

It suffices to say that there is nothing in the nature of abstract art which compels it to be so. The imperative comes from history, from the age in conjunction with a particular moment reached in a particular tradition of art. This conjunction holds the artist in a vise from which at the present moment he can escape only by surrendering his ambition and returning to a stale past. This is the difficulty for those who are dissatisfied with abstract art, feeling that it is too decorative or too arid and 'inhuman,' and who desire a return to representation and literature in plastic art. Abstract art cannot be disposed of by a simple-minded evasion. Or by negation. We can only dispose of abstract art by assimilating it, by fighting our way through it. Where to? I do not know. Yet it seems to me that the wish to return to the imitation of nature in art has been given no more justification than the desire of certain partisans of abstract art to legislate it into permanency.

2 Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970) with Barnett Newman (1905–1970) Statement

In a review of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors' exhibition in New York in June 1943 the critic Edward Alden Jewell expressed his 'befuddlement' at paintings by Gottlieb and Rothko, offering the hospitality of his column should the artists be willing to explain their work. Though the resulting statement was signed by Gottlieb and Rothko, Newman assisted in its composition. The statement stands as a virtual manifesto for the form of American painting which these three jointly represented in the early to mid-1940s, and in particular for their neo-Expressionist interest in the intrinsic significance of persistent themes and myths. Originally published in Jewell's column in the *New York Times*, 13 June 1943.

To the artist the workings of the critical mind is one of life's mysteries. That is why, we suppose, the artist's complaint that he is misunderstood, especially by the critic, has become a noisy commonplace. It is therefore an event when the worm turns and the critic quietly, yet publicly, confesses his 'befuddlement,' that he is 'nonplused' before our pictures at the federation show. We salute this honest, we might say cordial, reaction toward our 'obscure' paintings, for in other critical quarters we seem to have created a bedlam of hysteria. And we appreciate the gracious opportunity that is being offered us to present our views.

We do not intend to defend our pictures. They make their own defense. We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is *prima facie* evidence that they carry some communicative power. We refuse to defend them not because we cannot. It is an easy matter to explain to the befuddled that *The Rape of Persephone* is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all the brutal implications; the impact of elemental truth. Would you have us present this abstract concept, with all its complicated feelings, by means of a boy and girl lightly tripping?

It is just as easy to explain *The Syrian Bull* as a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions. Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then. Or is the one 3000 years old truer? ... easy program notes can help only the simple-minded.

No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an 'explanation' of the paintings, but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance. We feel that our pictures demonstrate our aesthetic beliefs, some of which we, therefore, list:

- 1 To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.
- 2 This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.
- 3 It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.
- 4 We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.
- 5 It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult any one who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantel; pictures of the American scene; social pictures; purity in art; prize-winning potboilers; the National Academy, the Whitney Academy, the Corn Belt Academy; buckeyes; trite tripe, etc.

3 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) Answers to a Questionnaire

Pollock's first one-man exhibition was held in November 1943 at the Art of This Century Gallery in New York, where many of the European Surrealists were shown during the war. In this statement, published three months later, he establishes a position for himself in relation to his American origins on the one hand and the concerns of the European avant-garde on the other. The questions were written by Pollock himself with assistance from a representative of the gallery. Originally printed in *Arts and Architecture*, New York, LXI, February 1944.

Where were you born?

JP: Cody, Wyoming, in January, 1912. My ancestors were Scotch and Irish.

Have you traveled any?

JP: I've knocked around some in California, some in Arizona. Never been to Europe.

Would you like to go abroad?

JP: No. I don't see why the problems of modern painting can't be solved as well here as elsewhere.

Where did you study?

JP: At the Art Students' League, here in New York. I began when I was seventeen. Studied with Benton, at the League, for two years.

How did your study with Thomas Benton affect your work, which differs so radically from his?

JP: My work with Benton was important as something against which to react very strongly, later on; in this, it was better to have worked with him than with a less resistant personality who would have provided a much less strong opposition. At the same time, Benton introduced me to Renaissance art.

Why do you prefer living here in New York to your native West?

JP: Living is keener, more demanding, more intense and expansive in New York than in the West; the stimulating influences are more numerous and rewarding. At the same time, I have a definite feeling for the West: the vast horizontality of the land, for instance; here only the Atlantic Ocean gives you that.

Has being a Westerner affected your work?

JP: I have always been very impressed with the plastic qualities of American Indian art. The Indians have the true painter's approach in their capacity to get hold of appropriate images, and in their understanding of what constitutes painterly subject matter. Their color is essentially Western, their vision has the basic universality of all real art. Some people find references to American Indian art and calligraphy in parts of my pictures. That wasn't intentional; probably was the result of early memories and enthusiasms.

Do you consider technique to be important in art?

JP: Yes and no. Craftsmanship is essential to the artist. He needs it just as he needs brushes, pigments, and a surface to paint on.

Do you find it important that many famous modern European artists are living in this country?

JP: Yes. I accept the fact that the important painting of the last hundred years was done in France. American painters have generally missed the point of modern painting from beginning to end. (The only American master who interests me is Ryder.) Thus the fact that good European moderns are now here is very important, for they bring with them an understanding of the problems of modern painting. I am particularly impressed with their concept of the source of art being the unconscious. This idea interests me more than these specific painters do; for the two artists I admire most, Picasso and Miró, are still abroad.

Do you think there can be a purely American art?

JP: The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the thirties, seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd. . . . And in another sense, the problem doesn't exist at all; or, if it did, would solve itself: An American is an American and his painting would naturally be qualified by that fact, whether he wills it or not. But the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country.

4 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) Two Statements

In 1947, Pollock made an application for a Guggenheim Fellowship. The first of the two statements printed below was written as part of this application. The 'large painting for Miss Peggy Guggenheim' was the work of 1943 known as *Mural*, now in the collection of the University of Iowa. The second statement was written for the first and only edition of

Possibilities, edited by Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg and published in New York in the winter of 1947/8. The final paragraph formed part of Pollock's draft, but was omitted in the statement as originally published. Our source for both statements is Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967, pp. 39–40.

I

I intend to paint large movable pictures which will function between the easel and mural. I have set a precedent in this genre in a large painting for Miss Peggy Guggenheim which was installed in her house and was later shown in the 'Large Scale Paintings' show at the Museum of Modern Art. It is at present on loan at Yale University.

I believe the easel picture to be a dying form, and the tendency of modern feeling is towards the wall picture or mural. I believe the time is not yet ripe for a *full* transition from easel to mural. The pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, and an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely.

II

My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West.

I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass and other foreign matter added.

★ When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.

The source of my painting is the unconscious. I approach painting the same way I approach drawing. That is direct – with no preliminary studies. The drawings I do are relative to my painting but not for it.

5 Mark Rothko (1903–1970) 'The Romantics were Prompted . . .'

Rothko here offers a modern revision of Romanticism, conceiving art as a form of transcendent experience in face of the ordinariness and hostility of the everyday world. Originally published in *Possibilities*, New York, I, 1947, p. 84.

The romantics were prompted to seek exotic subjects and to travel to far off places. They failed to realize that, though the transcendental must involve the strange and unfamiliar, not everything strange or unfamiliar is transcendental.

outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.

12 Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) 'A Desperate View'

De Kooning's work of the thirties and early forties was dominated by figure compositions influenced by the technical legacy of the European avant-garde, notably Picasso and Miró. But during the years between the end of the Second World War and 1950, his work was marked by a series of gestural, all-over, apparently abstract compositions, many of which tended to monochrome. Ten such works were shown in De Kooning's first one-man exhibition in New York in April 1948. Press coverage and other solo and group exhibitions rapidly followed. De Kooning's work of the period is generally regarded as culminating in *Attic* of 1949, and *Excavation*, completed in June 1950, and shown in the Venice Biennale of that year. The starkness of colour, the turbulent brushwork, and the vestigial traces of parts of figures led to an existentialist type of interpretation, in line with pervasive ideas of an 'age of anxiety'. It was during this time, in 1949, that De Kooning delivered a talk entitled 'A Desperate View' at the 'Subjects of the Artist' school in Greenwich Village, New York. This was an independent school organized by Rothko, Motherwell, Clyfford Still (briefly) and Barnett Newman. It opened in October 1948, continued in the spring term of 1949, and closed in April 1950. In addition to De Kooning's talk, others were given by Rothko, Gottlieb and Reinhardt. Joseph Cornell showed films, Huelsenbeck spoke on Dada, and John Cage on Indian sand painting. De Kooning's talk, reprinted here in full, is taken from *The Collected Writings of Willem de Kooning*, Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1988, pp. 9–14.

My interest in desperation lies only in that sometimes I find myself having become desperate. Very seldom do I start out that way. I can see of course that, in the abstract, thinking and all activity is rather desperate. When an idea is given, one is struck with it. You cannot help seeing it and even using it as a possibility. In Genesis, it is said that in the beginning was the void and God acted upon it. For an artist that is clear enough. It is so mysterious that it takes away all doubt. One is utterly lost in space forever. You can float in it, fly in it, suspend in it and today, it seems, to tremble in it is maybe best or anyhow very fashionable. The idea of being integrated with it is a desperate idea. In art, one idea is as good as another. If one takes the idea of trembling, for instance, all of a sudden most of art starts to tremble. Michelangelo starts to tremble. El Greco starts to tremble. All the impressionists start to tremble. The Egyptians are trembling invisibly and so do Vermeer and Giacometti and all of a sudden, for the time being, Raphael is languid and nasty; Cezanne was always trembling but very precisely.

The only certainty today is that one must be self-conscious. The idea of order can only come from above. Order, to me, is to be ordered about and that is a limitation.

An artist is forced by others to paint out of his own free will. If you take the attitude that it is not possible to do something, you have to prove it by doing it.

Art should *not* have to be a certain way. It is no use worrying about being related to something it is impossible not to be related to. Style is a fraud. I always felt that the Greeks were hiding behind their columns. It was a horrible idea of van Doesburg and Mondrian to try to force a style. The reactionary strength of power is that it keeps style and things going.

It is impossible to find out how a style began. I think it is the most bourgeois idea to think one can make a style before hand. To desire to make a style is an apology for one's anxiety. Anyhow, I think innovators come at the end of a period. Cezanne gave the finishing touches to Impressionism before he came face to face with his 'little sensation'.

Whatever an artist's personal feelings are, as soon as an artist fills a certain area on the canvas or circumscribes it, he becomes historical. He acts from or upon other artists.

An artist is someone who makes art too. He did not invent it. How it started – 'to hell with it.' It is obvious that it has no progress. The idea of space is given him to change if he can. The subject matter in the abstract is *space*. He fills it with an attitude. The attitude never comes from himself alone.

You are with a group or movement because you cannot help it.

13 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) Interview with William Wright

Taped in the summer of 1950 by William Wright for the Sag Harbor radio station, but not broadcast. Pollock's most successful show of all-over abstract paintings was held later in the same year. Transcript published in F. V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967, pp. 79–81.

Mr Pollock, in your opinion, what is the meaning of modern art?

JP: Modern art to me is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we're living in.

Did the classical artists have any means of expressing their age?

JP: Yes, they did it very well. All cultures have had means and techniques of expressing their immediate aims – the Chinese, the Renaissance, all cultures. The thing that interests me is that today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within.

Would you say that the modern artist has more or less isolated the quality which made the classical works of art valuable, that he's isolated it and uses it in a purer form?

JP: Ah – the good ones have, yes.

Mr Pollock, there's been a good deal of controversy and a great many comments have been made regarding your method of painting. Is there something you'd like to tell us about that?

JP: My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in

the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique.

Which would also mean that the layman and the critic would have to develop their ability to interpret the new techniques.

JP: Yes – that always somehow follows. I mean, the strangeness will wear off and I think we will discover the deeper meanings in modern art.

I suppose every time you are approached by a layman they ask you how they should look at a Pollock painting, or any other modern painting – what they look for – how do they learn to appreciate modern art?

JP: I think they should not look for, but look passively – and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for.

Would it be true to say that the artist is painting from the unconscious, and the canvas must act as the unconscious of the person who views it?

JP: The unconscious is a very important side of modern art and I think the unconscious drives do mean a lot in looking at paintings.

Then deliberately looking for any known meaning or object in an abstract painting would distract you immediately from ever appreciating it as you should?

JP: I think it should be enjoyed just as music is enjoyed – after a while you may like it or you may not. But – it doesn't seem to be too serious. I like some flowers and others, other flowers I don't like. I think at least it gives – I think at least give it a chance.

Well, I think you have to give anything that sort of chance. A person isn't born to like good music, they have to listen to it and gradually develop an understanding of it or liking for it. If modern painting works the same way – a person would have to subject himself to it over a period of time in order to be able to appreciate it.

JP: I think that might help, certainly.

Mr Pollock, the classical artists had a world to express and they did so by representing the objects in that world. Why doesn't the modern artist do the same thing?

JP: H'm – the modern artist is living in a mechanical age and we have a mechanical means of representing objects in nature such as the camera and photograph. The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world – in other words – expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.

Would it be possible to say that the classical artist expressed his world by representing the objects, whereas the modern artist expresses his world by representing the effects the objects have upon him?

JP: Yes, the modern artist is working with space and time, and expressing his feelings rather than illustrating.

Well, Mr Pollock, can you tell us how modern art came into being?

JP: It didn't drop out of the blue; it's a part of a long tradition dating back with Cézanne, up through the cubists, the post-cubists, to the painting being done today.

Then, it's definitely a product of evolution?

JP: Yes.

Shall we go back to this method question that so many people today think is important?

Can you tell us how you developed your method of painting, and why you paint as you do?

JP: Well, method is, it seems to me, a natural growth out of a need, and from a need the modern artist has found new ways of expressing the world about him. I happen

to find ways that are different from the usual techniques of painting, which seems a little strange at the moment, but I don't think there's anything very different about it. I paint on the floor and this isn't unusual – the Orientals did that.

How do you go about getting the paint on the canvas? I understand you don't use brushes or anything of that sort, do you?

JP: Most of the paint I use is a liquid, flowing kind of paint. The brushes I use are used more as sticks rather than brushes – the brush doesn't touch the surface of the canvas, it's just above.

Would it be possible for you to explain the advantage of using a stick with paint – liquid paint rather than a brush on canvas?

JP: Well, I'm able to be more free and to have greater freedom and move about the canvas, with greater ease.

Well, isn't it more difficult to control than a brush? I mean, isn't there more a possibility of getting too much paint or splattering or any number of things? Using a brush, you put the paint right where you want it and you know exactly what it's going to look like.

JP: No, I don't think so. I don't – ah – with experience – it seems to be possible to control the flow of the paint, to a great extent, and I don't use – I don't use the accident – cause I deny the accident.

I believe it was Freud who said there's no such thing as an accident. Is that what you mean?

JP: I suppose that's generally what I mean.

Then, you don't actually have a preconceived image of a canvas in your mind?

JP: Well, not exactly – no – because it hasn't been created, you see. Something new – it's quite different from working, say, from a still life where you set up objects and work directly from them. I do have a general notion of what I'm about and what the results will be.

That does away, entirely, with all preliminary sketches?

JP: Yes, I approach painting in the same sense as one approaches drawing; that is, it's direct. I don't work from drawings, I don't make sketches and drawings and color sketches into a final painting. Painting, I think today – the more immediate, the more direct – the greater the possibilities of making a direct – of making a statement.

Well, actually every one of your paintings, your finished canvases, is an absolute original.

JP: Well – yes – they're all direct painting. There is only one.

Well, now, Mr Pollock, would you care to comment on modern painting as a whole?

What is your feeling about your contemporaries?

JP: Well, painting today certainly seems very vibrant, very alive, very exciting. Five or six of my contemporaries around New York are doing very vital work, and the direction that painting seems to be taking here – is – away from the easel – into some sort, some kind of wall – wall painting.

I believe some of your canvases are of very unusual dimensions, isn't that true?

JP: Well, yes, they're an impractical size – 9 × 18 feet. But I enjoy working big and – whenever I have a chance, I do it whether it's practical or not.

Can you explain why you enjoy working on a large canvas more than on a small one?

JP: Well, not really. I'm just more at ease in a big area than I am on something 2 × 2; I feel more at home in a big area.

You say 'in a big area.' Are you actually on the canvas while you're painting?

JP: Very little. I do step into the canvas occasionally – that is, working from the four sides I don't have to get into the canvas too much.

I notice over in the corner you have something done on plate glass. Can you tell us something about that?

JP: Well, that's something new for me. That's the first thing I've done on glass and I find it very exciting. I think the possibilities of using painting on glass in modern architecture – in modern construction – terrific.

Well, does the one on glass differ in any other way from your usual technique?

JP: It's pretty generally the same. In this particular piece I've used colored glass sheets and plaster slabs and beach stones and odds and ends of that sort. Generally it's pretty much the same as all of my paintings.

Well, in the event that you do more of these for modern buildings, would you continue to use various objects?

JP: I think so, yes. The possibilities, it seems to me are endless, what one can do with glass. It seems to me a medium that's very much related to contemporary painting.

Mr Pollock, isn't it true that your method of painting, your technique, is important and interesting only because of what you accomplish by it?

JP: I hope so. Naturally, the result is the thing – and – it doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.

14 David Smith (1906–1965) 'Aesthetics, the Artist and the Audience'

Smith was the foremost American sculptor of his generation. He made his first welded-iron work in 1933 and continued to pursue open and constructed forms of sculpture until his death. Like his contemporaries among the painters, he expresses a marked confidence in the vitality of modern American art. This is the text of a speech given at Deerfield, Massachusetts, on 24 September 1952. Printed in Garnett McCoy (ed.), *David Smith*, New York and London, 1973, pp. 88–107. (For a later text by Smith see VIB2.)

I wish to present my conclusions first and start my presentation backward.

Time is a new dimension in sculpture, and since I don't accent bulkmass and prefer open delineation and transparent form – so that the front views through to the back – the same method by statement may work as well.

To the creative artist, in the making of art it is doubtful whether aesthetics have any value to him.

The truly creative artist deals with vulgarity.

Nobody understands art but the artist.

Affection for art is the sole property of the artist. The majority approach art with hostility.

The artist deserves to be belligerent to the majority.

The artist is a product of his time, and his belligerence is a defense and not a preference.

There is no such thing as a layman. The layman is either an art lover or an art rejector.

Suppose to
Pic/Brown

A-6

Why? - answer
w/ the art-
Beauty

The viewer of art, the art lover, has the privilege of accepting or rejecting. But there is no such thing as a layman. He is either a pretender or the verbalizer.

Masterpieces are made today.

Aesthetics are written conclusions or directives. The creative artist should not be impressed by verbal directives. His aesthetics are primarily unconscious and of a visual recording. No words or summations are involved. The artist does not deny aesthetics or the history of art. The myth in art, the history of art, are both enjoyed and used, but they are utilized by the memory of vision which is the only language in which the artist who made the work of art intended it to be understood.

I have spoken of the artist's use of the vulgar. But this term I use because, to the professional aesthetician, it is a vulgarity in his code of beauty, because he has not recognized it as yet or made rules for its acceptance. To the creative artist it is his beauty, but to the audience, who will wait for the aesthetician's explanation, it is too new and has not yet hammered its way into acceptance. It will not conform to the past, it is beyond the pale. Art aestheticians can only make conclusions or discourse after the work of art is made. The birth of the idea, the concept, is the important act in the work of art.

Nobody understands art but the artist because nobody is as interested in art, its pursuit, its making, as the artist. This need eliminate no one from enjoying any art – if they do not limit it with preconceived notions of what art should be or demand confinement in which it should stay. The true way to understand the work of art is to travel the path by visual response, similar to the method the artist used in arriving at the work.

Does the onlooker realize the amount of affection which goes into a work of art – the intense affection – belligerent vitality – and total conviction? To the artist it must be total to provide satisfaction. Does the critic, the audience, the philosopher even possess the intensity of affection for the work which its creator possessed? Can they project or understand this belligerent vitality and affection which contemporary art possesses? Or do they deal in the quality at all? Is this emotion too highly keyed – is it outside their lives? Or are they too skeptical? Or do they need written confirmation and general acceptance before they will let their own natural response be admitted to themselves?

All the artists I know find survival and the right to work by means other than the sale of their work. Their work speaks solely by their own conviction. They are not beholden to tradition or directives other than their own. Any artist must meet the world with his work. When he meets the world, what is his aim? Is there a need for aim, if the inner convictions and drive are so great that he will not settle for anything short of the fact that being an artist – and to exercise his mode of expression – is the most important pursuit in the world?

Since the artist cannot exist outside his time, certain social pressure has affected him, certain critical opinion has directed him. He feels the majority rejection, so for whom does he make art? For himself first, for the opinion of other artists next, and specifically those artists in his own mores and in his own aesthetic realm. But his world and his realm is the same world that all others inhabit. He has no secret code or key, no special foresight, environment, brilliance, erudition. He exercises the right of vision – projection – by his own choice. His preference is to be a working and recognized member of his culture, and to have his work accepted. [...]

Anti-Lit
again

I said
you will
find out
what
would

closed
circle?