930s, and still were, used and overused by artists in France. One has only to look at the texts by Édouard Jaguer or the delicate and poetical pictures produced in 1947 by Rezvani to realize Greenberg's simplifications. Mr. Greenberg either simply did not know the new wave of French abstract artists, or was conveniently looking the other way, toward what the French establishment was presenting, defending and sending abroad. This did not make him a very astute avant-garde reader … or maybe this was his way of dismissing a culture? By omission! When we think about it, this was a very similar tactic to Cassou's. Greenberg's article was for American consumption, of course, but it shows on what misunderstandings the entire relations between the two countries were based. The problem is that this way of thinking was later relayed *in toto* to generations of scholars and students through the reductive literature of Sam Hunter and Irving Sandler. For example, Greenberg never mentions the new abstract art presented at the Kootz Gallery the same year (Soulages, Mathieu, Schneider), at Rosenberg (Nicolas de Staël), nor earlier presentations of the abstract work of Wols and Bram van Velde. For him, they simply did not exist. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic dismissed, turned a blind eye for their own purpose and interests, to a nevertheless accelerating program of exchanges between private galleries.

37 Ibid.

The End: Irony, Emptiness and Rock n'Roll

If the show stops in 1956, it is because several things happened that year, signaling the end of a certain type of world. For one, this was the year when the leftist ideal of revolution, of utopia, crashed in the streets of Hungary. Nothing in France seemed the same after this dramatic event; all the symbolic potential garnered by the Communist Party since the war evaporated in a single week. The forced retreat of British and French troops from the Suez Canal under US pressure also signaled a new type of world, in which old colonial powers had to rethink their overall influence. The balance of power was going to be very different this time, and a new type of revolution was taking place: consumerism.

This immediately provoked virulent opposition from a generation raised on Surrealist criticism; Debord, Vaneighem, Lemaître, Isou etc. were now on the warpath against what they perceived as a totalizing and alienating culture. The modern art that the post-war generation had defended so unrelentingly, though often without much hope, was now ridiculed by a generation who could not accept the status quo. Soon the cultural scene was split in two. On the one hand, art turned from "expression" to either a form of philosophical and critical detached silence or vitriolic irony. On the other, a radical critique of the art scene was constructed, and a violently politically articulated art scene took its place.

Suddenly, the struggle, the violence, the personal tortured investment of the abstract expressionists and *peintres lyriques* or the painters of silence (Wols, Bram van Velde) gave way to blankness, to blandness, to Yves Klein early monochromes or Rauschenberg white paintings. The social and utopian geometric space was transformed into a Dadaist revision by Tinguely, making fun of both Abstract Expressionism and Geometric Abstraction by mechanizing them in humorous contraptions. Niki de Saint-Phalle applied the *coup de grâce* by shooting at targets in order to produce, through their bleeding, pseudo-Abstract Expressionist paintings. Virility was deconstructed, and so was the old exalted sincere expression. The last straw was the production, by the meter, by Pinot Gallizio of rolls of Abstract Expressionist paintings as dress material for cool, fashionable avant-garde women.

1955-56, years of drastic changes, also saw the disappearance of important popular icons: Jackson Pollock died in a car crash a year after James Dean's similar fate, and Nicolas de Staël opened the window of his studio facing the Mediterranean in Antibes and leapt from it to his death.

Indeed French culture, either that described by Francastel or the one photographed by Paul Strand in *La France de profil*, that rural and stubborn country, was being rapidly replaced by a sweeping Americanized consumerist society, which flourished unabated after the Communist repression of Hungary in November 1956. France had a distinctly different mood, as Jean Pierre Mocky described in his 1958 film *Les Dragueurs*. Youngsters were not singing "I hate Sundays" like Juliette Gréco used to do, but reading Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse* and watching Vadim's *Et Dieu créa la femme*. Brigitte Bardot's warm and appetizing curves were replacing Juliette

Jean Tinguely
Méta-Matic n. 10, 1959

Gréco's black humor and dresses. At the time of the arrival of the first abundant supermarkets Roland Barthes, writing his *Mythologies*, was sending a clear signal that an old and stable popular culture was disappearing, and being replaced by a petit-bourgeois sensationalized mass culture. A world was passing by. Also in 1955 Denise René, sensing the change, opened her exhibition space to *Le Mouvement* (with Agam, Bury, Calder, Duchamp, Jacobsen, Soto, Tinguely, Vasarely), an exhibition where humor and fun finally penetrated the old geometric abstraction. Paris was ready for this new experimental art and its participatory technique. The Latin American artists arrived just in time to help the grim post-war French public realize that life could be fun, even if they were buying another orientalist cliché. But all this is another mixed story.

After all the efforts by the US State Department over a decade to impress on the French the importance of American high culture, it was ironically mass culture which won over the new French generation. In 1955, Elvis Presley's *Hound Dog* topped the charts, opening up, with Bill Haley, the way to a teenage revolution in the US and the irruption of the *yé-yé* generation in France.