

The Developments Towards Postmodernism in the Writings of Harold Rosenberg
and Roland Barthes

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Harold Rosenberg was a philosopher and art critic that heralded Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists as artists who exemplified the new thoughts and theories of modern painting. However, a decade later, Roland Barthes and Robert Rauschenberg countered the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in their time, rejecting its modernist ideals and posing new concepts that furthered art towards postmodernism. However, while one might see this change from avant-garde-to-status-quo in art movements as a linear progression, the very notion of that concept follows modernist principles of progress as well and is far more complicated than just a step-by-step linear momentum of art movements.

In Rosenberg's 1952 essay, "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg acknowledged the formalistic similarities between the American Action Painters, his term for Abstract Expressionists, and their European predecessors. However, he believed that Abstract Expressionists had created an entirely new form of modern painting with their new attitude towards their canvas and subject matter. Rosenberg further said how Abstract Expression was a continued pursuit of breaking down the distinction between art and life—a goal that was shared by earlier avant-garde artists in Dada and Surrealism. While some of his ideas did break from modernist ideals—such as the meaning of a piece is contingent and depending on the context of the time in which it was created, as compared to the modernist autonomous logocentrism that was prevalent before—many of those standards remained a base for the Abstract Expressionist form. One of these ideals was that of the individual artistic genius, which was embodied by Jackson Pollock in this time. This belief is centered around how the artists has an intended meaning, idea, and expression. Especially in Pollock's painting, it relies on the emotional expression of the artist and his connection with the painting—particularly when looking at how involved he was in the making of the art. Rosenberg looked at Pollock's process of actively

splattering the canvas with paint as a way of “getting inside of the canvas” and a bodily expression of his emotions.¹ In this active action painting, there was also the concept of the autographic gesture, which was the idea that the mark-making on the painting was an indexical signature of the artist. Through this, the style was thought to be inimitable as the mark-making of the artist was unique. Abstract Expressionism was also very non-figurative and non-literal and tended to be spontaneous expression without sketches or plans of how the work was to turn out. Rosenberg noted how it was the release of tension, energy, and emotion in the art was what differentiated this style from previous movements, notably in how there was less concern in the aesthetic appearance of the art in favor of the bodily emotion being expressed on the canvas by the individual artist. Rosenberg discussed how the planning and aesthetic concern in previous artistic movements held artists back from breaching the distinction between art and life, as those concerns lacked a sense of reality. Rosenberg’s break from modernist principles was his rejection of disinterested contemplation. In his eyes, if the body of the artist was so interested and involved in the creation of the work the viewer cannot reach the meaning of it without that interest. Another thing that remained consistent with modernist ideals was the distinction between high and low art, especially when concerned with material purity and the physical presentation of the work. While the mark-making of abstract expressionists was far different than that of previous art movements, they were still using paint on canvas and presenting the pieces in a very sterile, modernist fashion that was the museum standard of the time. Another important thing to note about Abstract Expressionism as a whole is that it was very avant-garde and revolutionary in the art world when it was first introduced. After all, many of the artists were inspired by and interested in Dadaism, Existentialism, and Surrealism. However, the Abstract Expressionists’ presumption that their art was entirely neutral and autonomous lent their painting

1. Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *The Tradition of the New*, 1-8.

styles to branding. Due to Pollock's popularity, there was a sense of wealth and depth attributed to his style in particular. As he grew more popular the commodification for the masses of this once avant-garde style began, slowly turning his style into kitsch culture. At this point, Abstract Expressionism's dominance had turned it into the new status quo of what was considered good high art.

In response to this notion of the author's intended deep, hidden meaning and the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in the art world, both Roland Barthes and Robert Rauschenberg challenged these ideals with their work. In Barthes' "The Death of the Author," he discussed how the idea of an author who creates a singular, hidden meaning in their piece is detrimental to creation both in literature and the arts, and it should be dismissed.² Instead, he believes that the reader or viewer of a piece find its meaning through their own interpretation. In this, it's important to note how it allows the reader to experience a text contextually and subjectively, being affected by their own experiences and biases in determining the meaning. This entirely rejects the idea of the artist as the individual genius who injects meaning into their work, as the power is returned to the viewer and how they interpret it. This also ties into Rauschenberg and his artwork, as he often uses quotidian objects — such as newspapers, a bed, a quilt, or a taxidermy goat — which already have a referential meaning and context for the viewer, denying a singularity in meaning and material purity. His use of everyday objects rejects both the singular, creator-intended meaning and the distinction between high and low art. For example, in his piece *Bed* — a direct critique of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism—he places a quilt on the piece; it's an item that already has connections to African American culture, craft, and "women's work"— things considered low art. It's impossible to view these objects without the aforementioned context, as their existence in the piece already holds deep meanings

2. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *New Critical Essays*, 1-6.

and connections, and cannot be viewed in the modernist's disinterested contemplation. Rauschenberg particularly critiques the predictability and formula of abstract expressionism paintings in his work; despite Abstract Expressionism relying on some sense of "chance" in their creation in terms of action painting, they have continuous patterns in order to show that autographic gesture that was adored by critics. In Rauschenberg's *Bed*, he makes a jab at abstract expressionists by using found objects and splattering the sheets and pillows with paint in a style similar to Pollock's. The banality of these objects— a worn pillow, sheets, and a quilt— rejects the material purity while mimicking the presentation style of high art on canvas. The critique withstanding, Rauschenberg did state how *Bed* was an "intimate self-portrait," asserting how "painting relates to both art and life... I try to act in that gap between the two."³ He noticed the distinction between art and life, yet unlike in modernism, his use of daily objects combined with formal materials played with the dichotomy between the two rather than try to close the gap.

When looking at the relationship between the Abstract Expressionists and their supporters, and the counter to them, you could probably still look at theories that supported modernism's idea of linear progress. One theory that would support this is the Weltgeist principle, which is a linear model of progress built off of the image of a staircase. In this principle, the thesis plus the antithesis creates the synthesis, which then becomes the new thesis and the cycle begins again. To translate this, the status quo faces a counter or tension that eventually breaks to create change. However, that which was changed eventually becomes the new status quo. Looking at our relationship discussed, we can see how the new movement of Abstract Expressionism created an entirely new form of art and terminology to go with it, along with breaking from the base of some modernist principles by Rosenberg's definitions. The tension brought by Barthes in "The Death of the Author" and Rauschenberg's art work that

rejected Abstract Expressionism's ideas eventually breaks, creating a new movement that slips a little closer to the principles of postmodernism. However, this is a very simplistic way to view this progress between movements, as there are many branching and cyclical paths throughout. For example, if avant-garde styles of Rauschenberg and John Cage are the only linear next step of progress, how can one account for Minimalism when it stems from its own tension, separate and different from that of Rauschenberg, with Abstract Expressionist and modernist principles. Along with that, both Abstract Expressionists and Rauschenberg took inspiration from movements that were considered in their time as avant-garde as well, such as Dadaism and surrealism, creating a cyclical nature of avant-garde art and ideas.

Abstract Expressionism had been considered groundbreaking and avant-garde at its conception by art critics such as Rosenberg. While it held some of the same modern standards to its art, it still challenged the concepts of aesthetic and figurative work in high art and brought the process of creation into the light as part of the art. However, eventually it became part of the status quo, becoming commodified and kitschy and ready for the masses to consume. To challenge the mass dominance of Abstract Expressionism, Rauschenberg and Barthes created their own work that questioned some of the modernist principles that it was founded on, creating new works that exemplified the challenges they were making to the art world. By challenging Abstract Expressionism and taking notes from previous art movements, they furthered art towards more postmodernist principles, allowing their other contemporary movements room to grow.

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