Issues & Commentary

The Man Who Forgot How to Paint

Not Pollock, said here to have abandoned much; nor de Kooning. Below, the author proposes an unexpected model for today—a painter who forgot the rules in order to reinvent them.

BY RICHARD HENNESSY

An exhibition of paintings and sculptures from the Muriel Newman collection held at the Metropolitan Museum in 1981 provided a rare opportunity for comparing two highly important paintings of roughly equivalent size, date, and chromatic range. They were Jackson Pollock's *No. 28, 1950* (68 by 105 inches) and Willem de Kooning's *Attic*, 1949 (61⅜ by 80¼ inches). Color plays an extremely minor role in both of these works. We could and will think of them as monumental grisailles. We wish to begin by posing and answering two questions—what was it about de Kooning's procedures which made it possible for him to become one of the greatest colorists and manipulators of light in the history of painting; and what was it about Pollock's procedures which hampered him in this area of expressiveness? Finding the answer to these questions will help us to rethink the development of American painting after 1950. It will inevitably involve a discussion of drawing.

But why inevitably? The opposition of drawing and color has been an old saw of critical discourse for centuries, and in our own time, many a respectable artistic career is being pursued on the basis of their supposedly mutual incompatibility. Yet a little thought can make us see otherwise. When two colors meet they form an edge whose enormous esthetic potential can be realized only if this edge is treated as the occasion for drawing. The more it can be made to do, the greater it will be as drawing. By establishing a contour, a shape, much of moment will be implied. To one side we will have solidity, hence mass; to the other, air and light. These qualities can be made to reverse themselves if two shapes, instead of just one, are created by the edge. Maximizing this ambiguity will maximize psychological interest. The edge can suggest advancement and recession in space, either on a small scale, as in foreshortening, or on a more architectonic scale, as in perspective; it can also suggest the roundedness and general shapeliness of three-dimensional forms. One of the most difficult things a painter can teach himself is to draw while he paints: so that boundary, color and composition are established simultaneously, not in piecemeal fashion; so that conception and execution, thinking and doing, are indissolubly linked; so that every mark which describes is also constructing.

In the works before us, which artist is teaching himself how to do this? In the Pollock we have line, but do we have drawing? This question is of fundamental importance. Those dark lines which curve about on the surface nowhere suggest shapes assertive enough to produce a feeling of mass. In other words, as we move from one side of these lines to another, we do not move from solid to void, from opacity to light. Nor is there much sense of spatial advancement or recession in them, despite their thinning and thickening, which might have implied the alteration of size produced by relative distance in space. Pollock's notorious method of working produces a line so much like a physical substance (wire, for instance) that it lies too emphatically on the surface of the painting for it to be able to create such an illusion.

If not drawing then, what do we have in the Pollock? Some energy, some light (though mainly as a function of literal brightness of pigment), but practically no mass. Bemoaning its absence, however, would be to miss the point, would it not? This very lightness and airiness is what everyone finds so enthralling. Yet when mass leaves painting, color goes with it. For such a poetry, such a price. The allover mode provided few options—embodying color in the lines, increasing its intensity by thickening or multiplying them; or atomizing it into clouds of little dots. There is a drift toward the monochromatic. Colors cannot be made to enhance each other through interaction. Early on and later, color was for Pollock mainly a kind of filler in oversize drawings. He never demonstrated a knowledge of those advancing and receding properties in which lies color's structural potential. Instead, he relied on an arrangement of lines to make his paintings cohere. This essentially graphic approach is exaggerated in the allover period. But if what we mostly see is line, it does not necessarily follow that we are looking at drawing in its fullest sense.

While there are some who feel that if hard-and-fast distinctions cannot be made they should not even be attempted, there are others for whom fine distinctions are the essence of civilized life. Words do not always come into existence in order to search out objects to which they might arbitrarily attach themselves. Such words as "rendering," "illustration," "mark," "line," "diagram" and "writing" mean something. They refer to important modes of graphic activity which frequently blur into each other and may sometimes elicit an esthetic response. But their blurring can be expedient, as the current fad for "architectural drawing" proves. These "drawings" almost never rise to the level of even mediocre "art" drawing, but remain in the category—the illustration, the rendering—to which they are inevitably consigned by the intentions of their makers (if not their purveyors). The tendency to label graphic productions of all manner and kind as *drawing* suggests a lack of familiarity with the real thing. The very concept of drawing is so bogged down in banality that the phrases "good drawing" and "bad drawing" refer to the plausible depiction of the human form. When the diagram, rendering, automatism and various other forms of literalness have been eliminated, it soon becomes abundantly and shockingly clear just how rare a thing true abstract drawing is. Pollock belongs here, but not always.

While shapes have been eschewed in *No. 28, 1950*, de Kooning's *Attic* is nothing but them, and each is a potential vehicle for color. These shapes seem to be made out of a wonderfully supple and malleable substance from which they've been cut out, then cut into, sometimes even appearing truncated. They zip in and out of space with terrific speed. They wiggle, twist, shatter, squirm, jostle each other for room in which to move about. Because so much has been packed in, the sense of mass is overpowering. The ground has been eliminated. In its place, we have layer after layer of highly animated forms struggling to reach or retain the surface in a mad rush toward identity and being. Critical mass indeed! While the Pollock suggests an ecstatic vision of a world slowly and suavely transforming itself, the de Kooning evokes the very workshops of creation, a moment of coming into being.

But what do we mean when we say that the ground has been eliminated? The shapes do not lie isolated on a field, but lie in front of other shapes, which, in their turn, lie in front of still others. A ground exists, but only flickeringly, as it were, only in those moments when a shape becomes a background for a form in front of it. Thus, mass is being constantly converted into energy (light) and back into mass again. The ground plays no such active role in the Pollock. Illusionistically, it exists only as space. Literally, it is there as a support for those lovely skeins of paint which so beguiled the artist. Let us term this approach to painting "presentational." The field is merely the necessary condition for presenting to the world something the artist has found outside the laws of painting. Like many painters before him and since, Pollock is trying to make all of painting from a single beautiful effect. His work on glass, *No. 29, 1950,* is the all too logical outcome of his tendency to think away the ground.

The price he pays for this is enormous. In great painting, the ground is alternately present and absent, transformed from mass to light and air, and back again. This translates coloristically, into going from color as substance to color as glow and radiance. For this reason, *Attic* shines. *No. 28* seems dull. Pollock's recourse to the literal shininess of silver paint both here and in numerous other works takes on new significance in this context. Although it possesses considerable movement, *No. 28* seems curiously lifeless, while *Attic* pullulates with vitality. Its entire surface forcefully advances toward us, while only the linear net of *No. 28* advances, and, then, not beyond the picture plane. For all its superficial loveliness, the Pollock is a weak painting, as are most of his allover works. His settling for a single effect could be compared with the naive uses to which the lesser masters of the Renaissance put perspective. Yes, they get our attention. But does it then develop into absorbing interest?

Pollock's work methods, so frequently discussed, so endlessly imitated, generate insoluble artistic problems. Touch can play no role here because the artist is working at a distance from the canvas. He is literally out of touch—with himself, as well as his work. Consequently, the placement of *all* the lines is approximate, in an esthetic sense. And while they frequently have a pleasing ductility, it is the ductility of a physical substance, therefore a literal one; and to the extent that it is literal, it is antipoetic in effect. So broad are the methods employed here, there is no possibility of nuance, of fine-tuning, of generating *significant* detail. Since he has abandoned composition, Pollock must fall back upon his taste, balancing this with that: a little here, a little there. We have all the vagueness which the refusal to make the necessary number of precise choices inevitably produces. The organization of this painting, therefore, is of a low order. Its coherence basically depends upon the identification of the web of paint with the support. The result is that famous flatness, where top, side and bottom of the literal picture plane are coextensive with the projected one. But here lies the rub.

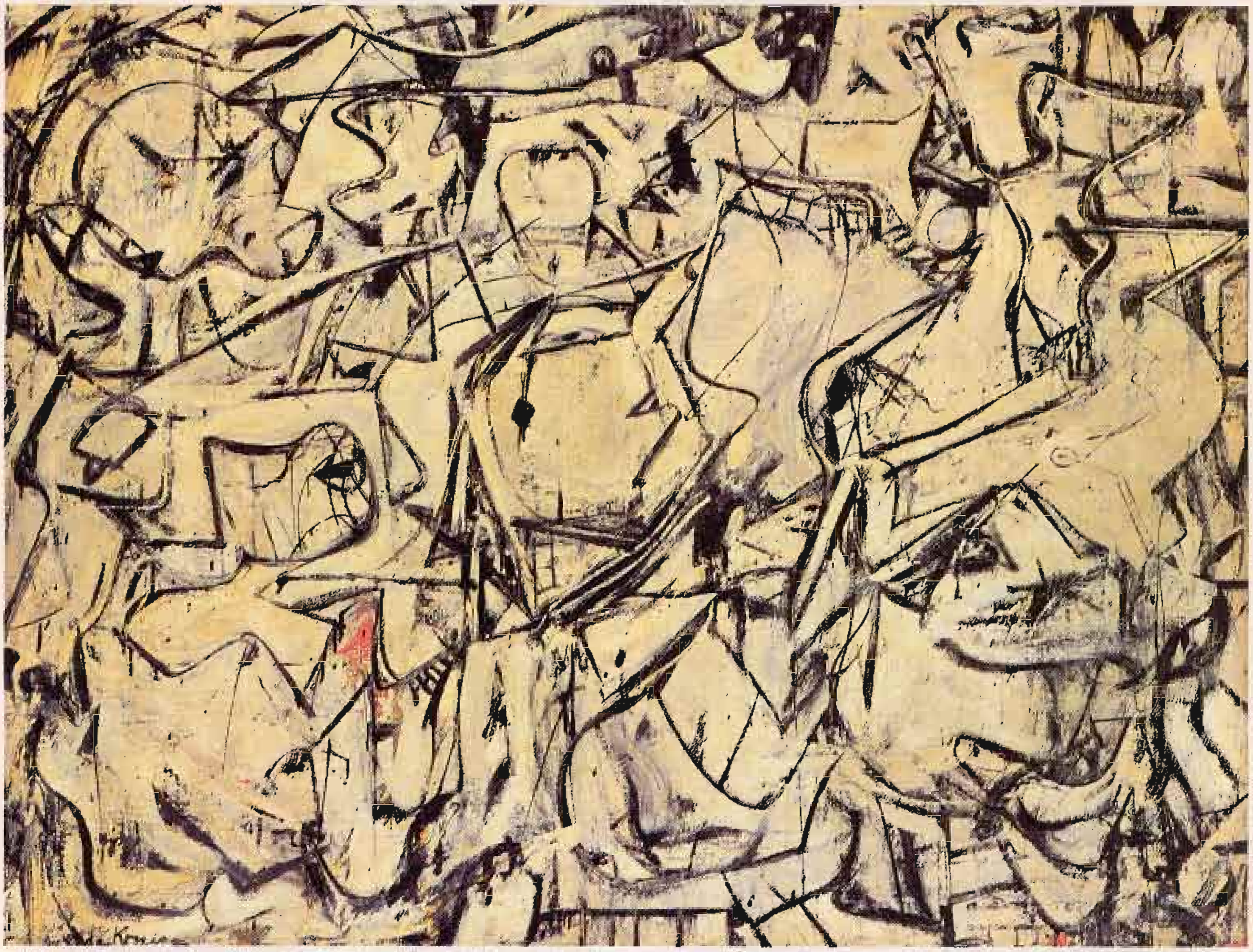
Attics suggest the past, and de Kooning's "Attic" is no different: he has stuffed it with art history.

Again, back to working methods. Painting on unstretched canvas spread out on the floor is problematic because the ultimate condition of the painting is never in view. Physical awkwardness aside, with its attendant aching back, the worst problem is angle of vision. Bending the neck to look at the painting produces an attractive but deceptive effect of foreshortening which will be absent when the canvas is hung. Further, gravity has a dishearteningly regularizing effect on all the materials, be they puddled, splattered, or dripped. If the artist does not intervene (and this is where drawing comes in, as someone like Frankenthaler well knows), the planes described by their edges will all lie parallel to the picture plane (the floor), making for a boringly predictable space of accumulated parallel planes. Because Pollock worked on pictures of this period from all sides, there is very little sense of top or bottom. What is physically farthest away is the same size as what is nearest, surely a questionable practice in very large paintings. The lack of orientation may not seem so dubious when we have all evolved wings, or when these paintings are put into orbiting museums, but for the time being it does not affirm our earthbound status: the denial of physical gravity produces a loss of moral gravity as well.

Compare this situation with the strategies of *Attic*. There, the forms diminish toward the top of the canvas. The two largish shapes which dominate the center are part of a complex of forms which jut out into space while emerging from the middle of the lower edge, where they have been pinned down by a group of short, vertical lines. Through these and a number of other devices, largely recessional in nature, the picture plane is made to seem to lean backward into space at the same time as it bows out at the middle. Let us call this buckling effect, this warping, this mighty corrugation, "compositional contrapposto" and let us recognize, in passing, that de Kooning is a past master at it, as any master must be. Were the visual incident all of the same scale, spread with some uniformity over the entire surface, there would be a tendency for the picture to sag in the middle. This is just what the Pollock does. As far as I know, we have no terms in the field of painting which revolve around this important design problem, although architecture is blessed with the concept of entasis. The allover mode, because it pulls our eye out to the framing edge, is fraught with peril. Since forms, as they approach this edge, acquire an air of greater physical reality, they make identical forms at a distance from the edge seem weaker by comparison—hence softness, sag and inward collapse at the center. Making the lines somewhat coyly turn away from the edge—a recurring stratagem in Pollock's work—has the unfortunate side effect of turning the ground into a passive container.

What made Pollock and his legions of admirers and imitators feel that composition could be discarded? Or to phrase it more pointedly, why were they so happy to see it go? To be sure, it certainly made looking at painting an easier proposition. Composition is a complicating factor. No painting can possess absorbing interest without it, but then, no painting can be "understood" because of it. The purpose of composition is to create inexhaustible ambiguity. The Pollocks of the allover phase can be "gotten." They are instantly intelligible because of the simple cause-effect relationship which is seen to have produced their forms. What seemed to be madness over 30 years ago is now revealing itself to be relentless method, but then, to be all method is to be truly mad. No worry about arbitrary choice here. All has been determined by the interaction of a few physical processes with the laws of nature. Everything is in the right place because physics and lots of good taste put it there. The narrative interest of these paintings is slight indeed, since the story of how they were made is so very simple.

Not surprisingly, what is valued in these paintings is valued elsewhere in American culture—rationalization, objectification, large size as a good unto itself: the dream of dematerialized, effortless motion. Our need for reasons is appealed to by the simplicity of the method, which generates nearly all that we see. However, the poetry of depiction is of the essence in painting. When form and process become indistinguishable, depiction ceases to exist. Painting's magical property, its sleight-of-hand, is drained away. To overemphasize the behavior of materials is to take up the philosophical position of materialism, with its artistically deadening insistence upon the opposition of the subjective and the objective. (The implications of this approach were taken to their logical if inartistic extreme in the gross abuses of the Minimalists.) Interestingly, though not paradoxically, materialism produces art with a low reality quotient. It lacks the



Willem de Kooning: **Attic,** *1949, oil on canvas, 61 ⅜ by 80 ¼ inches. Jointly owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Muriel Kallis Newman.*

requisite tactility. The materials have not been shaped, molded, fashioned enough by the human imagination acting through the human body.

But as we value, so do we desire, so do we fear. The rejection of mass is a rejection of life lived in and through the body. And let us not make the mistake of thinking that the poetry of buoyancy and lighter-than-airness requires this sacrifice. The late work of Léger and Matisse disproves this. The fantasy of ideally effortless motion implies a disembodied psyche, a psyche which, in this case, flees the irrational and the imagination. This promise of ease is the same one extended by the artificial paradises of drugs and booze. Let yourself go; stop choosing, preferring, or caring; skydive endlessly through space. Hailed as breakthrough, the allover style was really an attempt at breakout: the psyche's push to escape into a larger, outer world from what was felt to be, and no doubt was, an entrapping inner one.

Pollock's desire for release is not hard to understand when we survey his earlier works with a dispassionate eye. What slogging hard work they appear to be. No pleasure here in these muddied, clotted forms, these endlessly worried contours, these tortured, painted-over surfaces. One sympathizes with the struggle these paintings evince, for it could not have been amusing to have one's ambitions so outstrip one's skills. Pollock could not put brush to canvas and produce a mark which carried conviction. Few can. But because his honesty and impeccable taste were exceptional, complacency was not possible, hence the desperate search for a way out. Yet painting without touching the canvas is like sex over the telephone. It's a contradiction in terms.

The flight from the problems of real painting produced genuine euphoria. Miraculously, Pollock didn't get hooked on this feeling, although his admirers did, and have been so ever since. No state is more easily or consistently confused with the sense of freedom than manic euphoria. In vulgar parlance, freedom is taken to mean the absence of constraints. At a higher level, it means the ability to choose, although we choose in a context defined by the knowledge of the ultimate constraint—our own mortality. Close observers of mental life have noted that euphoria is frequently a response to catastrophic loss, the psyche's way of protecting itself from painful knowledge. This refusal to acknowledge pain is not self-affirming, but self-destroying. That is why the allover paintings are escapist art. Their false virtuosity produces false sublimity. They do not return us back to ourselves and our dilemma, strengthened and purged of fear, but offer us a false liberation, one steeped in the wrong kind of grandiosity. Hangover is the inevitable denouement when this most fleeting of states evanesces.

Only consummate artistry can provide true liberation. One thinks of the late Titian or Monet, of Wagner or Milton. The splendor of their work gives us the paradise we long for right now. Pollock, on the other hand, asks us to jump out a window. Trust me, he says, and offers as a come-on the old promise of life after death, the retention of an apersonal consciousness (one which neither chooses nor remembers) within a condition of physical dissolution. Not for nothing did he title a painting *Lucifer*. Spirit and matter are no more seen to be interrelated than are mass and light. The *locus classicus* of Western culture is the fall from grace and light. I refer the reader to the mad Kinbote's harrowing reflections on death by falling in Nabokov's luminous masterpiece *Pale Fire:* "Of the not very many ways known of shedding one's body, falling, falling, falling, is the supreme method. . . ."[1]

One is a long time looking at de Kooning's *Attic* before it reveals itself. Ponder the title. People frequently cram things into an attic in a helter-skelter fashion. And as they're often old things, attics inevitably suggest the past. De Kooning's attic is no different from anyone else's in this respect, for he has stuffed it with a good deal of art history. Look for eyes and mouths and you'll be on to the game. This is a loving recreation of a group scene from Dutch painting à la Hals or Rembrandt. Stretching from left to right, and occupying the implied center of the pictorial space, is a large oval table surrounded by figures. Smack-dab in the center is a seated and presumably male figure—head with swatch of hair, eye, mouth, ear, then shoulder and arm—who holds another figure in his lap, no doubt a woman—head with hat or crown, eye, nose, then neck and shoulders and a suggestion of two legs dangling to the left of the male figure's shoulder. What famous configuration does this evoke, if not Rembrandt's wonderful self-portrait with Saskia on his lap, in which he turns to the viewer and salutes him with a raised glass of wine? Embedded in the wildly beating heart of the now, the modern, is this cherished image from the past. What a wonderfully improbable, impossible achievement this is, and what resonance it gives the painting. This is humanist art at its finest. Thanks to the continuities provided by civilized life, we, limited creatures of time and place, hold converse with the dead. We contribute to the extension of this conversation into the future, not in the interest of prolonging our own existence in the *au-delà* of history books, but in the interest of humanity at large, simply to pass on the torch, to inspire confidence in life and courage in living, for those yet to be born.

De Kooning's art is both old and new. Pollock's was only new. This newness was specious, bought at the price of leaving out some of the essential ingredients of painting. It was a dreadful impasse. A man whose mind teemed with pictorial ideas (the drawings prove this) was working in a reductive mode which did not admit of them. A man whose gifts were for easel painting, even the exquisite, who lacked the commanding, overarching rhetoric which large-scale work requires, was painting enormous canvases. A confused, bewildered man was being greeted as hero and leader. A lesser artist would have succumbed to his celebrity; so many around him did—Rothko, Still, Newman, Motherwell, et al. They were like hypnotized rabbits, frozen in the headlights of history. But Pollock refused to collaborate, to repeat himself, to engage in the production of collectibles. He struggled on to paint his finest, most fully rounded work.

Yet this was not to be the lesson of Pollock, his legacy to younger artists. "Correct" opinion would seize upon the allover phase as the worthwhile one, as it did and continues to do with Picasso's Cubist period. Pollock would not be permitted a life lived in time, a life of struggle, learning and growth, but only a historical moment, one in which he was useful and then ceased to be so. Of course, Pollock's early death made all of this possible. The crowd neither fears nor envies the dead. Serious painting (which is to say, abstract painting) would be increasingly defined by an ever-narrowing range of attitudes about picture making developed logically out of Pollock's example. A painting need not be "interesting." The fewer processes involved, both mental and physical, the better.

Pollock's allover paintings are escapist. Their false virtuosity produces false sublimity. Hangover is the inevitable denouement.

Whatever the process, it will determine all the forms. Inspiration and the imagination will kindly not apply. It doesn't matter how the paint gets there, or, in some cases, who puts it there, as long as it does not reflect the agency of the hand. The lyric mode is the poetry to be preferred. Euphoria is the state at which to aim. Pattern passes itself off as composition. Design takes precedence over execution, when it is not indistinguishable from it. Size is of the essence. Flatness is all. The result? Acres of baby-simple paintings. Herds of white pachyderms waiting to be stampeded by the arrival of a new paradigm. Sprayed, stained, striped; soft-edge, hard-edge; the results are the same—staleness, flatness, profitability.

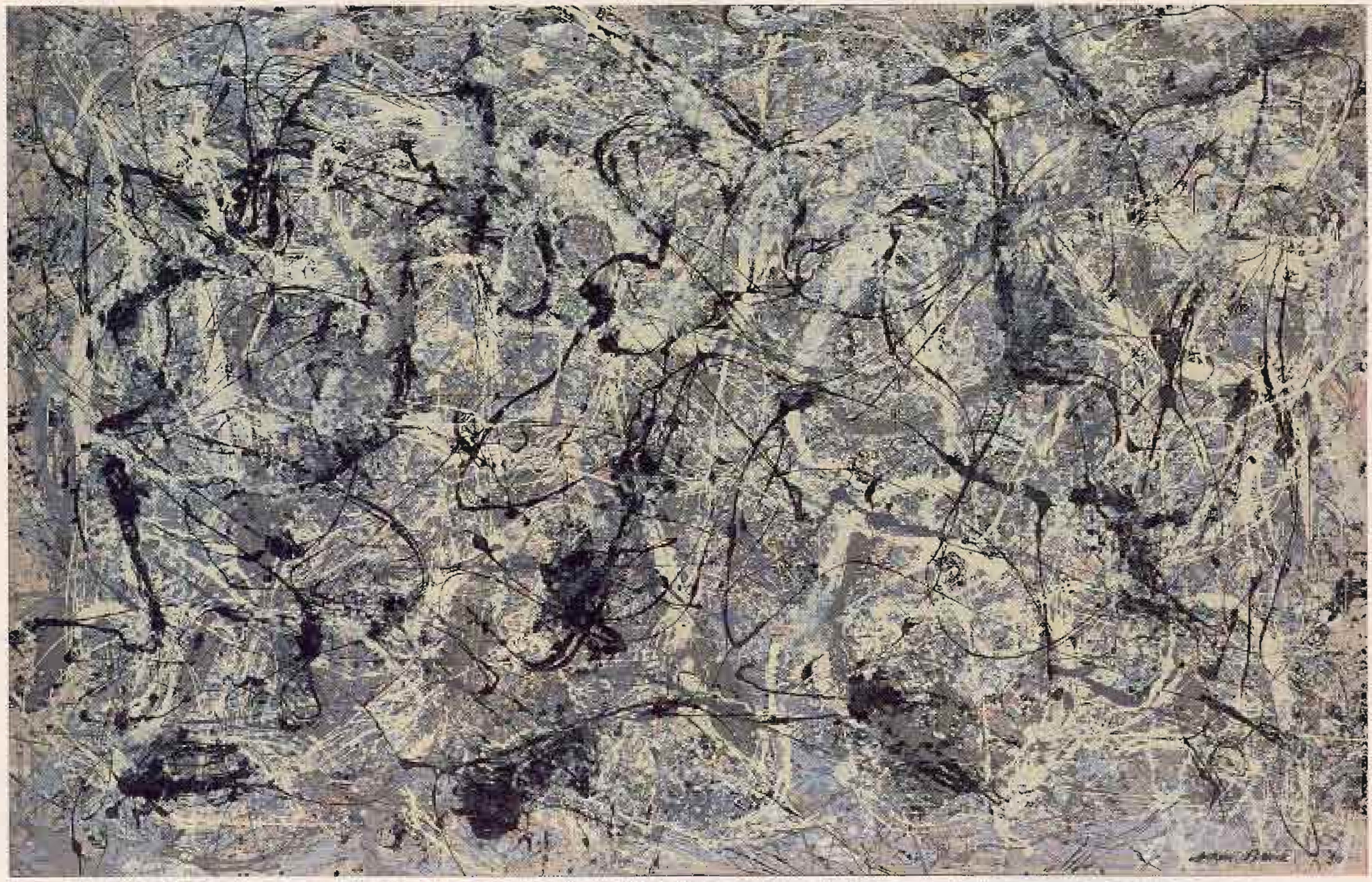
Artists like Bannard and Poons could go from dry, schematic painting to a loose and heavily encrusted kind, without giving any sign of having reexamined their notion of what painting is. However beautiful their paintings were, and many by Olitski, Noland and Morris Louis were that, they were beautiful in the way that nature is—a sunset, veining in marble, the structure of crystals; or in the way that Oriental ceramics are, Japanese Iga Ware for instance. But because this work fails to hold up an image of another consciousness, it is devoid of psychological interest. Beauty without intelligence is insipid. And for all the bluster about avant-garde, what came creeping through the back door was an academic illusionism of the most vapid variety, brought on by the suppression of all sense of the handmade.

We have now arrived at our most telling instance, the one which most clearly demonstrates the hopeless cul-de-sac into which abstract painting was being forced. It is important to remember that in the 1960s the phrase "good painting" was being said with a sneer. The smart artist played dumb. (That left lots of room for dumb critics to play smart.) No one expressed the attitudes I have enumerated more fully or more brutally than Frank Stella, in his series of black, striped canvases of 1958–60.

The American flag paintings of Jasper Johns were, to be sure, the new ingredient here. Johns's confusion of the signifier with the signified, of signs with paintings, produced an entirely new deadpan effect. In some, the flag is coextensive with the ground, thus becoming a sign in the literal sign-painting sense, and producing an extremely antipictorial impression of thingness. Usually it has been thought that the artist inhabits a privileged realm of adventure, pleasure and imagination, yet here was one who seemed to have willingly donned a straitjacket. But this was to be no escape act. The what of these paintings was predetermined. The how of their being painted was the only place where there was still some room left in which to maneuver. This would be the pretty part, the "feeling" part, not to say the sentimental part—those streaming tears of running encaustic.

The Johns flags are like a Francis Bacon painting, although in a much lower key. We don't have the Grand Guignol, flat-out horror of a Bacon, with a screaming, mutilated figure twisted about itself. We do have, however, the pictorial equivalent of a physically rigid person who is quietly and uncontrollably weeping. This is a clinical diagnosis of hysterocatalepsy if ever there was one, but this was not what the world saw. It saw the flag. And Johns had wrapped himself in it. A grateful nation has clasped him to its corporate bosom ever since. It was an extraordinarily successful bid for attention. The flag paintings spread the good news that all that is required in the face of a collapsing inner life is an act of appropriation. We do not need to learn how to express ourselves or how to choose. We can paper over our problems with ambition and will.

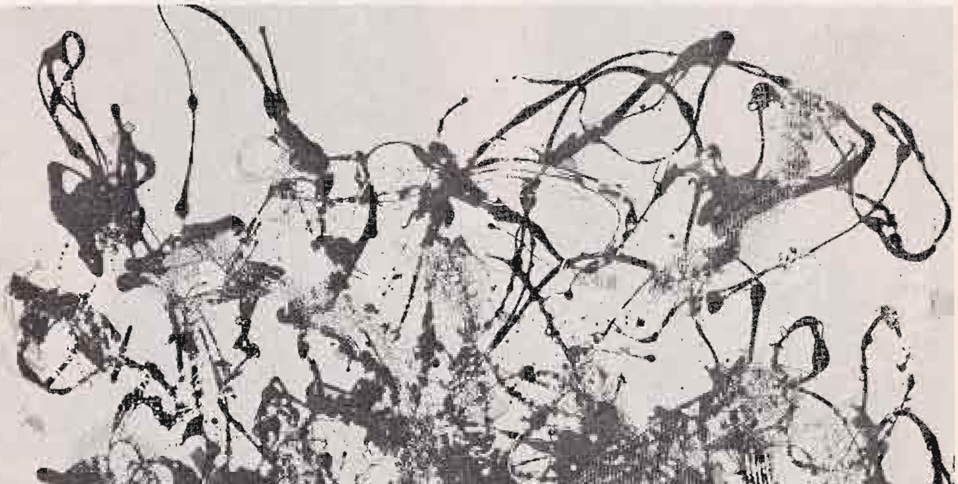
How to top that act? Stella pondered. And the black paintings resulted. They would be a triumph of the will. Purely. Simply. No flowers plucked along the way, no tender, small discoveries nurtured



Jackson Pollock: **Number 28, 1950,** *1950, mixed mediums on canvas, 68 by 105 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art and Muriel Kallis Newman.*

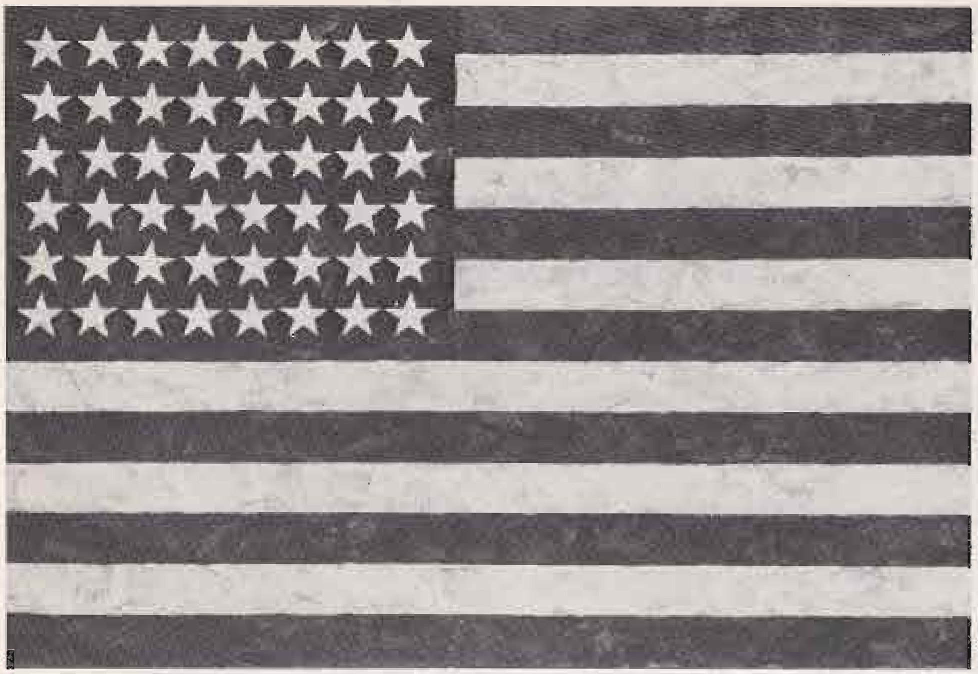
into glowing life. This would be the long march, each painting a monument to grim determination. They would be difficult and easy in the best possible way. Dreary, boring work to paint, this would be the hard part. Like all boring work, however, it would be perfectly undemanding, in the intellectual and the spiritual sense, for the artist and his audience. And so, in the land of the Puritans, Stella would garner the rich rewards accorded the ascetic and earn respect at the same time. The logic is compelling. Any artist who denies himself the pleasures of the imagination, the gratifications of painting, should have some consolations.

Art which is instantly comprehensible seems to exist outside of time, seems to make time stop. It provides an escape from dread; a consummation devoutly to be wished for if the thought of your own mortality makes you quail. But humanist art, the art which takes time as its subject, is nature's consolation prize for those who can contemplate the prospect of their own death. It consoles by providing deep sensorial gratifications and by creating an opportunity in which to share communally an awareness of life's mutability, hence its splendor and pathos. All cultures which seek to encourage intellectual achievement must provide an antidote to the painful awareness caused by the development of the capacity to think, to imagine.

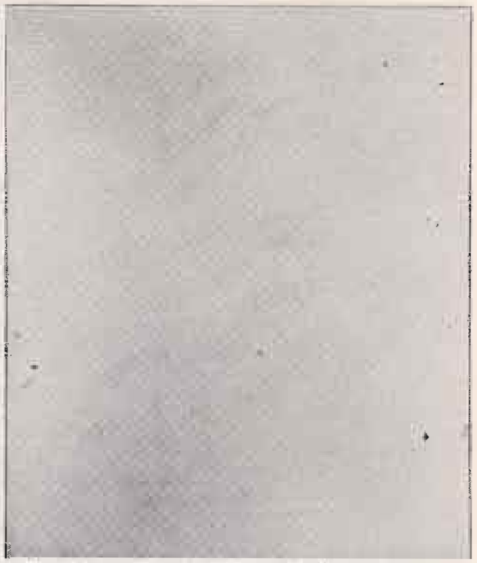


Pollock: **Number 29, 1950,** *mixed mediums on glass, 48 by 72 inches. National Gallery of Canada.*

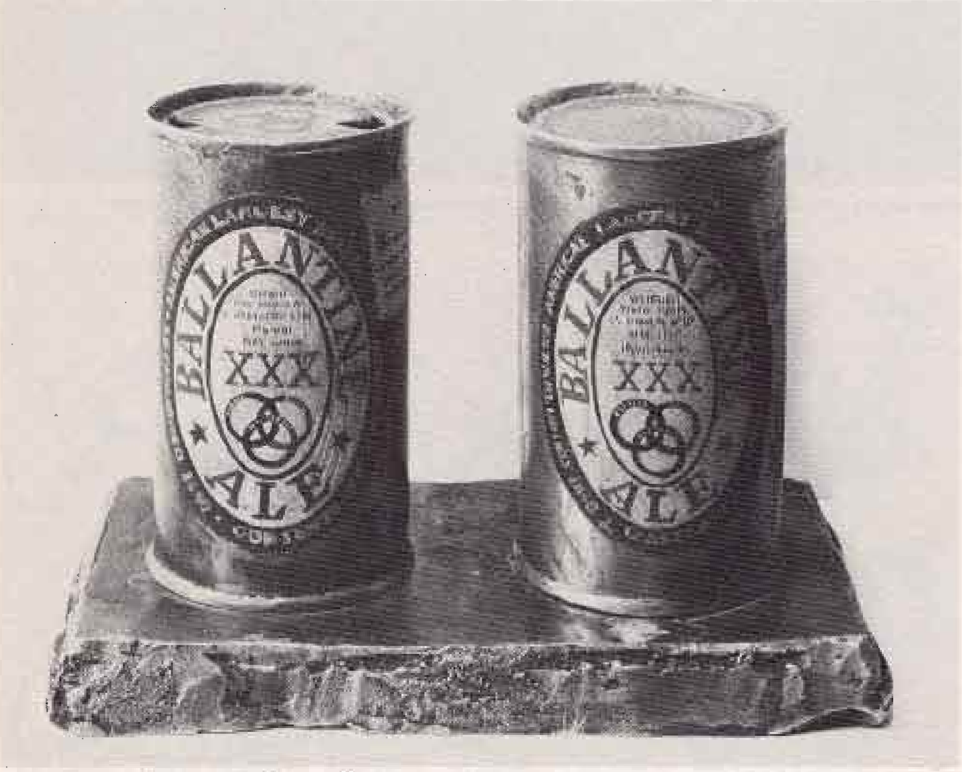
Intellectual achievement is mankind's chief means of survival. The thinking portions of society cannot be left to the tender ministrations of entertainment industries, nor to art as entertainment. People need images of the very highest forms of behavior, images which will help them to feel at home in their minds, at home with their imagination. People do not need "the *energetic* creation of deadness and fixity, the passionate reduplication of fetishized representations."[2]



Jasper Johns: **Flag,** *1958, encaustic on canvas, 41 ¼ by 60 ¾ inches. Collection Mrs. Leo Castelli.*



Robert Rauschenberg: **Erased de Kooning Drawing,** *1953, 19 by 14 ½ inches. Collection the artist.*



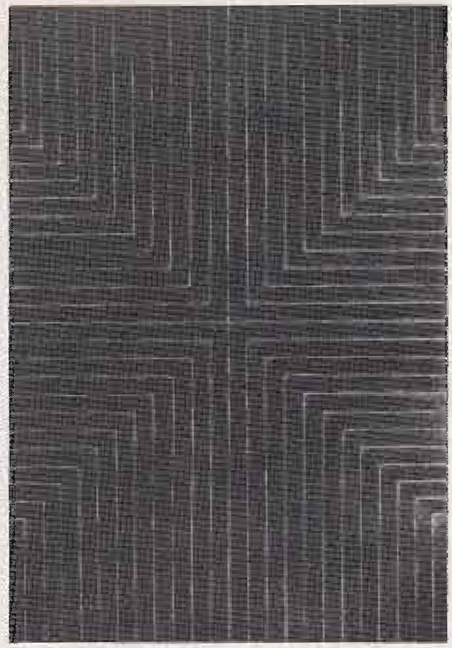
Johns: **Painted Bronze (Ale Cans),** *1960, painted bronze, 5 ½ by 8 by 4 ¾ inches. Collection Dr. Peter Ludwig.*

After Pollock, acres of baby-simple paintings. Sprayed, striped, soft-edge, hard-edge, the results are the same—staleness, flatness, profitability.

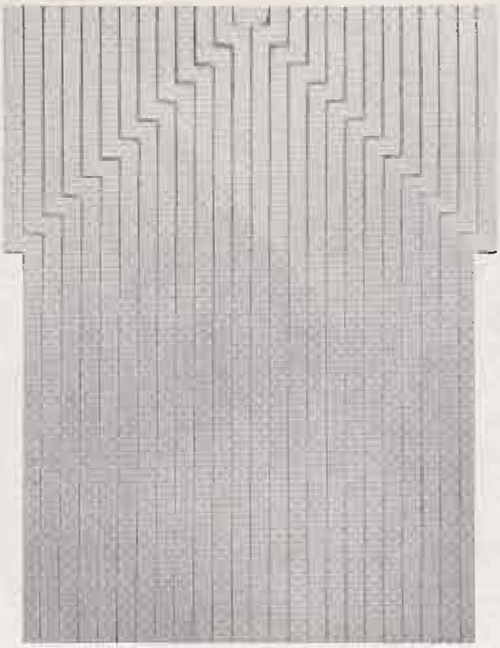
Stella had spared us the blandishments and overclose embraces of the muse, but he was in serious esthetic trouble and he knew it. The rectangle was causing him difficulties. This is not surprising, given what he was trying to do with it. Like Pollock, he was approaching it as a decorative surface, a passive container, which, in this case, he was trying to fill up with stripes.

The rectangle and its special case, the square, possess highly unstable fields. Their edges do not have a uniform psychological density along their entire lengths, but become more dynamic as they meet other edges at a 90-degree angle. These corners, and most so in a square, form arrows which thrust outward from the center of the field. Any system of lines running parallel to edges, while "logical" in a superficial way, is not psychological. It doesn't take into account the varying dynamic condition of the field and its edges, their relative tensile states. For this reason, and for those cited earlier in the discussion of Pollock, these pictures tend to cave in at the center after a little looking. Further, the essential arbitrariness of the length of the lines and bands is impossible to disguise. They always seem lopped off at the edge. (We know to what lengths, and to what extreme proportions, Noland would go to disguise this basic design flaw.) This problem does not arise with the American flag, however, since habit makes the length of the bars seem inevitable while rendering us mercifully insensible to its pathetically bad design.

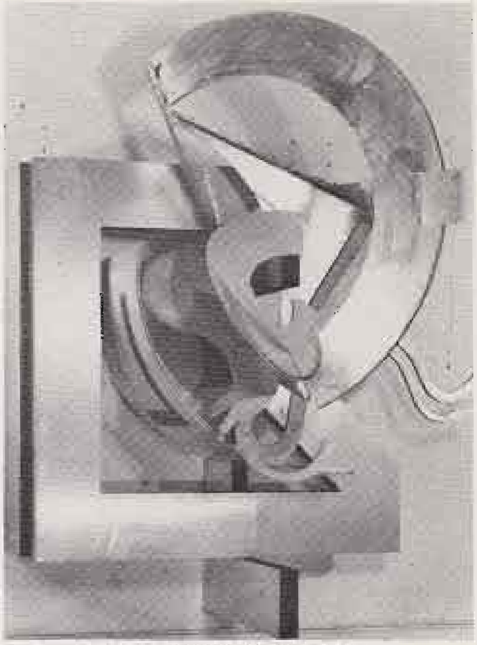
The black paintings are doomed to esthetic failure because they do not embody pictorial thinking so much as design thinking, and bad design thinking at that. The rectangle is the most optical of fields. It cannot be taken in whole by the human eye. Flatness cannot be produced by the simpleminded expedient of using flat forms. *Flatness has to be depicted*, as Johns well knew. Its depiction involves the preservation of individual brushstrokes. Johns's flag paintings do not collapse inwardly because of the tactility of their surfaces, the gently equilibrating movement of the paint strokes as they



Frank Stella: **Die Fahne Hoch!** *1959, enamel on canvas, 121 ½ by 73 inches. Collection Eugene Schwartz.*



Stella: **Luis Miguel Dominguin,** *1960, aluminum paint on canvas, 96 by 72 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine.*



Stella: **President Brand,** *1982, honeycomb aluminum, 121 by 101 by 78 inches. Collection Charles and Doris Saatchi.*

seek but never find a resting place in the field. While the design itself never breaks out of the picture plane (a grave failing), at least some of the strokes do, thus providing an antidote to collapse. Johns has preserved some dialogue between conception and execution, design and construction, though he has not managed to escape the pitfall of illustration. The conception is banal, but the detail is interesting. This is not the completely anti-intellectual position that Stella takes.

There is no point in examining the black paintings closely, since the acts of painting which produced them do not reflect significant mental processes, but only the most workaday acts of will. The detail, if it can be so called, lacks significance. These are configurations, not compositions. Their effect is stunning, numbing, deadening—because something we carry around with us all the time is not being invited to join in: our minds. The legitimate desire to astonish has shaded off into the desire to stupefy. To look at these things for any length of time is to be rendered stupid. Since all the forms exist either on the surface or behind it, nothing advances toward us. We are not being met halfway. What lay behind that surface? We found out when Stella revealed himself in the pointy, metallic, sharp-edged constructions which were to invade our living and breathing spaces. They underline, if it needs underlining, the enormous difference between passive and active aggression.

Something is always left over in the black paintings which the design has not been able to incorporate. A little life has managed to wriggle free from would-be total control—remember those pesky corners. The trivialization of abstraction had brought him this far, but light and air had yet to be totally expunged. With the silver paintings, Frank Stella gives the phrase "to cut corners" a whole new meaning. What could not be included would be excluded. Literally. His search for those effects of impact which flatness produces had lead him to literalness. Antipictorial by their nature, flatness and literalness are antihumanistic as well. The relationships we have with art imitate the ones we have in daily life. The black paintings are authoritarian. We are asked not to participate but to submit. This is the content of the icon or the fetish. This is what the worship of "impact" reduces itself to—a deeply reactionary reversion to prehumanist values, not to mention just plain bullying—the silent treatment, the cold shoulder.

This situation could be likened to those perverse 19th-century images of the naked maid embracing an aloof, stalwart gentleman completely clad in armor with the viewer cast in the role of quivering ectoplasm. Stella had struck just the right sadomasochistic note for his audience. No wonder, then, that rather than abandon his *idée fixe,* he abandons painting, as he must. Beefed-up stretchers, light-reflective paint, openings in the center of the canvas, the shaped canvas—all would be the order of the day. They would go some way toward solving the problems created by a misconceived enterprise. Yet even here the same difficulty (design collapse at the center) pursued him, because, to repeat, attracting our attention to the physical edge has the effect of diminishing, by force of contrast, the reality of all those areas removed from it. His recourse to higher and yet higher relief solved the problem but effectively removed him from the concerns of painting. Even here he was anticipated by Johns and Hinman.

For reasons best left to sociologists to explain, painting had been attracting people with no interest in pictorial space. One heard people talk a lot about "getting beyond painting," though clearly it was painting that had gotten beyond them. While it was verboten to put anything *into* a painting, including "feeling," it was just fine to attach anything you wanted to *onto* it. But this was just the old idea of the *repoussoir.* The affixed items establish a foreground. The literalist surface then becomes the middle ground and acquires some illusion of depth. All of these contortions are the outcome of failing to include color and/or light in one's calculations. Stella never avails himself of their structural potential. With him, color and brushstroke as well are superficial—applied, decorative, arbitrary, not a part of the structure—hence, the works emit noise, not signals.

Stella's reputation has thrived on the inability of his audience to distinguish between fine art and objet d'art. He has bluffed, saying that he intends his work to be decorative. (Or, like Warhol, has he told the truth and not been believed?) The neatness of the oeuvre, its clever parody of artistic development, lures the lazy taxonomist, if not the connoisseur. He has enjoyed the prestige of the painter without ever really being one. The confusion of painting with sculpture appeals to the popular imagination. (Think of those religious shrines in Italy, with their painted life-size figures in naturalistic settings, still drawing crowds of the faithful after centuries.) He has become the abstract Red

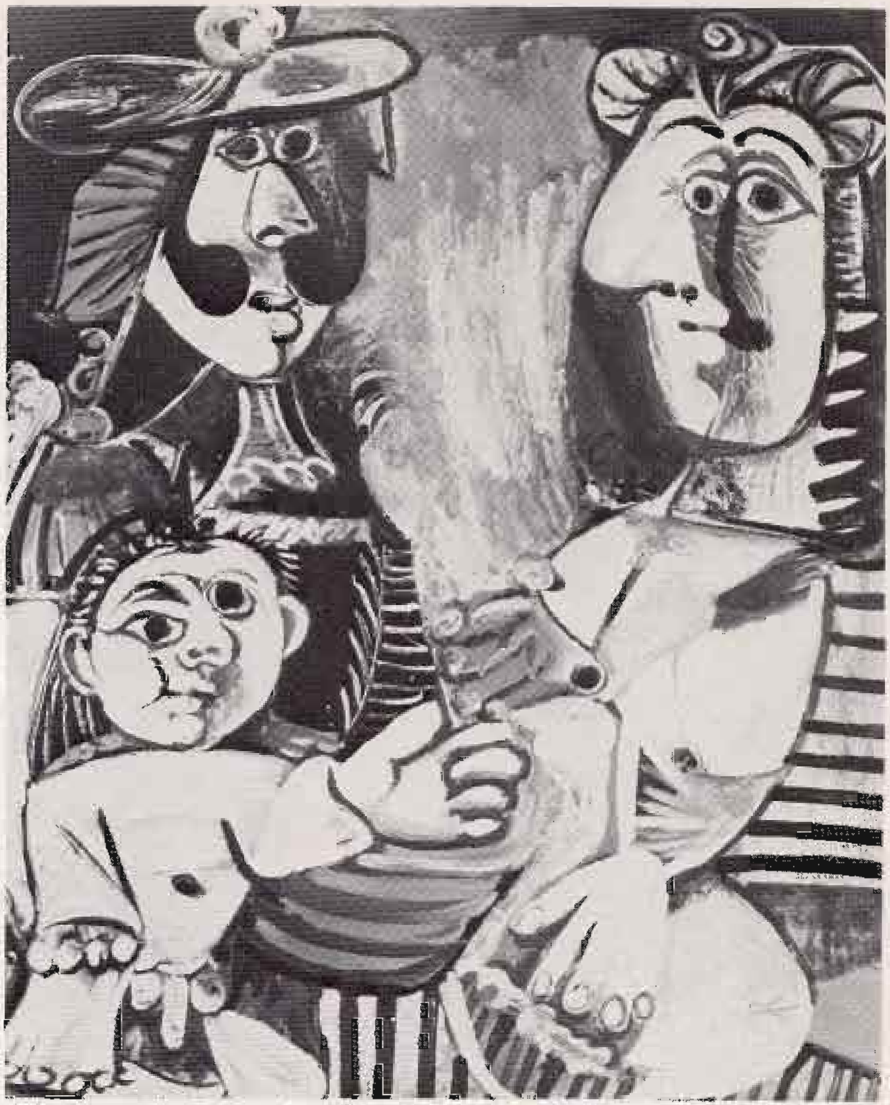
Grooms. When interviewed in the *New York Times* and asked to comment upon the relationship of his work to sculpture, the artist demurred, likening any remarks he might make to "opening up a can of worms." None of us picks our images accidentally. Significance pursues us whether we will it or not. It would be difficult indeed to find a better metaphor to describe his recent work.

Picasso's late paintings—familiar yet unknown, ripe with implications but spurned by the presumptuous.

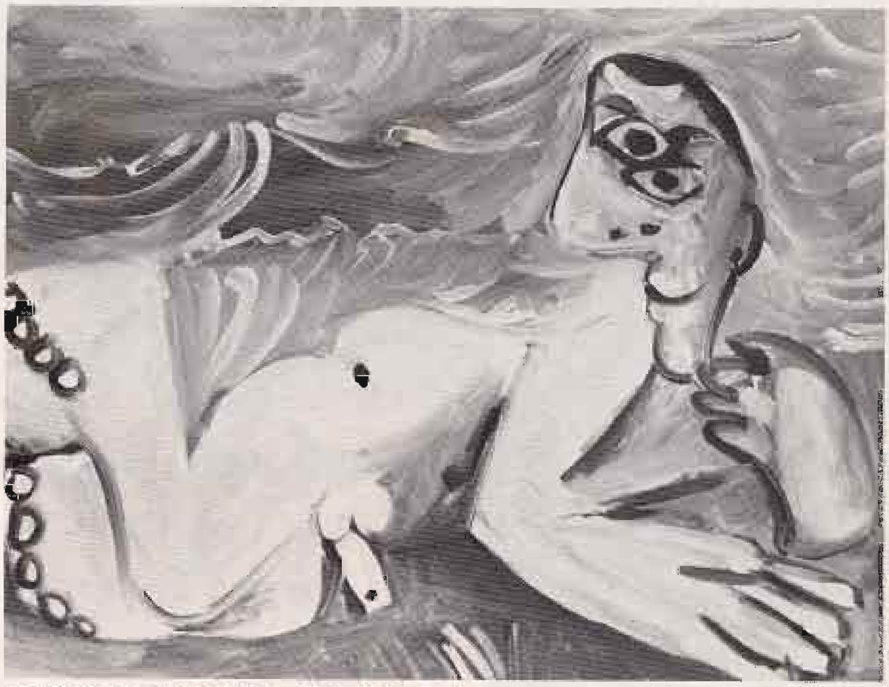
It has been discovered that the schooling behavior of fish is controlled by an area of their brain which can be surgically deadened. When this is done to a fish, it swims boldly away from its fellows. Instead of its usual response—increasing agitation with growing distance from the school, and then a quick return—the fish never looks back. To their surprise, researchers have found that the other fish follow it. The fish playing with the fewest marbles becomes the leader. And Proust observed that fish which constantly bump up against the sides of their aquarium, without ever seeming to learn about its size, could be compared to people who never learn that life has limits. He counseled taking a stand at the center of life.

Art stands at the center of our lives, and, for the past 30 years, it has provided us with the spectacle of a seemingly endless series of art movements and, for each one of them, a corresponding vowel movement. Beneath the profusion, however, we can see a constantly repeating pattern of *reaction*. All the elements were in place by the late 1950s. The attitude of Rauschenberg and Johns toward de Kooning speaks volumes. He was seen, and rightly, to reside upon the highest promontories of art. Because he had advanced on the broadest possible front, he had been slow to ripen into greatness. Always trying to include as much of what his comprehensive grasp of the history of art told him painting was and could be, he was now the possessor of a virtuosity almost unparalleled in the brief history of abstraction (he was rivaled only by Hofmann), and the creator of an expanding body of work which, in its richness, complexity and depth of pathos, nobility and monumentality and sheer gloriousness, invited comparison with the greatest masters of the Italian High Renaissance.

Abstraction had stopped being the province of *petit maîtres*, and de Kooning was one of the most important reasons it had. The young and ambitious who craved de Kooning's position, if not always the long



Pablo Picasso: The Family, *1970, oil on canvas, 63 3/8 by 51 1/8 inches. Musée Picasso, Paris.*

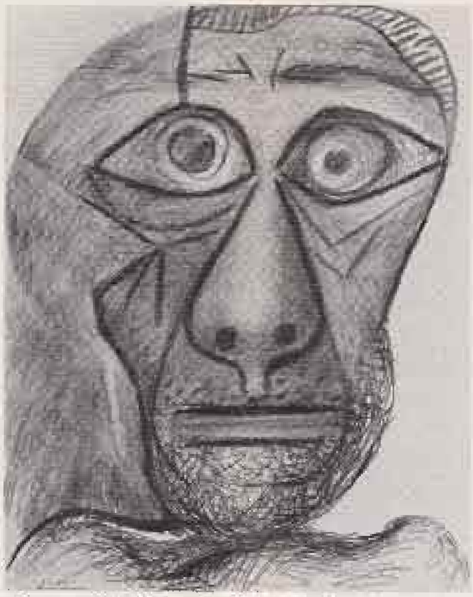


Picasso: Nude Man Reclining, *1971, oil on canvas, 34 1/2 by 45 3/8 inches. Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zürich.*

apprenticeship for which it was the reward, could try direct assault upon this redoubt, as did Rauschenberg, or a more subtle campaign of mining the heights, as did Johns. The former's "erased de Kooning" unspeakably speaks for itself. Johns's bronze beer cans, while remarkably mute, are no less eloquent. They were his riposte to de Kooning's reputed comment that Johns's dealer could sell anything, even beer cans. "I am the spirit which always denies," says Goethe's Mephistopheles. More powerful and less childish than mere vandalism, mockery would be the new destructive mode.

Not that there wasn't a great deal to mock—a posturing army of expressionists fatuously "affirming" life—but even more, the grotesquely exalted utopian wing of American painting. Rothko, Still, Newman and Reinhardt conspired to make St. Simeon Stylites look like a gadabout. But for every extreme, an equal and opposite one: populist imagery, not to say cornball Americana—Johns's and Rauschenberg's quilts, flags, beer cans and soda bottles—would provide one, and stimulate others to genuine excesses. The wheel of fashion had begun to turn. It would soon be spinning. The crass, the ascetic; the literal, the dematerialized: these would vie with and lean on each other. They would imply each other because each would be seen as the other's antidote. The quixotic pursuit of essence, the nihilistic insistence upon materiality and appearance; the quasi-devotional, the frankly commercial: the alternations were fast and furious. It was beginning to look like a cat fight. The antagonists were blurring into each other. What was being generated, and with the utmost vigor, was not the individual art object, forced to stand on its own, but a grotesque parody of art history. The "story line" would be all, and any object or artist the merest epiphenomenon.

Readers do not have to be told that, for the moment, crassness is back in the saddle; that it's off, running, and in full cry. What they do have to be told is why this essay has been titled *The Man Who Forgot How to Paint.* No, not Pollock. As we have seen, he was the man who had learned how to paint, though this has yet to be recognized. What is being proposed here is the discovery of a great body of work, familiar yet unknown, a corpus ripe with implication for the future, and rich in consolations for the present; a supreme gift spurned by the presumptuous and overconfident tastemakers of our age—the late paintings of Picasso. The story of the reputation of his post–World War II work should be told as a cautionary tale to every young person determined to become an artist or a patron. Here was a man, universally acclaimed as a genius, whose contribution to modernism—indeed, the history of art—was beyond dispute, yet whose later work was not even given the benefit of the doubt by the makers of correct opinion in this country. (Of course, these paintings require sorting out. Picasso left that task to time and connoisseurship.) Would it have helped if he had become an American citizen? (Doubtful, since the music of Stravinsky, a similar case, never ceased to be controversial.) Made-in-America had become an important issue, and one sympathizes, especially with the artists. Yet a great price is paid for insularity. The limitations of our national school of painting—flatness, dourness and general colorlessness—would be turned into virtues, as if those grim, provincial 18th-century portraits had come back to haunt us in abstract guise. Our values hadn't changed. We were just more confident. But winning a war hadn't turned this country into a nation of artists and connoisseurs.



Picasso:* Self-Portrait, *1972, pencil and colored crayons on paper, 25 ⅞ by 19 ⅞ inches. Private collection, Japan.

The limitations of our national painting—flat, dour, colorless—became virtues, as if those grim 18th-century portraits had come back in abstract guise.

Were the American or world art audience familiar with Picasso's late work, it would be hard to imagine the "new figuration" having the success it currently enjoys. The term "postmodern" is a bad joke; "premodern" would be more like it. The exuberance, vitality, newness and sheer, painterly expressiveness of this old man's work puts that of the youngsters to shame. What shocks in his work is not *what* he paints (that refuge of hacks), even in scenes of sexual coupling, but *how* he paints. The so-evident glee he took in painting struck our prudes as indecently childish. But as Le Corbusier once observed, the important thing is not to stay young, but to become young, and this Picasso had done. The love of knowledge was ever fresh in him, and he pursued it through the act of painting, an activity which he equated with experience, with life itself.

As he turned himself into a great Surrealist, so he learned from the best of American painterly abstraction, an influence which made itself felt in the 1960s, if not earlier, and continued right up to his death in '73. This period of his work is the greatest compliment ever paid to the art of this country. Ironically, it has gone unacknowledged. Why? Because those very achievements were being pushed aside as rapidly as possible, right here, in the land of their origin. Forgot how to paint? Those who said it were wiser than they knew. To invent, one must forget. Periodically Picasso would abandon all. Then, there would be yet another triumph of the imagination, that faculty, after memory, alas, most at a discount among us, where variation is so frequently confused with invention, size with importance, brutality and vulgarity with strength.

The issues raised by the old age of a great artist are the opposite of amusing. They put our values, especially escapist ones, to a serious test. Hedonism loses its swagger, evasion shows itself for what it is. Did Picasso waste the last 25 years of his life? Had he fallen hopelessly behind? As his physical energy flagged, did his spirit wither and grow short of breath? We think not. Here was a man who was ahead of his time because he lived in his time, not in "history." What power and glory these late works possess, as if Picasso's heart had burst into an immense bonfire with which to warm himself and us. His courage frightens because it reminds us that there is something to be brave about. Picasso affronts the dullards, rouses the timid, but—even more—he challenges death, stares back at it, smiles at it, even laughs. He proves, in doing so, that serious painting is not dreary and never has been; that joy can be as noble, as distinguished, as death—"that most distinguished thing." □

1.Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire,* New York, Putnam, 1962, p. 220.

2. David Turner in the *Times Literary Supplement,* July 1, 1983, p. 707, from David Simpson's *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad,* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

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