Strategic Ambiguity in Avant-Garde Painting

by

John Beeson
Class of 2009

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Art History

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2009
Contents

Illustrations page 2

Introduction 4

1 Willem de Kooning 31
2 Robert Rauschenberg 72
3 Jasper Johns 112
4 Cy Twombly 145

Conclusion 177

Bibliography 187
Illustrations

1. Installation view: the Modern Wing of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Summer 2008  
   page 3

   With Robert Rauschenberg, Monogram, 1955-1959  
   20

3. Willem de Kooning, Easter Monday, 1955-56  
   32

4A and 4B. Detail of Easter Monday and advertisement for Schraff’s treats  
   46

5A and 5B. Detail of Easter Monday and Marcel Duchamp, Tu m’, 1918  
   49

6A and 6B. Detail of Easter Monday and advertisement for Alexander the Great  
   51

7. Willem de Kooning, Woman as a Landscape, 1955  
   57

8. Willem de Kooning, Asheville, 1949  
   63

9. Willem de Kooning, Untitled (Drawings with eyes closed), 1966  
   67

    76

    82

    113

13. Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917  
    134

14. Cy Twombly, Untitled, 1970  
    146

    155

16. Cy Twombly, Academy, 1955  
    167
Introduction

The subject of this thesis is ambiguity, its ability to serve the strategic ends of avant-garde painters seen particularly as it was employed by Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. As it is conceived here, ambiguity can be defined as an uncertainty or apparent contradiction among forms, subjects, and/or meaning. The ambiguities that interest me in this thesis are those that derive from the artist’s experience with the conditions of art and that are intended aspects of the work, rather than those which derive from the artist’s indecisiveness concerning creative decisions. A given artist’s attitude toward his or her mode of expression, reliance on influences, or involvement with an established way of painting may involve conflicts that go unresolved. In these and other cases, ambiguity might develop as hesitation or obscurcation, but ambiguity has also been used strategically for the purpose of revealing an unresolved conflict in the work’s creation. For the imprecision of its causes as well as its instability, ambiguity poses a challenge in the viewer’s experience of a work, and, for this reason, it may serve to construct a dialogue with viewers or as a means through which the artist can manipulate the viewing experience.

Especially in the modern context, painters born into the shadow of predecessors - who have already achieved some extent of recognition and maturity in
style, and who exist as living, producing influences - have often turned to the strategies of subversion and transgression in order to establish their new art by conflicting with influential precedents. This situation was in effect among painters in the generation after Abstract Expressionism. Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly devised works and methods of production to express their rejection of some of the forms, subjects, ideals, and meanings that were embodied in the work of the heroes of the New York School, such as Willem de Kooning. This thesis will analyze paintings by those four artists in order to categorize their similarities and differences, to tease out the attitudes with which these painters worked, and to diagnose the particular aspects of the circumstances that motivated each painter - de Kooning included - to invoke ambiguity.

In order to delimit the focus of this thesis, four paintings - one by each artist - have been selected for analysis: Willem de Kooning’s *Easter Monday* (1956), Robert Rauschenberg’s *Winter Pool* (1959), Jasper Johns’s *White Flag* (1955), and Cy Twombly’s *Untitled* (1970). During the spring and summer of 2008, only these four paintings hung together on a wall in the Modern Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 1). This allowed me to view the four works intensively, and my experience served somewhat accidentally as the inspiration to study the case presented by these paintings. Simply put, ambiguities were evident in each of the four, and those ambiguities resonated with the artists’ art historical context. The implications of the museum context in which I viewed the works - i.e., the provenance of the works, their acquisition by the museum, and the curatorial decisions that went into their arrangement - do not have a strong bearing on my
interpretations. The analyses contained in this thesis do not depend on these four works - or any combinations thereof - being seen together. My experience with the works - in conjunction with comments by the artists, critics, and historians - will serve as the basis for generalization and conjecture regarding the experience of viewing them.

With the exception of Robert Rauschenberg, this thesis will not give full attention to more than one work by each artist considered. Thus, it is not an attempt to make sense of any oeuvre in a singular way. Instead, the works selected are representative of significant periods in the productions of the four artists. By 1956, de Kooning had gained important recognition. By 1959, Rauschenberg had developed an artistic language particular to himself with his “combines.”

Although White Flag came early in Johns’s production, the artist had already achieved some recognition through his first painting of the subject from 1954. Twombly’s painting - the latest of the group being considered - was produced more than a decade after he had emigrated from America to Rome but, nonetheless, addresses the stimulus of his initial response, Abstract Expressionism, only in new ways.

Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly had close interpersonal relationships early in their careers. Rauschenberg was the oldest of the three and came from Port Arthur, Texas; Twombly from Lexington, Virginia; and Johns from small-town South Carolina. They all served in the military, and they connected in New York in the early 1950s. Rauschenberg and Twombly met at the Art Students League in 1951, they

\footnote{Rauschenberg referred to his three-dimensional multimedia works from approximately the period of 1953-64 as “combines” rather than sculptures or paintings.}
attended two sessions at Black Mountain College together, and they traveled in Italy on Twombly’s fellowship money in 1952. At Black Mountain, the artists came into contact with New York School painters of the preceding generation, such as Robert Motherwell, Ben Shahn, and Franz Kline. At least Rauschenberg spent a significant amount of time in the Artists’ Club and the Cedar Tavern in New York, where he would have come into contact with Jackon Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and Jack Tworkov. Of Johns, Rauschenberg has said, “It would be hard to imagine my work at the time without his encouragement;” the two shared a studio by 1960. Although their work differed in similar ways from New York School painting at the time, these three artists did not comprise a group, nor did they share a uniform style. It is unclear exactly to what extent they interacted with de Kooning. Rauschenberg, for one, met with de Kooning in person before producing Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953). Johns has admitted the greatest admiration for de Kooning’s painting. Nevertheless, the extent of these artists’ interpersonal relationships is not the subject of analysis. To some extent, their art was bigger than themselves; it would have been possible for the four artists to know something of the others’ work and reputations without knowing each other personally.

2 Kotz, 71-79. (As in this example, footnotes will indicate the author’s last name and the page number, where applicable. Full citations appear in the Bibliography. Where there is more than one work by the author cited in the bibliography, the cited work will be indicated by the year of publication. If two of the author’s works were published in the same year, the cited work will be indicated by either “A” or “B” following the year. If the citation originally comes from another work, the original work will be indicated.)
4 Kotz, 82.
5 Ibid., 89.
Although this thesis focuses on four painters and four paintings, its focus does not preclude the application of its methods, models, and conclusions to other artists, media, or historical contexts. Any group of artists might have faced or might face the same relational dynamic, and the conflicts that incited these artists to use ambiguity strategically were a result of that dynamic. In the abstract, this thesis focuses on both the causes and effects of ambiguities. The framework that it proposes intends to address the nature of an artist’s relationship to art history, influential artistic precedents, and artistic philosophies. In the specific case being analyzed, the context of art following the height of Abstract Expressionism serves as the basis for some of the formal and conceptual concerns in the work of Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly as well as the similarities in the modes of their responses to artistic precedents such as de Kooning.

In art in the age of Abstract Expressionism, a conflict existed as a consequence of formalist interpretation. As a method of analyzing art, formalism placed primary focus on the form of a work - i.e., the materials that comprise it, the way in which these materials were combined by the artist, as well as how the work then reflects on its physicality, and, moreover, on the medium generally. In the same moment, formalist criticism chose to ignore, discredit and/or oppose the integration by an artist of any personal or representational imagery, particularly in anything like illusionistic space. Many of the artists whose style of gestural abstraction appeared to coincide with the formalist theory of painting were, however, unclear about their acquiescence to the critical stance or were unresponsive. For example, in “American-Type’ Painting” (1955), Clement Greenberg portrayed de Kooning as one of the most
ambitious and sophisticated artists in the New York School. De Kooning’s work epitomized Greenberg’s espoused interest in the integration of artistic traditions into contemporary art, in such a way that the new art could be considered as part of a greater trend of Modernism. The simple question, though, is whether de Kooning embraced the traditions requisite for inclusion in Greenberg’s pantheon of Modernism; for, Greenberg envisioned that post-Cubist art was the primary motivating influence of Modernism. Greenberg’s praise of de Kooning was followed by backhanded criticism, in which he charged the painter with including the past in a way that served to “forestall the future.” The author believed that de Kooning maintained a classical interest in placing figures in space, an interest which also motivated Picasso’s work from the early 1930s. In his introduction to a collection of Greenberg’s essays and criticisms, the editor John O’Brien asserted, “In short, neither de Kooning nor Picasso answered to Greenberg’s call for art that was ordered and balanced.” As O’Brien pointed out, de Kooning never responded to this essay, though he had reason to comment on Greenberg’s simultaneous embrace and disavowal of his work.

A significant part of Greenberg’s criticism of de Kooning’s painting was founded on the artist’s manner of “homeless representation,” as the author labeled it in “After Abstract Expressionism” (1962). Greenberg clarified, “I mean by this a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones.” The author admitted that nameable

---

7 O’Brien, 1993A: 221.
8 Ibid., 222.
9 Ibid., xxxi.
10 O’Brian, 1993B: 125.
subject matter had been an inspiration for some of the best Abstract Expressionist works; however, painting that served to construct spatial illusion was theoretically incompatible with formalist criticism as defined by Greenberg. The motivation behind formalism in painting, for example, was the medium’s self-criticism through only its own means, a radical concentration through formal means of its own two-dimensional existence. Greenberg took issue with the ambiguity between representation and abstraction when its “logical contradictions” turned into “artistic ones too.” In fact, what interests me in this thesis is the motivation of artists around this time to develop ambiguities - both in their incarnations as logical contradictions as well as contradictions that were motivated by the artists’ want for their art to reflect on their attitudes and concerns.

Illusionism, which became a preoccupation to a great extent in modern art, is an artistic tradition that involves the imitation - or construction - of primarily representational images in artificial space. In large part, the formalist motivation was to turn the focus of painting onto itself, to avoid its ability to imply forms and spaces other than its own, and to use its means to draw attention to its limitations. Artistic responses against illusionism - expressions of a preoccupation with the real physical forms of art - counteract representation in the way of abstraction, reduction, or even destruction. One way of rejecting illusionism was through registering nothing but the activity of painting, a nevertheless ambiguous enterprise that has been called “Action Painting.” From a theoretical perspective, this painting would merely shift the focus

of its representation, or mimesis, from nameable objects, times, and spaces to the immediate - to the artist-as-subject’s activity of creating.\textsuperscript{12}

In the conflicted period after Abstract Expressionism, after artists had shown what could be accomplished with personal expression through gestural abstraction, new artists concerned themselves with prevalent attitudes and ideals and decided how to move forward from there. Rauschenberg once said of the mid-to-late 1950s, “Jasper and I used to start each day by having to move out from Abstract Expressionism.”\textsuperscript{13} Some works, undertaken in the name of progressing art and focusing its attention on the most important concerns, venture to outdo or perfect precedents, subvert flawed precedents, transgress in the contemporary moment, or recapture the successes of the past. These attempts are based on retrospective judgments of the successes of other artists, works, and ideals. Just as Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly looked back at de Kooning and Abstract Expressionist precedents, other artists reflected on times, artists, and works from the past. Since art history does not follow a straight line, nor is art historically hermetic, the intense ideological fluctuations in the modern period produced works of art marked with the evidence of the conflicts. The questions of whether or not to return to object-representation as well as how to approach illusionism were important but difficult considerations following the height of formalism and the establishment of a critical canon concerning abstraction. As art in the modernist period focused increasingly on itself, the conflicts between artists, works, and ideals became inflamed and the shifts

\textsuperscript{12} Hutcheon, 5. It is for this reason that the focus of gestural abstraction could be called “process mimesis”, to reapply Hutcheon’s concept.

\textsuperscript{13} Kotz, 90.
that were built upon landmark works and symbolic gestures gained increased art historical significance.

The focus of this thesis is the dynamic involved between an artist and the strained and conflicted conditions of his or her art; the intent is not historical documentation but contextualization for the purpose of better understanding specific instances of the dynamic and the effect on the works created by the artists involved. For, if we understand the conditions surrounding ambiguity well enough in the abstract, then the concept can be reapplied in other contexts. Generally speaking, modernism appears to be concurrent with an increased sense of individualism, one of the symptoms of which is increased anxiety about one’s context. Although the envisioned dynamic does not exist solely in the post-war context, the Second World War was a historical watershed. Anxieties ran high among artists in the 1940s, and the socio-political climate determined much of the stylistic nature and ideals of the New York School. Much of art responds to the contemporary moment, the specific nature of the art world, and the characters included. This dynamic existed before modernity, though its manifestations in the second half of the twentieth-century were highly charged by conflict.14

In the specific case of these four paintings, some of the more abstract ambiguities that we will encounter involve the artists’ attitudes concerning preceding artistic concerns, subjects, forms, styles, and ideals. However, the artists were also concerned with what they could accomplish through these works that would be

14 Examples from further along in the transition toward the highly individualized, highly self-aware, parodic styling of the post-modern period are especially worth future investigating.
original and progressive. Given that primary subjects for modernist art up to this point had been art’s own “compositional techniques, methods of image making, physical presence, and constructive or destructive relation to the traditions of art,” it should come as no surprise that the work of each artist has reflected in some way on its own forms as well as precedents. For de Kooning’s painting, we will focus on the character of his painterly incident as well as the interactions between the individual formal components of his work, and we will analyze his use of referential subject matter in a painting that is both abstract and representational. Though de Kooning also responded to precedents and traditions, to a significant extent, he personified the immediate stimulus - the “father figure” - to which the three younger artists responded. Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly encoded their partial acceptance and partial refusal of that precedent within the differences between their individual methods and creations and Abstract Expressionist types. For one example, in each of their works, the three artists employed some but not all of the painterly devices that characterized Abstract Expressionist works. What is more, Rauschenberg, for one, created a work using a negative process, erasure, in order to respond at once positively and negatively to the concept of the Abstract Expressionist influence, embodied by de Kooning.

In order to describe this special kind of ambiguity between oppositions, we will invoke the notion of paradox, which can be defined as an irreconcilable conflict between two or more directly oppositional conditions. Paradox is “a statement or proposition that, despite sound reasoning (or apparently sound reasoning) from

15 Storr, 28.
acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory.” A paradoxical proposition, while seemingly unreasonable given its self-contradictoriness, is oftentimes well-founded based on the logic of its conditions and indicative of some amount of truth or, at least, honesty. Because paradox is simultaneously perfectly ambiguous and particularly revealing, its existence in the analyzed works will be important to this thesis. Since my focus is painting, instances of paradox take the form of static objects. In the case of an object in a paradoxical state, the opposition is solidified and irresolvable. Being that these objects are works of art, their conflicts become subjects for the viewer’s analysis, conflicts in the viewer’s experience of perceiving the work.

The idea of ambiguity as a recurrent condition of art with symbolic meaning derives from my own experiences with modern art, as well as from what I have been inspired to think based on my formal and informal education in the fields of modern art history, criticism, and theory. The ability for nameable objects, times, and spaces to inspire abstractions is a generalized aspect of ambiguity, and the various conflicts between seemingly incompatible subjects and forms motivates some of the ambiguities that we will encounter in this study. In terms of the type of logic that will motivate our description of these conflicts, I owe my use of the term “paradox” to Calvin Tomkins. His use of the concept to describe Jasper Johns’s *Flag* set me on my path:

Johns’s flag was something very strange. It was not a “real” flag, to be sure, but neither was it an artist’s image or representation of a flag. Its proportions were exact, its stars and stripes in the right order. The technique of its making

---

seemed to qualify it as a work of art, but the “realness” of the image simultaneously made one uncertain. Johns’s flag was a paradox. In common with almost everything he has done since then, it asked a question about art, or about the difference between art and reality, or about the faculty of human perception that differentiates between the two - a question that remained unanswered.17

This passage was indicative and greatly inspiring, and Johns’s paradox will come to bear in the section on his *White Flag*, though my analysis will deviate in some ways from Tomkins’s. For the model that we will use to explain the conditions of ambiguity, I am indebted to Professor John Paoletti, whose way of describing the relationship of Johns’s early work to formalist criticism and its detractors was that it satisfied the ideals of *both one and* the other, or neither. I will continue to reuse and revisit this model over the course of this thesis.

Ambiguity, when considered as a strategy, transcends singular cases of conflict deriving from the arguments of critics or manifest in the interior logic of a painting. Neither will we assume that any of the four artists considered here were directly engaged with formalism, nor will this thesis assume that any of these works were intended as coherent posturing in that debate; instead, these artists held ambiguity to be a fundamental part of their artistic philosophies. To the extent that these works represent attempts to achieve some original ideal through the subversion of, transgression against, or progression beyond art historical precedents, these artists were employing avant-gardist strategies, whether they were intending to be avant-garde artists or not.18 These four paintings were not selected in order to realign or recount the history of modern art, nor do they serve to map ambiguity as it has

17 Tomkins, 117. Italics added.
already been defined; painters have evoked ambiguity for strategic ends in works other than these. This thesis is an attempt to use specific instances of ambiguity, as found in the works contained herein, to envision their significances as well as the process by which such works are produced and experienced. This is in order to allow entrance into this theory of avant-garde painting for artists and works not addressed as well as nuanced notions of the works and ambiguities that are considered here. Fundamentally, this thesis attempts to contribute to the understanding of the selected works, the analyses of which should in turn appeal to a broader conception of an artist’s use of strategic measures for avant-gardist purposes.

Works of art that use ambiguity as a strategy necessarily anticipate engagement by a viewer, who may direct more or less of his or her conscious and unconscious mental activity to the act of experiencing and interpreting the work in question. A work of art that exhibits ambiguity achieves particular meaning through the viewer’s perception of each of the physical or theoretical conditions comprising the ambiguity as well as the irresolvability of those conditions. This given work achieves essential meaning through the viewer’s recognition of the strategic nature of the ambiguity as well as the circumstances that motivated the artist’s invocation of it. The four artists discussed here produced works that embody sustained instabilities; each work is a physical synthesis of conflicting characteristics that exists to affect the viewer and incite his or her analysis.

A commonly held analytical belief is that artists imbue their works with a range of meanings during creation. At the same time, though, more meaning registers in the work; for, “in thrusting himself or his idea into the picture, the artist drags into
it also doubts about art, uneasiness about his identity, conflict with the environment, traditional bohemian ambiguity and defiance, even the crisis of contemporary society.”19 Most analyses of a painting consider the work as a manifestation of the artist’s psychological, social, and historical position. The interpretation - or, at least, reception - of the work changes as the work is relocated, the socio-political context of that location shifts with time, the work shows the physical evidence of aging, and it takes its place within the artist’s oeuvre and among other works from art history. The painting is conceived of as a source from which the perceptive viewer can grasp the artist’s meanings as well as a form onto which the viewer can project personal meanings that may or may not have been the artist’s intention.20

In fact, the art object serves as an intermediary between the artist and the viewer, and, as such, it maintains complementary functions in the two exchanges. For example, in creating a painting, the artist registers both precise and abstract notions of his or her intentions. Given the psychological complex of the individual, that artist registers conscious intentions as well as subconscious and unconscious intentions. Although the artist controls the production of the image on the canvas, it is impossible to maintain complete control of all of the physical nuances. So, the smallest formal detail contained in the work may go unobserved by the artist. Given the formal and conceptual complexity of any painting, the viewer will only ever register relatively few of the physical nuances and only ever comprehend a part of the

19 Rosenberg, 1964: 49. Though the contemporary society in 1953 was not the same as in 1964, in 1970, or, now, in 2009, it is not the specific conditions of the society but the nature of a contemporary moment that is relevant to this comment.
20 See Michael Ann Holly, “Reciprocity and Reception Theory.” In Smith and Wilde, 448-457.
artist’s intentions. To the extent that a viewer can truly understand any part of the artist’s motivations and intentions, he or she may empathize with them. But, since this exchange - artist : painting : viewer - is reciprocal, the viewer’s mind is also capable of conscious, subconscious, and unconscious activity, and the lifetime’s worth of experiences that are particular to this individual allow him or her to develop further meaning, a portion of which is not initially contained in the painting. It should be evident from the complex nature of this process and its constituents that ambiguities can develop at any point. Misinterpretation can incite contradiction, as can the interpretations made by multiple viewers or one viewer after repeated viewings.

In the four paintings considered here, the ambiguities within each are many, and they are varied. Each has its own effect and its own significance. Specifically, though, an ambiguity that is composed of rational means - be they formal, representational, or literal - serves as a particular challenge to the rational aspect of any perceiving viewer’s mind. When the word “blue” is painted onto a swatch of paint, both of which are shades of gray,21 when just a few strokes of paint look like a figure if considered a certain way,22 or when an illusionistically painted object is accompanied by a written text deflating its illusion,23 those circumstances demand recognition. The rational viewer might be convinced that these contradictions could and should have been noticed by a thoughtful artist. The viewer may ask: why did the artist allow these contradictions to develop, why were they not resolved, or, why were they not excised? A rational ambiguity that has developed before the eyes of a

22 This is the case in some of de Kooning’s most abstracted figures.
23 See René Magritte, La trahison des images (1928-29): “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.”
thoughtful artist, or which is developed at the hands of that artist, and, yet, which is preserved, exists in order to be perceived by viewers, and, thus, has some significance. Ambiguities carry meaning for the work, and they mean that the artist intended the finished product of his or her working process to be a sustained source of instability to be perceived and evaluated by the viewer.

For one thing, the artist’s created ambiguity could respond to a conflict that existed within the mind of that artist, especially as it might pertain to his or her relationship with the conditions of art. Were an artist to draw inspiration for a work from sources that were in conflict or about which his or her own attitude were uncertain, the resultant work might represent that conflict by presenting either formal or conceptual elements that contradict each other. In the face of predominant formalist criticism a painter in New York in the 1950s might have painted impasto for its formal aesthetic, without intending to embrace the historical, critical, or theoretical implications of the act. Not only would the ambiguous motivations behind this decision serve as a kind of content, they might also elucidate the context in which the work was produced. Perhaps that artist knowingly embraced the formal aesthetic and rejected the other implications of the act. When a painting is intended to achieve some new effect by way of subverting an older tradition, its viewer is thrown into limbo.

During his first major exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1963, Robert Rauschenberg interacted with a woman who could not understand what motivated him to use a tire or a stuffed Angora goat - forms that she deemed irrelevant to art or unaesthetic - in the production of Monogram (1955-59; Fig. 2). As the artist
understood it, her initial interpretation was that “…all [his] decisions seemed absolutely arbitrary - as though I could just as well have selected anything at all - and therefore there was no meaning, and that made it ugly.” The artist proceeded to describe the woman’s clothing to her in the same way that she responded to the materials in his work: “…she had feathers on her head. And she had this enamel brooch with a picture of ‘The Blue Boy’ on it pinned to her breast. And around her neck she had on what she would call mink but what could be described as the skin of a dead animal.” Rauschenberg’s comments offended the woman’s sensibility in a way that was similar to his progressive interest in the objects used in life, which have significant material values but which are considered as valueless in the context of art. Surely, Rauschenberg’s choice of materials in the work and the conversational exchange were not without a sense humor. In the end, the woman returned and said that she was beginning to understand what the artist was trying to accomplish, that he was expressing his interest in the disparate identities of objects from art and those from life.

If artistic inspiration can come from anywhere and the meaning of a work can be divined from the qualities that it maintains as an object and a symbol, then the conflicted nature of a work might indicate that the conditions under which it was produced involved latent and unresolved conflicts on the part of the artist. There is a romantic notion that the artist’s experience differs from that of others, and while much of this conception is undoubtedly aggrandizement, it might be useful to consider psychological conflicts as models through which to understand the artistic

24 Kimmelman, 2.
experience and the strategies invoked during the process of creation. For, if works of art are documents from which the conditions of a given cultural context can be interpreted, then the artist is the agent through which those conditions are transmitted into the form of a medium. Some artists of the New York School produced painted abstractions as a way of coping with the inconceivable atrocities that were committed during the Second World War. By affecting the viewer with a sense of the spiritual or the transcendental, the works served as an opportunity to confront the issues of alienation and to gain some sense of inner insight, a logical response to the artist’s contemporary cultural context. Artists respond to their specific contexts; the particular dynamic that interests me is the artist’s response to influences, the deliberate response motivated by his or her relation to precedents.

One symptom of modernity is the pervasiveness of historical self-awareness. The first half of the twentieth century saw a progression of modernist artistic factions that strove to surpass precedents in the achievement of originality as well as an artistic ideal. To avant-garde artists, precedents act as challenging presences, in need of transformation in order for their contemporary effort to realize its full voice. The complete rejection of an artistic precedent and the reinvention of the terms of art was not an agenda held by all modernist movements, groupings, or individuals - not all artists or movements set out to create a revolution - nor was it the primary motivation of the four artists considered here. However, most progressive art is based on an idealistic philosophy.

Donald Kuspit has suggested that Édouard Manet’s psychological relationship with the history of art could be envisioned as a modernist anxiety, one that carried an
effect on the artist’s work. According to Kuspit, Manet was fearful that the topicality of his subjects and their settings would undermine the universality of his content and the relevance of his vanguardism in art history.25 Kuspit’s analysis of Manet’s self-consciousness reveals a fundamental conflict faced by many modern artists in their contemporary moment: their work has yet to achieve permanence - where future generations continue to relate to its forms and meanings. And so, while some artists take a stand - either to achieve something new in art, to continue in the modes of historical greats, or to use these modes to critique the system - some artists do not, and remain in a liminal position that manifests itself through particular symptoms evident in their art.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom discusses the issue of poetic influence and the metaphorical anxiety that it engenders. The notion could apply equally well to artistic self-consciousness, generally, and the nature of artistic influence, specifically - a major source of conflict in modern art - as well as their consequences. The source of this anxiety is the relationship between an artist and an influential precedent. In the text, Bloom quotes Oscar Wilde on the nature of that relation: “Every disciple takes away something from his master.”26 Elsewhere, the author begs the question, “…what strong-maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself [?]”27 For, artists owe something of their achievement to the precedents that influenced them. This indebtedness is a burden borne by every artist. This indebtedness begets a corresponding anxiety, which can motivate an artist’s

26 Bloom, 6. The quotation comes from *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*
27 Ibid., 5.
conscious efforts to achieve originality and to develop an independent voice; this is
the anxiety of influence. However, the anxiety caused by influence is different from
the psychological condition of anxiety. Psychological anxiety is defined as “a feeling
of worry, nervousness, or unease typically about an imminent event or something
with an uncertain outcome.” The behavioral consequence of psychological anxiety
would most likely be a kind of artistic reticence as well as an obsessive one-
directionality in the artist’s production. One could imagine that psychological anxiety
would manifest itself in painting through an overdeveloped sense of emotionalism or
intellectualism, which would be subjective and withdrawn.28 Or, the truly anxious
artist might turn his or her art to the transcendental, in an attempt to create a work
with universal meaning, as was the case with Mark Rothko’s massive, meditative
color-field paintings, whose spirituality is universal. Rothko’s life was particularly
tragic, but it is not without discretion that one can relate his psychological and socio-
historic conditions to his penchant for the transformative and the transcendental in art.
But, not all artists are truly anxious.

Theoretically, the motivations of the psychological condition of anxiety can
be used as a model in order to frame an artist’s struggle to achieve originality within
the greater tradition of art as well as any of an artist’s intentions that are motivated by
influence. The influence may derive from another particular artist’s production, an
aesthetic, an ideology, or a style of creation and would most likely motivate the artist
in question to avoid any indication of the source. As such, works motivated by the
anxiety of influence might exhibit characteristics from one of two opposing sets: In

28 Kuspit, 2000: 5.
accordance with potential manifestations of psychological anxiety, the work might exhibit reticence, obsessiveness, and introversion. Or, the work might exhibit qualities from a set of opposing manifestations; the anxious artist might produce work in a short period of time in a variety of styles and with a variety of techniques, in an attempt to ignore the influence. For this reason, the work of an anxious artist might appear confident, nonchalant, and particularly experimental.

The behavioral manifestations of schizophrenia might serve well as a model to describe an artist’s work which coincides with the latter set of characteristics. Jean Baudrillard invoked schizophrenia in a way that can serve as the theoretical foundation for the experience of an individual who engages a wide variety of stimuli:

What characterizes [the schizophrenic] is less the loss of the real, the light years of estrangement from the real, the pathos of distance and radical separation, as is commonly said: but, very much to the contrary, the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without obstacle… He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.

Baudrillard’s image translates to art well; for, since the artist is the agent, he need only project his inspirations onto the painted surface in order to represent his experience as a screen. In the process of creation, the artist might respond somewhat injudiciously to stimuli, in ways that may or may not actually represent the stimuli. These circumstances might serve to distance the artist from his or her conceptual accountability. For, parallel to the increased pressures of modern society and of

---

29 Ibid., 69.
modern technology, the individual is forced out into the open, plagued by the anxieties caused by the new and challenging circumstances, exposed and overcome.31

Baudrillard’s vision of the experience of the individual served as a precedent for and, most likely, strongly influenced Hal Foster’s evocation of the schizophrenic model in the context of art, which offers insight into the circumstances that might provoke it:

Faced with contradictory demands—to advance critical transformation in art and to demonstrate the historical futility of this project—some resorted to a “coquetting” with schizophrenia characteristic of cynical reason. This simulated schizophrenia was not new; in 1983 Craig Owens detected a similar posture among neo-expressionists, who were also confronted with contradictory demands to be avant-gardist (“as innovative and original as possible”) and to be conformist (“to conform to established norms and conventions”). In both instances this simulated schizophrenia served as a mimetic device against such double binds; it seemed to offer a way to suspend if not to escape them. This defense has several precedents in modernism.32

In order to empower himself or herself in this way, an artist first needs to realize that to be avant-gardist never can be to escape the norms and conventions of art; for, it is impossible to make art that exists outside of the domain of art. When an artist’s production pushes against the boundaries of art, those boundaries extend to include each new creation. In response to this situation, though, through artistic schizophrenia, the artist maintains the ability to reach deliberately for an ideal through the use of some established devices. These circumstances seem to coincide with the situation that a young artist would face as his or her influential precedents were being embraced in the art world. For an example, in several of his early works, Rauschenberg was compelled to face the influence of the New York School head on;

31 Kuspit, 2000: 2.
32 Foster, 1996: 123.
however, not only was it impossible for him to avoid that influence completely, he in fact recognized that one aspect of that influence’s practice - gestural abstraction - remained relevant to his transgressive agenda.

Moreover, Rauschenberg’s early production was particularly diverse in its forms, and the artist was particularly varied in his approaches to his concepts. He made *Blueprints* in 1949, *Automobile Tire Print* in 1951, *White Paintings* into 1951, *Black Paintings* into 1952, collages during his time in Europe in 1952, photographs consistently, and sculpture as late as 1953. And, he confronted Abstract Expressionism via negation, with *Erased de Kooning Drawing* in 1953, and via reproduction, with *Factum I* and *Factum II* in 1957. One could easily contribute the variety in his production to his having not yet found his own voice, an experience that is not atypical for young artists. As a point of reference, although Rauschenberg produced works prior to 1949, the earliest work that he admits into his canon, *the Lily White*, is from that year. And, he was neither the first nor the only artist to reject his early work, most likely in an attempt to conceal the variety of styles and techniques with which he experimented as well as early influences. In fact, the experimentation that is so common in an artist’s early production serves to evidence the notion that artists, generally, experience the anxiety of influence especially strongly during the period of their development - as they work to become technically proficient, develop a personal aesthetic, and develop a personal voice, all the while looking to precedents for inspiration.

33 Steinberg, 2000: 36.
34 Jasper Johns and Morris Louis also destroyed their early work.
Some artists discourage certain types of analyses of their work by suggesting that a given subject was not a concern of theirs. Some artists support diverse analyses of their works; they simply would appreciate it if their personal involvement were left out of the discussion. But, works of art do not exist separate from the artist’s influence; no matter how diminished his or her activity, the artist’s activity is the means by which common matter and thought become art. Still, once a work is finished, it is relinquished into the public domain. The artist is thus perpetually absent from a finished work, and, so, the viewer is compelled to interpret meaning through assumption and conjecture based on his or her own imagination. This thesis, for one, will only present interpretations that seem reasonable, that seem fair, and that are balanced against what is generally accepted.

As it should be evident by now, this thesis will invoke art criticism and art theory for their contributions to the understanding of the specifics and the generalities of the dynamic in question. Most art history involves some of each method, and the best of criticism and theory is responsive to history and appreciative of objects. To whatever extent this thesis is critical or theoretical - or is perceived as such - it is founded on formal analysis and contextualization, primary means in the production of art history. Still, there has been an increase in the past few decades of authors who have compounded the history of art based on facts and contextualization with critical theory, in the hopes that it will enhance the dialogue on art and provide greater insight. Art critics and theorists have recognized themselves to be in a state of crisis at least since the 1950s and have functioned to a significant extent under the same condition of self-reflexivity as is symptomatic of some artists and some of the objects
that they have created. This thesis will use relevant and significant written sources in order to investigate what de Kooning, Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly have accomplished, in order to come to a better understanding of the ways in which their works can be approached analytically.

The section on de Kooning will come first, since he was the figure of influence against which the three later artists responded. The first chapter will present the formal and conceptual ambiguities to be found in de Kooning’s painting, and the three later artists’ ambiguities will be considered as pointedly self-assertive, as a strategy for responding to the precedent. The sections on Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly will follow in turn, and each section will attempt to outline the ways in which the artist has accepted and rejected specific aspects of the precedent’s formal and conceptual objectives. Moreover, each chapter will focus on the overall attitude assumed by the artist as manifest in his method and the way in which his work provokes the viewer.

This thesis is an attempt to use specific works to develop a theoretical notion of painting based on artists’ use of ambiguity for avant-gardist purposes. This thesis incorporates aspects of each of the three methodologies of art history, criticism, and theory. The information presented in this thesis is primarily motivated by a concern

35 This crisis has been addressed by scholars as diverse in their writing styles and ideologies as Harold Rosenberg in *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* from 1964, Leo Steinberg in “Objectivity and the Shrinking Self” from 1972, Michael Fried in “An Introduction to My Art Criticism” in *Art and Objecthood* from 1998, Robert Storr in the company of a number of the founding and contributing editors of *October* in 2002 in “Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism,” Nancy Princethal in “Art Criticism: Bound to Fail” in *Art and America* from 2006, and as recently as 2007 in *The State of Art Criticism*, edited by James Elkins. If responses to the issue have been self-indulgent at times, they have been nevertheless thoughtful and thought provoking.
for the thoroughness and coherency of each analysis. This is because this abstract theory of art is assembled from specific means - the formal analysis and contextualization of one or two works each by four artists in the period after the height of Abstract Expressionism - and it aspires to pertain in various ways to various other cases of art history, art criticism, and the inspiration and analysis of objects.
The liveliness of the marks made and the variety of techniques used in the production of its heavily worked surface make Willem de Kooning’s *Easter Monday* (1955-56; Fig. 3) a visually exciting painting. By means of its physical complexity, slashing brushstrokes, and nuances of color, this painting captivates the viewer’s perception of physical and illusionistic space. In their Pulitzer Prize winning biography *De Kooning: An American Master*, Mark Steven and Annalyn Swan refer to this painting as the artist’s “first mainstream success.”¹ Scholars have considered *Easter Monday* as the terminal work in “a portentous-sounding cycle” that started with *Black Friday* (1948) and which included, at least tangentially, *Asheville* (1949) and *Excavation* (1950).² *Easter Monday* was but a point in de Kooning’s perpetual oscillation between figuration and abstraction. It is a complex work that exhibits all of de Kooning’s creative skill in paint. Its visually commanding painted forms are almost surely complete abstractions, and so, our initial focus will be the work’s formal qualities.

De Kooning has created an irregular patterning with strokes of paint in varying widths and thicknesses that crisscross the canvas. The thinnest strokes are

¹ Stevens and Swan, 379.
² Yard, 59.
approximately an inch wide, and they were painted primarily in black, grays, or bluish-grays. Overall, these relatively thin lines structure the composition and determine the illusionistic space constructed by the varying surfaces of paint. For the most part, the inch-wide strokes are perceived as linear and sit optically above the swatches and textures of the paint and photo-transfers that comprise the rest of the composition.

In the bottom right quadrant of the composition, two-inch wide bluish-gray strokes intersect perpendicularly to each other. The one is tilted slightly to the right off of the vertical and is bisected by the other, which is close to horizontal and is longer on the end to the right of the intersection. The shape could be described as cruciform. Right above this shape, touching the top end of the vertical stroke, sits a horizontal line with nearly vertical lines reaching up from its ends. This organization appears to draw a rectangle, since the vertical line on the right is bisected by a gradually curving stroke that almost completes the top of the shape. To follow the path of that bisected vertical line beyond its end into the upper half of the canvas would lead to an odd shape, given its very small size and its coherency as a shape. It is a caret, like the two standing sides of a triangle, drawn in black, sitting on a downward-slanting, thick stroke of Prussian blue, which causes it to tilt to the left. Set inside that three-inch tall shape is a brush-sized dab of the same black. Up and to the left of this shape is a stroke of gray that reaches up to the left and to the upper edge of the canvas. Just to the left of that stroke, a stroke that is almost symmetrical reaches down from the top of the canvas and angles down and to the left, extending almost twice as far as its counterpart. The longer of the two strokes sits
over a horizontal two-to-three-inch wide stroke in a pale, neutral yellow. This horizontal stroke reaches almost to the left edge of the canvas and connects at its right end to another stroke of the same width and color, which angles to the left and reaches up to the top of the canvas. In doing so, that angled stroke crosses back over the inch-thick black stroke that crossed its horizontal counterpart.

Far in the upper left corner there are a one-inch wide, curved stroke in bluish-gray and a curvilinear stroke in purplish gray, both of which connect to nearly straight lines of the same color. There is a concentration of inch-thick gray strokes in the upper left corner of the composition. In the bottom half of the composition, these inch-wide strokes are primarily black and are concentrated on the right side. These strokes are primarily straight in the bottom half of the composition and are more often curvilinear in the upper half. These strokes almost always intersect with one another, oftentimes one bisecting one another.

Formally, the strokes and the swatches compete for autonomy, but, given the vulnerability of the wet oil paints that de Kooning manipulated on the surface of the canvas, the act of making a stroke usually affected the swatch below or vice versa. Even the linear forms that have been the focus so far are not solid strokes. By making them mottled, the painter intentionally undermined their linear coherency for the sake of formal - especially, coloristic - ambiguity. For a prime example, the cruciform in the bottom right corner of the composition interacts with a saturated yellow shape that is of a lighter value and was painted in with a thick brush that was three or so inches wide. The lower half of the vertical stroke sits over the yellow and acts as a part of its left-side boundary. The right side of the horizontal stroke acts similarly, drawing the
majority of the lower boundary of the shape; however, this horizontal stroke was created by a brush that was loaded with less paint, and, so, the yellow shows through the splotchy stroke in some places. This transposition of color happens to a greater extent in the upper half of the cruciform’s vertical axis, which cuts through the center of the yellow shape and was lightly painted over in the same yellow. As a result, the yellow paint mixed on the canvas with some of the still-wet blue paint.

Either consciously or out of the habit of his painterly skill, de Kooning has created ambiguity in paint that would otherwise be considered muddiness. He is able to succeed in doing so primarily because the painted forms are abstract. They do not serve the purpose of object-representation; they are their own reason for existing. The yellow shape influences surrounding shapes; there are a number of off-white strokes that run horizontally just above the yellow shape. The pure, saturated yellow is concentrated in the form in the bottom right and in another in the bottom left corner, which has significantly defined linear boundaries. In fact, strokes of white muddied with yellow can be found in nearly all areas of the painting, to such an extent that the color might have been mixed off of the canvas on de Kooning’s palette. If the artist had gone to the effort of mixing the yellowed colors, it would only contribute to the argument that he was in control of the appearance of messiness.

Besides the black and dark gray linear forms, and, like the shapes of saturated yellow, shapes of color in this composition primarily exist as strokes made with two-to-four-inch wide brushes or as swatches - that is, concentrated patches of strokes of the same color that compose a shape. A stroke made using a wide brush has the capability of being perceived as a shape rather than a line more easily than a thin
stroke does. So, the three-inch wide, flat stroke of green that runs horizontally near the middle of the canvas on the ride side of the composition is similar to the randomly defined shape of pale orangey-pink that is built out of similarly colored strokes of impasto, which sits up and to the left of the middle of the composition. Both are primarily color-shapes.

The pale orangey-pink shape is a good example of a situation where painterly marks struggle for physical autonomy. The thin strokes of blue-violet, the color’s complement, which were painted into the upper-right part of the pink shape, mixed to neutralize each other when the two wet paints collided on the surface. Moreover, the two colors are of such similar saturations and values that their complementary nature does not serve to contrast them enough, and, so, they mix optically from a comfortable viewing distance of a couple feet.

The palette of this work is quite nuanced, and it is extremely colorful; there is one or another shade of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet: There is a slash of alizarin crimson. There is a swatch of pale orangey-pink. There is a pale pink on the right side in the upper half of the composition. There is saturated yellow ochre. There is a stroke of solid green. There is black, there are dark blue-grays, and there are lighter grays of varying temperatures. There is a thick stroke of indigo in the upper right corner of the composition and a swirling stroke of the same color that cuts through the center of the canvas and angles towards the bottom left corner. There is violet and blue-violet along the left side of the composition. There is a relatively solid shape of neutral gray in the extreme bottom left corner, which extends to the bottom and left edges of the canvas.
A significant proportion of the canvas has not been painted impasto; instead, these areas are flat. The surface was colored, but no paint was built up from the canvas. The majority of these areas have been painted one or another shade of white. These areas tend to be expansive - that is, uninterrupted by shapes of color - evenly textured, and larger than the shapes of individual colors. White appears to have initially covered the canvas’ entire surface.

There is more white visible in the bottom half of the canvas than there is in the top. In the bottom half, the visible areas of white and gray are expansive; the largest stretch is twice as long as the largest visible area in the upper half of the canvas. In the top half, the white of the canvas is localized in the upper left and extreme right corners. Like the interaction of colors that has already been addressed, the interaction of color with white oftentimes causes the white to become a highly unsaturated version of the color that was mixed on the palette, affecting its value, hue, and, thus, temperature. Nevertheless, the artist has controlled this interaction so that there tends to be high contrast between the values and saturations of the colors versus any off-white.

The palette of the painting is lightened incredibly by the whites that cover the canvas. And the other colors that make an immediate impression are also light in value; there are at least two light pinks, the saturated yellow ochre and the yellow ochre of very high value, turquoise, and the light blue-violet. The palette is colorful and filled with pastels. Both the title, *Easter Monday*, as well as the palette allude to a time in March or April, during the spring season, when one could imagine the winter to be thawing or thawed and plants coming back to life. On the canvas, in the spaces
where the white recedes, color comes forward in full bloom. On the painting’s real physical surface, the areas of white and off-whites serve as a ground for the black and color strokes and swatches to sit upon. For the reason that the flat expanses are the shallowest accumulations of paint on the surface, they also appear to be the deepest recesses in the illusion of space. Visually, the white areas tend to recede behind the incidents of color, allowing the color shapes to compete for physical and visual prominence.

When a stroke of paint has been layered over another solid stroke of paint, the physical reaction is either that the new stroke layers paint atop the old, if it is dry, or the new stroke slices through the thick, wet stroke, picking up some of its color in the process and altering the new stroke’s color. In either case, the point of impact becomes a moment on the canvas where the viewer perceives one color-shape sitting in space above the other. The coherency and the power of the illusion depend on the physical character of the interaction - primarily the extent to which the strokes are concrete and distinct from each other. The illusion also depends on the colors of the two strokes, since greater contrast between the two will contribute to the appearance of distinct forms. If, for example, a stroke of color is laid over one in black, which tends to recede visually, the illusion of depth will be stronger. In *Easter Monday*, de Kooning was careful not to layer strokes of color over any of the inch-wide strokes of black. Thus, as along the right edge in the upper half of the canvas, where a pale, mute yellow is painted over a pale blue, the color relationship is subtle and the illusion is ambiguous. Even in the center of the top half of the composition, where an inch-wide stroke reaches up from a curving, slightly diagonal stroke in black, the
vertical stroke fades from black to a mute, blue-gray before it slices through a two-inch wide stroke in pale, mute yellow. Here, the stroke changes before the point of intersection, so that the contrast is relatively low and the illusion is ambiguous.

The mute, blue-gray vertical stroke in fact angles slightly on its way up to the top edge of the canvas. The pale, mute, yellow stroke runs horizontal and then, at its right endpoint, turns, cuts back diagonally to the left, crosses over the blue-gray stroke, and extends to the top edge of the canvas. Together, the two demonstrate the ability of diagonal strokes of painted impasto to imply illusionistic space. Based on the principles of perspective, an angled line can suggest gradual protrusion or recession into space. The illusion is even stronger when the lines interact with each other, creating multiple linear points of reference. So, the blue-gray stroke appears to recede into space as it travels through the space between the pale yellow strokes. On the other hand, de Kooning has manipulated the strokes in ways that undermine the illusion at the same time that they create it. Besides the decrease in contrast that has already been mentioned, de Kooning has also extended both strokes to the edge of the canvas, which tends to cause the viewer to perceive the surface as flat. The intense contrast of this black stroke to its surrounding area causes the surface of the canvas to appear flat. He has also anchored the vertical blue-gray stroke at its origin to the slightly diagonal stroke in black. At its bottom end the stroke sits flat on the canvas, but on its way up it takes part in a vague illusion of space.

Given the linear nature of the black and gray one-inch wide strokes, the visible areas of white tend to appear as outlined shapes. The shape along the lower edge of the right side of the canvas is almost rectilinear. The shape in the upper left
region of the canvas is like a polygon with one curved edge on the top. Or, depending on how the viewer perceives the slightly curving, blue-gray line that angles down and to the left or the horizontal stroke of the same color, the expanse of off-whites might appear to be two or three polygons. The architecture composed of the linear strokes has the ability to present to the viewer an illusion in which the areas of white can be perceived as positive, negative or neutral spaces.

Where the whites, off-whites, pale pinks and pale grays that extend across the canvas have not been obscured by a thick layering of swatches and strokes, photographic transfers of full pages or segments of newspapers show through. Given the nature of the stratification already described and the impression of the flat surfaces as a unified shape, it appears as if the transfers were created all across the flat canvas before any impasto strokes, swatches, or linear strokes were layered on top. As such, the areas beneath the impasto are hidden. The paint prevents the viewer from verifying whether de Kooning applied the impasto in order to carefully cover over any areas that did not receive transfers. The transfers, themselves, depict columns of text accompanied by images as well as larger advertisements typical of what can be found in daily newspapers.

The interaction of paint with the transfers has muted the relatively low values of the newspaper ink, decreasing the contrast between the printed information and the painted incident, and making the transfers difficult to read. Moreover, due to the process of photo-transference - where the newspaper is laid face down against the surface of the canvas, transferring the reverse image of the printed information onto the canvas - the printed information retains its original scale. The transferred images
and letterforms, which are of a much smaller scale than any of the paint strokes, are less apparent than the painted incident. From a distance, they primarily act to texture and color the off-white areas. Concurrently, the low level of contrast between the transfers and the paint obscures the visual information represented on the newspaper page. The small, muted images lose their detail and their ability to give the illusion of space or volume to form. The text is nearly illegible, especially given the difference between the distances at which one reads a newspaper versus a painting, though the small-scale images and text might draw the viewer close to the surface of the canvas. The orientation of the printed information is always nearly parallel to the edge of the canvas, but it is just as often vertical as horizontal, which makes it a challenge to read the already muted and small-scale text. What is more, because of the nature of the photo-transfer process - in which the newspaper section is laid face-down against the canvas - the letterforms are all flipped in reverse, and the words, themselves, read right to left. It is possible to read the largest text with some effort, but the text in columns is practically illegible.

De Kooning regularly flattened newspaper onto the surface of his canvases, but he did so most often in an attempt to keep the oil paint surface from drying out. Even with *Easter Monday*, de Kooning used this method. This is evident from the color texture that he achieved over the expanse of white in the upper left corner. The mottled appearance of the turquoise on the far right side of the shape is unusual because of its flatness. More than that, the marks appear flattened. In the production of the photo-transfer images seen in other parts of the composition, de Kooning went

3 Stevens and Swan, 380.
a step further by allowing the ink to release from the newsprint onto flat areas of the canvas.

Even though more white is visible in the bottom half of the canvas than in the top, there is about as much visible surface covered in photo-transfers in each. In the bottom half, newspaper was flattened over much of the wet surface without making transfers. Since the transfers are only visible in the areas where the canvas’s flat surface is visible, almost like vignettes, the transfers are most often expansive, showing large sections of a continuous page. As such, the imagery in the transfers is various and extensive. Before attempting to analyze the iconography of the imagery, we must develop a record of specific images and their locations in the composition.

Along the bottom edge, in the center, is a patch of pale pink in which can be seen transferred images showing the expressive faces of three young women. In the left corner is a transferred image depicting the bust of a man, which is strategically painted over with a swab of pure white paint. To the right of the center of the canvas is a transferred image of a refrigerator advertisement turned upside-down. In the upper right-hand corner of the composition is a transferred image of an advertisement for the movie Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Also in the upper right hand corner, in the area of pale pink is a transfer of an ad for Easter treats, the illustration of which depicts three anthropomorphized bunnies, one of which holds a painter’s brush and palette. In the bottom right corner, laying horizontally, is an image of an ancient soldier. He is depicted holding a spear above his head. The text above him reads right-to-left, and the letters are flipped backwards, but the text reads “THE COLOSSUS.” Just to the left, but as a part of the same newspaper transfer, is the
word “SPACE.” In the same way as “THE COLOSSUS,” the text is inverted. The letters of the word “SPACE” are formed from the negative spaces in an area of transferred ink - that is, the letters are the color of the white paint and the area around the forms is a muted shade of the original printed image. Also, in the orangey-pink swatch of paint up and to the left of the middle of the canvas is an image of a hand reaching out a stick.4

The visually prominent and expressive abstractions were obviously important to the artist and the work’s critics, and they remain significant to viewers. However, to a great extent, the subject matter of this work, as it is indicated by the title, is to be taken not from the form of the abstract painting but from the newspaper images that were transferred onto the flat canvas. The images were appropriated, carefully transferred, and intentionally obscured by painted marks, so as to illustrate a literal subject. In “Resurrecting Content in de Kooning’s Easter Monday,” Kirsten Hoving Powell outlined what she envisioned to be the primary subject of the painting. In opposition to scholarly readings of the work as another in the series of paintings responding to the urban landscape done by the artist in the mid-1950s, Hoving Powell instead maintained that the subject of the work is biblical.5 This would not seem to be

4 This record is indebted to an article entitled “Resurrecting Content in de Kooning’s Easter Monday,” in which Kirsten Hoving Powell provides photographic details of many of the visually prominent transferred images.
5 Hoving Powell: “In addition to Diane Waldman, Willem de Kooning (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), p. 105, see Harold Rosenberg, de Kooning (New York: Harry N. Abrams, [1974]), p. 33, and Harry F. Gaugh, Willem de Kooning (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), p. 56, for critics who emphasize the paintings connection to the urban landscape” (100n1). This is also true of the readings by Thomas Hess, whose contemporary review of the show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1956 remains the most cited, as well as Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, who
a challenging premise, considering that Easter is referenced in the title, still Hoving Powell offers a relatively specific system to explain the iconography.

In the Christian faith, Jesus was resurrected on the Sunday of Easter, which took place three days after he died by crucifixion. Jesus was condemned to death by the Romans, and he was crucified in front of many witnesses. Among the witnesses were a Roman soldier and several distant mourners, of whom three of the most important were Mary Magdalene, Salome, and the other Mary, who was a mother of two of Jesus’ followers. Jesus was declared dead when a soldier pierced his side with a lance and blood and water flowed out. Jesus’ body was lowered from the cross by a group of his followers, wrapped in a shroud, and buried in a sepulcher. On Easter day, his tomb was found to be empty, and Jesus revealed himself in his resurrected form at different times and places to a variety of his followers.

The transferred images of the three young women along the bottom edge in the center of the canvas correspond with the description found in some accounts of the three women who bore witness to the crucifixion, the deposition, and the resurrection. In her explanation of the iconographic system, Hoving Powell argues that the image of the man painted over in white correlates to the way that Jesus was described when resurrected. The image of the refrigerator advertisement, found right of center above the rectangular form drawn in paint, is suggestive, since in the image the refrigerator is shown open and the door has been covered over by a carefully

address the biblical content but repeatedly refer to the work as one of de Kooning’s “urban abstractions,” 380.

6 Ibid., 89.
7 Ibid., 90.
placed stroke of muted yellow ochre. The similarity between the form of the refrigerator and the biblical accounts’ various descriptions of the sepulcher may be irrelevant considering the refrigerator’s primary function to contain and preserve as well as its human scale. Furthermore, Hoving Powell wisely points out the theme of resurrection suggested by the advertisements for Invasion of the Body Snatchers and World Without End, both of which were movies that opened in 1956.

If we pursue the initial indications of Hoving Powell’s analysis further, we will see that the content of Easter Monday is more like a compounded abstract notion of the religious and secular significances surrounding Easter rather than a coherent reference to historical events. The advertisement in the upper right corner for Schraff’s “Easter Candies” (Figs. 4A and 4B) is one of the few literal references to Easter besides the painting’s title; however, it refers to the secular aspect of the holiday. In fact, Easter Monday is a holiday in some countries. It is the secular counterpart to the religious holiday, which takes place on the Sunday just before. As has already been mentioned, the advertisement contains an illustration of three anthropomorphized bunny rabbits, and this is not surprising, since the Easter Bunny is the icon of the secular aspect of the holiday. In this particular advertisement, one of the depicted bunnies holds a painter’s palette and brush and wears a beret, a trademark of the painter’s stereotype. Although these props make reference to the secular Easter tradition of decoratively painting Easter eggs, this bunny instead paints a sign that advertises “Easter Cakes.” This detail may have interested de Kooning, 

---

8 Ibid.
9 See Hoving Powell, 90 for an analysis of depictions of the sepulcher in Renaissance painting, examples of which were depicted in Art News in 1954 and 1955.
10 Ibid., 92.
4A. Easter Monday (detail, upper right). In Hoving Powell, 95.

In Hoving Powell, 95.
who worked as a sign painter early in his career and remained fascinated by the tools and forms of that type of painting.\textsuperscript{11} As a metaphor, the ad’s reference to painting acts to reflect on de Kooning’s painterly activity as well as highlight the creative nature of the art making process. His intelligence devised the referent and, by extension, the referential system contained in \textit{Easter Monday} that comprises its content. His creative capacity as an artist made manifest the subject of Easter in the form of this painting through the use of symbolism. Nevertheless, in the context of the work’s iconography, de Kooning’s appropriation of this advertisement primarily signifies the modern, secular dimension of Easter.

In the Christian faith, Jesus endured torture and a painful death in order to atone for the sins of mankind and to give proof of the afterlife. The Romans played an integral role in the story; for, the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to death because he stood as a challenge to Roman authority. Moreover, a Roman centurion pierced Jesus in his side in order to prove that he was dead. Not only does the soldier depicted in the bottom right corner have a spear raised above his head, there is also a blood-red slash of paint in the mid-section of the painting, as if where Christ was stabbed. Through the symbolism of its color and its location in the composition, this painted form is transformed into a representation of one of the story’s physical details. However, the effect is metaphysical, since there is no representation of Jesus’ body; the abstractions make no other reference to his form in such a coherent way. A comparison that Hoving Powell made between the transferred image of a hand holding out a stick in the orangey-pink swatch of paint up and to the

\textsuperscript{11} Stevens and Swan, 185-6.
left of the center of the painting (Fig. 5A) and the hand in Marcel Duchamp’s *Tu m’* (1918; Fig. 5B) might help to explain this unusual dynamic: “Like the pointing finger of the trompe l’oeil hand in… *Tu m’*… this hand directs us to take notice, but points to nothing but the small flesh-tone area. The illusionistic hand transferred onto flesh-colored paint suggests the resurrected Christ’s now-unnecessary human body…”12 *Tu m’* presents the case of a reference and referent embodied in a single form; the hand points to its own flesh. Moreover, the title offers an incomplete statement; the subject is in the second-person, and the verb is transitive, but unspecified. The English equivalent of the title would be: “You ___ me.” The logic behind the title corresponds to the notion of an undifferentiated reference and referent, since, in the phrase, the subject and direct object are not differentiated by a verb. In the case of *Easter Monday*, the red paint is a fleeting reference whose referent has no form; there is no side represented in which the wound can be located. This circumstance relates to the story of crucifixion and resurrection, in which Jesus wavers between form and formlessness, since his essence is everlasting. A representation of Jesus’ body cannot be found in the abstract painted forms of *Easter Monday*; nevertheless, the various aspects of the story that are not represented in the painting’s abstractions and iconography, such as Jesus, remain part of the work’s subject matter.

De Kooning’s act of appropriating the text and imagery contained in the newspaper transfers is peculiar for a similar reason, since advertisements inherently commodify their subject and oftentimes use the act of disguise as a mode of

12 Hoving Powell, 92.
5A. *Easter Monday* (detail, center left). [The hand is in the lower left near the gray paint, and it holds a stick which reaches up and to the right along a diagonal.] In Hoving Powell, 96.

5B. Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m’* (detail, center), 1918. Yale University Art Gallery.
presentation. Take the image that serves to indicate the Roman centurion, for example. Surely, the image was widely distributed at the time when de Kooning was creating *Easter Monday*, and for that reason it was available for the artist to appropriate. However, the subject of the original image was not a Roman centurion, as it became when de Kooning included it in the painting for its iconographic capacity. Initially, the meaning of the image was more complex; it relied on the identification of Frederic March, in part for the fact that he was an actor, shown here in his role as Philip of Macedonia in the film *Alexander the Great* (Figs. 6A and 6B). One of the advantages of appropriation is that the artist can achieve his or her intended meaning by altering the reference so that it indicates the selected referent. As such, this image of an actor in the role of Philip of Macedonia, an ancient Greek king, can serve to indicate a Roman centurion.

In the advertisement’s original state, its ability to indicate its meaning relied on more than the iconic nature of Frederic March embodying his character. The composition of the text in the ad was significant, as was the typeface of the movie’s title; each served to indicate the nature of the commodity. Since credits in movie ads and posters are arranged in a certain way - primarily to emphasize the jobs of the most important people (i.e., to give credit where credit is due) and to advertise the involvement of well-respected individuals - the composition of text in the bottom half of the ad is recognizably for a film. The film marquee - the big bold letters of “ALEXANDER THE GREAT” - which is intentionally designed to give the movie

---

13 Ibid., 89.
6A. *Easter Monday* (detail, lower left). In Hoving Powell, 90.

advertisement a unique character that indicates its entertainment value, therefore, also obviously advertises a movie. This movie was a particular kind of commodity, since it relied on March’s ability to assume a disguise, and its function relied at least somewhat on the convincing illusion of the constructed scene and its projected moving image. This advertisement served to indicate the movie’s nature as a recreation as well as to advertise the commodity itself.

As part of the same newspaper transfer, transferred black ink creates the negative space around the letters of the word “SPACE.” The rest of the movie title On the Threshold of Space; however, just so happened to be obscured by a stroke of black paint. Hoving Powell was right to point out the irony of this moment on the canvas, which serves as both a verbal and visual pun. The ability to create spatial illusion with paint was suspect to formalists in painting of the 1940s and 1950s.

“SPACE” refers to the possibility for painted forms to deceive the viewer’s perception. “SPACE,” too, is a word; it is created from symbolic letterforms, and it carries literal meaning. The printed word, though, has no material form besides its support. The letterforms are registered on the surface of the canvas. Not only does the word, a reservoir of symbolic and literal meaning, lay flat against the plane of the canvas, en masse, as in the columns of text that cover much of the newspaper page, words emphasize the picture plane. And yet, ironically, “SPACE,” which makes reference to the taboo of illusion in Greenbergian criticism but reinforces the planarity of the surface, is not written; the letterforms take the shape of the canvas

14 Ibid., 99.
showing through the shapes of ink that were produced when de Kooning transferred the newspaper advertisement onto this painting’s surface.

The presence of words in this painting hearkens back to Cubism and its representation of words for the purpose of referencing the forms and habits of daily life. Here, the presence of words also draws a comparison between the way in which a word is read as a symbol or a phrase is read for syntactical meaning and the way in which a painting is interpreted based on incident and iconography. This painting conducts an investigation into multiple aspects of the process of interpretation; form is only legible through carefully orchestrated visual complexity, and the viewer is challenged to interpret the content of the work based on a variety of abstract and ambiguous sources. The comparison between modes of interpretation is particularly relevant, since in this abstract painting de Kooning has incorporated photo-transfers of representational and illusionistic images. Given that the painting maintains greater visual prominence, it might hold greater importance for the meaning of this work. The artist has acknowledged the preference that his formalist contemporaries were giving to formal means by creating a work that abides by this preference. However, he finds meaning in image, allusion, and metaphor and has created *Easter Monday* so that it carries meaning through each of these approaches.

The question of de Kooning’s belief in the ideals of formalism is a difficult one to answer given his obvious commitment to the form of painting. Concerning abstraction, the artist preferred the tactile to the transcendental. Stevens and Swan asserted that de Kooning “respected earth more than heaven” and that he “was not
one of the period’s mystics,” like Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman.\(^{15}\) He relished form for its material nature. And yet, he appeared unconcerned with its potential to represent an artistic ideal such as formalism. From this position, the artist was able to produce paintings, such as *Easter Monday*, which were, through their clear willingness to engage the means of illusion - albeit noncommittally, actively undermining or nuancing the illusion of space through formal ambiguity - engaged in a dialogue on the subject.

The artist’s use of newspaper transfers can and has been explained by scholars as being primarily performed for its formal effect. By registering the text and imagery in relatively monochromatic areas of even texture, the artist has added another texture, a subtle, even one. Since text and imagery in the newspaper are small in scale, the viewer who is set back several feet from the canvas, where the entire composition can be taken in, perceives the medium value incident of the transferred ink as a translucent screen that mutes the areas of painted color. There is a real push and pull on the viewer caused by the relative scales of the transferred imagery and the painted forms - the one best read from a distance less than a foot, the other from several feet back. So, the push and pull impacts the viewer psychologically as well as physically. Less than a foot away from the canvas, the viewer is able to move his or her focus from one detail of the canvas to another, just as from one transferred image to another or to the minute details of a paint stroke. From several feet away, the transfers vanish into the gestalt of the work, but the painted forms impress themselves upon the viewer with great personality.

\(^{15}\) Stevens and Swan, 379.
Just as the perpendicular lines in the bottom right corner carry enough information to become cruciform, and the three lines above this are just rigid and related enough to appear to be a rectangle, painted forms around the canvas have personality and interact with nearby forms as if in a dialogue on appearance. In an interview with Willem de Kooning, Harold Rosenberg related an anecdote that is particularly relevant to the issue of associating with the forms of a painting:

You can do what you wish with a picture. Once after a meeting with art teachers at the University of Kentucky we were standing before a large painting of a side view of a cow in front of a house. A woman said: “Tell me what you see in this picture.” For the fun of it, I began to find all kinds of images painted into the cow, between its head and its tail. It turned into a Surrealist painting. The more we looked at it the more figures began to appear. It became a game - everyone found something - here is a clump of trees on the side of the cow, there is a river running down the cow’s neck. All this began to appear, as if the artist had actually painted it.\(^\text{16}\)

Rosenberg continued his anecdote, in an attempt to explain to de Kooning exactly what he meant by finding images that were painted in, but which the artist did not paint:

…they were accidental effects that appeared when you looked at it in a certain way - as if you were watching clouds. A human profile emerges, a cathedral, an animal. We were standing in this idle way and began to see babies and motorcycles on the side of the cow and around the cow. The art teachers behaved as if I had given them a kind of magical lecture, because at first they had seen only a cow and a horse.

De Kooning responded: “I know now what you mean. I use that a lot in my work… I don’t make an image such as a baby, but I use it.”\(^\text{17}\)

Rosenberg’s anecdote is a successful illustration of the tense dynamic between abstraction and representation in painting. It is possible to “find” representational


\[^{17}\] Ibid., 148.
images in areas of paint that contribute to an entirely different representation, but the activity is just as easily done by looking in areas of abstraction. It is no small matter that “everyone found something.” What they “found” with all likelihood did not exist; it was not depicted by the artist, and perhaps no one else could “find” what they “found,” even with direction. However, the possibility of making convincing associations existed, and it was created almost necessarily through the artist’s activity with paint. More than that, it was “fun,” “a game;” “it was magical.” The activity was significant to the viewers. It was a constructive exercise, and although it might not have carried particular meaning for the artist, or been his or her intent, to some extent the painting - as do all paintings - became open to any potential interpretations once it was relinquished by the artist.

De Kooning’s ability to abstract and to create abstractions was practiced. The artist was classically trained in Rotterdam; his draftsmanship was impeccable, as is evident in his early figural works in the 1940s. Subsequent works such as Pink Lady (ca. 1944) show the process by which de Kooning abstracted figures rather than painting in the abstract. And this is a progression that de Kooning repeated in the early 1950s during the denouement of his Woman series. The conclusion of this period of abstracting figures may have had its penultimate creation in the form of Woman as a Landscape (1954-55; Fig. 7), which was finished in the same year that Easter Monday was begun. Within his oeuvre, de Kooning progressed from representation to abstraction with numerous sustained instances of hesitation and reversion between the two. Considering de Kooning’s artistic development from
classical figuration to abstracted figuration and then to complete abstraction, it is reasonable to “find” representational imagery in his abstractions. Furthermore, if, together, de Kooning’s artistic development and working process are any indication of where meaning might reside in his painting, perhaps, in part, it is in the elusive personality of his painted forms.

In a way, for de Kooning, who is incredibly focused on the fundamental capability of being a painter, which is to manipulate the viewer’s experience, “all painting is an illusion” - as he suggested in the same interview.18 This statement has multiple implications. For one thing, this masterful painter must understand the capability of even abstract forms to create the illusion of space through the suggestion of perspective and the interaction of color-shapes. For another thing, art has a unique existence because it is created by a conscious artist, and once it exists, its forms have lives of their own, and they can be perceived in a variety of different ways by each viewer. One viewer might perceive an abstract form in a certain way, another in another way, a third might believe that abstract form to reference symbolically something besides itself, and a fourth might perceive that abstract form to represent a real form. Each viewer’s perception is correct, given that the painted form existed how he or she saw it; it simply carried significance, which was nevertheless subjective, besides its form.

Association may be sparked by a characteristic of a single form, such as its color or shape. The pinks that are a signature of de Kooning’s palette are noted for their ability to imply flesh. In fact, de Kooning was a masterful colorist, and in the

18 Ibid., 147.
later stages of his production, when his palette was most nuanced, the artist strove to capture specific colors from life, especially from life in the places where he lived. He did this in part because he was so inspired by the palette that coincided with the seasonal and regional sense of light.\textsuperscript{19} An iconographic association also may develop more gradually, out of relationships between multiple forms. The perpendicular intersection of the two arms of the cruciform in the bottom right corner, in combination with the increased length of one arm on one end, is just the type of situation from which iconographic associations can derive.

Given de Kooning’s figurative abstractions of the late 40s and early 50s - such as the iconic \textit{Woman I} (1950-1952) or the later and intensely abstracted \textit{Woman as a Landscape}, with their vertically-oriented figures and similarly proportioned compositions - it is possible, using the imagination, to place a figure in the space of \textit{Easter Monday}. To imagine packing a figure into or superimposing a figure onto this composition would be excessive. It does not appear as if there is a whole figure depicted in this work - or even, necessarily, coherent body parts - and de Kooning most likely did not base this composition consciously on the form of a figure. However, to imagine that this composition is influenced by the preceding compositions constructed around the figure is reasonable in the same way that it would be reasonable to envision residual biomorphs in the forms of this painting. Though de Kooning did not necessarily intend it, nor did he necessarily intend it to be overt, this composition and specific forms were likely influenced by figuration in the abstract.

\textsuperscript{19} Stevens and Swan, 263 and 419.
*Easter Monday* is a prime specimen for analysis based on iconographic association - the type of “watching clouds” that Rosenberg described. For example, take the small, sharply angled form in the upper right-hand corner, which has already been singled out for its clarity and coherency. There is a corresponding shape higher up in the black scumbling in the center of the canvas, although the latter form is less clearly defined. The forms could be imagined to reference eyes, as much as a pair as individually. Taking the lower, more clearly defined form for the sake of argumentation, it maintains at least three characteristics that contribute to its similarity with an eye: 1) Its scale is similar to the painted eyes in de Kooning’s series of *Woman* paintings. 2) Its location in the upper region of the canvas is similar to the location of the others. 3) And, its construction is similar. In the *Woman* paintings, the shape of the eye was a fuller and more defined almond-shape; however, in numerous cases de Kooning altered the height and width of the shape and even painted only the line of the upper lid. The density of the black used to paint the pupil rarely changed, though. And the weight of the black strokes defining this form in *Easter Monday* is similar to that of the forms in the preceding figurations. Potentially more than any other body part, the eye is distinctive and powerfully suggestive of the complete body. Although de Kooning used the idea of the Cheshire Cat’s smile as a metaphor for manifestations of influence, it might relate just as well to the eyes in *Easter Monday* as evidence of the influence that the preceding five years spent painting the figure almost exclusively must have had on de Kooning.²⁰

²⁰ Rosenberg, in Yard, “I can open almost any book of reproductions and find a painting I could be influenced by… When I look at a picture, I couldn’t care less for when it was done, if I am influenced by a painter from another time, that’s like the
A second shape drawn in paint that mimics a biomorphic form can be found in the bottom right corner of the composition. Two thin, nearly vertical, slightly curving lines are spaced apart from each other on the expanse of white with the photo-transfer image of the Roman soldier. The line on the left bows noticeably to the left. The line on the right tapers towards the top, and, if it bows, it does so ever so slightly to the right. Together the lines follow the surface of the white shape as if it bulged at the center like a sphere. The two short vertical lines, as set a distance apart on the surface of a bulging volume, suggest eyes. The lines do not serve to depict eyeballs with irises and pupils set in sockets with top and bottom lids, far from it. Instead, they suggest eyes in the way that abstracted shapes would sit in the upper half of an outlined circle representing a cartoon character’s head.

Strokes and swatches of paint in shades of gray draw the boundaries of the white expanse on which the two lines sit. The outline gently arcs around the bottom left, cuts back in, draws two extensions reaching up and out from the central shape, and curves back around. The shape is unusual given that it is enclosed by a nearly unbroken outline. The shapes of paint that draw its boundaries are sometimes thinner and sometimes thicker. At the shape’s uppermost point, the extended arm of the cruciform reaches across to delineate the boundary. Although this is the point at which the boundary is its thinnest, de Kooning has painted boundary lines with such

---

smile of the Cheshire Cat in Alice; the smile left over when the cat is gone. In other words I could be influenced by Rubens, but I would certainly not paint like Rubens… Now I feel like Manet who said, “Yes, I am influenced by everybody. But every time I put my hands in my pockets, I find someone else’s fingers there” (141).

21 The extensions at the top of the form look like bunny ears - like the long, pointed ears of the bunnies in the illustration for Schraff’s treats. An abstracted depiction of the head of the Easter Bunny would correspond to Easter Monday’s reference to the secular holiday.
close similarity in color that the lines themselves read as a nearly continuous shape. Nowhere else on the canvas has he drawn an outline as he has with this form in the bottom right.

The way in which this painted form outlined in black leaps forward from the surface beneath it is very similar to the appearance of forms in *Asheville* (1949; Fig. 8), *Collage* (1950) and *Excavation* (1950). The same type of architecture of black linear strokes that supports *Easter Monday* also structures the compositions of these three paintings, but to an even greater extent. In these works, the architecture exhibits greater linearity as well as a denser - but even - organization across the entire canvas. And the linear strokes compose biomorphic arrangements more often and more obviously. In *Excavation* there is at least one drawn shape left of the center that has the same appearance as the shape in which de Kooning draws the teeth that his women bare, and several shapes exhibit the same shape but have been obscured. In *Asheville* there is a large eye drawn in black to the right of the center. There is also a shape just above the center of the composition in *Collage* that is drawn in the way that de Kooning draws eyes; however, it has been obscured by a large smear of paint. In all cases, the forms that appear within the abstractions have been drawn in black strokes of paint of similarly thin width.

That the shapes in *Easter Monday* that were previously described - the caret and the cartoonish shape - might be said to be biomorphic is a reasonable argument not only because of aspects of the shapes, but also because of the nature of abstraction. In many cases abstraction is a reductive process with a real form as its point of origin. Or, abstractions are informed by real forms, which have been
observed and that comprise the repository of one’s visual memory. This is why de Kooning is able to say, “I don’t make an image such as a baby, but I use it.” De Kooning actively pursued the avenues of representation and abstraction concurrently. For this reason, we should pay attention to the painterly incident in his figurative works as well as the referential capability of his abstractions, such as *Easter Monday*.

The viewer’s predilection towards association is a strong one. Like the artist, when the viewer engages a painting, he or she does so with a broad and commanding visual memory. Almost without trying, almost against his or her better judgment, the viewer picks up on visual cues or finds a visual reference that may be different from what is perceived or that may not exist at all. One of the most familiar and commanding points of reference is the human face. Pareidolia is the psychological phenomenon that explains the apparition of the Man in the Moon as well as the many images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ that have seemed to appear in natural phenomena, of which the Shroud of Turin is one of the most famous examples. Although controversial, the Shroud of Turin is purported to bear a transferred image of Christ’s body, much in the same way that several transferred newspaper images can be seen on the surface of *Easter Monday*. The question of what meaning can derive from specific biomorphic associations made with nevertheless ambiguous forms is a valid one. It is dually significant that associations made with the painted forms are figurative, since viewer associations tend towards bodily forms as a point of reference, and since associations made with *Easter Monday* are oftentimes

22 Ibid., 148.
biomorphic. This stands in contrast to any urban or topographic associations, which logically would be commonplace with an “urban landscape,” which is how most scholars categorize this painting.

Given de Kooning’s long-held preoccupation with the figure, it would make sense that this composition would be overtly influenced by figuration. The proportions of de Kooning’s figurative canvases were often proportionally longer along the vertical axis, in large part because his figures were most often vertically oriented. For example, the proportions of *Woman I* (1950-52), at 75 7/8 by 58 inches, and *Easter Monday*, at 96 1/4 by 73 7/8 inches, vary by just one percent. Simply put, a figure would fit comfortably into the size and proportions of this canvas. This is not to suggest that there is a figure in *Easter Monday*. In fact, the biomorphic forms that have been described exist no more truthfully than might a whole figure, were someone to “find” it. There is simply no evidence to suggest that the artist “used” a figure in the production of these abstractions. Nevertheless, it is possible and consistent with the subject as well as the content of the work. For these reasons, figuration and representation carry real meaning for this painting, which is otherwise abstract.

23 Hoving Powell, 93. Given this tendency to associate, it is no surprise that even in her scholarly article on the iconographic system constructed of appropriated representational imagery, Hoving Powell went to the effort to describe the organization of painted forms in which she perceived a face: “At the center left edge, directly to the left of the flesh-colored area, heavy black lines sketch a large eye seen in profile. To its right is a frontal eye. Below these eyes, a thick gray line outlines a schematic nose, a gold shape with a gray line within it suggests a mouth, and a sharp edge at the left defines a cheek and chin line. Like the images of Christ the Pantocrator that fill the apses of Byzantine churches, this face hovers mysteriously, slowly revealing itself on the surface of *Easter Monday.*
It is no small matter that de Kooning admitted to having a “lifelong fascination with the Crucifixion.”\textsuperscript{24} One can only assume that this fascination was concentrated on the symbolic, religious, and humanistic implications of the event, yet that it was focused on the standard iconic image of Jesus on the cross. If the subject of this composition were Jesus being crucified - as it was for a number of drawings made by the artist (Fig. 9) - then the slash of blood-red paint in the mid-section of the composition would relate to the stab-wound that Jesus received in his side. Moreover, the work would represent de Kooning’s creation of Jesus’ form in much the same way that the Bible emphasizes those events by which Christ takes or leaves his human form - his miraculous birth, his crucifixion, the disappearance of his body from the sepulcher, and his various appearances to his followers. Although there is a long history of artists depicting Jesus, there is nevertheless a theoretical parallel between an artist’s - here, de Kooning’s - creation of a representation and the divine capacity to create. The painter’s ability to manipulate the value, color, and shape of materials in the creation of mimesis - the imitation of forms and spaces in life - or the illusion of an invented form in space is comparable to God’s ability to create light, land, sea, animals, and human beings. To this extent, there is a parallel between an artist’s representation of Jesus and the holy means by which Jesus was given a human form.

There is an essential nuance to this similarity; for, Jesus’ human form is a factor on which hinge two of the most important tenets of the Christian faith: that God holds the power to create human life and that there is life after death. Not only does the artist who represents the figure create, the artist who represents the

\textsuperscript{24} Stevens and Swan, 379.
Crucifixion also metaphorically pursues the theme of Resurrection. Taking the event as the subject for the painting causes the viewer to recall the narrative of Jesus’ resurrection, and the artist’s created representation of Jesus mimics God’s ability to restore life. In fact, the symbolism of de Kooning’s creative gesture is all the more brilliant because he has represented the subject - not the subject as implied by the title, but the subject of the iconography - through abstraction. Jesus’ figure is not represented; at best, the perceived eye-like forms in the upper half of the canvas, the disembodied face, or the slash of blood-red paint serve as references to forms and combine to form a failed simulacrum that is based on synecdoche. De Kooning has encouraged only partial representations within an abstract composition. De Kooning’s creative activity serves as a metaphor for the divine power that gave form to Christ and also that incorporated Christ’s eternal formless existence. To consider whether Christ’s formless existence inspired this abstraction is not unlike the experience of Jesus’ followers on Easter Monday, the day after the Resurrection, when they were left to reflect on their experience, to decide whether they still believed in Christ, who had since disappeared, and, if so, to build a church on their conviction.

De Kooning believed in the notion of “slipping glimpses” - that life as well as individuals and artworks were in constant flux; he experienced the flux, and he believed that he held the power to affect that instability, since he was a “slipping glimpser.” To de Kooning, a “slipping glimpse” was the process in which a situation, an understanding, an object, or a representation slipped, in the blink of an eye, from one’s grasp. This philosophy is particularly relevant regarding the aforementioned conflict between abstraction and representation, a tension that is ever-present in de
Kooning’s painted abstractions. De Kooning thought that in one moment the viewer could see abstraction, in the next a representation, and then abstraction once again. Each time that the viewer’s glimpse would slip, it would alter and change in a way that could conceivably conflict with his or her initial understanding of the image. Rosenberg described how de Kooning’s painting has the ability to destabilize the viewer’s perception:

"While the figurations of the Surrealists and of Gorky remain immobile as representations against a landscape or neutral background, those of de Kooning, coming into being through rapid flaunts of the brush, sideswipe the mind in passing from one into another with continuous effect described by the artist as “slipping glimpses.” Thrown off balance, the consciousness is compelled to reaffirm its unity through an act of equilibrium. This is equally true of the artist and the spectator; in de Kooning’s practice, inducing such mental affirmations brings the audience into the act of creation."

In just this way, a glimpse of the slash of blood-red paint has the ability of representation to reference Jesus’ body, but the viewer will search in vain for a referent; for, there is no body represented in the painted forms of Easter Monday that can bear this wound. The red stroke slips back into being an abstraction like the rest of the painted forms. When the viewer perceived the wound, he or she registered the presence of a body, but that form is non-existent among the painterly incident.

The work also engages multiple and potentially conflicting subjects through the use of allegory. The title makes direct reference to the holiday of Easter Monday, which is distinct from Easter Sunday. Both the title and the transferred advertisement with an illustration of bunnies selling Easter treats focus on the secular aspect of the holiday. However, the images that reference the Roman centurion, the three female witnesses to the Crucifixion, and the sepulcher represent details of the biblical

account - the historical events as well as the religious significance of Easter Sunday. There is disjunction in the subject matter between Easter Monday and Easter Sunday, the religious and the secular aspects of the holidays, and the historical and the contemporary, just as there is disjunction between what has been represented and what remains abstract. *Easter Monday* presents a compounded notion of the various significances of the related times, places, and events related to Easter. In that the work’s subject matter is multi-dimensional, it is also ambiguous; the title claims that the work takes Easter Monday as its subject, but the work’s subject is necessarily more than that. De Kooning devised this abstract notion of the subject matter, and he devised this formally complex work in order to promote the instability of the viewer’s experience as well as the ambiguity of the work’s meaning.

But, all the while, the abstract painted forms take precedent; the paint strokes are broad, long, physical, colorful, stand in contrast to and sometimes obscure the transferred images, and dominate the composition. In the case of the representational imagery - as was the case with representational forms of paint - painted abstraction undermines the stability of literal meanings; to some extent, the work’s subjects and concepts are contained in de Kooning’s gestures of abstraction. In fact, the painterly incident contains greater prominence than the representational imagery as well as great formal complexity. De Kooning’s paint slips in and out of illusionary space and constantly dissolves into messiness or photo-transfers. Just as the subject matter is imprecise, the forms of paint are ambiguous, but, at the same time, they can be grand and confident. De Kooning’s painterliness is a masterful example of self-expression,
and, being that *Easter Monday* is one in an oeuvre of such feats, it comes as no
surprise that the following three artists devised new ways in which to handle paint.

De Kooning divided *Easter Monday*'s meaning across modes of
interpretation, involving the viewer’s perceptions of those meanings with literal
references, abstract notions, and the formal complexity of the artist’s gestural
abstraction. This painting is as concerned with itself and the way in which its form
and its meaning are perceived by the viewer as it is with any kind of nameable subject
matter. It is a very personal creation by an artist who was captivated by a wide variety
of subjects, and who was particularly committed to the variability of a single work’s
form and content. The viewer plays an active role in this perpetual mutability, since
his or her perception of each glimpse - whether it is focused on form or content
perceived as an abstraction, a representation, or a reference - serves as the counterpart
to the artist’s method of creation.
Robert Rauschenberg

During the spring and summer of 2008, Robert Rauschenberg’s Winter Pool (1959; Fig. 11) hung to the left of Willem de Kooning’s Easter Monday on the wall in the Modern Wing of the Metropolitan Museum, and for good reason; the relationship between the two artists was based on more than the simple fact that it was de Kooning’s drawing that Rauschenberg used to make Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953; Fig. 10). The work was a paradigmatic gesture suggesting the older painter’s hold over the imagination of the emerging generation of artists in New York. Into the mid-1950s, new paintings by Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, produced in the artists’ iconic styles, captured the attention of the contemporary art world. In some critical discussions on modern art, and especially in conversations in the Cedar Tavern, the hangout of the New York School artists in Manhattan, the leading voices accepted de Kooning as one of the greatest American painters as well as a thoroughly autonomous force, having great influence over his peers in the world of painting.

Robert Rauschenberg was one of a new generation of American artists following the original New York School that also included Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly. As a young American painter, he was working in the shadow cast by Abstract Expressionism. The visual prominence of painterly incident is characteristic
of New York School painting, and Rauschenberg grappled significantly during the first decade of his production with its influence on his painting. For Rauschenberg, de Kooning epitomized painterliness, abstraction, and personal expression. Erased de Kooning Drawing was not a way for Rauschenberg to sever ties with the preceding generation but a way to come to terms with its successes. In doing so, Rauschenberg was coming to terms with the influence of Abstract Expressionism, generally, and de Kooning, specifically, as well as general the experience of being influenced, with both its positive and negative implications. In the following section, Erased de Kooning Drawing will be analyzed as a pointed confrontation with the artist’s dilemma of whether to accept or reject de Kooning’s influence. Subsequently, Winter Pool will be seen as a mature and more oblique response, in which Rauschenberg employed painterliness in the exploration of his own artistic concerns.

In the early 1950s, as Rauschenberg was working to become an artist, he was also attempting to make his mark. Standing in his way were de Kooning’s success and stylistic influence; for, especially given the virtuosity and self-expression of de Kooning’s art, as long as he was still making paintings, how could one make art that looked in any way similar? Why would anyone pay new work any attention unless it were art of a different sort from what had preceded it? To Rauschenberg, the act of erasing a drawing made by de Kooning was an attempt to subvert the powerful

1 Steinberg, 2000: In a section on the subject of a young artist’s struggle to be original, Steinberg recalled his interpretation of a comment that Rauschenberg made in the early fall of 1961: “Becoming a painter is like groping one’s way out of a cluttered room in the dark. Beginning to walk, he stumbles over another man’s couch, changes course to… butt against a work table that can’t be disturbed. Everything has its use and its user, and no need of him” (12). Steinberg’s quotation of his own writing refers to Steinberg, 1972: 21.
influence exerted by this great and influential contemporary artist. Moreover, the erasure served as a means by which to absorb a product of that greatness, to alter it in a way that coincided with Rauschenberg’s transgressive artistic agenda, and to create a work, in the process, that would contribute to Rauschenberg’s artistic production.

De Kooning’s mark making was widely recognized, and it benefitted from the artist’s classical training. By 1953, he was prolific and accomplished in the medium of drawing. His peers had great respect for his technical prowess, but, to the younger generation, his classical training represented the outmoded artistic ideals and manners of European modernism. Only within the decade previous to 1953 had Americans and naturalized Americans managed to establish New York as the epicenter of the modern art world. In the process, the members of the New York School had become the leading figures of an assimilated avant-garde.

The generation of newcomers, Rauschenberg among them, had traveled from around the country to live and work in New York. Rauschenberg had received a formal education in art school, and he had spent time in Europe with Cy Twombly. But, he had become interested in alternative artistic methods and was turning away from his education in order to experiment.² The newcomers were also beginning to hang out at the Cedar Tavern. There, they saw first-hand that Rothko, Kline, and de Kooning were the leaders of Abstract Expressionism. Not only did the artists of the younger generation aspire to success, they knew that it would only come through the

² Ibid. The author notes, “The earliest work which Rauschenberg admits into his canon - *White Painting with Numbers* [now known as 22 the Lily White] - was painted in 1949 in a life class at New York’s Art Students League, the young painter turning his back on the model” (36).
invention of original forms. They intended to challenge the recently established standards with their new art.

When the young Robert Rauschenberg went to visit the elder Willem de Kooning to ask for one of his drawings, he did so with the intention of erasing it. Rauschenberg had the utmost respect for de Kooning because of his painting and his standing within the group of abstract painters. Rauschenberg also feared him because of the older painter’s belligerent temperament. But, he needed de Kooning’s involvement in order to obtain one of his drawings. To appease de Kooning, who was a notorious drinker, as well as to facilitate the process, and in order to propose some amount of reciprocity, Rauschenberg brought with him a bottle of whiskey as an offering. Rauschenberg explained to de Kooning what he planned to do with the drawing. De Kooning was annoyed, but, either because he supported the artistic project or because he sympathized with the younger artist’s motivations, he consented.³ He resolved to make the task difficult for Rauschenberg, though, and so he deliberately selected a drawing made with a variety of materials - charcoal, oil paint, heavy crayon, grease pencil, ink, and graphite.⁴

After leaving, Rauschenberg went to work experimenting with different erasers in order to find out what would lift off the marks that had been made on the heavily worked surface. Rauschenberg had to deconstruct de Kooning’s drawing, and in doing so, he created his own process that corresponded to de Kooning’s, which consisted of deliberately and repetitively retracing the marks that the older artist had initially made in constructing the drawing. The process was laborious; it took

³ Ibid., 19.
⁴ Rauschenberg, “Robert Rauschenberg discusses Erased de Kooning Drawing.”
Rauschenberg a month or more to erase the drawing, and even then the page was not completely blank. The result was a piece of paper bearing nothing but slight marks and a ghost impression of the original image. The paper had been worn down by the hours that Rauschenberg spent pressing into it with erasers, so much so that the drawing on the reverse of the paper shows through. Having finished erasing the drawing, Rauschenberg floated it inside a wide, white mat, and built a thin gilded frame. He had Jasper Johns do the lettering on a label, which he set in a space cut in the center of the bottom edge of the mat. It reads, “ERASED de KOONING DRAWING,” below that “ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG,” and below that “1953.”

Rauschenberg’s labor was intensely symbolic; *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was in part an Oedipal gesture. At least symbolically, the act was violent. Technically, the process was deconstructive. But more accurately, the act was one of negation. Rauschenberg respected de Kooning more than anyone else, and he had erased one of the master’s drawings in an attempt to exorcise himself of the powerful, looming hold that de Kooning’s influence held over him. It was Rauschenberg’s response to de Kooning’s authoritative presence, and erasure was a symbolic substitute for the act of patricide.

Like Rauschenberg, de Kooning also felt the anxiety of influence, and he admitted to feeling indebted to more than the images of the generation preceding him. As mentioned in the preceding section, de Kooning likened the smile of the Cheshire

---

5 Stevens and Swann, 360.
6 Ibid., 358.
Cat to manifestations of influence in the forms of his paintings. Unlike de Kooning, however, Rauschenberg approached the source of his influence face-to-face when he asked de Kooning to give him one of his drawings. Rauschenberg came to terms with his anxiety by incorporating into his own production an example of the work that inspired him. To Rauschenberg, De Kooning’s influence was made manifest by the drawing itself. Ironically, the gentle, young Rauschenberg exercised power over de Kooning, the noisiest, most belligerent, hard drinker at the Cedar Tavern, by erasing the latter’s influential artistic incident. Moreover, given the variety of materials used in the original drawing, one can only assume that it was active and vibrant.

Rauschenberg’s resulting drawing, in contrast, is very quiet. Rauschenberg advertised the initial strength of the influence by preserving and labeling its remnants as a part of the title - “de KOONING DRAWING.” Given the universal strength of the influence, only that artist’s last name was necessary as an indication of his identity. Rauschenberg nevertheless placed himself in the position of power by announcing how he had changed the drawing - “ERASED” - and who, exactly, he was - “ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG.” Rauschenberg did not escape the anxiety of his predecessor’s influence, but he caused it to serve his personal agenda and aesthetic.

Erased de Kooning Drawing is a challenging work to describe because of the linguistic and conceptual difficulties of explaining how the negation of a pre-existing drawing produced a work of art. The act of negation, erasure, mirrored the overall goal of exorcism. The way to do this was by absorbing one of de Kooning’s products

7 Rosenberg, in Yard: “I can open almost any book of reproductions and find a painting I could be influenced by… When I look at a picture, I couldn’t care less for when it was done, if I am influenced by a painter from another time, that’s like the smile of the Cheshire Cat in Alice; the smile left over when the cat is gone” (141).
and to reform it so that it belonged to Rauschenberg. The work came to exist in its present form through the simultaneous enactment of the contradictory methods of negation and creation. And while this is a paradox, the object itself is the resolution of these two actions through their synthesis in a static form; it is a product of negative creativity, which implies that the artist was motivated by destructive impulses but that his action was altogether constructive, producing a work of art as a result of the conflict.

There is irony in the fact that Rauschenberg created a palimpsest; the piece of paper is for all intents and purposes bare, but from both the ghostly impression and the self-evident title, it is apparent that this work once contained drawing, even if the smudges hardly provide enough evidence to recall a complete drawing. Quite significantly, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* never completely relinquished its relation to de Kooning. The ghost impression and slight marks are the most substantial surviving manifestations of the original artist’s presence. And, although the label indicates what, to a great extent, Rauschenberg had absorbed, it also recalls the fact of de Kooning’s involvement. The persistent involvement of de Kooning in *Erased de Kooning Drawing* makes the work more accurately collaborative. Moreover, it stands as a metaphor for the way that Rauschenberg never completely accepted or rejected the influence of New York School painting, which, in the younger artist’s opinion, was epitomized by Willem de Kooning. In fact, the situation of influence was irresolvable, so one of the ways in which Rauschenberg coped was by producing this work, which was one in a series of works that had an irresolvable conflict built in to it. The potential for the simultaneous fulfillment and contradiction of expectations, as
evident in *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, is a mode that Rauschenberg engaged time and again; *Winter Pool*, the other work by Rauschenberg that I wish to consider, is another example.

Leo Steinberg acknowledged a change in the nature of art generally, which was marked by these two works, specifically, as well as others by Rauschenberg. Steinberg asserted that, in the case of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, Rauschenberg “…was changing - for the viewer no less than for himself - the angle of imaginative confrontation; tilting de Kooning’s evocation of a worldspace into a thing produced by pressing down on a desk.”

In terms of Steinberg’s theory of the “flatbed picture plane”, the artist’s act of tilting was but a metaphor for the way in which the primary focus of certain works had become the physical actions involved in producing the images rather than their aesthetic or iconographic appeal. As a result, the viewer’s visual experience became secondary to the experience of recognizing the form as the documentation of a physical operation. The conceptual primacy of the work was clear to Rauschenberg when, in 1957, he told Steinberg, who had spent time analyzing the work but had never seen it, that seeing the work probably would not make any difference for his interpretation. Steinberg revealed, “Since then, I’ve seen the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* several times, and find it ever less interesting to look at. But the decision behind it never ceases to fascinate and expand.”

The transgressive attitude of Rauschenberg’s work relies both on its illogical means of production by erasure as well as its nature as a flatbed of activity, and not simply as a surface that was laid out horizontally during production. The perceptual

---

9 Steinberg, 2000: 22.
shift from a vertical to a horizontal plane indicates the way in which the subject of art had shifted from something ideal - an image presented primarily for visual appeal - to something practical - an image that carried relevance to the means and modes by which people actually live, including how they engage with art. Steinberg explains the specific nature of flatbed pictures: “The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.”\textsuperscript{10} In some ways, \textit{Erased de Kooning} exemplifies this dynamic, since it is a site that had been tilted into a common plane of human operation, and since it clearly indicates the activity that the artist engaged in for the creation of this form. Compared to the drawing, \textit{Winter Pool}, another so-called flatbed picture, presents the viewer with a more abstract and more complex dynamic, one that is fundamentally engaged in the processes of painting and sculpture.

\textit{Winter Pool} (Fig. 11) is comprised of three distinct units; on the left is a stretched canvas that is more than three times taller than it is wide, and in the center is a wooden ladder of nearly the same proportion. Somewhat different is the stretched canvas on the right, which is more than six times taller than it is wide. Still, all three separate elements maintain a strong sense of verticality. Their heights and widths are comparable to human scale. Nevertheless, the three units have the ability to overcome their disunion and relate to each other because of their similar scales, their clean physical attachment, and some shared formal characteristics. First, we will address each individually, and then we will analyze the relationships between them.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 84.
The left canvas has a thin piece of wood running along its top, left, and bottom sides. The canvas is covered over by paint in a variety of colors and found objects that are adhered flat against the picture plane. The shapes of paint and the shapes of the found objects are nearly all rectangular. On this canvas, the rectangles are oftentimes skewed slightly from ninety degrees to the edge of the canvas. The largest rectangular shapes are in paint, are vertically oriented, and can be found in the upper right corner as well as along the sides of the bottom half of the canvas. There is a large, dirty, off-white square of fabric just to the right of center in the bottom half of the canvas. Below and to the left of this is part of a handheld bellows. The work also contains miscellaneous pieces of wood and a found painting.

There are multiple printed elements depicting numerals and letterforms that have been collaged in the upper half of the canvas. For example, along the left side, there is a piece of paper with what appears to be three zeros, the tops of which are obscured by a piece of wood that has been nailed into the stretcher bar on the left side. Also in the upper half of the canvas, there appears an upright “T,” which is red, but which has been painted over with a wash of yellow paint. Below this, there is a sideways “O” or “D.” Below and to the left of this, in the middle section of the canvas, there is a collaged element with the letter “U.” These letters are approximately the same size as a number of rectangular shapes of paint, such as the black shapes along either edge just above the middle of the canvas. In the middle section, there is a collaged element with a white “S” on black paper. The “S” is upside-down, but, given the nature of the particular letterform, it is legible both right
side up and upside-down. This letter is approximately half the size of the other letterforms.

By mixing matter with paint, Rauschenberg had reused a technique that had been developed by the Abstract Expressionists, most notably by Jackson Pollock.\(^{11}\) Pollock once commented, “I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass and other foreign matter added.”\(^{12}\) In Rauschenberg’s hands, however, the foreign matter increased in size from sand and broken glass to paper, fabric, and wood. As a result, the foreign matter in his works can be better described as found objects, which no longer contribute to the texture of the paint. Instead, they draw a clear visual delineation between what is paint and what is foreign and three-dimensional. For this reason, Rauschenberg’s intermixing of materials relates more closely to the use of assemblage by artists such as the Dadaists, Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters, and Joseph Cornell. As we will see, this is not the only technique characteristic of Abstract Expressionist paintings that Rauschenberg invoked with differing results.

About as many of the small rectangular shapes in the middle of the canvas on the left are horizontally oriented as vertically oriented. Some of these rectangles consist of only a single stroke of one color of paint, and others are small swatches of a nearly pure color. One stroke is white, one red, one yellow, one green, one black, and

\(^{11}\) Rosenberg, 1964: The author outlines a thorough list of “Abstract Expressionist devices:” “heavy impasto, impulsive brushing, broad paint strokes, emphasized contours, streaks, smears, drips, the vertical band, one-color masses, scraps of newspaper and other matter mixed into the pigment” (179).

one shape is brown. One swatch is pink, one orange, one yellow, and one is blue. Most of the painted color on this canvas is concentrated in the middle section. Rauschenberg has obviously invoked the device of creating one-color masses, which was the fundamental in color-field painting. In doing so, Rauschenberg has emphasized the physicality of the paint and, consequently, the flat surface of the canvas support. The artist admitted to having no interest in a thing being what it is not, and here he abides by that philosophy; for, one-color masses usually have a destructive effect on painted illusion. Whereas de Kooning actively diminished the illusion of space within his painting or made it ambiguous, Rauschenberg has attempted to prohibit illusion. Moreover, unlike New York School painters’ use of gesture for the purpose of self-expression, Rauschenberg has demonstrated that painted forms need not be an expression of an emotion or anything other than an action.

There are a few incidents where the paint was allowed to run down the canvas. Streaks, smears, and drips have much the same effect as one-color masses - emphasizing the plane of the canvas on which the picture sits. Given the length of the drips, which are nearly a foot long or more, it is apparent that these colors of paint were mixed with a large proportion of medium. This is true of the short horizontal stroke of red just above the center of the canvas. And it is true of the shape of black paint along the left side in the lower half of the canvas. Since the paint was applied in

13 Stiles and Selz: “He… explained that his pictures and combine paintings explored the ambiguous messages of ‘pre-formed, conventional, depersonalized, factual, exterior elements’ drawn from everyday life, and that they ‘suggest the world rather than suggest the personality’” (287).
specific areas and allowed to drip far down the canvas, it is obvious that the artist carefully created the situations where this occurred.

Overall, the canvas on the left exhibits greater variation of surface than the one on the right. Since we read left to right, this makes good compositional sense; the visual complexity on the left balances the stasis on the right. On the left, there are more shapes, and there is greater variation in the scales of shapes. There is more paint that has been applied impasto, and there are more objects that have been adhered to the canvas. Especially considering the middle section that is dense with color, there is more activity in the painting on the canvas on the left than on the canvas on the right. On the canvas on the right, the only moments of thick impasto occur in the strokes of red near the top edge and in the pink shape in the center along the bottom edge.

The right canvas is composed almost solely of nearly rectangular shapes. In the bottom half, these shapes vary in scale from very small, such as the slightly askew vertical white stroke near the center, to relatively large, such as the field of dark color that extends from one side of the canvas to the other, on which the white stroke sits. As a single shape, the field it is nearly the size of the largest unified shape of color on the left canvas - the square of off-white fabric. Below the field of black, there is a large swatch of pure white paint, which was apparently applied with great vigor, since it has splattered in several places on the shapes below. One fascinating aspect of painted activity that Rauschenberg seems to have realized is that vigorous brushstrokes need not be impulsive. As appears to have been the case here, one could intentionally and methodically make a series of strokes in rapid succession that streak, smear, and drip.
At the bottom of the composition, there is a row of small, rectangular spaces, the top edges of which have been drawn on the canvas. The rectangular spaces are taller than they are wide, and they have been irregularly filled in with distinct swatches of color. From right to left they are light blue, yellow, pink, black, and brown. The canvas itself is visible to the viewer between these one-color masses at the bottom of the composition. Seeing the boundaries of the color shapes distinct against the canvas has the effect of emphasizing the contours.

In the top half of the right canvas, there is greater consistency in the sizes of the painted shapes. Some colors mix on the canvas, some of the paints drip, and in some areas the canvas shows through to the surface. In several ways on this canvas, Rauschenberg has gone to the effort to prevent the painted forms from being perceived as spatial illusion. For example, strokes and swatches tend to occupy distinct areas of the canvas; they may butt edges at the boundaries between each other, but they rarely crisscross. Moreover, strokes tend to be thick and short, so that they are not linear enough or long enough to extend into illusionistic space. What is more, there are almost no instances of diagonal strokes; instead, they are all nearly horizontal or vertical. For as many strokes of paint as there are, there are just as many rectangular swatches of paint. The rectangular shapes on this canvas are just as often vertical as they are horizontal in both the top and bottom halves. Nevertheless, since shapes often run from side to side in the bottom half of the canvas, the high contrast between shapes’ values emphasizes the horizontal boundaries between the shapes. As a result, the horizontal boundaries emphasize the horizontal width of picture plane.
The thin pieces of wood that run along the top, left side, and bottom edges of the left canvas correspond to thin pieces of wood that run along the top, right side, and bottom edges of the canvas on the right. By running along the outside edges of the canvases, this thickness of wood acts as an understated frame. As a result, it appears as if the space between the two canvases - now occupied by a ladder - once held a section of canvas with wood running along its top and bottom edges. Paint strokes on either side of canvas do echo each other’s color and application; however, the composition does not exhibit continuity from one side of the gap to the other. Neither strokes of paint nor collaged elements exhibit continuity either. It appears as if the area of the canvas in which this continuity would have occurred was removed; the canvases are the same height, so one could envision a piece of the same height taken out from between them. Nevertheless, the impression that a middle section was taken straight from the composition is disproved by the fact that both the canvas on the left and the canvas on the right were individually stretched over full sets of stretcher bars. On the inside edges of the two canvases, it is possible to see that each canvas was stretched around a frame and that the area of the canvas that stretches around the frame is unpainted. Since it is not possible to see cross-section views of the top and bottom stretcher bars, and since the canvas does not end but bends around behind an inside edge of the frame, it is clear that no cut was made.

Viewed from the front, it appears as the ladder was substituted in for the component piece missing from the space between the canvases. The found object is different in its nature from oil paint and canvas, both of which are common art materials, but it is just as much of an integral part of the composition. It fills a gap in
the composition, unifying what were previously separate pieces. Although the ladder
does not run straight along the central axis of the picture - it is set off to the right -
this location also gives balance to the composition, since the painting on the left
canvas is much more colorful, active, and visually complex.

Including the thickness of the piece of wood that runs along its left side as a
kind of frame, the left canvas is approximately the same width as the ladder. The
bottom edges of the two canvases are approximately flush with the top edge of the
bottom rung of the ladder, leaving part of the ladder to extend below the painting’s
putative frame. The ladder borders approximately two-thirds of the inside height of
the canvases. The legs of the ladder are flush along the inside edges of the canvases
as well as against the wall, so that the ladder stands altogether vertically.

The ladder is composed of seven pieces of wood. Five evenly spaced rungs
have been nailed straight across the two legs. Where a rung meets a leg, three nails
have been driven through the front face of the rung along a diagonal that runs from
the end of the rung, diagonally downwards. In cross-section, the legs are
approximately square; that is, the piece of wood is as high - approximately just over
two inches - as it is deep. Along the face that meets the leg, the rungs are
approximately twice as wide as they are high. The pieces of wood that serve as the
legs have been somewhat irregularly cut at the top, as if the ladder was cropped
before it was included in this work.

The wood itself is a weathered brown color on all of the visible faces, except
along the top where the legs were cut. There are splatters of black on all of the pieces
of wood on the side facing away from the wall. There are splatters of dull pink
concentrated in two places on the left leg and on the rungs. There is a single splatter of white at the bottom of the right leg. It is unclear whether Rauschenberg constructed this ladder, splattered the paint - accidentally or intentionally - or cropped the form at the top. For reasons of argument, however, we will treat it and refer to it as a found object.

There is conceptual tension between the ladder and the painting, given their disparate identities as materials; the one is an object from life, and the other is a composition of materials commonly found in works of art. The one has a functionality that it maintains to some extent or another, even in this art context, and the other has been developed specifically as a material that can serve to construct illusion, and which exists in this context primarily to be appreciated for its formal nuances. If there is beauty in this ladder, it is most likely in the simple intelligence of its design. What is more, the wooden, rigidly geometric form of the ladder and the “syncopated grid” in the composition of the painting are not equatable.\(^\text{14}\) They are not opposites, since there is some formal resonance between the two. However, there is visual tension in their incongruity. Both this visual tension and the aforementioned conceptual tension are sustained because the disparate objects have been joined together by the artist. They have been synthesized as one, and their irresolvable conflicts have been become the viewer’s. The artist made a conscious decision to construct this tension and to engage the viewer in these conflicts by presenting the form as a work of art.

The simple fact is that more can be found here than a vertically oriented plane covered with painterly activity. Although there appear to be partial, logical relationships between the subject of the work’s title and the form of the work, the lack of both coherency and completeness causes the viewer to construct meanings. The viewer focuses on a given object’s identity and relates it to a nameable aspect of another form near to it, establishing a kind of relationship that provides some order of logical meaning. These meanings, too, are inevitably partial, which reinstates the process.

The ladder in *Winter Pool* can be imagined to imply motion in space that is more complex than up and down, parallel to the picture plane, for the simple reason that it could derive from an association made with the form of the ladder or with the title of the work. Even though it is not made of metal, the shape of this ladder is strikingly similar to that of the shortened variety that rises out of or leads into water, as in a swimming pool. However, this ladder is wooden and, as such, is not the same as the ladder that is found at a swimming pool. Instead, it makes clearer reference to the variety of ladder that one might find at the end of a dock leading into a lake or the ladder used around the house for handiwork. It is not this particular ladder in *Winter Pool* - its shape, material, and construction all taken as one - but aspects of the object that would seem to reference a swimming pool. Although the title of the work is altogether ambiguous, it too makes reference to a “pool.” A swimming pool opens up from the single axis along which swimmers lower themselves into it, down to the lowest depths, and across the length and width of the pool.
A ladder provides the one who climbs it with rungs on which to stand and, thus, access to something, such as a light bulb, that was previously up high, out of reach. A ladder just as often allows access from the ground on which it stands to the raised plane, such as the roof of a house or the top of a wall, against which it leans. When it is being used in either one of these ways, a ladder’s middle rungs provide a path leading from the grounded legs to the raised upper rungs and back. This ladder in *Winter Pool*, which is altogether vertical, emphasizes the path along the vertical as well as the verticality of the wall on which it hangs. And since this ladder in *Winter Pool* normally touches the ground, the point at which its legs meet the floor draws particular attention to the way in which the ground plane, which is also shared by the viewer, spreads out laterally in front of it.\(^{15}\) If one were to imagine this ladder in a context other than the museum, if one were to imagine the sight of this ladder as a vignette of a longer ladder reaching down into the pool that is referenced in the work’s title, the ladder would emphasize the depth and lateral expanse of the water. And if, as the title suggests, it were winter, if cold temperatures had caused the owner of a swimming pool to drain it, the remaining ladder would emphasize the depth and the lateral expanse of the area defined by the inside of the pool. The preceding rumination is not to conclude that *Winter Pool* creates an illusion of space, but that partial and fleeting associations made with the forms of the work, such as has been

\[\text{________________________} \]

\(^{15}\) As it was installed on this wall in the Metropolitan, the ladder stood on a wooden shelf fabricated for the installation of the work. This was most likely a decision made by the curatorial staff in order to construct a consistent eye-level between the four paintings. This is different than the way the work has been displayed in the past and, most likely, a misrepresentation of the artist’s intention.
demonstrated using the prominent form of the ladder in combination with the title, might make reference to other forms, times, activities, and spaces.

The concept of space evoked by *Winter Pool* is a consequence of the work’s conceptual ambiguity. The ability to construct an association - albeit an abstract one - with space other than that of the painting is made possible by means of the found objects - namely, the ladder - that Rauschenberg chose to combine with painting. The formal details of this work are self-evident, although they are nevertheless sometimes obscured as a result of the physical complexity of the work. In contrast, the nature of the subject matter - its origin, its reason for being, what it refers to, and the motivations for using these materials, in these ways, and in these places - is ambiguous. The artist’s involvement seems haphazard and incoherent. For a prime example, take the title of the work, *Winter Pool*, which is left unexplained by the form of the work. As such, the entire system of meaning is left ambiguous. However, the very way in which the work’s subject matter is ambiguous corresponds to the work’s meaning.

The profound ambiguity of this work is the product of Rauschenberg’s commitment to maintaining an “open” artistic practice, which was inspired by New York School precedents.¹⁶ For, although Rauschenberg “does not recall having paid much attention to abstract expressionism’s philosophical premises in existentialism and Zen, he apparently took seriously the part of its moral position which emphasized risk and openness and keeping the artist’s activity - with all its precarious balancing -

---

Rauschenberg was interested in exercising the utmost flexibility in his use of materials as well as in the interaction of materials. This artistic philosophy was motivated by his interest in making work that preserved the liveliness of his activity, rather than simply documenting his action, and in preventing his activity from becoming practiced or rote. Ultimately, his hope was that the products of his open creativity would carry some amount of incident and meaning that would be unintended. This is clearly consistent with Willem de Kooning’s mindset; de Kooning created art constantly and liberally, so as not to lose the ease of his gesture. And the artist searched for ways to get the same fluidity from his materials, so he used excessive amounts of medium in his oil paints and flattened newsprint to some areas to keep them from drying. His paintings evidence this today, since different areas of similar colors often crack in inconsistent ways because the paints that the artist used had different consistencies. In some works paint literally still drips ever so slowly down the canvas as the years go by. Finally, we saw in the previous chapter how de Kooning was interested in the possibilities of associations, hidden meanings, and unintended meanings.

The viewer’s ability to draw associations freely with Winter Pool may be a veil to hide the artist’s own subjectivity. From two perspectives this subjectivity might be either the evidence of truly personal, sometimes-autobiographical iconography, or it may be nothing more than the evidence of an artistic mind having conceived and constructed impersonally. It is the difference between an artistic intellect that constructs meaning and influences the viewer’s experience and one

17 Ibid.
whose deliberate painterly activity has left the forms of the work as a document of his or her presence. When considering this dynamic, Rauschenberg’s work is a valid subject for consideration.

In a written text from 1963, the artist attempted to use prose as well as a type of abstract poetry in order to express his thoughts on the legibility of meaning in his work. In much the same way that he combined materials and forms in his work from the period, he interspersed found and appropriated words and phrases into lines of exposition. For the most part, however, the meaning of the exposition remains clear. The expository sentences are comprehensible even with distracting, random references interspersed between the words and phrases. And what is more, the decision to intermix digressive words and phrases carries its own meaning; as with the artist’s combines, it becomes clear that illegibility, or rather the construction of abstract meaning based on random and ambiguous elements, is just as much the meaning of this note as is any comprehensible expository meaning. In fact, the form of the note expresses the same artistic attitude that the exposition does. For this reason, since form and content are equivalent, it only makes sense to consider the piece of writing as a whole, including its misspellings. The following is the text at length:

NOTE ON PAINTING OCT 31-NOV 2, 1963

I FIND IT NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE FREE ICE TO WRITE ABOUT JEEPAXLE MY WORK. THE CONCEPT I PLANATARIUM STRUGGLE TO DEAL WITH KETCHUP IS OPPOED TO THE LOGICAL CONTINUITY LIFT TAB INHERENT IN LAGUAGE HORSES AND COMMUNICATION. MY FASCINATION WITH IMAGES OPEN 24 HRS. IS BASED ON THE COMPLEX INTERLOCKING OF DISPARATE VISUAL FACTS HEATED POOL THAT HAVE NO RESPECT FOR GRAMMAR. THE FORM THEN DENVER 39 IS SECOND HAND TO
NOTHING. THE WORK THEN HAS A CHANCE TO ELECTRIC SERVICE BECOME ITS OWN CLICHÉ. LUGGAGE. THIS IS THE INEVITABLE FATE FAIR GROUND OF ANY INANIMATE OBJECT FREIGHTWAYS BY THIS IMEAN ANYTHING THAT DOES NOT HAVE INCONSISTENCY AS A POSSIBILITY BUILT-IN..

THE OUTCOME OF A WORK IS BASED ICX ICE ON AMOUNT OF INTENSITY CONCENTRATION AND JOY THAT IS PURSUED ROADCROSSING IN THE ACT OF WORK. THE CHARACTER OF THE ARTIST HAS TOBE RESONSIVE AND LUCKY. PERSONALLY I HAVE NEVER BEEN INTERESTED IN A DEFENSIBLE REASON POST CARD FOR WORKING ACHIEVEMENT FUNCTIONALLY IS A DELUSION. TO DO A NEEDED WORK SHORT CHANGES ART. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT AGREAT PART INDIAN MOCCASINS OF URGENCY IN WORKING LIES IN THE FACT THAT ONE ACTS FREELY FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES MAY BECOME MORE CLOSELY ALLIED WITH YOU REAL SOON. U.S. POSTAGE STAMPS - SANITARILY PACKAGED - SAVE A TRIP TO POST OFFICE SHAPES..FILES..Cleans WITH KEY CHAIN FORGET TO BRING IT WITH YOU… TO MAKE SOMETHING THE NEED OF WHICH CAN ONLY FISHING 7 SPRINGS BE DETERMINED AFTER ITS EXISTENCE AND THAT JUDGMENT SUBJECT TO CHANCE AT ANY MOMENT. 15’ 18”. IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT ART BE UNJUSTIFIABLE.18

It is apparent that Rauschenberg had recourse to ambiguity in painting as well as in writing on the subject of painting, in part because a path riddled with diversions, for him, was the way to achieve a form that mirrored its content. To quote Rauschenberg from the text: “The concept I… struggle to deal with… is oppo[s]ed to the logical continuity inherent in la[n]guage… and communication.” As a result, his mode of expression - visual communication in the case of his combines and language in the case of this written text - was discursive and oftentimes diversionary.

There is perhaps no better justification for the rhyme and reason of the form of Rauschenberg’s combines than the statement: “My fascination with images… is based on the complex interlocking of disparate visual facts… that have no respect for

18 Hunter, 122.
Meaning in the combines derives from the relations between details, and that meaning is the most profound when that interlocking is the most complex, when it is the most abstract. It therefore comes as no surprise that the sources of his images and materials as well as the relationships between each other might remain ambiguous.

There are systems of interpretation that apply just as well to images as to language, which are based on this kind of interlocking. A rebus is, “a puzzle in which words are represented by combinations of pictures and individual letters.” An allegory is, “a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.” During a period in the late 1950s, when his combines were untitled nearly as often as they were titled, Rauschenberg created works whose titles made direct reference to these systems of interpretation: Rebus (1955), Small Rebus (1956) and Allegory (1959-60). It is apparent that despite the ambiguity of his works, the artist was clear in his intention to construct meaning through the combination of artistic gestures, images, objects, and language.

In an untitled statement from 1959, Rauschenberg famously claimed, “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two).” It is exactly in the way that he manipulated materials which related to the separate realms of art and life that Rauschenberg hoped to create possibilities for meaning. And Winter Pool is a prime example of the artist’s use of varying materials. The materials comprising this combine include oil paints, paper, fabric, wood, metal, sandpaper, tape, printed paper, printed reproductions, a handheld

20 Stiles and Selz, 321.
bellows, a found painting, two stretched canvases, and a ladder. The inclusion in this work of three-dimensional objects, and so many of them, which are so visually prominent, would serve to undermine any attempt that the artist would make to create an illusion. Moreover, the painterly marks become facts like the objects, and fact supplants illusion. Throughout the history of art, the coherency of the picture plane has been fundamental to the creation of illusion in paint, the so-called “window” into another time and space. Rauschenberg makes a clear statement that Winter Pool was not intended to create an illusion by separating the canvas into two parts and lodging a ladder in the gap between the two, thus cleaving the integrity of the picture plane.

In this way, Winter Pool engages in two related aspects to what Steinberg envisioned as characteristics of the shift towards the flatbed picture plane. For one thing, Steinberg suggested that the shift concerned the “subject matter of art,” that it was a shift towards “culture.” He argued that paintings, especially, had become “matri[ces] of information.” His idea was that in their inclusion of painterliness and found objects, the combines, specifically, encourage the viewer to reflect on both the formal evidence of the artist’s activity - such as was painfully obvious in Erased de Kooning Drawing - and the operational potential of the objects themselves. The latter case applies particularly well to the ladder in Winter Pool, since the object is still

---

22 Stiles and Selz. Rauschenberg: “Painting is always strongest when in spite of composition, color, etc., it appears as a fact, or an inevitability, as opposed to a souvenir or arrangement” (321).
23 Steinberg, 1972: 84.
24 Ibid, 85.
functional, and, as some claim, the viewer is compelled to “climb into the picture.”25 This claim is somewhat ridiculous, but it is true that the painting invites close looking and that the ladder appears functional. It is unclear exactly why the ladder is inviting, but perhaps there is some correlation between visual complexity’s appeal to sight and functionality’s appeal to the mind.

Nevertheless, the fact that the work is hung flush against the wall discourages any attempts to climb the ladder. For one thing, the ladder stands vertically, and wooden ladders such as this are usually angled when approached from the ground, as when used on the job or for handiwork around the house. For another thing, there are only four inches between the wall and the outside face of each rung on which one could place his or her feet, were a viewer to try to climb the ladder.

One could argue that to some extent or another this picture is “conveniently placed in a vertical situation;” for, were the ladder instead an object whose function involved passage through a horizontal space, such as a bridge, would the viewer not still feel compelled to walk across the picture?26 As a comparison, consider Monogram, which existed in three different states over the course of four years - (1955), (1956), and (1955-1959). The first state hung on the wall and incorporated a found object, a stuffed Angora goat, by raising it on a shelf and placing it laterally across the flat surface of the picture. The second state stood free from the wall, but it incorporated a tall, slender, vertically oriented canvas. By the third state, the canvas

25 Vogel, 2005: Nan Rosenthal, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum is cited as saying, “Winter Pool has all those wonderful Rauschenberg characteristics: paint and collage elements applied in a syncopated grid, with the feet of the ladder and the feet of the viewer standing on the same ground so that the viewer is encouraged to climb into the picture” (1).

26 Steinberg, 1972: 85.
was square and lay flat on the floor - in fact it was raised slightly off the ground on wheels - and the stuffed Angora goat stood in the middle of the canvas (Fig. 2) With the third state, the artist decided to establish a direct relationship between Monogram and the horizontal ground plane. Other works, such as Canyon (1959) and Pilgrim (1960), are indirect but have a similar focus: “though they [hang] on the wall, the pictures [keep] referring back to the horizontals on which we walk, sit, work and sleep.” In the case of Winter Pool, this spatial dynamic is explored through the ladder and its relation to the horizontals as well as the verticals in which we walk, climb, and even swim.

Is an association of this order - suggesting that the ladder has to do with walking, climbing, or swimming - which leads by logical means to a quite reasonable impression of the work, so inappropriate or so unjustified? And, if indeed it is ridiculous, is it because of the seemingly arbitrary nature of the impression, this particular association, or the use of logic in analyzing art and, specifically, this work? In fact, all of these elements are quite arbitrary, and at least one other: the system of association, itself, as it relates components of the work to each other and to exterior sources, such as one’s own experience with a swimming pool. It has already been mentioned how associations are precipitated by partial understandings, and it is true that when a viewer stretches to make an association based on subtle visual facts, the associations as well as the visual facts are somewhat arbitrarily involved. The primary participants are the work, which has been loaded with unintentional meanings by an

---

27 Kotz: “It took [Rauschenberg] almost five years to decide, with help from Jasper Johns, to place it on a ‘pasture’ of collage on a wood platform” (90).
28 Steinberg, 1972: 87.
“open” artist, and the viewer, who comes to the work with a life’s worth of experiences that may motivate subjective associations. In that the vast majority of the viewer’s psychological complexity could not be anticipated by the artist and is in fact unique to the given viewer, the associations drawn are individualized. As a result, they may have profound meaning for that one viewer, but they are arbitrary considering the specific nature of the work of art as being the production of a distinct artistic mind.

To continue, it may be fruitful to consider the ladder as an element with just this quality of arbitrariness. Were the title of the work different - say, Winter instead of Winter Pool - the ladder would retain its function, the appeal of climbing it, and its ability to elicit associations; however, it would no longer be related to the subject in the same way. For how does a ladder relate to the subject of “winter” in any way other than arbitrarily? And, besides their shared relevance to the concepts of form and space, perhaps the relationship between the ladder and the subject of “pool” is arbitrary. Perhaps the title itself is arbitrary. One could say that the primary subject of this work is the act of painting, modes of interpretation, and its own form. The ladder - itself embodying very strict formal relationships - does, however, maintain such a position of prominence, and it plays such an active role in engaging the viewer by inviting its use as well as evoking associations such as concepts of space, that it does not appear to be an arbitrarily included form.29 On the other hand, the other found

29 Hunter: The author cites Rauschenberg in reference to Monogram, “You forget about how arbitrary a goat is in the picture; that was never the point. It was one of many challenges, but it wasn’t a function of the work to exhibit an exotic animal interestingly. Also, the tire around the goat brings him back into the canvas and keeps
objects that the artist included - such as the fabric, the handheld bellows, and the
found painting - are less prominent and less engaging, so perhaps they were
arbitrarily included for the sake of constructing sufficient visual complexity to
support a variety of interlockings.

Surely though, not all (or even any) of the material elements are truly
arbitrary, at least if one assumes that, today, most viewers would be inclined to
extend to the artist a degree of artistic license and place trust in Rauschenberg’s
ability to create work that is considerately conceived and composed. It was not
always the case, however, that viewers had respect for Rauschenberg’s work. The
initial reception of the artist’s work was some combination of confusion, frustration,
and annoyance. And this is to be expected, since some of the respect that today’s
public holds for Rauschenberg’s work derives from the fact that it challenged its
contemporary viewers and truly altered their sensibilities.

The unsettling variety of materials used in this work is dubious given the
materials’ presence on the front of the canvas. They hold positions of prominence,
unlike objects used in other painted works throughout the long history of art that
preceded this artist’s production. Generally speaking, when, in the production of an
artwork, artists before Rauschenberg used paper, it was used as a substrate for
preparatory drawings, which informed subsequent paintings. When artists used wood
or fabric, they used them in the construction of canvases. If artists were to use a
ladder, perhaps they would have used it in order to reach the upper regions of their
painting with a brush. Any given artist may have used high quality materials, used

him from being an object himself. You don’t say, ‘What is that goat doing in that
painting?’ but ‘Why the tire around the goat?’ And you’re already involved” (139).
them to their best extent, or cared well for the work; however, the artist’s primary focus and the viewer’s primary interest would have been the quality of the work as art. The artist’s mastery of the craft would undoubtedly garner attention and respect, but, in a way, the artist’s skill in conceiving the subject and in the realizing the work’s form are only contributory in the production of a work that transcends its means to captivate the viewer. Whereas artists used these materials in preparation for paintings or as materials that contributed to the support of the painted surface, Rauschenberg exhibited them on the surface of the work. Perhaps he included some of these materials for the creation of the surfaces’ physical or visual texture, in the manner of Jackson Pollock. However, in several cases in Winter Pool alone, the artist presented the objects with such prominence and independence that, given their apparent identities, the viewer is forced to recognize them as nameable objects instead of as forms. Rather than using materials selectively and using the process of creation as an opportunity to demonstrate the extent of his technical proficiency down to the details, Rauschenberg acts as a conduit in production, letting instinct motivate him rather than his judgment. The possibility nevertheless exists that these elements were selected just for the fact that they had been previously disguised, discarded, and disdained in the history of art. Furthermore, similar to the way that the material components of Winter Pool can seem arbitrary in their inclusion, the overall form of the work appears to have been haphazardly constructed. Perhaps it is intentionally haphazard or quite carefully constructed to appear so, all for the sake of rebellion against established forms and a salient aesthetic, which was based on an artist’s mastery of materials.
In order to understand the question of whether *Winter Pool* was intentionally rebellious in its form, its modes of interpretation, its subject matter, or its aesthetic, it is important to acknowledge the state of art at the time of Rauschenberg’s beginnings. Steinberg was convinced that the emergence of the flatbed picture plane had fundamental ramifications on the way in which the viewer interacted with a work’s subject matter. Steinberg argued that a shift had occurred in the primary focus of subject matter from “nature to culture.” In fact, the author envisioned a difference between, on the one hand, the mere perception of art and, on the other hand, a psychological engagement with it. Simply put, it is the difference between the optical and the mental.\(^{30}\) For, as Steinberg argued, “the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.”\(^{31}\) So with what attitude towards the viewer’s experience did Rauschenberg create *Winter Pool*?

As concerns its form, we have already established that the viewer recognizes the identity of the ladder and responds to its functionality. Considered another way, the object’s functionality is its use in life; it is its ability to support “operational processes,” such as reaching a point or accessing a new space, which have already been described. The ladder does not serve primarily in the construction of an appreciable visual aesthetic. Oil paint, on the other hand, has the ability to be beautiful or to transcend its form in the creation of an illusion or the expression of an emotion. Rauschenberg’s painting is colorful, distinctive, and was created with all of the activity of a successful abstract expressionist composition. However, it appears as

\(^{30}\) As fundamental as this difference may appear, it was originally envisioned by Rosalind Krauss in her important article on Rauschenberg entitled “Perpetual Inventory.” In Joseph, 126n6.

if the artist employed painterliness primarily in the construction of physical gestures, as a register for the actions involved in producing the form. Most strokes sit isolated on the surface, and the activity that went into painting them appears to have been deliberate.

Even though Rauschenberg’s “openness” would seem to be motivated by an artistic ideology, perhaps the apparent arbitrariness of the materials and the apparent haphazardness of the construction were intended byproducts. If so, his artistic decisions regarding composition and touch as well as the degree of technical proficiency - or mastery - with which the work was produced would not evaluative by previous standards. A work such as Winter Pool would stand as a challenge to the modes of evaluation as well as the standards themselves. Its valor would be based on new and different aesthetic ideals or none at all, and in the process of transgressing the previous aesthetic it would serve as one in the series of Rauschenberg’s combines which attempted to subvert and expand that aesthetic.

The sheer material variety of Rauschenberg’s combines reflected his transgressive artistic ideology. The artist had no respect for the hierarchy of materials that permeates the history of art. In the aforementioned untitled statement from 1959, Rauschenberg declared, “A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails turpentine, oil and fabric.”32 The artist supported - in theory as well as in practice - a leveling of the importance given to all materials in art. The artist’s use of alternative materials and methods liberated what were previously discrete artistic mediums. His fascination with “disparate visual facts,” which manifested itself as the

32 Stiles and Selz, 321.
material variety in his combines, had historical precedent. Especially in the early years of his production, Rauschenberg was influenced by the work of Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), a German artist, and Joseph Cornell (1903-1972), an American artist, both of whom composed works from assorted found objects, a technique called assemblage. Cornell would compose objects inside of relatively small boxes that usually allowed a view through an open or glass-covered front side. Rauschenberg’s early combines openly borrow Cornell’s use of boxes. Almost more tellingly, his later combines exhibit the attitude of concealment either through his constructed three-dimensional works, which obscure certain vantages through the organization of their structure, or through his construction of ambiguous subject matter. Analogously, as the artist began to integrate found objects more prominently in the structure of his works, he curtailed the diversity and the autobiographical referentiality of the objects.

Given the context of post-war American painting, Rauschenberg’s use of found objects served as a particular affront to formalism, the predominant theory of art. In “Modernist Painting” from 1960, Clement Greenberg rooted his attitude concerning the discreteness of artistic mediums in his historical perspective. He defined Modernism as “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”33 In fact, in 1961, almost as a response to Greenberg’s conservatism, Rauschenberg proposed a rhetorical question to describe his

33 O’Brian, 1993B: 85.
prerogative: “What’s a pure medium?” As exemplified by *Winter Pool*, Rauschenberg transgressed formalist ideals in a number of ways.

Greenberg based his understanding of Modernism on the mode of self-criticism that Emmanuel Kant developed in order to turn logic upon itself. In order to undertake self-criticism, Greenberg conceived that Modernism had called attention to its forms and that it needed to attend to those forms independently. Thus, in order to conduct operative criticism and to determine what its successful qualities were, painting, for one, needed to relinquish every effect that it borrowed from other media. For one thing, Greenberg believed that “conceptual meaning” was the realm of literature, and that painting was forced to forfeit allegory, representation, and reference as a result. For another thing, he believed that the effect of three-dimensionality derived from the realm of sculpture and had been developed in Old Master painting as an attempt to ignore the limitations of the medium of painting - “the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment.” Greenberg envisioned that painting’s Modernist project had been to focus upon the quality of flatness using the forms of paint, in an attempt to direct attention to the plane of the picture rather than the forms themselves.

Rauschenberg’s painted forms do this perfectly well. They are discrete, and they have character, but their purity is undermined by the presence of a material as simple as paper. And while the paper might succeed in drawing attention to the flatness of the canvas on which it has been adhered, the artist aborted Greenberg’s

---

36 Ibid., 1993B: 86.
Modernist project by complicating the work’s material purity. Rauschenberg leaves no question as to whether he is sympathetic to the project of criticizing a single medium only by its own means, for just in this one work he also includes sandpaper, wood, and tape. The artist obviously has no respect for the notion of fine art, for he also includes printed paper and printed reproductions in what otherwise might be a work of high art. What is more, the artist shows no respect for the formalist Modernist project, even in theory, since he includes objects that were found and have no relation to the context of art, such as a handheld bellows and a ladder. Besides the material complexity of this work, the haphazardness of its production would surely relegate it to the category of poorly crafted art. Its form is apparently incoherent in the way that its support is inconsistent, some pigments have mixed on the surface of the canvas, some painted forms obscure adhered elements, and vice versa.

In his essay, Greenberg admitted that well after the onset of Modernism and into the time when he was writing, depictions of recognizable objects continued to appear in painting. His theory of formalism nevertheless took issue with the ability of recognizable imagery to evoke an association with a space other than the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. The ladder in Winter Pool maintains this associative ability based on its identity as an object. It maintains the ability to be perceived as more than a form because it comes from the context of life, where objects have uses directly tied to the actions we undertake and the spaces we occupy as a part of living. This is the logic behind the flatbed picture plane. Through the word “pool,” the title Winter Pool also makes reference to an object (or lack thereof) in three-dimensions, and, by extension, the space it activates. Although in this section
the handheld bellows and the found painting have not been analyzed to the same extent as the ladder, one could imagine that they could have a similar effect. Rauschenberg clearly chose to invoke modes of interpretation that are based on referentiality. For, not only does the viewer recognize the identity of the ladder, he or she relates it to the nameable aspects of the forms surrounding it, and constructs a system of personalized significances based on associations. Not only is this far from a visual experience - the only kind of viewer interaction that formalism allows a Modernist work to support - it emphasizes the viewer’s mental interaction more so than a reference to three-dimensional space does. The systematic relation of components supported by this work precipitates the fabrication of metaphoric meanings, much like allegories and rebuses, which represent the introduction of the conceptual into the experience of interpreting visual art.

Rauschenberg’s “open” attitude toward materials, forms, and meanings was fundamentally incompatible with the formalist intention. His willingness to engage arbitrariness invalidates the results that his forms would have achieved using the scientific method of self-criticism by pure means. The primary aim of formalist Modernism was to avoid what is constructed, unintended, and unknown in art, and one could argue that these were Rauschenberg’s dearest interests as an artist. Remaining “open” meant relinquishing his control over the decisions that he made while painting, sculpting, and constructing (or combining) as well as his ability to make aesthetic judgments. In this way, Rauschenberg encouraged accident as well as his unconscious. Rosenberg reiterated Rauschenberg’s “…desire to be, or present
himself as, a ‘material,’ like the materials he uses,” since the resulting appearance of the work is that of spontaneity unencumbered by artistic subjectivity or idealism.37

Rauschenberg’s own artistic philosophy survived because he was able to reject Abstract Expressionism through the neutralization of its ideals. The artist revealed, “I was trying both… to purge myself of my teaching and at the same time exercise the possibilities.”38 Rauschenberg rejected aspects of Abstract Expressionism to demonstrate that the philosophy of self-expression had been exhausted; however, he maintained painterliness since it continued to be relevant. To the extent that he enacted painterliness superficially, devoid of its philosophical and emotional meaning, Rauschenberg was parodying Abstract Expressionism for the purpose of transgressing it.

The form of Rauschenberg’s works benefitted from a variety of influences, and the accompanying anxiety stayed with the artist. Rosenberg asserted, “Rauschenberg’s claim to aesthetic autonomy in the face of his obvious debts - to Schwitters’ buildups of random scraps on painted areas, to Abstract Expressionist untidy surfaces, to Dada dissociation, to commercial photomontage, to bizarre combinations of objects in Surrealist window dressings - implies a state that is hardly joyous.”39 Around the time that the artist created Winter Pool, he encouraged variety, and he engaged formal, conceptual, and theoretical ambiguities and conflicts. In that his ideals involved the liberation and democratization of materials, forms, meanings, modes of interpretation, and artistic methods, Rauschenberg’s work transgressed the

38 Ibid., 111.
39 Ibid.
state of contemporary art and served to subvert some contemporary trends, all through the process of inclusion.
An equation of object and space.

OBJECT-FILLED SPACE
SPACE-FILLED OBJECT
(to locate this ambiguity?)

The focus of the eye, the focus of the mind, can change.
The price of this entertainment —
the work becomes beautiful.

The painting remains indifferent.¹

The painted surface of Jasper Johns’s White Flag (1955; Fig. 12) is a field of whites in varying temperatures and values; some swatches of pigment can be better described as faint, unsaturated yellows and others as dull blue-grays. It was painted primarily in encaustic, an uncommon type of paint that is prepared by heating wax to use as a binding agent for pigment. Johns had to transfer the encaustic to the painted surface quickly, before the wax cooled and hardened, and, as a result, his ability to await the inspiration to make a stroke as well as to create grand gestures was limited instead to deliberate and repetitive motions. Individual brushstrokes tend to be short in length, thick with paint, and richly textured. Given the material properties of the paint as well as Johns’s use of subtle, muted colors, some entire strokes and several

¹ Jasper Johns, “‘This Week’s Cover’: White Flag, Tokyo, 25 Oct. ’66.” In Varnedoe, 21. Johns’s invocation of ambiguity, a changing focus, and indifference are indicative of the artist’s intention with the work and the way in which viewers experience it.
parts of strokes are translucent. The encaustic is a stiff fluid ossified, and while some of the paint was initially applied as swatches of color, many individual strokes maintain physical autonomy; single gestures sit on the top of the painting’s surface, away from other strokes of the same color. In some cases, as the encaustic literally hardened while Johns was painting on a stroke, the streaks left by his brush as it swept away appear as tiny, parallel linear depressions in the mass of paint. Although they are short and stiff, the strokes often carried enough paint to clot, drip, and splatter. Some dripped a quarter inch slowly down the canvas when they could not hold together.

Through the layering of encaustic strokes show scraps of newsprint, which the artist pasted onto the surface of the canvas. Now more than fifty years old, the paper has aged, becoming brittle. The newsprint has changed color from light gray to a darker, warm brown due to exposure to light over time. Below the layer of newsprint scraps, Johns outlined in charcoal the design of the American flag and painted it over with a ground of unpigmented molten beeswax. The materials below the painted surface contribute to the texture of the painting, physically as well as visually. The relatively low values of the adhered newsprint and the charcoal drawing contrast with the extremely light value of the encaustic painting and show through in the areas between strokes of paint. The irregular browning of the newsprint also shines coloristic warmth in the form of yellowy-browns and orangey-browns through the strokes themselves, since most are translucent. The colors of the newsprint and of the

encaustic are subtle and muted, giving the impression that the work is nearly monochromatic.

Strokes, swatches, and newsprint scraps combine together in localized areas to construct out of material elements the shapes that compose the image of the flag of the United States of America. Johns’s use of the design to organize the composition acts as a self-imposed limitation; he is forced to paint and paste within the lines. There is some formal ambiguity in the image, though, since distinct strokes and swatches fall mostly within the shapes of the stars and stripes, but the visible shapes of paint do not correspond to the larger shapes of the flag. For example, a carefully drawn stroke runs precisely horizontal along the bottom-right edge of the sixth stripe from the bottom. Surrounding it on all sides are diagonal strokes of different shapes, colors, and consistencies. Each of the surrounding strokes falls within the boundaries of one shape of the flag design, but the differences between strokes indicates that there is no system of organization within the shapes. This is a prime example of the way in which Johns manages to exact oppositions simultaneously, with seemingly stable and unassuming results. The arrangement of gestural strokes into the shapes of the design causes it to appear as if there is disorder that abides by a system of order. There is also one star from the bottom-right corner of the field that is filled in with the same mute color as was used to paint what is normally the bordering blue. As a result, this star and other color shapes that constitute the design, which have already lost their color identities, are not delineated and thus lose their integrity and their autonomy as well.
The shapes in the design of *White Flag* were pasted over with newsprint using at least two different methods. For a star, Johns simply cut newspaper to the shape of a single star and glued it down. The stripes, however, were constructed in a similar way to how the shapes were painted; the newspaper shapes do not correspond to the shapes of the stripes. Although the cutout pieces of newspaper are the same width of the stripes, they are shorter in length. Multiple strips of newspaper were needed to run the length of the longer stripes as well as several of the shorter stripes. Where the newspaper strips meet - it is unclear whether they touch end-to-end or overlap - it is possible to see the vertical line of intersection through the layers of paint. While it would be wrong to say that the newspaper strips pasted over the shape of the stripe are the shape of the stripe, all of the newsprint cutouts do stay within the boundaries of the shapes in the design.

Together, the shapes of the stars, the field on which they sit, and the stripes in their specific locations comprise a design. The design of the American flag maintains certain graphic elements, not all of which have been represented in this painting. For one thing, the precise shapes of the stars and stripes, including their proportion to the whole, can be considered as one element of this design. The location of these shapes within the design is also a fundamental graphic component. A color is but one attribute of a given shape within a design; however, taken together, the colors of a design are a primary graphic element. The shape and proportions of the design as a whole are fundamental qualities of a design. Generally speaking, a design may take a digital, two-dimensional, or three-dimensional form. Any physical characteristics maintained by the particular manifestation - such as the material, its texture, or its
scale - do not necessarily relate to the accuracy with which the original design has been realized, but they might detract from it.

To a significant extent, to describe the graphic elements of this painting is to describe those of the American flag. Thirteen stripes of even width run horizontally from bottom to top; the stripes sit one on top of the other. The top seven stripes are cut short by a rectangle that is set in the upper left corner of the composition. That rectangle is wider than it is tall. Within that rectangle, forty-eight five-pointed stars are evenly spaced out into six rows of eight. All together, the image is nearly twice as wide as it is tall.

The design that was just described is shared by the image in this composition. Johns created *White Flag* out of canvas, stretcher bars, charcoal, newsprint, encaustic, and some oil paint, each element having its own formal characteristics. During construction, through the use of his materials, the artist made some decisions that supported the graphic nature of the design. For one example, since Johns has abided by the boundaries of the graphic elements and painted only within the lines of a given shape, the newsprint, browned by time, shows through and draws a darker outline around shapes. The coloration of the painting must have been different at the time of its creation, before the newsprint aged, and the contrast must have been less intense. In its current state, the work has no way of indicating when the aging process began to show nor the extent of the difference.

Johns made an interesting comment in reference to the changing physical nature of *White Flag*: “I think certain materials changing very quickly add a kind of fake time to the thing that I don’t really like, a patina, and give it a nostalgic quality
that it doesn’t have originally.”\textsuperscript{3} The artist appeared genuinely concerned by the thought because the work would give the impression that it was mutable or influenced by anything other than the artist’s systematic mode of construction. But, then, why did Johns use a material that would, over time, alter the effect of the image as well as the aesthetic of its palette? Immediately following, in response to a question about his choice of newsprint, the artist declared:

Well, it’s cheap and easy, that was probably one of the original things, and it had a different kind of information on it, and information that was contrary, had nothing to do with the activity… I like the fact that the newspaper introduced an intellectually different focus. It also gives a three-dimensional sense to the work. You know that what you’re used to doing with a newspaper is turning [the pages], and I think there’s probably a kinetic response.\textsuperscript{4}

Judging from these two comments, it is apparent that Johns was interested in his works supporting the ability to be perceived in multiple ways rather than a formal mutability. Furthermore, this latter comment reveals Johns’s interest in perceptual instability, since that “intellectually different focus” offered by the printed information primarily affects the viewer’s recognition of a different source of information, rather than allowing him or her actually to engage that focus, to read the information, which is altogether illegible.

In the previous chapters, this thesis addressed the way in which two other works on this wall, \textit{Easter Monday} and \textit{Winter Pool}, make use of printed matter. Whereas Willem de Kooning used newspaper to transfer recognizable imagery and Robert Rauschenberg presented printed images of letters and numbers, the text and images contained in the newsprint in \textit{White Flag} are obscured by the layering of the

\textsuperscript{3} Varnedoe, 1996: 161.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
surface. De Kooning also used newspaper in order to manipulate the paint on the surface of *Easter Monday*, and there is a correspondence between this act and Johns’s use of newspaper. In addition to what Johns said above, he adhered scraps of newsprint for their material function - to create surface texture, color, and in order for the cut and constructed shapes of newsprint to support the graphic qualities of the shapes of the stars, the field on which they sit, and the stripes.

Although *White Flag* is not a reproduction of the American flag, the image maintains that identity. It is obvious that this design has been represented without two of the colors - red and blue - and with a transformed third color, since the white is not pure white. As such, the reproduction is incomplete; technically, this is not an image of the American flag. At the same time, this picture is so obviously a representation, albeit an incomplete one, of the easily recognizable American flag, that even considering the inconsistencies, it nearly serves as a reproduction. For, as Clement Greenberg pointed out, there is “literary irony that results from representing flat and artificial configurations which in actuality can only be reproduced.”

Johns has produced this work so that it maintains enough of the graphic elements of the original design that the American flag is unmistakably the subject of this representation. One might call it a picture of the American flag, and, although one would be wrong, this picture is not so different from any other artistic rendering where the artist alters and abstracts the source due to artistic interpretation or technical limitations.

That said, some of the ways in which this image differs from the design of the American flag are obvious, but others are not. It is obvious that this representation is

---

5 O’Brian, 1993B: 126.
missing the colors red and blue. From another perspective, the grays, subtle blues, and faint yellows of the encaustic, the gray of the charcoal, and the brown of the newsprint with which this image has been colored do not exist in the original design either. Although the shapes comprising the design appear to be in their correct forms, locations, and proportion to the whole, the rectangular shape of the work as a whole is inconsistent with the design of the actual American flag. It is not immediately obvious, but the canvas is proportionally shorter - by approximately twelve percent - along its horizontal axis than the official design of the American flag is. Furthermore, *White Flag* is composed of three separate canvases - one for the field of stars, one for the top seven stripes, and another for the bottom six stripes. These physical divides, which are nevertheless concealed by the artist’s precise attachment of the parts, as well as the shortened proportions call into question the extent to which Johns’s representation can differ from the design and still act like a reproduction.

Both obviously and subtly, Johns has violated the rules of the design; however, he has done so in ways that do not completely undermine the ability of this picture to reference its source. One might say that this is a representation of the American flag, and, while some of the ways in which he has violated the design make that obviously untrue, Johns has invited that kind of thinking by methodically abiding by a number of the rules of the design. This work is partially transformative; it can give the illusion of being the American flag. However, it is not the American flag. This is another example of how Johns’s work contradicts itself; he has followed the rules of the design, but, no, he has not. Johns described this particular situation in the following way:
…at first everybody tends to regard [the work] as a flag, and not to take it for a picture. However, if I paint a flag in white only, using various brushstrokes and tone variations, or many painterly elements, then people would tend to regard it as a picture and not as a flag. It is the gray zone between these two extremes that I’m interested in - the area [where it] is neither a flag nor a painting. It can be both and still be neither. You can have a certain view of a thing at one time and a different view of it at another. This phenomenon interests me.6

Due to the way in which this work was constructed, it possesses at least three properties that help it to read as the design: (1) the work is constructed from three separate canvases, which correspond to discrete parts of the design of the American flag; (2) the surface beneath the paint - the shapes of the stars as well as the field behind them and the shapes of the long rectangles that constitute the stripes - has been layered over by shapes cut from newsprint and pasted onto the flat surface of canvas within the boundaries of the discrete shapes; and, (3) for the most part, the artist’s strokes and swatches of paint also fall within the boundaries of the discrete shapes. There is a kind of organizing logic behind the construction of this surface that supports the geometrical structure of the design.

The American flag has an official design, and since manifestations of that design serve an iconic or emblematic function, their appearance needs to be consistent. An icon is defined as a “thing regarded as a representative symbol of something.” An emblem is “a thing serving as a symbolic representation of a particular quality or concept.” Icons and emblems clearly carry meaning in every one of their manifestations. As such, the legibility of the physical forms taken by the icon or emblem is a primary concern. The American flag is both iconic and emblematic, and its official design is visually coherent. Although Johns has evoked the design of

6 Varnedoe, 1996: 98.
the American flag as the subject of *White Flag*, the formal complexities of the painting challenge the viewer’s ability to perceive of the image as a design. Its palette is complex, nuanced, and nearly monochrome; instead of exhibiting the simple, bold colors that help to differentiate the composing shapes, the palette minimizes the prominence of the rest of the graphic elements. Although the manifestation of a design need not have a perfectly flat surface in order to represent its source, in the case of *White Flag*, the rough and mottled surface distracts from the legibility of the emblem. In this way, to say that the work is a flag is to ignore the physical, gestural strokes of paint on the surface, but to say that it is a painting is to ignore its construction as the design of the flag.

Jasper Johns is best known for his *Flag* in red, white, and blue from 1954-55, which is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. That version was constructed in a way similar to *White Flag*. Although *Flag* is much smaller, its surface is built up with newsprint and then painted over with encaustic as well as oil. It, too, is constructed from three separate components, which constitute the same three areas of the image. The support is fabric over wood panel. When Johns creates a painting that takes as its subject the design of the American flag, the work functions in an unusual way exactly because of the subject’s iconic nature. By putting all of the stars and all of the stripes in the right proportions and locations on the work’s flat surface, Johns represents primary graphic elements. In fact, all of Johns’s many partial representations of the flag - regardless of their surface texture and less or more severe color variation - unmistakably invoke the design of the American flag. And by recalling this icon, Johns’s flags engage the icon’s meaning.
Perhaps primarily, the flag of the United States is a symbol of patriotism, or support and solidarity. It represents unity and it upholds meaning to every member of the society. By using its design, Johns is engaging that relationship. Although patriotism is not always founded on the ideals of the country in question, the flag is the national symbol and necessarily carries that layer of meaning. As such, it represents the ideals of the United States. Some of these ideals include life, liberty (or freedom), the pursuit of happiness, justice, equality, national unity, and national independence, among others. The relationship of Johns’s representations of the American flag to this meaning is unclear because all that the artist claims is that he is involved with the design of the flag, and, even then, his image is inaccurate. However, to the extent that it is capable of being perceived as the American flag, *White Flag* maintains the meaning of the national symbol along with its own meanings as a work of art.

Flags have proven themselves to be so adaptable as to maintain their identity in transformation from cloth to a patch on a uniform or to a bumper sticker. Conceivably, then, a painting could present a successful reproduction of the flag. By conserving fundamental components of the design - the stars and stripes in their proportions and locations - Johns’s flags can hang on this wall in the Met, on a wall in a school, or in a post office and still evoke the American flag; it maintains that layer of meaning. If the synecdochic epithet “The Stars and Stripes” is any indication of the reducibility of this ubiquitous symbol to fundamental graphic elements, then it should come as no surprise that Johns’s *White Flag* maintains a relationship with the American flag. Even from a moderate distance – even from a distance greater than
any viewer would have within the galleries of a modern museum, or from which anyone would appreciate a painted work of such remarkable texture – one can see that this painting reproduces the stars and stripes of “The Stars and Stripes.”

The American flag has other nicknames, some of which are also synecdochic. “Old Red, White, and Blue” is not used as prevalently as “The Stars and Stripes,” but the flag is known by both names. It is apparent that the original Flag is a closer representation of the design of the American flag than White Flag because the former maintains the color scheme. For the sake of contrast, one could imagine a picture that, rather than representing the graphic elements of the stars and stripes, only represents three color shapes: one white, one red, and one blue with the precise hue, saturation, and shade of the colors in the official design of the flag of the United States. Since this flag would have as much in common with the design of the American flag as it would with the design of the French and British flags, viewer associations would not be as specific or as reliable as the ones that are elicited by White Flag. Although White Flag obviously lacks the colors, it contains the shapes of the design of the American flag in the correct sizes as well as the correct arrangement. With every one of his flags, Johns has manipulated the degree of variation from the original design so that his pictures are ambiguous but ultimately referential.

In his instructive article “Jasper Johns: the First Seven Years of His Art,” Leo Steinberg interpreted Johns’s textural painted surface as a symbolic indication of his primary role as a painter: to manipulate the viewing experience. And since the artist’s vehicle was “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Steinberg envisioned that Johns was

begging the question: “O! Say, Can You See?” The question is rhetorical and provocative; for, to see the physicality of the painting, one must ignore the design of the subject matter and vice versa. The form of the work and the form of the design serve as obstacles in the viewer’s perception of the other. This dynamic, in turn, prevents perceptual stability. The picture is unusually flexible, a capability made possible by Johns’s use of a design as well as his partial representation of it.

Johns has been quoted more than once as saying that the first painting he made of the American flag was inspired by a dream:

One night I dreamed that I’d painted a flag of the United States of America, and I got up the next morning, and went out, and bought materials and began to paint this flag. That’s the way the first painting, as it is generally known, was done. My reactions to it were neutral. It seemed to me to get rid of a lot of the problems I had been dealing with in trying to figure out what I was doing. I had simply done something there was to do. I learned certain attitudes, I think, I learned that there was a possibility of making something which didn’t have to filter through judgments that one made about what one was doing, but one could set out to do something and do it.9

Johns’s claim that his painting was inspired by a dream is a convenient way for him to avoid responsibility for its conception - at least to the extent that one could analyze that decision, were it made consciously. The subject for Johns’s painting was unremarkably commonplace - it has also been called “banal” and “everyday.”10 Johns admitted that, to him, the image was something that he had recognized but had never before “observed.”11 So, even after the inspiration came to him, the everyday nature of the object was once again a way for the artist to avoid the culpability of a personal

---

8 This was the title of a lecture recently given by Steinberg on a variety of subjects, including Flag (1954-1955).
9 Varnedoe, 1996: 123.
10 Steinberg, 1972: 28.
relationship with the image and its meaning. And yet, Johns made a variety of technical decisions - such as constructing the work from three canvases - that are not explained by the dream. In fact, Johns’s dream is a way for him to deflect responsibility concerning why he chose to represent the image of the American flag; however, the dream does not allow him to escape responsibility for why he constructed his works in this way or, by extension, why he wanted the viewer’s experience to be perceptually unstable.

When questioned, Johns discouages certain analyses of his work by suggesting that a given subject was not a concern of his. He supports diverse analyses of his works; he simply appreciates his involvement to be left out of the discussion. To a significant extent, in works such as *White Flag*, the artist had intended to create pictures that appeared as facts. As the artist initially conceived, his pictures would be experienced in the same way that one considers a radiator, a form that is accepted rather than questioned and does not demand any extra psychological focus. In a fascinating moment of his analysis of the first seven years of Johns’s art, Steinberg determined that if Johns had ever hoped to produce work that was created devoid of his own influence, then he failed due to a certain extent to naiveté. Whereas the methodically crafted works serve as a document of the now-absent artist’s activity, Johns had intended his paintings to appear self-generated. The artist had resisted his involvement.

12 Ibid., 134.
13 Steinberg, 1972: “When I said to him recently that his early works seemed to me to be “about human absence,” he replied that this would mean their failure for him; for it would imply that he had “been there,” whereas he wants his pictures to be objects alone. Well then I think he fails; not as a painter, but as a theorist. For the assumption of a realism of absolute impersonality always does fail - if taken literally. That assumption is itself a way of feeling; it is… ascetic passion…” (52).
own psychological involvement, in part, through self-imposed technical limitations. Johns later reflected on his self-censorship: “In my early work I tried to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions. …but eventually it seemed like a losing battle.”¹⁴ By this time (in 1984), Johns had come to a conclusion much like Steinberg’s - that he could not avoid the issue of his own involvement and that his work evidenced that fact - and in his later work he embraced self-expression, although it remained cryptic.

When considering an artist as intensely impersonal in his production as Jasper Johns was in his earliest years, it is sometimes futile to question his decision to create, which forms, and under what conditions. Likewise, Johns expressed no pride, nor rendered any judgments of his own work; his neutrality after the fact protected him from having to engage in any of the reflection on or criticism of his work. In regards to *Flag*, he insisted, “My reactions to it were neutral.”¹⁵ The artist admits to having found some extent of security in the irreproachability of these circumstances. It was an effective and valuable way to resolve his earlier insecurities as an artist. Those insecurities were now the viewers’ uncertainties.

The perceptual instability caused by *Flag*’s ability to be a painting and, also, to “be” the American flag as well as not to “be” the American flag multiplies when the colors are expunged. For, a solid white flag is also a type of flag. Just as the American flag is meant to be recognized and to indicate the United States, a “white

¹⁴ Varnedoe, 1996: His self-censorship applied to many aspects of self-expression, and, to some extent, it coincided with the anxiety of influence, as is evident from the following statement: “Once, if I did something in my work that reminded me of someone else’s work - an idea, a gesture, paint quality - I would try to get rid of it.” (217).
"flag" is internationally recognized to indicate ceasefire, truce, or surrender. But just as
there are fundamental differences between the image of *White Flag* and the image of
the American flag, *White Flag* is not a “white flag.” It is not truly white - it is not
even a solid color; it is composed of several off-whites. It has a textured surface, and,
being canvas over stretcher bars, it has thickness. It will not - cannot - “fly.” The
ghostly image of the American flag peers through this white flag, since it maintains
most of the graphic qualities of “The Stars and Stripes.” So, to the extent that this
painting by Johns represents a flag, it can be both the American flag and a “white
flag.” The meanings indicated by these two flags are not nearly the same; in fact, they
can contradict each other. The American flag stands for personal freedom, national
unity and national independence. The waving of a white flag is either followed by
truce or it indicates the conquering of one group by another more powerful group. In
the latter case personal freedoms and independence are likely lost. Unlike “The Stars
and Stripes,” which is a rallying point of patriotism in the United States, as a symbol,
a white flag does not instill pride.

In one interview where Johns addressed *White Flag*, the artist spoke relatively
freely about the work, the effect of the painted incident as well as the imagery, and its
relation to the other works that use the flag imagery.16 The interviewer, Paul Taylor,
prompted the artist: “The hidden motifs in your work these days seem to be in marked
contrast to your paintings of flags.” The artist responded, “No, they aren’t. In all
cases, the outlines of particular forms are followed rather faithfully, but not entirely
faithfully, and filled in with some variation of color and texture.” Taylor insisted on

---

Varnedoe, 1996: 245.
what he perceived to be the difference: “But the blatantness of your early imagery is gone. I mean, there’s no mistaking a flag. It’s a nice, big, recognizable image.”

Finally, Johns submitted:

In some of the paintings, but not all. …The flag images exist at different levels of recognizability. Some are in red, white, and blue and are easy to see. There’s a gray one that I think is difficult to determine as a flag. But once you know the flag is something that I’m involved with, then you have clues to let you know what it is. That interests me - the degree to which what we know affects what we see. I'm also interested in how the eye and the mind work, because as we look from painting to painting we see the next painting differently, according to what we’ve seen before, probably.

The artist admits to being very engaged with how his works are conceived of as objects - where along the spectrum between paintings and flags his pictures fall. Although he conceives of and constructs the works, he takes little credit for their outcome. Nevertheless, he is highly attuned to the way in which viewers respond to and interact with each of the works.

\textit{White Flag} was not inspired by a dream, or at least it was removed partially from the inspiration of the dream. \textit{White Flag} is much larger than the previous incarnation of the American flag, and it is painted only in a palette of whites and off-whites. Since Johns has not attributed these qualities to any dream, he is responsible for the technical decisions that he made in the creation of this subsequent work using the same motif. Viewed from another perspective, Johns made alterations to his initial creation. For, \textit{Flag} served as a challenge to the viewer’s perception of the object’s identity in much the same way as \textit{White Flag}. Conceivably, \textit{White Flag} is a subsequent investigation into conflict and the “both… and” phenomenon, since the specific nature of and the intensity of the unstable viewing experience are Johns’ primary interests. By abiding by fewer of the graphic elements of the design - i.e.,
abandoning the original colors - Johns’s established a relationship between the painting and two different flags. As such, *White Flag* is more complex in its ambiguity than *Flag* is.

So what effect did the artist intend his changes to have? What new nuance of meaning did he intend? Was the painting of the American flag inspired by patriotism? Does this American flag in white stand for peace? Does its creator? Is this optimism? Is this American flag in white one of surrender? Is this pessimism? Is this political or social criticism? How might have Johns’s time in the military affected his attitude? These questions are all rhetorical, since in regards to this interpretation, Johns leaves the viewer primarily with conjecture. The artist’s intentions with the subject’s initial meaning is not clear through the form of the painting, and he has not revealed any iconographic motivations in interviews, even when pressured. What is more, in regards to the viewing experience, which Johns has destabilized through the form of the painting, the viewer is left grappling for firm footing, since each perception proves inconclusive or conflicted.

Today this work represents more than a painting or flags. Johns’s *Flag*, his *White Flag*, as well as *Flag Above White* (1955), *Flag on Orange Field* (1957), *Three Flags* (1958), his flags in Sculpmetal, and his prints of flags have all become icons of modern art. These works, especially *Flag* and *White Flag*, have simultaneously become the iconic works of Johns’s oeuvre. The works’ printed and digital reproductions are so many and so accessible that they act as simulations, replacements with identities in and of themselves that do not rely on reference to the objects or to Jasper Johns, the individual. In the museum, a distance away from *White
Flag, where the unique character expressed by each stroke of encaustic is indistinguishable - that intimate space obscured between the topmost surface of a clump of wax left by the stroke of an overloaded brush and the tender surface of the newsprint layering - a view of this work has more in common with its reproductions than with its physicality as an object. Closer up, but at a comfortable distance, where the oil paint strokes separate and glimmer, White Flag registers with some viewers for its iconic identity within art history rather than for its formal details; the viewer who recognizes this image knows that the work is “a Jasper Johns.” Even near the work, face to face with Johns’s remarkable painterly incident, close to the rope that keeps viewers from getting too close, this object is easily recognizable as one of Jasper Johns’s flags. Even here, it is still an icon within the context of Johns’s oeuvre.

In that he has produced objects that serve a function in reality as much as they function in the mind’s eye, Johns has embraced the principle of an “extra-rétinienne” path of perception, a concept devised by Marcel Duchamp and illustrated with The Large Glass in 1912.17 A work of art that does not “stop at the retina” is one that can register for the viewer perceptual significance that is not limited to the work’s physical details or formal subject matter. As Duchamp framed the issue, since the time of Courbet, Modernist painters had primarily concerned themselves with the

17 Cabanne: In an interview, Duchamp submitted, “Since Courbet, it’s been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone’s error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral. If I had the chance to take and antiretinal attitude, it unfortunately hasn’t changed much; our whole century is completely retinal, except for the Surrealists, who tried to go outside it somewhat. And still, they didn’t go so far! In spite of the fact that Breton says he believes in judging from a Surrealist point of view, down deep he’s still really interested in painting in the retinal sense. It’s absolutely ridiculous. It has to change; it hasn’t always been like this” (43).
form of their work. But, Duchamp argued that a painting may appeal to more than a viewer’s visual tastes; it may engage, in a challenging and satisfying way, his or her intellect, emotions, and desires. Simply put, a work of art can carry conceptual meaning.

In “Marcel Duchamp: An Appreciation,” one of few texts written by Jasper Johns, he declared:

Marcel Duchamp, one of this century’s pioneer artists, moved his work through the retinal boundaries which had been established with Impressionism into a field where language, thought and vision act upon one another. There it changed form through a complex interplay of new mental and physical materials, heralding many of the technical, mental and visual details to be found in more recent art…

As Johns indicates, conceptual meaning may be related to the literal or metaphorical elements of a work. It is often incited by formal qualities, but it carries an appeal for the viewer that is altogether different than its physicality or its aesthetic. We have established that Johns’s *White Flag* is an incomplete representation of the American flag; however, in the moment when the viewer recognizes the work’s relation to that design, *White Flag* necessarily invokes the symbolism of the American flag just as an official reproduction would. As such, the referential nature of *White Flag* mimics the iconic function of the American flag; one could say that *White Flag* maintains the function of an icon, to the extent that it is recognizable.

The ability to perceive subconsciously the function maintained by an object is a facet of non-retinal meaning. In fact, the distinction between an art object and an object from life, one whose identity is inextricably linked to the function that it serves, came unavoidably to the fore in the 1910’s through Duchamp’s Readymades.

---

18 Ibid., 109.
Fountain (1917; Fig. 13) was one in a series of ready-made objects that Duchamp transformed, through his capacity to choose, and transported to the artistic stage as sculpture, in an attempt to challenge the limitations of art. In this way, it was a transgressive gesture by an avant-garde artist. The primary purpose of these Readymades was different than the elicitation of the viewer’s aesthetic appreciation. Duchamp attempted to diminish their potential for aesthetic appreciation by limiting the number of Readymades that he produced, since their conceptual meaning was of primary importance. The artist chose such common forms that they did not require any amount of conscious mental activity on the viewer’s part in order to realize what they were or what their uses were. One might say that his ready-made gestures were primarily symbolic, fighting the battle for material diversity in art. More than that, though, Duchamp’s introduction of a urinal, a wine bottle drying rack, a shovel, and a coat hanger into art exhibition spaces was done for the purpose of utilizing an object’s functionality as a kind of subject matter. From one perspective, in the process of becoming art, the objects were rendered non-functional. From another perspective, though the objects would never escape their identity as art objects, they maintained their capacity to function as well as their form’s ability to indicate that function even after the transformation to art.

This radical gesture has real relevance to Johns’s intentions with White Flag. Whereas Duchamp’s hope was to avoid the issue of aesthetic appreciation, Johns’s attitude towards the primacy of the visual experience is ambiguous. The painted

19 Foster, 2004: 129.
20 Masheck: The artist claimed, “Anything can become beautiful if the gesture is repeated often enough; this is why the number of my ‘ready-mades’ is very limited…” (86).
13. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917. Oil and pencil on canvas, $14\frac{3}{10} \times 18\frac{3}{10} \times 24$ in. Reproductions in various collections.
surface abounds with aesthetic interest; it is visually nuanced and materially sensuous. But, Johns’s deliberate choice to use encaustic rather than common oil paints exclusively proscribed that his strokes would be crabbed and impassive. Like the structure of the design of the American flag, the painter’s medium acted as a self-imposed limitation on gestural impulses. Although he maintained the ability to be impulsive in his decisions of stroke and placement that were part of his process of painting, with already-hardening wax paint in hand, the artist was unable to patiently await inspiration or be self-expressive. Johns applied the surface so meticulously that the strokes only express the artist’s frustrated method. The way in which Johns painted in encaustic is described by Rosalind Krauss with the insight of metaphor; she refers to his painted incident as “the evidence of love lavished on the creation of a tombstone.”21 In its imagery, this phrase deftly references Johns’s obsessive use of grays - and oftentimes only grays - in the palette of his paintings. It also speaks to the very nature of Johns’s paintings, which he intended to be completely impersonal, but which, as Leo Steinberg pointed out, could not escape their fate as the evidence of artistic absence. The strokes document the painter’s action, referring to the operation of quickly and purposefully using a brush to transfer onto the canvas the hot wax as it was drying. The way in which the static forms of painted incident invoke the process of painting is not so different from the way that a urinal immediately brings to the viewer’s mind the action of stepping up to and using it. The identification with the object’s identity and use, in turn, is related to the way in which Johns’s representation of a flag brings to the viewer’s mind the object’s uses, contexts, and significations.

Like the urinal, the design of the flag was ready-made. In that Johns used the
design in his production of an image, and in that he altered the design during the
process of production, *White Flag* relates to Duchamp’s production of assisted ready-
mades. The graphic qualities that are preserved in Johns’s representation, he accepted
outright. For example, when the official flag of the United States gained two more
stars, he started painting flags with fifty stars.22 What is more, like Duchamp, Johns
made seemingly meaningful but relatively superficial alterations to the form, which
challenge viewers to perceive the object both in its new artistic identity as well as for
its common, functional identity. In Johns’s own words, he represented the design
“rather faithfully, but not entirely faithfully.”23

*White Flag* is formally indulgent in ways that Duchamp’s Readymades were
not. Although Johns appropriated the design of the American flag, he fabricated the
work himself. In the construction of the work’s surface, he used scraps of newspaper,
which did retain an “intellectual focus” that affected the finished product; however,
the newsprint is for the most part illegible, so the potential to engage that focus has
been neutralized. Instead, the newspaper engages the viewer’s attention primarily in
the way that it contributes to the form of the work, the texture of the surface. In fact,
Johns’s method of production - or, even, craft - required careful and deliberate

22 Bernstein: “In 1959 the number of stars in the American flag was changed from
forty-eight to forty-nine, and again in 1960 to fifty. Johns never painted a flag with
forty-nine stars, and it was not until 1965 that he painted his first flag with fifty stars,
*Flags*, 1965 (Cri. 130). Since that date, he has used the flag with fifty stars (five rows
of six and four rows of five) for his paintings and most of his graphics. There is only
one flag painting after 1960 with forty-eight stars, *Two Flags*, 1962” (8).
activity on his part, and the result is a formally complex, visually rich, and aesthetically gratifying work.

Besides a logical, albeit subconscious, engagement with a work of art, one may also have a reaction that involves desire in its irrational sense. In some ways, a work that engages the senses may rely on its formal qualities. However, its formal incident may also allude to the action involved in producing the work. This is the logic behind Krauss’ comment about “the evidence” of Johns’s “love lavished on the creation of a tombstone” as well as the name that Harold Rosenberg proposed to describe New York School painting: “Action Painting.” When the painted incident appears particularly earnest or particularly impulsive, it is possible for the viewer to perceive that the artist intended the paint to serve the purpose of self-expression. Between the extreme formal complexity of Johns’s painting and the technical limitations posed by encaustic, however, the painting in *White Flag* is more likely to be conceived of as overwrought workmanship rather than self-expression; it is a non-hierarchical painted totality rather than discrete instances of activity.

Formal qualities are the means through which a viewer can perceive a work as transformative. On the other hand, art that is intended to be transformative will not succeed if it cannot escape its means. Duchamp used the phrase “gray matter” to describe, generally, conceptual subjects that can precipitate an anti-retinal viewing experience.²⁴ In *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss related Jean-François Lyotard’s analysis of gray matter reactions: “But the gray matter… though it undoubtedly refers to the cerebral cortex, does not thereby invoke a disembodied faculty of cognition or

²⁴ Krauss, 1993: 123.
reflection. … The cerebral cortex is not above the body in an ideal of ideated remove; it is, instead, of the body…”25 The perception of a work’s form is a necessary step in the perception of a work’s concept, and both interactions take place by means of the viewer. Duchamp clearly stated that a preoccupation with a work’s physical characteristics, those that motivate a visual experience, prevents or puts in the background “the reactions of the gray matter.”26 Johns’s work functions exactly in this way, though he is focused primarily on provoking the transition back and forth from the retinal to the anti-retinal - through the “gray zone,” as he calls it.27 Johns has explained that he is concerned with “a thing’s not being what it was, with its becoming something other than what it is, with any moment in which one identifies a thing precisely and with the slipping away of that moment…”28 An artist constructs conceptual meaning from physical means, and when realized successfully, the potential for an anti-retinal experience is permanent. In the case of *White Flag*, that permanence can be described better as perpetual instability.

For an example of this phenomenon, consider the aforementioned interview with Paul Taylor. In response to Taylor’s comment that “there’s no mistaking” the “nice, big, recognizable image” of the flag, John’s offered this anecdote:

One of my largest paintings is a flag. It's painted in whites, and probably yellows by now, and I remember having it in my studio when somebody - I've forgotten who it was, I don't think it was someone involved with art, except perhaps a mover or something like that who had come to move something - simply went up to my painting and leaned against it. He saw it as the wall - it was hanging on a white brick wall.29

---

25 Ibid., 124.
26 Ibid., 123.
28 Varnedoe, 1996: 93.
29 Taylor, in ibid., 245.
Johns got a certain amount of satisfaction out of what he claimed to be a true story; for, it was possible for someone to perceive the object in yet another way: as a solid, white, brick wall. The anecdote is a fortunate, clever, and potentially concocted counter to Taylor’s comment. Although *White Flag* does exhibit horizontal stripes, surface texture, and a large scale, as would a brick wall, we have established that the image is not monochrome and is not white. Regardless of the accuracy of the story, it suggests that the work has the ability to function in the “gray zone” for casual viewers in much the same way that it does for focused viewers, and as more than just a painting and a flag (or two). This is a great proof for the notion that to see the work one way disbars one from seeing it another, as one would not lean against what he or she perceived to be a painting or a flag.

The field of belabored formal elements that comprise *White Flag* measures nearly seven by eleven feet. Whereas the American flag is an icon that has been stretched to the size of a football field and fabricated in untold materials without ever losing its identity, this is a large painting. Both in its seemingly straightforward nature as a field of color and gesture and in its size, this painting is reminiscent of some New York School works - such as by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, or Robert Motherwell, to name a few. It is no small matter that the swatches of off-whites on the surface of *White Flag* fall in localized scatterings. Both the coloristic and physical textures of this work are varied throughout. Rid of the bold colors usually comprising this design, the surface of the canvas maintains somewhat of an even visual consistency. Were the viewer to slacken his or her focus, the subtle color shifts and the labyrinth of delicate contrasts would serve to diminish the visual
differences caused by the graphic qualities and the construction, causing the surface to cohere. In this way, the painting appears as a unified image, as a single rectangular shape. As addressed in the preceding section on Robert Rauschenberg, the prerogative of formalism was to use forms of paint in order to emphasize the flat surface of the canvas on which they sit. One of the devices that Clement Greenberg believed helped to accomplish this gesture of formal self-reflexivity was the construction of an all-over composition. This relates to Johns’s motivation for portraying the work with the capability of being perceived as a wall, coincident with a solid, even white. As it might be conceived, as a coherent surface and a unified shape, *White Flag* appears to be capable of this gesture; however, that ever-present ghostly image of the American flag that peers through serves to frustrate this possibility before it develops. The lines are not drawn, so they do not prohibit the image from cohering, but, still, the materials below show through to the surface to form the contours of a referential image.

If the following statement by Harold Rosenberg is any indication, we should not assume that we can approach Johns’s work on the same grounds as we might for his New York School predecessors: “Given the entirely different ends for which he employs Abstract Expressionist devices, it is superficial to interpret Johns’s work as embodying a conflict between ‘painterly’ painting and representational art.”30 The conflict in Johns’s work is not manifest solely between his painterly technique and the representational subject matter. This conflict does exist and is of primary importance, given that challenges towards legibility have the effect of obstructing the

viewing process. What is more, concerning abstraction and representation, each alone is conflicted. We have seen how White Flag’s evocation of multiple representations leaves the viewer uncertain. In the case of painterly painting, the conflict exists precisely in the fundamental differences of how Johns employs Abstract Expressionist devices. He used the devices with the intention of constructing the impression of impersonality rather than apparent impulses of self-expression. In the case of White Flag, Johns’s subversion of Abstract Expressionist intentions through the use of its devices directs us towards the crux of its historical significance.

Johns’s painting exhibits many of the formal characteristics that were developed by Abstract Expressionist painters. Here, Rosenberg’s list of these characteristics will be just as accurate as any other: “heavy impasto, impulsive brushing, broad paint strokes, emphasized contours, streaks, smears, drips, the vertical band, one-color masses, scraps of newspaper and other matter mixed into the pigment.”31 As had already been explained, through his choice to use encaustic, Johns avoided the devices of impulsive brushing and broad paint strokes. His strokes are not grand and heroic, nor do they give the appearance that they were the product of the artist’s patient wait for a creative epiphany. White Flag exhibits only partial similarities with the devices of emphasized contours, since they are of relatively high contrast in the context of a nearly monochromatic work, as well as the horizontal band, which emphasizes the planarity of the surface in the same way that the vertical band does. His use of these devices caused his painting to draw attention to its support. In the hands of Johns, these devices served to evidence the fact that he

31 Ibid.
approached painting in a way that was, in some ways, antithetical to his immediate predecessors. By painting strategically and with impersonality, Johns reproduced the gestural style of painting that was liberated and developed by the individuals of the New York School, but he rejected its ability to be used for personal expression. His painting in this way solidified his motions, which are distinctly devoid of the emotionality that colors expressionism. Johns’s early work was a transgression from Abstract Expressionism, and his creation of a metaphorical “tombstone” was one way of establishing his art as avant-garde - at the expense of what was, to him, an exhausted precedent that was irrelevant to his artistic goals.

And yet, if Johns’s art did undermine many of the principle values of Abstract Expressionism, why did it do so by use of their idealized means? Surely it is significant that Johns’s art stood in contrast to the ideals of immediate predecessors in many ways - quite apparently in his use of referential subject matter - yet he maintained the preceding formal aesthetic to a certain degree. Johns had a real appreciation for formal qualities. Painterly incident is of fundamental importance to the activity of his objects; the viewer wavers between perceiving the painted incident and perceiving the represented design. Johns’s works relish in formal and conceptual ambiguity, and the ambiguity of the artist’s intention is one of the aspects of the work that so captivates viewers.

As Leo Steinberg has acknowledged, one’s experience with Johns’s early work is engaged in a perceptual oscillation.\(^{32}\) In the case of *White Flag*, the illusion that the painting could function as a flag implies no unreal depth, so the oscillation

\(^{32}\) Steinberg, 1972: 25.
fluctuates from a focus of “pure painting” to a perceived subject. Steinberg also quoted from an article by William Rubin on the subject of the exhibition “Sixteen Americans” from 1960:

William Rubin suggested that the ‘enigma’ of Johns’s works stemmed ‘from the paradoxical oneness of the picture as painting and image. Such a peculiar ambiguity,’ he continued, ‘cannot be achieved with just any subject… All Johns’s favorite subjects share an emblematic or ‘sign’ character. … Thus the paradox lies in Johns’s reversal of the usual process of representation, by which a three-dimensional from the real world is represented as a two-dimensional illusion. Johns gives his two-dimensional signs greater substance, weight, and texture than they had in reality; in other words, he turns them into objects.’

The elusive charge given to his work derives from the potential correspondence between the physical natures of a painting and a flag. As we have come to analyze Johns’s use of the design for the American flag, we have come to realize that his selective representation of its graphic qualities was supplemented by his evocation of formal complexity and activity. The way in which he realized this work was superbly methodical; for, each time that he exercised his ability to make decisions, he did so with a concerted effort to remain impersonal and uninvolved. He constructed formal ambiguity, and the result is a product of artistic activity that expresses nothing other than its conflicted existence.

In *White Flag*, we find a mode of refutation of the ideals of the preceding period through complication without negation. That is to say, we find *both* a work with its feet set in the modes of Greenbergian formalism *and* a work whose head floats in the clouds, where meaning in art derives from the identity of subject matter and its effect on the viewer. As a formal construct, gestural abstraction remained a

---

33 Ibid., 26.
relevant part of Johns’s creative activity, but the limits that he imposed as part of his process prevented his abstract gesturing from becoming expressive, suggesting instead that the significance of abstract expressionism had been exhausted. By painting in encaustic and by representing a design, Johns was able to strip the act of its vitality. The paint strokes have been contracted and solidified as well as purged of color; still, aped and altered, painterliness remains. Painterliness is a necessary point of reference in the oscillation between the perception of form and subject, and Johns has carefully constructed this work so that the precise nature of each is perpetually ambiguous.
Cy Twombly

Cy Twombly used oil-based house paint instead of oil paint for the ground of *Untitled* (1970; Fig. 14). The background is flat and thin rather than creamy or stained. There are immediate precedents for Twombly’s use of this kind of paint; de Kooning used enamel paints in his black-and-white works from the late 1940s, such as *Zurich* (1947), *Black Friday* (1948), or *Painting* (1948).\(^1\) Pollock also used house paints so that each color would have an even, fluid consistency. Pollock dripped layer after layer of paint on top of each other, though, and mixed in sand and other materials to develop a surface texture. The background surface of *Untitled* is flat and earthen toned.

On top of the painted ground, Twombly drew rows of loops using red-brown wax crayon, soft black wax crayon, and pencil. There are seven of these rows, and they decrease in height from the bottom one to the top one. Within each row, the loops were drawn with relatively even height. Each row is in fact a hazy mass composed of several strings of loops that were smudged out, with new strings of loops drawn on top. Most often, and more often in the top five rows than in the bottom two, the loops appear as one continuous string. It appears as if each continuous string was drawn either in red or in black. For example, although the third

\(^1\) Stevens and Swan, 244-45.
red loop from the left in the bottom row breaks at the bottom, the red loops immediately to the left and right are the same height and are at the same angle.

The loops all lean towards the right edge of the canvas. The artist’s stroke started at the bottom of the form, reached up at a sharp diagonal toward the right, curled over and evenly around back to the left, and then started once again. In the bottom two rows, some of the loops are broken at the bottom - that is, in the vigorousness of the artist’s motion, he let the crayon lift off of the surface of the canvas, but the crayon returned to the canvas as the artist circled his arm back around for the upstroke. The rows that the loops comprise run from inside the left-hand side of the canvas to the right. The ends of the strokes of the strings interact with the right side of the canvas in ways that support the impression that the rows were drawn from left to right: In the top three rows, the strokes end somewhat far before the edge of the canvas; they extend casually over a span of a few inches before petering out towards the edge. And, especially in the bottom three rows, the vigorous motion that went into making the tall loops carried the artist’s strokes to the right edge of the canvas with such speed that either they were curtailed off in some quick and cramped gesture or they abut the edge.

Strings of loops comprise one of several motifs that Twombly developed in his oeuvre, and, whereas his works into the early 1960s use representational motifs that derive from a vocabulary used by the artist, an abstraction such as loops carries all of the formal nuances that make his drawing self-expressive. In this canvas, Twombly also exhibited his nearly neurotic want to scribble, undo, and re-scribble his drawn lines. In the process of revising, the artist wiped out the lines, erasing them to
the extent that they make no indication of the initial shapes in the drawing; however, the lines were not erased, or their erasure was only partial, since the pigment that comprised the lines was smudged out, dispersing their color over large areas of the canvas. It appears as if the smudges once composed strings of loops like those that are visible on the top of the surface, that the smudges were a byproduct of the process rather than being layered arbitrarily across the surface as a ground. The coloristic haze produced by the smudging of lines heightens the apparent solidity of the canvas’s surface, since the smudges were created when the artist worked the pigment into the canvas and across the surface. The smudges stand in contrast to the drawn forms, which were built up from the surface, and which the smudges cast into formal ambiguity. There is a sense of space between the crisp forms that were most recently drawn on the top of the surface and the smudged ones that sit against the vague color of the canvas.

Unlike even the thinnest stroke of painted impasto, Twombly’s crayon and his pencil inscribed forms on the surface of his painting. The forms exhibit a slight physical presence. The forms are primarily linear, but when they were wiped away, they were not erased cleanly; they colored the ground with a reddish warmth or a gray haze. This process of revision left a residue, and, in combination with Twombly’s apparent insistence on repeating the process of inscription after every time that he smudged out forms, the work represents a highly nuanced document of the artist’s activity. Given that the smudges are previously drawn forms that have been partially erased, Twombly appears to have repeated the process of inscription and revision many times, as if he was continually dissatisfied with his inscribed forms.
It is apparent that Twombly has a negatively creative impulse; for, each time that he revised his drawing, he smudged out his drawing completely rather than obscuring or revising unsatisfactory parts of loops or incorporating subsequently smudged out parts. His impulsive smudging is all the more fascinating because the obsessiveness of the artist’s process is most likely feigned. While the picture has an austere aesthetic, the product of his revisionism is not perfection; it evidences the process of partial erasure so that the work is not an attempt at reduction but an image whose visual appeal derives from the formal subtleties found in its complex layering of mark-making and erasure. Roland Barthes’ offered a sensitive interpretation of the process:

…l’artiste feint d’avoir “raté” quelque morceau de sa toile et de vouloir l’effacer; mais ce gommage, il le rate à son tour; et ces deux ratages superposés produisent une sorte de palimpseste…

(…the artist pretends to have “bungled” a part of his canvas and to wish to erase it. But he again bungles the rubbing out and these failures superimposed on each other produce a kind of palimpsest…)

The way that Barthes envisioned the artist’s intentions indicates a fundamental implication of the artist’s revisionist process: impulsiveness governed by self-doubt. It appears as if he impulsively scribbled, made an impulsive decision to erase, impulsively scribbled, again, and again. Given that Twombly’s revisionism occurs in what is a formally nuanced composition, the viewer is left to wonder about the real state of the artist’s mastery as well as what would drive a capable artist to make marks motivated by uncertain impulsiveness.

---

The coloristic presence of the smudged forms has as much of a fundamental relationship to the overall composition as do the new inscriptions. Since Twombly only partially erased the previously drawn forms, the persistent smudges exist as forms of their own, the process of their erasure being only a historical fact contributing to the character of their current state of existence. In this way, the smudges and the drawn forms document the artist’s activity, both what was subsequently obscured and what is still evident. Despite his motivation to revise, the artist does not intentionally hide any aspect of his artistic incident from the viewer; Twombly does not hide brushstrokes or use glazes. The transparency of his artistic process is representative of the logic behind “Action Painting” - to document the artist’s action so that the viewer can perceive the nature of the activity and the energy that went into it - and it is common to *Easter Monday*, *Winter Pool*, and *White Flag*. Nevertheless, the surface of *Untitled* was produced under several conflicting motivations that undermine the Abstract Expressionist ideal of the heroic genius. Twombly’s revisionary process does not suggest the sureness of self-expression that drove painters from the New York School to engage creativity freely and passionately in the pursuit of formal dynamism. Although, at times, Twombly’s actions were impulsive, the viewer often assumes self-doubt to be the motivation, which drove the artist to create with the same degree of spontaneity as he exercised in erasing and revising his creations. And, there is no drama in Twombly’s expressionism; his gestures are not grand or daring. They are obsessive, and, since they are drawn with a dry stylus rather than being flowing streaks of paint, they maintain a “spindly
lightness.\textsuperscript{3} They carry neither the gravity nor the stability of the gestures created by a painter such as de Kooning.

As Kirk Varnedoe declared, Twombly created with “a different kind of anxiety” than did the Abstract Expressionists, one that was “compounded of impetuosity and frustration, obsessiveness and idle disregard, transgression and self-doubt.”\textsuperscript{4} This comment suggests a series of dichotomous attitudes, all of which would reasonably accompany the process of revisionism that this study has conceived so far. There is also a dichotomous affect to Twombly’s activity that is precipitated by the artist’s method of drawing, and which characterizes the forms in \textit{Untitled}. For, where the strings of loops appear to be most tremulous, as in the top rows, the artist’s control - in the form of spontaneity - was most involved in the creation of individual loops. On the other hand, in the bottom rows, where loops were created more rapidly and where they maintain greater consistency, the intended character is subsumed by the speedy and simple repetitiveness of the method he conceived. In the production of these strings of loops, then, the artist is able to undertake “self-aware detachment;” though his hand follows the gesture involved in creating the character, the motion takes control and causes the forms to become irregular.\textsuperscript{5} We have seen this type of distanced activity before, in the work of Jasper Johns, and, here, as was the case then, the viewer perceives nuanced formal incident motivated by methodical impersonality.

It is just this type of impression that inspired Barthes to conclude of Twombly’s activity:

\textsuperscript{3} Varnedoe, 1994: 24.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 42.
…le matériau semble jeté à travers la toile, et jeter est un acte en lequel
s’inscrivent à la fois une décision initiale et une indécision terminale: en
jetant, je sais ce que je fais, mais je ne sais pas ce que je produis.

(…the materials seem to have been thrown across the canvas, and to throw is
an act in which are enshrined at the same time an initial decision and a final
indetermination: when I throw something, I know what I am doing, but I don’t
know what I am producing.)

The literal implications of the verb “to throw” are misleading, since it would have
been impossible for Twombly to throw across the canvas the dry pigment transferred
when he touched a stylus to the surface. Instead, the act of throwing relates to
Twombly’s use of a gesture that is repetitive, and which, given enough speed, could
cause the artist to lose control, which, in turn, would cause the marks to vary
indeterminately from the conceived gesture. The anxiety in Twombly’s drawing -
which, at times, led the artist to hesitate, to obsess, to scrawl nonsense, and to
relinquish control over the technical reactions of his medium - stands in contrast to
the aspirations of Abstract Expressionism’s gestural painting: to manifest the artist’s
brilliance and mastery of the medium.

What is more, the very fact that Twombly drew in wax crayon and pencil
prevented many of the painterly incidents that contribute to formal interest: heavy
impasto, broad strokes, emphasized contours, streaks, smears, and drips. In the hands
of an Abstract Expressionist painter, these details were byproducts of the epiphanies
of painterly impulse that were motivated by earnest self-expression and were made
possible by independence and self-knowledge. Twombly’s crayon and pencil
inscriptions can appear as idle gestures with no substantial forethought or as

---

Aspinwall, 12.
uncontrolled gestures, which are relatively simple in their demeanor, but which the artist sometimes second-guessed and obsessed over.

The composition of Untitled consists of comprehensible strokes that would appear to hold something in common with both drawing and handwriting. Throughout its long history, writing has served many different purposes, its appearances have changed, and many people have been involved in the definition of its meanings. In the Western tradition, writing has existed for more than two thousand years, and it dates back even further in the Eastern traditions. Today, many people in Western cultures know the experience of putting pen or pencil to paper, if only to signify their names. To this extent, the gestures involved in drawing and writing are both basic and commonly shared. Twombly’s use of the technique of drawing in his painted works suggests that he was interested in the viewer’s instinctive relation to the activity. Most viewers will recall the sensation of putting pen or pencil to paper; many people write on a daily basis. And, since the lines in Untitled construct neither symbols nor syntax and, therefore, are not representative of any one language, the language they construct is universal. But, there are conventions that Twombly did retain - his gesture moved from left to right, and, since his forms are arranged in rows, his activity was installed in vertically differentiated episodes, both of which correspond to the Western tradition of which the artist is a part.

There have been several artists in the history of modern art whose imagery was inspired by languages as well as the symbols that comprise their written forms. Varnedoe insisted that Twombly would have been aware of the following: Joan Miró,
Paul Klee, Franz Kline, Mark Tobey, Robert Motherwell, and Adolph Gottlieb.7

Robert Pincus-Witten suggests that significant similarities exist between the subjects and forms of Twombly’s work and those of Kline, de Kooning, Tobey, Bradley Walker Tomlin, and Ben Shahn.8 Pincus-Witten also compared the result of Twombly’s revisionism to “a blackboard scrawled over during the height of the Palmer Method craze” - the Palmer Method was a popular system during the first half of the twentieth-century by which schoolchildren were taught proper cursive handwriting technique.9 There is obvious formal similarity between Twombly’s strings of loops and one of the preparatory exercises (Fig. 15) - it is for this reason that works such as *Untitled* are commonly referred to as Twombly’s “blackboard paintings”. Under the Palmer Method, the production of running loops like these served to familiarize students to the posture and gestures involved in writing. The loops were not informed by any one letter; their gesture, angle, and curvature served as the basis for all letters. As such, the long strands of cycling loops represent the potential of assuming the identities of specific characters, through which the forms would develop both symbolic and syntactical meaning. In that Twombly, an intelligent, grown man, has abstracted written language in a way that represents a reversion of the original learning process, his drawing represents an idealistic regression. His representation of pre- or proto-handwriting was derived, in part, from a process where the artist abstracted his handwriting and freed his draftsmanship to

---

It is not Palmer Method if the lines are tremulous. Study instructions for speed requirements

LESSON 4

Clear the serious work of writing and applying the correct movement begins. Before attempting to make any part of drill one, review lessons one, two, and three, and give the closest possible attention to position, muscular relaxation, and peeholding. Don't practice before you know how. With the left hand, move the paper to the left three times at equal intervals, in the progress of the pen across it.

Drill 1

Letting the distance between the two ruled lines, three-eighths an inch apart, represent one space in height, any part of this drill should be two spaces high. Look at these drills until you have a good mental picture of the height, proportions, and general appearance.

In connection with the straight line part of the drill, study closely diagrams twenty-six and twenty-seven on page eighteen. There is no value in this straight line exercise unless practiced with a forward and backward motion, from and toward the center of the body, with the paper held in the correct position.

If you cannot make the several parts of drill one high enough at first with pure muscular movement, practice without touching the pen to the paper until you have developed more muscular freedom.

In the second line of drill one, the traced line should first contain six, and later, as a lighter movement is developed, ten revolutions. In this drill it will be well to make first the straight line on the correct drill, and then the oval enclosing it. This order may be changed frequently and the ovals made first. This is an important drill and has a very specific bearing upon drill.

To the Teacher: It may be profitable for third, fourth, and fifth-year pupils to spend the practice periods of one week in studying and practicing the two movement drills given in this lesson, reviewing each day everything that has gone before. Pupils in the sixth, seventh, and eighth years, and in high school classes should be able to progress more rapidly. It is not wise to say how rapidly, as that depends upon the knowledge of the teacher, the mental caliber of the pupil, their interest in the work, the length of the daily lesson, and the amount of the right kind of outside practicing that pupils do.
release the poetry in the nuance of forms. It is for this reason that Tacita Dean perceptibly noted, “(Twombly) is drawing his words, no longer writing them.”

One might say that a linguistic symbol relates to two identities, each marked by its own set of formal and conceptual characteristics: the one being its own identity, whose form is perceived by the viewer; and the other being whatever it symbolizes. According to the foundational semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure, the notion of a sign - what has here been considered as a symbol - has a dyadic nature that is comprised of its own identity as a signifier and the identity of whatever it signifies. Since Twombly’s art is involved in both the act of writing and the construction of symbols - be they linguistic or representative - it comes as no surprise that Roland Barthes, one of the most noted semioticians, repeatedly criticized and theorized on the subject of Twombly’s art. In that the strings of loops are repetitive and that, under the Palmer Method, the loop served as the basis for each letter in the cursive alphabet, the proto-text that they compose is a complex of forms that, alone, have multivariate future identities and, together, have multivariate syntactical meanings.

Since these forms have yet to develop linguistic identities, their conceptual meaning is primarily based in their forms, which are defined by the activity that went into producing them. The forms are the product of the passion and vigor - or lack thereof - that went into drawing them, and they reflect back what the artist intended to imply about his psychological state during creation, which is information for the viewer to interpret. Those loops that were more casually drawn have wide bodies and thin, solid, regular lines. These idly drawn forms embody preliminary tentativeness.

---

10 Tacita Dean, “A Panegyric.” In Serota, 36.
and patience, since the produced forms display considered regularity. In contrast, the quickly drawn loops have tall, cramped widths and are composed from wide, broken streaks. A certain amount of mechanical regularity among the forms developed from the impatient energy of the drawing. Realizing that the conceptual nexus of Twombly’s drawn forms derived from the modes of their production, Barthes attempted to classify what he perceived as Twombly’s three types of drawn gestures: “la griffure” (“scratching”), “la tache” (“smudging”), and “la salissure” (“smearing”). In fact, Barthes’ categorizations applied primarily to works in the period from approximately 1955 to 1963. Still, Barthes proved that it is possible both to name and to categorize Twombly’s creative gestures, and this reaffirms the notion that the canvases serve as telling documents of the artist’s activity. To use Barthes’ categorizations and to take *Untitled* as an example, the work would exhibit “scratching” in the form of the drawing and “smearing” in the form of the drawn lines that were smudged. However, even when translated, the French classifications do not describe effectively Twombly’s activity in *Untitled*, so we will describe the work using other terms - i.e., drawing and smudging.

Barthes also suggested that there is a fundamental distinction between making a mark and leaving a mark, and he declares that Twombly’s art is interested in the latter. The artist’s activity is primarily one by which “en retenant la pression de la matière, en la laissant se poser comme nonchalamment de façon que son grain se disperse un peu” (“in holding in check the pressure of the matter, in letting it alight almost nonchalantly on the paper so that its grain is a little dispersed”), he is capable

---

11 Aspinwall, 10.
of “la laisser traîner” (“letting it trail behind.”) From this perspective, the process makes it possible for the material to speak for more than the artist’s involvement.\footnote{Ibid.}

The material speaks for itself; Twombly’s mark is not in crayon but of crayon. It is a deposit both of a nameable material, and, although it references something other than its material, the primary way in which it does so is by evidencing the similarly nameable action by which the artist left its trace. The form of the loop and the way in which it documents the action of its creation corresponds to its character as a signifier. It is in the cases of those works from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s where Twombly has drawn nameable symbols - such as letterforms, numbers, grids, crosses, geometric shapes, phalluses, breasts, and hearts - that the forms take on the capacity of the signified.

Varndoe was interested in what he perceived as a shift in the focus of Twombly’s art that occurred in the late 1960s, just before the creation of \textit{Untitled}, and that shift was embodied in the form of his drawing. Previously:

\ldots the primary issue was space\ldots In 1966, time seems to have been the more central concern. \ldots Twombly had already been exploring new structures of storytelling; now, stripped of literary or historical associations, some of those same issues - of flow, segmentation, development, and change - would themselves become the story. \ldots the rolling scrolls of the third 1966 picture established another enduring, and complementary, motif of continuously flowing energy. Twombly’s previous attraction to the evidence of deep, slow, ‘vertical’ time, in scarred surfaces, here is translated into a fascination for the forms of ‘lateral’ speed, forms and forces rushing by with their proliferation of marks more rationally divided than confoundingly layered.\footnote{Varndoe, 1994: 40.}

There is somewhat of a discrepancy, here, since the complex layering of “rolling scrolls” in \textit{Untitled}, specifically, supports much of the investigation into space that is
characteristic of Twombly’s work before 1966. Moreover, although the associations allowed by this work are neither literal nor symbolic and, as such, blatant, as they were in his previous works, his drawn abstractions make reference to real forms, such as exercises from the Palmer Method and letterforms, generally. At the same time, the artist’s technique makes reference to an abstract notion of writing, which has a history that extends back through centuries. Through the forms that Twombly used to investigate the details of a historical conception of time, he was also able to experiment with “flow, segmentation, development, and change” on a formal basis, as Varnedoe suggested.

The field of Twombly’s regenerating marks is composed of rows that emphasize the horizontality of the canvas as well as the directionality of the marks. If each string of loops is a series of characters, then they oscillate wildly and scurry to the right-hand side of the page. The vertical oscillation of the characters is greatest in the lowest row and decreases gradually until the seventh and highest row. In place of the erratic up-and-down of the lowest row and the thick, dark, opaque strokes that form sharp, vertical, and oftentimes incomplete looped forms, the rows become gradually more rightward leaning, lighter in value and quicker in realization.

Through the ambiguous relationship between the forms and the ground, this work supports the illusion of space. The interaction between linear forms makes it difficult to conceive which forms were drawn first and which on top of them; however, the gray and red haze that expands across the surface clouds the distinction between all of the drawing and the ground in such a way that drawn forms hover above an uncertain depth. It is of fundamental importance that the illusion created
between the web of drawing and the haze of the background is ambiguous in its depth. For, because of the smudging of Twombly’s revisionism, the background appears translucent and functions as a medium in which space can retreat indefinitely.

An interesting feature of drawing is that in the process of creating linear forms on a substrate, the only thing created is traces on the surface. To all perceptible extent, the character of the substrate has been altered, but no new physicality has been born. What is more, when Twombly erased forms in *Untitled*, he did so only partially, leaving the pigment smeared across the surface. Unlike the original drawn forms, the smeared pigment colors the substrate in a way that changes its character. *Untitled* is a palimpsest, where the original written forms have been effaced by being wiped across the surface. The drawing, on the other hand, is physically conjoined but formally distinct from the canvas. The drawing can only be added to or subtracted from and may never be disassociated from the substrate. As Pincus-Witten described the dynamic: “…despite the sense of a continuous expansion *out* from the perimeter in all directions, there was little sense of expansion *into* depth or *out* from the surface. …Twombly’s graphism can, like palimpsests, scrawl one upon the other but they expand little in or out…”14 There is little formal depth on this canvas as a result of Twombly’s decision to draw marks rather than paint impasto; the drawn forms accumulate on the surface without altering the surface, and there is a significant accumulation of forms following Twombly’s extensive revisionism.

As a result of their formal distinction, the remaining strokes serve an integral role in the composition. The erasure of any form now, without its replacement, would

14 Pincus-Witten, 99.
unbalance the carefully concentrated mass of drawing. Even though the loops were
produced in strands and are arranged in segregated rows, the fact that this
construction is systematically repeated creates a rhythm within the composition. Just
as there is spatial tension between the web of drawn forms and the background, there
is visual tension between the components of the drawing - individual loops, groupings
of similar loops within the diversity of a single strand, and individual rows - and the
overall composition of text-like forms

As has been mentioned, the characters, themselves, are gradually of shorter
height moving up through the rows. Taken as whole forms, the rows appear to
decrease in size as if they were set in receding space, moving toward the top of the
canvas. From another perspective, if the viewer’s sight were to travel down the
canvas, forms might seem to protrude out of the space in the work. Or, in opposition
to the way in which the canvas might be perceived either as reaching back or out into
space, space might be inconceivable, either indefinite or flat along the picture place.

Even though, as a whole, the gray and red smudges are translucent, the surface
of the work is opaque. Twombly’s process of smudging pigment across the surface of
the canvas emphasized the surface, itself. Although the canvas is not more than a
couple of inches deep, since the surface of the ground is not covered by impasto
gesturing, the canvas is coherent as a single mass rather than as a mass united to the
paint layered onto it. The gestalt of the three-dimensional work can emphasize its
appearance as a single rectangular mass and evoke anecdotal associations with its
material nature, such as that the mass is of stone. Nevertheless, since the thin fabric of
canvas has been stretched over four wooden bars, the back side of the work is left
open and the space behind the canvas surface and between the stretcher bars is left hollow.

Besides supporting multiple perceivable illusions, *Untitled* also has a multivariate objecthood, since the canvas can be perceived as a solid mass or as an ambiguous depth.\(^{15}\) Although anecdotal associations can be arbitrary, for the sake of convenience, it will be worthwhile to draw concrete associations with these two varieties of the work’s identities as objects. In order to envision the solid gray mass, imagine stone; and so as to specify the notion of an ambiguous depth, consider the work as a vision into the ether. So, Twombly’s canvas can exist as a solid mass or ambiguous space, and, yet, always as off-white canvas thinly veiled by drawn lines and smudges of neutral-colored paint. For, not only does the work inspire a sense of awe in that it can reach beyond its means and appear transformed, the forms that it evokes connote something mystical. There is some amount of drama as well as monumentality and powerfulness in the massiveness of stone, and the work benefits from these connotations. The critic Kenneth Baker, writing in 1972, explained the importance of the painting’s objecthood in reference to its appearance as a blackboard drawn on with Palmer Method exercised: “A Twombly is only a blackboard insofar as it is a painting, but its claim to being a painting, that is to *sic* certain kind of

\(^{15}\) Fried: “‘What is at stake in this conflict [between shape as a fundamental property of objects and shape as a medium of painting] is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects, and what decides their identity as paintings is their confronting of the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects’” (151). In fact, contrary to Fried’s formalist stance, Twombly’s painting develops meaning based on the illusion that it gives of being a blackboard, a tablet, and containing an ambiguous depth.
meaning, is based on the illusion that it gives of being a marked-up piece of slate.”\textsuperscript{16}

The same logic based on connotation could be applied to any of the objects that the painting appears to be.

On the surface either of stone or the ether, the marks made in crayon and pencil firmly realize their own weightiness, at least to the extent that they are dark traces on a light substrate. The marks hover in stark contrast to what sits below. The series of paintings that Twombly made in the same general palette as \textit{Untitled} contrast with a sister set of dark ground paintings done by the artist, where marks are either incised into the film of paint that covers the canvas, so that the marks bore down to the white weave of the canvas, or they are drawn in white on the surface.

Although in both works the drawing remains primarily linear, the interaction between the drawn forms and their support is different.

Roland Barthes was correct in suggesting that Twombly’s artistic activities - scratching, smearing (or soiling), and smudging, as he categorized them - all have something to do with dirtiing a surface.\textsuperscript{17} Symbolically, these acts imply that Twombly’s works involve vulgarity. Part of that impression derives from the artist’s use of a palette, as in \textit{Untitled}, that mixes on the canvas to incorporate maroons and orangey red-browns as well as light, creamy, and rosy whites, which suggest the body inside and out. And, in some works the imagery of the drawings is blatantly scatological, depicting male and female genitalia as well as abstract forms ingesting and expelling. In the case of \textit{Untitled}, the image is messy and overworked, the

\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{Artforum}, April, 1972. In Robert Pincus-Witten, “Cy Twombly.” In Pincus-Witten, 95.
\textsuperscript{17} Aspinwall, 11.
composition is relatively static, and the gesture of the drawing is rudimentary and hasty. All of these qualities stand in contrast to the notion of mastery in paint and the aesthetic ideal embodied by Abstract Expressionist precedents. Hal Foster, for one, submitted that an artist’s “anti-aesthetic” motivation “is the sign not of a modern nihilism - which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it - but rather of a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them.”

Twombly’s artistic motivation was in part this: to misrepresent the forms of Abstract Expressionist art so as to critique its attitudes. Thus, Twombly has subverted the appearance of heroic genius through his forms’ inconstancy, and he has subverted the accepted order of aesthetics through the displacement of forms.

What is more, Twombly was genuinely interested in subjects for whom vulgarity, history, and irreverence were fundamental. Early on, Twombly wrote of his own art, “What I am trying to establish is - that Modern Art isn’t dislocated, but something with roots, traditions and continuity. I’m drawn to the primitive, the ritual and fetish elements, to the symmetrical plastic order (peculiarly basic to both primitive and classic concepts, so relating the two).” Initially, his interest was in the objects of ancient times, for their ability to capture something universal in their agedness. Recognizing Twombly’s attempt to represent his forms with a primitive aesthetic, in 1952, Charles Olson wrote, “…the dug up stone figures, the thrown down glyphs, the old sorrels in sheep dirt in caves, the flaking iron: these are his

---

18 Foster, 1998: xvi.
paintings.”\(^{20}\) And, while the focus of Twombly’s interest had shifted by 1970, when he created *Untitled*, a comment that the artist made in 1956 will shed light on the specific nature of that shift: “Generally speaking my art has evolved out of the interest in symbols abstracted, but never the less humanistic; formal as most arts are in their archaic and classic stages, and a deeply aesthetic sense of eroded or ancient surfaces of time.”\(^{21}\) In fact, this last point is most relevant to a discussion of *Untitled*. For, through its palette this painting evokes life buried below the surface either of the body or the Earth. This painting comprises a heavily worked surface dirtied in production, on which are represented abstract symbols from a universal language. The irreverently vigorous drawing on the surface sits atop the pigment accrued from the many now-smeared forms that came before them. The drawing and the smearing were impulsive and incomplete, expressive and distracted; these actions relate to the graffiti that can be found scratched into the stone surfaces of ancient ruins. And this comes as no great surprise, since Twombly traveled extensively in Europe and Africa, and because, since 1957, he has lived among millennia-old ruins in the city of Rome.

Pincus-Witten considered Twombly’s painting as a metaphor for graffiti, and he compared his work to a specific type of graffiti: “in toilets, phone booths, in the subways, and in the grimy stalls of cheap restaurants.”\(^{22}\) The graffitist whose work might be compared to Twombly’s seeks out a semi-private surface on which he or she can make a mark, crudely expressing his or her presence through symbolic, semantic, or abstract forms. This type of graffiti is more like doodling than a grand expression;

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 14.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 61n99.
\(^{22}\) Pincus-Witten, 96.
it is more often spontaneous than pre-meditated and composed. The expression is personal, to a great extent, and is only accessible to subsequent individuals who enter into that semi-private space. To scrawl graffiti on a wall is inherently an act of defacement, but in that its forms might be crude or not, the act has something in common with the scrawlings of a child on a surface that he or she might not realize to be restricted, such as in a book or on a wall. Varnedoe compared Twombly’s drawing to the act of childish creativity given its “disorderliness and impatience with boundaries or niceties of logic.”

Like graffiti, a child’s defacement in crayon of a living room wall is motivated by the instinct of expression. Varnedoe argued that, in graffiti, Twombly sought the evidence of peoples and times past; he sought the generalized identity that, instinctively, repeatedly expressed itself through new selves and in new times. As we have seen, one of Twombly’s artistic conceptions was the interrelatedness of peoples and times based on continuity.

When asked about the relationship between his drawing and graffiti, the artist responded that his concern was not vulgarity, per se; he insisted that his drawing did not maintain the same “rough crudeness about it” that graffiti does. Nevertheless, he yielded some ground:

Well graffiti is linear and it’s done with a pencil and it’s like writing on walls. But [in my paintings] it’s more lyrical. And you know, in those beautiful early paintings like Academy [1955; Fig. 16], it’s graffiti but it’s something else too. I don’t know how people react but they take the simplest way to something, and in the totality of the painting, feeling and content are more complicated, or more elaborate than say just graffiti. Graffiti is usually a protest, or has a reason for being naughty or aggressive.

24 Serota, 53.
That Twombly’s marks have something to do with graffiti, that they can be perceived even by oversimplification as graffiti, but that they are something else as well, is exactly the issue. His drawing is linear, and, if the objecthood of the painting is considered in a certain way, it is similar to writing on walls; moreover, his imagery is sometimes rudimentary and his gesture is often impulsive. And while graffiti is a base action, to fuse the drawing with a grand sense of time is to relate it to a universal human capacity and, at the same time, to glorify it. Primitive and ancient graffiti carry with them the significance of genuine expression exercised by a distant, and thus generalized, individual. If the ancient symbols of an extant example are either indecipherable or abstracted, then the creation is all the more idealized.

On the other hand, Twombly’s drawn loops correspond by their nature to calligraphy. Conceived of as considerate rather than an impulsive, abstracted writing rather than abstractions, and a personal effort in a universal language, the strings of loops have much in common with decorative writing. Compared to graffiti, calligraphy is similarly linear, and it maintains writing conventions; it utilizes a vocabulary of characters, and - at least in the Western tradition - it is systematically composed out of rows that read left-to-right and display a progression from top-to-bottom. Known examples of calligraphy date back to antiquity, and, for this reason, calligraphy connotes much of the dynamic between personal expression and idealized expression that relates to ancient inscriptions. On his journeys to ancient ruins at the birthplaces of Western civilizations or in his daily life around the monuments of Rome, Twombly would have found examples of artifacts, some of which would have contained inscriptions; however, Twombly would have had some conception of
graffiti and calligraphy as well as their significances even despite his experience traveling. If nothing else, his travels were an opportunity to indulge and inform his interest is ancient times, places, and artifacts in the abstract.

The character of Twombly’s drawing has so far proven to be of significant interest; for, in analyzing its form, this study was also driven to consider what the abstract forms might symbolize, what the artist’s psychological motivations might have been in creating them, as well as what the artist’s physical activity might have been. Given their abstractness and their simplicity, the forms of *Untitled* distance the viewer and challenge him or her to conceive of their purpose. Twombly’s drawing is superbly lyrical, but, since it is thoroughly abstract, there is nothing particularly crude about its form. Exactly because these forms are something between drawing and writing, between abstract forms and abstractions, the linear markings are ambiguous in nature. They are something like graffiti, and they are something like calligraphy, but the subject of the work is always something more.

What Twombly has managed to achieve in his work is not only a tension underlying the character of his marks, but also a related conflict involving their relation to the temporal aspect of their history. For, Twombly’s interest in the aesthetic of “eroded or ancient surfaces of time” would have focused on the example surfaces of extent forms, as they existed in his own time. What is more, the way in which Twombly responded to his conception of distant times and places and their remaining artifacts was through the use of brand-new materials - the typical, modern artistic means of canvas, stretchers, oil paint, pencil, and crayon. If his intent was to

---

represent or incite associations with timeworn objects and surfaces, neither did he use the original materials that inspired him, such as stone, nor did he use materials that were authentically aged to any extent. He substituted the patina created by his accumulative process of revisionism for the wear of hundreds or thousands of years. As a result of his condensed activity, his works developed a complex history marked by the formal evidence of his alterations rather than the passage of time.

In an edition of the Italian journal *L'Esperienze moderna* from 1957, Twombly addressed a text to gestural abstraction, generally, which may nevertheless apply to his own mark making:

> Each line now is the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate - it is the sensation of its own realization. The imagery is one of the private or separate indulgencies rather than an abstract totality of visual perception.

> This is very difficult to describe, but it is an involvement in essence (no matter how private) into a synthesis of feeling, intellect etc. occurring without separation in the impulse of action.26

We had come to the conclusion that the marks in *Untitled* are shrouded by an impersonality seeded in the fact that they express, primarily, the artist’s activity in their making. Nevertheless, it is now thoroughly evident that the artist’s inspirations, attitudes, meanings, and ideals were ambiguously compounded as motivation for his nuanced activity. Roland Barthes interpreted this dynamism of the work’s meaning in the following way:

> L’effet n’est donc pas un “truc” rhétorique: c’est une véritable catégorie de la sensation, définie par ce paradoxe: unité indécomposable de l’impression (du “message”) et complexité des causes, des éléments: la généralité n’est pas mystérieuse (entièrement confiée au pouvoir de l’artiste), mais elle est cependant: *irréductible.*

---

26 Varnedoe, 1994: 27.
(An effect is therefore not a rhetorical trick: it is a veritable category of sensations, which is defined by this paradox: the unbreakable unity of the impression (of the “message”) and the complexity of its causes or elements. The generality is not mysterious, that is, attributed to the power of the artist, but it is nevertheless irreducible.)

In other words, the irreducibility of the meaning’s complexity corresponds to the potency of its ambiguities.

Twombly was an immigrant in Rome, and he attributes some of the changes made in his art to the new inspirations that he found while abroad. His experience in foreign lands informed his artistic motivations as well as his aesthetic, and his art carries a special relevance in his new cultural context. As an immigrant interested in the ancient history that exists in Rome, but which does not exist in America, he reaped the benefits of liminality; he observed the eroded surfaces of ruins as a Roman would not have - for their novelty as well as for their beauty. As Varnedoe envisioned: “In his experience and in his art, a new feel for ancient traditions inhabited a new space of lived, contemporary freedoms. He experienced the opposites together, and surprised the Italians by showing them their own ignored or scorned environment, cultural and visual, as the stuff of a truly contemporary and personal art.”

To a great extent, it was possible for Twombly’s art to seem original in each of his contexts, since he experienced Rome as only a foreigner could, and he found a history that an American could only find elsewhere.

Seeing how Twombly’s marks fall somewhere between being universal and personal, the artist’s forms were all the more monumental because his message was

---

27 Aspinwall, 15.
28 Ibid., 29.
abstract and his medium derived something from the mystique and the history of genuine artifacts. As a point of reference, take a quote by Harold Rosenberg, which was originally aimed at “the chalky tan-gray of scratching on a slate or tablet of stone” of paintings by Mark Tobey (1890-1976). Rosenberg’s description could apply just as well to Twombly’s strings of loops on their ground. Tobey was also American. He traveled in South America, Europe, and the Mediterranean Basin, and he traveled and studied calligraphy in East Asia. Rosenberg concluded that Tobey constructed his paintings to look this way “as if he wished to fix his twentieth-century experience into a message brought down from the mountain.”

Although Twombly appears to have shared what Rosenberg considered to be Tobey’s grandiose wish, it is worth investigating to what extent his chosen message might have been significant within his personal history.

It has already been mentioned that the forms in *Untitled* are similar to a preliminary exercise that was part of the Palmer Method of penmanship. Given the popularity that the system enjoyed in the first half of the twentieth-century, it is possible that Twombly, who would have been in grade school in the 1930s, was required to practice the method. On one of the pages where the looping drill was introduced, there is a note within the text of the manual that reads, “It is not Palmer Method if the lines are tremulous. Study instructions for speed requirements.”

Ironically, almost as if Twombly had used this indication as a standard for contradiction, in *Untitled*, the artist’s lines tremble anxiously in the top rows and progress gradually until, in the bottom row, the artist has conducted the gesture with

---

such speed that the character spins off of the intended axis and breaks form. Here, the artist’s attempt at the form appears as if he still has difficulty with the exercise or has represented a young student’s - perhaps his own - initial difficulty. Much has been made in this section of the significance of the artist’s reduction of language into abstractions and the potential that they represent as a result. However, it is possible to view the process from another perspective, in which his act is a regression, in which he has recaptured the primitivism of adolescence, when the student, who has already learned how to print, is unaware of how to write cursive characters or use them to construct syntax. This consideration would coincide with the logic by which, in some of his early works, Twombly enlarged, abstracted, and utilized his signature as an expressive form.31 In each case, the potential power of communication rests both in language and in the capability of the individual. If Twombly is pursuing a regression, his message is still universal; it is representative of a universally experienced stage of development. Nevertheless, the message then undermines its own grandiosity and focuses primarily on the experience of the individual during his or her assimilation into society, its procedures, and its history.

Considered from the perspective that the strings of loops are a necessary labor along the path to effective communication, the work as an object assumes the identity of a classroom’s chalkboard. With this identity the objecthood of the work is no longer involved with primitive and ancient societies or the sense of time and erosion that they evoke. Instead, the object represents the relatively immediate span of time over which a chalkboard would accrue writing and partial erasures - the smudging

31 Varnedoe, 1994: 42.
that chalkboards tend to retain when they are swept over by a dry eraser - were a class of students to do their handwriting exercises one after another in the same space on the board. From this perspective, there is a powerful sense of impersonality to Twombly’s marks as well as a level of mindlessness to his labor. But, to someone whose education incorporated this type of exercise, the object is a personal artifact from his or her formative years; effectively, it derives from long ago in the historical scope of an individual. And if education, personal struggle, self-expression, and language are major concerns for that individual, then the message of this object and its forms is grand, indeed.

If Twombly’s painting maintains a complex of meanings in the drawn evidence of the artist’s gesture, then the imprecision of a subject should be similarly fertile. As Barthes asserted, Twombly’s paintings affect a certain truthful explication of the subject of the title, but what truthful explication is offered when a title does not exist? Is it an explication of painting, or a critique of painting’s means, as in formalism? No. Twombly’s process and his use of drawing undermine the potential for his painting to be involved with formalist self-criticism. Barthes argued that the creator - namely, Twombly - is the subject, mostly in his creative capacity.32 But, in fact, it is more than this. The artist has expressed in his writings his interest in conceptions of the places, peoples, and objects that derive from disparate reaches of history. Twombly’s gesture and its inspiration might be one facet of the subject, but the artist’s intention was to capture through abstraction something that was

32 Aspinwall, 19-20.
ambiguous in its origins and thus greater than any one time, place, person, or material.

Given its ability to convey a message, Varnedoe related Twombly’s “proto-handwriting” to a tactic of some modern art, where:

…the artist takes what others see as inert and merely instrumental adjuncts to creativity - wrap-up conventions or warm-up exercises - and proposes them as the principal drama of art. In the modern tradition, this confounding practice has typically been a gesture of aggression against tradition, but with equal frequency it has proved to be a means by which respected older values get remade in terms that respond to contemporary experience.\(^{33}\)

The obvious question is: Which one of these strategies is Twombly’s gesture attempting to enact, and what is its target? There is no simple answer. Twombly is fundamentally involved in the contemporary, both in that he is interested in historical artifacts for their eroded forms, for the aesthetic that they maintain now, and in that his art indulges in the common means of art for both New York and Rome in the years after Abstract Expressionism. Conversely, the artist’s attitude toward the predominant trends in art in Europe and America during his career is complicated. His art remained distinct from the work of his predecessors as well as his successors, in part because of its ambiguity, because it engaged multiple sets of opposing motivations.\(^{34}\) By 1970, however, Twombly’s style had matured. *Untitled* should not be considered as a mere gesture, and especially not an aggressive one, since Twombly’s style was the product of an initially conflicted artist’s confrontation and subsequent assimilation of those relevant aspects of the art that influenced him.

\(^{33}\) Varnedoe, 1994. As Varnedoe concluded, his painting was “too anti-heroic and impersonal for Abstract Expressionism” but, at the same time, “too subjective and undisciplined for Minimalism or systematic art” (42).

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
Nevertheless, Twombly’s art maintained its ambiguity even after he left New York, nearly two decades after he and his peers first confronted the influence of Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps the artist remained conflicted and the works’ various ambiguities comprised a strategic response to subsequent influences, or perhaps ambiguity retained a fundamental importance to the artist’s philosophy.

But, at the same time, *Untitled* is an investigation into the latter strategy that Varnedoe addressed. For, while and the aesthetic of aging - erosion or, in some cases, accrual - are not necessarily widely regarded in art history, ancient messages always have been valued for their insight into the realms of our shared history that are otherwise inaccessible. To some extent, Twombly has seized upon modes and messages that are not necessarily considered insightful, potentially because they are vulgar, impulsive, meaningless, or insignificant. Twombly created his messages through personalized modes, but he has created his messages in the abstract, so as to promote their universality, so that they perpetually retain their potency and their relevance.
Conclusion

Many painters of the New York School were particularly boisterous, both in gatherings at the Cedar Tavern and in their style of painting. Their abstract gesturing empowered them with a sense of heroic self-expressionism. While theirs was not the only art being made in the day, and while popular opinion in the art world was not entirely embracing, the recognition achieved by some of the artists - especially Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning - indicated that their avant-garde art had swayed some people and taken hold. This commercial success was paralleled by increasing critical successes, as when Irving Sandler wrote of Abstract Expressionism as the “Triumph of American Painting” and when Clement Greenberg analyzed the style of painting for his theory of formalist Modernism. Still, the critical and theoretical bolstering built around New York School painting did not necessarily coincide with the artistic concerns of the work.

De Kooning’s painting *Easter Monday* (1955-56) is a prime example of this challenge to insight; his style of gestural abstraction is an achievement in self-expression through self-evident means, but it can also evoke subjects beyond its means, compromising its self-critical purity. Broad strokes thick with painted impasto are pure presences of paint on the canvas and declare the masterful expressivity of an Abstract Expressionist icon. Although the impression of space develops where the
forms crisscross and weave, de Kooning diminished this illusion in several ways. The colors are full and varied, but they sometimes mix and neutralize. They take hold of the viewer at a distance and pull him or her near, only to reveal close up that the artist has manipulated the painted surface with newspaper and even transferred text and images into flat expanses of light, even color. The referential imagery contained among the photo-transfers is difficult to discern and does not immediately suggest any common theme. The abstract painted forms and the transferred imagery prompt the viewer to make personalized associations, but the title hints at a literal subject encoded within the form of the work. De Kooning’s work is not purely painting, and it is not solely the expression of emotion through abstractions. Although one could potentially deduce that these issues were of primary importance to the artist in this work, the painting has been complicated by formal and conceptual concerns that do not fit within the confines of formalist Modernism.

Following the reception of Abstract Expressionism into canons that positioned that contemporary work within a trajectory of the avant-garde tradition, painters of the subsequent generation faced the pressure of limitations. Critics and theorists of the period attempted to determine what painting was, had been, and, by extension, where the work of the relevant avant-garde would then go. By the logic of formalism, it was not possible for an avant-garde artist to paint illusionistically or to create paintings that were transformative. So, not only were the forms and methods of the medium determined to some extent, aspiring artists also had to compete with the still living, still producing painters who represented the gatekeepers of the successful American avant-garde. But, following what was considered to be individualized
genius, the succeeding generation’s attempts to enter into and maintain that tradition would have been futile. There was no room for the artists of the next generation to create self-expressive works in that same vein; they could not expect their similarly formed expressions or earnest imitations to carry potent meaning, since the original painters were still producing works at a consistent pace.

Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly, three from the next generation of painters, set out to avoid formalist self-criticism and instead involve their artistic concerns with the formal, conceptual, critical, and theoretical qualities of art in the preceding generation. Their intention was neither to maintain nor to deny these qualities; each developed an individualized art that, in various moments, accepted something of the previous art, rejected something, accomplished both at the same time, and progressed beyond the concerns for the sake of invention. These three artists were not considered to be a group because the interaction between them was inconsistent and because each artist’s paintings looked and acted differently than those of the other two.

This thesis has fully analyzed one painting by each of these three artists as well as a drawing by Rauschenberg, and while these works relate to some of the same concerns, the methods of the artists’ responses were very different. Rauschenberg’s work Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953) is perhaps the clearest example cited of an artist’s struggle with the anxiety of influence, and it remains an ingenious paradoxical expression of the timeless conflict between the artist and the greater context of history. Rauschenberg’s use of painting materials as well as found objects in the creation of Winter Pool (1959) is a formal indication of the artist’s primary interest in
his combine’s capability to reference times and spaces other than those occupied by the work. Rauschenberg’s painted incident is richly physical and gestural, suggestive of the action that went into the construction of the surface. The abstract interrelatedness of the disparate forms promotes viewer involvement in the process of constructing meaning.

The attitude that Rauschenberg assumed in response to Abstract Expressionism was one of “openness;” viewer associations with the seemingly arbitrary actions of the artist and material elements of the work precipitate an impression of the creator’s openness to various inspirations, forms, methods, and aesthetics. Not only was there formal and conceptual variety within each of his works, there was also variety among his works. He experimented with materials, and he experimented with different conceptions of art - from minimal painting to the assisted ready-made to assemblage. He was willing to engage arbitrariness in the conception and realization of his works, since grandiosity and technical mastery were not his priorities. Nor did Rauschenberg intend for his artistic activity to allow individual forms or works altogether to be transformative. In that the incident of his drawing, painting, and construction was intended to have the same sense of self-contained identity - not relating to artistic expression or in any way constructing an illusion - as his found objects, Rauschenberg intended the viewer to consider his involvement as something factual, just as materials are factual.

In the case of Johns’s *White Flag* (1955), the artist called upon some of the devices of Abstract Expressionist painterliness in order to take advantage of their contribution to physicality and formal interest. Into his method, though, the artist
incorporated measures to limit the free expressivity that involves both patience and impulses of brilliance. While rich, textural, and sensuous, his encaustic painted incident was confined to a repetitive, cramped gesture of application, both because of its material properties and because of the subject matter of Johns’s work. Johns abided by some of the rules of the design of the flag of the United States of America in creating the composition, such as painting within the boundaries of shapes, but he altered or ignored others. In doing so, he created an object that is both a painting and a flawed reproduction of a flag in painting materials. The painting is inseparable from its image, and the image is not an accurate representation either of the American flag or the “white flag” of surrender. So the object maintains both one and the other identity, but also neither. Still, simply by being involved in this conflict, the work necessarily retains something of the identities of each object - a fascinating fact, since this painting has the ability to evoke something other than its means and the image’s purpose.

Johns’s work also supports the impression of the artist’s impersonality. His intentionally crabbed painting prevented the expression of grand gestures, brooding emotion, or anything other than the frustrating effect of his method. His painting is methodical, drawing more attention to its form than to the activity of its creator. He selected a subject that is commonplace, which prevents the artist from being implicated as an active force, for he has chosen something that is not apparently expressive of any personal emotion or insight. This object was produced rather than born from the creative intellect. The viewer responds to the painting as form rather than expression and the object altogether as one of two flags, objects whose function
is to be recognized. The transformative aspect of this painting does not transport the viewer to a better understanding of an emotion or concept, instead it keeps the viewer’s mind in a state of registering, where he or she is kept at arm’s reach from the artist’s intention. It is impossible for one’s perception to decide on a single identity for the object, since it is inherently multivariate. This instability, which is based on the artist’s ambiguity and his impersonality, is the artist’s intention.

Twombly drew the visually predominant strings of loops in Untitled (1970) with wax crayon and pencil - materials used in art, for sure, but materials that compromise the painting’s purity as a product of one medium. The abstract forms evoke language as well as writing, a method of self-expression. The marks are extremely expressive, at least of speedy activity and, perhaps, of the state of mind that accompanied their production. Twombly’s revisionism is obsessive; not only does the act suggest the artist’s dissatisfaction with his original drawing, but also, since smudges remain, his revisions reveal his obsession. It seems as if an anxiety - composed of compulsion and self-doubt - motivated the artist’s drawing. The drawn forms are abstracted, and they have the ability to affect the painting with the appearance of stone or a blackboard, objects of different substances and significances than canvas, or even indefinite space. The inconsistency of the drawn forms within each row as well as among the rows at once suggests the artist’s incapability to control his motions and impulsive action, and, being that they are abstract and represent the potential for varied expression, they appeal to an almost timeless, almost universal aspect of self-expression.
Twombly’s drawn gesture varies so that, at times, the strings of loops can appear casual and inconsistent, and, at other times, when the loops are most regular, the drawing appears as if it was created vigorously and repeatedly revised. But, the drawing is the product of the artist’s carefully devised method. Through his constructed attempts at release, the artist has been able to tap into an instinctive outlet of creative energy. The abstracted forms relate to the Palmer Method and derive from the artist’s personal history (or one that would coincide with his), at once capturing the modesty of adolescent exercises and common graffiti and the might and drama of language. In part through distancing himself - historically, from a gesture and a product that he would have created in grade school; intellectually, through abstraction; and physically, through the method of his mark making - the artist was able to make a statement that is greater than its means and forms, but which is not grandiose in its realization.

All three of these artists borrowed devices of painterliness from the Abstract Expressionists, but not one of them painted with the intention of achieving grandiosity, as did painters such as Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and even Rothko. Instead, Rauschenberg involved de Kooning’s handiwork in form only to erase the drawing and present the lack thereof, embodied by the support. Johns’s encaustic registers all the incident and physicality of gestural abstraction, but because of the artist’s self-imposed limitations - of encaustic and of the design of the flag of the United States - his method and gestures are systematic. There is no emotion motivating the activity; the painting is impersonal, and, by extension, so is the work altogether. What is more, Johns devised ways through the construction of his work to
enact oppositions simultaneously. Twombly, like Rauschenberg, produced a work through the paradoxical method of negative creativity, which allowed each to invoke the theoretical mode of negation through the practical method of erasure as a means to represent the way that the work took form out of conflict with influential precedents.

The artists’ conflicted attitudes are relayed to the viewer through the mediums of these four works, which had conflicts built into them. In *Winter Pool*, Rauschenberg’s painting is gestural and physical, but never expressive, only documentary; his painting becomes a factual entity rather than illusionistic. And, his artistic openness allowed for any of the various associations drawn by viewers to conflict with or contradict another’s. Since Johns gave form to a design, his work can be perceived as one of three objects: a painting and two different flags (and, perhaps, even a white wall). In the forms of the drawing and in its physicality, Twombly’s marks appear to be motivated by anxiety; his act is at times hesitant and at other times compulsive, and its message can be interpreted as either vulgar and instinctual or insightful. All three of these artists beckoned contradictions through the viewers’ experience with the works.

Each and every time that one of these artists used a material other than paint on the surface of his work, the act was an affront to the foundation of Greenberg’s theory of Modernism. But, at the same time that these artists chose to transgress the boundaries of what Greenberg had defined as Modernism, they did so as an act of response to or engagement with the artists and works who comprised the most recent period in that tradition. By accepting something of the tradition, regardless of whether
they rejected some of its other concerns, these artists were continuing that tradition, taking it in a new direction, redefining the concerns of Modernist art.

Nevertheless, the assimilation of aspects of Abstract Expressionist painting into the agenda of the new artists was not at all seamless. The pressures to strike out with an original artistic voice were compounded by the social pressures provided by the well-established New York School artists and their critical supporters, who did not respond well to the imitation or rejection of Abstract Expressionism. What is more, thrust into the New York art world, all of the artists - Rauschenberg, Johns, Twombly, and de Kooning, too - felt the pressure to produce work that was commercially as well as critically successful. The aforementioned is not to exaggerate the circumstances but only to give name to the stresses that each artist would have experienced differently. There was a strong artistic community in New York, and Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly found some support in each other. There was a rich dialogue between the artists of the younger generation. Although the artists’ experiences differed, there were similarities of intention between their artistic concerns, since they interacted with each other to varying extents, and since their works developed within the same greater context. Each developed somewhat non-traditional methods, forms, and attitudes as part of his progressive agenda. To some extent, their successes were based on the way in which they reflected on their context of art, which was significant for the pressures that it placed on new artists and their work. Lots of artists are motivated to achieve independence and originality, sometimes through the reflection on or critique of precedents. In this specific case, these artists chose to accept some of the precedent’s means and use them to
undermine others in a way that could be considered ironic or parodic but, all the while, ambiguous. Fundamentally, though, these artists did find some aspects of the precedent’s influence to be relevant; their critique was incorporative and constructive in the process of being progressive and original.

In the production of these works, these artists invoked ambiguities of form and concept that put the viewer in an unstable position of perceiving these tensions and trying to interpret the conflicts, which cannot be comprehended with any stable logic. The works by these four artists were creative and intelligent responses to their shared context: painting in the decades following the height of Abstract Expressionism. The ambiguous nature of the works reflects the intense strain of the changing tide in that context of art. What we have seen, though, is that as the anxieties and artistic concerns that motivated the creation of ambiguity affected these four painters in comparable ways, those anxieties must be greater than this single situation. Ambiguity can apply to more than forms, or the interrelation of subjects, or an artist’s response to the state of art at a given moment; some ambiguities are shared by artists, whether because they are young and breaking onto the scene, because they are coping with the socio-historical conditions of modernity, or for other reasons. Ambiguity is an effective strategy for relaying psychological and intellectual conflicts to the viewer, and it is an effective strategy for confronting the conflicts presented by influential precedents in the promotion of an avant-gardist agenda.


