

# MoMA, The Bomb and the Abstract Expressionists

*Ruth Evans, née Mönckeberg, returned to Hamburg, city of her youth, after the War [in 1945]: "Had it not been for the two rivers, the Elbe and the Alster, I would not have known where I was... most of the familiar landmarks had vanished: factories, houses, churches, schools, hospitals — which ghastly ruin belonged to which? Not a living soul in the streets, no trees, no birds, not even a stray dog or cat. Nothing."*

*Silence. Nothing. Emptiness at the heart of civilization. "All the poems that sustained me before are as rigid and dead as I am myself," wrote a German mother to her children. All the rhymes, all the metaphors, all the harmonies, they meant nothing or they were lies. Reflection, analysis, and even language itself seemed inadequate, indeed improper, when one was confronted by the magnitude of the horror. The muses had been silenced. Only the second-rate had the courage to speak. Only the mindless claimed to understand. "Everything was false," wrote Charlotte Delbo. "Faces and books, everything showed me its falseness and I was in despair at having lost the faculty of dreaming, or harboring illusions; I was no longer open to imagination, or explanation."*

from Walking Since Daybreak, by Modris Eksteins,

Houghton Mifflin, 1999

*There's no real life for an artist in America — only a living death....If he is a painter, the surest way for him to survive is to make stupid portraits of even more stupid people, or sell his services to the advertising monarch, who, in my opinion, have done more to ruin art than any other simple factor I know of.*

Henry Miller, The Air Conditioned Nightmare, New Directions, 1945

What was America in the aftermath of the Second World War? Perhaps it could be described at this juncture in history as a trembling victor, owning the world outright (with the exception of the Soviet Union and its bloc); wealthier by leaps and bounds than the rest of the world put together; full of bluster; full of the kill. And simultaneously

terrified that it might just lose its grasp, the tenuousness of which was based on the fact that its role as top dog was grabbed by force of such unimaginable viciousness, that, in fact, not too many of the world's people were reveling in America's blood soaked victory. It had learned one thing at least from its legacy of slavery: brute force alone will not win hearts and minds.

When Eisenhower came to office he proclaimed:

*Our aim in the Cold War is not conquering of territory or subjugation by force. Our aim is more subtle, more pervasive, more complete. We are trying to get the world, by peaceful means, to believe the truth. That truth is that Americans want a world at peace, a world in which all people shall have opportunity for maximum individual development. The means we shall employ to spread this truth are often called "psychological." Don't be afraid of that term just because it's a five-dollar, five-syllable word. "Psychological warfare" is the struggle for the minds and wills of men.*

The US after the War was swimming in dollars. Every country in Europe was thoroughly bankrupt, and thus at the mercy of America. America set forth on a path, then, to buy allegiance for its anti-Communist Cold War, via the dissemination of "anti-Communist" psychology, best disseminated by "anti-Communist" culture.

The newly formed Central Intelligence Agency evolved from the O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services) which had been the US's secret service organization during the War. A primary activity of the OSS by the War's end was the recruitment of Nazi officials and SS officers, shipping them secretly to South America, where, with OSS protection and new identities, they set to work to suppress indigenous communist insurrections.

Simultaneously, the US did not hesitate to sink huge sums of unaccounted funds into the CIA's campaign to "culturally" fight communism. This culminated in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was rooted into place by 1950. The general idea was to parade art (writing, visual arts, music) that was as antithetical as possible to Stalinist dictums about what art should be. Art was to represent "freedom," a nebulous concept without a

context. The idea was that this pro-American freedom was a freedom of the individual, with the emphasis on every-man-for-himself. No political doctrine was going to tell these artists what to do. But basically, what the Congress for Cultural Freedom sponsored, was precisely that art which was banned in the Soviet Union. As an example, they put on an all-out-expense International Conference of Twentieth Century Music in 1954, which concentrated heavily on atonal music, for the express reason that atonal music was not allowed under Stalinism. Alfred Barr (director of MoMA) said, "The modern artist's nonconformity and love of freedom cannot be tolerated within a monolithic tyranny and modern art is useless for the dictator's propaganda." In 1952 The Congress for Cultural Freedom sponsored the "Masterpieces Festival" of modern art. "On display will be masterpieces that could not have been created nor whose exhibition would be allowed by such totalitarian regimes as Nazi Germany or present day Soviet Russia and her satellites." The primary art of this exhibition and a number of other widely publicized art extravaganzas during the fifties was Abstract Expressionism. Eva Cockcroft wrote about Abstract Expressionism in Artforum (No. 12) in 1974: "To understand why a particular art movement becomes successful under a given set of historical circumstances requires an examination of the specifics of patronage and the ideological needs of the powerful."

Why was Abstract Expressionist art singled out by the CIA/State Department as an essential weapon of the cultural Cold War? Why did Nelson Rockefeller purchase over 2500 pieces of Abstract Expressionist art and use these paintings to decorate the lobbies of Chase Manhattan banks? And then, why was New York's Museum of Modern Art so terrifically enthusiastic over this specific art movement? In order to understand the trajectory behind these actions and policies, we have to examine the history and formation of the Abstract Expressionist Movement, what it was attempting to achieve in the world through its art, and how it was consequently interpreted. Perhaps this understanding will shed some clarity on the present day art establishment, and why it functions in its seemingly nonsensical manner.

The phenomenon of artists as wealthy members of the establishment, living in multi-million dollar lofts in Tribeca and being featured in upscale fashion magazines, has not always been with us. In the US in the '30s, artists were generally just scraping by, living

off the federally sponsored WPA (painting post office murals, for instance), and most often Marxists. Neither were artists typically loners, the way they are today: many were involved in a number of quite vocal and significant artist groups — the American Artists Congress, and then later, a group that broke away from it, the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. The AAC held substantial political sway, aligning with the Popular Front Movement (along with the notorious Communist, Picasso), which proclaimed a necessity to make peace with all liberal and democratic forces in order to create a unified front against Fascism, which in the '30s was rising up rapaciously. After 1935, with the official formation of the United Front, artists in the US went from referring to themselves as revolutionaries, to seeing themselves as "the guardians of liberal and democratic ideals." A combination of this altercation of political commitment (confounded by the Hitler-Stalin Pact), and the wartime demise of WPA funding, left artists not only isolated agents on the free market, but also bitter and cynical towards political solutions in general. As the artists' target audience turned from the masses (whom they were trying to influence) to the elite (whom they were trying to sell to), they became wary of losing their individuality by joining groups. Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, who went on to become superstars of Abstract Expressionism, led the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors fervently against the communist presence in the art world. Even before the tremendous disillusionment that prevailed at the end of the War, the late '30s brought artists a sense of betrayal by the Soviet Union. They thus took a turn toward Trotskyism, which upheld the belief that art in and of itself was subversive, and should be left free to develop on its own without political restrictions. From there, a new ethos took root: the individual as king.

All this was happening in America. In the Soviet Union and among Communist parties around the world, artists who upheld politically committed and realist art were standing strongly behind their beliefs. The French Communist Party stated, "An answer to the fake prophets of skepticism, anguish, and despair, our realism is a realism of affirmation, construction, and joy." In Mexico, Diego Rivera, Carlos Romero Orozco, and David Alfero Siquieros were stunning the world with their enormously powerful murals that fought so effectively against American imperialism.

When the US entered the War in 1941, victory and the ability to essentially monopolize

the world were dependent on teaming up (temporarily) with the natural enemy of everything they rested upon, the Soviet Union. Somebody had to do the fighting, after all. The anti-Communists, like snakes, might have done a bit of hibernating during the War years, but this hibernation was a breeding nest for the unleashed forces of virulent opposition. The Cold War emerged on the scene as early as February 1945 with the "inexplicable" bombing of Dresden (later thought to be a warning by the US to Soviet Russia about who really is in power now).

Certain artists, hardly pushed aside into insignificant obscurity, were instead paraded before the world as supermen of "The American Century." Not all artists, of course. Many were tossed away to their demise, exemplified by the 1951 Gimbels' Department Store "Art Show", where 322 primarily figurative works, stacked irreverently against the walls, were selling for 50% off. But the artists who had, throughout the '40s, solidified their "freedom" from political, anti-imperialist commitment, and then went on to flaunt a violence in their art that not so coincidentally mirrored America's wartime atrocities, became propitiously useful.

These were the Abstract Expressionists. Overwhelmingly men, previously Marxists and then disillusioned Marxists, their art exemplified a worldview that could be construed as the ultimate antithesis to Communism. They were individualistic, autonomous, exuding despair, anxiety, and fear of atomic annihilation. Jackson Pollack, in particular, became the icon of alienation. As his person as well as his art were splashed across the pages of Life Magazine (owned by Henry Luce, a prominent force in Cold War State Department machinations), a magazine which was so obviously not an art magazine, Pollack became a metaphorical commodity himself, a most useful pawn of US "psychological warfare."

In 1943 Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman wrote a manifesto, essentially, for the Abstract Expressionist Movement. One of their points was, "It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial.... Consequently if our work embodies those beliefs it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures of the home; pictures over the mantle; pictures of the American

scene..."

When the US dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an unprecedented terror fell upon the world like so much nuclear fallout. The Abstract Expressionist artists felt keenly that they had to present a pessimism, a somber refusal to paint either reality or viscera, as that would be frivolous, superfluous, and hollow. The brutality of their art was a screaming out of rage at what their world had become. Nothing should be finished, or refined, or inauthentic. Crudeness, power, and destruction were the only reactions left.

They emerged from the nightmarish debacle of the war unable, and unwilling, to speak in any form of language that was not of complete nihilism. They felt that the world had become dehumanized to such an extent that ideas of "progress" and "science", such as those used in Marxist texts, were utterly false. Naturalism, realism, were no longer adequate, either aesthetically or morally, to cope with the modern horrors. Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman emphasized (in a 1946 show catalogue) that the horror of modern conditions could not be represented or described. To do so was unworthy of the artist; it was to descend to the level of Life or The New Yorker, to wallow in the filth of everyday life. To depict the horror, to describe it, was tantamount to accepting it.

Nevertheless, the CIA latched onto Abstract Expressionism for its purported anti-communism. With the CIA's generously funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, and under the auspices of the Rockefeller owned and operated Museum of Modern Art in New York, huge, enormously expensive exhibitions of Abstract Expressionist artworks were staged, and then exported to (some would say dumped upon) museums throughout the Western Bloc European countries. Most particularly these exhibitions were foisted upon France (the acknowledged "art capital"), "proving" American supremacy in the art world by sheer size and volume. In reality, this vision of supremacy was an aspect of the Marshall Plan, which forced American products on France as part of their huge war reparations. The French public had no illusions as to the true meaning of this "sharing" of American culture. 1946 brought massive street demonstrations in Paris, which often became violent over the next few years. When one of these Congress for Cultural

Freedom exhibits in Barcelona featured Abstract Expressionist paintings so large that the museum's metal doors had to be sawed off in order to get the paintings through, La Libre Belgique wrote: "The Biggest in the World...This strength, displayed in the frenzy of a total freedom, seems a really dangerous tide. Our own abstract painters seem pygmies before the disturbing power of these unchained giants."

America knew how to win a war, all right: size, brute force. Unfortunately, these attributes didn't function very well in Vietnam, despite persistent efforts.

Capitalizing on the millenium year 2000, New York's Museum of Modern Art is featuring an extensive exhibition entitled "Making Choices," which consists of categories of artistic constructs, mostly putting on displays of work from their vast collection. I went to this, expecting perhaps to be led through some kind of progression of art movements, but instead I sensed only a jumble, with a cursory explanation provided in an accompanying catalogue. What we did have was a focus on the years 1920 through 1960, because this period was seen as highly tumultuous.

It would be difficult to say less, since individualism in choice is the only cohesive factor in this exhibition. Since MoMA's conception in 1929 (by none other than Abbey Aldrich Rockefeller, mother of Nelson), it has served the US as a vital link between American diplomacy, American imperialism, and the cultural "justification" for everything perpetrated in the name of Western Civilization.

Sometimes hiding behind a "democratic" free-for-all embrace of modern art (as is evidenced in the current exhibition), and sometimes blatantly political, MoMA has functioned as the top arbiter of GREAT ART (and, by elimination, the top arbiter of that art which is deemed dismissable).

MoMA's linkage with the State Department and American policy has sometimes been flauntingly overt. In 1942 it staged *The Road to Victory*, a photo exhibition of enormous blowups of work by Edward J. Steichen, with text by Carl Sandburg. The subject, of course, was AMERICA — the American people — and the need to fight and win the War.

But during the same period (under Nelson Rockefeller's presidency of MoMA), a show

that had been planned years in advance of the work of David Alfaro Siquieros was cancelled because of his communist affiliations, a move which put him quite intentionally in a position of dangerous exile for a number of years. (It must be noted here that out of the vast opus of this world renown master painter, the Museum of Modern Art seems to have only two relatively small paintings).

MoMA was part and parcel of the CIA's efforts to combat Communism with American culture. Not only were the presidents and board members of MoMA also directors or major funders of the Congress for Cultural Freedom ("Jock" Hay Whitney, William Burden, Alfred Barr), MoMA also directly organized and sponsored exhibitions in conjunction with the CIA. One example of this was the 1953-4 exhibition entitled "Twelve Contemporary American Painters and Sculptors" which was foisted on France via the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. The French press called the Parisian museum the new outpost of US territory, and the artists, "John Foster Dulles' 12 apostles."

President Eisenhower endorsed MoMA as the bastion of freedom and democracy: "As long as artists are at liberty to feel with high personal intensity, as long as our artists are free to create with sincerity and conviction, there will be a healthy controversy and progress in art....How different it is in tyranny, when artists are made the slaves and tools of the state; when artists become chief propagandists of a cause, progress is arrested and creation and genius are destroyed." Modern art, in Eisenhower's estimation, was a "pillar of liberty."

It was, then, no coincidence that MoMA spearheaded the propulsion of Abstract Expressionists into super art stardom. It was, after all, the voice of authority. "Links between cultural Cold War politics and the success of Abstract Expressionism are by no means coincidental....They were consciously forged at the time by some of the most influential figures controlling museum policies and advocating enlightened Cold War tactics..." (Eva Cockcroft, op. cit.).

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Whenever something or someone is extolled so virulently by the power structure, and used, as was Abstract Expressionism, to defend policies of genocide in the name of



liberty and freedom, then something must be inherently wrong with it.

The Abstract Expressionists, although recipients of a great deal of fame and money, were probably themselves victimized by the use they were put to. Perhaps they also did not understand the dangers of what they were saying when they eschewed political commitments and sought refuge in myths and "universality." Images out of historical context can so readily be construed to mean their opposite, and most certainly this will happen if the interpreters wield tremendous power and have an urgent agenda to attend to.

Jackson Pollack and David Smith both died in car crashes. Arshille Gorky, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko all committed suicide in one way or another. Rothko's friends felt his suicide resulted from being so well paid for his paintings that "howled their opposition to bourgeois materialism."

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Woody Guthrie wrote a song, "Unwelcome Guest", about a Robin Hood styled thief who robs the rich man's house to give to the poor.