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The American Impact on Western Europe:

Americanization and Westernization in Transatlantic Perspective

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The Give and Take of American Painting in Postwar Western Europe

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The standard narrative of 20th century art maintains that with the advent of abstract expressionism in the late 1940s American painting for the very first time made a genuine contribution to the course of Western art history. This at first sight eurocentristic narrative relies on the conceptualization of modern art as an evolutionary process, mainly conditioned by the esthetic qualities of the autonomous art work and urged on by successive vanguard movements. Pointing out its formal inventiveness and radical newness, its painterly grandeur, purity of means, and artistic self-consciousness, art historical writing has naturalized abstract expressionism as an integral part - if not the climax or glorious finale[1] - of the modernist adventure.

In 1970, the American art critic Irving Sandler published „Abstract Expressionism. The Triumph of American Painting.“[2] The book perpetuated the by then well-established modernist interpretation of abstract expressionism, but the somewhat self-congratulatory title suggests a bias which became crucial for a revisionist reading of this „triumph“ in the following years. Max Kozloff‘s article „American Painting During the Cold War,“[3] Eva Cockroft’s „Abstract Expressionism. Weapon of the Cold War,“[4] and, especially, Serge Guilbaut’s book „How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art“[5] are landmarks of a new, materialist approach in dealing with post-1945 art history and its American contribution. Investigating the political, institutional, and ideological circumstances, which influenced the transfer of

American art works to Western Europe after the Second World War, the revisionists claim that abstract expressionism is inextricable from American imperialism and was used as an instrument of propaganda in a „Cultural Cold War“. Members of the State Department and CIA-agents as well as museum curators, art dealers, and even the artists themselves get unmasked or are made to appear as accomplices of a purposefully planned cultural offensive against communist influence in Western and Central Europe. The „triumph of American painting,“ the success of abstract expressionism with the European art establishment, would then be no more than the triumph of American foreign policy and its imperialist ambitions.

Though both these interpretations, the formalist and the materialist, have been much debated and harshly criticized in the last decades,[6] their clash hasn't been really fruitful yet. T.J. Clark characterized the situation quite poignantly: „There is a sentiment in the air as if the study of abstract expressionism has come to a dead end. [Es liegt eine Stimmung in der Luft, als stecke das Studium des Abstrakten Expressionismus in einer Sackgasse.]“[7]

It is my concern to question the revisionist argument – not out of partisanship with modernist critical theory, but in order to realign these two approaches to a new reading that insists on the specific role of the art work as a powerful medium within transatlantic discourse. The conceptualization of the Old World and the New World as antagonistic cultural systems and accompanying ideas of the Self and the Other decisively conditioned the dialogue on American painting in the postwar period. The terms „Westernization“ and „Americanization“, more often used to cover up than to

reveal, have to be defined within this context. While the „Cultural Cold War“ as a catchword with by now mythic overtones seems to have a strong and lasting appeal, one general question to be raised would be, if, considering the traditional hegemony of what was perceived as European highbrow culture, such a thing as American painting could be successfully „instrumentalized“ at all. A detailed chronology of the presentation and reception of contemporary American painting in postwar Western Europe, and in West Germany in particular, is necessary to investigate the question whether abstract expressionism was in fact (ab)used as a „weapon“ for propagandistic purposes by American Cold Warriors. Having done quite some research in a number of mainly American archives, I would argue that these sources tell a different story.

Let me first discuss the transfer of American painting to postwar Western Europe initiated and executed by institutions and individuals in the United States. I will then comment on corresponding European interests and activities and, eventually, deal with the role accorded to abstract expressionism in the transatlantic fine arts dialogue of the late 1950s.

The transfer of American painting to postwar Western Europe

American initiatives

The American occupation of parts of West Germany, the ideological claims purported by re-education and re-orientation, and the role of Germany as an early battle-field of the Cold War could have constituted a stage ideally set for an American

cultural offensive also in the realm of „high art“. In February 1949, the Cultural Affairs Branch of the Education & Cultural Relations Division (E&CR), OMGUS, was instructed to „arrange and encourage international exchange of fine arts exhibitions.“[8] William G. Constable, a British-born art historian and curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts since 1938, traveled as „visiting expert“ through the American occupation zone in order to evaluate the situation at German museums and cultural institutions and to advise E&CR on the implementation of fine art objects within the re-education program. Among other things Constable supported exhibitions of contemporary American art works to democratize and internationalize the German art scene and to break down German conservatism as well as to present the cultural achievements of the United States to a European audience. However, „[i]t is important that the selecting agency should be of high standing and good repute. Some of the best contemporary American work is experimental and its exhibitions might arouse criticism in certain quarters, unless backed by accepted authorities.“[9] This remark by the „visiting expert“ is crucial. It hints at a fundamental dilemma that determined American cultural policy in the postwar years and prevented the realization of Constable’s exhibition program in Germany for close to a decade.

The wish to officially export and show off American art works did exist with members of the US government, and the endeavor was backed by parts of the American art establishment and a liberal intelligentsia. Two main problems obstructed corresponding activities: In the United States there existed no tradition of public art patronage similar to European standards, which, however, would have been a precondition of cultural foreign policy involving the fine arts. Furthermore, the

establishment of a fine arts exhibition program designed for audiences abroad implied the definition of its representative content: What is „American art“?, What is „American“ in American art?, or What should such as thing as „American art“ look like? These questions were vehemently debated in postwar America, and the exhibition project „Advancing American Art“ (1946-48) highlights the intertwinement of political and esthetic arguments typical of that debate.[10] The show was put together by employees of the Office of International Information & Cultural Affairs (OIC), a newly founded subdivision in the State Department. It consisted of 79 oils by 47 painters, and 73 water colors. Its curator, J. Leroy Davidson, had opted for modernist trends in contemporary American painting to emphasize the progressiveness of the native art scene. While realism and figurative expressionism were also represented, the main body of exhibits was abstract works. Conventional academic art, Folk Art, and American Scene-painting did not find entry into „Advancing American Art“. William Benton, Assistant Secretary of State, commented on the exhibition: „To all those abroad who thought of the United States as a nation of materialism ... the same country which produces brilliant scientists and engineeers also produces creative artists.“[11] And the art critic Alfred M. Frankfurter announced: „This time we are exporting neither domestic brandy in imitation cognac bottles nor vintage non-intoxicating grape juice, but real bourbon, aged in the wood – what may justly be described as the wine of the country.“[12] While „Advancing American Art“ was well received abroad, protests from within the United States were numerous and vehemently articulated. Conservative artists, journalists, and politicians – among them President Harry S. Truman – criticized the formal

radicalism of the exhibits as of obviously European origin and thus not indigenuous to the American soil. The whole show was considered not representative. „Those paintings that try to tell a story at all, give the impression that America is a drab, ugly place, filled with drab, ugly people. They are definitely leftish paintings.“[13]
The stigmatisation of some artists as extremists with communist background, and the linking of esthetic quality with political identity became powerful arguments in the upsurge of Red Scare populism by then well under way. The fact that J. Leroy Davidson had bought the art works for the State Department with tax payers‘ money further fuelled the protest against the exhibition. In May 1947 the House Appropriations Committee decided to cancel the whole OIC-budget and recommended the division‘s dissolution. In June of that year, Secretary of State George C. Marshall ordered the exhibition’s return to the United States. Eventually, the art works were put up for auction sale in the summer of 1948.
The consequences of „Advancing American Art“ and its disastrous fate were that for all future export exhibitions at government‘s expense the official permission of the American Congress had to be obtained, and that the issue of contemporary American painting was purposefully side-stepped as a too „hot potato“ in the following years. The establishment of the United States Information Agency (USIA) in August 1953 did not bring about decisive changes as regards this particular issue. As a government agency, it was „by its very nature against experimental art. We want to show the artistic nature and achievement of America in ways that all people abroad can understand“ – as its deputy director Andrew H. Berding publicly remarked.[14] In

1954, USIA adopted the policy of excluding artists with real or supposed communist sympathies from its exhibition program.

If the US-government was engaged in a „Cultural Cold War“ to win the hearts and minds of Europe, contemporary American painting had no place in it – at least if we consider the manifestations of official cultural foreign policy up to the late 1950s. As a consequence, the special German-American postwar relationship did not result in a massive presence of American art works in the occupation zone or West Germany in general. Exhibition activities to be initiated by OMGUS/HICOG were limited or even dictated by domestic policies and the corresponding discourse in the United States.

So how and when did contemporary American painting, and abstract expressionism in particular, actually come to Western Europe after 1945 – if not via state patronage? When „Advancing American Art“ was cancelled in 1947 it became obvious to American museum curators, gallery owners, and other interested individuals that their government could not be counted on as sponsor or organizer of the kind of shows they intended to present to a foreign audience. Driven by diverse motivations and encouraged by European requests, private institutions, amongst whom the American Federation of Arts and the Museum of Modern Art in New York were the most prominent, put together a series of contemporary art exhibitions for display in Western European cities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to report on each show and the history of its coming about. Analyzing them all together allows for the delineation of common characteristics and recurring arguments, though.

The guiding principle for most of the exhibitions up to the late 1950s was to be representative in the broadest sense, and to demonstrate the variety and diversity of the American art scene. Co-existing tendencies in contemporary American painting such as Social Realism, Figurative and Abstract Expressionism, „Primitive" Painting, and Magic Realism were exhibited next to each other. Individualism, pluralism, and freedom of expression were the qualifying catchwords that accompanied the cross-currents concept, as it was usually called. Exhibitions representing this approach were „Amerikanische Malerei – Werden und Gegenwart" (1951),[15] „Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors" (1953-54),[16] „Modern Art from the US" (1955-56),[17] „Amerikanische Maler der Gegenwart" (1956)[18] as well as the American contributions to the Venice Biennale (1948, 1950, 1952, 1954, 1956).[19] While these qualities, i.e. individualism, pluralism, and freedom of expression, harked back to nationally circumscribed values of American society and political identity, they also served as rhetorical antidotes to the uniformity and dogmatism associated with totalitarian art. The insistence on pluralism further reflected the multitude of conflicting voices and lobbying groups within the American art establishment then – a battle-ground, which exhibition curators tried to appease or circumvent by the displayed compromise.

Another quality many export shows set out to mediate was topicality or newness. In view of the prejudiced European idea saying that the United States had no significant art history of its own, the recourse to national traditions in the arts did not commend itself as a successful exhibition strategy. Therefore, the historical perspective was rarely chosen. A much more promising strategy seemed to be to put the focus on the

contemporary aspect itself, on the up-to-dateness of the paintings, as it were. They were supposed to convey the idea of a new beginning, indeed an emancipation from the (European) past. The „new“ beginning picked up the traditional topos of the „New World,“ embedding contemporary American art in a long-established rhetoric and providing a frame for thinking in national terms.

Within the spectrum of exhibitions that were brought to Western Europe in the first decade after the war and put together by Americans, abstract expressionism played only a minor role. It usually got subsumed under the plethora of artistic styles and tendencies displayed and was then more or less differentiated as a movement of its own with vanguard status. Only the New York-based art dealers Samuel Kootz and Sidney Janis made a purposeful effort to establish abstract expressionist painting in postwar Europe. Their activities were mainly motivated by financial reasoning. Both hoped to improve the standing of their artists on the American market via reference to a positive reception in Paris, the longtime art capital of the Western world. In 1947, Samuel Kootz cooperated with the Galerie Maeght to show „Introduction à la peinture américaine,“[20] and in 1952, Sidney Janis presented „Regards sur la peinture américaine“ at the Galerie de France.[21] The exhibitions were designed to profile an American vanguard art and displayed a variety of New York painting, which in retrospect could be categorized as abstract expressionist. Both shows were poorly received by the European public and failed to succeed in terms of a financial investment. As a consequence, Kootz and Janis in the following years concentrated their activities on the American market exclusively – a strategy, which from the mid-1950s on proved to be extremely lucrative. Apart from these early adventures,

American gallery owners dealing with contemporary American painting were conspicuously absent form the European art scene until the very late 1950s.

The survey of the kind of American art brought to the Old World by private institutions and individuals based in the United States reveals that no concerted effort was made to thrust abstract expressionism down European throats in the first postwar decade. If there was an overall message intended to be mediated abroad, it would be that the United States was a liberal nation, where freedom and individualism were cherished, and that it had a genuine art of its own – promising and worthwhile to look at as well as to obtain.

European initiatives

In 1958, a Jackson Pollock retrospective exhibition and „The New American Painting“, a parade of abstract expressionist painting, both put together by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, started their tour through Western European capitals, where they were enthusiastically received and heralded as the most relevant art of the time. How did such a change of exhibition strategy come about, and why were the two shows so successful in Europe?

A look at the cultural climate in postwar Europe and at the ways, means, and interests Europeans actually had to confront and deal with American art is crucial, if one wants to understand the narrowing down of what was perceived as representative American painting to one particular movement, namely abstract expressionism, in the late 1950s. Fascist leadership and the Second World War had

left a devasted art scene mostly bereft of its avantgardes. To find points of reference for new creative departures many artists and art institutions took recourse to prewar modernism and its diverse accomplishments. Anti-modernist sentiments were also vehemently voiced, especially in France and West Germany, but lost momentum in the 1950s. The first „documenta"-exhibition at Kassel (1955)[22] demonstrates the establishment of modernism as that tradition, which the leading forces within the West German art scene had by then adopted as their own and considered imperative to continue. It was a huge stock-taking of occidental art in the 20th century up to 1955, designed to rehabilitate modern painting and sculpture against the backdrop of its manipulation and devaluation as „Degenerate Art" by Nazi-propaganda in the Third Reich.[23] However, the kind of modernism exhibited at Kassel was a streamlined version thereof and reflected biased selection criteria. Realist and expressly figurative art had no place in it. The radically political painting of the Weimar Republic years, formulated most eloquently by George Grosz and Otto Dix, did not find entry, neither did Russian constructivism. Modern art got defined as a purely formalist adventure, as an ongoing history of abstraction in progress, as a free play of form and color, and as an exclusively Western phenomenon. But if the first „documenta" propagated the Westernization of the West German art scene via assertion or, rather, invention of a common tradition, the United States had no part in that tradition. American art was more or less absent in Kassel.[24]

The ignorance of contemporary American art, ten years after the war, is conspicuous. It is exemplified not only by „documenta", but was prevalent at West German

museums, commercial galleries, and art institutions in general. In other parts of Europe a transatlantic dialogue was by then well under way.

Apart from the exhibitions sent to the Old World by institutions based in the United States, there were two important outposts of contemporary American art on the continent: the Peggy Guggenheim Collection at Venice, and American artists working in Paris. In 1948, Guggenheim had brought her remarkable collection of modern European and American art from New York to Italy.[25] As for the American section, it comprised works by Hans Hofmann, William Baziotes, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and, especially, Jackson Pollock, whom Guggenheim had been supporting since 1943. The collection was exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1948,[26] at the Museo Correr in 1950,[27] and, upon explicit invitation, at the art museums of Amsterdam, Brussels, and Zurich in 1951.[28] Guggenheim's focus on abstract expressionism as the only American art she personally thought worthwhile of promotion, and the integration of New York School painting into the phalanx of modern art works that constituted the bulk of her collection, markedly shaped the European perception of what American painting was all about and how it could be related to the modernist, i.e. up to then European tradition.

Furthermore, in the 1950s, more than 300 American artists were working in Paris.[29] Several exhibitions reveal that they were recognized as a nationally circumscribed group, and the spectrum of art works presented leaned heavily on the abstract side.[30] The expressionistic, gestural or calligraphic abstractions of Lewin Alcopley, Oscar Chelimsky, Joe Downing, Sam Francis, and others reflected the influence of classical Ecole de Paris and vanguard French painting likewise, while they were also seen as

closely related to the art of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Tobey. Thus, the work of the American painters in Paris visualized a formal connection between artistic developments in the United States and Western Europe – developments, which shaped and determined the course modernism was then about to take.

The transatlantic analogy was sought and conceptualized even earlier by the arbiters of a postwar avantgarde movement in Paris. Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Georges Mathieu, Camille Bryen, Wols, and several other painters, who were working in the French metropolis and became known under the simplifying group headings Informel, Art Brut or Tachisme respectively, rejected the then dominant Ecole der Paris art as outdated, devoid of meaning, and lacking in topical relevance. They were searching for a new kind of creativity that would not rely on perfect form-and-color-composition, but propagated the archaic un-formed of the material, the un-decided, processual, spontaneous, and subjective as strategies of artistic autonomy, instead. The formally quite different work of the individual artsists was presented in several group exhibitions in Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s, often organized by the art critic Michel Tapié, whose theoretical writings and lasting support were crucial for the perception of Informel as an avantgarde movement. The painter Georges Mathieu knew the work of Pollock, de Kooning, Reinhardt, Rothko, and Still as early as 1946.[31] Mathieu saw the same artistic goals pursued on both sides of the Atlantic and wanted to confront Informel and abstract expressionist painting in a group show in Paris. The plan did not materialize immediately, but in March 1951, two Pollocks and at least one de Kooning could be seen next to new works by Bryen, Mathieu,

Jean-Paul Riopelle, Wols, Hans Hartung, Alfred Russell, and Giuseppe Capogrossi in a little gallery exhibition called „Véhémences Confrontées.“[32] A year later, Michel Tapié, together with the American artist Alfonso Ossorio, managed to bring a Jackson Pollock one-man show to Paris. The 15 canvases were on view at the Studio Paul Facchetti in March 1952.[33] Abstract expressionism was so attractive and interesting to the Informel painters, because its raw generosity and primitive vocabulary suggested an archaism that only a country supposedly lacking in artistic traditions, such as the United States, could have brought forward – „in America you are less encumbered by tradition [en Amérique vous êtes moins gênés par la tradition].“[34] American art thus functioned as a stereotype role model for a European avantgarde that – out of saturation, fatigue, and existential anger - wanted to leave behind the bastions of Old World high culture.

The detected parallels between Informel, abstract expressionism, and related phenomena inspired the idea of a Western art with roots, i.e. traditions to be rejected in Europe, but branches now on both sides of the Atlantic. The new avantgarde got the tag „international Informel“ or „international Tachisme“, and its revolutionary appearance or conceptualization as artistic revolt complied with the logic of modernism.

Arnold Rüdlinger, director of the Kunsthalle Bern since 1945, got to know American art via Paris, where he met Sam Francis in 1954. Rüdlinger responded enthusiastically to the artist’s work, and then they became friends. Rüdlinger’s acquaintance with Michel Tapié and the rising tide of Informel painting in Paris inspired him to put together an exhibition of international Tachisme to be shown at the Kunsthalle Bern

in 1955. „Tendances Actuelles 3“ presented works by Bryen, Francis, Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Pollock, Riopelle, Tancredi, Mark Tobey, and Wols.[35] Many of the American exhibits were on loan from the collections of Peggy Guggenheim and Michel Tapié, or, in the case of Sam Francis, were lent by the artist himself. In the accompanying catalogue, Rüdlinger remarked on the state of contemporary art: „Fine art has reached a point today, where a common language is spoken in Europe and America, a language, which uses the same vocabulary that has not been taught, but was created simultaneously. I want to call this language ‚Tachisme‘. [Die bildende Kunst ist heute an einem Punkt angelangt, wo in Europa und Amerika eine Sprache gesprochen wird, die sich des selben Vokabulars bedient, und zwar nicht eines angelernten, sondern eines simultan geschaffenen. Ich möchte diese Sprache ‚Tachisme‘ nennen.]“[36]

It is obvious that those Europeans, who in the first postwar decade showed an interest in American art at all, focused their attention on New York School painting and the work of Jackson Pollock in particular. In the autumn of 1954, the American art critic Dore Ashton could report from Paris: „It is generally believed here that American art is all ‚drip school‘.“[37] The selective choice – considering the cross-currents pluralism presented by most of the American export exhibitions – reflected the idiosyncracies of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, a permanent showcase of abstract expressionism in the Old World; it further corresponded to European standards and needs, and fulfilled stereotype expectations of American culture. New York School painting, by way of its formal appearance, could be related to the course

modern European art was apparently taking after the war. Within this context of alignment, abstract expressionism unfolded its avantgardist potential, which was esthetically as well as culturally circumscribed. The canvases by Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko were extraordinary in many ways. They illustrated a totality of painting, richness of material, uncompromising vitality, and a raw, almost brutal energy, unseen in the Old World before. A prejudiced European perception of the United States as a nation without culture secured abstract expressionism the status of a somewhat primitive art hopefully capable of revitalizing modern painting – comparable to the effects African sculpture had had in the early 20th century.

Comparing American claims to what a representative American painting should mediate and European expectations thereof, the common denominators appear to have been freedom of expression and newness, i.e. the idea of a new beginning. If abstract expressionism happened to be the sole issue of the transatlantic fine art discourse eventually, it was largely due to the fact that it embodied these qualities or, rather, became their icon.

The triumph of abstract expressionism

The staff of the Museum of Modern Art had been pondering an exhibition of New York School art for display in Western European cities since 1956. At that time, abstract expressionism was recognized, at least in Manhattan, as the most powerful, though still vehemently disputed contemporary painting in the United States. The

lasting support of prominent art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, and of avantgarde dealers such as Sidney Janis, Samuel Kootz, Betty Parsons, and Martha Jackson eventually payed off. Especially after the tragic death of Jackson Pollock in August 1956, prices for first generation abstract expressionist works were rising steadily in a market for contemporary art that was booming and gathering momentum on both sides of the Atlantic.[38] However, and despite the fact that some critics already considered the New York School a sort of new academy,[39] no major American museum had presented a comprehensive show devoted to the movement as such. The MoMA-project of 1956 was the first of its kind, and, significantly, it was basically triggered by requests from European art institutions. The corresponding project proposal, dated October 1, 1956, and most probably written by Porter A. McCray, then director of the International Program at the Museum of Modern Art, reads: „Europeans have not yet [...] seen characteristic works exemplifying these tendencies in an aggregate large enough to convey the coherence and importance that the movement [i.e. abstract expressionism] has assumed in America. A number of major European countries have therefore requested a full-scale exhibition of avant-garde art in the U.S..“[40] The proposal lists Milan, Basel, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Stockholm, and Paris as possible stops of the exhibition’s European tour, supposed to start in March 1957. „Recent American Painting and Sculpture“ should have comprised about 120 art works dating from 1947 to 1957 and demonstrating the history and development of abstract expressionism in both media. Designated curators were Dorothy Miller and Frank O’Hara.

Preparations at the MoMA were well under way, when early in 1957 Arnold Rüdlinger arrived in New York, accompanied by the Swiss art dealer Eberhard Kornfeld, to put together an exhibition of abstract expressionist painting for the Kunsthalle Basel. Before embarking on the trip, Rüdlinger had conferred with Robert Giron of the Palais des Beaux-Arts at Brussels and Willem Sandberg of the Stedelijk Museum at Amsterdam. Both had shown a lively interest in presenting such a show at their museums, whereas the West German curators Rüdlinger had contacted as potential partners, Alfred Hentzen, Werner Haftmann, and Werner Schmalenbach, had declined the offer to cooperate. Rüdlinger apparently didn't know of the MoMA-exhibition, and, once in New York, he first addressed the American Federation of Arts (AFA) for assistance and financial support. What he initially had in mind was a group show consisting of about twenty works each by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, and Sam Francis. This plan did not materialize as Rothko and Still would not lend their work for a group exhibition. Rüdlinger then proposed a series of one-man shows, which, however, did not find the sympathy of the AFA. Eventually, a cooperation with the International Program at the Museum of Modern Art was arranged. The museum's project underwent some conceptual alterations to comply with Rüdlinger's preference for the first New York School generation, and the start of the exhibition's tour through Western Europe got postponed until the spring of 1958.

In November 1957, the MoMA-staff decided to provide for a Jackson Pollock retrospective as well, so that the two exhibitions would travel through Europe simultaneously and even be shown at the same time at some stops. The year before,

the Museum of Modern Art had, on its own premises, presented a Pollock retrospective, which afterwards was part of the American contribution to the „VI. Bienal de Sao Paulo," Brasilia.[41] The shows had enhanced international interest in the artist's work, and several European „institutions [were] eager to see his work."[42] The idea of a concomitant Pollock exhibition was definitely in accordance with Arnold Rüdlinger's wishes, as was the museum's decision to dispense with sculpture and to concentrate on painting exclusively in the abstract expressionist group show, eventually titled „The New American Painting."

Thus, the two exhibitions of 1958/59 that came to signify the break-through of abstract expressionism as well as the triumph of American painting in Western Europe were the outcome of transatlantic cooperation and communication. The Museum of Modern Art embraced the opportunity to present itself as the arbiter of a „new American painting" at home and abroad. It did not risk a failure for it could count on European appreciation and support, which also facilitated the logistics involved and definitely reduced the museum's financial expenditures. Rüdlinger, Giron, Sandberg, and the other European curators interested in a display of abstract expressionism at their museums would hardly have been able to organize such a double event on their own. They could rely on the professionalism of the New York museum, which guaranteed exhibitions of high quality that in turn were prone to enhance the reputation of the art institutions they were in charge of.

„The New American Painting" and „Jackson Pollock" travelled through Europe for close to a year and were shown at Basle, Rome, Milan, Madrid, Amsterdam, Brussels, Hamburg, Berlin, London, and Paris respectively.[43] The project proposal

for what was to become „The New American Painting“ had argued that Europeans had „not yet [...] seen characteristic works exemplifying these tendencies in an aggregate large enough to convey the coherence and importance“[44] of abstract expressionism. If the European reactions to the exhibitions of 1958/59 suggest a sentiment of being overwhelmed or even shocked, it was to a large extent due to the sheer size and amplitude of the two presentations. „Jackson Pollock“ encompassed 31 oils and 29 drawings, whereas „The New American Painting“ presented 81 canvases by 16 artists. Most of the individual art works were of considerable dimensions anyway. Installation views give an idea of the wall space the exhibitions demanded and how the rows of canvases by Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Sam Francis, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Grace Hartigan, and Adolph Gottlieb dominated the gallery rooms assigned to them. The „aggregate“ was certainly „large enough“, and it conveyed an „importance“ that the majority of its European audience wasn’t prepared for. „The New American Painting“ and „Jackson Pollock“ bespoke a grandeur that could also be denigrated as grandiloquence; they made abstract expressionism a revelation that was exciting and arousing as well as irritating and humiliating. Either way, in the late 1950s, it became obvious to the European art world that a powerful American art could no longer be ignored, but had actually taken the lead, and that modernism was flying under a new flag, which was the star-spangled banner.

Early instances of „revisionist“ sentiments

Upon having seen „The New American Painting“ and „Jackson Pollock“ at West-Berlin‘s Fine Arts Academy in September 1959, the German art critic Will Grohmann raised the ambivalent question: „Could it be that we’ve already assumed a position of defense? [Sollten wir uns bereits im Stadium der Verteidigung befinden?]“[45] The quotation reflects the antagonism between the Old World and the New as it was perceived by the European. Obviously, the experience of the „new American painting had caused an astonishment and a perplexity that could only be articulated with recourse to a military metaphor. Thus, the revisionist interpretation of abstract expressionism as „weapon of the Cold War“[46] put forward twenty years later was not new in the choice of its rhetoric, but harks back to a different conflict, which doesn’t appear to have been the issue at stake in the 1950s. The European uneasiness resulted from the perception that artists in the United States, i.e. in an ostensible cultural backwater, had created an art that wasn’t only good but maybe even better than the one produced in the Old World at the same time. Frustrated prejudices and insecurity as to where cultural authority was to be located caused tension and overreaction.

After „The New American Painting“ and „Jackson Pollock“ it was plain to the West German art establishment, which, except for some internationally oriented artists, hadn’t shown an active interest in American art before, that abstract expressionism could no longer be ignored. The organizers of „documenta II,“ subtitled „Art After 1945“ and planned for the summer of 1959,[47] decided to integrate American exhibits into the plethora of contemporary Western art, and, in September 1958,

consequently contacted the International Program at the Museum of Modern Art for assistance. The museum staff considered the exhibition at Kassel important and opted for cooperation. It was even willing to bear a considerable part of the costs involved. A list of desirable artists had been compiled by the „documenta"-committee. As for the painters, it more or less corresponded to „The New American Painting". Furthermore, a small memorial exhibition of about twelve works by Jackson Pollock was planned. That, and the list of artists determined the general outlook of the American contribution, while final decisions were left to the MoMA-curators, namely Dorothy Miller and Frank O'Hara.

„Documenta II" was conceived as a showcase of postwar modern painting and sculpture in the Western hemisphere. The organizers intended to illustrate the international character of abstract art, or the „universal language of abstract painting [Weltsprache der abstrakten Malerei]"[48] - as one critic noted, paraphrasing the diction of Werner Haftmann, who was the leading curator of the first two „documenta"-exhibitions. The hanging was considered crucial: „Since it is [...] the wish and desire of the committee of documenta not to accentuate the various countries in their characteristics, but to call special attention to the multiplicity of international directions in art since World War II, the paintings and sculptures will not be arranged according to nationalities."[49]

However, when the American contribution, 144 art works by 44 artists, arrived at Kassel shortly before the exhibition's opening, it blew up the whole concept. The „documenta" people had been informed of the exact number and kind of exhibits the Museum of Modern Art was sending, but obviously nobody in Kassel had really

thought about it. While the initial, in the context of „documenta“ extraordinary decision to delegate a whole section of the show to a foreign institution had already revealed a lack of interest and of creative ambition on the part of the Germans, their being virtually unprepared for the actual art works confirmed that impression. Hectic rearrangements were undertaken at Kassel to accommodate the American paintings, and time was short. They simply could not be mixed with the European exhibits to participate in the „international round of talks“ so dear to Werner Haftmann. They were too large and too powerful, and there were too many of them and not enough wall space available. Porter A. McCray of the MoMA reported to Frank O'Hara with a definite tinge of triumph in his voice: „Their effort to integrate the Americans with the Europeans did not work for with every effort our artists knocked hell out of the others.“[50] Eventually, the American paintings were presented as a separate, national section in some of the spacious rooms of the Museum Fridericianum's upper floor.

The Americans at „documenta II“ (1959) duplicated „The New American Painting“ and „Jackson Pollock.“ Their resistance to being integrated into a eurocentric model of contemporary Western art was obvious, and the separate hanging underlined that notion. Reactions to the American contribution at Kassel were either enthusiastically approving or extremely depracatory. While some praised abstract expressionism as a cataclysmic harbinger of a new and revolutionary art that united the avantgarde movements on both sides of the Atlantic and led the way into the future, others denounced the „American invasion“ as a subjugation of European culture. Fear of and fascination with „Americanization“ were co-existing sentiments that framed the

discourse on abstract expressionism, especially in West Germany, where it was recognized so late and then all of a sudden.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the presentation and reception of abstract expressionism in postwar Western Europe appears to have been qualified by two general tendencies or lines of argument. There was the trend to „Europeanize“ American painting by way of conceptual and factual integration into the tradition of modern art. On the other hand, though based on the same intellectual construct, the uncompromising esthetic quality of abstract expressionism, accompanied by the powerful critical theory put forward by Clement Greenberg, implied an „Americanization“ of modern art and modernist discourse likewise. „Westernization“ might be a keyword in this context, for it hints at several aspects of the phenomenon: the westward shift of cultural authority from Paris to New York, the new geographical definition of modern art and Western Culture as transatlantic, and the political partisanship such a fusion meant for the Western European art scene.

Against this backdrop, the fact that New York School painting became an American icon may be interpreted in two ways: While confirming the European notion that Americans could not paint properly, it visualized stereotypical expectations of what America was all about, i.e. largeness and expansion, primitivism and rawness, brutality and wildness, extravagance and richness, freedom and recklessness. Strangely enough these „non-paintings“ lingered on in the minds of those who saw

them and opened up new avenues for creative endeavors. The liberating effect of abstract expressionism markedly shaped the European image of America.

This association of freedom and America, brought about or at least amplified via New York School painting in the postwar period, constituted the intellectual rallying point of the revisionists in the 1970s. Their rather exclusive attention to the global conflict between the United States and Soviet Union means a belittlement of the transatlantic dialogue, which drastically simplifies the matter and tends to reduce the communicative potential of the art works in question for the sake of the argument. A statement by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., as of 1958, which anticipates the revisionist accusation to simply reject it, hints at the perplexity and even frustration the pilloring „Cultural Cold War"-thesis is able to generate: „They [the abstract expressionist painters] are no political activists, despite the fact that their works have been praised and denounced as symbolic manifestations of freedom, in a world where the word freedom has come to signify a political attitude. [[S]ie [die Abstrakten Expressionisten] sind nicht politische ‚engagés', trotzdem ihre Bilder gelobt und verdammt worden sind als symbolische Kundgebungen der Freiheit in einer Welt, in der das Wort Freiheit eine politische Haltung bedeutet.]"[51] Eventually, philosophical and ethical questions may be raised: Do we really need politics when what we're dealing with is art? and What's wrong with freedom?

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[1] Charles Harrison, „Modernism and the Transatlantic Dialogue," in Francis Frascina, ed., Pollock and After. The Critical Debate (New York, 1985), 217-232, esp. 225-228.

[2] Irving Sandler, Abstract Expressionism. The Triumph of American Painting (London/ New York, 1970).

[3] Max Kozloff, „American Painting During the Cold War," Artforum 11, n°9, May 1973, 43-54.

[4] Eva Cockroft, „Abstract Expressionism. Weapon of the Cold War," Artforum 12, n°10, June 1974, 39-41.

[5] Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (Chicago/ London 1983).

[6] Francis Frascina, ed., Pollock and After. The Critical Debate (New York 1985); Paul Wood et al., eds., Modern Art in Dispute. Art Since the Forties (New Haven/ London 1993).

[7] T.J. Clark, „Zur Verteidigung des Abstrakten Expressionismus," Texte zur Kunst 7, Oktober 1992, 42.

[8] Military Government Regulations, Title 1, General Provisions, Change 3, 3 February 1949, 1-455.3.e.

[9] William G. Constable, „Preliminary Notes on Exchange Exhibitions of Works of Art between Germany and the USA," March 14, 1949, Archives of American Art, William G. Constable Papers, 3078: 320.

[10] Margaret Lynne Ausfeld and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, eds., Advancing American Art. Politics and Aesthetics in the State Department Exhibition, 1946-48 (Montgomery, AL, 1984); Susan Sivard, „The State Department ‚Advancing American Art' Exhibition of 1946 and the Advance of American Art," Arts Magazine 58, April 1984, 90-99.

[11] William Benton, „Vernissage," Art News 45, Oktober 1946, 19.

[12] Alfred M. Frankfurter, „American Art Abroad. The State Department's Collection," Art News 45, Oktober 1946, 78.

[13] „Exposing the Bunk of So-Called Modern Art," New York Journal American, December 2, 1946.

[14] Andrew H. Berding, „Documents. The Arts as Ambassador," Art Digest 28, November 15, 1953, 4.

[15] „Amerikanische Malerei – Werden und Gegenwart": Rathaus Schöneberg, Berlin, September 18 – October 5, 1951; Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, October 10 – 24, 1951 (parts of the exh.); Walsurni Galerie, Vienna, October 15 – November 7, 1951; Amerikahaus, Munich, November 24 – December 12, 1951.

[16] „Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors": Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, April 24 – June 8, 1953; Kunsthaus Zurich, July 25 – August 30, 1953; Kunstmuseum Dusseldorf, September 20 – October 25, 1953; Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm, November 25 – December 23, 1953; Taidehall/ Konsthallen, Helsinki, January 8 – 24, 1954; Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, February 18 – March 7, 1954.

[17] „Modern Art in the US": Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, March 31 – May 15, 1955; Kunsthaus Zurich, July 16 – August 28, 1955; Palacio de la Virreina/ Museo de Arte Moderna, Barcelona, September 24 – October 24, 1955; Haus des deutschen Kunsthandwerks, Frankfurt/Main: November 13 – December 12, 1955; Tate Gallery, London, January 5 – February 12, 1956; Gemeente Museum, The Hague, March 2 – April 15, 1956; Wiener Sezession Galerie, Vienna, May 4 – June 2, 1956; Kalemegdan Pavillon, Belgrad, July 6 – August 6, 1956.

[18] „Amerikanische Maler der Gegenwart": Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, June 3 – 27, 1956; Munich ?; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, September 21 – October 20, 1956.

[19] Philip Rylands and Enzo di Martino, eds., Flying the Flag for Art. The United States and the Venice Biennale 1895-1991 (Richmond, VA, 1993), 87-93, 101-113, 277-278, 280-286.

[20] „Introduction à la peinture moderne américaine": Galerie Maeght, Paris, March - April 1947.

[21] „Regards sur la peinture américaine": Galerie de France, Paris, February 26 – March 15, 1952.

[22] „documenta. Art of the 20th century“: Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, July 15 – September 18, 1955.

[23] Walter Grasskamp, Die unbewältigte Moderne. Kunst und Öffentlichkeit (München 1989), 76-119.

[24] A few works by Alexander Calder, Naum Gabo, Kurt Roesch, Lyonel Feininger, and Fritz Glarner constituted the „American“ contribution.

[25] Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (New York, 1985).

[26] Rylands/ di Martino, eds., Flying the Flag for Art, 87-93, 277-278.

[27] „Jackson Pollock“: Museo Correr, Venice, July 22 – August 15, 1950.

[28] „surréalisme + abstraction. collection peggy guggenheim“: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, January 19 – February 26, 1951; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, March 3 – 28, 1951; Kunsthaus Zurich, April 15 – May 15, 1951. Willem Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, had suggested the idea to Peggy Guggenheim. She gave him two paintings by Jackson Pollock, „The Water Bull“ (c. 1946) and „Reflection of the Big Dipper“ (1947), as presents to the Stedelijk's permanent collection.

[29] Peter Selz, „Amerikaner im Ausland,“ in Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal, eds., Amerikanische Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert. Malerei und Plastik 1913-1993 (Berlin, 1993), 201-210, 205.

[30] F.ex. „American Painters in France“: Galerie Craven, Paris, April 24 – May 7, 1954; „Vijf amerikanen in europa“: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, January 1 – February 28, 1955; „Junge Amerikanische Kunst“: Haus der Heimat, Iserlohn, April 14 – 29, 1956, and Kunstmuseum Dusseldorf, May 9 – June 20, 1956.

[31] Georges Mathieu, De la révolte à la renaissance. Au-delà du Tachisme (Paris, 1972), 184.

[32] „Véhémences Confrontées“: Galerie Nina Dausset, Paris, March 8 – 31, 1951; Mathieu, De la révolte à la renaissance, 185.

[33] „Jackson Pollock, 1948-51“: Galerie Studio Paul Facchetti, March 7 – 31, 1952; Alfred Pacquement, „La première exposition Pollock à Paris. Studio Paul Facchetti, mars 1952,“ Paris – New York (exh. cat., Paris, 1977), 537-542.

[34] Mathieu, De la révolte à la renaissance, 186.

[35] „Tendances actuelles 3“: Kunsthalle Bern, January 1 – March 6, 1955.

[36] Arnold Rüdlinger, Tendances actuelles 3 (exh. cat., Bern, 1955), n.p. [my translation].

[37] Dore Ashton, „Paris,“ Art Digest 29, October 15, 1954, 15.

[38] Deirdre Robson, Prestige, Profit and, Pleasure. The Market for Modern Art in New York in the 1940s and 1950s (New York/ London, 1995).

[39] Comp. f.ex.: Randall Jarrell, „The Age of the Chimpanzee,“ Art News 56, 4, summer 1957, 34-36; Leon Golub, „A Critique of Abstract Expressionism,“ College Art Journal 14, 2, Winter 1955, 142-147.

[40]„Project Proposal, Recent American Painting and Sculpture, October 1, 1956,“ The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, International Council Archives (ICE-F-36-57, Basel, workfolder).

[41] „Jackson Pollock Memorial Exhibition“: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 19, 1956 – February 3, 1957; „VI. Bienal de Sao Paulo“: Sao Paulo, September – December 1957.

[42] „Project Proposal, Jackson Pollock: 1912-1956“, MoMA Archives, NY, IC Archives (ICE-F-35-57).

[43] „The New American Painting“: Kunsthalle Basel, April 19 – May 26, 1958; Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna, Milan, June 1 – 29, 1958; Museo Nacional de Arte Contemporaneo, Madrid, July 16 – August 10, 1958; Hochschule für Bildende Künste, West-Berlin: September 3 – October 5, 1958; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, October 17 – November 24, 1958; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, December 6, 1958 – January 4, 1959; Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, January 16 – February 15, 1959; Tate Gallery, London, February 24 – March 23, 1959. „Jackson Pollock: 1912-1956“: Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome, March 1

– 30, 1958; Kunsthalle Basel, April 19 – May 26, 1958; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, June 6 – July 7, 1958; Kunsthalle Hamburg, July 19 – August 17, 1958; Hochschule für Bildende Künste, West-Berlin, September 3 – October 5, 1958; Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, November 5 – December 14, 1958; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, January 16 – February 15, 1959.

[44] „Project Proposal, Recent American Painting and Sculpture, October 1, 1956," MoMA Archives, NY, IC Archives (ICE-F-36-57, Basel, workfolder) [my italics].

[45] Will Grohmann, „Die neue amerikanische Malerei," Der Tagesspiegel, September 7, 1959 [my translation].

[46] Eva Cockroft, „Abstract Expressionism. Weapon of the Cold War."

[47] „documenta II. Art After 1945": Museum Fridericianum, Orangerie, Schloß Bellevue, Kassel, July 11 – October 11, 1959.

[48] Horst Richter, „Weltsprache der abstrakten Malerei," Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, July 16, 1959 [my translation].

[49] Letter by Rudolf Zwirner, Kassel, to Porter A. McCray, New York, March 12, 1959, MoMA Archives, NY, IC Archives (ICE-F-40-59, correspondence folder U-Z) [original italics].

[50] Letter by Porter A. McCray. Moskow, to Frank O'Hara, New York, July 22, 1959, MoMA Archives, NY, IC Archives (ICE-F-40-59, correspondence folder A-T).

[51] Alfred H.Barr, Jr., Introduction, Die neue amerikanische Malerei (exh. cat., Basel, 1958) n.p. [my translation].