The Visual Arts in Post-1945 America

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In 1949 art historian Oliver Larkin ended his Pulitzer Prize-winning survey, *Art and Life in America*, with this optimistic statement: “Nowhere . . . is there more brilliant artistic technique, more latent creative talent, than here” (Larkin, 1949, p. 478). Larkin’s paean to America’s cultural exceptionalism were not atypical in the immediate post-World War II era. Indeed, in 1948, influential critic Clement Greenberg proclaimed “how much the level of American art has risen in the last five years, with the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith.” “The main premises of Western art,” he added, “have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power” (Greenberg, 1948, p. 215).

For many historians and critics, the second half of the twentieth century has meant the cultural and economic dominance of America’s visual arts. Notions of cultural nationalism, first championed in the 1910s and 1920s and supported during the Great Depression by various New Deal arts programs, remained strong in the immediate postwar years. A steady progression of new American art styles, from Pollock’s postwar brand of Abstract Expressionism to later movements such as Neo-Dada, Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, Feminist art, and Neo-Expressionism, whetted critical appetites, fed historical understandings of native creativity, and piqued art market interests, nationally and internationally. If European strains of modern art, especially those of French avant-garde artists such as Picasso and Matisse, had previously commanded the attention of collectors and curators, the post-World War II era saw a surge of interest in an American avant-garde, and American culture in general.

By mid-century, New York had clearly replaced Paris as the world capital of modern art – the culmination of aesthetic, social, and economic trends decades in the making – and modern art had become widely understood as “American” art. During the 1940s, many universities added courses in American art to their curriculum; a decade later, the first dissertations in American art and “the systematic filling of academic and museum positions with Ph.D.s in American art history began to take place” (Johns, 1984, p. 342). In 1951, the first training center specifically focused on the study of American art and culture was established at the Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum (Delaware); in 1952, the editors of *Partisan Review* organized a benchmark symposium, “Our Country and Our Culture”; in 1954, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted the twenty-four-gallery exhibition, *Two Centuries of*

Surveys of American art, from Oliver Larkin’s landmark historiography (Wallach, 2001) to texts by art historians (Wilmerding, 1976; Taylor, 1979; Baigell, 1984; W. Craven, 1994; Bjelajac, 2000; Doss, 2002) and critics (Rose, 1967; Hughes, 1997), detail the evolution of art styles and important cultural moments. Yet many accounts of post-1945 American art have been shaped by “histories” outside the academy: by critics and theorists who wrote for art journals and magazines; by museum curators who organized exhibitions; and by artists who found their voice in manifestos and interviews. In the years after World War II, American art emerged, evolved, and was repeatedly redefined in artists’ studios, galleries, museums, and classrooms, and by institutions such as the College Art Association (CAA, the primary professional organization for art teachers and art historians in higher education, numbering 14,000 members in 1997). The art press and mainstream media played major roles in articulating the artistic agenda, shaping cultural tastes, and contributing to larger public discourses about American art. Moreover, since the mid-1970s, the historiography of America’s postwar visual arts has been informed by revisionist sensibilities which recognize that earlier versions of the story of modern American art were frequently biased and exclusive, overlooking much of the art and many of the artists of the postwar period. Shifting understandings of modernism, and of modern art, are central to an understanding of postwar art, as are shifting understandings of national identity; indeed, much of post-1945 American art, and its historiography, has repeatedly focused on recreating and redefining modernism as well as notions of modern American identity.

### From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism: New Notions of American Modernism

During the 1940s, a remarkable shift occurred in American art as the representational American Scene, Social Realist, and Regionalist styles dominant during the Great Depression were eclipsed by new strains of abstract painting and sculpture. As one critic observed in 1944: “There’s a style of painting gaining ground in this country which is neither Abstract nor Surrealist, though it has suggestions of both, while the way the paint is applied – usually in a pretty free-swinging spattery fashion, with only vague hints of subject matter – is suggestive of the methods of Expressionism.” “Jackson Pollock, Lee Hersch, and William Baziotes are of this school,” he added, “in addition to some forty other contemporaries” (Coates, 1944, p. 50).

The new modern art was called Abstract Expressionism, and alternately “action painting” and the “New York School” because most of its artists lived and worked in New York City, and because postwar American critics deliberately aimed to contrast it with the “School of Paris” abstractions of Picasso and Matisse. Jackson Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950* (plate 1), a huge 8 × 17-foot canvas
densely covered with intersecting lines and splashes of paint, is emblematic of the Abstract Expressionist style that dominated post-World War II American art, and typical of the “drip” compositions the artist pursued from 1947 to 1950. A foremost student of Regionalist artist Thomas Hart Benton in the 1930s, Pollock rejected his mentor’s commitment to “art for the millions” and social reform, concentrating instead on personal expression and social alienation (Doss, 1991). As Pollock remarked, “My work with Benton was very important as something against which to react very strongly” (Pollock, 1944, p. 14). Postwar artist Adolph Gottlieb similarly echoed: “It was necessary for me to destroy...the concept of what constituted a good painting at that time” (Sylvester, 1990 [1963], p. 265).

Explanations of Abstract Expressionism’s emergence and cultural dominance prevail in postwar American art history. Indeed, Abstract Expressionism remains the most discussed and debated movement in twentieth-century American art: inspiring more scholarship and speculation (history surveys, artist biographies, museum exhibitions); commanding some of the highest prices in the art market (a 1956 painting by Mark Rothko sold for $13 million at Sotheby’s in spring 2000); and dramatically influencing subsequent generations of artists. Abstract Expressionism, in other words, remains the measure of success against which modern and contemporary American art is judged – as art, as art history, as blue-chip goods. Indeed, in the late 1970s, when a younger generation of artists including Julian Schnabel aimed to “become” art historical, they imagined themselves as the new Pollocks, fashioned an audacious style similarly full of drips and splashes (although Schnabel’s “drips” were broken plates), and called their grand scale art “Neo-” Expressionism.

The romance of Abstract Expressionism began with this historical narrative: in post-World War II America there emerged an heroic band of avant-garde artists,
rebels whose cause was to overthrow various representational styles of art and the political agenda they embodied in order to create a culture more in keeping with the “American Century” that magazine publisher Henry Luce prophesied in *Life* magazine in 1941. Arguably one of the most important twentieth-century declarations of national purpose and identity, Luce’s manifesto urged the nation to embrace a “vision of America as a world power which . . . will guide us to the authentic creation of the 20th Century – our Century” (Luce, 1941, p. 65).

A decade later, in an equally influential *Art News* essay titled “The American Action Painters,” critic Harold Rosenberg lionized the typical Abstract Expressionist artist as an American loner, “heir of the pioneer and the immigrant,” a “vanguard painter [who] took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville’s Ishmael took to the sea.” Rosenberg also constructed the standard history of the movement, noting: “Many of the painters were ‘Marxists’ (WPA unions, artists’ congresses) – they had been trying to paint Society. Others had been trying to paint Art (Cubism Post-Impressionism) – it amounts to the same thing. The big moment came when it was decided to paint. . . . Just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value – political, aesthetic, moral” (Rosenberg, 1982, p. 30). Such accounts mythologized the Abstract Expressionists as heroic avant-garde rebels, the art world equivalents of brooding 1950s movie stars like Marlon Brando and James Dean, or teen idols like Elvis Presley.

The look of their painterly gestures ranged from Pollock’s drips to Rothko’s luminous fields of color, and the loose brushstrokes and spontaneous forms of an all-male Abstract Expressionist “club” that included Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still. The subjects of their monumental canvases embodied the artists’ profound disaffection with both earlier modes of American art and political culture (whether New Deal Regionalism or radical left Social Realism), and with the changed political climate of consensus and Cold War. As Motherwell remarked, the “rebellious, individualistic, unconventional, sensitive, irritable” paintings of the Abstract Expressionists “arose from a feeling of being ill at ease in the universe.” “Nothing as drastic an innovation as abstract art could have come into existence,” he added, “save as the consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need. The need is for felt experience – intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic” (Motherwell, 1951, p. 12). While physically powerful and energetic, Abstract Expressionist art betrays a palpable sense of uneasiness. Feeling caught in a trap of reactionary consensus politics and Cold War tensions, Pollock and other postwar avant-garde artists responded with highly individualized “signature” styles expressing personal and social alienation. In this respect, Abstract Expressionism embodied artistic yearnings for self-determination and struggles to re-legitimize the transgressive possibilities of the avant-garde. As Pollock observed in 1956, “Painting is a state of being . . . painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is” (Rodman, 1961, p. 82). Pollock’s pictures were revolutionary attempts to liberate himself, and the larger American culture, from the alienating conformity and pathological fears of the postwar era.

Avant-garde interests in synthesis and integration – abiding characteristics of American modernism since the early twentieth century – converged with interests in myth, in the universal symbols and heroes of both Western antiquity and “primitive” cultures. These interests were equally pervasive among the New York School and
mainstream US culture: indeed, Mark Rothko called his fellow Abstract Expressionists “a small band of myth-makers” (Rothko, 1946), and James Frazer’s classic book of mythology, *The Golden Bough* (1922), was a postwar bestseller (Polcari, 1991, p. 38). Convinced of the bankruptcy of previously dominant styles and subjects, postwar artists searched for new forms of identity. Many valorized the myths and symbols of diverse premodern cultures, feeling they best embodied a universal language that expressed essential truths about the human condition.

Abstract Expressionism was inherently ambiguous and unresolved, an open-ended modern art unbound to any particular ideology and committed to liberation through personal “acts” of expression. Pollock, in particular, was idolized as a postwar rebel: “the embodiment of our ambition,” wrote artist/critic Allan Kaprow, “for absolute liberation” (Kaprow, 1958, p. 24). Yet precisely because of its rebellious and utopian appeal to personal expression and autonomy, Abstract Expressionism represented an enormous threat in Cold War America. Recognizing this, and taking advantage of its core ambiguity, many postwar critics deliberately misrepresented the movement.

The misconstruction began with Abstract Expressionism’s consolidation as a “school” and a “canon” of art. By the mid-1950s, the movement had gained national and international currency, becoming “the” style to master in postwar America’s booming universities and art schools and inspiring a “second generation” of improvisational artists, including color-stain painters Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. Willem de Kooning had argued that Abstract Expressionism “implies that every artist can do what he thinks he ought to – a movement for each person and open for everybody” (de Kooning, 1951, p. 12). But many commentators reduced this multifaceted phenomenon of individual expression to a single art movement and ignored assertions of personal autonomy and cultural liberation. Instead, postwar critics emphasized Abstract Expressionism’s *formal* qualities: its rejection of shading, modeling, and realistic perspective.

Because its emergence was concurrent with US global ascendency in politics and industrial production, Abstract Expressionism was championed throughout the Cold War as evidence of American cultural superiority by critics such as Clement Greenberg and hailed as an art of uniquely American individualism by scholars such as Irving Sandler, who titled his 1970 history of the movement *The Triumph of American Painting*. If Pollock was ridiculed by some as “Jack the Dripper,” Life magazine presented him as “the greatest living painter in the United States,” intimating that the style of Abstract Expressionism best met the terms of Henry Luce’s prophesied “American Century” (Seiberling, 1949, p. 42).

Greenberg was one of the leading critics to shape the postwar response to Abstract Expressionism and to modern art in general. His influential essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” prescribed the rigid separation of modern art from kitsch, or popular and mass culture. Kitsch, Greenberg explained, was not only escapist and debased but politically dangerous: “the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy, and Russia . . . another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects” (Greenberg, 1939, p. 35). Only an avant-garde art free of popular subjects and mass politics was appropriate to the modern culture he envisioned. Greenberg later elaborated on these ideas, asserting that the rejection of realism, a tendency toward “flatness,” and the reduction to “pure” form was the
inevitable path for modern painting, and that modern sculpture should similarly strive for self-referentiality: referring only to its particular medium (steel, bronze, etc.) and to the individual aims of its artist-maker (Greenberg, 1940, 1965).

Critical renunciation of popular and representational styles exemplified the general, postwar, intellectual backlash against “the masses.” Liberals and leftists who had earlier placed their faith in collective reform, including figures like Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Hannah Arendt, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Daniel Bell, now condemned mass political and cultural movements, fearing their links to totalitarianism. Reneging on a previous generation’s trust that humanity was rational and reformable, these postwar intellectuals held that humankind was intrinsically irrational, even evil – as the horrific circumstances of World War II had shown. Abandoning notions of human and historical progress, they now advocated the conservative and cautious concept of a “vital center” – the title of Schlesinger’s influential yet contradictory 1949 book, which insisted on the importance of individuality but also advocated conformity, or consensus. Their new mandate was to promote modern cultural forms – such as Abstract Expressionism – which embodied these conflicted qualities. Consequently, the meaning of modern art profoundly shifted during these years, from a movement associated with social reform and cultural pluralism to an art viewed as the apolitical abstraction of individual, and especially male, artists.

In recent decades, more fully contextualized accounts of Abstract Expressionism’s patronage and position in Cold War culture have emerged. Although Abstract Expressionism addressed issues of postwar disaffection and proposed personal, individualist modes of autonomy, historical and critical analyses of postwar art and politics explain how the movement became a weapon in the Cold War: championed by critics and museums in the United States and abroad as a powerful symbol of American individuality, as an emblem of the creative and personal freedoms denied communist artists and others behind the Iron Curtain (Kozloff, 1973; Mathews, 1976). One of the most debated books in this regard was Serge Guilbaut’s How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (1983), which provided a sharply critical analysis of the institutional contributions to the cultural history of the 1940s and 1950s (by the Museum of Modern Art, for example) but was curiously indifferent to a discussion of the art itself. Other revisionist narratives explained how deep-felt desires by postwar artists to break away from and “destroy” the modern art styles of an earlier era were grounded in a larger political and cultural transition: from the New Deal to the burgeoning of a “Cold War” between the United States and the Soviet Union (Doss, 1991).

Issues of race and gender have further shaped the ongoing revision of Abstract Expressionism, as have accounts of its appropriation of “primitive” myths and “glyphs” and its postcolonial lineage (Leja, 1993; Belgrad, 1998; D. Craven, 1999). If formerly reduced to limited formalist descriptions and cast as a small “club” of white male artists, revisionist histories such as Ann Gibson’s Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics (1997) demonstrate that the postwar avant-garde was actually very diverse, consisting of many women and nonwhite artists including Lee Krasner, Norman Lewis, and Sonia Sekula. Reasons for their exclusion from the Abstract Expressionist canon relate in part to the formalist New Criticism practiced by Greenberg, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Michael Fried, and Rosalind Krauss. Intend-
ing to foster “objective” analyses of art, formalist criticism suppressed the intention-
ality, subjectivity, and biography of the artist. Barthes’s influential 1968 essay, “The Death of the Author,” insisted that only the work of art – not the author/artist, and not the audience for art – was important (Barthes, 1977 [1968]). Subsequent generations of artists, critics, and historians would repeatedly challenge these limited formalist understandings of American modern art, many addressing the manner in which postwar art and its early historiography reinscribed larger cultural understandings of racism and sexism.

Modernist Sensibilities: 1950s–1970s

In the mid-to late 1950s, British critic Lawrence Alloway began writing about growing artistic interests in mass media and popular culture. As he noted, “Acceptance of the mass media entails a shift in our notion of what culture is. Instead of reserving the word for the highest artifacts and the noblest thoughts of history’s top ten, it needs to be used more widely as the description of ‘what a society does.’” Once this was done, Alloway added, “unique oil paintings and highly personal poems as well as mass-distributed films and group-aimed magazines can be placed within a continuum rather than frozen in layers in a pyramid” (Alloway, 1988 [1959], p. 30).

Alloway’s critical insights were a far remove from Greenberg’s insistence on the hierarchical superiority of fine art over kitsch. During the later 1950s and throughout the 1960s, formalist New Criticism continued to dominate art discourse, dramatically influencing the development of certain styles of postwar painting and sculpture, from hard-edge abstraction to Minimalism. Yet critical and artistic recognition of postwar consumerism and commercialism, inspired in part by Marshall McLuhan’s theories of mass media and new technologies, was also pervasive (McLuhan, 1964).

McLuhan’s idea that the “medium is the message” became a mantra of sorts for a new generation of artists who were especially stimulated by mass culture’s visual vocabulary and broader cultural meanings. Around 1958, Lawrence Alloway coined the term “Pop art” to describe a burgeoning postwar visual art movement based on the subjects of mass media and popular culture – from comic books and advertisements to magazines, movies, television programs, and product packaging. Tom Wesselmann’s 1963 *Still Life #30* (plate 2), a collage painting featuring a kitchen table laden with brand-name foods (Dole pineapple, Kellogg’s Rice Krispies), a pink General Electric refrigerator showcasing 7-Up bottles, and a small framed reproduction of Picasso’s *Seated Woman*, captures Pop art’s attention to middle-class consumerism. Pop art “cannot be separated from the culmination of affluence and prosperity during the post-World War II era,” art historian John Wilmerding remarked in 1976. By the early 1960s, “America had become a ravenously consuming society, packaging art as well as other products, indulging in commercial manipulation, and celebrating exhibitionism, self-promotion, and instant success.” Pop art “seized on these elements and exploited them,” said Wilmerding, “with a brazen-ness that seemed offensive both for its discomforting insinuations and for its assault on the elevated hegemony of abstract expressionism” (Wilmerding, 1976, p. 222). Intrigued by and occasionally disgusted with the manner in which middle-class consumerism and conformity had become the primary forms of American identity,
postwar Pop and Neo-Dada artists forged an anti-aesthetic focused on cultural commodification and on the divide between fine art and popular culture.

In the later 1950s and 1960s, American artists and critics no longer worried about competing with Europe: the “triumph” of Abstract Expressionism and the authority of the New York art market proved the cultural and economic superiority of postwar American art. Yet some remained uneasy with the terms of this postwar triumph and worried that American art had become too personalized and autobiographical. Others criticized Abstract Expressionism’s appropriation as a political symbol of American “freedom” and as a widely copied signifier of sophisticated modern taste in advertising and interior decoration. By 1960, in other words, the revolutionary and liberating art of Abstract Expressionism had become thoroughly commodified as political pawn, lucrative investment, and cultural prop. A new generation of postwar artists, recognizing this manipulation, challenged the heroic individualism and art world dominance of Abstract Expressionism, and the art market’s rapacious appetite for the avant-garde, with new styles that emphasized a nonhierarchical and fundamentally conceptual aesthetic.

Ironically, their efforts paralleled that of a flourishing New York gallery scene and art market. The number of major collectors swelled from two dozen in 1945 to 200 in 1960, and 2,000 by 1970. Sales of postwar American art skyrocketed after the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* for $30,000 in 1957. In 1960, gallery dealer Leo Castelli sold Jasper Johns’s *Painted Bronze* for $960; in 1973, the same sculpture sold for $90,000. Likewise, a Pop art painting by Roy Lichtenstein that sold for $1,200 in 1962 sold for $40,000 in 1967. The 1950s and 1960s also saw the dramatic growth of other modern art institutions: university art programs and schools; art museums and American art collections; the creation in 1966 of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA); and an art press focused especially on postwar American visual arts. Tensions between the marketing and meaning of art, and changing definitions of modernism and the avant-garde, would preoccupy American artists as well as critics throughout these decades. Philosopher Arthur Danto, for example, addressed those tensions in the highly influential essay “The Artworld” (1964), which considered why Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* was “art” and the boxes of Brillo in the supermarket were not, and concluded that “participation in the discourses of the artworld, mastery of some of its theories, and knowledge of its relevant history” determined the making and meaning of “art” (Danto, 1998, p. 23).

A new generation of “Neo-Dada” artists emerged in the mid-1950s and worked throughout the 1960s, inspired by artist/theorist Marcel Duchamp (who had pioneered the international movement of Dada in the 1910s). Intrigued by Duchamp’s primary interest in the conceptual – not visual – underpinnings of art, Neo-Dada artists merged painting and sculpture in experimental hybrids that revamped postwar understandings of modern art and artmaking. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg worked with banal and often unexamined images and objects (maps, alphabets, flags, advertisements), reusing them in nonreferential ways. Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow similarly challenged Greenberg’s strict separation of media and his hierarchical readings of “art” versus popular culture with ephemeral performances – called “Happenings” – that aimed at eliminating borders between art and audience (Kirby, 1966; Banes, 1993).

Collage-like, collaborative, and carnivalesque, Happenings further challenged art market understandings of modern culture, as did Beat and Funk “assemblage” artworks produced by Robert Arneson, Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo, Edward Kienholz, and Betye Saar, and experimental films made by Stan Brakhage and Ken Jacobs (Seitz, 1961; Phillips, 1995). Finding inspiration in found objects and urban detritus, these artists claimed the marginal and debased as their primary subjects, emphasizing process over product and subverting cultural commodification with willfully ugly and highly perishable “junk” sculptures and noncommercial films.

By deconstructing the meaning of modern art – especially its dominant postwar meaning as highly personalized and increasingly collectable forms of Abstract Expressionism – these avant-garde artists aimed to return postwar art to issues and problems of representation and perception and to redirect artmaking toward a broader engagement with social subjects and mass culture. Such impulses did not go unnoticed. “Contemporary artists such as Robert Rauschenberg have become fascinated by the patterns and textures of decaying walls with their torn posters and patches of damp,” commented art historian Ernst H. Gombrich. “Though I happen to dislike Rauschenberg,” he added, “I notice to my chagrin that I cannot help being
aware of such sights in a different way since seeing his paintings” (Gombrich, 1982, p. 31).

The possibilities of different ways of seeing preoccupied multiple postwar artists – Neo-Dada, Pop, Minimalist, and Conceptual alike. What linked them was a changed aesthetic sensibility of “cool detachment,” a shift from “subjectivity to objectivity, from interpretation to presentation, from symbol to sign – to seeing things as they literally are and ‘saying it like it is’” (Sandler, 1988, p. 61). Pop artists including Wesselmann, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein violated traditional art standards of personal execution, craftsmanship, and originality and mimicked the detached and depersonalized character of mass culture. Culling images from mass media – stills of movie stars, tabloid newspaper photographs of car crashes – Warhol employed a photo-silkscreen process and a staff of artists who “made” his art (sometimes as many as eighty paintings a day) in assembly-line fashion at a New York studio he named “The Factory.” As Warhol remarked in 1963, “I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else’s” (Swenson, 1997 [1963], p. 104).

Pop’s deadpan imagery and ambivalent intentionality initially provoked heated controversy as critics debated its artistic merits, and whether it was even art. Following its earlier nod to Jackson Pollock, Life featured Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein in a 1964 article headlined: “Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?” (Seiberling, 1964, p. 79). Soon, however, critics began assessing Pop in terms of its formal qualities, identifying its reliance on flat, unmodulated color, simple forms, and an impersonal, machine-like surface (Rosenblum, 1965; Russell and Gablik, 1969). Although Pop artists selected representational and mass media subjects to critique the separation of high and low culture, their art was ironically “embraced under the formalist umbrella” (Stich, 1987, p. 4) until the advent of revisionist art historical approaches in the 1970s. These later accounts placed Pop in its postwar historical, economic, and political contexts, delineating its relationship with American mass culture, the art market, and issues of gender (Kozloff, 1973; Roth, 1977; Mamiya, 1992; Whiting, 1997).

The historiography of Minimalist art is similar. A style of painting and sculpture that emerged in the mid-1960s, Minimalism was particularly preoccupied with the literal, physical presence of art. “Increasingly the demand has been for an honest, direct, unadulterated experience in art,” art historian Eugene Goossen noted in 1966, “minus symbolism, minus messages, and minus personal exhibitionism” (Goossen, 1966, p. 31). Opposed to artifice and emotionalism, Minimalism’s reductive style was especially informed by the theoretical framework of structuralism and semiotics. Shifting attention from Abstract Expressionism’s existential individuals to the “systems” of modern society, Minimalist art adopted a machine-like, industrial style of geometric abstraction and elementary forms. Subverting painting’s traditional role as a mode of representation, or as bearer of artistic feelings, Frank Stella’s canvases were inherently objects: their content was their form. “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there,” Stella remarked in 1964. He added: “If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion. . . . What you see is what you see” (Battcock, 1968, p. 158). Likewise, the large-scale “object sculptures” of Minimalists Don Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre, made of
industrial materials and based on elementary geometric shapes, were distinguished by “no more than a literal and emphatic assertion of their existence,” noted critic Barbara Rose in 1965. Minimalist sculpture was “not supposed to be suggestive of anything other than itself” (Rose, 1965, p. 66).

In his widely read polemic, “Art and Objecthood,” critic Michael Fried attacked Minimalist sculpture because of its “theatricality,” or its emphasis on the role of the spectator, the “beholder” (Fried, 1967). Indeed, as Minimalist artist Robert Morris argued: “The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic” (Morris, 1966). Although critics such as Fried aimed to narrowly classify Minimalism as the logical extension of a reductive aesthetic formalism, Minimalist sculptors were more broadly interested in the phenomenological underpinnings of modern art, in the links between objects, audiences, and the spaces they occupied. Andre, for example, placed his “plains” of metal plates on gallery floors and encouraged audiences to walk on them, while Morris arranged and rearranged L-shaped beams (Plate 3, *Untitled*, 1965) and other “unitary forms” in galleries, considering how the variables of light, space, and the human body articulated the “meaning” of art objects.

Like the Pop artists, Minimalists mimicked the banal designs of mass production and further appropriated their construction methods, usually hiring industrial fabricators to assemble their plans. Eradicating their personal touch or “hand,” Minimalists raised fundamental questions about who was an artist, and whether sculp-

ture made by factory technicians qualified as “art.” Too large for most homes and art galleries, Minimalism’s monumental industrial forms suited more the huge headquarters of corporations and government buildings, and the sober “white cubes” of modern museums (O’Doherty, 1986). In the 1980s and 1990s, historians and critics concluded that Minimalism’s inherently institutional aesthetic was deeply embedded in “the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology” (Chave, 1990, p. 44) and that its forceful and domineering aesthetic evoked the (male) authority of the late 1960s: the authority of corporate capitalism and the defense industry (Wallis, 1983; Foster, 1996). Despite efforts otherwise, Minimalism recapitulated Abstract Expressionism’s historical trajectory.

Challenging the formalist stranglehold on modern art and the avant-garde, many Minimalist and Conceptual artists devoted much of their creative energies to theoretical issues traditionally left to historians and critics. Indeed, the 1960s and 1970s saw an eruption of artist-driven critical theory, and journals like Artforum, October, and Art in America gained increasing authority as sites of art theory distribution and debate. In 1967, Artforum published Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” which argued that the “idea or concept is the most important aspect of the art” and “what the work of art looks like isn’t too important” (LeWitt, 1967). This manifesto paralleled Joseph Kosuth’s 1970 statement that Conceptual art was “the investigation of the function, meaning, and use” of art (Lippard, 1973, p. 261).

Indebted as it was to Marcel Duchamp, to linguistic philosophy, to Thomas Kuhn’s articulation of “paradigm shifts” in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), and to worldwide destabilizing social, political, and economic conditions and movements (including student and worker revolts in the late 1960s in France, Japan, Mexico, Eastern Europe, and the United States), Conceptual art focused on issues of cultural production, distribution, and reception. Aiming to radically unsettle the institutional frameworks of modern art, Conceptual artists bought space in newspapers and magazines to “exhibit” their work, made “mail art,” and generated their own theories — thereby eliminating the need for galleries, museums, and art criticism. Some critics embraced Conceptual aesthetics as the next step in the evolution of the postwar avant-garde, while others denounced its “ politicization” of art (Kramer, 1970). Until recently, Conceptual art was largely ignored in the history of postwar American visual arts, an ironic gap given its tremendous influence on subsequent artistic developments and on critical understandings of postmodernism (Alberro and Stimson, 2000, p. xiv).

**Feminism and Postmodernism**

In 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin’s highly influential essay entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” appeared in Art News (Nochlin, 1971). Nochlin argued that notions of “greatness” (artistic and otherwise) were constructed rather than natural or innate, and that critics, historians, and art institutions had consistently ignored and undervalued women’s art. As Nochlin pointed out, the very question she posed of the supposed lack of female “greatness” betrayed these abiding patriarchal conceits. Her provocative analysis of art and authority was one of many feminist volleys fired in the early 1970s. Angered by their exclusion from art history (H. W. Janson’s popular survey, The History of Art, first published in 1962, failed to include a single female artist), and from the art world (only eight women, of 143
artists, were included in the 1969 Whitney Museum of American Art Annual exhibition), Feminist artists aimed to raise consciousness, invite dialogue, and transform cultural attitudes about women (Lippard, 1995 [1980]). A touchstone in the Feminist art movement was The Dinner Party (plate 4), a monumental, multi-media project (organized by Judy Chicago) that celebrated the lives and achievements of over 1,000 women and mythical female figures (from the Primordial Goddess to Georgia O’Keeffe), and featured porcelain plates shaped in labial-butterfly forms that asserted the value and integrity of female sexuality.

A core issue in early Feminist art was female identity, and the ways in which images shape and direct identity. In 1975, filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey published “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” a groundbreaking essay that introduced notions of the “male gaze” and linked the power relations of “looking” and being “looked upon” to the construction of male and female identity, and to patriarchal ideologies (Mulvey, 1975). Recognizing the long history of demeaning representations of the female body as a passive object to be gazed upon and desired – a history repeatedly reinscribed in art, mass media, and advertising – Feminist artists sought to reclaim the female body as a subject. Some artworks resisted the male gaze by parodying its visual stereotypes, while other projects, such as The Dinner Party, subverted and revised traditionally masculinist historical narratives by highlighting female identity and new understandings of female sexuality.
Inspired by the activism of civil rights, the anti-war movement, and Women’s Liberation, artists’ collectives proliferated during the 1970s, challenging the longstanding exclusion of women and nonwhite artists. At the same historical moment that formalist New Criticism theorized the death of the author, Feminist and black artists, among others, reclaimed marginalized female and minority voices and redirected postwar American art along more expansive and pluralistic pathways. Feminist art programs were developed across the United States; by 1974, over 1,000 US colleges offered women’s studies courses. New journals were published (Feminist Art Journal, Woman’s Art Journal, Heresies), aimed at “excavating the buried history” of women artists (Rickey, 1994, p. 120). Likewise, in the late 1960s, African American artists attuned to issues of black nationalism formed groups, organized gallery and museum exhibitions, directed community mural projects, and debated notions of a modern black aesthetic (Campbell, 1985; Patton, 1998). Protests against racial and ethnic stereotypes and limiting and monolithic assumptions of American identity found further resonance among Native American and Chicano artists.

Egalitarian aspirations and protest aesthetics infused new revisionist practices in American art history; scholars “chafed at the narrow definition of their field” and “rebelled against the elitism and restrictiveness of a canon that privileged male artists and high art masterpieces” (Corn, 1988, p. 96). Marxist, feminist, postcolonialist, psychoanalytic, and semiotic approaches, among others, provided new interpretive and interdisciplinary strategies for the new art history and destabilized myopic or fixed understandings of art. Art history surveys expanded to include non-Western works and visual cultures once considered unworthy of academic study (such as advertising, tabloid journalism, comics, movies, and self-taught art); panels and professional papers at the College Art Association were increasingly attentive to theoretical debates and issues of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual difference; the CAA’s flagship quarterly, Art Bulletin, began to feature articles on commercial illustrators such as Norman Rockwell; and the CAA itself took an active role as an advocate for First Amendment rights for artists and historians.

Reckoning with the contradictions and complexities of American history and identity, artists, historians, and critics deconstructed earlier postwar assumptions of cultural and national exceptionalism. They challenged limited formalist understandings of modernism that had centered on individual (and mostly white male) artists, discrete media, and stylistic innovation. Some went so far as to pronounce the “end of art” (Danto, 1984) and the “death of modernism” (Foster, 1984), lauding instead diverse and often conflicted forms of “postmodernism” and interdisciplinary analyses of cultural relationships.

Critic Craig Owens described postmodernism as “a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions” (Owens, 1992 [1983], p. 166). Battles over cultural authority raged in the 1980s and 1990s, as various political, social, and artistic factions struggled for recognition and power. Neoconservative political figures and religious demagogues attacked art, artists, and art organizations as a “moral cancer in our society” (Selcraig, 1990, p. 24). Art museums and government funding agencies such as the NEA were indicted for exhibitions some found offensive, including Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of gay men and Andres Serrano’s critiques of Catholic religious symbols. Angry protests against public art, including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982) and the
Minimalist sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981–9), and fierce arguments over freedom of expression and public funding for art heightened the era’s contentious mood (Doss, 1995). The overnight success of the Neo-Expressionists, a group of young, male, and heavily promoted New York painters determined to become the “new” Pollocks, provoked bitter debates about artistic “quality” and “merit” in the art world (Buchloh, 1981).

Issues of power and authenticity dominated postmodern criticism and art in the 1980s, evident in Mark Tansey’s 1984 painting, *Triumph of the New York School* (plate 5), which used the military liberation of France as a cultural metaphor to satirize perceived historical notions of the French avant-garde ceding modern art to Clement Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism. Borrowing subjects and styles from multiple sources – especially advertising, photojournalism, and television, but also earlier genres of art – “appropriation” artists such as Tansey, Barbara Kruger, Sherry Levine, and Jeff Koons raised questions about the originality and institutional framework of art and art history. Levine copied photographs by Walker Evans and paintings by Miró, “representing someone else’s work as her own,” wrote critic Thomas Lawson, “in an attempt to sabotage a system that places value on the privileged production of individual talent” (Lawson, 1981, p. 45). Kruger quoted mass media images and words to expose the cultural dominance of advertising. Koons displayed Hoover vacuum cleaners and Spalding basketballs in heavily promoted exhibitions, selling his art for extremely high prices and exposing the ways in which art, artists, and notions of taste are manufactured.

In the 1990s, postmodern cultural analyses centered especially on the complexities of contemporary identity: race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual difference. The decade opened with *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, a collaborative project of three New York art institutions (the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem) that highlighted social and cultural understandings of difference. It closed with the Whitney Museum’s “Millennial Biennial,” an exhibition that showcased new visual media (such as video and electronic imagery) and revealed a robust multiplicity of artmaking practices and cultural identities at the end of the “American Century.”

Issues of difference were especially dominant in the 1990s, as artists and museums wrestled with the nation’s conflicted and abiding history of multiculturalism. Earlier artistic affirmations of race, ethnicity, and gender as art subjects were now complicated by more sophisticated understandings of the hybridic or syncretic realities of contemporary American cultural identities. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s *Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)* (plate 6, 1992), conveys the kaleidoscopic dimensions of contemporary Indian – and all-American – identity. Her humorous but pointed critique draws on Abstract Expressionist and Neo-Dada styles, and features sports souvenirs of the Cleveland Indians and Washington Redskins as trinkets to “trade back” to whites for stolen Indian lands.

“Despite the dispiriting statistics on race, poverty, crime, and the ‘culture wars’ that bedevil America, there is scarcely another country more obsessed with the rights of minorities and the recognition of cultural diversity,” critic Homi Bhabha wrote in 1999. “It has infused the American century with a spirit of freedom and equality embodied in civil rights, women’s rights, the needs of and obligations toward AIDS

In the early twenty-first century, a “new” art history shaped from multiple theoretical horizons – social history, feminism, queer theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, intertextuality – is clearly in place. An interdisciplinary hybrid called visual culture studies has emerged, focused on the genealogy, practice, and experience (reception) of modern visual culture – from art, advertising, and mass media to new technologies of holography, lasers, computer graphics, digital imagery, robotics, the Internet, and virtual reality (Mirzoeff, 1999). Recognition of the varieties of visual interpretation – “no interpretation can be privileged over any other” – has “decentered” knowledge (Bal and Bryson, 1991, p. 207), much as postwar notions of a monolithic “American Century” have shifted to those of a more expansive American multiculturalism. Some historians protest this state of affairs: the Association for Art History, a group “interested in traditional approaches to art history,” formed in the mid-1990s as an alternative to the College Art Association; and Rosalind Krauss, a professor of art history at Columbia University and an editor of the theoretical journal *October*, is among those “frankly suspicious” of art history’s “flirtation” with visual culture. “Students in art history graduate programs don’t know how to read a work of art,” she remarked in 1996. “They’re getting visual studies instead – a lot of paranoid scenarios about what happens under patriarchy or under imperialism” (Heller, 1997, p. 105).
Still, revisionist narratives assessing race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality continue to inform American art scholarship today, and new accounts of the visual culture of American religions and issues of spirituality challenge the predominantly secular focus of postwar historiography (Morgan and Promey, 2001). One can only speculate about the look and shape of visual culture in the future, but clearly, revised perspectives regarding the nature of art and the meaning of American history will continue to inform our knowledge of the field.

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