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SPACE IN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

This Thesis for the M.F.A. degree by
by

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Space in Abstract Expressionism: its publication.

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Instructor in charge of dissertation

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This abstract of about 200 words is approved as to form and content. I recommend its publication.

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Robert Rauschenberg, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, New York: Harper Brothers (1957), p. 128. "The struggle to represent spatially, to create an illusion of reality, caused the artist to disengage from his range field of sensation, first the voluminousness of physical entities like mass and color; then the relative position of such entities or groups; and finally a felt and substantial space, pulling up between such entities and binding them together in a space which is the space within which the spectator is"

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¹Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting, New York: Herbert Praeger (1959), p. 109. "The struggle to represent realistically, to create an illusion of reality, caused the artist to disengage from his vague field of sensation, first the voluminousness of physical entities like human beings, then the relative position of such entities or groups; and finally a felt and substantial space, welling up between such entities and binding them together in a space which is also the space within which the spectator is situated."

The view of the picture as a "window" through a frame had allowed for different penetrations into depth, but regardless of the width of the tract of space used and the expressive distortions which occurred within the limits of enlargement and diminution, spatial orientation in the picture space was the Renaissance's first and architectural composition was

CHAPTER I

THE PICTURE PLANE PRIOR TO ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM The three-dimensional cube conception of the picture presupposes a

Since the Renaissance and up to the end of the nineteenth century the artist in narrative, portrait, and landscape painting was assumed to inhabit, as nearly as possible, though in the picture it was "illusory," from looking at this the same spatial system as the one operating in the picture,¹ "illusory space" in the picture one could have derived "normal" until Cezanne's plastic topography of nature, Gauguin's spatial expectations in respect to real space. The effect of Synthesism and Van Gogh's explicit reduction of landscape to a meeting ground between reality and emotion betrayed an "illusion" depended on a "continuity of normal expectations" in respect to the objects' position in space and their entirely new view of natural and pictorial space. After mutual interrelations and scale.

Cezanne and the Post-Impressionists, through the progressive loss of object-quality in representation, the break between pictorial and natural space was dramatized to its fullest extent. To the 'ideated,' psychic distance from 'the representative reality of the world in the picture was dramatized to such a degree by Caravaggio that in the complete realization of the picture and the spectator was added.

After the Mannerist interlude in which this continuity was undermined by the introduction of spatially indeterminate and ambiguous areas from a stereometric point of view, the concept of the picture plane as boundary between them was

¹Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting, New York: Herbert Praeger (1959), p. 100. "The struggle to represent realistically, to create an illusion of reality, caused the artist to disengage from his vague field of sensation, first the voluminousness of physical entities like human beings, then the relative position of such entities or groups; and finally a felt and substantial space, welling up between such entities and binding them together in a space which is also the space within which the spectator is situated." "autonomy" of picture space was asserted,

emphasized the view of the picture as a "window" through a frame had allowed for different penetrations into depth, but regardless of the width of the tract of space used and the expressive distortions which occurred within the limits of enlargement and diminution, spatial orientation in the picture space I (a) Cezanne's tight and architectonic composition was possible and invited along stereometric lines. The three-dimensional cube conception of the picture presupposes a continuity of his response to the whole of the canvas. Whatever similar cube around the spectator; that is, space extending in both directions according to the same principles. Even though in the picture it was "illusory," from looking at this whether because of compositional concerns, or as a response to perceived structures of experience, with as much spontaneity and "innocence of the eye," and the hand, as his world view permitted. In fusing the facet structure of his forms with the actual sections of the canvas, Cezanne forced attention on the physical part which the canvas plays in the process of picture making and the actual making process of pictures as was undermined by the introduction of spatially indeterminate such; but it is the vitality of his sustained effort and his and ambiguous areas from a stereometric point of view, the objective reality of the world in the picture was dramatized to such a degree by Caravaggio that in the complete realization of the continuity between the two spatial systems, the concept of the picture plane as boundary between them was violated. This assumed continuity of spatial experience between picture space and spectator's space, adumbrated to different degrees in the following centuries, was shattered completely by the Post-Impressionists. With differing emphases the "autonomy" of picture space was asserted,

After the Mannerist interlude in which this continuity was undermined by the introduction of spatially indeterminate such; but it is the vitality of his sustained effort and his and ambiguous areas from a stereometric point of view, the objective reality of the world in the picture was dramatized to such a degree by Caravaggio that in the complete realization of the continuity between the two spatial systems, the concept of the picture plane as boundary between them was violated. This assumed continuity of spatial experience between picture space and spectator's space, adumbrated to different degrees in the following centuries, was shattered completely by the Post-Impressionists. With differing emphases the "autonomy" of picture space was asserted,

emphasizing the interest in composition and the emotions in the creation of pictures; that is, any interest in the positive relation between picture space and spectator space became secondary to other considerations. short, it provided

only an oblique reference to either the space of the picture or that of the spectator, and assumed between them a continuity of interpretation. I (a) Cezanne's tight and architectonic composition has importance for Abstract Expressionism because of the consistency of his response to the whole of the canvas. Whatever his reasons, Cezanne activated every part of the canvas by a sustained and total response. He disposed his energies, whether because of compositional concerns, or as a response to perceived structures of experience, with as much spontaneity and "innocence of the eye," and the hand, as his world view permitted. In fusing the facet structure of his forms with the actual sections of the canvas,² Cezanne forced attention on the physical part which the canvas plays in the process of picture making and the actual making process of pictures as such; but it is the vitality of his sustained effort and his moral determination in the physical presence of the canvas that marks him as an ancestor of Abstract Expressionism.

I (b) Although the Cubist analysis of objective reality and their "circulating" vision telescoped into one multiple or simultaneous views of objects and assumed a continuity of vision in these terms, it provides a link between the spatial spell out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat, even though at the same time it had to overcome this proclaimed flatness as an aesthetic fact and continue to reproduce ²Clement Greenberg, Art and Culture, Boston: Beacon Press (1961), p. 55.

world of observer and of the picture only by a "reference,"² reference to the kind of evidence we have in real space, reference to the basis on which we decide in real space that there are three-dimensional objects. In short, it provided only an oblique reference to either the space of the picture or that of the spectator, and assumed between them a continuity of interpretation.

The awareness of the canvas as a flat surface, which overtly and consistently influences the arrangement of the picture elements,³ reached its climax in Synthetic Cubism, but with curious results. The articulation of the surface into depth by means of color planes, and the distribution of object quality over a series of planes by means of transparency, sections, simultaneity and positive-negative reading of shapes, emphasized the nature of the picture plane as a literal plane; but it also helped to dematerialize it. The canvas being an object of one plane assigns it a difficult place in the Cubist universe; that is, the fact that it it has helped to see the picture plane not only as flat, two-

³Greenberg, Art and Culture, p. 70. "There is no question but that Braque and Picasso were concerned, in their Cubism, with holding on to painting as an art of representation and illusion. But at first they were more crucially concerned, in and through their Cubism, with obtaining sculptural result by strictly nonsculptural means: that is, by finding for every aspect of three-dimensional vision an explicitly two-dimensional equivalent, regardless of how much verisimilitude might suffer in the process. Painting had to spell out, rather than pretend to deny, the physical fact that it was flat, even though at the same time it had to overcome this proclaimed flatness as an aesthetic fact and continue to report nature."

(c) Neoplasticism can be said to have made of pictures that in essence only asserting the space in which it never had "modules" of two-dimensional organization; hence the feeling

consists of only one plane makes it spatially neutral, except in relation to other planes inside and outside the picture. It was this fact that led the Cubist to "texturize" it and thus involve it consistently not only with the kind of space presented on it, but also with the actual space immediately adjoining. While adhering to the concept of plane they introduced texture as depth dimension in order to spatially localize it and also to make it concrete. While the concept of "transparency" was crucial in accommodating the picture plane to its dual role as a transparent plane and a material plane, the material introduced on it and the emphasis of the material constituting it, served to make it concrete. The general material enrichment of the picture surface in Synthetic Cubism is "spatially" justified, as it is in Abstract Expressionism. Paradoxically, Cubism has helped to point out the object quality of the canvas and the materials of picture making, "the medium," in a way that carries over into Abstract Expressionism. But its most significant contribution is that it has helped to see the picture plane not only as flat, two-dimensional, but also as a spatially neutral field, as a void, as a "tabula rasa." The freedom and ambiguity which it introduced in the treatment of planes has affected the artist's attitude toward the picture plane and has since forced experiment to search for other means to make it a "special of plane." as, it asserts tactile space around it. In addition, the execution so emphatically shows the presence of the hand

I (c) Neoplasticism can be said to have made of pictures that it cannot help asserting the space in which it moves and "modules" of two-dimensional organization; hence the feeling

that they could be repeated as elements in the appropriate architectural context, i. e., act as walls; they have so exhaustively defined their space that only by repetition or arrangement could variety be produced. Put differently, the organization of space in Neoplastic pictures is so taut and powerful that it seems to extend into the adjoining, in a less defined space. It defines this space as it moves into it laterally, portioning and enclosing space as a plane. Abstract Expressionist pictures are not dominated by an architectural role. The term "wall-painting" has not helped to better place Abstract Expressionist pictures; on the whole it does more harm than good by reducing them to "wall decoration." True enough Abstract Expressionists respond to the picture plane more as to a part of architecture than as to a figure of plane geometry; and Abstract Expressionist pictures have a "strong" relation to the space of the observer, as strong as Neoplastic pictures; they both define it, Neoplasticism by principle, Abstract Expressionism by intrusion. Even when Abstract Expressionist pictures are not overt reliefs they include tactile differentiations and material differentiations in the picture to a degree that it plays up the contact of the picture surface with the space of the observer rather than the flatness of the picture.

University Press (1948), p. 8. "Actually, things exist in space even though empty, continues to exist, because the exists forms, it asserts tactile space around it. In addition, contact with nothing. The eye, contrariwise, can see only the execution so emphatically shows the presence of the hand even empty space, for it cannot be seen."

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feels.⁴ In Neoplasticism the size of the shapes used is so interrelated into a rhythm, so completely incorporated in a relation sufficient to the picture as a whole that even when the picture is big it does not project the size element in relation to the space of the observer; it is not monumental. In Abstract Expressionism the size of the shapes is used in a way which refers to actual space perceptions, to their relation to the space of the observer, and in this they can be monumental. The picture plane is thus again frontally related and because of the strength of this frontal interrelation the problem of what to do with the edges of the picture plane is not as paramount as with Cubism and Neoplasticism. The actual contours of the canvas in Neoplastic pictures are integral to the horizontal-vertical system which structures their composition, whereas in Abstract Expressionist pictures of the Pollock variety they act as arbitrary boundaries to an activity, as physical rather than formal boundaries. Hence also the feeling that these Abstract Expressionist pictures could go on beyond their actual edges, where Neoplastic pictures could proliferate along their edges; but even in linoleum they would look differently and act differently.

⁴W. M. Ivins, Art and Geometry, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1946), p. 8. "Tactually, things exist in a series of here's in space, but where there are no things, space even though empty, continues to exist, because the exploring hand knows that it is in space even when it is in contact with nothing. The eye, contrariwise, can see only things, and when there are no things there is nothing, not even empty space, for it cannot be seen."

I (d) For Suprematism to dwell on the flatness of the picture plane would have been to make too much of its objective nature. Freed from an objective frame of reference, reference to this recognizable objects and traditions, even in regard to the picture plane, Suprematism proceeded to make it the stage for objective disembodiment. The vehemence with which the Suprematists approached their aim has not failed to attach to the picture plane an aura of the hallowed ground of highly motivated action. This is not to say that other artists before had not felt as strongly about making pictures. With the Suprematists one gets the feeling that the canvas acted on them as a signal to a complex combat. The word "arena" has been used of the picture plane by Abstract Expressionists frequently, but Suprematism first demonstrated the precariousness and daring implicit in the decisions involved in the act of painting. Van Gogh may have shown the psychological feat which goes into the painting of pictures and which can take place on the edge of madness, but Suprematism placed officially the painting of pictures in relation to action; they showed it to be one kind of moral action, and thus introduced into the painter's action the drama, the freedom and the consequence which pertains to moral action. The "live" and moral response to the picture plane of Abstract Expressionism is here prefigured with great force and can help to an understanding of the Abstract Expressionist attitude to the picture plane, not just in relation to history, but also in relation to its special aims. *very opposition is stated are*

Looking at Suprematist pictures superficially, one finds them very close to schematic textbook illustrations of the tension of pictorial elements on the picture plane. This similarity has made it easy to interpret Suprematism as a streamlined exercise on the principles of pictorial tension and hard to see its contribution to later styles. The compression of means in Suprematism dramatizes the impersonal force of exemplary pictorial action rather than isolates spatial tensions peculiar to the picture plane. In contrast to Neoplasticism which marshalled pictorial tensions in terms of the plane as architectural element, in terms of one unified spatial system, Suprematism presented tension on the picture plane as conflicts of two kinds of spatial categories--of real, architecturally undefined space, and of geometrically digested space. The diagonal which it uses is not designed to serve as the path of recession into the cube of three-dimensional space, but indicates the penetration of real space adjacent to the picture through the picture and out as a path of action; this non-geometric diagonal is contrasted with the geometric value of the picture plane as a shape; the straight line in the one case is taut, optimal, individual action, in the other case, geometric definition, generalized action. Sometimes the picture plane is treated merely as that which is "given," in contrast to what man's actions add. This contrast is made with breath-taking economy in Malevich's "White on White." The elements in terms of which the nature-history opposition is stated are

identical as far as pictorial language is concerned; they are both white, both identical in shape and dimensional value, i.e., they are both flat. City" (1958). In particular Without immersing itself in the projection of ideological contents, as the Suprematists did, Abstract Expressionism has aspired to the breadth of statement which Suprematism introduced. The importance of Suprematism in relation to Abstract Expressionism is that it cleared the field of the picture plane of the elaboration of the conflict between the two-dimensionality of the canvas and the three-dimensional projection of space which preoccupied Cubism. After Suprematism this conflict emerged as meaningful only in terms of the different painter's actions which it permitted. On the whole, Suprematism showed the artist in an "active" relation toward the elements of experience which Abstract Expressionism also claims to do.

Abstract Expressionists have, on the whole, a variable and flexible attitude toward the picture plane. For their purposes its two-dimensionality does not exclusively or exhaustively define it. The use of the "action" metaphor of painting of pictures has made it possible and desirable to give it names such as "field of action" and "arena," always in reference to the kind of action the artist in each case, or generally, conceives to be engaged in. Its character as material resistance as well as ground for material application obviously and consciously influences his "actions," in a narrow and in a wide sense. He needs to treat it as a

plane only when he is thinking of it in terms of planes. A good example of this complex and rich attitude toward the picture plane is Hofmann's "The City" (1958). In particular here the picture surface is "exposed" to an interplay with the light in the space of the observer which is a characteristic of Abstract Expressionism in general.

CHAPTER II

II (a) The spatial implications of the pictorial elements have emerged out of Abstract Expressionist practices with great force; they have been isolated and emphasized to an unprecedented degree by the attention of the critics for lack of other intelligibles to deal with. But their general "action" can bear some more elaboration.¹

The Line

The line functions here in three ways: (1) as a graph,² as a kind of kinesthetic record, a record of movement which has taken place in front of the picture plane. (2) As a path of movement along the picture plane, which implies a

¹Harold Rosenberg, Arshile Gorky, the Man, the Time, the Idea, New York: Horizon Press (1952), p. 77. "If the ultimate subject matter of all art is the artist's psychic state or tension (and this may be the case even in non-individualistic epochs) that state may be presented either through the image of a thing or through an abstract sign. The innovation of Action Painting was to dispense with the representation of the state in favor of enacting it in physical movement. The action on the canvas became its own representation."

²Georgy Kepes, Language of Vision, Chicago: Paul Theobald (1956), p. 186.

field of space displacement immediately next to the picture plane and points to a section of space outside the picture plane. (3) As a boundary between areas or contours of shapes, as voids of variable and incisionlike dimension. The space

CHAPTER II

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field of space displacement immediately next to the picture plane and points to a section of space outside the picture plane. (3) As a boundary between areas or contours of shapes, as voids of variable and incisionlike dimension. The space immediately before the picture plane is "implicated" by dint of the specific action of the artist which enters as definition into the line's function. (This might seem like a special case of (1) but includes reference to the relation of line to area, which goes beyond the situation in (1) above). This quality of line received special elaboration in Cezanne in connection with his use of color to create three-dimensional projections of volume--to intensify the "voluminal jump" of color, and it plays a great part in the work of Gorky. Even when used to create form, such a line incorporates the suggestion of the gesture which originated it and its origin in the space in front of the picture plane.

The Color

The color is utilized in its recessive and advancing seen as "paint," and with the concreteness of paint its properties. The "jump" of color implies spatial equivalents existence in real space is underscored. referring to space behind or in front of the picture plane.³

³The absence of actual space behind the picture plane is clearly indicated as it interacts as resistance of a surface with the painter's actions in the resulting characteristic marks of the drip, splotch, incision or scribble. The spatial configurations on the canvas are "isolated," "focused on" by the reference to the special sort of action, that is, the action of painting, which originates them. They do not serve to universalize spatial conditions or models as Renaissance perspective and Neoplasticism do; the space behind invites speculation only if the picture fails as a unity in itself.

While in Cezanne and the Neoplasticists this "jump" is controlled, poised, balanced, within a measurable distance defined by the other elements in the picture, this "jump" or "push and pull" has a more indeterminate character here and serves not as a measure of distance between planes in the picture space, but as a demonstration of "color action," of a tendency for movement, and of tensions across and along the picture's surface. These color actions have value in Abstract Expressionist pictures as part of the imaginative action of the artist. It would not be far-fetched to say that through the various experiments with color prior to Abstract Expressionism we have acquired almost an object-feeling for colors and accord them automatically a wider field as their "life-sphere," literally, than the concept of the picture as "plane" would allow. Wherever Abstract Expressionists make use of color areas or "the action of color," "the life of color," this kind of spatial field operates, not as a formal element of the picture, but is treated as a "medium," as "material," seen as "paint," and with the concreteness of paint its existence in real space is underscored.

The Texture

The texture functions in three ways: (1) the heavy impasto, the raised drip, the slash and thrust-marks and all the other marks of the malleability of the picture surface take away from the feeling for the picture plane as geometric plane; they suggest or point to the movements which originate

them, the space displacement involved in it and the spatial field of movement in front of the picture; (2) this articulated surface, by the light-and-shadow-play upon it, draws in the whole spatial universe of light--the origin of light, the path of light from source to picture plane, the reflections of the spatial properties around the picture which impinge on it by the nature of the "light-array";⁴ all imply space, the space adjacent to the picture and the space of the observer. In this instance the feeling for the material and its articulation through the play of light complement themselves in articulating the space in front of the picture; (3) textural differences of the surface suggest through tactile responses a different degree of permeability and thus different spatial penetrations of the space in front of the picture plane into the picture space. The enlargement of the surface involved in this quasi-relief character of the picture plane also serves to present directly the participation of the space in front of the picture plane in the space of the picture.

Perspectives

The different perspectives which Abstract Expressionists make use of includes: (1) a special sense of the principle of recession derived from the cube; the vertical

Paul Klee, Diagonal Sketchbook, New York: Praeger (1959), pp. 18-20.

⁴James J. Gibson, "Pictures, Perspective and Perception," in The Visual Arts Today, ed. Gyorgy Kepes, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press (1960), p. 225.

pile-up of shapes. Again this carries a strong suggestion of the movement or action of bringing the horizontal (the lower border of the picture which serves as ground plane and as first of the laterals of recession into depth) around, and spilling out, and down, all objective residues or forms along the front of the picture plane. The spectator is not left unaware whenever this "bringing around" of the horizontal to a vertical actually has occurred; he is shown by the "running" of paint its spatial past; recalling Klee's saying⁵ to the effect that moving a point results in a line, moving a line, in a plane, moving a plane, in volume, one cannot help remarking that this principle is at work here. Whatever feeling of depth one has in front of a San Francis is due as much to the use of vertical arrangement, as to the action of paint due to gravity. (2) Aerial perspective,⁶ or rather some aspects of it; distinct forms can be presumed to be nearer than blurred ones. But again blurred shapes can be seen as closer, when reading the roughening of texture as enlargement, in short when the phenomenon of accommodation⁷ can be understood to be in effect, which amounts to saying that the eyes "focus" differently for different distances in space. The ambiguity between aerial perspective and areas are not felt as large until they are pushed into a "figure"

⁵Paul Klee, Pedagogical Sketchbook, New York: Praeger (1953), pp. 16-20.

⁶William H. Ittleson, Visual Space Perception, New York: Springer (1960), p. 97.

⁷Ibid., Visual Space Perception, pp. 63-72.

accommodation requires a heightened awareness and spatial adjustment of the observer in relation to the painting.

(3) Overlapping. Overlapping planes are used, again in a special way; linear elements overlap or rather "run over," "are brushed over," "thrust over," one another, strokes are "laid over" another, but in a way that accords them the minimum of suggestion of a plane and the maximum of "flow" or "thrust." (4) Size. The laws of perspective in general imply that large objects are seen nearer the observer.⁸ This depth value of size may or may not be made use of by Abstract Expressionists, but for the most part size controls emotional values as much as it measures physical distance, and tends to make the world of the picture physically imminent into the spatial world outside. In ordinary life situations we are seldom exposed to such large color surfaces at such close distance as we come to view them in these pictures, and it bears some consideration how much this size depends for its effect on a familiarity with the enlarged size-proximity metaphor and how much on the lack of familiarity of just such "confrontations." The reading of size within the picture depends naturally enough on the spatial context. In some instances (to confirm good "Gestalt" principles) large areas are not felt as large until they are pushed into a "figure-reading," which makes them "jump" not only assumed location but also dimension as well and this makes for added "action"

⁸ Ittleson, Visual Space Perception, pp. 65-72.

of the space in the picture. (6) The Figure-Ground Phenomenon. The figure-ground phenomenon or positive-negative space relations play a prominent role in the spatial action in Abstract Expressionism; it is used more freely than, say, in Neoplastic creations, but apart from its importance within the picture it is largely responsible for the special relations of picture space and observer space in Abstract Expressionism. From the point of view of the observer, a picture as a whole is seen as a "figure" against the ground of a wall; that is, the elements of the picture space are already seen at one remove from the imagined plane which continues the wall under it. Put differently, the elements in the picture, space elements included, have a different value by being within the "figure" of the painting, than the adjacent space.⁹ The "autonomy" of picture space may be accounted for in this special relation of picture and its background. From Cubism on, through Neoplasticism and Suprematism to Abstract Expressionism, the definition of the picture in relation to its adjacent space, its background, becomes crucial for the treatment of the space within the picture. Abstract Expressionism seeks for its part to establish a space condition or space articulation within or from the picture which makes the observer oblivious to the figure-ground relation in order to make the relation of picture space to viewer space at once more direct, more concrete and less mechanical.

⁹Ittleson, Visual Space Perception, p. 93.

concept The ambiguity and elusiveness of space in Abstract Expressionist pictures derives to a great degree from the positive-negative reading of shapes in the picture. There again it is not a measure of depth, but a measure of the intention of the artist--of how much spatial ambiguity he would produce or tolerate while making his other points. That is, its reading is not designed to yield a plane as location for an object or to place an emphasis on any one plane, but predominantly as a means for changing direction, direction of the action of the artist, direction of the visual attention of the observer: it has no stationary effect, no arresting effect, but the opposite. (Compare the positive-negative reading of shapes and lines in Picasso's "Girl Before the Mirror" (1932), with that of Pollock's "Circular Shape" (1948). In Picasso's picture it is part of the contemplative mode of the subject and it acts as a stop within a certain area. In Pollock's picture it is a means of adding further movement within an area. In both its use makes for compression of energies, but with a different emphasis: in Picasso's picture it increases spatial definition and meaning; in Pollock's it adds more space to act on. the picture plane, flatness is experienced as actual deprivation not just of II (b) The view of pictures as "windows," "mirrors," "pro-visual depth, but of tactile experience also. To celebrate scenium openings" points to space relations as perceived from this deprivation as victory of visual fact over "illusion" an interior, from some architecturally given limitation.

And we can assume that the architectural division between "interior" and "exterior" accounts in great measure for the

concept of the picture as "boundary between two worlds," as much as the function of the door as a "passage between two worlds," for doors more often than not act as "windows." The differentiation of the picture from the different architectural openings and their different actions has occupied artists down to the present and influences our visual "approach" toward pictures. But picture making reflects another response to the architecture/outdoor contrast, to the wall as such. As a piece of wall decoration, pictures act as mediums of adjustment between the carry-over of visual activity (after images, phantasy images, remembered images) and the visually inarticulated wall (this is giving horror vacui a positive interpretation). In any case, these two different architectural references influence our general concept of the picture plane and merge very different spatial expectations in our anticipation of what the artist has made of the picture plane. The Cubists in their insistence on the literal flatness of the picture plane made the most of its role as "anticlimax" to three-dimensional experience, making it thus very easy for Dadaists to parody it as "Bah-relief."¹⁰

In isolation from other qualities of the picture plane, flatness is experienced as actual deprivation not just of visual depth, but of tactile experience also. To celebrate this deprivation as victory of visual fact over "illusion"

¹⁰Rudi Blesh, Modern Art U. S. A., Men, Rebellion, Conquest 1900-1956, New York: Alfred Knopf (1956), p. 183.

is one of the perverse outcomes of formalism which Abstract Expressionism is pitched against.

The discussions of pictures are still dominated by an uncritical use of the word "illusion" and from them the artist emerges as little more than a performer in a sideshow of illusions.¹¹ On the one side, the critics see as "given" the three-dimensionality of the real world, on the other side, the two-dimensionality of the canvas, and to see the two in a meaningful relation seems as difficult as getting the camel to pass through the needle's eye. On the picture we are told we see three-dimensionality "as illusion."¹² Even when dealing with non-objective art, any depth-readings on the two-dimensional plane are seen "as illusions." If perception allows us to pass with ease from looking at the three-dimensional world to looking at two-dimensional pictures, it is worth the while to ask if perception in real life does not embrace both the three-dimensionality and two-dimensionality.¹³

¹¹Patrick Heron, The Changing Forms of Art, New York: The Noonday Press (1955), p. 47. "Painting, . . . is essentially an art of illusion, and 'pictorial science' is simply that accumulated knowledge which enables the painter to control this illusion, the illusion of forms in space."

¹²Ibid., p. 30. "Pictorial space . . . is an illusion of depth behind the actual canvas. It may also be a projection--of plane or mass--apparently in front of the canvas."

¹³Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press (1954), p. 221. "All perceived space ranges somewhere between two extreme situations. At one extreme it is equal to its projection upon a two-dimensional surface . . . in the other extreme space looks infinitely deep."

If, adopting the "window view" toward three-dimensional reality, we look out of a room with a view, we see within the frame the view of the three-dimensional world outside adjusted to the plane which connects the window's edges. We see it, contrary to knowledge, as two-dimensional "figure" against the surrounding ground, or we can be said to give ourselves to the "illusion" that it lies as a picture against this ground and because of this assumed overlay it appears at roughly the same distance as the background (the wall).¹⁴ What matters here is our indifference to the depth clues perceived except as they present themselves in terms of the plane connecting the window's edges. Our attention to the "figure" as a whole outweighs our attention to details of depth perception within it. Odd as it is we could speak here of "two-dimensionality" "as illusion"; and if we were not versed in such two-dimensional reading of the three-dimensional world on seeing in one plane, in thinking in one plane, its two-dimensional presentation would be meaningless to us in pictures. The picture-windows in modern houses provide for such "two-dimensional" views of the world and in the Romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, the sublime views (viewed by spectators in the picture) are viewed at a the real spectator and the presentation of a transcendental landscape is no longer necessary, we ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before these

¹⁴Ittleson, Visual Space Perception, pp. 74-75. "Two-dimensional form perception can most properly be considered to a special case of three-dimensional perception rather than the reverse. Since almost any plane figure has some apparent depth it remains a moot question what to label such apparently three-dimensional physically two-dimensional object."

distance against which the figures act as a frame and turn them into two-dimensional "pictures" within the picture. Extreme depth as an area is read as a "whole" in terms of the indifference to possible human experience, and by dint of this "uniformity" it acts as a plane and is drawn into a figure-ground reading which is two-dimensional. This is why the flat background in Byzantine painting is read as "infinity"; yet it cannot be said that there we are experiencing depth "as illusion," nor that the flat background "symbolizes" infinity. It is important to dwell on just this ambiguity between extreme depth conditions and two-dimensionality because without it we cannot appreciate what Rothko, and to a certain extent, Barnett and Still are doing. Without wanting to oversimplify their intentions and the whole complex effect of the pictures, one could reach a similar conclusion to that of Rosenblum:¹⁵ that they have articulated the perceptual conditions of the Infinite--of infinite depth and its emotional values. The part which scale plays in this will be discussed later; now it is important to note that

a near edge as a perceptual cue is, however, extremely
 interesting.¹⁵ Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," Art News, Vol. 59, No. 10 (February, 1961). "In the abstract language of Rothko such literal detail--a bridge of empathy between the real spectator and the presentation of a transcendental landscape is no longer necessary, we ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before these huge and soundless pictures . . . the floating tiers of veiled light in the Rothkos seem to conceal a total remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp. These infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the Sublime."

tradition, because of the "unlearned" overlay mechanics in

where Rosenblum speaks of the figures in the Romantic landscapes as "bridges of empathy" it is possible to visually interpret them as "frames"--their location established as a plane is a reference similar to that of the frame in the "window view" in relation here to the expanses of the "transcendental landscape" beyond. Put differently, the figures in Friedrich's pictures act as "repoussoirs" in the picture, the spectator acts as a "repoussoir" before Rothko's pictures. Conditions of extreme depth and proximity were dealt with by the Mannerists with special fondness but also appear as a matter of special interest in the early phases of linear perspective application. It is very common in both cases to use the edge of a figure (just as the edge of the window in the "window view") as the line or common contour of the closest visual plane and of the most distant plane in the picture (in linear perspective this is often the vanishing point also). How this condition of space is resolved in these pictures of the Renaissance tradition is beside the point here: the working of extreme depth perceived against a near edge as a perceptual cue is, however, extremely interesting. It is a case of overlay with which we deal constantly in life and which influences our visual guesses in relation to the depth of the picture plane. The frame of a picture even when barely an edge is a "repoussoir" as well as a means to stress the value of the canvas as one plane, whether because of our acquaintance with pictorial tradition, because of the "unlearned" overlay mechanism in

perception, or because of our carry-over of expectations in regard to architectural openings. In any case the ambiguity of extreme depth and two-dimensional surface is not conjured up by the artist as part of the tricks of the trade, but is an unavoidable condition of visual perception. In pictures such as Rothko's, Barnett's and Still's, the actual proximity of the observer acts as one element, the flat canvas indicated as such, as the other element that gets the ambiguity going. Unless we enlarge "picture space" here to include the and the spectator and his space, we cannot assign to it any "depth illusion." Because of the fact that we perceive depth past edges or lines acting as such, in most Expressionist pictures we don't find lines acting as edges. One can view Guston's clusters of lines, huddles of lines, as an attempt to present something akin to objective grouping while avoiding the point. "edging in" of forms which would make the depth and two-dimensionality ambiguity explicit. of the picture-making process. We can say that in Abstract Expressionism two-dimensionality is not given "formally," "abstractly," but it is restated, ignored, rediscovered in a succession of approaches. It is striking how in de Kooning's pictures two-dimensionality is perceived as the result of the artist's actions rather than an unavoidable aspect of the canvas. In his "Women" series for instance, it would not be "naive" to protest the way he has bashed in the figures and literally flattened them out. The shock which these "Women" produced was mainly due to what de Kooning did to the concept of plasticity in

his pictorial world. Although one could go on talking as if flat treatment of three-dimensional objects is dictated by the contemporary "truth to materials" (in this case the canvas), de Kooning showed that two-dimensionality can be enacted as a bit of vandalism. Distortion and flattening of figures has occurred previously in equal violence in Picasso, but there the forms convey an anguish at the principle of picturemaking, as well as at the emotions (of the artist), which flatten and convolute them like paperstrips around the remnants of plasticity (viz., Picasso's "Woman in an Armchair, 1929), whereas here not the exigencies of the surface, but the decision to slam down a plane on the figure has the upper hand. Plasticity, however, survives; not because of an "illusion of three-dimensionality" on the picture surface, but because of the strength of the material presence of paint. It is this material presence of paint which qualifies the effect of depth which the elements of the picture-making possess; to enumerate these elements: size, shape, color, brightness, position in the field, overlay (including figure-ground relations, common contour and closure)--is to list depth cues of visual perception as such. Their observed and recognizable use in everyday perceptual decisions reinforces their effect in pictures in general.

The increased familiarity with the elements of depth perception makes for the greater plasticity of Abstract Expressionist pictures even when the depth suggested is small. One can go as far as to say that given our increased visual

experience and our enlightened attitude toward the elements of picture-making whatever skills this sort of painting has to claim goes into avoiding the stereotypes of depth illusion. There is a greater density of depth cues in Abstract Expressionist pictures but their total effect is felt in terms of quality rather than in terms of quantity--mainly because they are made to contradict each other and are pitched against the strong presence of paint. "Illusion" emerges after Abstract Expressionism as a misplaced and impossible consistency of interpretation of depth cues and it simply does not work. Instead, the unities of drama, place, time, and canvas action of the painter order our perceptions in the picture. "Honesty" in regard to the picture plane is preserved not as a ritualized acknowledgment of its "flatness" but in making overt its nature as support by undisguised application of material on it.

It is debatable how far the "birds-eye" view of space holds for Abstract Expressionist paintings, but the experience of flight has emphasized the nature of the earth as a ground, as a tray almost on which objects are situated. This visual sense of ground as support as gained from above has helped to appreciate the plane of the picture as support without actually imagining that one is standing above it; we know of many Abstract Expressionist pictures that were painted from within, from above, that is, and not from the side, which brings attention to the piling up of material on top of the plane, rather than its adherence to a vertical plane.

It might be argued that the Cubist device of tilting up table tops amounts to the same effect, but again this was dictated as a means for a location of objects in space which permitted the maximum, or the most significant, views of objects, which then allowed itself to be incorporated into a "formally" unproblematic way of arranging them on the picture's plane.

Here the awareness of the actual place from which the paint impinged on the surface and the fact that it was so placed is significant.

Where the quality of "writing" predominates, the situation is obviously a bit different and the nature of the canvas as a ground needs no further elaboration. But in viewing painting as "writing on the wall" somehow a destructive impulse in relation to the wall also is made manifest. After all, the picture surface is a boundary of our forward impulses, as a wall is, and inasmuch as one cannot tear it down one can do comparisons to scientific enlargements, bacterial cultures at least scribble on it. If one found an Abstract Expressionist painting of the Helen Frankenthaler variety, not to say Pollock, on one's wall unexpectedly, it would make sense "aesthetically" to say "What have you done to my wall!" without commenting on the quality of the performance in other regards. This is really putting the canvas in a live and quite intimate context with the painter; and this intimate

and direct relation between artist and the picture plane is distorted in viewing large Abstract Expressionist pictures as "murals."

clear and we are told what we are looking at and where in relation to our everyday experience it is to be found. The dizzying effect of Abstract Expressionist pictures derives from the fact that there is no special location for the viewer from which to look at the pictures, no angle from where it would fall.

CHAPTER III

SCALE IN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

The hugeness in size of Abstract Expressionist pictures, together with the ambiguity of size relations within the pictures, have caused great discomfort. Since their size of relativity and nothing prevents them from seeing Abstract Expressionism as such, except statements from the artist disavowing any interest in scientific space. Neither is talk of "private space" and "psychological space" helpful in space literally life-size,¹ the effect of the picture is a complete chaos. This is not helped even when uniformity in pictures because of the associated clichés of anti-socialism, solipsism and anarchism. "Private space" is not given as a scale to a map. It stands for the sequence of decisions which is irreversible (which thus places it temporally as an act) but which can be recaptured (as a whole) because it has been disengaged from its temporal context. In order to keep superficially there is a resemblance to the fascinating documentary that scientists have so diligently produced. But in viewing these scientific records, the actual size is made experience, including art traditions, that is, of still-life

¹Frank O'Hara, Jackson Pollock, New York: George Braziller (1959), pp. 28-29.
²Gyorgy Kepes, Language of Vision, Chicago: Paul Theobald (1956).

clear and we are told what we are looking at and where in relation to our everyday experience it is to be found. The dizzying effect of Abstract Expressionist pictures derives from the fact that there is no special location for the viewer from which to look at the pictures, no angle from where it would fall in place. This may be true of Cubist, Futurist and other dynamically conceived pictures also, but here the complete lack of consistent scale adds to the confusion. Critics have seen Cubism as an illustration of the principle of relativity and nothing prevents them from seeing Abstract Expressionism as such, except statements from the artist disavowing any interest in scientific space. Neither is talk of "private space" and "psychological space" helpful in bringing one in closer contact with Abstract Expressionist pictures because of the associated clichés of anti-socialism, solipsism and anarchism. "Private space" is not given as a scale to a map. It stands for the sequence of decisions which is irreversible (which thus places it temporally as an act) but which can be recaptured (as a whole) because it has been disengaged from its temporal context. In order to keep these decisions literally graphic, Abstract Expressionists take a free recourse to scale systems out of every walk of experience, including art traditions, that is, of still-life scale, of landscape scale, of portrait scale, of battle scenes, of macro- and microviews of nature, of handwriting and print, and of geometrical ratio systems. "Private space" does not define a special area of human experience, is not a

metaphor for a hiding place, but ways of moving in and out of all areas of human experience; hence its predominant character of kinesthetic record. This freedom of transition is indicated in the free use of scale. Scale works emotionally, by association rather than descriptively. The difference between the Abstract Expressionist use of scale and Tobey's, for instance, is that Tobey scale is used as a "local color" to certain kinds of experiences, and even though it is arbitrary it has a "fixed" character in creating a certain space, of ecstasy, of mystic immersion. In Tobey scale and space give a phenomenology whereas in Abstract Expressionism they are part of a cultural history.

Scale in Abstract Expressionist pictures is not a set metaphysical scale nor a set natural scale nor a definite scientific scaling up or down of experience, it is a mixture which is given dimension by the activity of the artist: some work big, some work small within a given area; yet this is not all there is to it. Even if one approaches the paintings without definite scale expectations, one tends to vacillate between the desire to see the small in big terms (still life orientation) or the vast brought down to scale (landscape orientation). Abstract Expressionists seem to rely on this switch-over from outdoor to indoor scale and its opposition, "humanize" the intricate and ugly shapes with which industrial in a cultivated "jump" of scale: masses are built up by wires or complex machinery as the product of human action. We are writing motions, letters are blown up to act as areas, huge factory are turned into tanglewoods.

brush strokes are huddled like objects in a still life fashion, wide tracts of color thrusts are dwarfed by huge

scribbled messages (as in Motherwell's "Je t'aime" [1955]), in an animated mosaic structure dots suddenly assume the scale of periods, (Tomlin's No. S, 1952), details dwarf grandly conceived passages and grandiose uniformity dribbles off into calligraphic incoherence. Apparently here the artists are giving chaotic tendencies (and devices known from Dada) the utmost freedom, but are holding them at bay by their constant conversion into "human gesture." Not violence of gesture is emphasized, but the extent to which human gesture has to be mobilized to master all categories in which ambiguity and disorder can manifest itself.³ In this sense picture space becomes an "arena" in which the "autonomy" of picture space is challenged as a form of tyranny just as its interpretation in terms of geometric perspective was challenged by Mannerism, which articulated the ambiguities which picture space proffers apart from being a place where one space conception can be demonstrated. The onslaught on a one-sided interpretation of the picture space had already been attempted in terms of the depth--two-dimensional ambiguity by the Mannerists and by the Cubists. All that was

attitude. But this freedom in respect to scale has even
 here. ³E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion, New York: Pantheon Books (1960), Bollingen Series XXXV 5.p.282. "If this game has a function in our society, it may be that it helps us to "humanize" the intricate and ugly shapes with which industrial civilization surrounds us. We even learn to see twisted wires or complex machinery as the product of human action. We are trained in a visual classification. The deserts of city and factory are turned into tanglewoods."

sult of the painter's gesture and this, in effect, makes it less complete, but the emphasis of the origin of this freedom

left to revalue was unacknowledged scale consistency which dominated all modern art except the later Kandinsky and the later Monet. This was done primarily by giving freedom of gesture and of "writing" the upper hand. Yet this is not a question of tapping new possibilities of beauty from calligraphy even though associations of "elegance" in writing gestures, of "style," creep in even where rawness, toughness of physical approach predominate.

While in Kandinsky's early abstractions there is a predominant scale, that of landscape, in his later works his forms suggest a wide scale of origin: from the minute to the cosmic, from a whimsical, playful, concrete "human" activity to a conceptual ordering activity, geometric and dimensionless, from a feeling for the pictorial elements as humanly available and physically manipulable objects to an attitude toward them as absolute categories of feeling of constant and unalterable dimension and value. Because in this later phase there is no intrusion of a "painterly handling," this freedom in respect to scale is most clearly and most completely stated and has had such a great impact as an "abstract" attitude. But this freedom in respect to scale has even here, in Kandinsky, an illustrative value, even if it is illustrative of "the freedoms of abstraction." In Abstract Expressionism it is incorporated in the picture as "material." There this freedom in respect to scale is explicitly the result of the painter's gesture and this, in effect, makes it less complete, but the emphasis of the origin of this freedom

New York: Museum of Modern Art, Garden City Publications

on the painter's gesture makes it more direct. The importance of the later Monet in relation to Abstract Expressionism lies in his articulating this freedom as incidental to the painter's gesture. In his fervent attempt to paint what he saw, Monet pushed painterly action to such an extreme that even though he did not depart from the appearance of his objects, its articulation in paint assumed a separate existence and could be viewed in terms of the painterly action and its scale. The value of brush stroke as an element of a scale of action becomes in Monet so insistent, so rich and vivid, that it diverts our attention from the scale of the objects depicted; hence the impression that his pictures are enlargements, that a change of scale has taken place even when this is not the case. It is irrelevant here whether his brush strokes stand for abbreviations of sensations, what matters is that he has made it possible to view the brush strokes in their actual size as well and to read their unifying action as "a whole." We can speak of "visual curtain" and "veil" of sensation because of the consistency of his painterly action, and the impression that some of his pictures "contain no solid point of reference"⁴ is due to the split of our attention between the brilliant surface as a place in space and the rhythm of the activity which we "place" in the artist. What an enormous

⁴William Seitz, Claude Monet, Seasons and Moments, New York: Museum of Modern Art, Garden City Publications (1960), p. 23.

visual risk to have one's walls decorated with an aquatic landscape done by Monet! The ambiguities of scale inherent in this enterprise were matched with Monet's powers as a painter at their height. And it is touching that this intimate commission should have had such revolutionary implications. For in the "Water Lilies" we find the strongest statement prior to Pollock of the spatial conflicts in modern painting: viewing the picture as an object our attention is located on the surface; seeing it as a work of art, our attention is lost in a spatial recapitulation of the painter's actions--the space which our awareness covers is also in front of the picture. The oppositions in which we evaluate Abstract Expressionist pictures and which are manifested here are not those of two-dimensional versus three-dimensional depth values but between the scale of the painting as an object and the scale of the painter's actions which have different points of spatial reference, this side of the picture plane. Hence the "crowding" we seem to experience and the attribution of "aggressiveness" to Abstract Expressionist pictures.

The adverse attitude of Abstract Expressionism toward de Stael illustrates how deep going their break with consistent scale is. Their lack of sympathy for his work is not due to the fact that he uses figures in his later style, but that he brings "scale" back into painting. His case shows especially clearly that because figurative reference involves above all consistent scale experience this can be

isolated and made an "abstract" concern. The abstract value of scale and its fundamental alliance with figure experience are equally dramatized in this work and account for its "classicism." His overt reference to these two principles which have dominated painting traditions up to now contrast strongly with Abstract Expressionist orientation. To weigh the tensions within the picture so as to favor a particular scale, of landscape, of the figure, of still life, has in traditional art been one of the most effective and reliable ways of giving unity to the picture. It is possible to see this as too easy a victory, and Abstract Expressionists have sought to show that no general, pre-conceived, formal unifying principle should be applied to create unity within the picture; it has to come from the unity which each particular artist establishes within his experience. We move between different spatial frameworks and between different functions at such a speed that we cannot look to the continuity of spatial frameworks to scale our experience for us. Man, as Kepes says, ". . . measures and organizes up, down, left, right, advance and recession in a single system of which his body is the center, and identified with the main directions of space."⁵ Yet, unless we stay on the ground, and do not choose to orbit, dive, fly, drive at high speeds, or penetrate into nature armed with the new devices expanding man's vision in science which is

⁵Gyorgy Kepes, Language of Vision, p. 18.

directionless, we disregard the main directions of space more often than not. We cannot deny that we are facing the belated effects of scale disorientation stemming from the machine age, a disorientation which Futurism only perceived as movement and visual sweeps of movements. This is not to say that Abstract Expressionism is the latest reportage on the ills of industrial civilization. It deals with them because they are with us. To the fluidity of scale such as it presents itself in Abstract Expressionist pictures is opposed the artist's active and enlightened presence. This is what is at stake in Abstract Expressionism, not the endless elaboration of the quirks of personality nor a parody of vitality. For this reason also, it is mistaken to see the size of the canvas as expression of illusions of grandeur or as reflection of "the size of America as a continent";⁶ rather one must allow that the artist conceives experience and its conflicts on a scale commensurate with his powers.

⁶Bryan Robertson, Jackson Pollock, New York: Harry N. Abrams (1960), p. 54.

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree M.F.A. in Creative Arts.

Radka Zagoroff Donnell

NAME

has submitted this written thesis
as a supplement to the creative thesis

two oil paintings and two charcoal drawings

No. and Medium

<u>43" x 34"</u> Size	<u>"Red & Green Together"</u> Title
<u>46" x 38"</u> Size	<u>"Landscape"</u> Title
<u>24" x 20"</u> Size	<u>"Rita"</u> Title
<u>22" x 15"</u> Size	<u>"A Child"</u> Title

Which is in the permanent possession of the University of
Colorado and recorded with the Department of Fine Arts.

Approved by

Roland Reiss
Co-Chairman of Committee

Louis Eades
Co-Chairman of Committee

Hubert H. Beck
Head of Fine Arts Department

Date

5-23-63

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