

THE INDETERMINACY OF ABSTRACTION: PHILIP GUSTON 1947-1951

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Many scholars exclude New York painter Philip Guston (1913-80) from the artistic tradition of Abstract Expressionism due to his absence from New York City during the group's early formative years. This thesis asserts, however, that Guston's role in Abstract Expressionism can be firmly established through his unique interpretation of the formative influence of surrealist automatism. Though never engaging with the surrealists directly, Guston explored automatist ideas upon meeting New York School experimental music composers John Cage and Morton Feldman. This trio's engagement with the Zen Buddhist concepts of unimpededness and interpenetration influenced Guston to create compositions through chance operations, a process Cage would call "indeterminacy." My aim is to enrich an understanding of Guston's idiosyncratic relationship to Abstract Expressionism and, ultimately, to offer a more expansive definition of Abstract Expressionism in general, allowing for a broader understanding of the formation of American modernism. Audio of one of John Cage's indeterminate pieces is included with this thesis as a supplemental file.

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For my parents, who supported me emotionally and intellectually throughout my college career, and for Porcelina, my patient sidekick.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Abstract Expressionism is not an artistic movement in the traditional sense of a group of artists linked by a manifesto and a common visual style. Though New York School artists such as Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and others were indeed interested in similar ideas and formed close friendships, their later formation of Abstract Expressionism was not based on a singular interpretation of key events or the philosophies of the period. The group was even split into the two categories of “action” painters, as coined by critic Harold Rosenberg, and “color field” painters, emphasizing the differences between the artists. Art historian Robert C. Hobbs describes the group not as a cohesive movement like cubism or surrealism, but rather as belonging to a “cultural tradition” bound by formative influences and the shared belief that “advocated independence as the only legitimate pursuit for responsible individuals.”¹

This idea of a collective of individuals upon which the group was founded creates the first of many paradoxes that would begin to complicate the definition of what will be referred to in this thesis as Hobb’s term: the Abstract Expressionist “tradition.”² A second contradiction discussed within the scope of this paper involves the two most formative influences: French existentialism and surrealist automatism. As discussed in further detail in Chapter Two, existentialism dictates the necessity of the intentionality of an artist

¹ Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1978), 9.

² For a humorous article regarding additional paradoxes of Abstract Expressionism see Harry Cooper’s essay “Spatter and Daub: Harry Cooper on the Contradictions of Abstract Expressionism” in *Artforum*, XLIX:10 (2011): 316-19.

while surrealist automatism argues for a release of control through chance operations. As can be seen, however, some artists were able to reconcile the existentialist and automatist paradox through Motherwell's development of "plastic automatism." In 1944, Motherwell would state that plastic automatism was "actually very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms."³ Employed by the Abstract Expressionists, plastic automatism allowed for a modicum of chance to enter in an otherwise highly controlled work.

Scholars, including art historians Serge Guilbaut, Hobbs, Nancy Jachec, and Micheal Leja, often exclude American painter Philip Guston (1913-1980) from Abstract Expressionism due to his absence from New York City during the early formative years. Though the Los Angeles County Museum of Art would include Guston in their 1965 exhibition *New York School: The First Generation Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s*, Jachec lists Guston as a "second-generation" Abstract Expressionist artist.⁴ Arguably, Guston does not fit easily into the categories of "action" or "color field" painters, which is perhaps the reason for his dismissal from many of the canonical texts of Abstract Expressionism. Due to the highly idiosyncratic nature of the artists, however, Guston can be argued to not only have engaged with both existentialism and automatism, but also to have emerged as a prominent artist of the tradition in 1951 when Abstract Expressionism was solidified and recognized internationally.

While Guston's engagement with existentialism is not debated, what remains to be explored is his unique approach to automatism. Though never engaging with the

³ Robert Motherwell and Stephanie Terenzio, *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34.

⁴ Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185.

surrealists directly, Guston explored these formative ideas upon meeting New York School experimental music composers John Cage and Morton Feldman in 1948. This trio's engagement with Zen Buddhism and the theories of Carl Jung introduced Guston to the ideas of chance, indeterminacy, and the Buddhist notions of unimpededness and interpenetration. Art and music historians, such as Dore Ashton, Michael Auping, and Jonathan W. Bernard, would compare the works of Cage, Feldman, and Guston as though art and music were interchangeable, revealing the strong affinities between Guston and the composers.⁵

Guston's childhood friend Pollock, a prominent figure in Abstract Expressionism, would also engage with automatist techniques in a similar manner as Guston, but scholars have overlooked the close link between these two friends. By illuminating these personal connections and by examining the influences that shaped Guston's artistic practice, this thesis will argue for an expanded definition of Abstract Expressionism that includes a variety of artists' approaches to automatism, thereby including Guston's unique interpretation arrived at through Eastern philosophy. A new definition of Abstract Expressionism including Guston's unique approach to the formative influences expands the current understanding of how American modernism was formed in the 1940s and 50s. By incorporating influences derived from Eastern philosophy, the creation of American modernism can be broadened beyond the scope of copying European tradition to include a variety of international factors.

⁵ For further information see: Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 93-94; Philip Guston and Michael Auping's *Philip Guston Retrospective* (Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003), 44-45; and Jonathan W. Bernard's "Feldman's Painters" in Steven Johnson, *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 188.

The American artists' common engagement with existentialism and automatism reveals the reason why many scholars believe France was the strongest artistic influence on American art in the postwar period. With well-established cultural traditions of surrealist art and existentialist literature, the city of Paris was considered the prominent center of modern art in the early 1940s and was highly influential for Western artists. With only regionalism and social realist painting to call their own, many unsatisfied American painters wallowed in the past by continuing to borrow artistic traditions from France. The borrowing of French artistic conventions allowed for Americans to prolong the use of successful artistic motifs, but hindered the artists in their goal to craft a uniquely American art, as it maintained their roots in the traditions of Europe.

Art dealer Samuel Kootz expressed his frustration in 1941 with American artists who repeatedly returned to European conventions:

Under present circumstances the probability is that the future of painting lies in America. The pitiful fact is, however, that we offer little better than a geographical title to the position of world's headquarters for art... Isn't there a *new* way to reveal your ideas, American painters? Isn't it time right now to check whether what you're saying is regurgitation, or tired acceptance, or the same smooth railroad track?⁶

Kootz criticizes American painters who continued to borrow ideas from Europe and accuses them of lacking originality in the field, a criticism Parisians would also assert. Increasing pressure was placed on artists at this time with the prediction that the new center for modern art would fall into the hands of the United States.

As foreseen, Paris eventually collapsed upon the German invasion in 1940. American artists needed to prove their artistic integrity before they lost the opportunity to

⁶ As quoted by Paul Schimmel and Lawrence Alloway, *The Interpretive Link: Abstract Surrealism into Abstract Expressionism: Works on Paper, 1938-1948* (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1986), 17.

become the new center for modern art. According to Guilbaut, American artists responded to this need by becoming “anti-isolationist, anti-social realist, anti-AAA, anti-Artists for Victory, antiacademic, and antipopulist,” using an “‘anti’ philosophy...to stake out a position and to clear away the dead wood left behind by the rapid social changes of the war.”⁷ Many modern artists realized the only way to forge new ground would be to eliminate any reference to previous American traditions.

Pollock was at the forefront of these revolutionary thinkers and when his artistic prowess was discovered, his compositions of poured and splattered paint offered a new approach to the creation of form in American art. This free and radical style became a symbol of the current political turmoil and his lack of subject matter and focus on purely formal elements relieved the frustration of Kootz. Pollock’s paintings were progressive, shunning conventions in alignment with the individuality of American citizens.

Even in his early Abstract Expressionist works, however, Pollock’s ideas were not divergent from French tradition. By the time the Germans infiltrated Paris in May of 1940, many French artists had previously been exiled or had already fled to New York City to escape the war, including Max Ernst, André Breton, Fernand Léger, and Marcel Duchamp, who were later joined by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945. In fact, French surrealist art was exhibited as early as the 1930s in New York City in several very instrumental exhibitions attended by many of the New York School artists. Guilbaut marks this important event as a turning point in the way Americans viewed themselves during the war:

⁷ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 76.

The influx of European refugees, who brought with them a cultural baggage that American artists had always admired without altogether assimilating, suddenly brought home to New Yorkers especially that the United States was indeed at the center of the cultural upheaval provoked by the war.⁸

Though Americans were hesitant to accept the new refugees within artistic circles, some artists, such as Bradley Walker Tomlin, de Kooning, Pollock, and Motherwell, began to latch on to the prevalent ideas of existentialism and surrealist automatism as was spread by French intellectuals.

The writings of Sartre were becoming increasingly popular in the mid-1940s due to his publications of *Being and Nothingness* in 1943 and *Existentialism and Humanism* in 1946, both translated into English shortly thereafter. The ideas presented in these texts, among others, caught on quickly in the United States as Sartre found a way to maneuver between the current trends of idealism and orthodox Marxism by emphasizing intentional consciousness and subjectivism.⁹ Existentialism, as influenced by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, allowed for absolute independence separate from any historical situation. An individual's moment of interpretation was intrinsically a creative act because the individual crafted his or her own interpretation of the immediate environment regardless of reactions made previously by the individual or others.¹⁰ Though Sartre's writings were originally conceived of as a way to politically and emotionally engage the French during World War II, this unpredictability of emotion can be understood as what

⁸ Guilbaut, *New York*, 62.

⁹ Ibid, 198.

¹⁰ David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 169.

led to the radically individual painting styles of the Abstract Expressionists responding to their present situation.¹¹

Guston shared the desire of his New York School colleagues to create a new American art that no longer required the support of European traditions, but still experimented with the ideas of French existentialism prior to 1948 through his interest in the writings of Gustave Flaubert, Stephan Mallarmé, Sartre, and Albert Camus.¹²

Flaubert's comments on artistic creation as independent of history and detached from external influence are suggestive in this context. In a letter to his paramour Louise Colet in 1852, Flaubert writes:

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible.¹³

To create a work independent of current artistic trends, social influences, and historical precedents is something many of the American artists hoped to achieve as well. Embracing existentialist ideas, American artists quickly moved away from recognizable subjects in their paintings and focused on a “view of existence” and an “expression of the human condition.”¹⁴ Many of these painters became interested in the *process* of painting as the content and regarded the finished product as “evidence” of this process.¹⁵

¹¹ Jachec, *Philosophy and Politics*, 73.

¹² Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 84.

¹³ Gustave Flaubert and Francis Steegmuller, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 154.

¹⁴ Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 84-85.

¹⁵ Philip Guston and Clark Coolidge, *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 10.

Looking back on the 1940s during an interview with Joseph Ablow in 1966, Guston described his painting method as “a sense of embarking on something in which you didn’t know the outcome.”¹⁶ He recalled many artists were discussing “a revolution that revolved around the issue of whether it’s possible to create in our society at all.”¹⁷ The ability to create new forms was challenging for artists amid the strong influences of cubism, surrealism, dada, and various other European artistic traditions. There was much frustration expressed by artists regarding the definition of “creation” in an American context and critics accused American artists of whether or not they could truly contribute to the progression of modern art. According to Ashton, Abstract Expressionists attempted to assuage this fear by being set “adrift in experience itself, in the quest for direct experience unmitigated by rational procedure.”¹⁸

As the Abstract Expressionists became increasingly independent from European artistic conventions, the visual arts slowly began to reflect the individuality embedded in American culture. Though Sartre was often violently anti-American, flirted with communism, and rejected ideas from surrealism that so many Abstract Expressionists embraced, these antithetical aspects to traditional American thought were ignored by many of the artists who found existentialism to be the long-awaited solution to the individual subjectivism they were beginning to incorporate in their art. Motherwell even called himself an “existentialist artist” in his adherence to ideas from both Sartre and

¹⁶ Guston and Coolidge, *Collected Writings*, 56.

¹⁷ As quoted in Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 85.

¹⁸ Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 85.

Camus, reconciling in his art the contradiction between the unintentionality of surrealism and the intentionality of existentialism.¹⁹

According to art historian David Craven, the differences between surrealism and existentialism created a unique contradiction within the art of the Abstract Expressionists:

This cleavage, if not irreconcilable difference, between Abstract Expressionism and existentialism opens up, because to grant a major determining role to the unconscious in the subject's constitution is to undermine at least in part the very idea of a unified and centered subject that operates largely by means of conscious volition, as it was defined by Jean-Paul Sartre.²⁰

Craven explains that while the surrealists relied on the unconscious to create art in which they believed was without premeditation, Sartre argued for the opposite by emphasizing artistic intentionality. The Abstract Expressionists reconciled the differences between surrealism and existentialism for their own purposes through "plastic automatism," using surrealist ideas as a way to create new forms spontaneously that could be refined through the conscious choices of the artists.

It was several years before Guston would reconcile these differences in his own art. His work in the few years previous to 1947 are largely figurative and reflect the lonely, melancholic state Guston retreated to when residing in the Midwest. *Sanctuary* (Fig. 1, see the Appendix for all figures) of 1944 reveals Guston's transition from the murals of the 1930s Works Progress Administration (WPA), as he was anxious to return to the intimacy of easel painting. *Sanctuary* embodies the isolation Guston felt in Iowa City by depicting a young boy reclining on a bed with the back of his hand resting across his forehead. The uncommon positioning of his hand and the way it casts a shadow over

¹⁹ Craven, *Cultural Critique*, 169.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 170.

the figure's downcast eyes adds a sense of uneasiness to an otherwise peaceful portrait and perhaps alludes to Guston's separation from his colleagues during a time of national crisis. In a letter some years later, Guston wrote of his time spent in Iowa:

You say 'flat and hermetic'—yes, but also emptiness, the lonely quality of it. Not only Iowa City but towns like Decatur, Illinois, and Des Moines, etc., with lonely empty squares, 'Gothic' City Halls, armories, big clocks illuminated at night. Railroad Stations. Trains. Soldiers moving around—the war years....

Upon moving back to New York in 1947, once again surrounded by his colleagues, Guston was quick to incorporate the ideas of existentialism. Guston's transition into painting with no recognizable forms can be pinpointed to *The Tormentors* (Fig. 2) of 1947-48, a painting comprised of simplified colors and shapes with no identifiable imagery. Most recognizable is his use of dotted lines, an indicator of constructed forms, such as the nails on the edge of a canvas or the bolts connecting the metal sheets of an airplane, a common motif in Guston's work post-1946.²¹

It may be argued that *The Tormentors* maintains two references to the real world: gravity and depth. These conventions are used in the traditional manner depicting the objects as having weight by appearing closer to the viewer with the placement of shapes in the lower portion of the canvas. Though small, the expanse of black dominating the upper portion gives the feeling of distance and atmosphere beyond the shapes in the foreground. Overall the composition remains unrecognizable with little resemblance to real world objects.

²¹ Guston was highly influenced by Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico throughout his life and may have been influenced by de Chirico's *Le due sorelle* of 1915 in which a red masked figure has been constructed with stitching or rivets of black dotted lines. Examples of dotted lines can be seen emphasizing the pins around the sole of a shoe in *Untitled* a 1946 ink wash on paper, nails on the edge of a canvas in *Porch No. 2* of 1947, and rivets on the metal construction of trash can lids such as in *Untitled* an ink, pencil and gouache on paper of 1947, perhaps influenced by planes and other heavy machinery during his time as an artist contributing to the war efforts. Dotted lines will appear again in more shoes and as stitching for the masks of his hooded figures in the late 1960s, as can be seen in *By the Window* of 1969.

In preparation for *The Tormentors*, Guston's drawing *Study for Tormentors* (Fig. 3) of 1947, also reveals evidence of this transition, and perhaps resistance, to the elimination of identifiable imagery. *Study for Tormentors* is overall highly abstract, the bottom half of the composition delineated into rectangular spaces by black ink and the top half containing more irregular and seemingly overlapping forms. The one recognizable area of the painting is the disembodied arm raised in the center with elbow bent back, a rope dangling from a clenched fist as though Guston is clinging to the last bit of identifiable imagery in his work. Being an overtly figurative artist previous to this transition, Guston must have had some reservations about moving towards an art where the subject relied on the process rather than premeditated content.

During the years of 1947 to 1951, Guston would sporadically retreat to his second home in Woodstock, New York, to temporarily remove himself from the distracting bustle of city life. It was here Guston spent most of his time with his close friend Tomlin, finding they shared an interest in abstraction that would eventually transition into the calligraphic shapes prevalent in both their works of the 1950s.²² The two artists met frequently to discuss ideas revolving around plastic automatism, as is reflected in a quote where Guston described Tomlin's work as "the impossible pleasure of controlling and being free at the same moment."²³

Tomlin's shift to abstraction occurred around the same time as Guston's and, tellingly, even the titles of his paintings became more abstract. One of Tomlin's early works, *Watermelon* (Fig. 4) of 1942-44, depicts a room cluttered with objects on a

²² Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 79.

²³ Guston and Coolidge, *Collected Writings*, 11.

tablecloth composed of various rectangles. Though chaotic at first, eventually the viewer can discern a table and wall, a plate of three pears, a mangled watermelon dotted with seeds and a knife protruding upward from its flesh, and perhaps an orange that has rolled to the right side of the canvas.

Number 10-A (Fig. 5) an oil painting of 1947, however, takes a huge leap from *Watermelon* into the realm of abstraction, an example of the shift in Tomlin's work beginning in 1946. Similar to Guston's *The Tormentors*, no object is specifically recognizable and a sense of distance manifests as heavy colors weight the bottom of the canvas and white dominates the upper portion. Warm reds, muddy yellows, and blues pepper the composition, but to what they refer is unknown. Perhaps the two blue eyes on the bottom right indicate a black and white cat with an arching back and swishing tail, but such claims are only speculation.

Though existentialism's call for the intentionality of the artist is reflected in many Abstract Expressionist works of the mid-1940s, scholars refer to surrealism as the strongest influence affecting American artists upon the arrival of French intellectuals exiled in 1940.²⁴ In the next section of my thesis, Chapter Two, I interpret the influence of surrealism as it related to leading Abstract Expressionists Motherwell and Pollock. Chapter Three will explore Guston's utilization of similar ideas as introduced through Zen Buddhism, and Chapter Four will reconcile these distinct approaches within the tradition of Abstract Expressionism. By revealing the shared compositional methods of Guston and the surrealists, both can be shown to emphasize the importance of chance

²⁴ For more information, see Craven's *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*; Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*; Jachec's *Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*; and Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

operations in the compositional process. This comparison allows for a broader understanding of the influences that helped shape American modernism, revealing the importance of Eastern philosophy and reducing the influence of the artistic conventions of French modernism.

CHAPTER II

AUTOMATISM IN THE NEW YORK SCHOOL OF ART

The majority of literature regarding the origins of Abstract Expressionism emphasizes the exceptional influence of the French surrealists in the early 1940s.²⁵ As the surrealists continued to practice in accordance with the original manifesto established by Breton in 1924, artists associated with Abstract Expressionism borrowed fundamental surrealist ideas as early as 1936 during the highly-charged, prewar political context of the United States. Guston would not figure highly in New York art during this period as he spent the years 1941-1947 teaching in the Midwest. The use of surrealist automatism, a technique influential for prominent artists such as Motherwell and Pollock, is important to understand, however, as Guston would eventually reach ideas akin to surrealism upon his meeting of Cage and Feldman in 1948. These ideas would ultimately shape American modernism, though arrived at by different influences.

Motherwell's knowledge of the French language led him to act as liaison between the American artists and the French surrealists. Motherwell's teacher Meyer Schapiro introduced him to artist Kurt Seligmann during visits to Seligmann's studio from January to June of 1941. Though he was not particularly drawn to Seligmann, Motherwell met other surrealist artists in the studio including Breton, Duchamp, Ernst, Yves Tanguy, and Chilean painter Roberto Matta Echaurren.²⁶ The surrealists maintained a tight group of

²⁵ These texts include Craven's *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*; Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*; Jachec's *Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*; and Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*.

²⁶ Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Robert Motherwell: The Formative Years* (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1987), 23.

French refugees in New York and had little contact with the Americans overall, mainly conversing with Motherwell, William Baziot, David Hare, Isamu Noguchi, and a few others during lectures, exhibitions, and informal meetings.²⁷

Automatism was first developed in Paris by surrealist artist André Masson and practiced as a means of expressing unconscious thoughts. Due to the devastation of World War I, surrealists were interested in exploring the human psyche to further understand the origins of mental illness and violence. They sought modes of creativity that would explore the irrationality of man, thereby paralleling the irrationality of war, and demanded a revolution in consciousness. Automatism stood as one of their most original contributions in which surrealists claimed they could draw or write while unconscious, thereby tapping into areas of the brain not driven by reason or logic. Works resulting from this process, therefore, were thought to be completely original. The extent to which these artists could actually create from an unconscious state is not necessary to debate in the scope of this thesis. What needs to be understood for this discussion is the understanding that the surrealists facilitated situations in which their art would be created through unintentional means and chance processes.

American artists toyed with surrealist ideas when French art began to be exhibited in America in the mid-1930s. Two of the most prominent exhibitions were *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* of 1936-37 at the Museum of Modern Art and *Artists in Exile* at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1942.²⁸ American artists were quick to adopt surrealist techniques after their frustration with being told what and how to paint by the

²⁷ Schimmel and Alloway, *Interpretive Link*, 17.

²⁸ Hobbs and Levin, *Abstract Expressionism*, 28.

government through programs such as the WPA. Automatism allowed artists not only to create entirely imaginative works deviating from art historical movements, but also allowed them to create a new method of making art.

Many critics warned the New York School artists of yet again following French tradition, such as Harold Rosenberg's article entitled "Life and Death of the Amorous Umbrella," published in the American surrealist magazine *VVV* created in 1942. Rosenberg's title referred to the poet Comte de Lautréamont's phrase, "Fair as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella," a well-known reference among the European surrealists. In this article, Rosenberg cautioned the American artists of a false method of creation:

This ability to combine spontaneously has been taken as a sign of dermal alertness characteristic of those born of the spirit who, like the wind, blow where they list. The embrace of the umbrella and the sewing machine has thus become the device on the banner of absolute freedom.

In our admiration for the free, pure, beautiful and revolutionary, we must take care not to overlook the pathos of the umbrella's quick-fire romance. Though his act is perfect in its moment, a distinct psychological malady is implied by his unpremeditated leap... Everything points to frantic impulses and the absence of the critical spirit.

The anarchism of the amorous umbrella does not change the conditions of his existence... He is still himself, the slave that society made of him, and the force and duration of his embrace are not really as unconditioned as they seem.²⁹

Rosenberg warned that although surrealism seemed to solve current issues in American culture, its impact would be fleeting. He expressed the inherent danger of automatism as it aimed for a revolutionary image rather than an intentionally composed art requiring the keen eye and formal training of an artist. In short, he felt the use of surrealist automatism would not solve the needs of the Americans.

²⁹ Harold Rosenberg, "Life and Death of the Amorous Umbrella," *VVV* 1 (June 1942): 12-13.

Due to the critical response of surrealism and the American artists' desire for control over their artwork, Americans did not directly borrow European automatist practices. Instead, American artists invented new techniques that utilized chance to fit their personal needs. The surrealist "psychic automatism" transformed into "plastic automatism" in the hands of the Abstract Expressionists, allowing for more control compositionally. Motherwell commented on his "plastic automatist" works when he wrote in 1944, "All my works [consist] of a dialectic between the conscious (straight lines, designed shapes, weighed color, abstract language) and the unconscious (soft lines, obscured shapes, *automatism*) resolved into a synthesis."³⁰

Motherwell utilized plastic automatism to bridge intentional mark-making with chance compositional techniques. This can be seen in the scribbled ink drawings of *Mexican Sketchbook* (Fig. 6) of 1941. The thin, clean lines juxtaposed with blurry shapes and abstracted forms reveal the context in which he spoke of his plastic automatist works. The majority of the pure line drawings collected in this sketchbook bear no resemblance to the external world: no objects, depth, or physical weight, but reflect the artist's control as he contained the drawing within the boundaries of the small paper size.

Motherwell found that automatism afforded him the means to create a new worldview in his quest to define American art:

My search for an *original creative* principle (which seemed to me to be the thing lacking in American modernism), was what the surrealists called psychic automatism... Psychic automatism has potent characteristics... A: it cuts through any a priori influences – *it is not a style*; B: it is entirely *personal*; C: it is by definition *original*, that is to say, that which originates in one's own being... in

³⁰ As quoted in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), 65.

this sense I believe it is the most powerful creative principle... consciously developed in twentieth-century art.³¹

This desire to create something entirely new and void of rational thought appealed to the Abstract Expressionists who wanted to look beyond the traditional modes of creation. They were searching for an original art that would represent America's reinvention of itself to claim the spotlight of the new center for modern art.

Surrealists Matta and Wolfgang Paalen were the most influential for Motherwell.³² Though Matta's paintings of fantastical, abstract landscapes were very different than Motherwell's, Matta's idea of psychic automatism was embraced in the form of painting rapidly and without control, preserving the process of the work in chance splatters and drips. Matta is considered the most influential figure to spread automatism to American artists with his multitude of approaches to painting including dripping, whipping, scraping, and staining the canvas.³³ He also actively preached the ideas of automatism in hopes the Americans would transform the notion and use it as a way to help advance art beyond surrealism.³⁴

³¹ Motherwell and Terenzio, *Writings of Robert Motherwell*, 230.

³² Mattison, *Robert Motherwell*, 25.

³³ Jeffrey Weschler and Jack J. Spector, *Surrealism and American Art 1931-1947: Rutgers University Art Gallery, March 5-April 24, 1977* (New Brunswick, J.J.: Rutgers, 1976), 51.

³⁴ According to Sawin, Matta invented his own automatism that he called "psychological morphology." Sawin defines "psychological morphology" as a goal to "expand consciousness outward more than inward, to use effects of transparency to link differing spheres of time and space, which would then be perceived simultaneously." Martica Sawin, "The Third Man or Automatism American Style," *Art Journal* 47:3 (1988): 184.

Even more influential for Motherwell was Paalen, however, of whom Motherwell claimed, “I received my post-graduate education in surrealism from Wolfgang Paalen.”³⁵

Paalen had strong ideas of what constituted a true automatist work of art, as expressed in his criticism of Salvador Dalí:

His defenders pretend that his academic style does not matter since he uses it as a means to relate automatically experienced images of dreams... But it is precisely for this reason that his painting instead of being automatic is simply an academic copy of a previously terminated psychological experience... [T]he true value of the artistic experience does not depend on its capacity to *represent*, but on its capacity to *prefigure*, i.e. on its capacity to express a potentially new order of things.³⁶

Paalen believed that automatism should be a truly creative act rather than a representation of dreams. This was an extremely important influence for Motherwell’s own automatist practices as Paalen incorporated techniques such as splashing ink on paper, which fed Motherwell’s need for spontaneity and complete abstraction.³⁷ Chance played a big role in Motherwell’s work, which can be seen in his later paintings and collages, such as *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive* (Fig. 7) from 1943, which reveals a splattering of paint on the right half of the paperboard and his common practice of allowing the torn edges to depict the shapes of the composition. Motherwell often painted politically charged images during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, as he was also interested in the surrealist fascination with the origins of violence.³⁸

³⁵ Sidney Simon, “Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School, 1939-1943: An Interview with Robert Motherwell” in Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 21.

³⁶ Wolfgang Paalen, “The New Image,” translated by Robert Motherwell, *Dyn* (April-May 1942): 12.

³⁷ Mattison, *Robert Motherwell*, 37.

³⁸ Megan M. Fontanella, “Bloodstains and Bullet Holes: Motherwell, Collage, and World War II,” in Robert Motherwell, Susan Davidson, Megan M. Fontanella, Brandon Taylor, and Jeffrey Warda, *Robert Motherwell: Early Collages* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013), 43.

Guston's childhood friend, Pollock, would also employ chance within his own work in the 1930s and 40s. Though Pollock had accepted and utilized instances of surrealist automatism in his early work, he most likely explored these concepts due not as much to Sigmund Freud, but more because of an interest in the Jungian "collective unconscious." In 1939, Pollock began meeting with the Jungian analyst, Dr. Joseph Henderson, who helped Pollock to interpret his visual stream of consciousness into subjects appropriate for painting.³⁹ Pollock became interested in methods with which an artist could incorporate both intentional and chance mark-making.⁴⁰ Pollock even gathered with Motherwell, Baziotes, and their wives to create automatist poetry and often met in Matta's studio to participate in drawing blindfolded with other artists.⁴¹ In 1944, Pollock commented on the influence of the surrealists on American artists:

I accept the fact that the important painting of the last hundred years was done in France. American painters have generally missed the point of modern painting from beginning to end... Thus the fact that good European moderns are now here is very important, for they bring with them an understanding of the problems of modern painting. I am particularly impressed with their concept of the source of art being the unconscious. This idea interests me more than these specific painters do.⁴²

Pollock's *Untitled* (Fig. 8) ink and gouache on paper of 1943 illustrates his use of automatist techniques with the constraint of Jungian symbols and draftsmanship. In some areas, the iconography diminishes into an exploration of line and the ink wash of the

³⁹ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), 96.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 160-61.

⁴¹ Toynton and Pollock, *Jackson Pollock*, 7.

⁴² As quoted in Claude Cernuschi and Jackson Pollock, *Jackson Pollock: Meaning and Significance* (New York: IconEditions, 1992), 45.

background reveals early experiments with ink splattered across the page. Pollock was particularly inspired by French surrealist Joan Miró's forms, which were simplified to their most essential elements yet maintained a recognizable subject. The explicit theme of the "journey" of Jungian philosophy reveals the context in which he is applying these ideas, the iconography and composition of interlocking shapes revealing his unwillingness to let go of intentional, structured form.⁴³

In another creative use of automatism, Pollock's *Untitled* (Fig. 9) circa 1944 reveals not only globs of paint straight from the tube and areas of watered-down pigments spreading in all directions, but the center crease and somewhat symmetrical composition indicate he folded the work while still wet, allowing the pigment to transfer to the other half of the paper; the image mirrored as though in printmaking. Though Pollock could surely guess an approximation of the results, there is an inherent lack of control permitted when using chance techniques.

Abstract and Surrealist Art in the U.S. was an exhibition organized by the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1944 that listed artists Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Motherwell, and Pollock as "American surrealists."⁴⁴ These works revealed some of the American experimentations with automatism involving the use of conventional materials in unconventional ways, including dabbing paper with painted rags, finger painting, and the dripping of pigment. Pollock's later drip paintings are an interesting continuation of his experimentations in automatism, as the works purposefully reveal elements of the aleatory that could not be controlled through rationality. Though Pollock would have

⁴³ Schimmel and Alloway, *Interpretive Link*, 152.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

learned much about the way paint dripped and splattered through practice, the process would inevitably incorporate an element of the unknown. This allowed Pollock to transcend rationality in the creation of entirely new form. The importance of automatism for the Abstract Expressionists was not to instill French traditions in American culture, but rather the spirit of surrealism was used to meet their own personal needs as they moved toward an increasingly independent mode of creation. Abstract Expressionists were able to break from tradition by utilizing the unexpected elements of chance afforded by automatism.

Guston's later engagement with the unconscious would parallel the interests of Motherwell and Pollock, as he also experimented with ways to create new forms within highly composed, plastic automatist paintings. Guston would incorporate chance techniques in his own works by looking away from the canvas when beginning a painting and by allowing the brushstrokes to remain an evidence of his process. Though Guston never directly engaged with the surrealists, he would eventually make his way to these ideas when he returned to New York by befriending the musicians of the New York School of Music. Through an understanding of how Guston utilized ideas similar to automatism, his approach to the aleatory can be likened to his colleagues of the Abstract Expressionist tradition, thereby expanding the definition of the group of artists to include a broader range of formative influences that informs a new understanding of the creation of American modernism.

CHAPTER III

INDETERMINACY IN THE NEW YORK SCHOOL OF MUSIC

One of the most influential factors impacting Guston's work beginning in 1948 was his friendship with experimental music composers Cage and Feldman. It was Cage who introduced Guston to the ideas of Zen Buddhism and encouraged him to attend lectures by Buddhist scholar Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki. According to several accounts, the three would meet daily in Guston's studio to discuss art, music, and Eastern philosophy. Cage, Feldman, and Guston were particularly attracted to the Buddhist concepts of "unimpededness and interpenetration," as introduced in one of Suzuki's lectures. Cage would define these terms in 1952:

...this unimpededness is seeing that in all of space each thing and each human being is at the center and furthermore that each one being at the center is the most honored one of all. Interpenetration means that each one of these most honored ones of all is moving out in all directions penetrating and being penetrated by every other one no matter what the time or what the space... In fact each and every thing in all of time and space is related to each and every other thing in all of time and space.⁴⁵

The idea of every thing as being in relation with every other thing would lead Cage to regard each sound created during a musical performance as integral to the music, including noises made by the audience such as a cough, a whisper, or the shifting in a seat. Cage considered these noises as much a part of the performance as the notes played by the performers. These ideas, combined with others deriving from Jungian psychology and various other sources, were frequently explored in the compositions of Cage, Feldman, and Guston.

⁴⁵ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 46-47.

When looking through his oeuvre chronologically, there is a decisive shift in Cage's work the same time he began experimenting with the chance operations of the *I Ching*. The ancient Chinese text, arranged in numerical sets Cage would activate using yarrow stalks or coins, served as a tool that Cage would refer to as a "chart of possibilities" that allowed him to apply chance operations to his compositions.⁴⁶ The following excerpt from an article by interdisciplinary art historian Branden W. Joseph, describes Cage's first use of the *I Ching* to create an indeterminate composition:

Cage derived the sequence in which the sounds would occur by making vertical and horizontal moves on the [*I Ching*] chart: beginning with the sound represented in one of the cells, subsequent sounds were selected by following a simple sequence such as moving down two cells and then over three... Cage then tossed coins to obtain the hexagrams by which to read these additional charts in order to determine the moves to be made on the one containing sounds. Since the charts Cage used in composing *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* included already complete and precisely notated sound complexes, composition essentially consisted in using chance operations to determine the sequencing of the sounds.⁴⁷

Fellow composer Christian Wolff presented Cage with the newest translation of this book in 1950. It contained a forward by Jung himself in which he described every moment in life as embedded with chance occurrence with the understanding that logic and reason could never fully dominate a situation.⁴⁸

The system Cage developed for activating the unconscious processes of the composer can be further understood through his composition *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* of 1951 (an mp3 recording of this composition is included

⁴⁶ Branden W. Joseph, "Chance, Indeterminacy, Multiplicity," in Julia Robinson, *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009), 213.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 216.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 215.

as a supplemental file with this thesis).⁴⁹ Cage describes his method for composing this work, in which he included:

...single sounds, double sounds and others more numerous, some to be played simultaneously, others successively in time... The elements of the gamuts were arranged unsystematically in charts and the method of composition involved moves on these charts analogous to those used in constructing a magic square.⁵⁰

This work, among others, belonged to Cage's category of indeterminate compositions in which the music was composed through chance operations, but the outcome was fixed in a way that the same notated music would be played each performance with little variance. It was in 1950 that Cage began incorporating chance to create compositions after his introduction to the *I Ching*, allowing for further comparison with the surrealist interest in the aleatory as explored in their parlor games of the 1930s.

Cage also created indeterminate compositions that were open for interpretation by the performer. In these compositions, elements of the performance were left open to spontaneous decisions made by the performer, inevitably leading to an entirely new experience each time the piece was performed. Pieces such as *Music for Piano* of 1952 allowed for the performer to act spontaneously on certain elements of the performance, in this case the dynamics and tempo, to create an indeterminate performance.

Finding that musicians panicked when offered too much freedom, Cage discovered a way of providing choices rather than complete freedom, an idea that gave the performers a starting point without telling them exactly where to begin. This can be

⁴⁹ John Cage, *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra: First Part (1-62)* (as performed by Giancarlo Simonacci, Orchestra V. Galilei, and Nicola Paszkowski). Original score 1950-51. Source: Cage, John. *Cage: Complete Music for Prepared Piano*. © 2012 by Brilliant Classics. Track 53.

⁵⁰ Cage, *Silence*, 25. The word "gamut" refers to a musical term defined by Michael Kennedy and Joyce Bourne Kennedy as "the whole range of musical sounds from the lowest to the highest." Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Michael Kennedy, and Joyce Bourne Kennedy, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music 6 ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

understood similarly as Abstract Expressionist “plastic automatism,” in that choices are offered through the selection of materials, shapes, lines, colors, etc., but the process is inherently free, as the final outcome has not yet been determined. Because each performance was new and unique, it was as though the performer evacuated the role of the musician and instead became the composer and the listener simultaneously.

Cage was surprised at how difficult this task was for musicians as he gave them the instructions to “play whatever comes to hand... without knowing what you are going to do when you get there.”⁵¹ He asked for the sound to simply be left alone while the noise heard next would inevitably be juxtaposed in comparison to the previous sounds, just as the movement of a painter’s brush and the resulting mark would inexorably be felt and seen in relation to the previous marks. As with sound, layers of paint can bury an individual mark or it can be left alone, preserved to resonate on the canvas. In both approaches to indeterminacy, Cage was interested in facilitating chance either in the composition process or in the performance.

Cage also encouraged noises created by the environment and audience, claiming that a true absence of sound was impossible, and embraced the atmosphere as another element of the unexpected in his music.⁵² This blending of roles without delineation between composer, performer, and audience allowed for participants to experience Buddhism’s interpenetration. Each person and element present in the environment influenced the sound in such a way that not a single component could be removed and

⁵¹ Austin Clarkson, “The Intent of the Musical Moment: Cage and the Transpersonal,” in David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, and Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 75.

⁵² Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 237.

still allow for the same experience. Each and every noise was integral for the resulting amalgamation of sounds in that very moment.

Cage's interest in indeterminacy and the use of the *I Ching* to create musical compositions based on chance have interesting parallels with the surrealist use of automatism. Cage used chance operations to create an opportunity for the unexpected. By facilitating chance during the composition process, Cage's interests paralleled those of the surrealists working some years before in their explorations of the aleatory as a way to incorporate the creative and irrational elements of the human psyche. Though utilizing the aleatory through different influences, both Cage and the surrealists shared an interest that paralleled the preoccupation of many philosophers, artists, and psychologists of the early to mid-1900s stemming from Freud and Jung. Though the surrealists had infused their art with chance twenty-five years previously, a method for appropriately incorporating these ideas into the realm of music was still being explored.⁵³

Cage introduced Guston to unimpededness and interpenetration upon their meeting in 1948; concepts they found applicable to both art and music. The inherent similarities of art and music, including space, movement, and texture, sparked a dialogue between the composer and artist in their shared interest to define American modernism. Cage's idea that music was inseparable from other sounds led him to believe that though music was omnipresent, listening was intermittent. He would apply this idea to the visual arts when he said, "art is everywhere; it's only seeing which stops now and then."⁵⁴ In

⁵³ Composer Earle Brown described Cage, Feldman, Christian Wolff, and himself as the "first aleatoric composers" in his article "On December 1952," *American Music* 26:1 (Spring 2008): 6.

⁵⁴ As quoted in Constance Lewallen, "Cage and the Structure of Chance," in David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, *Writings Through Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 234.

further comparison, many of Cage's compositions involved the transformation of the performer into both the composer and audience simultaneously, while Guston's application of these concepts involved his role as the painter and the viewer simultaneously through each chance mark on canvas.

Guston's early flirtations with chance began around 1950 with works such as *Small Quill Drawing* (Fig. 10), revealing delicately traced, quivering lines of ink on paper. Hesitation can be perceived in the thin lines that mimic the same wary movement of the painter's hand. Similar mark-making can be seen in his transition to abstraction a few years previous when exploring the loss of subject encouraged by existentialism.

This drawing is reminiscent of one of the other sketches leading to *The Tormentors* with similar line quality and stacked forms heavy to the left of the composition. *Study for Tormentors (Drawing No. 1)* (Fig. 11) retains the subject of a pile of discarded machinery with unusual shapes comprised of dented metal and dotted lines, the recognizable forms an indication Guston was still not ready to relinquish a subject grounded in the real world. *Small Quill Drawing* does reveal, however, an elimination of subject in 1950, progressing further as he began to let go of the depiction of gravity, his last motif grounded in an illusion of the three-dimensional world.

Guston's explorations of the aleatory would give way to more confidence in works such as *Loft II* (Fig. 12) later that year. This ink drawing overflows with a flurry of sketched lines dashing off the edge of the paper, almost as if Guston's unconscious needed to escape after years of repression. Individual lines disappear and reemerge as they overlap and intersect in a blur of hurried mark-making. This coalescence and simultaneous separation of line is also reminiscent of interpenetration in the coexistence

of the lines to form a unit. Not a single line is more important than another, each piece integral to the overall whole.

This characteristic would be shared between Pollock and Guston who both utilized individual lines that would merge to form a cohesive composition. Art critic Lawrence Alloway commented on the affinities between the work of Guston and Pollock when he described Guston's work of the 1950s: "Under the discreet lyricism, he has been most radical, presenting paintings that are the sum of their discrete visible parts. In this structural candor he can be likened to Pollock in his open drip paintings (though not the densely textured ones)."⁵⁵ The fact that other scholars dismiss Guston's use of automatism is striking when Pollock and Guston both shared an interest in automatist techniques and utilized ideas similar to Buddhist interpenetration.

Guston's personal use of chance operations can be better understood through his description of his painting process during this period:

What is seen and called the picture is what remains—an evidence. Even as one travels in painting towards a state of 'unfreedom' where only certain things can happen, unaccountably the unknown and free must appear. Usually I am on a work for a long stretch, until a moment arrives when the air of the arbitrary vanishes, and the paint falls into positions that feel destined.⁵⁶

Guston's comment in 1956 compares the creation of art to a journey, describing his mark-making as "arbitrary." As observed many times in Guston's studio, Feldman said to make a painting, "Guston just looked out of the window, made a little mark."⁵⁷ Feldman's description of Guston's painting process illustrates the nature of Guston's activation of the aleatory and the unpremeditated composition, as looking away from the

⁵⁵ Lawrence Alloway, "Notes on Guston," *Art Journal* (Fall 1962).

⁵⁶ Guston and Coolidge, *Collected Writings*, 10.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *New York Schools*, 191.

canvas removes the artist's control of the placement, color, density, and shape of the brushstrokes. Guston would simply allow his brushstrokes to be shapes on the canvas, observing that there no longer were "mistakes" during the painting process when he allowed the marks and materials to simply "be."

This is comparable to a statement made by Margaret Tan, who performed *One* in 1992, a later example of Cage's indeterminate pieces. Tan, like other performers, was confused as to how to perform Cage's composition because the preparation for the work was drastically different from how classically trained musicians would generally prepare for a performance. During the stage of preparation, Cage told her to "simply let sounds be sounds." When Tan finally discovered the mental preparation necessary for performing Cage's music, she found the process to be relatively easy:

It was very simple... I had only to draw spontaneously on the reservoir of possibilities at the moment of performance to make a truly indeterminate performance, the outcome of which would be different each time and unpredictable even to me.⁵⁸

Just as in the musical performance of Cage's *One* in 1992, Guston would simply use unpremeditated brushstrokes to begin a composition, exploring the possibilities of the brush rather than forcing the marks to fit within certain constraints of a particular style or subject matter of the painting. Guston had finally achieved a loss of subject for which he had been striving for two years and it was unimpededness and interpenetration that permitted him that freedom.

A close connection between Guston and Feldman also developed during the early 1950s, both sharing in interest in a "more perceptive temperament that waits and observes the inherent mystery of its materials," in which "the painter [or performer] achieves

⁵⁸ Clarkson, "Musical Moment," 75.

mastery by allowing what he is doing to be itself.” This quote from British music critic Paul Griffiths illustrates how painting and music could have found an overlapping nature in conversations between Guston and Feldman. Instead of battling the nature of oil paint or the nature of a music note, the link between their works was to allow the materials to be genuine representations of the moment. To have a preconceived idea before approaching the easel was to disconnect the subject from the materials.

Feldman’s shared interests revolving around chance compositional methods further reinforce the connection between Guston, Feldman, and Cage. Cage recalls an earlier statement made by Feldman:

One evening Morton Feldman said that when he composed he was dead; this recalls to me the statement of my father, an inventor, who says he does his best work when he is sound asleep... The ego no longer blocks the action.⁵⁹

Feldman achieved an unpremeditated composition through his use of the patterning of antique Turkish rugs to determine the repetition of sounds or phrases.⁶⁰ Feldman never felt the need to explore the same method of utilizing the *I Ching* as Cage, but rather felt free to create his own chance operations.

Many art and music historians, including Ashton, Michael Auping, and Jonathan W. Bernard, saw the similarities between the works of Cage, Guston, and Feldman describing their compositions in ways that could almost be interchangeable.⁶¹ Ashton compares their works in the early 1950s:

⁵⁹ David Wayne Patterson, *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 194.

⁶⁰ Clarkson, “Musical Moment,” 253.

⁶¹ For further information see: Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 93-94; Guston and Auping’s *Philip Guston Retrospective*, 44-45; and Jonathan W. Bernard’s “Feldman’s Painters” in Johnson, *The New York Schools*, 188.

Cage enforced his Oriental perceptions of the void through what Henry Cowell called ‘the dynamics of silence, a relativity of silence as well as of sound, expressed by rests and extreme *pianissimi*...’ Feldman concentrated on the *pianissimi*... rendered in delicate, sparse compositions that often receded almost to inaudibility, played caressingly on a piano. The trailing short phrases could easily be apprehended with the same sensibility that read the pale, trembling calligraphy of Guston’s paintings.⁶²

Cage, Feldman, and Guston would all embed their work with vast areas of space, Guston’s rendered as negative space and Cage and Feldman’s space understood as temporal “silence” or rests. This element of space not only alluded to a separation of painted marks or disparate notes, but also embedded their work with the notion of interpenetration. Ashton describes Guston’s “spaces” as “not bound by systems of perspective but rather corresponded to the vast dislocations that occur in dreamlike mental conditions,” thus reinforcing the practice of activating the unconscious, or chance techniques, as a means to release one’s self from the strict role of the painter.

Through a comparison of Guston’s compositional process with the process of Cage and Feldman, Guston’s application of chance operations can be further understood as an interpretation of Cage’s approach combining many early theorists including Jung and Suzuki. What can be taken from this comparison is Guston’s incorporation of new methods of painting enacted to resolve the current crisis regarding the lack of a truly creative American art form, a common practice utilized by many American artists of the period who would later be deemed “Abstract Expressionists.” The next chapter addresses the scholarly literature that insists upon differences between Guston and the other Abstract Expressionists. I conclude, on the contrary, that Guston shared a unified goal with the Abstract Expressionist artists and thus should be considered as a key member of

⁶² Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 92-94.

that artistic tradition. Guston's inclusion in the Abstract Expressionist tradition allows for a better understanding of the varied influences that informed the creation of American modernism, an influence that stretched farther than European soil.

CHAPTER IV
THE INDETERMINACY OF AUTOMATISM

The original belief that American artists were influenced primarily by European artistic conventions ignores artists like Guston who looked to Eastern rather than Western influences. It is important to include the varied international influences to broaden the understanding of modernism in the United States. By revealing the similarities between the chance operations of Cage and of the American surrealists, the transition from French to American modernism can be better understood as deriving from a variety of international influences.

Though Cage would denounce surrealism, overall deeming the movement “uninteresting,” there are clear affinities between Cage’s indeterminacy and surrealist automatism that reflect a shared interest in revolutionizing consciousness, including the goal to liberate American creativity through the utilization of chance operations.⁶³ Cage and the surrealists also employed similar means to activate the aleatory, such as the engagement with games such as “Exquisite Corpse.”⁶⁴ Both Cage’s indeterminacy and the American’s automatism utilized chance to revolutionize their respective art forms in search of a true American expression.

⁶³ Branden W. Joseph and Robert Rauschenberg, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 273.

⁶⁴ *Party Pieces* were co-written in 1944-45 by Cage and his American composer friends Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and Virgil Thomson. Harrison describes the process of this party game produced in a similar manner as the surrealist *Exquisite Corpses*: “Each composer present would write a measure, fold the paper at the bar line and, on the new fresh sheet, put only two notes to guide the next composer in his connection. The next composer would write a bar, fold at the bar line and leave two more black spots and so on. It seems to me that we would begin simultaneously and pass them along in rotation in a sort of surrealist assembly line.” Patterson, *John Cage*, 204.

The affinities between automatism and indeterminacy can be further illustrated through a comparison of Guston's art with the work of Motherwell. Motherwell and Guston both shared the impulse to create truly original works of art, approaching this desire through their own chance operations. Motherwell's *Automatic Drawing No. 1* (Fig. 13) of 1941 and Guston's *Loft I* (Fig. 14) of 1950 both utilize aleatory techniques combined with the intentional mark-making common in plastic automatist works. Motherwell's addition of watercolor responding to the forms already present in the composition reveal this drawing as one of his early explorations of automatism, still hesitant to abandon control over many of the compositional elements.

The similarities between these drawings are apparent in the consistent use of hatch marks and trailing lines creating a ghost of ink scratching the surface, as though both artists averted their eyes from the canvas like Feldman had claimed of Guston. Marks such as these reveal the artists' failure to notice the lack of ink on the brush, or perhaps they simply did not care, and asserts a visualization of the creative process as it unveiled before the artist. Both automatism and indeterminacy involved new experimentation that inspired artists to utilize the materials in new ways, including an exploration of the dry marks a barely inked brush could make on paper without regard for traditional painting techniques.

Both artists' applications of the aleatory reveal Cage's concept of the blending between the creator and the audience, an idea Guston understood as "interpenetration," though Motherwell's interest in Zen Buddhism would not develop until 1982.⁶⁵ When works began without premeditation of the final outcome, the results were inherently

⁶⁵ Mary Ann Caws and Robert Motherwell, *Robert Motherwell: What Art Holds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 92.

unexpected and the creator could simultaneously take on the role of the audience as he or she watched the work unfold. The inclusion of the mistakes, the scratch marks, the drips, and all the other “noises” of painting is comparable to Cage’s assertion that the environment and occurrences during creation were just as important as any intentionality of the artist-performer.

Though the compositions of these two pieces are not directly comparable, it can be noted that the forms in both have little relation to those with which they are juxtaposed. Overlapping forms create areas of density, a place for the viewer to become subsumed in the constellation of marks. The full use of the paper in both cases, with some marks veering off the page, is also similar and the subject becomes the ink marks and their negative spaces, floating on paper rather than grounded in reality. Interestingly, both compositions (and the majority of these artists’ works) retain an acute application of compositional balance, revealing the use of “plastic automatism” to exert some extent of control over the final outcome.

As can be seen through these examples, Guston’s explorations of existentialism and chance operations aligned him with his colleagues before Abstract Expressionism would emerge as a prominent artistic tradition. As early as 1951, Guston would deem *White Painting I* (Fig. 15) a seminal work in his Abstract Expressionist career.⁶⁶ Guston described his process for creating this work:

I remember that I was most anxious to break all my habits of construction. It’s amazing how one builds up certain habitual responses... I had the desire to be as spontaneous as possible, or to not criticize one’s acts so much, never move back from the canvas... I put the palette right in front of me, instead of on the side where palettes usually are, and just kept painting for about two hours.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ashton, *Philip Guston*, 99.

⁶⁷ Guston and Coolidge, *Collected Writings*, 215.

This painting embodied what American art critic Irving Sandler would call “tentative in the extreme” when describing Guston’s works of 1951-54.⁶⁸ Guston’s hesitant lines seem to lack the strength to reach the edge, detaching the amorphous image from the defined space of the canvas. Though many scholars would suggest the wavering lines and grayed hues reflected Guston’s apprehension, Sandler argues that Guston was expressing core existentialist ideas:

A number of critics have mistaken Guston’s equivocation for timidity, failing to grasp that much of the expressive content of his pictures stems from their ability to convey the difficulty of choosing from among mutable alternatives experienced in the process of painting, which, in a broader sense, refers to a central existential problem of contemporary man.⁶⁹

This intimate method of painting is revealed through the dry application of pigment, as though Guston never reached to add more paint to his limited color palette. The short strokes also indicate Guston’s close proximity to the canvas through the lack of broad, gestural movements utilized by “action painters” such as Pollock. Rather than using his whole arm and body to compose this piece, Guston seems to have engaged only his elbow and wrist in a series of strokes reminiscent of calligraphic writing.

Guston’s impulse for direct expression, a desire of many Abstract Expressionists, inspired Guston’s new and intimate approach to painting. *White Painting I* embodies the visceral, the spontaneous, the automatic, and the lack of depth inherent in all Abstract Expressionist works, revealing the unifying characteristics shared among artists as diverse as Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, and Rothko. As the use of plastic automatism spread throughout the painters of the New York School, works utilizing chance

⁶⁸ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 258.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

operations were more common in the early 1950s. At this time, however, painters of this tradition had not yet been brought together to celebrate their innovations and present these new ideas to a wider audience.

The organization of the *Ninth Street Show*, an exhibition that opened in May of 1951, aimed to unite the disparate artists of the New York School and help them gain exposure to the public. Among a broad range of participants, as can be seen on the advertisement for the opening (Fig. 16), the exhibition of painting and sculpture included Abstract Expressionist artists such as de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Motherwell, Pollock, and Tomlin, among other avant-garde artists from New York City. Most importantly, this exhibition also included Guston among the list of artists that would be deemed the “Abstract Expressionists,” revealing the context in which his contemporaries were viewing his work in 1951, though later scholars would overlook his inclusion in this seminal exhibition.

As can be seen, Guston’s utilization of the aleatory as understood through Cage’s indeterminacy aligned him with his contemporaries of the Abstract Expressionist tradition. Guston not only arrived at similar techniques, but was able to emerge as a prominent figure of the tradition in the 1951 exhibition. I argue, therefore, that Abstract Expressionism should not be understood through formative influences deriving solely from French artistic traditions, but should incorporate a broader range of influences including Guston’s Eastern philosophy. American modernist artists can be freed from the belief that they copied French artistic conventions and can now be understood to include a much wider range of international influences as uniquely interpreted by the American avant-garde as a whole, including artists and musicians alike.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Though Guston did not directly engage with the surrealists exiled in America in the 1940s, he did not miss this important formative influence upon his return to New York City in 1947. Guston's close friendship with Cage and Feldman introduced Guston to a world of ideas not explored by the Abstract Expressionists, but the two groups nevertheless shared the goal to define "American art" and to create original works of art and music that went beyond historically established boundaries deriving solely from French artistic tradition. Guston's utilization of the aleatory by losing himself intimately in his works, or by looking out the window instead of focusing on the canvas, can be seen as akin to Motherwell and other Abstract Expressionists employing the use of automatist chance operations. These voyages into the aleatory required artists to become the viewer and creator simultaneously to realize the creative potential previously unknown and entirely unexpected.

This thesis argues that scholars who dismiss Guston from Abstract Expressionism should reconsider his placement within the tradition as Guston engaged with both formative influences of existentialism and automatism. Because Guston cannot be easily categorized as an "action" painter due to his intimate working method, nor a "color field" painter with his disparate lines, these categories should be diversified as they inherently contradict the nature of the group as a collection of highly individual artists. Guston's goal of direct expression, spontaneous creation, and the painting as evidence of the process is in alignment with all other artists categorized as Abstract Expressionists,

sharing a refutation of subject and an embedding of emotion unprecedented in the history of art.

The definition of Abstract Expressionism is forever in flux due to the artists' various interpretations of contemporary philosophy, literature, and art during the political turmoil of the 1940s. Hobb's suggestion of the collective as more of a "cultural tradition" allows for Abstract Expressionism to encompass a broader range of artists that shared the formative influences of chance and existentialism, and unifies a group of artists that all fought as a vanguard not only uniting themselves through individuality, but uniting the nation under the new title of "American modernity." Abstract Expressionism, therefore, should be defined as a tradition of artists that strove for individual expression, utilizing techniques of spontaneous creation to introduce new forms to their work in a shared goal to define American art in the early 1950s. Guston's role is incorporated in this definition as it allows for a multitude of formative influences rather than limiting the artists to a direct engagement with surrealist techniques.

In this thesis, I compared Guston's approach to the formative influences of Abstract Expressionism as influenced not by French tradition, but by experimental music composers who were inspired primarily from Eastern philosophy. I argued that Guston should be included in the movement, thereby expanding the definition of Abstract Expressionism as Guston utilized the same techniques but arrived at these techniques through a more interdisciplinary approach. To further the study of Guston's work, it would be fruitful to examine his art as it transitioned through the 1950s into a darker palette and denser compositions. Eastern philosophy only satisfied Guston for a short time through 1953 and then he began a transition where he moved away from

indeterminacy, completely abandoning the concept by 1956. This would also mark an end in his friendship with Cage and Feldman. Research into this phase of his career could illuminate Guston's later influences and shed light on the transformation of Abstract Expressionism in the later 1950s.

APPENDIX

FIGURES



Fig. 1. Philip Guston, "Sanctuary," 1944, oil on canvas, 22 1/8 x 35 7/8 in. (56.2 x 91.1 cm), Collection of the Artist (reprinted from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Philip Guston, *Philip Guston* (New York: G. Braziller, 1980), Figure 5).



Fig. 2. Philip Guston, "The Tormentors," 1947-48, oil on canvas, 40 7/8 x 60 1/2 in. (103.8 x 153.7 cm), San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco (reprinted from Philip Guston and Michael Auping, *Philip Guston Retrospective* (Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003), Plate 18).

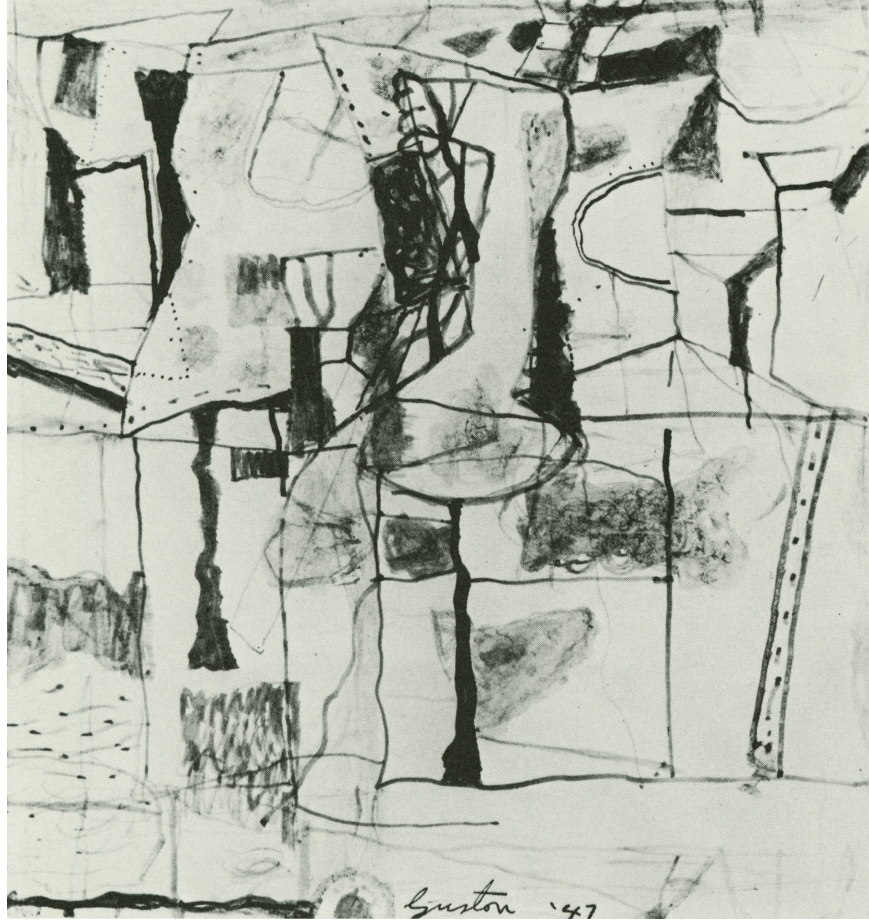


Fig. 3. Philip Guston, "Study for Tormentors," 1947, ink wash on paper, 10 x 10 in., David McKee Gallery, New York (reprinted from Philip Guston, *Philip Guston: Drawings 1947-1977* (New York: David McKee Gallery, 1978), Catalog 1.

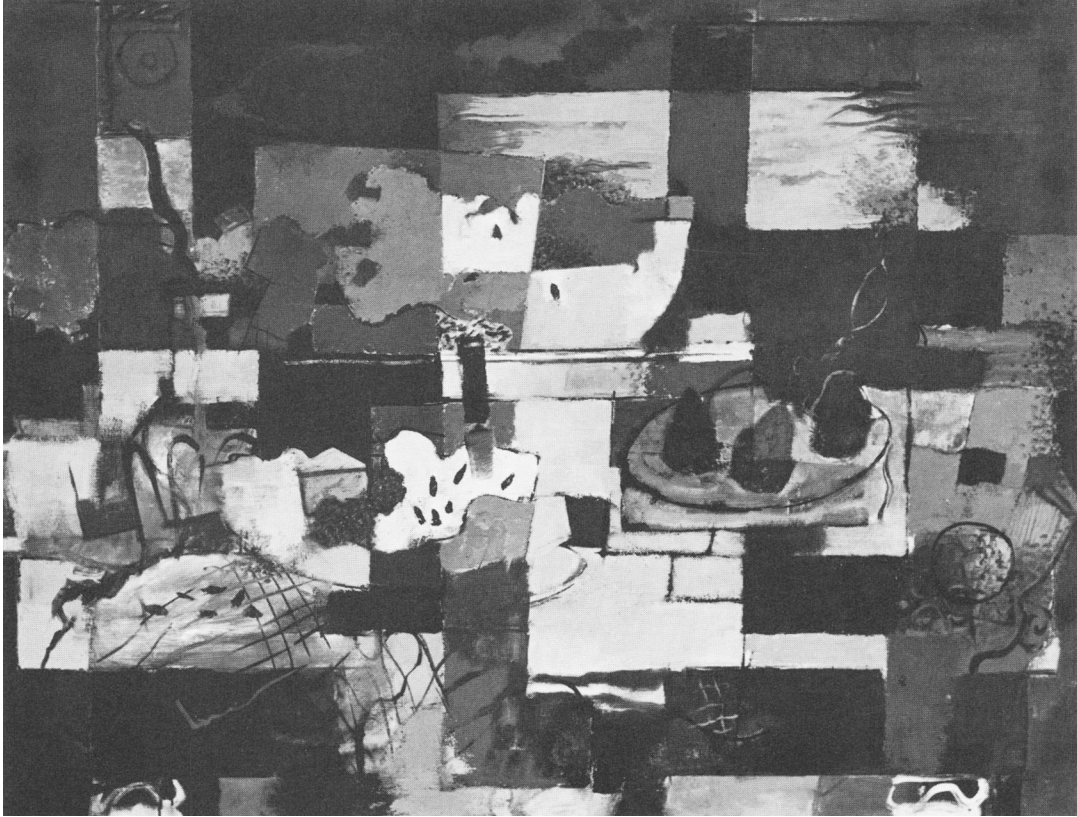


Fig. 4. Bradley Walker Tomlin, "Watermelon," 1942-44, oil on canvas, 37 x 48 in., Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York (reprinted from Bradley Walker Tomlin, *Bradley Walker Tomlin: A Retrospective View* (Garden City, N.Y.: Whaler Press, 1975), Plate 33).



Fig. 5. Bradley Walker Tomlin, "Number 10-A," 1947, oil on canvas, 46 x 31 in., Private Collection, New York (reprinted from Bradley Walker Tomlin, *Bradley Walker Tomlin: A Retrospective View* (Garden City, N.Y.: Whaler Press, 1975), Plate 36).

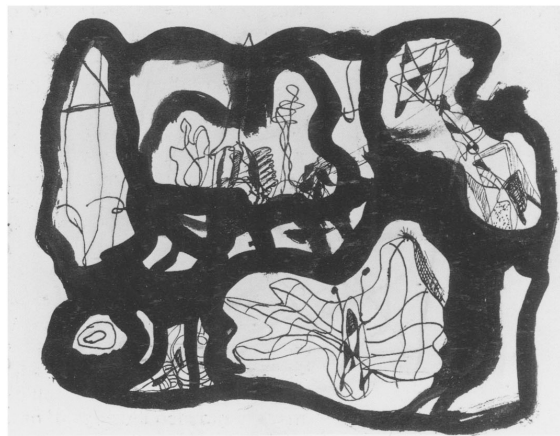
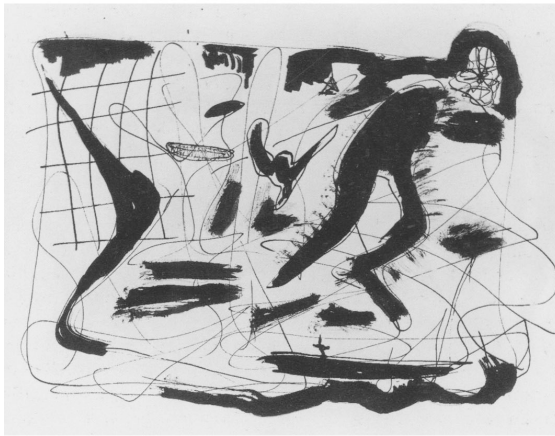
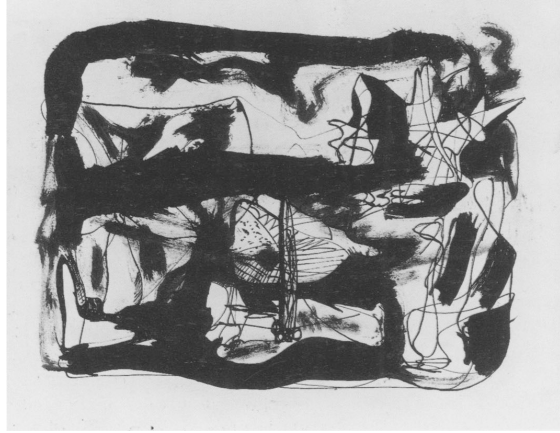


Fig. 6. Robert Motherwell, "Mexican Sketchbook," 1941, India ink on paper, 11 pages total, each 9 x 11 ½ in. (22.9 x 29.2 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York (reprinted from Paul Schimmel and Lawrence Alloway, *The Interpretive Link: Abstract Surrealism into Abstract Expressionism: Works on Paper, 1938-1948* (Newport Beach, C.A.: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1986), Plate 76).

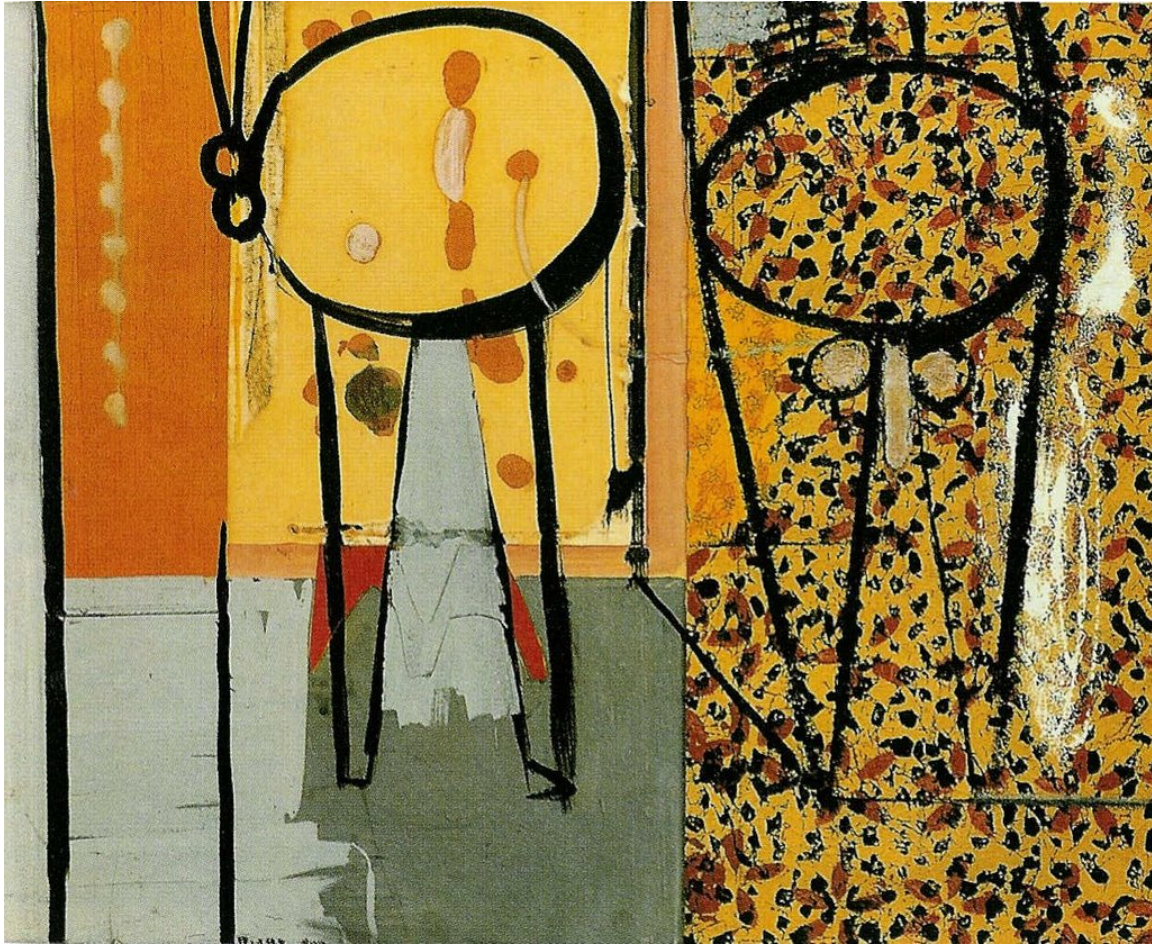


Fig. 7. Robert Motherwell, "Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive," 1943, gouache, ink, oil, and pasted German decorative paper, colored paper, Japanese paper, and wood veneer on paperboard, 71.7 x 91.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York (reprinted from Robert Motherwell, Susan Davidson, Megan M. Fontanella, Brandon Taylor, and Jeffrey Warda, *Robert Motherwell: Early Collages* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013), Plate 13).



Fig. 8. Jackson Pollock, "Untitled," 1943, ink and gouache on paper, 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (47.6 x 62.9 cm), Private Collection, New York (reprinted from Paul Schimmel and Lawrence Alloway, *The Interpretive Link: Abstract Surrealism into Abstract Expressionism: Works on Paper, 1938-1948* (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1986), Plate 104).



Fig. 9. Jackson Pollock, "Untitled," 1944, mixed media on cardboard, 14 ¼ x 19 ¼ in., Private Collection, Belgium (reprinted from Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 95.

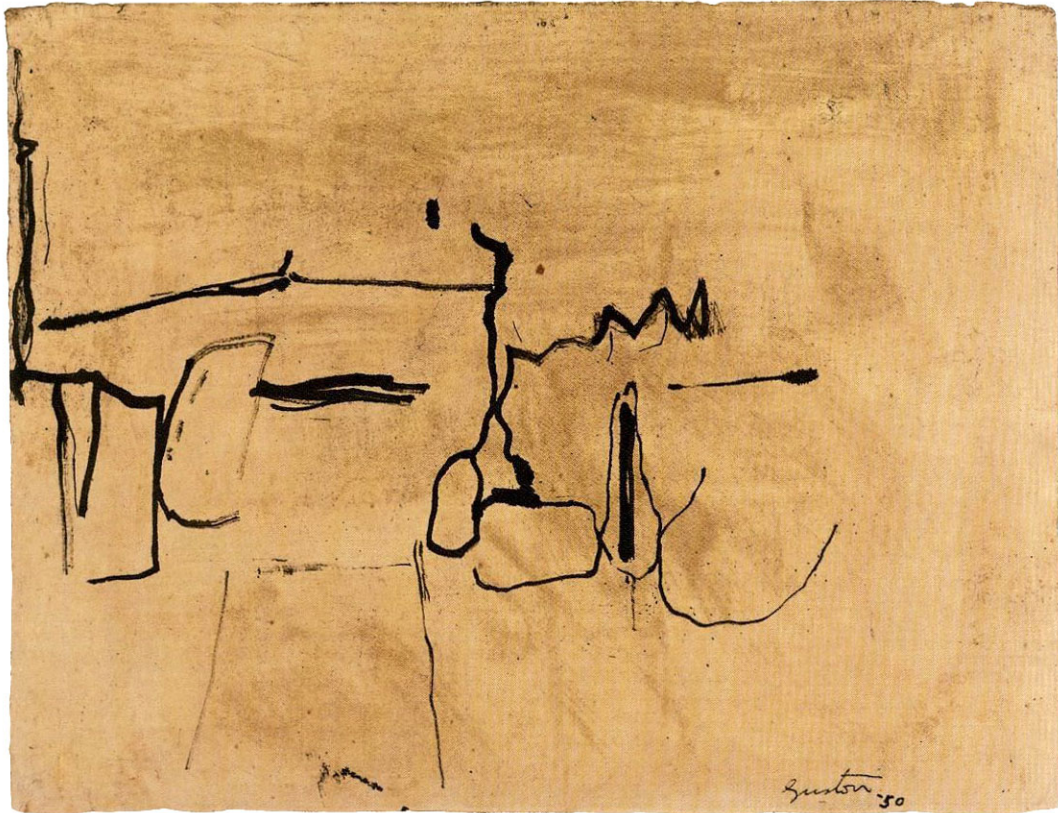


Fig. 10. Philip Guston, "Small Quill Drawing," 1950, ink on paper, 12 1/8 x 16 1/8 in. (30.8 x 41 cm), Private Collection (reprinted from Philip Guston and Michael Auping, *Philip Guston Retrospective* (Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003), Plate 24).



Fig. 11. Philip Guston, “Study for Tormentors (Drawing No. 1),” 1947, ink on paper, 14 7/8 20 7/8 in. (36.8 x 53.3 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York (reprinted from Philip Guston, *Philip Guston: Works on Paper* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2007), Catalog 1).

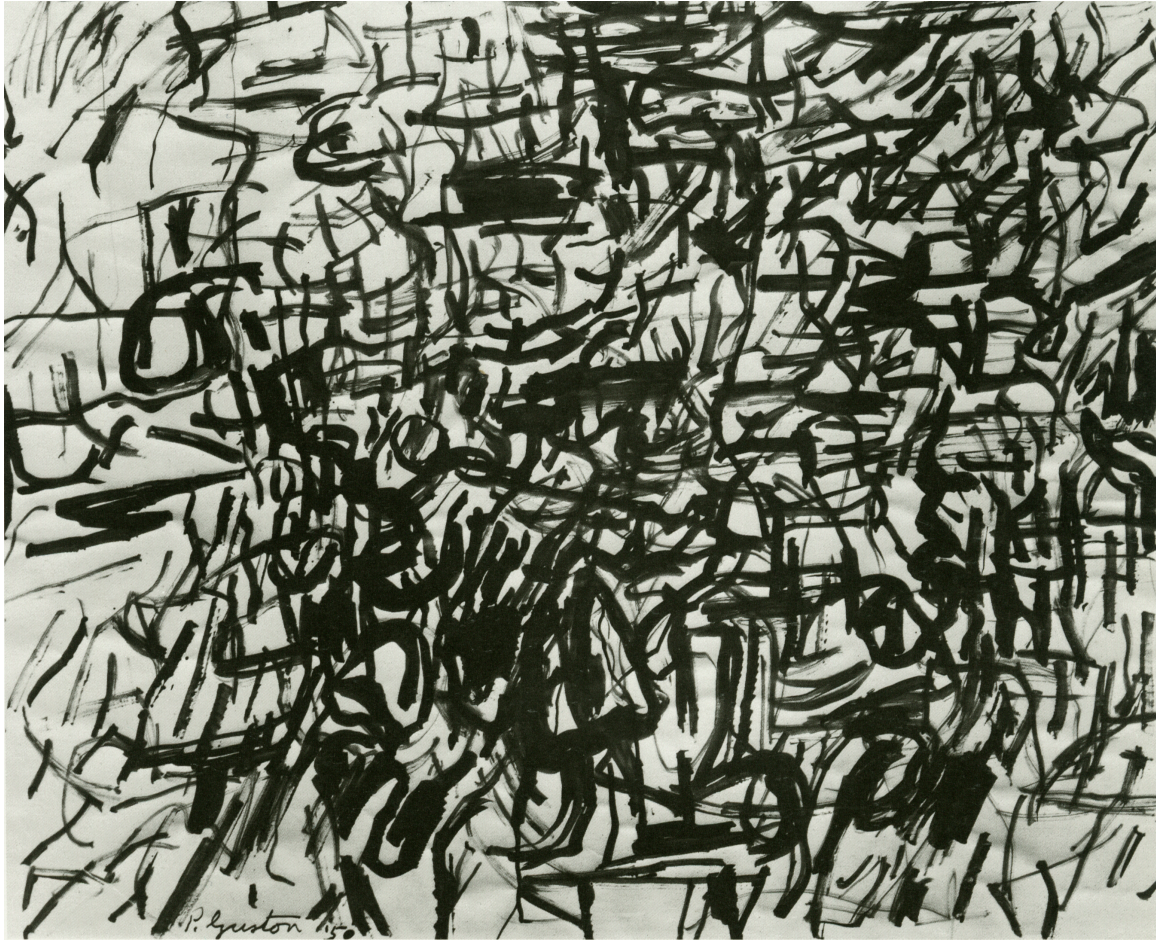


Fig. 12. Philip Guston, "Loft II," 1950, ink on paper, 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (47.6 x 59.4 cm), Private Collection (reprinted from Magdalena Dabrowski and Philip Guston, *The Drawings of Philip Guston* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), Catalog 22).

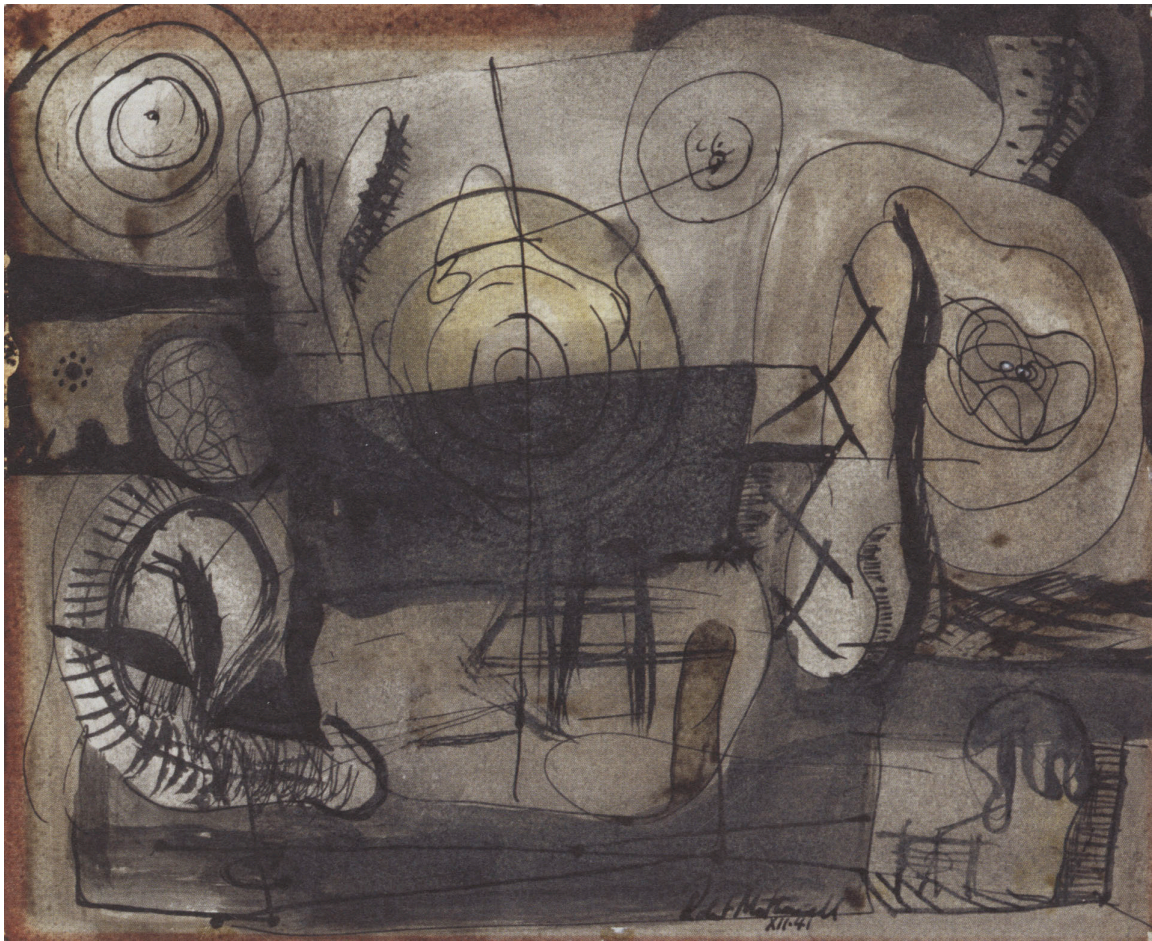


Fig. 13. Robert Motherwell, "Automatic Drawing No. 1," 1941, watercolor and ink on paperboard, 20.3 x 25.1 cm, Private Collection, Scottsdale, Arizona (reprinted from Robert Motherwell, Susan Davidson, Megan M. Fontanella, Brandon Taylor, and Jeffrey Warda, *Robert Motherwell: Early Collages* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2013), Plate 3).



Fig. 14. Philip Guston, "Loft I," 1950, ink on paper, 17 x 22 in. (43.2 x 55.9 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York (reprinted from Magdalena Dabrowski and Philip Guston, *The Drawings of Philip Guston* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), Catalog 21).



Fig. 15. Philip Guston, "White Painting I," 1951, oil on canvas, 57 7/8 x 61 7/8 in. (147 x 157.2 cm), San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California (reprinted from Philip Guston and Michael Auping, *Philip Guston Retrospective* (Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003), Plate 28).

ALCOPLEY • BOUCHE • BROOKS • BUSA • BRENSON •
CAVALLON • CARONE • GREENBERG • DE KOONING • DE
NIRO • DZUBAS • DONATI • J. ERNST • E. DE KOONING • FERREN
• FERBER • FINE • FRANKENTHALER • GOODNOUGH • GRIPPE
• GUSTON • HARTIGAN • HOFMANN • JACKSON • KAPPELL •
KERKAM • KLINE • KOTIN • KRASSNER • LESLIE • LIPPOLD •
LIPTON • MARGO • MCNEIL • MARCA-RELLI • J. MITCHELL
• MOTHERWELL • NIVOLA • PORTER • POLLOCK • POUSSETTE
DART • PRICE • RESNICK • RICHENBERG • REINHARDT • ROSATI
• RYAN • SANDERS • SCHNABEL • SEKULA • SHANKER •
SMITH • STAMOS • STEFANELLI • STEPHAN • STEUBING •
STUART • TOMLIN • TWORKOV • VICENTE • KNOOP •

COURTESY THE FOLLOWING GALLERIES: BORGENICHT, EAGAN,
TIBOR DE NAGY, THE NEW, PARSONS, PERIDOT, WILLARD, HUGO

MAY 21ST TO JUNE 10TH, 1951

PREVIEW MONDAY, MAY 21ST, NINE P. M.

60 EAST 9TH ST., NEW YORK 3, N.Y.

9TH ST.

EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURE

Fig. 16. Franz Kline, "Poster 'Ninth Street Exhibition,'" 1951, linoleum cut, 16 x 8.5 in., Private Collection (reprinted from Marika Herskovic, *New York School: Abstract Expressionists: Artists Choice by Artists: A Complete Documentation of the New York Painting and Sculpture Annuals, 1951-1957* (New Jersey: New York School Press, 2000), 10).

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