DEFINING ABSTRACTION: HOW POSTWAR NEW YORK BECAME AMERICAN

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Art at the College of Arts and Sciences

Chapel Hill
2017

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis reexamines the art historical narrative of abstraction in 1950s New York City. I argue that this story as written since the 1960s chooses to regard abstraction as bifurcated into styles supposedly native to either Europe or America. Examining the works of two European artists, Nicholas de Staël and Pierre Soulages, I demonstrate rather how American curators, gallerists, and critics in the fifties promoted a pan-national abstraction. The affinities they stressed between Paris and New York were recognized but modified by the critical and popular press, whose responses foreshadowed a break between American and European abstractionists discursively created by art history. Drawing on readings of exhibition materials, critical responses, and histories of abstract expressionism, this thesis aims to reintroduce Europeans to this history of abstraction. By doing so, I hope to explain how the history heretofore written on the international community of abstractionists in the fifties became exclusively American.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first offer my thanks to Dr. Daniel Sherman, my advisor and a stalwart advocate for me during my second “tour of duty” at Carolina. His insight, wit, and discerning analysis improved my project at every turn and his guidance through this process has retaught me the written word. Dr. Cary Levine’s sharp critiques were invaluable to honing the paper’s argument and Dr. Victoria Rovine’s comments scrubbed the prose clean of improprieties. Thanks is also due to the Minor clan, both extant and in the great beyond, whose unconditional support for the arts knows no bounds. And to all my friends.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES.................................................................................. VI

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: THE EXHIBITION OF PAN-NATIONAL ABSTRACTION ...................... 9

Abstraction as Political ............................................................................................. 9
Abstraction as Inheritance ...................................................................................... 13
Abstraction as Pan-National .................................................................................. 16

CHAPTER 2: ABSTRACTION: UNITED AND DIVIDED ..................................... 21

Artistic Inheritance: Favorability and the Public ..................................................... 21
Internationalism: Comparative or Competitive? ..................................................... 27
Contextualization Foreshadows the Break ............................................................. 32

CHAPTER 3: BIFURCATING ABSTRACTION .................................................... 37

Criticism as History ............................................................................................... 37
The 1950s and ’60s: Contention and Defiance ....................................................... 39
The Break is History ............................................................................................... 43
Breaking the Break ................................................................................................. 51

CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................... 54

FIGURES .............................................................................................................. 56

APPENDIX 1: FAVORABILITY INDEX OF A UNITED ABSTRACTION ............. 62

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................... 64
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Favorability Index of a United Abstraction……………………………………………………………24

Table 2. Group Exhibition in America by Decade 1955 – 1996……………………………………………….47

Figure 1. Pierre Soulages, Peinture 146 x 97 cm, 17 Fevrier 1950, 1950……………………………………56

Figure 2. Franz Kline, Nijinsky, 1950………………………………………………………………………….57

Figure 3. Nicolas de Staël, Composition (Rouge) 1950, 1950………………………………………………58

Figure 4. Mark Rothko, No. 17 (or) 15, 1949…………………………………………………………………59

Figure 5. View of display of Rothko, de Staël, Dubuffet and da Kooning at the Sidney Janis gallery exhibition, Young Painters of U.S. and France, 1950………………………………60

Figure 6. View of display of Kline, Soulages, Cavallon, Coulon, Pollock and Lanskoy at the Sidney Janis gallery exhibition, Young Painters of U.S. and France, 1950………………61
INTRODUCTION

Yet it’s odd, all the same, to discover that so many apparently individual and unorthodox methods now in use here have their echoes across the ocean, and it certainly indicates that the extreme modern movement, uncoordinated though it still is, has a far wider and stronger appeal to young artists everywhere than most of us imagine.1

The rise in importance of New York after World War II, entailing a shift in primacy in the world from Paris to the American metropolis, has long been central to the story of Western art in the 20th century. As the story goes, part of the reason for this shift was the development of a distinct, modern and superior American style of painting. Abstract expressionism, a moniker credited to the author of the quote above, is often hailed by the discipline as the style that carried on the legacies of modernism honed in Paris during the century’s first decades, refiguring the stylistic and philosophical lessons of the old world in a flurry of American virility, action, and power.2

This narrative has been challenged and expanded in many ways since its original conception by American critics in the 1950s. Ann Gibson has highlighted the prejudices of the era that suppressed from the story of abstract expressionism many artists who didn’t fit the original “cowboy” persona of the movement.3 Joan Marter in her compilation of essays on the international context of abstract expressionism focused on the antinationalist attitudes of many of

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2 For examples see Balken, Movements in Modern Art; MoMA on Abstract Expressionism; Stella, “Abstract Expressionism”; Sandler, Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience.

its artists and the international influences both affecting and stimulated by their work.  

Serge Guilbaut demonstrates in _How New York Stole The Idea of Modern Art_ (1983) that the success of American art in the five years after World War II was in a large part due to the social and political situation of the United States during the formative years of the Cold War. His argument calls into question the validity of the teleological aspects of this narrative, showing that the quality of the abstract expressionist work was not the only reason for this rise of American art.

But such revisionist historians continue to frame their arguments around the assumption that New York was exclusively the domain of American artists. They ignore an important trend: as the appetite in America for abstraction and modernism grew in the 1950’s, many artists not living and working in New York found themselves represented there alongside the American abstract expressionists. One such group was a new generation of artists coming of age in Paris. They came from a variety of different countries and backgrounds and, like the abstract artists working in New York, were only loosely affiliated with each other. Critically dubbed Tachists, Lyrical Abstractionists, or the New School of Paris, these artists shared dealers, wall space in museum exhibitions, social spaces, collectors, and ideas with their American contemporaries in the American metropolis. However, American histories of this era only briefly mention these artists and their work and usually only as foils to their American counterparts. By ignoring the similarities between the abstractions of two places, the art historical narrative of this period has

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7 Ibid., 792.
artificially divided the abstractionists of America living in New York from those working and living in Paris. My thesis aims to detail how this discursive break occurred by analyzing the presentation of these artists in New York City, how they were construed by various institutions and publics there, and the legacy of these presentations and receptions for these artists in America.

Many Parisian artists of the postwar period found permanent, if short-lived, representation in New York: Samuel Kootz represented Pierre Soulages, Georges Mathieu, Gerard Schneider and Zao Wou-ki; Henry Kleeman took on Hans Hartung; Pierre Matisse showed Alfred Manessier, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Jean Dubuffet; Paul Rosenberg signed Nicolas de Staël. Other artists such as Gustave Singier, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Jean Bazaine and Wols did not have permanent dealers in the city but were included in many group exhibitions of young French painters in New York in the fifties. Two of the most visible of these artists were de Staël and Soulages, whom their respective New York dealers regularly exhibited and sold for a decade from the early fifties. Both were included in many group exhibitions of postwar French painting, both were taken seriously by the popular press and critics of the time. Yet both, since this initial period of exhibition, have faded into obscurity for American audiences since this initial period of exhibition. The similar ways that their artwork was represented in America in this decade, their longevity of representation, and the mass of American response that identified them with the ‘Paris School’ at large make them ideal case studies for an examination of proximity of the abstractionists in New York and those in Paris during the fifties.

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Pierre Soulages, born in Rodez, France in 1919, focused as a teenager on becoming a professional painter, drawing inspiration from both the natural surroundings and man-made monuments in his hometown. His work in these early years was mainly in landscapes, but it readily incorporated different shades of black inspired by shadows in Romanesque art and architecture. After attending the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montpellier in 1941 he spent the rest of the war years working as a farmer in the same region. Soulages first gained critical recognition in a 1948 German traveling exhibition, where his work was seen by art historian James Johnson Sweeney and gallerist Louis Carré. He signed with Carré in 1950 and displayed his work in the Carré galleries in Paris and New York, selling his first work in America to Washington D.C. collector Duncan Phillips. After taking part in group exhibitions between 1950 and 1953 in Carré’s galleries and in museums on both sides of the Atlantic, Soulages signed in 1954 with a noted dealer of Abstract Expressionism, Samuel Kootz. Kootz’s gallery exhibited Soulages’s work consistently until the dealer’s retirement in 1966. In these dozen years, Soulages was more popular in America than in his homeland. During trips to New York City, he was introduced to American abstract artists like Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell who would remain his friends for the rest of their lives. After Kootz’s retirement and brief professional relationships with Knoedler and Gimpel Fils galleries, Soulages’s presence in America dwindled as he


concentrated on building relationships with French dealers and collectors. His work would not return to America until monographic exhibitions in New York 2005 and 2014 to coincide with the opening of his museum in Rodez in the same year.

Like Soulages, Nicolas de Staël was very popular in America in the 1950s. But unlike the younger painter he would not live to promote his work in later decades. Born in 1914 in Saint Petersburg to a father who would become the last tsarist commandant of the Peter and Paul fortress, he fled Russia with his family following the Bolshevik revolution. Following the death of his parents in this flight, he was raised by relatives in Brussels where he studied architecture and first experimented with painting. From 1936 to the beginning of the Second World War he traveled frequently throughout Europe and North Africa, briefly joining the French Foreign Legion in Tunisia in 1940. During the war he settled in Paris and, following its conclusion, moved to a studio close to Georges Braque. Under Braque’s informal tutelage de Staël increasingly considered himself heir to the tradition of painting in France. His first exposure in America was through dealer Theodore Schempp and collector Duncan Phillips, who in 1950 was the first American to buy his work. Phillips would also host the first monographic exhibition of de Staël’s work in 1951. In 1953, after participation in several New York based solo and group exhibitions, de Staël signed an exclusive contract with Paul Rosenberg, a dealer noted for his representation of early 20th century modernists in both Paris and New York. Rosenberg’s gallery hosted four solo exhibitions of de Staël’s work between 1955 and 1963. The artist’s suicide in 1955 cut short a promising career and Rosenberg’s own death in 1959 further hindered the

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13 Ibid., 34, 115-130.


impetus for exhibition. Though the gallery continued to sell his work throughout the 60’s and 70’s to American buyers, only two monographic exhibitions of his work in America after this initial period of display occurred: in 1990 at the Phillips Collection and in 1997 at the Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery in New York.  

The exhibition, reception and legacy of these two artists are case studies in how a break between American and French abstraction in the fifties was discursively created and disseminated within a specific art historical narrative. An examination of exhibitions of the works of these two artists followed by a summation of the American reactions to them will show that in New York in the 1950s these artists were in many ways construed and presented as part of trans-Atlantic movements in abstraction. Such an examination shows that real divides between the abstract art of the two nations were not originally manifest institutionally, in American collecting practices, or in popular reaction to these artists, but only in some art criticism of the time. My approach owes much to revisionists like Guilbaut who focus on how similar artists were received and the interpretations they provoked rather than later scholars like Michael Leja who examine the ideologies of the period to identify why abstraction was popular at this time.  

The legacies of these exhibitions and the critical response to them will be analyzed through the subsequent display of the work by de Staël and Soulages in America as well as a brief summary of their place in the American art historiography of the era. Among other things, I will show how the break created by American art critics of the 1950s between French and American abstraction resulted in a historical and institutional divide. Broadly, such an investigation helps


to internationalize the history of an era in New York City. It adds to the field an eventful history that shows this supposed break between abstract movements to be causally heterogeneous, path dependent and contingent.\textsuperscript{18} Ultimately, for art history as a discipline this investigation helps to historicize the confusion Robert Coates expressed in 1950 when examining American and French abstract art side by side.\textsuperscript{19} It continues to break down the teleological narrative of American abstraction to complicate the story of postwar art in the Western world.

The first chapter will illuminate how exhibitionary institutions in New York between 1950 and 1956 often considered the abstract movements of the United States and France part of the same artistic trends.\textsuperscript{20} It focuses on the common themes running through both the solo exhibitions of de Staël and Soulages and the group exhibitions that included their work. Chapter two examines the criticism of these two artists and their exhibitions. It traces how the themes of the exhibitionary contexts outlined in chapter one were used in different ways by critics of the period to portray abstraction as either a united, pan-national trend or as a competition, compartmentalized by the artists’ nationalities. The third chapter explores how the break between French and American abstractions that was foreshadowed in the criticism outlined in chapter 2 became a discursive reality in the American art historiography of the period.

Furthermore, it will outline how this discursive break became an institutional manifestation in subsequent decades by tracing the records of display of these two artists in American institutions. Why the divide occurred is a question beyond the scope of this study, but probing how it spread


\textsuperscript{19} Coates, “The Art Galleries: Assorted Abstractions,” 118.

through American conceptions of fifties abstraction reveals the query to be a key girder in the composition of modern art history.
CHAPTER 1: THE EXHIBITION OF PAN-NATIONAL ABSTRACTION

Throughout the fifties in New York City, Soulages and de Staël were frequently represented both within group exhibitions of concurrent European work and in individual shows. Despite wide differences in the installations of these exhibitions, the galleries and museums displaying their work often emphasized the same conceptual motifs: abstraction as international, politically derived, and as heir to the legacy of Western Art. These themes were not limited to descriptions of European abstractionists, but were also used by dealers and curators to characterize the work of abstract artists living and working in New York. Examining these shared interpretations of abstraction reveals that organizers of these exhibitions thought of modern abstraction as pan-national. In many ways, then, the break between the abstractionists of Europe and the United States was illusory in New York in the 1950s. For at this time, exhibition organizers often thought of the abstract art of Europe and the United States as two sides of the same coin.

Abstraction as Political

The organizers of these exhibitions in 1950s New York often emphasized the Second World War and the political landscapes that resulted from its conclusion as partially responsible for the emergence of European abstraction. The exhibitions that conveyed this emphasis most clearly were *The New Decade* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 and the early exhibitions of Soulages’s work at the Kootz gallery in 1954 and 1955. *The New Decade* was shown between May and September of 1955 and featured the work of artists of a wide variety of nationalities across the European continent. Of the fourteen painters in the exhibition, nine were categorized as completely abstract by the show’s curators; their work receives the most attention in the
exhibition catalog.\textsuperscript{21} Intended to expose a large American audience to the work of contemporary European artists, The New Decade was the first since 1950 to include these artists in a traveling exhibition and, over the following eighteen months, was hosted in museums in Minneapolis, Los Angeles and San Francisco.\textsuperscript{22}

Following an epigraph by Oliver St. John Gogarty in the catalog for The New Decade, the show’s curator Andrew Carduff Ritchie spends the early paragraphs of his forward describing how the political upheaval in Europe was a catalyst for the new forms of abstract art being produced there. In particular, he relates the trend of abstraction in France to a continent-wide struggle against communism and its officially sanctioned style, social realism.\textsuperscript{23} Such an argument was similar to contemporaneous statements emanating from institutions in the United States that detailed the impact of the world’s political bipolarity on American abstraction. One such statement was the Modern Manifesto, written in 1950 by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art. After stressing that a diversity of artistic styles is essential for a healthy democracy, the manifesto states: “we recognize the humanistic value of abstract art, as an expression of thought and emotion and the basic aspirations towards freedom and order… while Soviet officials still insist on a hackneyed realism saturated with nationalistic propaganda.”\textsuperscript{24} Such a description was


\textsuperscript{23} Ritchie, The New Decade, 9.

\textsuperscript{24} Peyton Boswell, “Comments: ‘Modern Manifesto,’” Art Digest 24, no. 13, April 1, 1950: unpaginated.
typical of materials accompanying American exhibitions of abstract art produced in New York; this outlook helped lead to the institutionalization of these works in the middle of the fifties by government forces like the United States Informational Agency and by museum auxiliaries like the International Council.25

Unlike these explanations, which linked the styles of New York’s gestural painters to the individual freedoms provided by democracy, Ritchie in this essay ties European abstraction to the legacies of World War II: “In France most noncommunist painters tend to be abstract…the memory of the sentimental would-be heroic realism of fascist or Nazi art may have something to do with their choice.”26 Such a statement differed from descriptions of the contextual origins of New York abstraction, which focused on the impact of the Great Depression and the exposure of these artists to the work and philosophy of European modernists moving to the United States.27 The commonality of these accounts lies not in the specific origins prescribed to each group, but in the essentialist readings of both groups by these curators. The New York painters were consistently grouped together as Abstract Expressionists, Action Painters or as American Type Painting despite their own denial of the stylistic commonalities these terms imply.28 The painters emerging from France and Europe were grouped together in these exhibitions on the basis of their common experiences of war and postwar politics. This was in contrast to their own


individual personal beliefs. Soulages was always skeptical of artistic conglomerations saying, “I’ve never been part of any group. Everytime I felt a group forming, I hightailed it…What’s essential is what’s unique about each artist.”\textsuperscript{29} Though these exhibits divided the abstractionists based on their region of origin, their respective organizers shared essentialist perceptions of each group and, therefore, formed each similarly based upon political context. The result was a consideration of abstraction by curators like Ritchie that was comparative and emphasized commonalities rather than seeking to highlight absolute differences and divisions.

Materials that accompanied Soulages’s exhibitions at the Kootz gallery in 1955 also make clear how these artists’ works were portrayed as at least in part a result of postwar politics. Along with Georges Mathieu, Soulages was the first of the young generation of European painters to sign with Kootz in 1954.\textsuperscript{30} In these early years of their relationship, Kootz was still very much known for representing and exhibiting the work of the abstractionists who lived and worked in New York. This changed when he signed these two young Europeans under different contractual terms. Feeling undervalued and underappreciated, Robert Motherwell and Adolph Gottlieb left his gallery shortly after this announcement.\textsuperscript{31} Upon this loss, Kootz must have been anxious to justify his shift in representation to his buyers and the general public. He did so in markedly political terms in a speech in the fall of 1955 given at a fundraiser he hosted at his gallery for once and future Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson. In this speech, he focuses on the restrictions faced by abstract artists in totalitarian societies, making reference to both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and how the artwork of these societies tends towards figuration and

\textsuperscript{29} Ungar and Soulages, \textit{Soulages in America}, 80.

\textsuperscript{30} Kootz Gallery, Announcement (March 1954), Kootz Gallery records, 1923-1966, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

\textsuperscript{31} Ungar and Soulages, \textit{Soulages in America}, 39.
propaganda. He continues to detail the totalitarian tendencies of McCarthyism and American society of the early fifties in order to establish the “point of view” of his gallery as oppositional to these forces, an outlook that was consistently international, advocating the work of both the American and European avant-garde artists at the same time.\(^\text{32}\) Nuancing the message from the MoMA exhibition, this speech postulates that abstraction in art originates from the freedoms provided within liberal, democratic societies rather from reactions to totalitarian ones. In such a framing, Kootz groups together the work of American and French abstractionists as reflections of the postwar liberal order.

*Abstraction as Inheritance*

No matter their origin, abstract painters displayed in New York were consistently compared to their artistic forbearers. Nicolas de Staël in particular was set apart from his peers as an artist whose style most closely adhered to the principals and techniques of the first generations of modernists. His representation by Rosenberg alone established him in New York as worthy of consideration alongside the early Parisian modernists. Alexandre Rosenberg had been active in the art trade in Paris since opening an antiques gallery in 1878. But, the family’s commercial notoriety was established in the years immediately prior to World War I when Alexandre’s two sons, Paul and Leoncé, were quick to accepted and exhibit the works of the Parisian avant-garde.\(^\text{33}\) Paul Rosenberg would eventually sign exclusive contracts with Picasso and Matisse while maintaining at this gallery a legendary stock of nineteenth-century French painting.\(^\text{34}\) When he moved from Paris to New York in 1940 his expertise, connections and stock of art


\(^{34}\) Ibid.
immediately positioned him as one of the leading dealers in the city and helped to elevate the international reputation of the galleries on 57th Street.35 De Staël met the dealer during his only visit to the United States in 1953 and became one of the few artists of postwar renown to sign an exclusive contract with him.36 Rosenberg, after inking the contract, then made clear his opinion that de Staël was a current iteration of earlier modernists, telling the media he was willing to take all the necessary risks he once took for the great masters of cubism.37

The exhibition that most emphatically connected de Staël to previous modern artists was a 1955 traveling show organized after the artist’s death by Theodore Schempp, his first American dealer, and the American Federation for the Arts.38 After beginning its tour of six American cities in Houston it came to Rockefeller Center in October 1956.39 It was in a short essay written as a handout for exhibition attendees that Schempp established de Staël as the heir to his French predecessors. It stressed his noble lineage (he was distantly connected to Germaine de Staël) and the already robust group of followers imitating his work.40 But, it was de Staël’s death that Schempp focused upon most to connect him to the great modernists of the past:

His last paintings were often thinly painted as were the last paintings by Modigliani and indeed some analogy could be drawn here…he literally burned himself out with work and with living life to the full. This was his nature much as it was with Van Gogh, Lautrec, Modigliani and others too countless to mention in the field of the arts.41

35 “Paul Rosenberg Here,” *Art Digest* 15, no. 7 (January, 1941): 8.


38 F. de Staël et al., *Nicolas de Staël*, 700.

39 Ibid.


41 Ibid., 2-3.
This is followed by a description of de Staël as uncomfortable with the “mad fast pace of modern 20th century life” and as a last remnant of a slower life, stereotypical of a Slavic past.42 This short essay positions the influence of de Staël, his working practices and ultimately the narrative of his life in the context and time of his modernist predecessors. Doing so, it set his work as a link to this past, establishing continuity between the abstract art of the 1950s and that which came before.

This narrative of continuity was also applied to many of the abstract artists working in New York. In particular, the comparative story of demise was often used in the exhibitions of Jackson Pollock after his death in 1956. During Pollock’s lifetime critics considered his work, like that of de Staël, an immediate iteration of earlier European modernism; following his death, this narrative became even more pronounced.43 In the forward of the catalog written for the first postmortem retrospective of Pollock’s work at MoMA in 1956, curator Sam Hunter, wrote that Pollock’s painting “was deeply nourished by the radical modern forms of continental painting and by spiritual attitudes which recognize no national boundaries. One of his significant achievements was to rejuvenate the European sense of art.”44 Others, like Sidney Janis, the gallery owner who helped handle sales of Pollock’s work for his estate following his death,

42 Ibid., 4.


would describe the effects of his “romantic death” as similar to earlier Western artists like Van Gogh.\textsuperscript{45}

Therefore, portrayals of both European and American abstractionists as heirs to Western artistic traditions were common in exhibitions of their work in fifties New York. Focusing on individual narratives allowed the curators to avoid grouping artists together and, as a result, broadened the range of artists that could be considered as part of the canonical lineage of Western art. Expanding this canon did not promote artists of one nation over another, but suggested that the legacy of Western art was pan-national in scope.

\textit{Abstraction as Pan-National}

The American exhibitions in the fifties of European abstractionists were often shown in conjunction with similar displays of American abstractionists. \textit{The New Decade} at MoMA was organized alongside a neighboring exhibition of the same name at the Whitney Museum of American Art featuring works of young American painters (in 1954 the Whitney had moved to 22 West 54\textsuperscript{th} Street, the same block as MoMA).\textsuperscript{46} The 1953 exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum \textit{Younger European Painters} preceded an exhibition in the same space held in 1954 entitled \textit{Younger American Painters}. In 1950, the Sidney Janis Gallery showed both groups of painters side by side in the exhibition \textit{Young Painters in U.S. and France}. The organization and presentation of these exhibitions, which was always collaborative, helps to demonstrate how the artists included within them were often considered two iterations of the same phenomenon, namely the rise of abstraction in Western art.


The comparative exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery opened in October of 1950 and focused on the formal similarities between American and French abstractionists.47 Pairing fifteen artists from each side of the Atlantic with one another, the show was one of the first to directly examine the abstract trends of the two continents.48 De Kooning was compared with Dubuffet, Pollock with Lanskoy. Soulages’s Peinture 146 x 97 cm, 17 Fevrier 1950 (Figure 1), a mélange of straight black lines of varying length arranged unevenly on top of a background of shadowed blues and greens, was shown directly next to Nijinsky by Franz Klein (Figure 2). Despite its white background and the curves of its overlaid black marks that distinguish it from Soulages, Kline’s work is constructed of similarly thick paint and wide black strokes, while the hints of color emerging from underneath the white impasto nearly create a negative of the Frenchman’s work. De Staël’s Composition (Rouge) 1950 (Figure 3) was positioned next to Mark Rothko’s No. 17 (or) 15 (Figure 4). Though differing in their orientation and texture, both these works are constructed of approximate rectangles of predominantly orange, yellow and red; both are set on similar umber backgrounds subtly punctuated by dark underlying tones that are only occasionally revealed.

The idea for the exhibition came from Leo Castelli, who was interested in opening a gallery in Paris to promote American abstraction.49 Following the gallery’s dualistic program, representatives of each of the two nations were curated independently; Castelli chose the

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American paintings while Janis selected the European works.\textsuperscript{50} Castelli, already invested in promoting American abstractionists, certainly sought to elevate the status of the Americans he chose for the exhibition saying, “I wanted to stress this idea that American painting was as good as the European, the great Europeans.”\textsuperscript{51} Such a statement, stressing the greatness of both groups, suggests that rather than seeing the groups in competition with one another, Castelli instead saw them as representatives of the same trend.

Furthermore, the works for the exhibition were chosen and hung in an equitable way (Figures 5 & 6). The curators went to great lengths to ensure that each work in the comparative pairs was generally the same size and that each pair was hung so that both paintings could be admired equally at the same time.\textsuperscript{52} Finally, the invitation for the exhibition opening was a pamphlet split vertically into a color scheme of white, red, and blue. This color scheme could generically remind viewers of either nation’s flag and, therefore, hints at other values shared by the two peoples.\textsuperscript{53} Such curatorial considerations suggest that Janis and Castelli wanted to present the artists of the two groups as equals, highlighting the formal similarities that were driving abstraction in the 1950s.

The curatorial decisions around The New Decade exhibitions at the Whitney and MoMA also reflect the museums’ desire to show the abstract art of both nations as part of the same trend. The idea for the exhibitions came first from Andrew Ritchie, who, in early 1953, shared his plan

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 195-196.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Letter from Michel Seuphor to Pierre Soulages, July 18, 1950, Kootz Gallery records, 1923-1966, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

\textsuperscript{53} Ungar and Soulages, \textit{Soulages in America}, 24.
for displaying young European artists with the associate director of the Whitney, Lloyd Goodrich. Soon the Whitney began planning its own exhibition on American artists who had made their “reputations” after World War II. The two curators, Andrew Ritchie and John Baur, would then work closely together over the next two years to ensure that the shows were as similar as possible. Beyond the same name, the museums published catalogs of the same length and style (both were 96 pages and printed in the same font), that featured the works of artists next to their own words. Each show exhibited an average of four works per artist. Both curators insisted that they were not selecting works based on stylistic trends, but subjectively, picking what they deemed the best representatives of art made in the preceding decade.

And the museums coordinated to send their exhibitions afterwards to museums in two of the same cities, San Francisco and Los Angeles, so that different American publics could compare the art of the two continents for themselves. In fact, Ritchie and Baur encouraged the San Francisco Museum of Art to host both exhibitions at the same time. The purpose of this collaboration to ensure likeness was to give audiences across the United States the chance to identify and compare the leading tendencies of the decade rather than to look for a superior


55 The original name of these exhibitions was “New Reputations in European/American Art 1945-1955.” Memorandum from Lance Goodrich to Mr. More.


national art. As Ritchie put it at the end of his forward, “Why one country or another provides a fertile soil for artists must remain an open question. There are answers – sociological, geographical, economic – but none is altogether satisfactory. The enormous element of chance that goes into the making of each one of us is a simple matter compared with the mysterious accident of an artist’s birth.”

The curators, dealers, and administrators who displayed the work of European abstractionists were therefore concerned with illuminating their similarities to contemporaneous Americans working in New York. Often through comparing individual artists rather than defining any groups, they drew the two continents together through political contextualization and artistic inheritance to highlight the international flavor of artistic trends in the postwar world. Critics reviewing the exhibitions identified and advanced these pan-national traits, but, as the next chapter will show, sometimes to exclusionary and divisive ends.

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59 Ritchie, The New Decade, 11.
CHAPTER 2: ABSTRACTION: UNITED AND DIVIDED

The lack of distance between French and American abstractionists in fifties New York should be evaluated not only through their portrayal in exhibitions. Summarizing the wide range of critiques of these exhibitions in sources of the day is an effective way to discern how the works of de Staël and Soulages were perceived by different segments of the American public. These critical reactions often echoed the foci of the exhibitions’ organizers, casting the artists’ work as products of the then-current political context, as iterations of a pan-national abstraction, and as contemporary heirs to the legacies of twentieth-century modernism. The use of these foci in critical reviews demonstrates the similarities American audiences saw in the work of abstractionists from both nations. But the ways they were used in these sources also foreshadows the break in abstraction based on nationality that would come to dominate the art historical narrative of fifties New York.

Artistic Inheritance: Favorability and the Public

Much of the critical response to the exhibitions of de Staël and Soulages during this period describes them as avatars of earlier Western painters. Writings with this focus are mostly reviews of the artists’ solo exhibitions rather than of the larger group exhibitions in which they took part. Art critic James Fitzsimmons’ two short reviews of a 1953 de Staël exhibition at the Knoedler Gallery epitomizes this focus: “Nicholas de Staël is a 39-year-old protégé of Braque’s. A few of his paintings (which are totally unlike the older man’s) were shown…”60 In these opening lines,

the critic situates the Parisian cubist as a professional forbearer of de Staël while providing the caveat of difference that makes the latter artist’s work original. A month earlier he wrote in *Art Digest*, “De Staël is an abstract impressionist…he has affinities with the Fauves (though line is absent from his art), but his real ancestors are Vermeer and Hercule Séghers.”\(^{61}\) In this case, he traces de Staël’s lineage back even further while continuing, through convenient use of parentheses, to remind readers of the formal traits that separate the descendant from his artistic progenitors.

Soulages’s continuous use of the color black likewise garnered him comparisons to artistic forerunners, modernist and otherwise. Sam Hunter comments on Soulages’s first solo exhibition in the United States in 1954:

> His paintings throw off strange smoky reflections that suggest the hallucinating light of Rembrandt or the seicento ‘tenebrai.’ These effects deepen and enrich his…black paint, giving his art a curious emotionality and a relationship to the grand art of the past. Yet these ‘pictorial effects’ don’t disqualify his modernity.\(^{62}\)

Like Fitzsimmons, Hunter places Soulages in a genealogy of painters while at the same time emphasizing his contemporaneousness, which he then uses to set up a formal description of Soulages’s work later in the article. Throughout the fifties, critical reviews of Soulages’s work would continue to place him in the lineage of Western art. They did so through stylistic comparisons to artists such as Rodin (“one of the more hieroglyphically patterned works looks like a sign for the ‘Gates of Hell’”\(^{63}\)), and citations of modern artists of earlier generations, like Francis Picabia, who had publicly praised Soulages’s work.\(^{64}\) Such comparisons stressing lineage

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\(^{64}\) “Knockout Blow,” *Time* 70, no 23: 62.
functioned similarly to those made by organizers of his exhibitions. In making these
comparisons, writers do not just review the exhibitions in question but situate these current
iterations of great Western art in their immediate surroundings, namely New York City. Such
promotion puts Paris into New York, firmly grounding the heirs to Western artistic tradition in
this new locale. It is a rhetorical method utilized by these authors to suggest that the world’s
artistic epicenter had shifted to New York while still recognizing the quality of work emanating
from postwar Paris.

The articles that focused on Soulages and de Staël as heirs to an artistic legacy were also
overwhelmingly favorable in assessing their work. An index of favorability, used here to assess
the critical acceptance of these artists as part of a larger movement in abstraction, offers a means
of judging how these artists were being received in New York and perceived by the public as
part of the broader trends in art of the time. Table 1 charts each of the reviews written by
American critics cited in this thesis on a scale of favorability by theme, showing the wide variety
of opinions held on these two artists and the exhibitions in which they were included:
Table 1: Favorability Index of a United Abstraction in Critical Reviews by Theme, 1950 - 1957


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Thomas Hess, after comparing the composition of de Staël’s work to ancient masonry walls, ends his brief review of a 1951 exhibition at Theodore Schempp’s gallery by saying, “The show as it stands gives a fair view of the accomplishments of one of the few painters to emerge from postwar Paris with something personal to say, and a way of saying it with authority.” In a 1956 piece on Soulages Fitzsimmons states, “I’m convinced he has it in him to become one of the major artists of his generation.” Fitzsimmons based this conviction on formal interpretations of

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Soulages’s paintings, comparing his work to classical sculpture and the Egyptian Valley of the Kings. 66 Others referred to Soulages as an abstract expressionist or action painter, using periodizing terms since associated with abstraction emanating from New York. 67 Through the favorable use of generalized terminology these reviewers suggest that these artists’ impact is not limited by location and, therefore, that they are part of a pan-national community of artists experimenting with abstraction.

The favorability of the reviews of these solo exhibitions was mirrored by the enthusiasm of American collectors for these two artists. In fact, the reviews often cite this enthusiasm to lend credence to their arguments. In 1954, a small exposé in Vogue linked the price increases of Soulages’s work to his popularity with American audiences and collectors. 68 Hess begins his review of de Staël at Schempp’s gallery with, “Nicolas de Staël is a younger Parisian whose abstractions have become increasingly popular among collectors on both sides of the Atlantic.” 69 This enthusiasm by collectors was as real as it was reported. Kootz infuriated collectors in March of 1955 by selling all of Soulages’s work hung for exhibition prior to the show’s opening, forcing a second show later that year. 70 Of the 96 works by de Staël exhibited in the Paul Rosenberg gallery in New York between 1953 and 1964, only three did not sell and were


returned to the artist or his estate. The rest were bought by some of the most important collectors of the day including Paul Mellon, Joseph Hirschhorn, G. David Thompson, Nelson Rockefeller, Douglas Cooper and Duncan Phillips.\textsuperscript{71} The writings of these collectors on de Staël show a genuine enthusiasm for his work. Cooper would write glowingly of him in an exhibition catalog published in 1967, and Phillips wrote upon his death, “Was his suicide due to illness or to depression about his change of style or perhaps his becoming too popular? We can only wonder. It is a tragic loss of a potentially great artist.”\textsuperscript{72} The warmth of both critics and collectors shows how accepting the American art world was of these painters, particularly with regards to solo exhibitions of their work.

*Internationalism: Comparative or Competitive?*

The internationalism featured in the exhibitions including the work of de Staël and Soulages was also a focus of many of the critical reviews of their work. Critical writings emphasizing the connections between American and French abstract painting were most frequently reviews of the group exhibitions at the Sidney Janis Gallery, the Guggenheim, and MoMA. An examination of these reviews demonstrates that the cross currents of abstraction passing between European and American artists could be interpreted as either competitive or comparative. The reviews of the exhibitions that were comparative continued the assertions established by the exhibitions themselves, namely that the abstract movements of both places were part of the same trend. But others interpreted the juxtapositions of the American and French artists in nearby spaces as competitions. These reviews were always preferential, judging one group superior to the other


through a language of difference. In doing so, they foreshadowed the break between the abstract art of the two places that would come to characterize the era in later historiography.

Comparative reviews of these exhibitions began in response to *Young Painters of the U.S. and France* in 1950 and were generally favorable in their analysis of abstraction as a global movement. The quote by Coates used to begin this study was made in his review of this exhibition in the *New Yorker*. In the paragraphs that follow he searches for the standards that the two groups share. These include a disregard for traditional formal concepts espoused by both representationalists and cubists, an abandonment of standard painting techniques, an interest in texture, and a shared desire to appeal to pure and abstract emotions. He presciently points out that, “it’s a chancy method, for our emotions are all aroused differently, and it may be that the extremists’ refusal to provide us with any common ground on which to meet them will eventually mean the end of them as a school.” Other reviews made similar attempts to denationalize abstraction. Roger Gindertael in his brief review for *Art News* uses the exhibition to explain the ‘similarities in direction’ of the two notions of abstraction, while describing each of the paired artists as ‘alter-egos’ of one another. He ends his review, “Most of the work is abstract, with some of the best paintings invoking the subjective, all-over picture image and others depending more on structure; but the picture plane is invariably respected.” Listing traits for the entire exhibition puts the artists of the two nations in dialogue with one another rather than initiating a debate over their differences.

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74 Ibid.

75 Gindertael, “Young U.S. and French Painters,” 47.
Comparative reviews were not limited to this early exhibition. Howard Devree made a habit of writing such reviews during the first half of the 1950s. In 1953 he compared the stylistic traits of European and American abstraction he perceived as evident in the Guggenheim’s *Younger European Painters* and ends his article on the exhibition by saying, “we are indebted to Mr. Sweeney (exhibition curator) for this proof that experiment and vitality are not confined to this side of the Atlantic.”\(^76\) Later, reviewing the concurrent *New Decade* shows at MoMA and the Whitney in 1955, he makes a similar statement:

> One cannot see the work of the more familiar Americans and compare it with the selection which Andrew C. Ritchie has made…without realizing how much the two shows have in common and becoming aware anew of the existence of something international in today’s artists’ approach to our torn age’s problems.\(^77\)

Here he internationalizes the abstraction of both groups while also externalizing it by referring to issues that perhaps are beyond the immediate scope of the art world. In doing so he suggests that the shared styles of the works are results of an increasingly international era and that the similarities that bind these artists go beyond artistic philosophies to a common, deep engagement with the world.

Reviews that evaluate the curators’ emphasis on internationalism in judgmental and preferential terms tend to be unfavorable. In this case unfavorability does not mean a lack of acceptance of European artists, but rather the sense of division between the two groups such that one must be deemed better than the other. In some cases, reviewers prefer the European abstractionists. The title of Belle Krasne’s review of the Janis exhibition, “Youth: France vs.


U.S.” sets a combative tone. She refuses to attempt to interpret the artists of the two places as part of a single abstract movement: “The trouble with making comparisons is the trouble with this show: similarities more often than not superficial or accidental.”

Though she eventually concludes that “the Americans by and large seem blander, the French more intense,” she has established a dichotomy and hierarchy between the two groups that turns an international exhibition into a national competition. Even more direct is Arthur Miller’s review of *The New Decade* exhibitions for the *Los Angeles Times* when both of the shows were installed there in 1956. Miller’s first sentence frames the entire decade represented within the exhibition as an international competition: “If the twin ‘New Decade’ shows which opened here last week are fair criteria, European painting and sculpture have regained their lead over our own during the 10 years since 1945.”

He then attributes some of the uninspired qualities of the American show to the limited number of exhibited works by each American artist and the crowded hanging of the show itself. But he then forcefully reiterates his assertion of European superiority by establishing individual competitions between the artists featured: “The French section includes more painters who makes a positive impression…Pierre Soulages, whose dark space compositions fade those of America’s Robert Motherwell.”

Like Krasne, Miller’s article is not depreciative towards the quality of French art, but is unwilling to see the artists’ work as part of an international abstract movement.

Many articles preferred the American abstractionists to their European counterparts. These reviews set the tone for what would become the standard narrative for abstract art of this period.

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80 Ibid.
Robert Rosenblum, writing his review of *The New Decade* exhibitions, did the opposite of Miller. He handicaps the Americans through a description of what he deems to be poor curatorial techniques at the Whitney, but then elevates them above their European counterparts: “The simple fact is that whereas American painting and sculpture would have looked provincial and derivative when seen against its counterpart at almost anytime until about 1945, by far the best painting and probably the best sculpture of the post-Second World War period was done right here.”

In his review of the Sidney Janis exhibition, Manny Farber takes another, but equally effective, divisionist approach to describing the exhibition. Though overwhelmingly disparaging of abstraction in both nations, he makes no mention of any of the French painters exhibited in this show, effectively eliding their presence for his readers. Farber misinterprets a show intended to be comparative and international by homogenizing it to focus solely on American artists. Despite their different methods, both reviewers create a division based on nationality between the art and artists of the exhibitions despite the comparative aims of the exhibition organizers.

The most in depth of these preferential reviews came from Hilton Kramer in his review of *The New Decade* exhibitions. Though he is disappointed with the quality of the work shown at the Whitney, he writes, “The irony which this exhibition reveals consists in this: that the provincialism of the last decade is threatened by no major artists from abroad, and therefore its claim to vitality, its very large claim to being the most advanced art of the West, will go uncontested by default.”

Following this declaration he describes the work of different

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Europeans through a narrative of decline, which he originates in the artists’ desire to escape the artistic legacy of the West while comfortably living within it. In the rest of the article legacy becomes an important form of internationalism. Kramer perceives traditions of Western art to be diluted in the work of contemporary European abstractionists and that its modern iteration is instead fully embodied in abstract expressionism. The international competition for abstraction therefore becomes a struggle over the true heirs to the legacy of Western art. In such a competition there is no room for a unified abstract movement; it is defined through the struggle for a unique legitimacy.

Ironically, the institutional emphasis on internationalist and comparative interpretations of abstraction led to this competitive framing of the work of the two nations. Despite the warmth of the reviews focusing on the single artist or on American collectors’ enthusiasm for the work of European abstractionists, this preferential interpretation of these exhibitions in criticism foreshadows the arguments of later art historical writings on abstraction in fifties New York.

**Contextualization Foreshadows the Break**

Critical reviews of the group exhibitions begin to reveal an opinion of French and American abstraction as two separate, national movements rather than a single, pan-national event. But it was the criticism of French abstractionists detached from the exhibitionary context that best demonstrates this essentializing break. A series of articles, which tended to dismiss ideas of a unified trans-Atlantic abstraction, almost always anchor the differences between the post-war artists of America and Europe in the physical destruction caused by World War II. Such a narrative of difference began directly after the war, sometimes by American artists themselves writing as critics in various periodicals. Boris Margo wrote in 1947 that he believed stylistic

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84 Ibid., 527-529.
differences between the two continents were real and that these differences existed because “artists overseas are too close to the holocaust of war or too busy with their battle for the everyday necessities of life...Europe’s war weariness gives us a chance to ‘carry the ball.’”

This comment asserts that the war prevented artists living in Europe from making quality work and that, as a result, it broke the continent’s monopoly on Western art. The result, to be restated by Kramer in 1955, is the chance for American artists to step in and carry on uncontested the legacy of ingenuity in Western art.

Other critics use bellicose language to describe French art in the fifties. Kramer, in his review of an exhibition of contemporary work at the Carnegie Institute in 1955 states that, “The American ‘look’ is everywhere visible in the abstract painting from Europe. It constitutes one of the paramount historical themes of the post-war decade – this ‘liberation’ which American abstract expressionism has exercised on European painting.” Such a claim equates the political liberation of Europe at the end of the war with the supposed influence of American abstraction on French artists. Others use the emotional language of depression and fatigue to describe the qualities of French art, qualities they claim must have been caused by the war. For instance, Robert Coates, reviewing The New Decade exhibition, uses an anecdote to imply that the war years had caused French art to adopt a sad and tired spirit of caution that resulted in their art’s static quality.


The most accusatory of these contextual articles suggested that French abstractionists were producing only a pastiche of abstract expressionism. Alfred Frankfurter in 1956 writes from the position of a frequent traveler and “art critic historian.” After defining the modern world by the political events resulting from the agreements made at Yalta in 1945 he states,

Is there any reason why Parisians need paint like the Ecole de New York? Not only Mathieu’s somehow contrived automaticism, which makes one think of rock ‘n’ roll in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, but the whole group of Hartung, Soulages and the Milanese like Carmassi seems to an American only too regrettably like the self-conscious and far too well contained Charleston dancers in Paris in the 1920’s. Frankfurter, in perceiving a long history of cultural plagiarism by Parisians, is suggesting that there is something in the modern French character that causes them to copy American styles. He states that the lack of originality in French abstraction resulted from “changes of air pressure on levels other than the arts” which, read with his comment on Yalta in mind, construes the war as a catalyst that caused this plagiarism of abstract styles. Frankfurter’s attitude certainly caused consternation among the defenders of French abstraction in New York. Kootz directly responded to him in a letter published in the next issue of Art News defending the originality of his artists. In it he specifically identifies the early abstract works by Soulages that predated the abstract styles of the New Yorkers. Despite Kootz’s correction of the inaccuracies in Frankfurter’s article, his argument is naturally competitive and furthers the conception of a break between French and American abstract artists.

Debate over differences between American and European abstractionists would sometimes turn to the formal qualities of the art itself. This is an iteration of the break that can be identified in criticism written by Clement Greenberg. In his contribution to a symposium in Art Digest


entitled “Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated” Greenberg suggests that the differences between the abstractions of the two places are found in the painterly qualities of each. The French works are made according to more agreeable standards of taste, characterized by their buttery paint and use of varnish. Greenberg abhors such reticent qualities and instead advocates for American abstraction, whose surfaces are open and fresh and whose paint is defined by its blunt and corporeal contrasts. After describing these differences in formal qualities, Greenberg sharply states his position: “Do I mean that the new American abstract painting is superior on the whole to the French? I do.”\(^91\) He finishes his article with an idea that Frankfurter would later solidify, namely that American abstraction predates its French counterpart. This infers some sort of unoriginality in the French work.

Most of Greenberg’s writings in the period focus on promoting American abstraction without mentioning its French equivalents. Doing so is a critical iteration of the break by elision first seen in Farber’s review of the Janis show. In his writings, however, Greenberg goes farther than Farber by often completely ignoring the existence of French artists working in abstract styles. But one moment in which he does briefly mention the French artists comes at the end of his essay on American Type Painting:

> What I hope for is a just appreciation abroad, not an exaggeration, of the merits of ‘American-type’ painting. Only then, I suspect, will American collectors begin to take it seriously. In the meantime, they will go on buying the pallid French equivalent of it they find in the art of Riopelle, De Staël, Soulages, and their like.\(^92\)

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This sentence disparages both the French abstractionists, by setting them as foils to the American artists he praised in previous parts of the essay, and American collectors whose passion for French abstraction has already been outlined. He challenges those abroad to collect American art and in doing so seemingly alludes to these foreign buyers as those who set the trends for American collecting practices. In these articles Greenberg thus suggests two related trends: French abstract artists are apt to mimic their American equivalents, and American collectors copy their French counterparts who prefer the art of their own countrymen. It is a nuanced form of internationalism that frames not a dialogue between the two groups of artists and their constituencies but rather a competitive debate. Greenberg ignores the institutionalization of the two groups occurring in New York museums and galleries and instead is grounded in a subjective hierarchy of style.

These arguments, developed by Greenberg and others, frame the abstraction of the two different nations as a form of competition. Such criticism undermines the arguments that French abstractionists are the continuation of a longer legacy of French painting or that abstraction in this period represented a synthesis of French and American sensibilities. Moreover, it foreshadows how these European abstractionists would be written out of the historical scholarship of the era. As the next chapter will demonstrate, this break in the way the two movements were perceived would result in a very real break in the institutionalization and portrayal of these two French artists in New York City.
CHAPTER 3: BIFURCATING ABSTRACTION

More than half of Pierre Soulages’s paintings realized between 1956 and 1976 were sold in the United States, and yet the light surrounding this living monument of twentieth century art began to fade in America. What happened?93

The separation of American and European abstraction that was foreshadowed in the critical writings of the 1950s gradually solidified into a complete break in the art historical scholarship on the era in succeeding decades. The changing representations of de Staël and Soulages offer two revealing case studies in how art history created this break discursively; scholars wrote European abstractionists out of the history of post-war New York. As this written history became standardized, it was institutionalized by American museums and galleries and became a manifestation of the break in exhibitionary practice in the United States. This chapter examines the treatment of these two artists within the art historiography of the era. It also details the decline in the rate of exhibition of these artists’ work in American galleries and museums since this initial period of exposure. This scrutiny demonstrates the intricacies and extent of how this break occurred at all levels of American scholarship on abstract painting since the 1950s.

Criticism as History

This break, initially foreshadowed in the criticism outlined in chapter 2, began its domination of the art historical narrative in American books written in the fifties on broad trends in twentieth-century abstraction. Often these publications were written by critics who drew on their writings and ideas published elsewhere. Thomas Hess, editor of Art News, was

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one of the first to include the development of abstraction in New York as part of this larger history of abstraction in Western art. His 1951 *Abstract Painting* traced the different iterations of abstract art in the twentieth century by neatly dividing the eras of abstract painting around the Second World War; it historically set abstraction’s “background” in Paris and “foreground” in New York.⁹⁴ To demonstrate the continuity between the two eras, Hess details the history of Americans working with abstract styles in Paris prior to the war as well as the many European artists who moved to America due to the war.⁹⁵ Not mentioned are the postwar abstractionists from Europe whose work migrated to New York through dealers like Janis and Carré. In this book it seems that artistic production in Paris stopped following the war, only to be resuscitated afterwards in New York by lucky immigrants and the plucky Americans.

More forceful than Hess was Rudi Blesh in his *Modern Art USA* (1956). Blesh, remembered for his lasting work in promoting and historicizing jazz, also wrote art criticism for the *New York Harald Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. Unlike Hess’ elision, his book includes the work of postwar European abstractionists; specifically, it highlights their appearance in the Sidney Janis show of 1951. They are used as foils in the book to promote the originality and superiority of their American counterparts. For example, Blesh inaccurately proclaims that it was only after being shown alongside Franz Kline in the *Young Painters in U.S. and France* that Soulages began painting with similar black

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⁹⁵ Ibid., 69-108.
Such a narrative echoes the claims of Frankfurter and Greenberg and justifies a disregard for postwar European abstractionists.

William Seitz’s dissertation, written in 1955 for his Ph.D. at Princeton University, was one of the first extended academic works exclusively on American abstract painting of the fifties. Though not published until 1983, it was constantly cited by the next group of art historians to write comprehensively on abstraction in fifties New York and thus helped to conceptually tie the earliest criticism of the era to later art historical writings. In it, Seitz studies the common ideas and formal similarities in the works of different American abstractionists so that later scholars might “separate what is American from what is European in modern painting of the forties and fifties.” By identifying commonalities in order to essentialize postwar abstraction by region, Seitz suggests that the shared traits of American and European art of the fifties were conflated or confused in other sources and that creating a break between the art of the two regions was desirable.

**The 1950s and ’60s: Contention and Defiance**

Despite this desire to drive a wedge into the trans-Atlantic trends of abstraction in the early histories of the era, some historians and many institutions continued to promote a unified abstract movement. Harold Rosenberg, champion of American “Action Painting”, was, like Hess and Blesh, a critic who dabbled in publishing academic scholarship; he contributed to *Art News* and

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Partisan Review prior to becoming the art critic for the New Yorker in 1967. In the early 1950s he was an outspoken advocate of a distinct American abstraction, writing in 1953 of the possible influence of American abstraction on its European counterparts. But by later in the decade his views essentializing the abstract movements of both places had changed completely to instead promote a pan-national theory of abstraction. Rosenberg best articulated this view in his 1964 book The Anxious Object, where he states:

> With Gottlieb, Rothko, Newman, Nevelson, as with postwar French contemporaries like Soulages, Mathieu or Dubuffet, the sense of locality was entirely replaced by mythology, manner, metaphysics or formal concepts. For their art...a given environment had become meaningless. Their declaration of independence from Paris resulted not in the establishment of an American or New York “school” but in the end of any need for one. Their works fulfilled themselves in becoming universal.

He elaborated on this opinion a few years later in his review of a 1968 exhibition of European art held at the Jewish Museum in New York. In this review, he made clear his thoughts on the absurdity of defining artistic movements by physical location. He points specifically to Soulages as an example of an international artist who shared many commonalities both stylistically and philosophically with his American counterparts and, as a result, became more widely accepted in America than in his native France. Such observations show that some American thinkers were interested in theorizing a pan-national abstraction.

From 1955 through the middle of the 1960s these critical advocates of a united abstraction were buttressed by the continued exposure of artists like de Staël and Soulages to American

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102 Ibid., 147-8.
audiences through solo and group exhibitions in New York and across the United States. The large number of these exhibitions kept these artists visible, continued to integrate the two artists into the American abstract milieu, and encouraged their inclusion in abstract movements. Soulages’s relationship with Samuel Kootz improved throughout the fifties. He became the dealer’s professed “number one” artist in 1957 and, between the years of 1956 and 1965, was hosted in Kootz’s gallery in six solo exhibitions.\textsuperscript{103} The Rosenberg Gallery held solo exhibitions of de Staël’s work in 1955 and 1958. Following Paul Rosenberg’s death in 1959, his son Alexander continued the partnership with the artist’s widow, Francoise de Staël, and held a solo exhibition of his work in 1963.\textsuperscript{104} Additionally, both artists were highlighted within group exhibitions in New York and the larger United States. Between 1955 and 1966 de Staël was included in 40 group exhibitions.\textsuperscript{105} Soulages was similarly included in 77 group exhibitions within this same period.\textsuperscript{106}

Some of these exhibitions made explicit arguments for a united and pan-national abstract movement. \textit{Paths of Abstract Art}, an exhibition held at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1960, traced the stylistic similarities of abstract art from early twentieth-century artists like Cézanne through American and European abstractionists of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{107} The catalog of the exhibition casts abstraction as a unified trend, whose artists only differ in the ways they utilize common formal devices. Other exhibitions that included works of both Soulages and de Staël were public

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\textsuperscript{103} Ungar and Soulages, \textit{Soulages in America}, 73, 139.
\textsuperscript{104} F. de Staël et al., \textit{Nicolas de Staël}, 685-716.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Encreve, \textit{Soulages: l’oeuvre complèt}, 303-311.
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displays of the private collections of Americans like G. David Thompson and Nelson Rockefeller. Both of these exhibitions displayed these artists’ work alongside their American contemporaries.\textsuperscript{108}

Other exhibitions, however, were already beginning to anticipate the break that was building in the surrounding scholarship and criticism. A major exhibition put together by the Walker Art Center, \textit{The School of Paris 1959: The Internationals}, highlighted the work of eight contemporary European artists, including Soulages, who were working in Paris. The descriptions in the accompanying catalog were similar to the reviews discussed in chapter 2, notably those by Arthur Miller or Belle Krasne, approving of the artists’ styles and work, but for the most part partitioning them off from their counterparts working in the United States. The reference to “internationals” in the title of the exhibition refers to the varying (but non-American) origins of these artists rather than the international nature of their art. Furthermore, though generally favorable towards the work of the artists included, museum Director H.H. Arnason stated in his forward: “It is interesting in studying a show such as this one to speculate on stylistic common denominators which might distinguish the school of Paris from the New York School.”\textsuperscript{109} This is followed by an essay that, like many of its critical predecessors, focuses on how these artists’ work was defined by their uniquely European experience during World War II.\textsuperscript{110} Such

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institutional interpretations readily incorporated tropes characteristic of earlier critical reviews of these artists, while showing the works in isolation from other iterations of abstraction.

_The Break is History_

In the three decades following 1966, a continental break among abstractionists of the fifties was established in art historical scholarship and then gradually adopted by exhibitionary institutions. Beginning in 1970, the next cadre of scholars writing on abstract expressionism took up Seitz’s project anew, attempting to identify the underlying commonalities in the works of those living and working in New York. In doing so, they broke the abstraction of the era into movements based on region. Irving Sandler made no mention of European abstractionists in his 1970 work _The Triumph of American Painting_. This is despite these European artists’ use of the same tendencies, such as a rejection or realism or automatism, that Sandler employs to define the core artists of the abstract expressionist movement.¹¹¹ Such traits were identified in early reviews by Roger Gindertal and Robert Coates, discussed in the previous chapter, as similarities to draw the developments in abstraction together, whereas in Sandler’s work they are used exclusively to essentializing effect.¹¹²

Dore Ashton, though not providing details on Soulages or de Staël specifically, does briefly mention in her 1982 _American Art Since 1945_ the presence in New York of European artists like Georges Mathieu and critics such as Michel Suphor.¹¹³ She describes their awed

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impressions of abstract expressionism in order to emphasize how the New York movement was becoming internationally recognized. There is no mention of the European artists as a part of the continuing development and exhibition of abstract art in New York.

Since these publications, many historians have revised and nuanced the narrative of 1950s abstraction, but in ways have perpetuated the idea of a break between the abstract movements at the time. Social art historians Eva Cockcroft, Serge Guilbaut, and David Craven all explore the political underpinnings of abstraction in an international context. Though differing in their conclusions, they examine abstract painting in New York and its political consequences as an American phenomenon. In her 1974 article that helped begin the explorations of fifties abstraction as a political tool, Cockcroft never explicitly defines abstract expressionism.\textsuperscript{114} Hence the movement comes to be partially defined in the article by its political use throughout the fifties. Doing so limits this movement to artists who were included in international exhibition organized through the International Council and funded covertly by the CIA. Needless to say, these artists were all based in New York. This furthered the break by limiting the definition of the postwar abstract movement to exhibitions that were inherently nationalistic.

Guilbaut’s \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art} makes no mention of the European abstractionists of the period and thus elides their presence in New York. As Guilbaut makes his argument, many of the New Yorkers who would be advocates of pan-national abstraction, like Samuel Kootz, are portrayed as pitiless nationalists, ruining the reputations of artists who were too similar to French styles.\textsuperscript{115} And the final sentences of this


book describe the possible influences of American abstraction on the French psyche, a suggestion that reverberates with echoes of Blesh and Frankfurter. Though helping to explain the political nature of New York’s rise to prominence as the world’s artistic epicenter, such arguments limit “New York” solely to those working there and fail to recognize the international representation of abstraction within the city.

Unlike Guilbaut and Cockcroft, David Craven acknowledges European abstractionists like Soulages and even mentions how they were used by surrounding political forces in ways similar to their American counterparts. But he sets these artists firmly apart from the Americans by quoting only French critics’ opinion of their work and describing them as representatives of a “European strain of abstract expressionism.” He does no more than hint at the physical presence of these artists in New York by including a plate of a Soulages painting that was bought by the Guggenheim after the Younger European Painters exhibition in 1953. His conclusions focus on the political philosophies behind abstraction made in New York and the reception of American abstract artists around the globe. Such an argument is reminiscent of the claims of Harold Kramer and Boris Margo outlined in chapter 2 that make distinctions between abstract artists by outlining their distinct political and contextual surroundings. Craven thereby ignores the similarities of these American artists to their European counterparts and construes postwar abstraction as solely an American export rather than simultaneously an American import. Though reevaluating the

\[116\] Ibid., 205.
\[118\] Ibid., 18.
political underpinnings of abstraction as defined by Guilbaut, his arguments still reinforce the idea of a break in abstraction.

Other revisionists looking at this era fall into many of the same traps. Dore Ashton, in her 2007 contribution to Abstract Expressionism: The International Context, bemoans how nationalism, described here as an artistic iteration of American exceptionalism, is sometimes used to define the artists of the abstract expressionist movement in art historical writings. She then continues, however, to define this movement by the working locations of artists.\textsuperscript{119} Michael Leja states that an artistic collective is created by artists’ shared social contract, perceived similarities by external actors and ideological congruencies.\textsuperscript{120} He identifies the “curious amalgam” of these three factors in the relationships within New York’s abstract coterie throughout his book to define the abstract expressionist movement. In doing so, he explains how this perceived group excluded artists who did not fit the reconception of modern man reflected in paintings of abstractionists like Rothko, Still, Gottleib, Pollock and Newman. But he never mentions European artists who, when similarly examined by exhibition organizers like Ritchie and Sweeney, were deemed to share many of these traits he uses to trace the boundaries of American abstract expressionism. Similarly, Ann Gibson reframes the definition of the abstract expressionist group, examining how its canonical works are bound by the power relations inherent in the politics of race and gender in the fifties.\textsuperscript{121} But, with the exception of Rufino Tamayo, she too elides the presence of

\textsuperscript{119} Ashton, “Implications of Nationalism,” 19-28.

\textsuperscript{120} Leja, Reframing Abstract Expressionism, 19.

\textsuperscript{121} Gibson, Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics.
international artists like Soulages and de Staël who, though not working in New York, formed an important part of the city’s abstract art scene.

The break between European and American abstractions created in art historical scholarship was gradually incorporated into the exhibitionary practice of American institutions. Because these artists did not live in the U.S. or personally participate in advocating the inclusion of their work in American artistic movements, the best way to trace how the break was manifested institutionally in the decades after 1966 is to identify the trends in the visibility of these artists’ work to the American public. The number of exhibitions in the United States that included the work of de Staël or Soulages declined dramatically between 1966 and 1996. It was this increasing absence that prevented due consideration in institutions of these artists as part of the abstract movements of fifties New York. Table 2 diagrams the diminishing presence of the two artists in American group exhibitions in these three decades:

![Table 2: Group Exhibition in America by Decade](image)

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122 All statistics are derived from the artists’ catalog raisonnés F. de Staël et al., *Nicolas de Staël; Encreve*, *Soulages: l’œuvre complêt.*
The declining number of solo exhibitions by these artists throughout this period was even more pronounced. Soulages has had only six such exhibitions in the United States since 1966, all within private galleries. De Staël has had only two solo exhibitions since 1966, a 1990 retrospective at the Phillips Collection in Washington and a small solo exhibition at the Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery in 1997. The paucity of exhibitions cannot be explained by a lack of availability of works by these artists to these institutions. Thirty museums in the United States hold paintings by Soulages in their permanent collections. Twenty-six possess paintings by de Staël. Doubtless many others possess works on paper by both artists. Not only were these two artists separated from other exhibitions of abstract art, they were increasingly invisible in American institutions in general.

In contrast, American abstractionists continued to be shown at a high rate throughout this period in New York and the United States. Taking as examples the American artists who were paired with Soulages and de Staël from the 1951 Janis exhibition, Franz Kline was featured in sixteen solo exhibitions, Mark Rothko in seventeen from 1966 to 1996. Unlike their European counterparts, who experienced a gradual decline, these exhibitions were evenly distributed over these three decades. By the mid-1990s the dearth of institutional representations of Soulages and de Staël in America had become a manifestation of the historical break between the

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125 F. de Staël et al., *Nicolas de Staël*, 763-4.

126 The total number of exhibitions that featured Rothko or Kline is unknown, as the full exhibition history of either artist has not been published. The numbers quoted here total the number of solo exhibitions of either artist that also published corresponding catalogs. Therefore, they are the minimum number of solo exhibitions of these artists’ work held in the United States between 1966 and 1996: Castello di Rivoli, *Franz Kline, 1910-1962* (Milan: Skira, 2004): 306-399; Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko in New York* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994): 139.
American abstractionists and their European counterparts that was nearly absolute. These artists were no longer considered at all, much less as part of the same movement that produced the abstract expressionists of fifties New York.

This lack of consideration of all iterations of postwar abstraction became frustrating for the dwindling number of advocates of pan-national unity in fifties abstraction. Robert Motherwell, like Rosenberg, had in the 1940s and early ‘50s been a champion of a distinct and exceptional school of abstraction native to New York.127 Also like Rosenberg, his views on the coherence of abstraction based in nationality had shifted to pan-nationalism.128 In 1980, when the institutional break between the abstract artwork of the two nations was becoming real, Motherwell publically voiced his frustration:

I cannot understand why there is not a show in which the artists who emerge after 1945, such as Dubuffet and Soulages …are now shown side by side with whoever are their American correspondences…I am tired of hearing, and of reading segregation. I want to see collectivity and depth in the international world of modernist art.129

Though coinciding with the establishment of the break in the narrative of fifties abstraction in art history, other reasons for this dearth of American exhibitions of these two artists must be considered. The most obvious of these, though perhaps not unrelated to the discursive break, was the artists’ lack of permanent representation in the United States. 1964 was the last year that the Rosenberg gallery had an official relationship with de Staël’s estate. Through his work was shown in the United States throughout the next two years as part of a touring retrospective


organized by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and in a solo exhibition at the Andre Emmerich
Gallery in New York, the lack of new work for the market might have dissuaded others from
taking on his estate. ¹³⁰ ¹³⁰ In 1966 Kootz retired from dealing art and left Soulages to find new
American representation. For the next two years Soulages was represented in New York by the
Knoedler Gallery, a relationship that ended soon after the artist voiced displeasure with a 1968
exhibition of his work. The gallery nearly ruined many of the paintings in this exhibition through
extensive varnishing and Soulages felt that the hanging of the show on walls of red velvet
lessened the impact of the works.¹³¹ ¹³¹ Whether these debacles led to the end of their relationship is
unclear, but it does seem apparent that Soulages commitment to Knoedler in these two years was
apathetic in comparison to his earlier partnership with Kootz. Perhaps this was because Kootz,
upon his retirement, made the extraordinary gesture to turn over to Soulages the names and
contact information of anyone who had bought his works through the gallery between 1954 and
1966. This list was used in its original format to compile the catalog raisonné of Soulages thirty
years later, so it can be assumed that it held significance for the painter.¹³² ¹³² Perhaps the artist used
this list to continue to sell his work in the United States without the assistance of official gallery
representation after 1968. Speculation aside, in 1968 Soulages also was interested in expanding
his representation in Europe. In the dozen years with Kootz, American buyers had purchased
more than half of his work and limited his ability to exhibit closer to home. Leaving Knoedler,
he signed with Gimpel Fils who would represent his work in Zurich and London until 1977,

¹³⁰ F. de Staël et al., Nicolas de Staël, 701-710.

¹³¹ Ungar and Pierre, Soulages in America, 118-25.

¹³² Harry Cooper, “Preface: Reminiscence,” in Soulages in America (New York: Dominique Levy
helping to expand his representation in Europe at the expense of public exhibition in the United States.¹³³

*Breaking the Break*

Complete information regarding the exhibitions that included works of these two artists since the mid-90s is unavailable. But evidence points to their gradual reemergence in the United States since this low point of American interest. Both de Staël and Soulages were included in a 1998 exhibition of prints at MoMA detailing expressionist work from the United States and Europe in the postwar period.¹³⁴ Soulages was shown at the Guggenheim next to American abstractionists in 2005 as part of an exhibition on the collecting practices of J.J. Sweeney, who had shown interest in abstractionists of both places. Additionally, Soulages featured in three solo exhibitions in 2005 and another in 2014 in New York galleries and has seen an increase of the display of his works as part of the permanent exhibitions of major museums across the United States such as the National Gallery of Art.¹³⁵ De Staël’s work has also been displayed more frequently since this period in group exhibitions, most notably at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2014.¹³⁶

But even with this slow reexposure in America, the two artists are distanced in these institutions from works of the New York abstractionists. The educational materials provided by

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¹³³ Ungar and Soulages, *Soulages in America*, 115, 125.


institutions like MoMA, the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art on abstraction in the fifties focus solely on works made by artists who lived in New York and make no mention of their European counterparts.\(^{137}\) This is despite these museums holding works by both Soulages and de Staël, as well as contemporaneous European Abstractionists, in their collections. The only exception to this is the Guggenheim, which includes in its website a filter for searching their collection that is based on artistic movements. When applying this filter, the European abstractionists in their collection are listed as part of the abstract expressionist movement alongside their American counterparts. Such a feature could suggest a slow erosion of the longstanding manifestation of the break that has limited the institutional interpretation of abstraction in fifties New York to only its artistic inhabitants.

Nevertheless, compared to the prolific exhibition of their work during the 1950s and ‘60s, the exclusion of de Staël and Soulages in the institutional representations of fifties abstraction in the United States is a manifestation of the break between American and European abstractionists previously made only in art historical scholarship. The result of this exclusion is that American historiography and exhibitions of abstraction in fifties New York has been nationalistic in the sense that it has limited discussion to artists who lived and worked in the city. This is despite the sizable presence of abstractionists from elsewhere, such as Nicolas de Staël and Pierre Soulages, represented within the city. Stemming from early criticism, this historiographic break, along with

its institutional manifestations, has effectively removed these artists from the consideration of American audiences and continued to simplify a complicated movement in art history.
CONCLUSION

I remember a couple years ago mentioning the kind of show I am describing [comparative of U.S. and European abstractionists from the 1950s] to the director of a major museum of contemporary art, saying that I would like to see, for example, lots of Franz Kline and Soulages side by side. He looked taken aback, protested, and said that such a comparison would be devastating. When I asked to whom, he replied, Franz Kline!  

Following the Second World War, the global center of artistic production, display and collecting most certainly shifted from Paris to New York. But those living elsewhere continued to create and, through exhibition and critical consideration, were integral parts of new movements developing in the U.S. metropolis. Abstraction in the West as represented in New York through exhibitionary institutions in the 1950s should be considered as a pan-national movement. But as certain critics judged abstraction to be a style localized in the artists living and working in New York, this transatlantic trend was transformed into a movement based on location. Their writings drove a wedge into the idea of an international abstract movement, breaking the New York artists away from their counterparts. Doing so set the stage for later historians of the era to consider only artists from the United States as worthy of inclusion in the pantheon of fifties abstractionists.

The aim of this thesis has been, through the examination the case studies of Pierre Soulages and Nicolas de Staël, to illustrate how this happened. I hope this examination will help to widen the heretofore bifurcated gaze of art history in its consideration of postwar abstraction. Such a

broadening raises a series of questions, the biggest of which is why did this shift occur? Why did
certain critics in the 1950’s eschew the European abstractionists shown around them? Why did
the different generations of art historians also do so? Each author whose writing helped to
establish this break deserves more detailed individual consideration to answer these questions.
Equally deserving of further examination are exhibiting institutions and their reasons for
choosing not to display these artists’ work since 1966, despite local availability. Whether
personal, political, by commission or omission, the reconsideration of each contributor to the
break may illuminate how systemic biases seep and spread through the different subfields of art
history. Such considerations also expose the ways that variations in art, supposedly rooted in
geographical difference, often have more to do with critical responses than with the formal
qualities of the art itself. Ultimately, the ability to judge whether the abstract works of the
postwar period in Europe and America should be deemed part of a general trend or individual
movements depends on visibility. The only way make this judgment is through fair
consideration, whether it be, as Motherwell suggests, on the walls of museums or in historical
scholarship.
Figure 1:
Pierre Soulages, *Peinture 146 x 97 cm, 17 Fevrier 1950*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 146 cm x 97 cm. Copenhagen, Denmark, Statens Museum for Kunst.
Figure 2:
Figure 3:
Nicolas de Staël, *Composition (Rouge)* 1950, 1950. Oil on canvas, 80.6 cm x 99.4 cm. St. Louis, Kentucky, St. Louis Museum of Art.
Figure 4:
Mark Rothko, *No. 17 (or) 15, 1949*. Oil on canvas, 131.8 cm x 74 cm. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art.
Figure 5:
Figure 6:
Table 1: Favorability Index of a United Abstraction in Critical Reviews by Theme, 1950 - 1957
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Secondary Sources


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