

THE VITAL CREATIVE ACT
IN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

by

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INTRODUCTION

Scope and Source of the Writing

The greater part of this thesis deals with what occurs in the creative process, with special and constant reference to Abstract Expressionism's peculiar relation to and embodiment of this process. The primary insights evolved and impetus sustained in writing this paper were derived from my own painting and overall art-producing experience, including my reflections thereupon. I am aware, however, of the fact that there are innumerable broad influences upon my thinking and personal interpretations resulting from reading and discussion which could not possibly be cited specifically.

For various reasons, I have neither dwelt upon nor elaborated extensively about why the artist acts as he does, whether or not I could have done so successfully. Among the more important reasons for not going into a long discursive elaboration of such topics as the artist's relation to his society, his culture and his world is that the primary emphasis and weight of a thesis toward the granting of an advanced degree in a studio field is carried by the work produced by the candidate in his studio. Therefore, the written part of such a thesis should concern itself primarily with the considerations, conditions and/or processes in the production of the studio work.

I would like to offer, however, in the remainder of this Introduction, some ideas which I consider valid observations upon the above-mentioned questions which are not dealt with in

the main body of the thesis.

The Artist's Relation to Society and the World

There is in our society a great "gap" or "cultural vacuum":¹ this vacuum is the lack of control over one's own fate. There is no place to escape to and no way of effectively opposing the sweeping but subtly legitimized (and therefore, in general, unquestioningly accepted) exploitation, which today finds its greatest field of existence internationally. The big countries exploit the small countries. In addition to this, the rulers in most countries deceive and exploit the populace thereof. There is a creeping but all-encompassingly effective thwarting of essential freedom.

The artist is and should properly be regarded by society as a hero, because insofar as he is an artist worthy of the name he unrelentingly manifests the principle of freedom: the rejection ever of establishments and the establishment of external and extraneous orders and rules. The contemporary artist thus reacts to the above-mentioned cultural gap to fill it through his work, keeping alive the ideal and the exercise of freedom, even though he has no political power to make the principle widespread.

A prime example of artists fulfilling this ultimately important role is in the movement that has come to be called

¹C. H. Miller, "A Cultural Space-Time Approach to Art", p. 11. I am indebted to Professor Miller for the concept of "cultural vacuum" as well as for the general conception of art as occupying "cultural space-time", which is elaborated upon later in this thesis.

Abstract Expressionism, whether or not it is the conscious intent of any or all of these artists to function in this way. This is not to say that this is the sole role or content of the work of such giants in art as de Kooning, Pollock, Hofman, Kline, Still and Motherwell: but it is an important aspect of their work that should not be overlooked. For instance, I have never seen anyone include the increasingly greater peril to the human race as a whole since World War II (and the totally ineffective position of the overwhelming majority of individual men for reducing that peril) as one of the factors in the development of Abstract Expressionism at that time. I believe that it was.

Another and possibly broader motivation toward artistic creation is suggested by Motherwell himself: and it is also one which I find operative in my own impetus to paint. One might call this a feeling of alienation from the larger pulse of the essential processes of the Cosmos. It might be felt as a lack of intensity of existence. In the words of Motherwell:²

Whatever the source of this sense of being unwedded to the universe, I think that one's art is one's effort to wed oneself to the universe, to unify oneself through union....

I suppose that the art of far more ancient and "simple" artists expressed something quite different, a feeling of already being at one with the world....

Nothing as drastic an innovation as abstract art could have come into existence save as the consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need.

The need is for felt experience--intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic.

²Frank O'Hara, Robert Motherwell, with Selections from the Artist's Writings, p. 45.

It goes without saying that when and if an artist already has the feeling of being "wedded to the universe", he will still feel the need to paint. Even if he has a genuinely religious vision of the Universe, of his and all other things' "places" "in" "it", he will realize that he can best glorify and extend and celebrate existence by exercising freedom in an open-ended creative process.

These and other possible broad drives to creation may be kept in mind as the discussion of the creative process develops in the body of the thesis.

THE VITAL CREATIVE ACT: STRUGGLE RESULTING IN PRODUCTION

A struggle, resulting from starting out from nothing, and involving danger of failure (which is mortal to the artist, as artist) is essential to a meaningful act of creation.

For the abstract expressionist, this "meaningful act of creation", this struggle, is engaged in during the entire period of creating a work. This means that there is not in the process a separation into, for example, making studies (which is where, in such a case, the creative process would take place) and then executing one of these studies or combining them in the final work. The artist must face directly and deal immediately with contingencies as they arise, rather than systematically thinking out ends and means in advance. The vitality, the excitement of a painting produced in such an existential struggle results from the fact that the record of the struggle is all there, in the "adversary", which the painter has more or less successfully subjected to his will or resolved by attuning himself to his impulses.

ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESS IN CREATIVE STRUGGLE

Freedom

When painting is approached without preconceptions, a type of unavoidable "freedom" is thrust upon the serious artist. The setting of "problems" reduces this crippling freedom by giving a starting point from which one can proceed, and sometimes a problem is set before the artist approaches the canvas. But the

emphasis in the type of creative struggle under consideration here is upon the problem(s) arising out of and being solved by gestures for which one has no conscious reasons.

The intelligent, sensitive, serious man eventually becomes aware that even the categories of the mind, those so-needed crutches, are unreal and rest on no solid and absolute basis. Differentiations are creations of man and are relative in their dependence, as everything in the universe is relative. I think thus, but I might conceivably think in an exactly opposite manner. I am here only in relation to you or other objects: and you and they have a similar status to mine. We are all in this together: and none of us has any position or starting place in relation to the infinite. It is only by starting somewhere that one gets anywhere and precipitates consequences. One accepts and uses the information provided by the senses and unavoidably works within the framework of the way one's mind works: but the artist of consequence is among those who look beyond this pat, common sense world for a discovery or creation of something which does not logically follow from what is now and is known.

The artist thus aware approaches his work without answers in the way of "design principles" he will employ or in the way of social or metaphysical "truths" which he can illustrate in the work, and which may comfort him if his plastic experiment doesn't work out. No, he must succeed! For it is in this act and its product that he works out his reality, meaning and value. Before the act there was a crutchless, groundless, crippling, infinite freedom. Move, act, and there is reality and commitment

in the act and in its record on the canvas--a reality and an order of things which cannot be ruined or destroyed by subsequent dullness, weakness, dishonesty, injustice or corruption, except that the work be physically destroyed without ever being seen.

Even if it is true, as Nietzsche insists, that all meaningful and systematic interpretations or derivations of the Cosmos are lies, one should note well that for Nietzsche, art (the grandest of lies) is considered as a higher value than the truth, which equals Nihilism.³ The implication here is that art, the great "yea-sayer", results in a more desirable existence than Nihilism, which is an unhappy and unproductive state of being. Whether or not one agrees with Nietzsche's metaphysics, the struggle remains and retains its significance. One could as easily say that a true insight into reality is a cause for great joy, and that it is through the creation of art that the artist discovers the undifferentiated serenity of the all. Whoever may be right, both theories admit the obvious fact that the creation of meaningful art is productive of joy for the artist as well as for his sympathetic public.

Courage

It becomes obvious that given the above-considered type of awareness of freedom (as Sartre would have it, a condemnation to freedom), a considerable degree of courage would often be necessary to sustain an individual who habitually engaged in an

³Melvin Rader, ed., A Modern Book of Esthetics, pp. 125-26.

activity which placed him in situations where he had absolutely nothing to lean upon except his own act and faith. Even in the alternative theory to Nietzsche's which I indicate above, one still never knows whether he can establish rapport or unity with the cosmic gesture.⁴ While every act, every gesture, is part of the self-creating whole, the individual self's realization of this involves a constant struggle. Even though the hand of Shiva is raised, it takes courage to have no fear.

Honesty

But just any act whatsoever is not only insufficient but may be more detrimental to one's development, to one's unfolding reality, than doing nothing at all. This is what makes honesty, of the most unrelenting and thoroughgoing sort, essential. The act must be the culmination of an impulse or perceived solution which is new, genuine and honest. Otherwise, cliches and triteness result. And unless one is totally insensitive to personal honesty, one will suffer self-punishment when canned solutions are employed. One learns nothing from repeating one's old answers or mannerisms. Moreover, whether or not one keeps himself honest, it is likely that the ring of insincerity and facility will be (or become) apparent to perceptive viewers, when and if the artist does not face himself, the work and the problem in an open-ended and honest manner. Of course, it would be wrong to

⁴Alan W. Watts, The Joyous Cosmology, p. 72. I am indebted to Mr. Watts for the notion of all existence as gesture.

hold that just anyone might easily see the difference between vital, original painting and that which is hackneyed and cliché-ridden. This point is perhaps best illustrated by another selection from the writings of Robert Motherwell:⁵

I believe that painters' judgments of painting are first ethical, then aesthetic, the aesthetic judgments flowing from an ethical context....

...One has to have an intimate acquaintance with the language of contemporary painting to be able to see the real beauties of it; to see the ethical background is, even more difficult. It is a question of consciousness...⁶

Without ethical consciousness, a painter is only a decorator. Without ethical consciousness, the audience is only sensual, one of aesthetes.

For my part, I have never met a man or experienced a work of art that I respected without a sense of freshness emanating from either. A moral beauty of modern art, which has led it inevitably and dialectically to the new, is its inability to stand that which is musty and stale. No wonder Marcel Duchamp says he is so grateful to anyone who can show him something new! No wonder those who have a stake in the old and stale hate the new! What an ultimate confrontation!

...To create is not to repeat, but to discover, critically and radically and freshly.

Sensitivity to Impulse

So, one must be very aware of the truth of one's inner workings and of one's uncontrived impulses in order to let them come through without being twisted to fit old answers or deadened by being forced through old mannerisms. For, though it may seem paradoxical, it is only by cultivating this close attention

⁵Frank O'Hara, op. cit., p. 53.

⁶My underlining.

to one's inmost insides that one can best communicate with the external world and with one's fellow man. The artist must let rush and run and splash or float and seep and flow onto the canvas his deepest and most direct reactions to those submerged and nebulous but all-influencing feelings, desires, impulses and unutterables which lie at the core of us all.

The "impulse", as I use the word, can be toward serenity, quietude, contemplation and harmony as well as toward violence, movement, impetuosity and clash. But in either case, the vitality and significance of its manifestations will depend upon the freshness and appropriateness of those manifestations.

In a metaphysical consideration of the impulse, it can (as hinted at earlier) be seen as an extension of universal gesture, with the individual artist as an unusually active vehicle of its manifestation. The artist actually extends reality, the universe, when as the expression of an impulse he brings into being, through his "manipulation of sensuous materials", "a series of intrinsically interesting events, or closely knit families of events, which tend to perpetuate themselves..."⁷ And even if these productions have relatively little self-perpetuating power, the totality of being could not possibly be the same thence. I believe, however, that Professor Miller is right in maintaining that the relative greatness of works of art depends upon the amount of "cultural space-time" they occupy; or in another sense,

⁷C. H. Miller, op. cit., p. 10.

the amount of reality or existence they contribute.⁸ Artistic movements and individual oeuvres proceed in a very obviously dialectical manner when they are a direct or a conscious reaction to another movement or oeuvre. But these artists (as well as those who proceed along their own paths, oblivious of what others do) serve to expand the universe. Movements and individual artists who are successful and take their places in the order of things tend to come to seem the way or direction in which to move. The reaction of others into previously unseen manifestations serves to show that the possibilities are limitless, infinite.

Assimilated Formal Knowledge

The modern artist, and pre-eminently the abstract expressionist, approaches his work without preconceptions, denying reliance upon previous methods of proceeding and of resolving the work, except insofar as they seem to arise out of this situation. It seems to me that the only constant sine qua non of a successful (not necessarily a highly significant) work is whether it is somehow "digestible". To be vital, artistic work must incorporate the new, that which is unlike what already exists and is known: but in order to be experienced without inordinate difficulty, and thus appreciated (which is the life of works of art),

⁸I hope that I am not here twisting Professor Miller's meaning to the point of unrecognizability, and that he will not interpret me as making a vitalist of him. His did seem a succinct and appropriate expression for the point I was trying to make.

the work must be digestible or apprehendable as a whole. And this ability to be apprehended as a whole inevitably requires something that can at least retrospectively be called order.

The vital impulses (made so much of thus far) in their rightness, their appropriateness, at least to some extent grow out of the artist's total life experiences, an important part of which might be called "assimilated formal knowledge": the formal knowledge of his specific discipline.

Some might insist that the more important impulses are from the universe at large, and that the important artist is that person who, knowing and being skilled in an artistic discipline, is peculiarly receptive, through his inner world, to the cosmic gesture. But even one who held such a theory could not, I think, avoid the importance of the artist's past experience and present situation.

And regardless of the source of the preponderance of impulse-generation, in vital work the formal knowledge is not simply applied over the impulse or the record left behind by the impulse. It is not an essentially rational process of addition and subtraction (many think it is, among them the horde of mediocre abstract painters): but rather it requires being able to tune to the point where the irrational impulse comes out and is manifested in a visually "digestible" form. There is a Dionysian-Apollonian interplay-counterplay:⁹ but for alive and fresh work, the majority of the dialog must take place on a very deep

⁹Melvin Rader, op. cit., p. 120.

and basic level.

Now the artist, like everyone else, uses his rationality in innumerable ways. But in the essential part of the creative act he must rely upon non-rational means to solutions. Attesting to this fact is Hans Hofmann, an outstanding member of the abstract expressionist movement:¹⁰

"There are 30,000 decisions in a painting" he says, "and each one by intuition."

...There are 30,000 decisions, and each one is so intricate that if an artist tries to pluck his answers out of Reason, he will be paralyzed by possibilities. The choice must be made through instinct--highly trained, widely cultivated, but as "blind" as a Zen archer's aim.

Hofmann seems an especially fitting personage upon whom to conclude the discussion of "requirements for success in creative struggle"; he who knew so much of structure and yet who, as the years progressed, approached painting more and more freely; and who, until his death this year at almost eighty-six, was honestly and courageously doing loving battle and brilliantly winning the creative struggle.

CONCLUSION

The more general of the above observations apply, I believe, to the core of the creative process (properly so called) in all times and places. But the concentrated emphasis upon the struggle and upon impulse in abstract expressionism is due to the fact that it as an art movement has made this very process

¹⁰Thomas B. Hess, "The Mystery of Hans Hofmann", Art News, February 1965, pp. 39, 55.

itself a major part of its subject matter.

DISCUSSION OF THE PAINTINGS PRESENTED IN THE THESIS

As indicated by the foregoing discussion, I seldom came to the canvas with a preconceived notion of what I would do in the session, except for the times when there were certain (usually) nebulous groups of ideas or obsessions which I wanted to explore.

Sometimes there was a certain type of color or form idea, provoked by nature or art that I had become aware of. If and when such a beginning was employed, the previous conscious visualization of the idea was inevitably altered and sometimes almost totally left behind as the painting and I developed its (the painting's) own life.

Often, however, there was an even more vague desire to release impulses of a more general nature through a certain type (for example, violent and uncontrolled) of gesture.

In a case or two, as I faced the canvas, an image appeared before me, coupled with a broad feeling or cluster of feelings associated with it.

Probably most often, there was simply a vague feeling of a need or desire to paint; with colors and a surface to paint on, something always suggested itself. Thus a beginning occurred for the process elaborated above.

In many cases, the extended impulse that lasted through a painting session (or series of sessions) resulted in a work that was not (for one reason or another) satisfactory. In some such cases, a consciously thought out addition or subtraction or an

irrationally motivated alteration or series of alterations successfully completed the work. In a large number of these instances, however, the general impulse or rapport could not be re-established, and the canvas was then approached in a new and different impulse framework. In this latter type of case, the canvas was treated as though it were a new one.¹¹

Whatever may or may not be its broader implications, during a good painting session there was a sense of communion, of being outside of or larger than oneself. And the more meaningful culminations of works seemed to come from elsewhere, as if by "magic". Whether this was from mind at large, the subconscious, the association-of-ideas function of the imagination, a fantastically rapid and complicatedly enthymemic logical process or a combination of some or all of these, I cannot say. I can only say that there appeared solutions which were (at least for me) exciting and meaningful and which seemed new.

¹¹It was approached as a new canvas, that is, excepting the obvious and acknowledged fact that it was not; that there were already colors, images and so forth present which would very likely influence what was put down in the new session, and that any areas not painted anew would be not white and quiet, but of the color and character of the previous work.

PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS PAINTINGS

PLATE II

"High"

(oil on canvas, 28x28)



PLATE III

"Fudrillion"

(oil on canvas, 20x28)



PLATE IV

"Ghost of the Medicine Shield"

(oil on canvas, 48x30)



PLATE V

"The Red, White and Black"

(oil on canvas, 42x42)



PLATE VI

"Black, Brown and Rage"
(oil on canvas, 54x66)



PLATE VII

"Stripescape"

(oil on canvas, 30x30)



PLATE VIII

"Sober is as Sober Does"
(oil on canvas, 37x44)



PLATE IX

"Dream of an Eloquent Scream"

(oil on canvas, 24x24)



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I do not deal extensively with why a painter paints, or with the artist's relation to society, because the main emphasis in the thesis complex is upon the paintings presented. The writing is drawn primarily from my own personal experience and therefore is not to any great extent historical, even in the sense of contemporary art history. In the Introduction, however, a few observations on the artist's role and motivations seem appropriate. Consciously or unconsciously, the artist functions to an extent that few others do as a preserver of freedom. But a more general, broad and deep pressure seems to motivate most artists toward involvement in creative production. For many, this pressure is their feeling of alienation from essential reality or the feeling that ordinary experience is not intense and meaningful enough. But even if the artist feels at one with all things, he can still be motivated toward producing art in order to celebrate and extend life.

In the essential part of the meaningful creative process, there is a struggle from the nothing to the something. For the abstract expressionist this struggle has a life-and-death character, because he not only eschews previous studies and sketches, but also avoids preconceptions about design principles. Further, he employs a minimum amount of rational ends-and-means type of thinking, relying upon his impulses or intuition for beginnings, conclusions and most of that which occurs inbetween. The struggle goes on throughout the painting process.

An awareness of absolute freedom is both necessary and a handicap, because it requires the courage to act without any

ultimate reason. But there is no learning or development in superfluous and meaningless acts. One must be intensely aware of and sensitive to his impulses and must let them come out in the work directly, freshly and honestly. If one has enough experience (especially art experience), and if he tunes himself deeply and finely enough so that to a large extent the impulses are provoked in terms of that art experience, then the manifestations of those impulses will be both visually digestible and fresh. If the artist thus tuned is a man who also feels strongly about life, the work can then become significant.

The paintings presented are for the most part the result of approaching the canvas with a very open artistic attitude, but bringing to it at the same time many of the artist's feelings and thoughts about the world, life and himself. This combination usually provokes some kind of action bringing together paint and canvas. This everpresent situation subsequently becomes an important part of the subject matter in the paintings. Realizations or culminations of paintings very often seem to just "present" themselves and be known to "feel" right, without having been consciously or rationally thought out.