

1 GESTURAL ABSTRACTION

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The dominant art mode during and after World War II has been labeled as Abstract Expressionism, action painting, lyrical abstraction, *tachisme*, *art informel*, *art autre*, and a host of other terms. Characterized by an intensely personal and subjective response by artists to the medium and the working process, it was an art in which painters and sculptors were engaged in the search for their own identity. In a universe described by existentialists as absurd, the artist carried the romantic quest for the self, sincerity, and emotional authenticity into a world of uncertainty, placing great value on risk-taking, discovery, and adventure into the unknown. Painters and sculptors manifested an attitude that the Cubist Juan Gris had described earlier: “You are lost the instant you know what the result will be.”

In the aftermath of fascist domination in Europe and in the face of the increasing rigidity of authoritarian communism in Stalinist Russia, artists everywhere felt the need to establish a sense of personal autonomy. Auschwitz and Hiroshima were cataclysms of such monstrous proportions that they could elicit little direct commentary from visual artists. Indeed, responding to the Romanian poet Paul Celan’s poem “Death Fugue” (1944–45), which recalled the Nazi death camps, the German philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote, “After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.” Adorno’s comment suggested the impossibility of making art after the apparent collapse of liberal humanism. The dilemma posed by the conformity encouraged by mechanized mass culture and the growth and plethora of media added to the artist’s sense of alienation and need for individual expression. The artist’s own work became paramount. The very fact that paintings and sculptures were still handmade objects also became significant, emphasizing the particular quality, material, and facture of each.

The French writer and politician André Malraux observed that “modern art was doubtlessly born on the day when the idea of art and that of beauty were separated” and suggested that Francisco de Goya might have been the starting point (see chap. 3). During the nineteenth century, having abandoned the subject matter of history, artists also became dubious about narration, realism, and verisimilitude. With the aesthetics of Cubism and Expressionism in the early twentieth century, the notion of art serving

primarily as a source of visual pleasure was largely relinquished. In the period between the world wars, many abstractionists employed geometric forms such as circles, squares, and cubes (see chap. 2). By mid-century, however, many artists, though by no means all, rejected these forms as being too closely related to science and technology, too formalistic, and too impersonal. As the century progressed, artists increasingly broke with traditional aesthetics and with conventional values and ideas. The repudiation of traditional means was not entirely without precedent, but related to what Wassily Kandinsky, the first “abstract expressionist,” had called an “art of internal necessity.”

Although perceptible differences existed in both theory and praxis, similar attitudes toward art arose at approximately the same time in Europe and the United States, reflecting the increasingly unified culture of the Western world in the postwar era. Surrealism, with its emphasis on the personal psychology of the artist, had been the primary avant-garde movement in Europe between the world wars. The Surrealists’ desire for unpremeditated spontaneity held the promise of creative freedom, and their groundbreaking attitudes and work were of pivotal importance in the postwar period, not only on both sides of the Atlantic, but also in other parts of the world. Some artists emphasized gesture and an aesthetic of incompleteness, exhibiting the Surrealists’ investigation of expressive meaning through ambiguity. At times this exploration turned toward new and unexpected figuration, as in the work of Alberto Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet, and the CoBrA artists (see chap. 3). But for all such artists, the existential act of making became essential, and increasingly the dialogue between artist and consumer became a necessary element in the completion of the work.

Many American artists who came to public attention after World War II had been developing their personal styles during a long period of gestation in the 1930s, when the government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) program not only provided work but also promoted aesthetic and intellectual exchange among artists. Within this community, painters and sculptors discussed Marxist theories and political action, as well as the social and individual purposes of their art. Rejecting American regionalist scene painting, such artists argued that Social Realism was inadequate to address the current human and societal crisis. After the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact, however, artists and intellectuals in the United States and Western Europe became increasingly disenchanted with political engagement. Differentiating the artist from the politically identified individual and feeling that art was too important to be used as a tool, Robert Motherwell wrote in 1944: “The socialist is to free the working class from the domination of property, so that the spiritual can be possessed by all. The function of the artist is to make actual the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed.”¹ Older forms of expression were no longer held to be valid. Only revolutionary methods could arrive at revolutionary solutions, and artists of this period called for nothing less.

Before or during the war, many of the Surrealists—André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, André Masson, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Kurt Seligmann, Leonora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and Matta—had come to the United States. Their work—above all, Miró’s evocative and poetic abstractions—had been admired in New York galleries and museums. But soon they walked the same streets, frequented the same restaurants, and attended the same art openings as American artists. Once in contact with these established artists, scarcely older than they were themselves, many American painters

and sculptors began to evolve artistically in ways that partly continued the European tradition. The tragedy of the fall of France in 1940 affected American artists and intellectuals as profoundly as it did the Europeans. Noting the impact of the Surrealists on the American painters, the critic Dore Ashton, in her contextual analysis of the New York School, wrote: “Myth, metamorphosis, risk, event painting—these liberated possibilities were little by little impressing themselves upon the troubled psyches of many New York painters.”²

Nevertheless, the “new American painters,” as they were to be called, were somewhat ambivalent toward European art, and many urged a decisive break with Western traditions. Few, however, went as far as Clyfford Still, who, although well versed in European modernism, expressed extreme hostility in a 1959 statement: “The fog has been thickened, not lifted by those who . . . looked back to the Old World for means to extend their authority in this newer land. . . . But that ultimate in irony—the Armory Show of 1913—had dumped on us the combined and sterile conclusions of Western European decadence.”³ Although most American painters did not show such animosity, many did search beyond the contemporary European horizon, hoping to find affirmation in tribal art, ancient civilizations, and other cultures. Barnett Newman studied the art of indigenous groups in Oceania and the pre-Columbian Americas; Jackson Pollock explored Native American painting and dance; Mark Rothko immersed himself in Greek mythology; Adolph Gottlieb examined prehistoric petroglyphs; and Mark Tobey was deeply influenced by Baha’ism and Zen.

At the same time, many artists of the New York School felt themselves cut off from a society that had more immediate concerns than art in the postwar era. In fact American artists, even more than their European colleagues, felt a lack of recognition and financial support from the public. In abandoning the expectation of fame and fortune, however, many felt liberated to follow their own inner necessity and to take risks in the creation of original art forms. In large lofts in lower Manhattan, some began to paint in enormous formats, far exceeding the space limitations of the private apartments of potential collectors, and, in dialogue with their art, reenacted what they conceived as the drama of contemporary experience.

Jackson Pollock (1912–56), the most celebrated American painter of this period, came to New York from the West. His early work was influenced by his teacher Thomas Hart Benton and by the Mexican muralists, but Pollock soon adopted aspects of Surrealist practice and Jungian theory as well. By the late 1940s Pollock was pouring paint freely onto canvases placed on his studio floor. His artistic decisions were made during the working process, and the resulting paintings evoked rhythm in action. He was one of a number of American painters to move from salon-size paintings to large-scale, almost mural-size works.

Barnett Newman (b. U.S., 1905–70), a man of searching intellect and a sharp polemicist, pared painting down to large, flat planes of color divided by geometric stripes, or what he called “zips.” Warning against the dangers of decoration in abstract art, Newman proposed uncharted paths to unravel the “mystery of life and death.” He also presented the unconventional idea that in human history “the aesthetic act always precedes the social one.”⁴ Newman considered the new American art to be concerned with both chaos and the transcendental.

Mark Rothko (1903–70), who was born in Russia and grew up in Oregon, studied at Yale University on a scholarship before attending the Art Students League in New York, where he studied painting. His early expressionist style revealed the influence of Max Weber, his chief teacher. Then, after a period indebted to Surrealism and searching for a meaningful mythology, Rothko began to paint visually vibrating, highly saturated color planes. In the brief passage quoted in this volume, he explained that his painting needed to be large in order to place the viewer intimately into the picture space itself.⁵ At the end of his life, Rothko completed fourteen large paintings for an ecumenical sanctuary in Houston. Eliminating all references to subject matter, but retaining the triptych shapes for his almost monochromatic dark paintings, he succeeded in evoking undefined yet universal meanings and emotions.

Robert Motherwell (1915–91), one of the youngest of the original New York School artists, was born in the state of Washington and, before turning to painting, studied philosophy, literature, criticism, and art history at Stanford and Columbia Universities. In New York he became a personal friend of the French émigré Surrealist painters and a guiding force, as both an artist and a theorist, in the search for post-Surrealist ideas. In his own work Motherwell achieved a synthesis of free exploration and a rational sense of form and order. In “Beyond the Aesthetic,” a key essay of 1946, he demarcated the path of the artist as proceeding toward ordered chaos.

Helen Frankenthaler (b. U.S., 1928–2011), who belonged to the second generation of Abstract Expressionists, was deeply impressed by Pollock’s technique of pouring paint directly onto canvas. She originated a stain-painting technique in which she let light-colored pigments flow onto unprimed canvas, saturating it and integrating color, surface, and support in a single unit. Her flat surfaces and staining method, as well as her alliance with Clement Greenberg’s formalist theories and advocacy of “post-painterly abstraction,” established Frankenthaler as the leader of color-field painting, which would be further developed by artists such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland (see chap. 2).

Along with Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell (1925–92), born and trained in Chicago, was one of the few women to join the ranks of the American Abstract Expressionists. In the 1950s, like her friend and mentor Sam Francis, Mitchell immigrated to France, where she became a member of the expatriate artist community. A landscape painter by inclination but an abstract painter by formal inheritance, she made loosely brushed, highly expressive gestural paintings, infused by evocative sensations of the water, trees, and rocks in her garden in Vétheuil, not far from Claude Monet’s water garden in Giverny.

Another expatriate, Cy Twombly (1928–2011) moved from the United States to Italy in 1957. Characterized by loose, gestural marks or scribbles that elicit comparisons to both calligraphy and graffiti, his imagery conveys a sense of disorder even as it often seeks to evoke ancient myths. Some have argued that Twombly’s indiscernible gestural writing attempts to convey the presence of the void, the nothingness of Zen, and is comparable to the hermetic symbolism of the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. In light of Twombly’s reticence to ascribe meaning to his work, the German poet Heiner Bastian (b. 1943) offers additional insights into Twombly’s elusive oeuvre.

American sculptors maturing in the 1930s and 1940s experimented with form in space in a manner appropriate to the new age. Isamu Noguchi combined the Romanian

sculptor Constantin Brancusi's sense of form with elements drawn from his own Asian heritage. Eventually he directed much of his energy to creating new sculptural sites (see chap. 6). Others adapted concepts and techniques from the Cubist-Constructivist tradition. No longer limited to the established conventions of either building up form in clay or plaster or carving it away in stone or wood, many of these sculptors used welding techniques to draw in open space. Working with metal in this way, Ibram Lassaw, David Smith, David Hare, Theodore Roszak, Herbert Ferber, Seymour Lipton, Richard Lippold, and others created sculpture in which space—the void—became an essential element of form.

Among these sculptors, David Smith (1906–65) made some of the most significant contributions. Born in Indiana and trained as a painter, Smith was both personally and programmatically close to the Abstract Expressionist painters. Like many of them, he was profoundly influenced by avant-garde European art. He eventually combined American technology with innovations in welded construction introduced by the Spanish sculptor Julio González (who taught Pablo Picasso to weld). Smith created a series of works that became increasingly abstract in form and universal in content. His metal sculptures ranged from calligraphic drawings in space to solid geometric forms interpreted as poetic yet tough metaphors for American vernacular culture in the industrial age. Smith wrote in an affirmative language of belonging to his own time and of the unpredictability of the final product, elegizing a Whitmanesque sense of freedom and luxuriating in the intellectual and the sensual.

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) was born in Paris and worked there as a painter before moving in 1938 to New York, where she began making sculptures and installations. She employed numerous wooden forms that, although abstract, carry anthropomorphic figurative associations. Bourgeois also used a variety of other materials, including marble, plaster, bronze, rubber, and plastics. Her enigmatic objects and installations were often autobiographical, emphasizing sexuality and trauma as major themes. In a 1988 interview by the art historian Donald Kuspit, Bourgeois discussed her working method, artistic concerns, and thoughts about feminism.

The interaction between artists and critics was of great importance in the heady years of ascendancy of the New York School. Discussions took place in artists' studios, cafeterias, bars, and the Artists' Club. Notable among the critics were Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both of whom had been associated with the left-wing literati before turning to art criticism. Their writing helped to legitimize the new American painting, which was initially unpopular with the public because of the conceptual difficulty posed by abstraction. Greenberg, who had originally aspired to become a painter himself, had studied with the German-born American painter Hans Hofmann in the early 1940s. In his criticism, he adopted many of Hofmann's influential "laws" about abstract painting and the significance of the two-dimensional picture plane, which emphasized flatness as a property of painting. Greenberg expressed his passion for the art he supported by ranking artists, often in subjective and arbitrary ways, but his discriminating taste made him a perceptive advocate of Pollock and Smith, among other artists. From the 1960s on, Greenberg became increasingly doctrinaire, adhering strictly to the formalist tradition of Heinrich Wölfflin and Roger Fry and the precepts of logical positivism.

The writings of Hofmann, Rosenberg, and Greenberg are represented in Herschel B. Chipp's *Theories of Modern Art*.⁶ Arguing that Greenberg's formalist approach considered "art in a vacuum," Rosenberg contended that art and art criticism could be forms of social action. A onetime editor of the left-wing journal *Art Front* (1934–37), Rosenberg supported the revolutionary character of the new painting in perspicacious essays and reviews for *Art News* and then for the *New Yorker*, for which he wrote the art column from 1967 until his death in 1978. Rosenberg introduced the term "action painting" into the vocabulary of art history in 1952, in reference to Pollock's approach and process. He also described the spontaneous act of the painter confronting the canvas as tantamount to a moral act.

The American art historian Alfred H. Barr Jr. (1902–81) was the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, established in 1929 as the first museum devoted to all forms of modern visual art. Because of the museum's preeminent position in the art world, its major exhibition *The New American Painting*, shown in eight European countries between 1958 and 1959, gave this work official sanction and contributed to the international ascendancy of American painting. In his preface to the exhibition's catalogue, Barr made specific connections between existentialist thought and this new art, which he associated with both commitment and anxiety. He also claimed that it demonstrated "a freedom in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude."

The critic Max Kozloff also interpreted the new gestural abstraction as closely related to American political ideology, despite many artists' own belief that their work was independent of the body politic. He pointed out: "The most concerted accomplishment of American art occurred during precisely the same period as the burgeoning chasm of American world hegemony."⁷ Though the Abstract Expressionists had separated themselves from political engagement since the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, their work found support in the political and cultural establishment. It was sent abroad, Kozloff asserted, as "evidence of America's coming of creative age,"⁸ with the aim of propagandizing U.S. democracy over Soviet communism by pitting freedom of expression against its suppression behind the Iron Curtain. A year after the publication of Kozloff's "American Painting during the Cold War," Eva Cockcroft, an American artist, muralist, and art historian, examined the same issue from a Marxist point of view.⁹ In 1983 the French art historian Serge Guilbaut published a polemical treatise in which he argued that through a sequence of accommodations and co-options the Abstract Expressionists worked hand in glove with the American Cold War establishment. He entitled his book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.¹⁰

In Europe the situation was very different. After years of occupation and suppression, the end of World War II in 1945 signaled a renewal of all aspects of life, including literature and the arts. With most Surrealist artists in exile, that movement, so central before the war, had less presence, and the geometric abstractions of Piet Mondrian and his followers initially seemed to have little relevance after the catastrophes of the war. Although a new figuration was an essential aspect of postwar art in Europe (see chap. 3), *art informel* offered greater possibilities for diverse, spontaneous expression. Yet when compared to painting in the United States, European gestural abstraction seemed less aggressive and more inwardly directed, in large measure due to limited studio space and shortages of materials, both of which required the European paintings to be considerably smaller.

After the war Paris continued to function as the center of European art until the 1960s. For a brief time a group calling itself “young painters of the French tradition” attempted to combine the color of Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse with the structure of Cubism to produce a harmonious abstraction. But many artists and commentators felt that harmony was not what the postwar experience called for. More radical voices, like that of the critic Michel Tapié (b. France, 1909–87), spoke out against the encumbrances of the great classical tradition, which left no room, he argued, for “all the meaningful ecstasy of life and mystery.” Tapié invoked the lessons of Dada and Surrealism to promote an art that took risks, abandoned security, and attempted to touch “the ambiguous and transcendental reality that is ours.”

Galerie René Drouin was the focal point of the most provocative new manifestations in Paris. Even before the city’s liberation from Nazi occupation, Drouin had organized exhibitions of work by Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, Wols, Hans Hartung, Henri Michaux, and Georges Mathieu. Mathieu, who organized many exhibitions of both American and European art, theorized extensively about art and philosophy and, beginning in 1952, painted with great speed, energy, and spontaneity in front of huge audiences. Some U.S. critics considered his public actions to be vulgarizations of the existential angst and privacy of the artist, but Mathieu was respected and acknowledged throughout the rest of the world and widely celebrated in France. His actions are often identified as a precursor of performance art (see chap. 8).

Wols (Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze; b. Germany, 1913–51) had studied music and architecture but was largely self-taught as a painter. He also practiced photography, wrote poetry, and was keenly interested in biology and geology. While living in France during the war, he was interned several times, and he died in Paris at the age of thirty-eight, after many years of heavy drinking. Comparing Wols with Pollock, the German art historian Werner Haftmann wrote: “Because of their unprecedented acceptance of the terrible events of the desolate years before and during the war, the lives and works of Wols and Pollock seem to provide documentary evidence of that period. Pollock was rebellious, Wols passive and resigned; he merely recorded whatever happened to him—not the simple facts of his life, but the images which streamed from his wounded soul.”¹¹

Henri Michaux (b. Belgium, 1899–1984), a writer known primarily for his poetry, was also a self-taught draftsman who created enigmatic signs by making doodles and traces with a brush. The Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz considered Michaux’s images to be absent of “conceptual burdens and closer in the realm of language to onomatopoeia than to words.” Michaux believed in total anarchic freedom, using drugs such as mescaline to provoke new insights and heightened states of awareness. His “signs” were aimed at tapping into the unconscious and operating as vibrations of psychic improvisation.

In Italy many groups of lyrical abstractionists emerged after the overthrow of fascism, with a number of leading personalities appearing in the 1950s. In Milan, Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) was at the center of the new experimentation. Born in Argentina and educated in Milan, he made sculptures in ceramic and cement that bridged between art and craft. During World War II he returned to Buenos Aires, where he became a central figure in the dynamic modernist movement in Argentina. Together with other artists and his students there, he published the “Manifiesto blanco” (White Manifesto)

in 1946, a text that insisted that “change is an essential condition of existence.” Conceiving of a total transformation of life, the prophetic manifesto cited recent discoveries in the sciences, called for “an art that is in greater harmony with the needs of the new spirit,” and identified a new age in which “painted canvas and standing plaster figures no longer have any reason to exist.” Fontana propounded a “four-dimensional” art based on the unity of time and space, an art that could be brought about only if reason were kept subordinate to the unconscious. On his return to Milan, Fontana became the founder of the spatialist movement and created some of the first abstract environments. Around 1950 he began piercing and then slashing his canvases with holes, introducing actual space as part of the painting. His work resonated strongly with younger Italian painters, monochrome painters throughout Europe, the German ZERO group (see chaps. 2, 5), and later with artists associated with the international Arte Povera movement, which flourished especially in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s (see chap. 7).

Emilio Vedova (b. Italy, 1919–2006) and Alberto Burri (b. Italy, 1915–95) came to public attention in Venice and Rome, respectively. Vedova’s work exhibited the dual impact of Tintoretto and Umberto Boccioni. By the early 1950s he had established his own form of action painting, producing dynamic abstract works that responded directly to his working on the picture surface. Setting out to liberate the picture from the wall, he also made freestanding paintings on panels of wood and metal in the *Plurimi* series (1962–65), an early example of environmental art that anticipated installation. In a brief essay of 1948, Vedova stated his thoughts about the tensions and difficulties of being a contemporary artist and of having to lead the way toward a new and unknown art.

Burri trained as a physician in Rome and began painting as a prisoner of war in Texas. By the early 1950s the former surgeon was making paintings out of old tattered flour sacks, to which he applied trickles of red paint, recalling the blood-stained bandages of war victims. During a long and productive career, Burri worked with a great variety of materials, including burned wooden sheets, industrial plastics, battered tin plates, and large scorched pieces of fiberboard. His abstractions often contained references to the real world, from wounded bodies to (in later works) the earth’s surface. In their emphasis on process, Burri’s paintings anticipated Arte Povera as well as assemblage, especially the work of Robert Rauschenberg, who visited Burri in the early 1950s with Cy Twombly.

After the collapse of the Third Reich, German culture arrived at what was called *Stunde Null* (zero hour). Many prominent artists had left Germany, and others had died during the Nazi era. One survivor, Willi Baumeister (1889–1955), had painted mural-like pictures related to the work of the French Purists before the war and then, during the Nazi period, ideograms that, although they resembled prehistoric writing, were imaginary characters culled from his psyche. In his semiautobiographical book *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst* (The Unknown in Art), written during the war and first published in 1947, Baumeister differentiated art from nature and defined the aim of art as a search for enigma and the unknown. Like many artists of his period, Baumeister studied the Tao and Eastern philosophy.

Artists living in Spain under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco suffered considerably less repression than did their counterparts in Germany under Adolf Hitler, and after the war important groups such as Dau al Cet in Barcelona (1948) and El Paso

in Madrid (1957) were able to organize. In spite of the cultural isolation that occurred during Franco's regime, visual artists created distinctive work related to international modes of the era. Antoni Tàpies (b. Spain, 1923–2012) began working in a heavy textural style in the 1950s, recalling *matérialistes* (matter painters) such as Dubuffet, Fautrier, and Nicolas de Staël. But Tàpies also embedded or concealed found objects in his paintings, evoking ambiguous associations. In his 1971 essay "I Am a Catalan," he communicated his awareness of the precarious situation in his country and the obligation of the artist to "prepare the groundwork for new, positive knowledge . . . capable of giving our world a new direction."

By the mid-1950s *informel* painting had spread throughout Eastern Europe, namely Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland, during a period of considerable intellectual and cultural freedom. One of the leading spirits of the movement for freedom in the Eastern Bloc was Tadeusz Kantor (b. Poland, 1915–90). After the war Kantor, who worked in theater before turning to painting, created an experimental theater in Kraków that shared many characteristics with the theater of cruelty and theater of the absurd theorized by the French actor, poet, and artist Antonin Artaud. Kantor's work in all disciplines was characterized by innovation, risk, uncertainty, and rebellion. In a poem written in 1955, he identified painting as a "living organism," a "demonstration of life," and a "spectacle . . . which holds me bound in passionate expectation of the unknown epilogue."

Artists associated with gestural abstraction in the decades following the halcyon years of Abstract Expressionism (1940s to early 1960s) augmented its existential underpinning with multiple themes and philosophical directions and, eventually, postmodernist pluralism. The works of the Danish painter, sculptor, and architect Per Kirkeby (b. 1938) and the U.S. painter and printmaker Pat Steir (b. 1940) are exemplary of post-Abstract Expressionist developments. Kirkeby participated in happenings and Fluxus (see chap. 8) in the early 1960s, when he also became an experimental filmmaker and an accomplished poet and novelist. Despite his opposition to lyrical abstraction in the 1950s, by the 1970s he was working in a related style, interlocking and overlapping broad swatches of paint that appeared infused with light. Kirkeby has discussed the mysterious quality of physical layers in a painting and noted that the "light of ambivalence is a heavenly one."

Steir evolved a hybrid style coupling her broad study of art history with influences from minimalism and conceptual art (see chaps. 2 and 9). Her monochromatic canvases of the 1970s included graphs as well as crossed-out images of flowers, simultaneously presenting and denying representation while referring to her feminist politics. In the 1980s Steir divided her canvases into grids, filling each box with a different image in a different style. Then, with her *Waterfall* series (1988–), Steir turned explicitly to expressionistic abstraction, depicting the gravitational forces of cascading water through spontaneous gestural splashes of paint, in a process informed by her study of Taoist principles of chance and change.

Joan Snyder (b. U.S., 1940) studied sociology before becoming a painter and earning an MFA from Rutgers University in 1966. Rebelling against the restraint of minimalism and color-field painting and eschewing the heroics of Abstract Expressionism, she concentrated on the abstract quality of individual brushmarks in "stroke paintings" (1969–73). She soon began adding found and collaged objects, including natural matter

(such as mud, sticks, and herbs), to her paintings, as well as fragments of text and diaristic writings. Increasingly, Snyder brought her social activism, environmentalism, feminism, and lesbian sexuality into the content of her art. Mixing both abstraction and representation in her works since the 1990s, Snyder took up themes of violence (especially against women), death, grief, mourning, and memory.

Like Snyder, Elizabeth Murray (b. U.S., 1940–2007) played a critical role in reinstating painting as a viable medium in the 1970s, after it had been widely proclaimed “dead” by influential critics and artists alike. In her whimsical structures Murray joined cubistic structures to biomorphic Surrealist forms and played with Frank Stella’s use of shaped canvases (see chap. 2), fitting hers together like puzzles. Painted in strong, bright colors, her works bear humorous titles that hint at connections to her personal life. *Yikes* (1982), for example, suggests a red cup from which topples the brown-and-white form of, perhaps, spilled cappuccino. Through such references to domesticity, Murray linked feminist considerations to popular culture and Pop art, anticipating the feminist edge of expressionist painters like Suzanne McClelland, who mixed figuration with loose brush, bright colors, and provocative themes. In 2005 Murray became the fourth woman artist to receive a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹²

Murray’s work can be both funny and poignant. In contrast, the gestural images of Anselm Kiefer (b. Germany, 1945) are sober comments on German history, the land, myth, and the world of the artist. He came to wide attention in the 1980s in the context of Neo-Expressionism, a revival by a younger generation of mostly German artists of the colorful, gestural, and content-laden style of early-twentieth-century German Expressionism—a style that had been suppressed under the Nazis and was not publicly exhibited in Germany until Documenta I in 1955. Influenced by his mentor Joseph Beuys (see chap. 7), Kiefer introduced a visual discourse on fascism and used extra-artistic materials like straw, as well as clay, wire, and lead, to produce large-scale paintings, handmade books, and installations, all with a dominating physical presence. Like action painters of a previous generation, Kiefer believes that artists must take risks and assume responsibilities for both art and history.

Born a year after Kiefer, David Reed (b. U.S., 1946) addressed the history of his own country differently. While simulating and synthesizing New York School gestural painting and minimalism, Reed deemphasized the emotional touch of the artist. Creating seemingly mechanically produced canvases, he used acrid colors to express something of the technological luminescence of television and film, which had such a determining impact on the development of American culture after World War II. After deploying computer-generated montage to edit images of his own paintings into scenes from Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo*, Reed returned to his “photo-expressionism,” depicting voluptuous brushstrokes in vibrant colors applied with scalpel-like precision. Reed has noted that he is interested in how Barnett Newman combined “conception and execution, control and impulse,” developing a “double awareness” that required him to be both spontaneous and self-conscious.¹³

Fiona Rae, who was born in 1963 in Hong Kong and moved to England in 1970, has, like Reed, been interested in the cinematic synthesis of images. Approaching painting as a series of filmic edits, Rae sampled art historical precedents, appropriating forms and rejecting emotional intensity for a cool but painterly style. Her work, which includes

signs, symbols, scratches, and marks suggestive of graffiti, nods to Disney as much as to Pollock. The artist Damien Hirst (see chap. 4) selected Rae's work for inclusion in the 1988 exhibition *Freeze*, which launched her as one of the Young British Artists (YBAs) who dominated the international art market of the 1990s. Choosing to work in a traditional medium, Rae has noted that painting poses the greatest challenge "to be fresh and original in the 21st century."¹⁴

The large-scale paintings of Julie Mehretu (b. 1970) visualize the interconnectedness of twenty-first-century nomadic migrations and diasporas. Born in Ethiopia, Mehretu grew up in Michigan, before studying in Senegal, Michigan, and Rhode Island. With its substructure of interpenetrating expressive black lines, dashes, dots, marks, and erasures overlaid with carefully drawn graphic lines and often brilliantly colored geometric forms or eccentric abstract shapes, Mehretu's work has been viewed in multiple ways—as a kind of visual map or diagram of social space; as a narrative on urban planning and the negotiation of power; as an ambiguous compositional maelstrom of architectural forms suggestive of the swirling cacophony of public life; and as energetic postmodern landscapes dense with information and activity. Through dissonant competing symbols, flags, and logos, she portrays the restless clash of disparate circumstances that characterize globalization, much as Mark Bradford creates expressionistic paintings, infused with elements of collage, to depict the multiracial, multilingual cultural influences and experiences of living in Los Angeles. While Bradford is best known for cartographic-like images that recall the interest of the Situationist International (see chap. 8) in the psychogeographic impact of cities on their inhabitants, he has also translated this content into videos, photographs, installations, and performance, making art as hybrid as life is in the twenty-first century.