

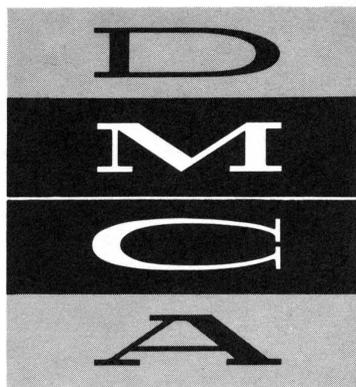


*Action Painting... 1958*

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB, NADIR



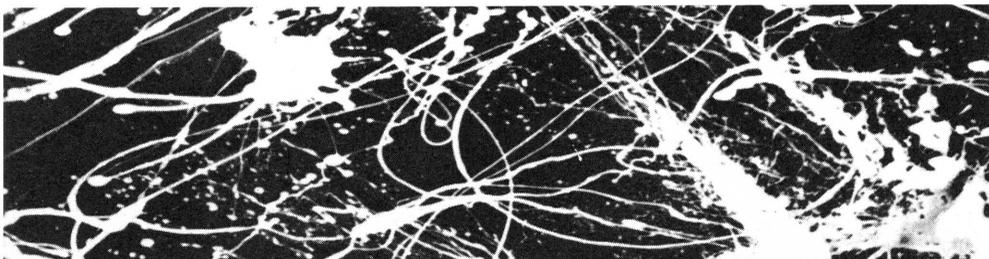
# Action Painting



MARCH 5 TO APRIL 13, 1958

DALLAS MUSEUM FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

JOSE GUERRERO, CRIES IN THE FOREST





# Some Points about Action Painting

The following dialogue was written especially for this catalogue by Mr. Thomas B. Hess and Mr. Harold Rosenberg. Mr. Hess is executive editor of *Art News*, and is a well known art critic and writer. Mr. Rosenberg is an art critic, a writer, and a collector. In this dialogue he refers to his article "The American Action Painters" published several years ago in the *Art News* in which he originated and defined Action Painting.



## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THOMAS B. HESS AND HAROLD ROSENBERG

HESS

Before we honor the Horizontal Man, The Action Painter to whom this exhibition is dedicated, shouldn't we make it clear that our admiration goes to the Vertical One?

In art, it is the individual quality that counts. We admire Picasso, not Cubism; Cézanne and Lautrec, not Post-Impressionism; Seurat, not his theory; the painters in this exhibition, not Action Painting; the individuals, not what they have in common.

The damage that is being done to the reputations of artists (and to the fields of art-history and criticism) by the German-American, night-school science fad for systems makes all categories, labels, nicknames and slogans suspect.

Each painting exists as a work of art in a light that can illumine only itself; seen under other lights — the generalizations of politics or philosophy, for instance — they appear as mute objects — amputees.

What distinguishes the modern artist from the Renaissance or Baroque painter is that the modern is only himself. Everything else is tautology of geography, chronology, economics, Cultural-Situations, Cocktail-Parties, fashions, friendships.

The painter who can be accounted for by tautology is the Perfected Disciple.



ROSENBERG

We agree in objecting to people who cluster around a word as if it were a placard. Let me add that those who flee from one as if it were a notice of quarantine are no better. False impressions aroused by both groups induce me to underline certain statements in my old article "The American Action Painters." They constitute the opening sentences of the piece but, by the principle enunciated by Poe, they hid themselves in being conspicuous. "What makes any definition of a movement in art dubious," the article began, "is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement — certainly not as well as, if successful, it does the others. Yet without the definition something essential in those best is bound to be missed.

The attempt to define is like a game in which you cannot possibly reach the goal from the starting point but can only close in on it by picking up each time from where the last play landed.”

Of course, this game of moving up on the idea of Action Painting is pointless if, as you say, “the modern artist is only himself.” But doesn’t one miss something in Kline or Resnick or de Kooning by examining each as if he were an isolated nomad? It is precisely what is unique in the individual that needs the gray wall of the “semblable” to stand out against. Agreed that “we admire Picasso not Cubism,” don’t we admire him more the better we understand Cubism and what it brought to painting? Oddly enough, it was Cubism that proclaimed the originality of Picasso, not the vice versa; later movements proclaimed it again and again. When Action Painting appeared in the United States, every other mode of abstract art was undergoing a production boom. The concept of Action Painting was an attempt to distinguish within this profusion a particular trend which had never appeared before — the term was *not* designed to comprehend all the new painting. After stressing that a definition was impossible, I wrote: “For the question of novelty a definition would seem indispensable.”

Yet who would object to your caution against formulas and classifications, even if the warning does go too far? How futile it was for me to scribble qualifications on a phrase that could be used as a sticker. “The new painting does not constitute a School,” I wrote. “A School is the result of the linkage of practice with terminology. In the American vanguard the words belong not to the art but to the individual artists. What they think in common is represented only by what they do separately.”

Today one sees everywhere paintings in which both the common consciousness and the separate actions have vanished leaving only the established manner and the critics’ labels.



HESS

The importance of your article was twofold; primarily, it resumed and enlarged (in witty and eloquent form) many of the ideas and opinions that critics and artists had been discussing at the time, emphasizing the difference between the new sorts of abstract art that were (and still are) appearing in America and those continuations of older “Modern” styles which dominated (and still do) most official museums of modern art. It also emphasized the new (if I may quote myself) “role of the painter as a mediator between painting and idea...an idea of a sensation or response to meditation expressed with appropriate methods and intuition on the canvas.” Secondly, it coined the term “Action Painting,” which by now is being used, from London to Tokyo, with as many different meanings as there are writers to misunderstand it. Gradually “Action”

has come to indicate some kind of athletic messiness – the blob of flung paint – what Herbert Read misunderstands as *Tâcheisme*.

This concept has a venerable European history. In 1917 Rilke wrote his friend Elizabeth Taubman (who was worrying about her paintings) that he admired her ability at “dominating the gait and behavior” of “strong and wilful animals . . . tests on horseback” “of daring, resoluteness, presence of mind.” “If in your artistic output,” he concluded, “you were only able to be all this,” for isn’t art “the right impulse clearly understood, sheer action and counter-action?”

But art isn’t riding or tennis or golf or even bullfighting. In sports, action approaches Style; action is perfected as it loses its personal qualities to resemble more closely the efficient abstract gesture that will hit the ball hardest. When an individual improves a sport’s Style, Style progresses to include and perfect the innovation (e.g., the new ways of skiing). In the modern painter’s action, mind and hand seek to perfect the personal unique qualities of a gesture – which may be no longer than an inch, and no louder than a sunrise.



#### ROSENBERG

I hope you don’t mean that Style (or, more accurately, skill) is opposed to individuality, and that art is to be found on the side of whatever violates the concept of the “efficient,” that is, in whimsicality, awkwardness, eccentricity. In this age so often felt to be one of de-individualization, there is a great tendency to make an ideal of “the individual.” Such an ideal is no less abstract and unreal than any other ideal and the living individual can only be reduced by it.

No one begins by being very different. Originality is a product – better still, it is a by-product. Of what? Of actions that persist until they have cut a track in Time so deep that no matter which way they turn they have to cut more fissures. For it is only through our acts that we can combine phenomena hidden in the world with what we belatedly discover in ourselves.

You say that action when “perfected loses its personal qualities.” The same could be said of a craft, of any making as well as of any doing. The “perfection” of all human movements is the machine, with “its efficient abstract gesture.” And the machine, we all know, is death and the death of art.

Does this mean that life, personal being, is a struggle against perfection? That makes as much sense as workers trying to smash the mechanical loom. That any human capacity strains to get out of hand and to move automatically in the direction of its own fatal purity proves only that the accomplishments of man are subject to irony, and that to allow oneself to become the ward of a successful “way” is to invite annihilation. In brief,

action cannot be perfected without losing its human subject and being transformed thereby into the mechanics of man-the-machine – and this revelation is precisely the metaphysical content of Action Painting.

Action never perfects itself; but it tends toward perfection and away from the personal. This is the best argument for dropping the term “Abstract Expressionism,” with its historical associations of ego and personal *schmerz*, as a name for the current American painting. Action Painting has to do with self-creation or self-definition or self-transcendence; it has nothing to do with self-expression, which assumes the acceptance of the ego as it is, with its wound and its magic. Action Painting is not “personal,” though its subject matter is the artist’s individual possibilities.



#### HESS

Or to put it another way, the perfection of an action has nothing to do with that dead-horse of an idea, the “progress” of Style. But Abstract-Expressionism as a term has its uses; it is a nice stuffed bird with wings kept spread by fifty-year-old sawdust – the “abstraction” of around 1914, the “expressionism” of around 1910; the historical associations are so venerable that they bring to mind only a sense of time-past, which in a way is good, for if Action Painting *is* different from the art that preceded it and that surrounds it, it is also not New in the naive way that is sometimes attributed to it. These pictures are not the images of some childish idea of a Space-age without ancestors. They are in the international, cosmopolitan, avant-garde pictorial tradition of Western Europe. It is not a School where Alphas practice fencing.



#### ROSENBERG

No, modern art is not a sport; the style of its act is not given in the model performer or the champion, nor can a painting be “efficient” according to any set of rules. An Action Painting is a free act, by which we mean that the act is not determined by its own previous moves any more than it is from the outside, but that it remains always open to a new choice. As other art movements of our time have extracted from painting the element of structure or the element of tone and elevated it into their essence, Action Painting has extracted the element of decision inherent in all art in that the work is not finished at its beginning but has to be carried forward by an accumulation of “right” gestures. In a word, Action Painting is the abstraction of the *moral* element in art; its mark is moral tension in detachment from moral or esthetic certainties; and it judges itself morally in declaring that picture to be worthless which is not the incorporation of a genuine struggle, one which could at any point have been lost.



## *the Exhibition*

GANDY BRODIE, New York. Born 1925, New York

*The Black Sea*, oil, 20" x 24", 1954

*Lent by Mr. Phillip Bruno, New York*

ELAINE DE KOONING, New York. Born 1923, New York

*Event in Warehouse*, oil, 6' x 6½", 1957

*Lent by Tibor DeNagy Gallery*

WILLEM DE KOONING, New York. Born 1904, Rotterdam, Holland

*Woman #5*, oil, 62" x 46"

*Lent by Mrs. Ruth Culberg, Chicago*

*Composition*, gouache, 20" x 22¾", 1951

*Lent by Miss Betty Parsons, New York*

RICHARD DIEBENKORN, Berkeley. Born 1922, Portland, Oregon

*Berkeley '37*, oil, 70" x 70", 1955

*Lent by Poindexter Gallery*

SAM FRANCIS, New York. Born 1923, San Mateo, California

*Red No. 2*, oil, 77" x 45", 1954

*Lent by Martha Jackson Gallery*

HELEN FRANKENTHALER, New York. Born 1928, New York

*Homage to Chardin*, oil, 3½' x 4'

*Lent by Tibor DeNagy Gallery*

RICHARD GOODNOUGH, New York. Born 1919, Syracuse

*Seated Figure in Red*, oil, 5' x 4', 1957

*Lent by Tibor DeNagy Gallery*

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB, New York. Born 1903, New York

*Nadir*, oil, 42" x 72", 1952

*Lent by Martha Jackson Gallery*

JOSE GUERRERO, New York. Born 1914, Granada, Spain

*Cries in the Forest*, oil, 51½" x 58½", 1957

*Lent by Betty Parsons Gallery, New York*

HANS HOFMANN, New York. Born 1880, Weissenberg, Germany

*Nocturne*, oil, 60" x 48", 1952

*Lent by Samuel M. Kootz Gallery*

FRANZ KLINE, New York. Born 1910, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.  
*two untitled*, calligraphy, ink on paper, 9" x 11", 1942  
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kulicke*  
*'54 Pennsylvania*, oil, 39" x 54", 1954  
*Lent by Poindexter Gallery*

JOHN LITTLE, New York. Born 1907, Alabama  
*Black Forms*, oil, 78½" x 38½", 1957  
*Lent by the artist*

JOAN MITCHELL, New York. Born 1926, Chicago  
*Sunday, August 12*, oil, 58" x 52", 1956  
*Lent by Stable Gallery*

JACKSON POLLOCK, 1912-1956, born Wyoming  
*Constellation*, oil, 24" x 19", 1945  
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harold Rosenberg*  
*Number 10*, oil, 65" x 36", 1950  
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Deutsch*

MILTON RESNICK, New York. Born 1917, Russia  
*Winged Horse*, oil, 70" x 59", 1957  
*Lent by Poindexter Gallery*

JACK TWORKOV, New York. Born 1900, Poland  
*House of the Sun*, oil, 50" x 45", 1952  
*Lent by Stable Gallery*

## *Special Acknowledgments*

The Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts wished to make a special acknowledgment of thanks to all lenders whose generosity has made possible the exhibition: Martha Jackson Gallery, Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, Poindexter Gallery, Tibor deNagy Gallery, Betty Parsons Gallery, Stable Gallery, Mr. Phillip Bruno, Mrs. Ruth Culberg, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Deutsch, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kulicke, Miss Betty Parsons, Mr. John Little, and Mr. and Mrs. Harold Rosenberg. The Museum also extends its thanks to Mr. Jon North Streep, Mr. Thomas B. Hess, and Mr. Harold Rosenberg for their assistance and advice.



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