

Menacing Machines and Sublime Cities: Hedda Sterne and Abstract Expressionism

Tasia Kastanek
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Primary Advisor:
Kira van Lil – Art History

Committee Members:
Robert Nauman – Art History
Nancy Hightower – Writing and Rhetoric

Abstract:

The canon of Abstract Expressionism ignores the achievements of female painters. This study examines one of the neglected artists involved in the movement, Hedda Sterne. Through in-depth analysis of her Machine series and New York, New York series, this study illuminates the differences and similarities of Sterne's paintings to the early stages of Abstract Expressionism. Sterne's work both engages with and expands the discussions of "primitive" signs, the sublime and urban abstraction. Her early training in Romania and experience of WWII as well as her use of mechanical symbols and spray paint contribute to a similar yet unique voice in Abstract Expressionism.

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“Just as each spoken word rouses an internal vibration, so does every object represented. To deprive oneself of this possibility of causing a vibration would be reducing one’s arsenal of means of expression: anyhow, that is the case today. But besides this, there is another [answer] which art can always offer to any question beginning with ‘must’: There is no ‘must’ in art, because art is always free.”¹

– Wassily Kandinsky,
Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular, 1912

“And through all this pervades my feeling that I am only one speck (hardly an atom) in the uninterrupted flux of the world around me.”²

– Hedda Sterne,
“Documents: From Studio to Gallery,” 1954

Echoing Kandinsky’s theory, Hedda Sterne sought the underlying threads of existence through any form that appealed to her, not restricting herself to rigid dogma about abstraction or realism. A yearning to share and to catch a glimpse of some eternal force weaves together her diverse oeuvre: “As she touches first one style and then another, first one subject or genre and then another, the linking image or idea is that of energy, force, personal commitment, the animus that is the inner state insisting on the outer condition.”³ Each painting shows a facet of Sterne’s perspective; each is a discovery of her inner state as well as the wonder of the exterior world. Everything from tractors to lettuces to trees inhabits her work; numerous friends and family members fueled her love of portraiture. Some saw this as lack of sincerity or purpose but Dore Ashton described Sterne’s practice, rooted in her knowledge of language and absorption of many different art historical periods as a child, as a “polyglot impulse,” the desire to transcribe the same idea or inspiration in many different ways. As a Romanian-born American, influenced by

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1955), 50.

² Hedda Sterne, “Artist’s Remarks,” *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*, (Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, 2006), 2.

³ Lee Hall, “Hedda Sterne: Diversity and Imagery,” *Hedda Sterne Retrospective, April 24 through June 26, 1977*, (New Jersey: Montclair Art Museum, 1977), 14.

Constructivism, Surrealism and Renaissance masters like Da Vinci, Sterne certainly fused many sources in her vision of meaningful subject-matter. Although the canonical Abstract Expressionists⁴ did not share Sterne's European, cosmopolitan background, many shared her desire for volatile content in the wake of war. Whatever they labeled the product of their endeavors – sublime, metaphysical or living myth – the goal was the same: to perceive and represent some timeless, revitalizing facet of human existence.

Although Sterne did not consider herself an Abstract Expressionist, many other factors tie her early work to that group. In New York, she participated in the roundtable discussions at Artists' Sessions at Studio 35.⁵ This discussion⁶ was one of the events that solidified the movement and those who attended were among the advanced artists in New York.⁷ Betty Parsons, one of the major dealers for Abstract Expressionism, showed Sterne's work throughout the life of her gallery even though she recognized that some did not appreciate Sterne's methods: "...she changed all the time, and the damn critics thought she wasn't serious. Maybe they thought that because she was a woman. And beautiful...Hedda was always searching, never satisfied. She had many ways; most artists have only one way to go."⁸ Parsons' comments hint at the inequality that women faced; critics read lack of seriousness in the work of female painters even

⁴ Most critics include Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still in the core of the canon. William Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, Hans Hofmann, and Franz Kline form a secondary group and the third tier includes Richard Pousette-Dart, Mark Tobey and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

⁵ "Chronology," *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*, (Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, 2006), 121.

⁶ It resulted in a letter of protest to the president of Metropolitan Museum of Art, condemning the conservative group-exhibition juries. Ironically, before the discussion, one of those juries chose Sterne to exhibit in *Young American Artists: Life Magazine's Fifty Most Promising Painters in the United States* at the Metropolitan Museum. Sarah L. Eckhardt, "Consistent Inconsistency: Hedda Sterne's Philosophy of Flux," *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*, (Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, 2006), 1.

⁷ Celia Stahr, "Case Study Four: Hedda Sterne," *The Social Relations of "Abstract Expressionism", An Alternative History*, (PhD diss., University of Iowa, August 1997), 286.

⁸ Ann Eden Gibson, "Lesbian identity and the politics of representation in Betty Parsons Gallery." *Journal of Homosexuality*. 27 (1994): 258-259, accessed 28 January, 2011.

when those artists committed to a single style. Nonetheless, Sterne participated in major exhibitions⁹ alongside the canonical artists, counting some of them as friends.

Despite similarities in content and style, anthologies of Abstract Expressionism rarely name Sterne, or any woman, as a major contributor. All of the masters are white, heterosexual and male. Sterne is perhaps luckier than other female, black or homosexual artists. She is at least listed as a participant in exhibitions or mentioned in footnotes. Although categories are historical constructions and tools that can outlast their use, power and legitimacy extend from categorization as well. Abstract Expressionism, as the most acclaimed American movement of the '40s and '50s, designated the elite and those outside of the standard of quality.

Critics and artists did not recognize Sterne's contributions because of the rigid framing of the movement.

For Abstract Expressionism, a style whose definition was intimately related to the identity of the artist, personal identity linked meaning to power. Prejudice and social sanctions involving sexuality and race were both internal and external. Those who were the most 'different' from the white male norm (black female artists, for instance), had great difficulty establishing their ability to produce what Abstract Expressionist circles would see as meaning of consequence.¹⁰

The meaningful subject-matter was highly linked to the identity of the artist. The conventions promoted by prominent critics like Clement Greenberg became signs of authority; large canvases and brushstrokes, spontaneity and pure abstraction became the only signifiers for originality and power.¹¹ Delicate lines and small canvases did not fit the profile of significant meaning. The

⁹ During the period from her arrival in New York to 1960 (and beyond the dates of this study), Sterne's work gained prominence in solo and group shows in the U.S., as well as in Italy. From the beginning of Parsons' Gallery, Sterne had solo shows nearly every year. She showed in the Third and Fourth Annual Exhibitions at the Stable Gallery, an important continuation of the 9th St. Show. She also had a solo show in Rome and participated in the 1956 Venice Biennale as well as the Mexican Biennale in 1960. The Whitney and the Art Institute of Chicago each exhibited her work in three group shows.

¹⁰ Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism and Other Politics*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), xxi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

professed rejection of commercial interests, ideologies¹² and sense of community added to the myth of the artist as lone warrior, delving into self to save society.¹³ Despite a growing lyrical quality and the personal interest of many artists in themes of love, death, chaos and rebirth,¹⁴ Greenberg's insistence on rejection of literary associations created a false mystique. Falling back on the notion of the inexplicable, viewers and critics did not question how presence in paintings might be gendered and thus a mirror of societal power structures.

The paradigm of Abstract Expressionism did not bode well for Sterne; she was not a masculine, rough, spontaneous character who painted only forms that embodied plastic qualities and/or deep psychological experience. She was a woman who retained figurative elements in her work and refused to adhere to one style or to market her work aggressively. Hints of delicacy also damned her and other female painters. In Sterne's case, she used fine marks as well as spray-painted strokes which obscured the artist's hand. This tendency toward a reproducible mark defied the standard of originality – the gesture as a sign of the artist's unique inner struggle. In addition, Sterne was not consumed with purging all literary associations in her paintings but avidly absorbed contemporary literature. In short, neither she nor her work fit the mold of the ideal artist and style.

Similar use of myth, metamorphosis and the sublime combined with the visual language of women, spurred questions of quality rather than appreciation of a different approach. To deny one's identity became a survival technique for many women.¹⁵ This was true for Sterne too. "I signed [my work] 'H. Sterne' so people wouldn't know I was a woman. Because I knew I would

¹² Greenberg thought of morality, religion and metaphysics as false consciousness.

¹³ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, xxv.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ This is true for black artists as well. Strangely viewed as a modern incarnation of the eternal "primitive," black artists could not use signs of indigenous cultures because critics viewed this as "only natural" for them while those same signs were innovative and expressive of immutable properties of humanity when used by white artists. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, 31.

be judged wrongly. It was really kind of self-protection.”¹⁶ Her choice of representational imagery, in the Machine series and New York series, also circumvented stereotypes of feminine content. Despite these masking strategies, women struggled to assert a place in Abstract Expressionism as it was forming.

Luckily, art historians are steadily re-examining and expanding the canon and the limits of the movement. Ann Gibson, in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, contributed tremendously to this research:

Broadening the understanding of the artistic milieu in which Abstract Expressionism existed in order to include the subtexts of race and gender, then, does more than expand the meanings of works of the ‘major’ figures or elevate the work of ‘minor’ artists. It demonstrates a way of thinking about the purposes and methods of art history that addresses the multiple levels – economic and sociological, as well as aesthetic – on which questions of value are determined...Addressing art that is currently *outside* the canon of art in New York at the mid-century, but that bears many of its stylistic marks, is a way of inserting a wedge in the canon, one that breaks it, right at the seams of racism and sexism...A restructured version of Abstract Expressionism will be a history that responds to more than one agenda, that tells more than one truth.¹⁷

Gibson’s words are a powerful call to arms for art historians to sunder monolithic movements and forge something new and better with an ear alert to the oppressed groups in society. Owing much to Gibson’s framework, this study is not an attempt to degrade the accomplishments of the male painters or a plea to include Sterne in the canon. It is an attempt to see her work more clearly in comparison to better known artists and to chart the similarities as well as Sterne’s differences, her important contributions to art. In exploring Sterne’s work, I hope to clarify the diversity of the movement and move toward a more expansive definition of Abstract Expressionism.

Several retrospectives since 1970 illustrate the breadth of Sterne’s achievements but in-depth analyses of specific series remain undeveloped; several critics intersperse studies of

¹⁶ Sterne quoted in Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, 156.

¹⁷ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

Sterne's complete oeuvre with snippets of such insight. I hope to complement their work with an examination of her Machine series and New York, New York series. Considering that Sterne was a woman in a man's movement, postmodern perspectives and feminist frameworks guide this analysis.

I will use a variety of sources, some more problematic than others. Sterne did not publish many of her writings (though journals attest to her love of words) but many interviews outline her perspective on art. Although the work functions independently of her intent, Sterne's words provide context and a critical framework which contrasts with the sometimes condescending reviews. To round out her perspective, I will analyze the formal qualities of her paintings, outline her biography, and decipher statements from her colleagues. Through these viewpoints, this study will illuminate Sterne's voice on the issues of her time, her interaction with the Abstract Expressionists and how we must continue to revise our notions of the movement as a whole.

From Romania to New York

The transition from Surrealist collages to her Machines coincided with Sterne's upheaval from Europe. When WWII started in 1939, Sterne was forced to leave Paris for her home in Bucharest. In 1940, Romania joined forces with Germany, Italy and Japan, which worsened violence against Jews. Although Sterne and her family were "thoroughly assimilated"¹⁸ Jewish Romanians, the menace of war permeated her world: "The young, newly married Sterne barely escaped a roundup in which so many of her acquaintances were trapped and hung from meat hooks. She never discusses this."¹⁹ To escape such horror, Sterne made plans to move to New

¹⁸ Dore Ashton, "A Cosmopolitan of the Imagination," *Hedda Sterne: Forty Years, The Queens Museum, February 2 – April 14, 1985*, (New York: The Queens County Art and Cultural Center, 1985), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

York.²⁰ Though war forced Sterne from her home, those early experiences had a critical impact on her reception in America and her later work. Some of her Surrealist collages evoke the anxiety and pain of war, a tone later echoed and transformed in her machines.

Before her flight from Paris, Sterne had shown collages, *papiers arrachés et interprétés*, for the first in the 11th *Exposition de Salon des Surindépendants* in October 1938.²¹ Hans Arp saw her work there and encouraged Victor Brauner, a family friend of Sterne, to send the collages to Peggy Guggenheim. One of these works may have been included in *Exhibition of Collages, Papiers-Collés and Photo-Montages* (Guggenheim Jeune, London, 1938).²² When Sterne arrived in New York in 1941, Guggenheim remembered her collages and quickly welcomed Sterne to her gallery. Sterne showed work at several important group shows at Art of this Century in 1943 and Guggenheim considered her one of the important “discoveries.”²³ Surrealism influenced other Abstract Expressionists, but for Sterne, the European movement was a vital force in her early work and a major factor in her acceptance in the New York art scene. In addition, according to several scholars, her Machine series evolved from her interest in Surrealism and adjustment to life in New York.

Surrealism

A general disenchantment with humanity led Sterne, the Surrealists and American painters to search for deeper meaning than a still life could afford. Sterne, escaping from persecution, could identify with the American artists’ horror at the consequences of two long wars. This general disillusionment opened the Abstract Expressionists to the traditions of modern

²⁰ “Chronology,” 118. She secured a visa through her first husband, Frederick Sterne, who had moved to New York in 1938 and changed his name to Fred Stafford. She left behind her mother and brother who survived in Romania throughout the war. They moved to France in 1948.

²¹ Anna C. Noll, “Chronology,” *Hedda Sterne: Forty Years, The Queens Museum, February 2 – April 14, 1985*, (New York: The Queens County Art and Cultural Center, 1985), 49.

²² “Chronology,” 118.

²³ Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 122.

art, particularly Surrealism.²⁴ Adolph Gottlieb said of the time: “During the 1940s, a few painters were painting with a feeling of absolute desperation. The situation was so bad that I know I felt free to try anything no matter how absurd it seemed...”²⁵ Sterne, Gottlieb and other painters needed a more immediate, meaningful mode of expression. Myth, metamorphosis, automatist methods and taking risks in painting became central to both Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.²⁶

The Surrealists (antireligious, antinationalist and anticonventional) wanted to renew man’s psychological life and thereby rehabilitate humanity. They demanded the “transcendence of merely subjective” and revival of subject matter;²⁷ in other words, the replacement of the subjective, or mere representation, with the imperative subject of psychological life.

Biomorphism and automatism offered methods or styles for breaking down barriers between states of being, the integration of “man and nature, of the inner and outer worlds, of human and universal experience.”²⁸ The Abstract Expressionists certainly echoed these goals and the Surrealist experiments provided a starting point.

Sterne produced her early collages using automatist techniques. Creating free associations from scattered pieces of torn paper, Sterne rendered biomorphic figures in delicate pencil marks.²⁹ Motherwell wrote of the purposes of this technique, emphasizing the finishing aspect of the process, when one enhances or effaces certain characteristics.³⁰ Differences in artistic goals distinguished the two groups’ intentions for the technique:

²⁴ Ibid., 118.

²⁵ Adolph Gottlieb quoted in Ashton, *New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, 118.

²⁶ Ashton, *New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, 117.

²⁷ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ I will discuss some of her collages in more detail later. A series dated to around 1941 shows evidence of her experience of war and thus brings more symbolism to her machine series.

³⁰ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 24.

...rather than free associating a flow of images and subverting banal reality and logic with them, Abstract Expressionists used automatism as a key to creativity and creative life...Mainstream surrealist automatism transformed life through questioning the real; the Americans, like Masson, transformed life by symbolizing and representing creative and destructive change.³¹

Less emphasis on the liberating forces of the fantastic, the Abstract Expressionists used automatism to reveal the revitalizing forces of the unconscious. The contemporary interest in Jung and Nietzsche helped differentiate the Abstract Expressionist use of the unconscious from that of their predecessors. While Sterne did not subscribe to those psychological theories,³² these meta-narratives created a gendered structure for discussion of the movement, which I will address later.

Another important distinction between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism is the formal characteristics. The latter combined tenets of abstraction and Surrealism: “Most of the Abstract Expressionists were anyway already predisposed to the poetic, suggestive content that [Surrealism] had given the modern tradition but disliked its fanciful excesses.”³³ Emphasis on illusionism receded while psychological, mythic exploration survived. One answer to this calling for revitalizing subject-matter, depicted in a more abstract language, arises in “primitive” signs and Sterne’s machine paintings.

Meaningful Signs

Building on the Surrealist exploration and integration of inner and outer states, both Sterne and the Abstract Expressionists turned to totemic symbols. Although the machines also fall into this context, her more obvious creation of a modern symbol for humanity is *Totem Pole I* (1949) (fig. 1), technically part of the New York, New York cityscape series. This piece is

³¹ Ibid.

³² Eckhardt, “Consistent Inconsistency,” 5.

³³ David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 96.

based on a battleship she saw floating in an NYC harbor but the structure and small details suggest machines.

That Sterne, a survivor of the war, transformed a battleship into a totem seems contradictory but modern signs repeatedly surface in her work. As opposed to the “primitive”³⁴ forms favored by many Abstract Expressionists, battleships, machines and skyscrapers expose a different side of humanity. Both types of signs explore basic human experiences (fear, anger, awe) but modern signs, with connections to war and materialism, allow for more cynicism and do not simplify early cultures into timeless, child-like states and thus degrade non-Western societies. Sterne questions and mocks these symbols – her first machines convey fragility and imperfection – instead of placing them on a pedestal.

In contrast, Gottlieb ascribed an almost limitless profundity to “primitive” signs:

That these demonic and brutal images fascinate us today, is not because they are exotic, nor do they make us nostalgic for a past which seems enchanting because of its remoteness. On the contrary, it is the immediacy of their images that draws us irresistibly to the fancies, the superstitions, the fables of savages and the strange beliefs that were so vividly articulated by primitive man. If we profess kinship to the art of primitive men, it is because the feelings they expressed have a particular pertinence today. In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of color and form seem irrelevant. All primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life.³⁵

Gottlieb found a reflection of modern society in “primitive” signs. He correlated the violence of contemporary war to early man’s heightened state of fear and awareness of immutable forces. He also suggested that early mankind was a product of the brutality of the natural world and constant menace of death; they are savages who expressed the most basic emotions through demonic and

³⁴ I use the term “primitive” because the Abstract Expressionists used it to describe a large range of traditions that today may be best categorized based on individual artists or cultures. The “primitive” encompassed everything from African masks to Inuit totem poles to Native American leatherwork. Even the labels of African, Inuit or Native American, without clarification of the complexity of the art objects and artist perspectives, efface the value of non-white art practices.

³⁵ Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, “Excerpt from ‘Art in New York,’” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 135.

brutal images. Mark Rothko, in the same publication, emphasized that the signs from indigenous cultures had to be restructured through a modern lens. “Our presentation of these myths, however, must be in our own terms...we must redescribe their implications through our own experience.”³⁶ Thus the many Abstract Expressionists who appropriated “primitive” signs sought to describe the modern anxiety through more elemental and thus powerful form. However, the problem they run into, which does not occur with modern signs, is the devaluation of the contemporary cultures of those societies.³⁷

“Primitive” signs place descendants of those artists in a cultural and temporal vacuum, forever derivative and simplistic.³⁸ In contrast, Sterne did not search for foreign signs but looked to her own cultural and political history. Rather than presenting mysterious ominous signs, partly appreciated for the exoticism (despite what Gottlieb claims) machines and battleships all too clearly reference the strife of the twentieth century and thus facilitate direct dialogue with war, production and consumption. While machines and cities do not awaken some primal recognition, modern signs still speak to the “brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life,” a primary concern for Gottlieb and many other Abstract Expressionists.

Machines

From 1947 to 1961, Sterne painted machines. Spindly, strangely human contraptions, or anthropographs, first appeared during a summer in Jamaica, Vermont.³⁹ Her last works in the series, a stylistic and conceptual leap from the first, was a commission for *Fortune* magazine. Sterne’s anthropographs draw on the rich literary and artistic symbolism of machines as well as her own fantastic view of machines as reflections of the soul. While the early machine paintings

³⁶ Ibid., 128.

³⁷ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, 31.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Chronology,” 120.

feature elongated stacks of intricate compartments, her renderings of John Deere tractors are solid portraits against hazy backdrops and foreground motion and accuracy of observation. Her comments and the structure of a commercial commission indicate homage to tractor parts and material production, rather than the social and material critique of the earlier works. While the tractor-inspired series does not incorporate the depth of meaning of earlier works, her stylistic developments are an important bridge between her earliest work and the more abstract New York series.

Sarah Eckhardt, one of Sterne's prominent biographers, connects Sterne's machines to her experience of the land: "The concept of the anthropographs (machines with humanlike qualities) evolved out of Sterne's observation that the American landscape was in itself more surreal than any surrealist dream or fantasy. By the late 1940s, she was intrigued by the idea that humans unconsciously design machines as self-portraits, portraying their needs and an insatiable desire for consumption."⁴⁰ It is not a large leap from contemplation of a surreal cityscape to analysis of the workings of its inhabitants; a crowded metropolis conjures questions of consumption and material desire. As a self-portrait, reflective of the inventors as well as the artist, Sterne's work conveys some essential, if ugly, component of human life.

Ashton also links Sterne's first work in the U.S. to her experience of the fast-paced atmosphere of New York: "With her Surrealist intellectual background, it came as a thunderbolt that the whole country of America was more surrealist than Surrealism. She brought an innocent eye to bear on the cavernous phenomenon of New York...and on the industrial prodigies of the skyscrapers, highways, and the mammoth machines that made America hum...her confrontation

⁴⁰ Sarah L. Eckhardt, "Uninterrupted Flux," *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*. (Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, 2006), 16.

with the new environment unsettled her.”⁴¹ The American city presented new fodder for Sterne, a new unsettling environment in which to experience and define the complex warp and weft of reality.

Sterne developed the study for *Totem Pole I* and many solitary machines in monotype. The study is a simple linear structure that comprises six or seven units stacked on top of each other with diagonal extensions similar to pulleys or fork-lift arms. Others in the group of 1949 monotypes follow a similar format: Enclosed machine figures stand immobile against solid backgrounds. The interaction of the parts is always slightly vague; each piece attaches to the next but does not indicate any specific motion or function. One of the few monotypes with solid planes, *Untitled* (1949), features two “eyes” and horns as well as more human proportions (fig. 2). A curved segment extends from the middle to the upper portion, like a hand adjusting glasses. The thin human-like shape, scratchy texture and varied thickness of the white accents lends humanity and insecurity to the figure. Sterne transferred several of these figures into oil on canvas, adding richer browns and creams. She even applied gold leaf to *Machine [Gold Structure XVIII]* (1950) (fig. 3), perhaps adding idol status to the incomprehensible, tenuous structure. The triangular configuration at the top balances on a thin brown line connected to the thickest section. This precarious connection appears bound to swing the top-heavy glyph back down.

Machine 5 (fig. 4) also verges on collapse but the bright red stabilizes and fuses the stick figure parts. Strange apparitions of faces recall the curlicues of her paintings of interior settings but take on a more menacing character with sharp fangs. Four pairs of googly eyes, two sitting on fanged “mouths,” top the central structure. The machine holds an unnatural balance:

Most likely inspired by a New York City construction site, the piece of industrial equipment portrayed in *Machine 5* features an impossibly top-heavy superstructure that undermines any notion of conventional functionality. The vibrant red background further

⁴¹ Ashton, “A Cosmopolitan of the Imagination,” 10.

dislocates the machine from an ordinary setting. The machine, at once whimsical and frightening, has come to life, with a variety of eyes wide open and jaws ready to devour.⁴²

Sterne depicts a slightly menacing, slightly humorous machine which exists in a separate world. The two figures with “jaws ready to devour” do not appear to attack anything but hang suspended, one attached to a sort of crane arm. The scraped-on texture emphasizes an ethereal quality, as if the figures are in the process of crumbling away or slowly gathering mass. Yet the whole is very flat; the structure appears impossibly connected because there is no recession of space or volume. Complicated yet purposeless, Sterne’s *Machine 5* shares the forlorn uselessness of Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, or *Large Glass* (1915-1923). Both Duchamp’s and Sterne’s creations sprouted from a literary and visual history of machines which constructed an array of characteristics for man’s mechanical counterparts.

Mechanolatry: Female Machines

Artists, philosophers and writers have endowed the machine with various meanings since the Enlightenment. Mechanolatry, or the (Western) cult of the machine, first appeared as the realization of man’s rational powers and then manifested itself as artistic, libidinous desire. René Descartes and his follower, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, viewed the machine as an extension of man’s soul and a symbol of God’s divine perfection. In contrast, Denis Diderot pictured a world of robots which coupled according to perfectly timed sexual thermometers; rumors also circulated that Descartes owned a female robot. However, this was a shadowy parallel to the more common association with the transcendent sublime or “pure expression of human will” as seen in J. M. W. Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed: The Great Western Railway*, of 1844, or in

⁴² Eckhardt, “Uninterrupted Flux,” 16.

Claude Monet's series of interior landscapes painted in the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris.⁴³ Thus machines, early in literary history, embodied a strange combination of spiritual awe (similar to the sublime feelings conjured by great cliffs and oceans), the triumph of human invention and reason and unfettered sexual gratification.

Despite the association with God's perfect rationality (and by extension man's rationality), the trend of sexualized machinery continued into the industrialized age. The erotic mechanical fantasies of the Enlightenment transferred to the literature of the height of industrialism⁴⁴ in which the female robot surfaces periodically. Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* illustrates gendered machines (the bride machine separated from the bachelors below) and gender anxieties of the fin de siècle. "Many artists besides Duchamp⁴⁵ who came of age around the turn of the century drew parallels between a flourishing technological environment and the emergence of a bold new group of political and economic agents who happened to be female. A subliminal connection was formed between these newly active women and contemporary machines."⁴⁶ Yet female machines did not inherit heavenly reason and equal footing with their male inventors: "Although everything from bicycles to dynamos⁴⁷ was invested with imaginary female attributes, the control and mastery of those machines was reserved, whenever possible, for men."⁴⁸ Thus, before Sterne painted her

⁴³ Caroline A. Jones, "Mechanolatry," *Painting Machines: Industrial Image and Process in Contemporary Art*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 9.

⁴⁴ E.T.A. Hoffman's "Sandman" (1817) and the ballet *Coppélia* had themes of mechanical belles (the former involves much more complex themes that explore the uncanny); *Les chants de Maldoror* (1868-70), by Isidore-Lucien Ducasse, featured the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine; in Villiers de L'Isle Adam's novel *L'Eve futur* (1886) Thomas Edison invents a "sultry, well-spoken android as a gift for an aristocratic friend." Jones, "Mechanolatry," 10.

⁴⁵ Sterne's work could also be placed more closely in relation to Dada and other artists contemporary to Duchamp, such as Fernand Léger and Francis Picabia (who also painted machines). However, for the purposes of this study, I will remain focused on her connections to Abstract Expressionism.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1900) by Henry Adams for a detailed account of a feminine machine. Adams conflates the power of the dynamo with the spiritual resonance of The Virgin.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

machines, the subject was not gender neutral, nor implicitly masculine (though the sphere of industry and work certainly was). The feminized machine is a means to an end and only functional with a male master.

Sterne brought mechanical creations, with their background as sexual object and human/holy achievement, into the discourse of internal struggle and eternal sign. She thought of the machines as symbols of herself and society. In 1977, Kathryn Gamble, director of Montclair Museum in New Jersey, interviewed Sterne for her retrospective in Montclair. They sat on *Diary*, a large canvas on which Sterne recorded a quote or thought each day. At the beginning of the interview, Gamble said, “We are showing some of the early paintings you made when you came to Manhattan to live that record your encounter with the mechanized monsters of our industrialized society. You mentioned that you painted them to exorcise them,” to which Sterne replied:

At one point I even called them anthropographs because I had the feeling that artists could express their innermost nature when they let machines be the subject of their work. They were terrifying, but beautiful. Picasso said it very well, I thought, and here is another journal entry [she reads the canvas on the floor]: ‘Painting is not an aesthetic operation, it’s a form of magic designed as a mediator between the strange hostile world and us – the way of seizing power, of giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.’⁴⁹

She thought of painting machines as exorcism and self-representation. Thus, the logical question is, what does she exorcise? The context for this is important as well, whether public or personal. In an art world that increasingly conflated the two, it is logical to think of Sterne’s configuration of self as a projection or extension of society, her own “universal” language. Together with the connotations of a female machine, Sterne’s exorcism of mechanical portraits may refer to a wider societal purging of the demonized yet passive feminine. By putting them on paper, she at

⁴⁹ Kathryn Gamble, “Introduction,” *Hedda Sterne: Retrospective, April 24 through June 26, 1977, Montclair Art Museum*, (Montclair, New Jersey: The Montclair Art Museum, 1977), 8.

once gives them significance and takes away their power. She also takes the role once reserved to the male inventor by conjuring up these mechanical figures.

The female robot and consumer goods share the same place in the overwhelming material culture that confronted Sterne in New York; though feminist movements made significant strides toward equality, women still easily slipped into the category of object, meant to be displayed, consumed and controlled. Thus machines, women and materialism are intertwined. Exorcism, though steeped in the persecution of witchcraft and the subjugation of the female body (first to male demon, then to male exorcist),⁵⁰ more generally means to seek to expel a demon or attempt to free someone from an evil spirit. As an exorcist in the historical sense, Sterne assumes the masculine role of Catholic priest, cleansing the female body (herself and society) of this insatiable materialism and/or the sexual subordination of the female machine.

However, the comically unbalanced, non-functional, frail machines poke more fun at the desire for goods/the female body. Could this be an exorcism by humor? “Although the moods of her early machine series paintings range from threatening to comical, their human qualities tend to upend any notion of idealistic advancement in the twentieth century. Instead they exaggerate the frailty of the human condition.”⁵¹ These images unseat grand ideas about society by emphasizing human imperfections. Sterne did not portray shining, well-oiled behemoths running smoothly into eternity. The first machines are frail, funny, perhaps even poorly constructed. The evil mechanized female robot and the mad drive for goods cannot sustain itself. Humor can be a visual weapon; satire is often a subtle method for subverting the dominant system.

⁵⁰ Darlene Juschka, “Signifying Demons: Gender and the Ritualised Performance of Possession and Exorcism,” *Politics/Body Politic: The Semiotics of Gender*, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009), 115.

⁵¹ Eckhardt, “Uninterrupted Flux,” 16.

Mechanical Symbolism of War

This comical critique also resides in the seriousness of her perspective on art. Her reference to Picasso illustrates her view that painting is a means to seize power and give form to inaudible emotion. For Sterne, painting machines was a ritual of understanding as well as mediation of threatening forces, both representative of humanity and herself. Machines evoke threatening forces in more than one facet of society. Sterne's anthropographs not only symbolize destructive production and consumption in the sense of women and objects but also in the context of war. On top of the implications of mechanolatry, machines reference the brutal mechanics of war, the inhuman systems that separated and crushed so many lives in the early twentieth century. Although most Abstract Expressionist did not experience war firsthand,⁵² the events in Europe impressed upon many artists the insecurity of life and essentially savage nature of man.

In contrast, Sterne experienced the effects of war firsthand. Though she did not speak about Jewish friends and family she may have lost in Romania, some of Sterne's Surrealist collages reflect on her anxiety during the war using disturbing combinations of magazine images. Based on the glue spots and cheap paper,⁵³ she probably did not intend to exhibit these pieces. This indicates the highly personal nature of these pieces as well as experimentation with forms. Most likely from 1941-42,⁵⁴ the collages show gentle figures in threatening environments. In *Untitled* (fig. 5), two women who appear to be sleeping or dead float upward across a flattened (perhaps bombed) cityscape while two ominous silhouettes drift like smoke from the landscape.

⁵² Only Ad Reinhardt and James Brooks entered military service. The military turned down Gottlieb, Pollock and Rothko. However, the general attitude emphasized contribution to the war effort; artists made art for the war effort, such as posters, parade float decorations and battle-scene illustration. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 18.

⁵³ Eckhardt, "Uninterrupted Flux," 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

One of the black figures bears “Make this a White Christmas” in white text. The innocent holiday saying⁵⁵ makes the destruction and looming black forms seem more sinister. Setting the words in this context also contrasts superficial desires with the difficulty of sustaining the most basic human needs for survival during times of war.

Another untitled piece (fig. 6) depicts a girl, with her back to the viewer, who points toward a dark crowd of people around a huge fire. A flaming hand rises from her head, perhaps conveying a warning to the viewer or expressing the girl’s inner state of alarm. The crowd suggests a Nazi demonstration⁵⁶ or some frenzied mob. In addition to fostering conformity and mob mentality (implied in Sterne’s collage), fascist leaders often implemented large programs of industrialization. Machines reference production in that sense as well as the symbolic domination of human life. War is the twin specter of materialism, both strongly suggested by machines.

Sterne relocated the pain and terror of war to symbolic imagery (instead of painting actual scenes of war) but did not withdraw into ancient history. While painters like Gottlieb and Rothko connected anxiety and fear to “primitive” man, Sterne mediated the terror of war by painting modern symbols. Although her method incorporates a wider range of symbolism than the mythic legends of cave paintings or Oceanic masks and may thus require more analysis, the modern sign facilitates direct dialogue with the pressing issues of Sterne’s time, equality, materialism and the systems of war.

Ode to Tractors: *Fortune* Commission

Developed for *Fortune* magazine, Sterne’s later machines take a different tack than her anthropographs. The commission evolved from her exploration of shaped canvases. At her 1953 show at Betty Parsons, Sterne showed paintings in a circular format, inspired by her method of

⁵⁵ The phrase may also reference ashes produced by crematoriums used in concentration camps.

⁵⁶ Eckhardt, “Uninterrupted Flux,” 15.

rotating the canvas as she worked and the rotation of the machine parts.⁵⁷ She mounted the tondo pieces on central axes and invited viewers to turn the paintings to take in the different vantage points and changes in meaning.⁵⁸ The formal change related to the representational subject-matter and her desire to convey a variety of meanings. The following year she used the circular format for her interpretation of Joy Manufacturing's "Continuous Miner," a machine that produces a constant flow of ore, for a *Fortune* article, "Seven Painters and a Machine" (the publication had a tradition of interspersing art among business articles).⁵⁹ This led to her July 1961 commission from *Fortune*, "The Artist in the Tractor Works."

The magazine arranged for Sterne to fly to Iowa and Illinois to tour John Deere factories.⁶⁰ Her work accompanied the article, "Farm Machinery Shifts Gears: Business Strategies for the 1960s."⁶¹ Clearly, the structure of the commission did not call for rebellion from the masculine, commodity-based culture or commentary on the essential qualities of humankind. The parameters of a commission may have contributed to the change in approach. In fact, her depictions were so faithful to the persona of the tractor that William Hewitt, an avid art collector and CEO of Deere & Company, purchased the set for the company.⁶²

She expanded from the mostly neutral palette of the early machines to blues and bright yellows. All of the paintings in the series feature a central figure against a hazy, undefined background; the effect is of tunneling vision when the edges go blurry. This gives the central figure a more monumental status; the complex, moving innards of the tractors stand bold against

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Eckhardt, "Uninterrupted Flux," 16.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

the foggy, perhaps frozen surroundings. The introduction that accompanied Sterne's paintings illustrates much about her process and her views of the machines:

'These are all sculptures, and the man who designed them is better than an artist. He is an artist by mistake. Very good art never aims directly at beauty, but at significance, meaning, clarification. The people who made these machines have the clarity of innocence.' This is the way complex factory machinery struck the eyes of Hedda Sterne, the sensitive Romanian-born painter who recorded these impressions of the plants where Deere & Co. manufactures these tractors and other farm equipment. She chose to paint parts and processes rather than finished machines because she was attracted primarily by 'the way the part moved and what I thought it would be doing' in such things as control-valve housings and brakes. The combine platform on a conveyer line (opposite) is a portrait of 'a complete, finished part. It's part of a combine – which is a magnificent invention. It's really miraculous what it does... I was trying to understand not how they work, but how they are. Probably the workers will suffer intensely when they see my paintings. I hope they don't say the parts couldn't work the way I painted them.'⁶³

Fortune's text emphasizes Sterne as the naïve female artist, a "sensitive Romanian-born painter."

Although she states her goal is not to understand the mechanics of the parts, the text frames her as a woman with little to no mechanical sense; she praises the machines as magnificent inventions that are "miraculous," a miracle in the sense that she cannot comprehend the process. She worries over how the educated eye will criticize her interpretation and, in the last two lines, she all but apologizes for the inaccuracy of her rendering.

Her initial quotes picture the factory worker as a hero, unwittingly crafting sculptures of great artistic value. This complements the article which examined the down-sizing of farming. *Fortune* cited the closure of 850,000 farms from 1954 to 1959 and projected the loss of 400,000 farms by 1970, with average acreage increasing.⁶⁴ The article, essentially examining factory farming practices, takes the perspective of farm equipment vendors. Thus it makes sense that *Fortune* would want to project the magnificent character of machines and their noble makers,

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ G. Bookman, "Farm Machinery Shifts Gears: Business Strategies for the 1960s," in *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*, (Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, 2006), 16.

salesmen to a shrinking pool of buyers. Granted, Sterne characterizes the workers as innocently brilliant artists, but still their status is elevated from factory grunt.

Of course, a favorable perspective of John Deere cannot be entirely attributed to *Fortune*'s editorial scheming because Sterne made those statements. However, quote selection is a major factor in the bias of a story. The audience for the commission and reputation of the magazine rest on a more conservative basis; it would be unlikely for *Fortune* to send Sterne on tours of factories to develop a critical portrayal of machines when John Deere and farmland are bastions of American patriotism.

Formally, as the excerpt says, Sterne emphasized part as opposed to whole and movement as opposed to function. However, the functionality is clearer in these paintings than her early machines. Close observation is evident: The proportions seem accurate and in paintings like *Six Cylinder Engine* and *Press Brake* a housing structure contains the intricate pieces (unlike the thin appendages and superfluous gears that extended like decorations from early figures). The contrast between figure and background also emphasizes the movement of parts. In *Main transmission Housing of the 830 Tractor* (fig. 7), vigorous brushstrokes animate the solid silver metal where it intersects with bright yellow sections and stark black outlining. In *Six Cylinder Engine* (fig. 8) the spiked and smooth camshafts or crankshafts are not fully articulated, again suggesting motion. Although she captured many details and ironically imbued the mechanical still life with motion, her most notable work in this subset of her machine series is one that diverges from this pattern: *Combine Platform* (fig. 9).

A large black splotch obscures the top of this machine while the bottom dissolves into more black. The resulting ambiguity of the figure creates a more somber, questioning tone. The upper background of light blue, connected to a fuzzy gray almost at the horizon line, gives the

feeling of a portrait against a landscape. There are arms, belts, pulleys, buttons and gears receding into the face of the machine but the blackness in the foreground prevents a clear translation. The machine loses some the veneer of purpose and production, exuding ominous mystery instead. It captures most the anxiety of the machine, the fear of an over-industrialized society filled with smog and clanking contraptions. The clear blue patch that reads as sky reinforces the anxious mood; black rises from the bottom, blooms from the top of the machine and creeps in along a thin triangle over the topmost sky. This piece is exemplary in its defiance of the smoothly functioning machine, expressing the doubt of her earlier machines in a very different form.

Despite passing through different stages, her machines symbolize humanity – as products, means of production and portraits – but emphasize different attitudes toward women and American society. Her early machines not only invite social critique but provide an alternative to “primitive” symbols. Her later machines are more formal and, particularly in conjunction with the magazine text, cast a pall over female subjectivity. That Sterne received a commission to depict tractors, large tools for arguably masculine labor, runs counter to a stereotypical female project (flowers, animals, etc.). However, she had already broken that barrier by depicting machines in 1947 and she subverted the gender structure more in her early work with her statements on materialism and exorcism, taking the male role of inventor/exorcist. Though the *Fortune* commission serves as a more simple observation and praise of machines, the new formal elements enhanced her later series.

The same ambiguity and motion characterizes Sterne’s concurrent endeavor in the New York, New York series. The texture of the background carries over as the spray-painted streaks in her buildings and bridges. Motion and light become more integral components as well. Her

description of machines as both beautiful and terrifying also applies to the major conceptual characteristic of her cityscapes: the sublime, a vision both horrifying and awe-inspiring. Sterne said in a 2007 interview "...for the sublime and the beautiful and the interesting, you don't have to look far away. You have to know how to see."⁶⁵ Thus her desire to perceive and depict the intangible, embodied in the ugly humanity of machines, also influenced her experience of New York.

New York, New York

Her metaphysical viewpoint or desire to see a different side of reality informed the New York series and her entire artistic practice. In an artist's statement in a 1954 *Arts Digest* Sterne wrote:

A.N. Whitehead says of religion, 'the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things, something which is real yet waiting to be realized, something which is a remote possibility yet the greatest of facts, something that gives meaning to all that passes and yet eludes apprehension.' The above could define what art is to the artist. He knows very well that the essentially elusive cannot be grasped and transcribed, only he doesn't believe it. Each painting is started in the hope of doing just that.⁶⁶

Just as her machines convey subject-matter more significant than the meaning of the concrete objects, her cityscapes isolate some facet of the immutable, which is intrinsic to those forms. The pursuit itself is heroic; the artist must struggle to capture the evanescence of life.

In Sterne's New York, New York series, as with her Machines, there are two groupings. Her oil-painted pieces employ intricate patterns and visible brushstrokes. Unique brushstrokes conformed to the Abstract Expressionist concern with signs of the artist's hand but the delicacy of the brushstroke and pattern did not fit in the masculine guidelines for style (sweeping, forceful brushstrokes). In the majority of the series, spray paint heightens the sense of motion and better

⁶⁵ Joan Simon, "Patterns of Thought: Hedda Sterne," *Art in America* 95, no. 2 (February 2007): 110-159, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost, accessed January 31, 2011, 117.

⁶⁶ Sterne, "Artist's Remarks," 12.

illustrates her metaphysical viewpoint; the marks merge with the representational imagery, signifying that the artist and minute details belong to a larger design. Both groups of paintings, incorporating abstraction and representation, recreate light fracturing through intersections of highways and bridges as well as the motion and density of the city. Although this mixture of styles did not please critics, Sterne's methods are essential to her philosophical pursuits: The artist summons the sublime from many sources, including city streets and skyscrapers.

Debate on Realism and Abstraction

The critical discourse on abstraction decreased Sterne's value in histories of Abstract Expressionism but the consensus among artists emphasized meaningful subject-matter, the common factor in Sterne's work. Both Greenberg⁶⁷ and Harold Rosenberg, essential critics in the formation of Abstract Expressionism (though they proposed different labels for the group), advocated total abstraction. Greenberg proposed a stringent formalism in which emotion was secondary. Rosenberg insisted that the modern painter abandons all objects and copies only the nothingness within him.⁶⁸

"Naturally, under the circumstances, there is no use looking for silos, or madonnas. They have all melted into the void. But, as I said, the void itself, you have that, just as surely as your grandfather had a sun-speckled lawn."⁶⁹ Rosenberg asserted that by rejecting representational imagery, the artist connected to a communal unconscious and thus used an absolute language (a proposed effect of "primitive" imagery as well). Formal qualities become the byproduct of the

⁶⁷ Greenberg's views evolved from his early career to the more hard-line perspectives represented in this study. See *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), for more information on his earliest criticism.

⁶⁸ Harold Rosenberg, "Intrasubjectives," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 156.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

emotional intensity of the artist's act.⁷⁰ Though Sterne shared the view of art as a powerful act that can shape identity, as I will discuss later, her retention of mimetic form disagreed with the visual components of the theory. Her language does not rely on absolutes but incorporates the varied influences of life.

In "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" Greenberg advanced the idea that innovation is tied to quality and is the strength of Modernism. Based on his study of European tradition, abstraction was the only means of innovation. Referencing Kant's theories of art, Greenberg repeatedly endorsed "disinterested contemplation,"⁷¹ the prime state for appreciation of true beauty, something he said was nearly impossible when confronted with representational imagery (i.e. a pretty girl). Taking in the painting at a single glance, the viewer should experience sudden revelation, an instantaneous connection with the unconscious.⁷² New form and content determined value.⁷³ Adding more mystery and prestige to the movement, Greenberg lauded the inexpressible qualities of abstract art, the emotion and presence only possible in color, shape, line and texture.⁷⁴

The theories of Rosenberg and Greenberg, together with prejudice against non-white, female or homosexual artists, regulated the reception and success of Abstract Expressionists. However, artists also contributed to the discourse on abstraction and provided a counterpoint, one more supportive for Sterne's work. Gottlieb, during the 1950 roundtable sessions,

⁷⁰ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 192.

⁷¹ Clement Greenberg, "The Case for Abstract Art," *Adventures of the Mind*, (New York: Knopf, 1959), 69.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷³ Clement Greenberg, "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" *New Literary History*, 3:1(1971:Autumn): 172.

⁷⁴ Greenberg, "The Case for Abstract Art," 72.

acknowledged possible significance for less abstract forms.⁷⁵ His work, heavily tied to “primitive” symbolism, retained vaguely representational forms.⁷⁶

In 1943, before the movement had solidified, Mark Rothko explained, “Neither Mr. Gottlieb’s painting nor mine should be considered abstract paintings. It is not their intention either to create or to emphasize a formal color-space arrangement. They depart from natural representation only to intensify the expression of the subject implied in the title – not to dilute or efface it.”⁷⁷ While Rothko primarily renounced the lack of subject-matter in non-objective art, he also clarified the purpose and common denominator of Abstract Expressionist art, material that inspired transcendental experience.

For Rothko, mimetic form hindered that purpose because people could not or would not look beyond. The formal transition was a byproduct rather than end in itself. “I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It really is a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one’s arms again.”⁷⁸ He connected a tremendous freedom with the new *subject-matter*, not necessarily the new forms. Sterne definitely followed this creed, using all forms that spoke to her of the sublime.

Clearly, not all artists followed the rules set by Rosenberg and Greenberg. Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Sterne used the inspiration of their exterior surroundings instead of only listening to Rosenberg’s inner void. Yet de Kooning and Kline gained considerably higher status in the movement. The difference lies in the level of abstraction and signs of identity. Sterne did not follow the definition of quality by pushing toward complete abstraction and using

⁷⁵ Robert Goodnough, ed., “Excerpts from Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 163.

⁷⁶ *The Cadmium Sound*, 1954, and *Sentinel*, 1951, use the vaguely primitive pictographic language that appears more frequently in earlier paintings; arrows and simplified human forms fill the foreground of both pieces.

⁷⁷ Gottlieb, “Excerpt from ‘Art in New York,’” 127.

⁷⁸ Mark Rothko, “The Romantics Were Prompted,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 142.

masculine brushstrokes and large canvases. Although her spray-painted pieces strongly connected form to content, that gesture did not proclaim her identity, a problem at a time when quality, subject-matter and identity were intertwined. Nor did Sterne create oppositional forces in her formal language. Her emphasis is on subtle variation and thus questions of knowledge rather than absolutes.

De Kooning and Kline also translated life in the city into paint but masculine rhetoric and stylistic dogma provided them much higher acclaim. While Rosenberg and Greenberg ascribed an immediacy to completely formal language (realization in an instant, acting elevated above thinking), popular meta-narratives, namely the theories of Jung and Nietzsche, added violence to the visual language, creating gendered, oppositional roles for the primary forces in psychic life. As with Surrealism, part of the appeal of these theories lay in the rejuvenation of society after war.

Philosophy of Masculine Subjectivity

Struggle, evil, cataclysm, and the need to rebuild were not fictions but realities of life in the early 1940s. The war brought an end to the uneasy alliance of art and politics that had existed in the thirties...To be sure, revitalization and regeneration were sought, but now increasingly through individual as well as cultural transformation.⁷⁹

As evident in “primitive” signs, American artists recognized the horror of the war and pursued art as a means to transform humanity. Nietzsche’s and Jung’s conception of the artist as hero added to the sense of importance and urgency. Jung portrayed the artist as a seer or shaman, able to tap into the vital communal unconscious and resolve the psychic warfare by bringing the unconscious and conscious sides in balance.⁸⁰

Nietzsche proposed a similarly important role for artists: “The Dionysian artist is one of the few to have ‘courage and freedom’ before powerful enemies, before sublime calamities,

⁷⁹ Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 17.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 45.

before dreadful enemies, to choose nevertheless, to celebrate humanity and to affirm life. Art is the great stimulation of life, an intoxication and its own will to life.”⁸¹ The scientific “Death of God” created a need for a hero to fill the void and raise society to a higher level. The primitive was important to Nietzsche only so much as it could help create a society without Christian asceticism, not as biological or intellectual regression. In that process, Apollonian reason must mediate the Dionysian creative impulses.⁸²

Critics and artists associated the irrational, unconscious, primitive forces with femininity. Admittedly, not all New York School artists read Jung and Nietzsche. However, there was a general cultural milieu: “It goes without saying that the artists are not academic intellectuals; rather, they express their context in the latent and manifest content of their shared personal idioms. So much is shared and believed that open allusion is scarce.”⁸³ Essentially the connections to contemporary influences cannot be ignored. Artists who had contact with these sources⁸⁴ transmitted the ideas to others who expressed them in less specific terms.

As Abstract Expressionism progressed, the Jungian framing of the poles of the self – unconscious, other within and rational exterior self – made identification with the feminine an obstacle for women.

The increasing emphasis on division within the self exacerbated woman’s disqualification from subjectivity. Being made into anima, earth mother, and locus of sexual desire made woman an object, not a subject, of Abstract Expressionist painting, even when the Abstract Expressionist painter was a woman. The pictures interpellate male viewers within the dominant ideology’s evolving model of self, and what holds for viewers holds as well for producers.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid, 55.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., xxi.

⁸⁴ Pollock and Martha Graham underwent Jungian analysis and Gottlieb said, “We’re all of us influenced by Freud, I guess. I’ve been a Jungian for a long time.” Newman, Still, Parsons, Lee Krasner and John Graham (a personal friend of Sterne) were also “familiar with” Jung. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 43.

⁸⁵ Michael Leja. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism, Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 262.

Rather than be able to channel these powerful forces, this philosophy left women in the role of object rather than subject.⁸⁶ Male viewers and producers held the key positions in the formation of the dominant ideology (as privileged over women to begin with) and thus agreed with signs of male subjectivity.

The feminine unconscious steadily became ominous and threatening. The act of painting, as a battle between opposing forces, sometimes resulted in violent gestures. Motherwell wrote in 1944, “The fundamental criticism of automatism is that the unconscious cannot be directed, that it presents none of the possible choices which, when taken, constitute any expression’s form. To give oneself over completely to the unconscious is to become a slave.”⁸⁷ He casts the unconscious as a malevolent virus that will overtake the body if given a chance. To tame this fear, he reasons the artist can transform the unconscious into a “plastic weapon with which to invent new forms.”⁸⁸ As this mysterious force by itself does not lead to “any expression’s form” and can make man a slave, it (she) must be controlled. Woman is not only irrational and voiceless by herself but she needs a master.

Clearly, the roles created through extension of Jung’s and Nietzsche’s theories⁸⁹ did not offer much agency or favorable framing for female Abstract Expressionists. Sterne’s artist statements and work reveal a different perspective on reality and painting, one based in change and subtleties rather than fixed roles and sweeping judgments. These theories explain some of the difference between the work of de Kooning and Sterne, despite their common source of inspiration. De Kooning’s work, in the intense color and violent brushstroke, shows

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Robert Motherwell, “The Modern Painter’s World,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 131.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Sterne probably encountered these ideas through colleagues or her year of studying philosophy in Bucharest. “Chronology,” 117.

confrontation and assertion of self. With more muted colors, variation in value and delicate strokes, Sterne's oil paintings evince an energetic harmony and hint at a more flexible definition of reality.

Urban Abstraction: Sterne, de Kooning and Kline

In addition to revealing the metaphysical, Sterne's cityscapes build on the raw sensory experience of New York. In an exhibition catalogue featuring one of these works, Sterne explained that she painted "with a spray gun – because it could not be done in skywriting with jet planes – an old dream of mine. It is about New York – New York seemed to me at the time like a gigantic carousel in continuous motion – on many levels – lines approaching swiftly and curving back again forming an intricate ballet of reflections and sounds."⁹⁰ With a certain exuberance and whimsy, she praised the beautiful choreography of the city's motion, the rhythm and lines that naturally occurred all around her. Her gestures recreate her experience of New York.⁹¹

In contrast to the lightness and child-like play reflected in Sterne's statement about New York, Irving Sandler asserts that de Kooning drew upon the darker sides of the city: "[de Kooning] sought to create a new urban art, that is, to express the restlessness, claustrophobia, density, rawness, violence and ambiguity, of the city. Indeed, de Kooning's painting of the late 1940s and 1950s felt like a walk down a Manhattan street."⁹² Sterne draws on a similar tone, including density, restlessness, rawness and ambiguity, but violence and claustrophobia appear less, if at all. Her paintings project a sense of looking upward, over and through because of the light and dark contrast; white highlights hint at sunlight filtering through buildings. De

⁹⁰ Sterne quoted in Eckhardt, "Uninterrupted Flux," 17.

⁹¹ Some of these canvases emphasize the drama of the city with larger scale; *New York No. 1* (1954) is 86 3/16 by 50 1/4 inches and *New York VIII* (1954) is a similar size. However, more of the paintings stay in the range of 35 by 60 inches, and none of her pieces approached the much larger scale of some Pollock paintings (*One: Number 31, 1950* is a whopping 8' 10" x 17' 5 5/8").

⁹² Irving Sandler, *From Avant-garde to Pluralism: An On-The-Spot History*, (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2006), 24.

Kooning's paintings almost assault the viewer with the cacophony of colors and slashing brushstrokes.

A useful comparison is in *New York VIII* (1954) (fig. 10) and de Kooning's *Composition* (1955) (fig. 11). In *New York*, an oil painting, Sterne recreates the constant movement and dense structure of the city in the sweeping, overlapping dark lines. Although there are vaguely identifiable supports and cross sections of a bridge or highway, her thinning brushstrokes reassert a flat picture plane and break or distort the image. It is not a pristine cross-section of the city and the values are mostly dark and grayish but highlights produce movement. The white collecting in the upper half and a few specks accenting the bottom create the illusion of being in the city with the sky somewhere far above the thick fabric of buildings. These white spots also expand out of the angular lines, creating the sensation of fogginess, snow or regaining sight after being blinded.

These visual characteristics correspond to Sterne's anti-reductionist attitude. Similar to her "polyglot impulse" which led her to expand on an idea (the metaphysical) through many different languages, never resting on one style or representational image, her hazy photographic style vision of New York displays ambiguity and subtlety. Although Sterne may strive to apprehend an ultimate connective force, in her paintings, weighing of relative values forms a "signal occupation,"⁹³ casting doubt on anything absolute. Thus for Sterne, art may be a process of gaining knowledge but she may also ask what can we know?⁹⁴ In *New York VIII*, the beauty arises in the spaces between sharpness and ambiguity, between vision and blindness.

In contrast, de Kooning's *Composition* discards any physical reference and uses sharply contrasting color and visible brushstrokes; yellow, blue, red, white and black fight and claw at one another. The larger swaths of red unify the composition by extending to all ends of the

⁹³ Ashton, "A Cosmopolitan of the Imagination," 22.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

canvas but the scratching tearing brushstrokes speak of disorder. According to Sandler, de Kooning's images,⁹⁵ "clogged with paint-laden forms" evoke the "squalor and violence of street life." While Sterne developed a more lyrical ode to the city, incorporating negative space as well as energetic brushstroke, de Kooning filled his work with rough expressions and loud color.⁹⁶ The different mood evoked by de Kooning is not lesser than Sterne's subtle harmony but simply evidence of a different experience of the city or painting itself and perhaps a reference to Jungian conflict.

The city also inspired Kline but in a more light-hearted way than de Kooning. His experience of the city matches the effervescence of Sterne's perspective:

Franz Kline's thrusting black-and-white swaths also allude to the ever-changing city – to massive sections of partly demolished or constructed skyscrapers and bridges. But unlike de Kooning's images, which are compacted, ambiguous and anxious, Kline's are expansive, bold and exuberant. He once said: 'Hell, half the world wants to be like Thoreau at Walden worrying about the noise of traffic on the way to Boston; the other half use up their lives being part of that noise. I like the second half. Right?'⁹⁷

Kline rejoices in being part of a city jam-packed with people, buildings and noise; he leaves the anxious part to de Kooning. At least one of Kline's paintings refers to New York in the title (others name specific locations such Pennsylvania or Bethlehem) but his working method provides the clearest support for observation of man-made structures in his images. Based on a chance projection of a drawing onto a wall, Kline discovered that the magnified lines "gained

⁹⁵ Interestingly, even in de Kooning's figurative work, Sandler finds the urban experience. "The Women of the early 1950s, big-busted, with eyes crossed and teeth bared, both violent and voluptuous, are equally urban in feeling – city-bred pinup girls." The women literally embody the darker side of the city, violence, anxiety and squalor included.

⁹⁶ Sandler also claimed that de Kooning borrowed from "graffiti on tenement walls" (*From Avant-garde to Pluralism: An On-The-Spot History*, 24). This suggests that de Kooning blurs the boundaries of high and low art (or non-art at the time). However, Sterne accomplishes this more clearly with the use of spray paint, which I will discuss later. Although she may not have intended to reference graffiti, spray paint is a sign of the industrial and every-day, curiously transformed into ballads of the city.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

abstraction and sweeping force.”⁹⁸ Often described in the brushstroke or contrast of elements, force was a fundamental sign of high quality associated with male painters. Though Sterne and Kline share subtle variation (particularly in Kline’s white spaces) and the city as inspiration, Kline’s work gained an advantage in its force.

The new process guided much of Kline’s work after 1940: “This discovery inspired all of his subsequent painting; in fact many canvases reproduce a drawing on a much larger scale, fusing the improvised and the deliberate, the miniature and the monumental.”⁹⁹ In a symbolic sense, Kline’s fusion of the large and small mirrors the interest shared by the Surrealists and Sterne in bridging boundaries between the ordinary and fantastic, conscious and unconscious. Kline’s magnification of representational imagery also breaks the critical taboo of mixing realism and abstraction, even if the source image is hard to decipher. The case was not the same for Sterne. Facing the additional obstacles of her gender, she fell prey to the myth of pure abstraction, even though she met essential conditions of the movement – serious subject-matter, rendered in some combination of realism and abstraction, which had greater consequence for society in a time of upheaval.

In *Chief* (1950), which references “a locomotive Kline remembered from his childhood, when he had loved the railway,”¹⁰⁰ memory, emotion and abstraction mix together:

Many viewers see machinery in Kline's images, and there are lines in *Chief* that imply speed and power as they rush off the edge of the canvas, swelling tautly as they go. But Kline claimed to paint ‘not what I see but the feelings aroused in me by that looking,’ and *Chief* is abstract, an uneven framework of horizontals and verticals broken by loops and curves.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ The Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA Highlights*, in “Franz Kline. (American, 1910-1962),” MoMA: The Collection, accessed February 27, 2011, http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3148&page_number=1&template_id=1&sort_order=1

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Although the title comes from a specific object from Kline's childhood and his process developed from figurative studies, the ultimate inspiration (Kline's emotion) and bold formal qualities confirm the painting as Abstract Expressionist. Although Kline earned a more prominent place in the movement,¹⁰² he and Sterne display significant similarities.

In Kline's *New York, New York* (1953) (fig. 12), which measures 79 by 50 ½ inches, roughly painted thick black lines contrast with spaces of white paint. The details in the whites support Kline's rejection of comparisons to calligraphy; he did not simply splash black onto the white. Though the black portions suggest more of a stroke, the thickness makes it possible for the white to fluctuate between positive and negative. The intensity of gesture combined with crossing vertical, diagonal and horizontal strokes produce lively movement and expansiveness. His lines do not extend rigidly to the edge of the canvas and restrict the interior spaces but appear to be frozen before leaping off the edge of the painting. In Sterne's *New York No. 1* (1954) (fig. 13) the indefinite structures of her bridges and receding gray spaces echo the varied opacity of Kline's white areas.

In Sterne's piece, the lower right presents the most similar high intensity contrast of the Kline's iconic paintings. Black lines intersect to form repeating diamonds and her skipping brushstroke stands out against the white. Fragmented black and white verticals separate Sterne's painting in half; the upper left side consists of faint details and textures embedded in blue while the upper right displays a large diamond with a cruciform shape in the middle. Repeated bridge forms arch across the bottom half. The white parts diffuse like spots of sunlight but do not suggest one source of light as in as in *New York VIII*. *New York No. 1* depicts a similar motion and density but also a fogginess and ambiguity in the layering and thin, textured brushstrokes.

¹⁰² David Anfam asserts that Kline's gesture "has the assurance which distinguishes founders from acolytes." (*Abstract Expressionism*, 169)

The small details build into the large man-made forms to create scale in the work and allude to the vastness of the city. At least in their urban paintings, Sterne and Kline shared much in visual inspiration as well as tone. Sterne shows the exhilarating structure and tempo of the city by amassing many details in the seemingly infinitely layered bridges and highways. Kline uses those same structures in close-up form and conveys a vigorous tone through brushstroke. Although the fine details provide the contrast between sharpness and amorphous shape that makes *New York No. 1* interesting, the small densely packed brushstrokes do not convey force like Kline's marks. In criticism of Sterne's machines, lack of forces was a negative attribute.

Delicacy and Force

In the eyes of Greenberg, Sterne lacked force. Greenberg's review of a 1947 exhibition was a compliment couched in masculine critique.

The most recent evidence to support the supremacy of the abstract was provided by Adolph Gottlieb's latest one-man show at the Kootz Gallery and Hedda Sterne's latest show at Betty Parson's. The second show is even more striking testimony than the first, for whereas Gottlieb proved himself as a painter on a high level several years ago, Miss Sterne is now taking her first steps in abstract painting and would seem to have as yet little more to bring to bear than a delicate sensibility and a careful taste. Nevertheless, this show of hers contained at least five pictures whose sureness and originality lift them far above the general run of stuff on Fifty-seventh Street. Admittedly, this art lacks force – but force is not everything; there is also room for delicacy.¹⁰³

Greenberg figured force and delicacy as opposing aspects. He applauded her more abstract work but claims she has little to contribute other than a “delicate sensibility” and “careful taste,” perhaps good qualities for picking out curtains but not worth much in painting at the time. Although he claimed there is room for delicacy, male painters who admitted to feminine characteristics had to reinforce their masculine identity. De Kooning, when asked about his *Woman* series, alluded to painting the feminine in himself, then immediately asserted his

¹⁰³ Greenberg, “Art,” 629.

heterosexuality by saying he liked beautiful women.¹⁰⁴ Thus small doses of femininity provided contrast to the acceptable masculine characteristics for the dominant painters but the opposite was not true for non-white, homosexual or female artists.

Delicacy and taste are also closely related to the decorative, a baneful characterization for many women. Later in the same 1947 review, Greenberg warned against the decorative: “Miss Sterne’s art is not quite enough as yet; there is a danger that it will content itself with decorative successes: the effect is of panels rather than easel-pictures.”¹⁰⁵ Anne Ryan battled this caveat. She mixed textiles into her small scale collages, emphasizing the formal textural properties as well as concrete associations with cloth.¹⁰⁶ Yet critics declared Ryan’s work as too decorative, a designation that Elaine de Kooning and many other female painters tried to avoid.¹⁰⁷ Although Greenberg claimed there is room for delicacy and force, female painters experienced disdain for asserting hints of feminine characteristics.

Yet, just as in Sterne’s machines where delicacy conveys fragility and thus adds dimension to her portraits, the delicacy of her cityscapes is an asset. If these characteristics framed her identity and meant lack of force, so be it. Her flickering brushstrokes multiply into the grandeur of the city and the monumentality of her vision of the sublime. Sterne’s New York pieces in spray paint retain ambiguity and some of the layering but employ a very different gesture. The harmony of her oil paintings becomes more evident in the soft texturing of spray paint.

¹⁰⁴ Marcia Brennan, “Fragmented Bodies and Canonical Nudes: Painting and Reading in de Kooning’s Woman Series,” *Modernism’s Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 70.

¹⁰⁵ Greenberg, “Art,” 629.

¹⁰⁶ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Spray Paint and the Sublime

While Sterne's thick sweeping lines recall Kline's or de Kooning's gestures, spray paint effaces the small variations in texture that result from a brush. In Sterne's *New York, N.Y.* (1955) (fig. 15) arching, intersecting lines weave a hazy mirage of a city structure, similar to the skeleton of a skyscraper or beams of a bridge. The lines are not sharp and biting like de Kooning's slashes nor varied in thickness (in width and built-up texture) like Kline's strokes. Instead Sterne used the spray paint to achieve a uniform thickness of line with haze at the edges where the paint particles began to thin and dissipate. In the upper left, a small spot of white mimics a glimpse of the sun or its reflection. The piece almost recreates the feeling of looking at the sun and then trying to refocus on concrete objects, an increased sense of obscurity from her oil works. The forms are flat in texture but become slightly illusionistic in relation to one another; the larger red lines to the left set against the two arched forms, one inside the other, suggest the recession of space.

Spray paint facilitated both a very spontaneous, personal gesture and one that hides the painter's hand. Instead of many hairs in a brush responding to the artist's flick of the hand or sweep of the arm, the can of spray paint emits pigment from one point, resulting in more uniformity of line and a fuzzy melting quality. Spray paint is also a very immediate medium and Sterne related it to physical experience: "The speed with which she could move her arm across a canvas holding a spray can mimicked the blurred speed of cars passing on highways and bridges."¹⁰⁸ Her gesture both recreated experiences of the exterior world and recorded her bodily movement.

The majority of works employ smoothness of form but in *Third Avenue El* (1952-1953) (fig. 15) Sterne created yellow and blue speckled patterns on top of the darker lines, breaking the

¹⁰⁸ Eckhardt, "Consistent Inconsistency," 9.

illusion of a real structure to emphasize the medium. The tension between the artificiality of the two-dimensional canvas coated with industrial spray paint and the figurative references add further dimension to Sterne's cities. They are both real and imagined, painted object and illusion. Although tension, motion and density recreate the conflict of the city, the soft ambiguous texture and repetition of line establish an overall wholeness and cohesiveness of forms, alluding to a more zen-like urban atmosphere. This hint of a city tied together with a metaphysical undercurrent corresponds to Sterne's sense of being a small part of the "uninterrupted flux."¹⁰⁹

Kant and the Sublime

In contrast to Sterne's view, Immanuel Kant based the experience of the sublime in unity of subject and subjugation of the other, similar to the poles of popular meta-narratives (Jung and Nietzsche). The basic problem that Kant grappled with was how to assert the unity and freedom of a subject derived from nature. Men¹¹⁰ were animals subject to nature's laws but became free by asserting their role as "rational and free agents responsible for discovering the principles of reason."¹¹¹ The conundrum for the Abstract Expressionists was roughly the inverse, how to reconnect with the unconscious and creative force in order to balance the rational side which had caused so much destruction during two world wars.¹¹² However, Abstract Expressionist theory (based in Jung and Nietzsche) matched Kant's theory because balance of the forces gave way to control of the feminine unconscious in later years. This matches the domination of Kant's imaginative force.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁰ I use men in the sense of mankind, often a term which excluded women as irrational creatures.

¹¹¹ Bonnie Mann, "Feminism and the Sublime," *Women's Liberation and the Sublime*, (New York: Oxford University press, 2006), 37.

¹¹² Overly rational society suppressed the necessary subconscious influences and led to inner psychic strife, reflected in wars and worldly disorder. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 44.

For Kant, the sublime is only that which surpasses imaginative capacity for understanding; only reason can comprehend the vast terror of knowledge.

Reason demands that the imagination provide for him a representation of the magnitude (the mathematical sublime) and might (the dynamical sublime) of nature, which threatens his sovereignty, and striving to fulfill this demand in the act of comprehension, the imagination is broken...But the imagination's very failure becomes the rational subject's success, since reason *can* comprehend the might and magnitude with which it is confronted. The Kantian subject uses what most approximates the sublime in nature as a mirror, which allows him to experience his own might and magnitude as sublime.¹¹³

The sublime exceeds the imagination, allowing reason to relocate the sublime to within man instead of nature. The poles of imagination and reason were gendered similar to the unconscious and conscious forces of Jung and Nietzsche. In Kant's mind, as women¹¹⁴ identified more closely with nature, they could not perceive the sublime. Kant juxtaposed feelings of the sublime, an exaltation of the rational male subject, to feelings of beauty, an extension of nature and the feminine: "In the natural world, those things that evoke a sense of eternity, the infinite, and grandeur are sublime; those that evoke a sense of inconstancy, multiplicity, and delicacy are beautiful."¹¹⁵ Thus Abstract Expressionism's battle between the conscious and unconscious parallels Kant's "conflict-ridden relation of imagination and reason."¹¹⁶ In both cases, male actors affirm agency and freedom through control of a lesser female force, an experience characterized as sublime or profound.

Though Kant's conflict matched the psychological battles of Jung and Nietzsche, direct reference to the sublime emphasized harmony. Fitting Kant's philosophy to a newer spiritual

¹¹³ Mann, "Feminism and the Sublime," 46.

¹¹⁴ Kant wrote extensively of women's rights as well, defining their success according to how well they fulfilled the obligation of appearances as "thinglike" people. Fortunately, marriage guaranteed that man govern woman just as he reigned in his animal side with reason.

¹¹⁵ Mann, "Feminism and the Sublime," 38.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

need, Abstract Expressionism¹¹⁷ retained formal properties suggestive of the sublime and the importance of the artist's subjectivity but discarded some of the brutality inscribed in the early conceptions of sublime content. The relocation of the sublime to within, rather than in nature, was appealing to many Abstract Expressionists. Newman advocated a similar process: "Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our feelings."¹¹⁸

Descriptions of the sublime used Kantian indicators – boundlessness, formlessness, a combination of terror and awe – but called it the triumph of emotion rather than reason, the inundation of logic with raw feeling (hence expressionism). In his 1961 article, "The Abstract Sublime," Rosenblum compares the work of Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock, canonical figures, to John Martin, Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner, noting the lingering elements of Romanticism and sublime landscapes.

Lest the dumbfounding size of these paintings prove insufficient to paralyze the spectator's habits of seeing and thinking, both Ward and Still insist on a comparably bewildering structure... And not the least awesome thing about Still's work is the paradox that the more elemental and monolithic its vocabulary becomes, the more complex and mysterious its effects.¹¹⁹

Magnitude and obscurity constitute the sublime as well as the complexity which can only emerge from simplicity. Rosenblum also distinguishes a calmer, more subdued sublime. Rothko creates the sublime in the "luminous, hushed stillness" of his fields in contrast to Pollock who, according

¹¹⁷ In his pronouncements on the virtues of abstraction, Greenberg drew on Kant's theories of sublime aesthetics (emphasis on disinterested contemplation). In addition, as I have mentioned, many artists spoke of transcendental experience and the need for a serious subject-matter. So although the Abstract Expressionists may not have read Kant or subscribed to all his viewpoints, his theory of aesthetics, as one of the first to define the sublime, presents a foundation and a context in which to process these artist statements and critical responses.

¹¹⁸ Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 137.

¹¹⁹ Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays by Robert Rosenblum*, (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 74.

to Rosenblum, unleashes limitless, teeming power which verges on the brink of sublime chaos.¹²⁰ Though the emphasis switched from reason to emotion and immersion in the sublime rather than complicated navigation of it, the qualifiers remained the same. Those terms tended to exclude the smaller, less forceful paintings of women.

Rather than defining the sublime as a conflict within the ego or Kant's confrontation of subject and other, Sterne reduced her part in the creation of the sublime by locating it outside herself in spray-painted gesture and figurative reference. Sterne's painting, *New York No. 1*, illustrates some of the delicacy of her work yet it conveys a spiritual experience beyond the beautiful as well. The two categories could work in conjunction, and in an urban environment not normally connected to the sublime. The delicate details help create a sense of the vastness of the city; the multiplicity of her figures alludes to the grandeur of the endless motion and energy of New York. Her New York series demonstrates the fusion with the environment (replacing nature with the new industrial, urban setting) that Kant described as inferior in comparison to the sublime. Reason and the will of the artist do not triumph over technique and environment. Thus she is closer to the Abstract Expressionist definition of the sublime (bits of Rothko's "luminous, hushed stillness" surface in her spray-painted marks) but she defies the mandate of simplicity (i.e. complete abstraction). Her gesture and figurative reference show that she did not relocate the sublime to within herself but found exaltation in her surroundings and in the metamorphosis of identity within the vastness of the concrete world.

Instrument vs. Actor: Sterne's Artistic Roles

As the similarities to de Kooning and Kline suggest, Sterne's abstracted cityscapes fit more into the canonical conception of Abstract Expressionism. Within a common formal and conceptual dialogue, she distinguished her style through the detailed layering of her oil paintings

¹²⁰ Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," 76.

and the soft ambiguity of her spray-painted works. These formal characteristics, as well as her use of exterior source material, de-emphasize ego as the sole source of profound experience. This contrasts with the typical role of the artist in Abstract Expressionism, which emphasizes the subject (as a conflation of subject-matter and artist), but matches her criticism of self-aggrandizing art. Sterne disagreed with the introspective drive of her time: "The intention, the purpose, is not to show your talent but to show *something*. This is very important. Because I grew up and lived in a period of ego, ego, ego, ego. And I was always anti-ego...I had a very great urgency to show, to share...I discovered things and wanted to share them."¹²¹ She decried the influence of ego on the goals of painting. It mutated the expression of relevant subject matter into a show of the artist's virtuosity.

Eckhardt, one of Sterne's biographers, interpreted Sterne's comments as a total dismissal of self-discovery. "...instead of directly expressing a personal, interior struggle on canvas (as some critics describe Pollock and de Kooning's paintings), Sterne translated her sensory experience of particular exterior spaces into a uniquely visual language of motion."¹²² Eckhardt claimed that Sterne's work differs from Pollock's because she took inspiration from her sensory experiences, from the external world, while Pollock battled himself (his unconscious) on the canvas. Her experience of New York corresponds to this; at least part of her goal is to recreate the motion, light and rhythm of the world.

Eckhardt further reasoned that Sterne removed herself from the process entirely:

Just as Sterne did not associate a national identity with her painting process or style, she similarly separated her own identity and vision from the painting. Instead it is the painting itself that 'takes life and fights back.' Sterne considered 'self-discovery' far too limiting and repetitive. Then, as now, she values the ideas she finds 'out there' more than those within her: 'People think they have the idea. And I think more of myself as an

¹²¹ Simon, "Patterns of Thought: Hedda Sterne," 114.

¹²² Eckhardt, "Uninterrupted Flux," 18.

optical instrument. And what I feel and see is out there and I perceive it. It's not something that I fabricate out of nothing.'¹²³

Eckhardt cast Sterne as purely a medium for outside experience. These statements take Sterne's denial of ego to extremes. The role of an instrument is only a step above the complete lack of agency in the Jungian unconscious. Eckhardt eliminated the personal elements in Sterne's work to emphasize external inspiration. Though self-discovery alone cannot encompass Sterne's artistic practice, personal investment and risk were significant components in her concept of art. Just the symbolism of her machines indicates a greater level of interaction with the painting and her own psyche.

Although Sterne took inspiration from the outside world (clear in her figurative elements), her sources of significant subject-matter fluctuated; she embodied many roles as a painter, including masculine ones. If we examine Sterne's earlier statements, we will see that her role as instrument did not mean a suppression of identity. In her artist's statement from the 1954 *Art Digest*, she uses masculine metaphor and describes an instrument as more than a passive conduit:

Covering a canvas is a very complicated and deadly serious game. There are strict rules and one can't possibly cheat. The artist's position might be likened to that of a bull fighter in an arena, only for the artist all moments have the intensity of the bullfight's one 'moment of truth.' Each brushstroke exposes you to yourself with complete intransigence – you might as well be booed or cheered by a big audience. And again, like some sort of sportsman who eats and sleeps in a way designed to keep him fit, the artist incessantly strives to 'free himself from all that is superfluous to himself' in order to coordinate his capacities and to become a more perceptive and better performing instrument.¹²⁴

Sterne related the role of instrument to the self-improvement of a sportsman, a masculine, active role. She also described the instrument as perceptive, able to process the exterior world, not just channel it. This instrument relates more to the Surrealist automatism that Sterne used for her

¹²³ Eckhardt, "Consistent Inconsistency," 9.

¹²⁴ Sterne, "Documents From Studio to Gallery," 4.

1941 collages. At first, the artist allowed the play of unconscious forces but completion required the control of the artist, a structuring of the flow of thoughts.

Many artists considered themselves instruments in this sense. Even Pollock acknowledged a certain level of subservience to the creative force of the painting:

When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the *painting has a life of its own*. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. [second emphasis added]¹²⁵

This description evokes more symbiosis than Sterne's viewpoint; she stated that the painting 'takes life and fights back' and the bullfighter metaphor is wrought with conflict, while Pollock desired harmony, a sort of collaboration. Yet the artist's role is similar. He or she must allow the painting to have "a life of its own" and facilitate, through violence or communion, the translation to the canvas.

In this manner, Sterne again asserted a masculine role, among many others. However, she did not limit herself to this role and particularly not within the Jungian sense. The latter would lead to a paradox of subjectivity; she cannot be the creative anima and the controlling, rational medium. Self-discovery may have been too limiting in itself but it presented one of many roles for Sterne to choose from (as with her myriad styles and sources of inspiration). Her description of the "deadly serious game" also indicates nothing less than a sharp confrontation with self: "Each brushstroke exposes you to yourself with complete intransigence." The canvas is as obstinate as a mirror. This is strikingly similar to Rosenberg's description of the role art and artists.

¹²⁵ Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism, Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 139.

Rosenberg elevated art-making to a mystical process inextricably tied to life. “The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.”¹²⁶ Although Sterne did not take the path that Rosenberg insisted on (liberation from exterior reference like politics and tradition), she certainly saw herself as venturing to “depths” in which she “might find reflected the true image”¹²⁷ of her identity. Painting was an act of self-discovery, perhaps even rebirth.

Sterne framed painting as a process that changed the maker and could be very self-revelatory. A greater interest in mystical ritual also shaped her perspective (a twist on the Abstract Expressionist interest in myth).

Someone has said that art is really a form of alchemy. You only work with two or three basic substances, and you work, work, work and now and then you discover something, by a miracle. But the real miracle is that every time that you make a discovery, the alchemist is changed. Well, this is exactly what happens with art. Art is really a process of changing the artist. Having made something, you are another person. But it’s not a turning out of objects, it is a way of functioning.¹²⁸

She thought of painting as an arduous magical process which ultimately changed the artist. Each discovery not only transformed Sterne but contributed to the next step in her process. Art is about translating and changing both the interior and exterior world. Just as Rosenberg commended the fusion of art and life, so Sterne called art, in all its personal alchemy, a “way of functioning.”

Shifting to accommodate the wily, ephemeral sublime, Sterne constantly reconstructed her relationship to painting. Similar to art as alchemy, machines, as a window into the artist’s desires, constitute a self-reflective practice. Her reference to Picasso envisions art as a defense strategy, or a way to mediate the terror of the world. Counter to expectations for female painters,

¹²⁶ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 191.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹²⁸ Gamble, “Introduction,” 10.

she also assumed masculine roles, mediating both exterior beauty and internal struggle. Sterne incorporated roles and formal characteristics outside the parameters of Abstract Expressionism but also worked within the rhetoric of the movement, becoming her own bullfighter and sportsman in a process of self-discovery.

Conclusion

Hedda Sterne's paintings challenge classification in the mixture of diverse subject-matter, influence and style. Her *Machines* and *New York, New York* series simultaneously belong in Abstract Expressionism and, with the work of other under-represented artists, demand an expansion of the definition of the movement. Her work from the '40s and '50s shares some major points with the Abstract Expressionists but deviates enough to be Sterne's voice and not an echo of the "greats."

Subtle differences distinguish divisions within both series. The first army of *Machines* registers a frailty and humor that does not arise in the Abstract Expressionist's primitive signs, but her mechanical imaginings are still symbols of society and essential, if menacing, characteristics of humanity. She fast-forwarded to modernity instead of idolizing the elemental "primitive." The *John Deere* commissioned works do not register the same critique of endless consumption (of objects and women) but shows the germination of a formal style prominent in her cityscapes. The dual exploration of internal and external (machines as a glimpse into the inner workings of the artist and society) also surfaces in the *New York* series but more in the guise of a metaphysical journey or unity of self and surroundings.

The distinction in materials becomes important to her urban series. Her delicate gestures in oil paint defy Kant's definition of the sublime (not to mention his low expectations for the female perceptive capacity) and by extension the masculine precedent for that ultimate form of

spirituality. Both her oil and spray-paint vistas align with the Abstract Expressionist transformation of the sublime into a union of self and awe-inspiring environment (as opposed to a violent struggle) but spray paint further assimilates Sterne's brushstroke, a sign of the artist/her identity, into the city with the fuzzy, melting texture of the lines. Thus her forms correspond to her subject-matter, a major concern of Abstract Expressionism.

Although the city inspired Kline and de Kooning as well, Sterne struggled against the criticism of figurative elements and signs of delicacy. Her spray-painted cities use a reproducible yet personal gesture and mimetic form, defying critically accepted characteristics of Abstract Expressionism. At a time when pure abstraction and "unique" personal gestures determined originality and thus quality, Sterne's methods garnered more smug dismissals than accolades. Yet, as I have shown, artists like Gottlieb and Rothko believed the rejection of representational imagery was more an effect of the search for meaningful subject-matter than an end in itself. Sterne expressed the same concepts as the Abstract Expressionists – self-discovery, eternal symbols and metaphysical signs – without sacrificing forms that she found meaningful.

Thus an Abstract Expressionism that incorporates Sterne's accomplishments expands the lexicon of relevant forms beyond pure abstraction and violent gestures. Sterne discovered the sublime in cities and signs of humanity in machines: Innovations in form and subject-matter can be representational and abstract. Histories of the period can only benefit from a re-examination of the motives and inspirations of the canonical artists and an appreciation of the contributions of lesser known artists. As more art historians uncover the accomplishments of artists like Sterne, Abstract Expressionism will grow into a more fluid conception, one not based on the subjugation of outsider artists, but on the exaltation of diverse voices.

Bringing a firsthand understanding of Surrealism and the consequences of war in Romania, Sterne combined Abstract Expressionist principles with personal symbolism and her vision of the metaphysical. She did not acquiesce to the “universal language” of the dominant ideology (rough brushstrokes, large canvases, anti-literary attitudes). As a woman in a male-dominated movement, evident in both the gendered dogma and exclusion of female artists, Sterne followed her own way. Both her artist’s statements and formal language convey a greater complexity for spiritual subject-matter and feminine identity. A bullfighter, alchemist and exorcist by her own account, Sterne is also a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism and feminist art.

Images

Figure 1: *Totem Pole (N.Y., N.Y. #17)*, 1949, Oil on canvas, 38 x 16 in.

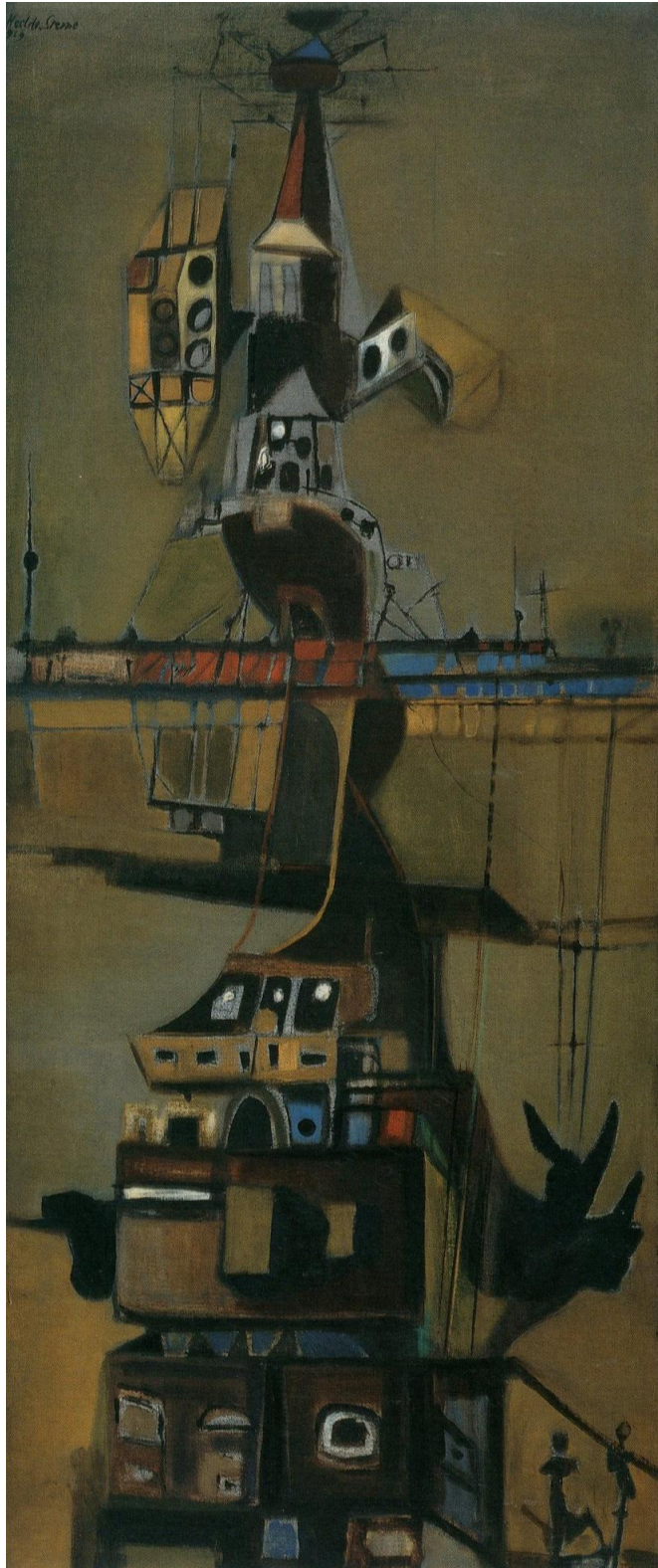


Figure 2: *Untitled*, 1949, Monotype, 12 ½ x 8 ¾ in. Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion. University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign 2002-3-9. Gift of the Artist.



Figure 3: *Machine (Gold Structure XVIII)*, 1950, Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 58 x 21 in. Image Courtesy CDS Gallery, New York.

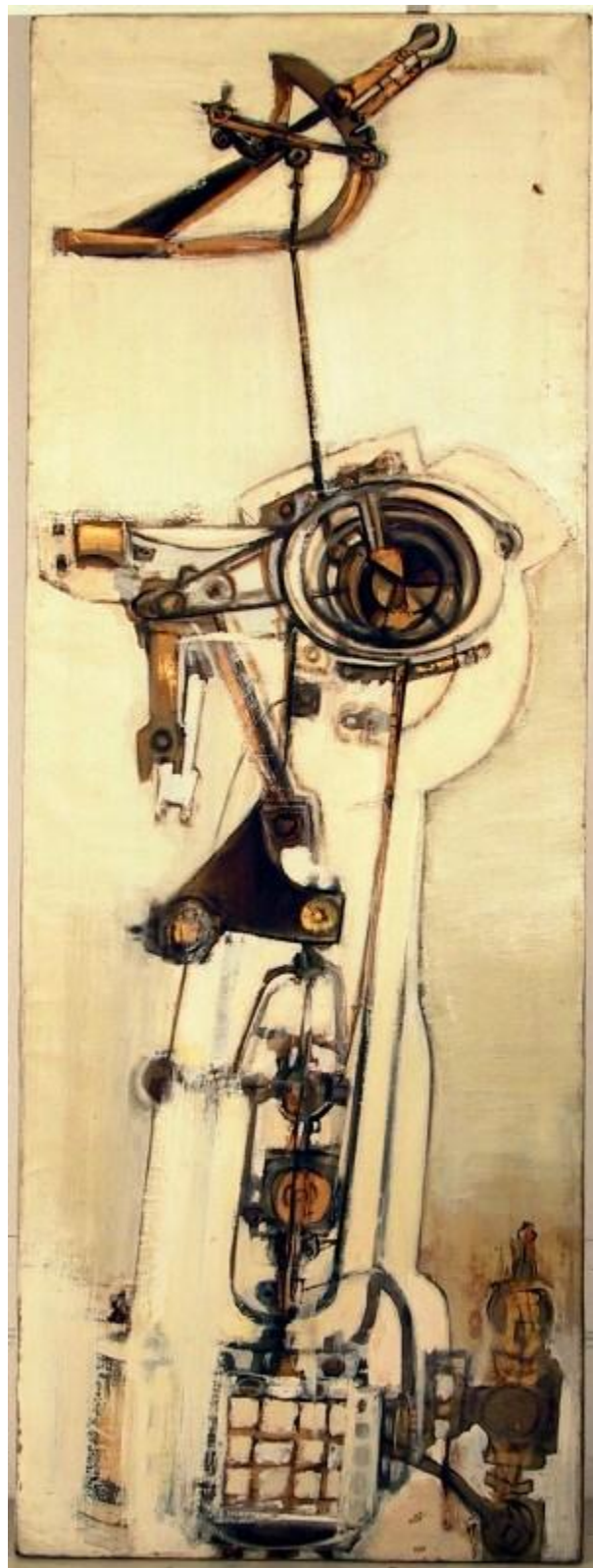


Figure 4: *Machine 5*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 51 x 38 1/8 in. Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 1950-7-1. Festival of Arts Purchase Fund.



Figure 5: *Untitled*, ca. 1941, Collage on paper, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 in.



Figure 6: *Untitled*, ca. 1941, Collage on paper, 15 ½ x 11 7/8 in.



Figure 7: *Main Transmission Housing of 830 Tractor*, 1961, Mixed media on heavy paper, 25 x 20 in. John Deere, Moline, IL.

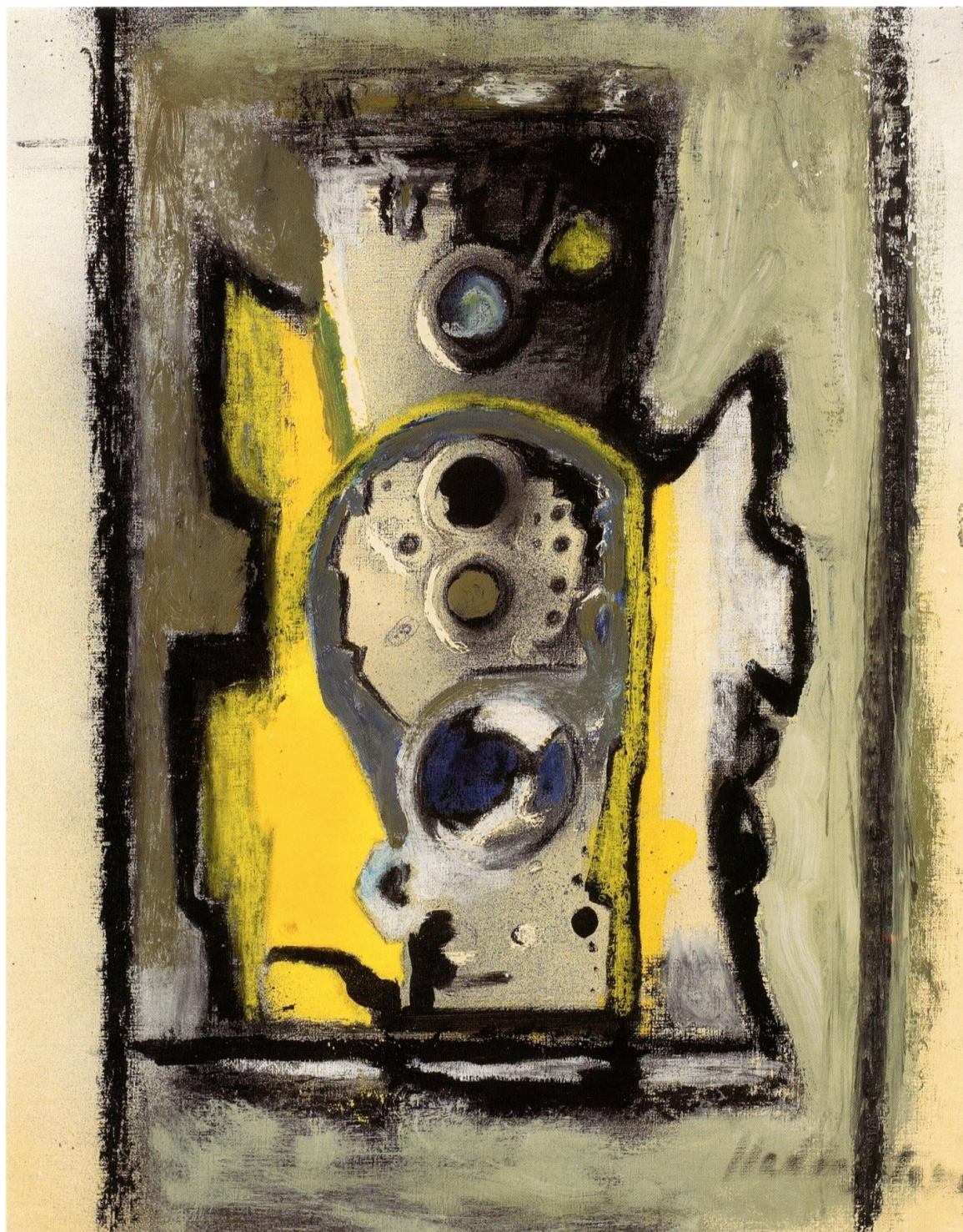


Figure 8: *Six Cylinder Engine*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 34 x 26 in. John Deere, Moline, IL.

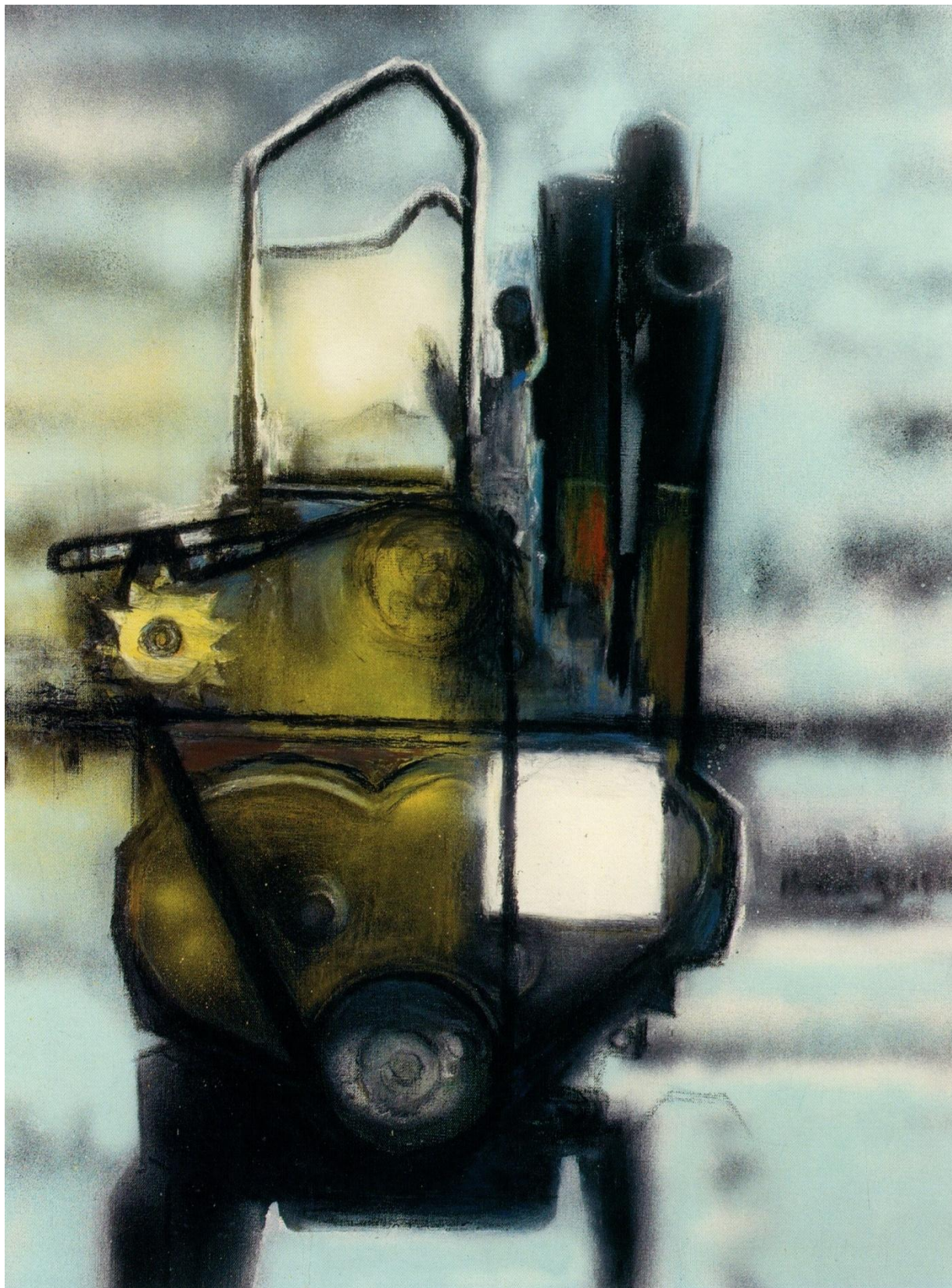


Figure 9: *Combine Platform*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 34 x 26 in. John Deere, Moline, IL.

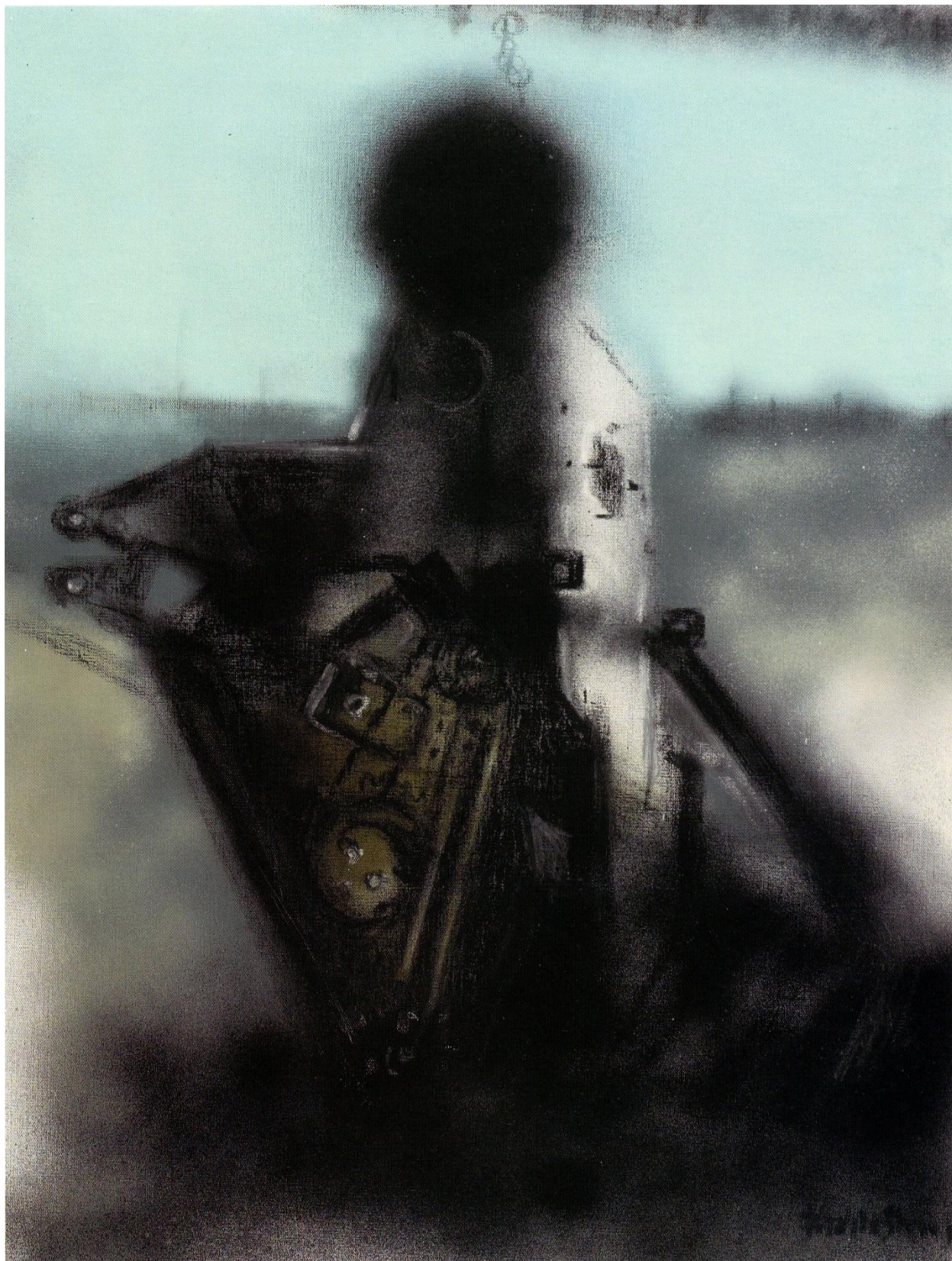


Figure 10: *New York VIII*, 1954, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 72 ½ x 42 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger Fund.

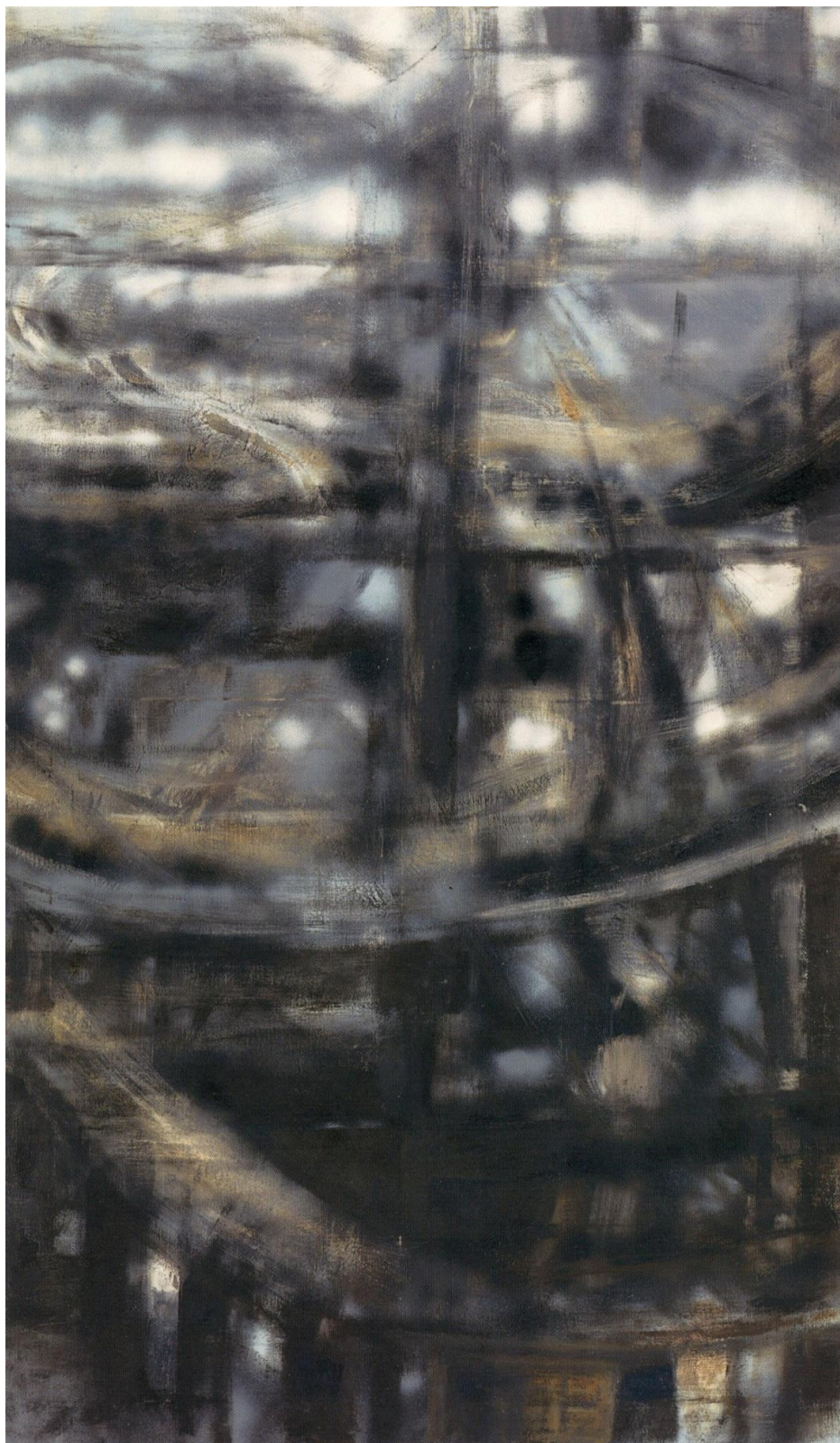


Figure 11: Willem de Kooning, *Composition*, 1955, 79 1/8 x 69 1/8 in. ARTstor Slide Gallery. Data from: University of California, San Diego. © 2007 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Figure 12: Franz Kline, *New York, New York*, 1953, oil on canvas. Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Source: ARTstor Slide Gallery with data from University of California, San Diego. © 2007 The Franz Kline Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 13: *New York No. 1*, 1954, Oil on canvas, 86 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 50 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Toledo Museum of Art 1957.29. Museum Purchase Fund.

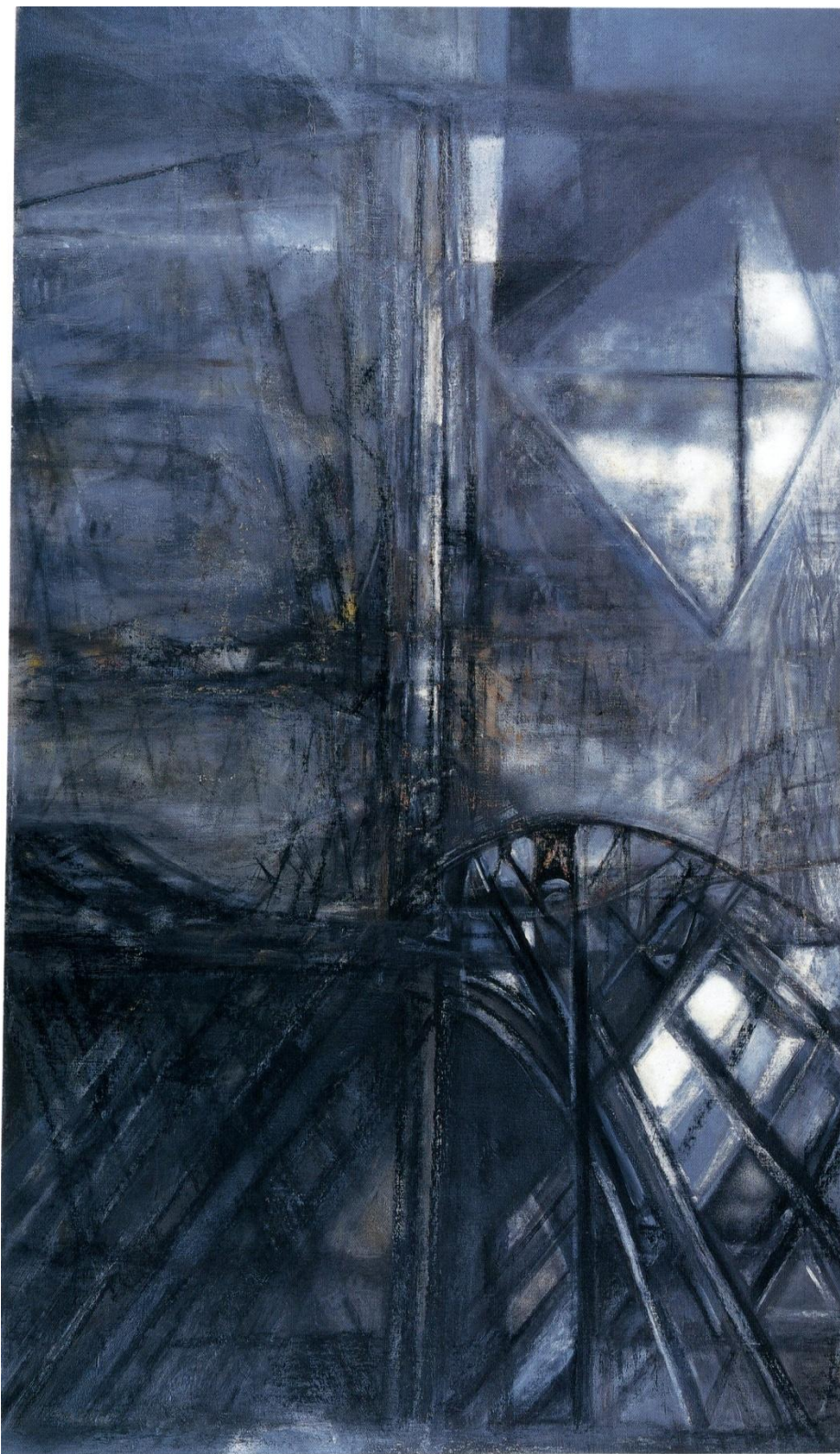


Figure 14: *New York, N.Y.*, 1955, Oil on canvas, 36 x 60 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 56. 20. Gift of Anonymous Donor.

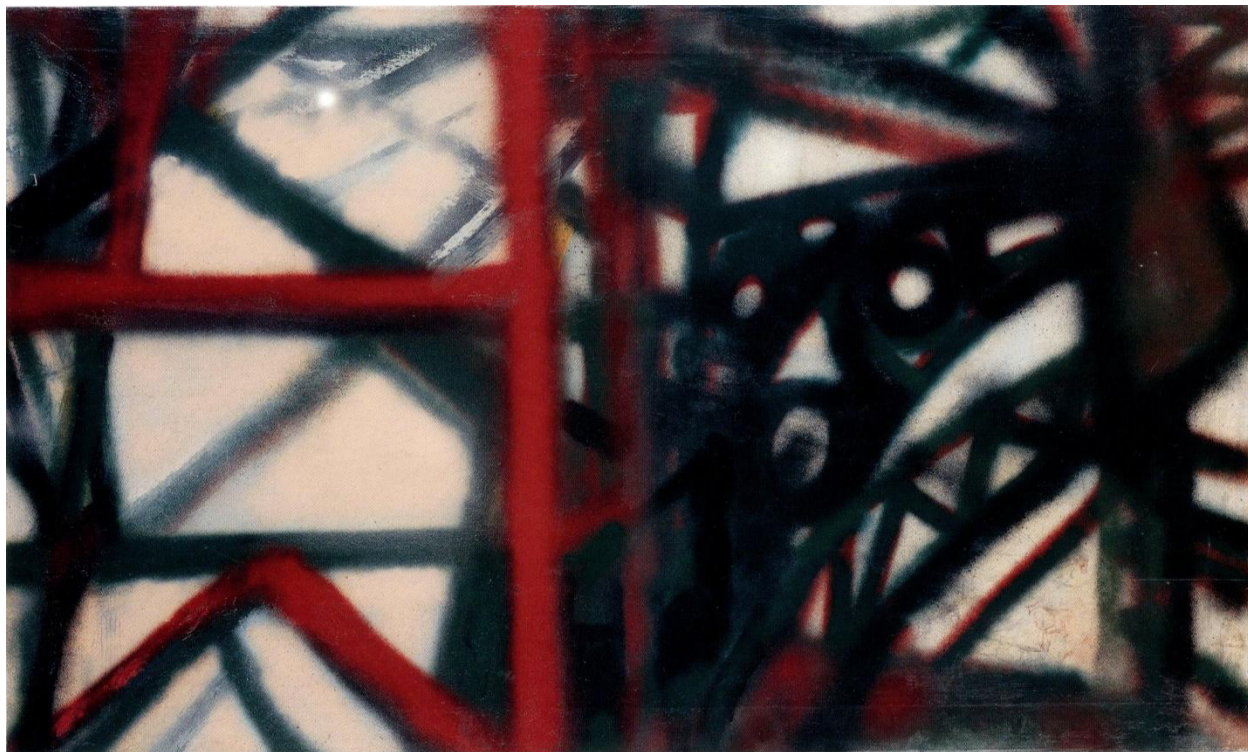


Figure 15: *Third Avenue El*, ca. 1952-53, Oil and spray enamel on canvas, 40 3/8 x 31 7/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art 64.123.4. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel H. Silverberg, 1964. Photograph © 2005 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹²⁹



¹²⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all images are by Hedda Sterne and from *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*. Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, 2006.

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