Politicising the Apolitical: Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War

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Abstract Expressionism emerged amid a tense post-war climate, as a new genre of art that seemed so devoid of representational form or meaning that it could not be political. However, it was precisely this apparent apoliticality that made it so intensely political. Historiography on the topic has followed what I am inclined to call a 'top-down' trend. As outlined by Eva Cockcroft and Frances Stonor Saunders, those in power consciously used the art of the Abstract Expressionists as a means of cultural diplomacy or propaganda to influence the opinions of both Western and Russian intelligentsia. In this sense it provided a riposte to Soviet Socialist Realism.[1] It is important to note that this view was precipitated by the 1967 exposé which revealed the CIA's political involvement in the Cultural Cold War, and it has been supported since.[2] By contrast, revisionist interpretations, such as Kozloff's *Artforum* piece, have sought to present the parallels between 'American Cold War rhetoric' and the individualistic philosophy of Abstract Expressionism as purely coincidental. They cite the lack of evidence of political manoeuvres and agreements between arts institutions—such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)—and the US government.[3]

To evaluate the extent to which Abstract Expressionism was an ideological weapon, one must explore the intentions of the actors involved in the structure of the cultural-diplomatic operation—if that is how one characterises the movement. It is necessary to analyse the objectives of artists within the movement, as well as subsequent interpretations by critics and those at the forefront of the American conservative backlash. It is more plausible that the political significance of Abstract Expressionism was created by those with influence—such as art critics and the heads of cultural institutions, whose opinions carried intellectual weight—than by artists. MoMA enthusiastically supported Abstract Expressionism through exhibitions abroad, and there were suspicious links between its leadership and that of the CIA, as highlighted by Louis Menand and David and Cecile Shapiro. These facts further endorse this view.[4] Abstract Expressionism was in many ways a riposte to Soviet Socialist Realism, but the discourse between these two movements is beyond the scope of this essay, which instead interrogates the institutional processes behind this politicisation of the American art movement. Although individuals at all levels of influence had the political agency to engender combative ideology, those in the upper echelons of the political structure were markedly energetic in their promotion of art as a tool of war. They ensured Abstract Expressionism was rendered a weapon in the Cultural Cold War.

In many cases, artists did not produce work with a political purpose in mind. Art critics were largely responsible for constructing the combative personality of Abstract Expressionism. 'Abstract Expressionism' encompassed such a wide range of abstract art that those within it were reluctant to label themselves a collective. Yet, a common feature of Abstract Expressionist works was the absence of distinguishable or referential subject matter, and therefore any apparent political leaning. However, if one were to emphasise the significance of the artist's agency, as Stonor Saunders does in her view that it is 'hard to sustain the argument that the Abstract Expressionists merely "happened to be painting in the Cold War and not for the Cold War"', then the artist's political affiliation would become of interest to the historian.[5]

1 Eva Cockcroft, *Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War. Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (Harper and Row 1985) 125–33; Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (Granta 1999).

2 In March 1967, *Ramparts Magazine* exposed links between the CIA and the National Students' Association (NSA), revealing the extent of the alleged Operation Mockingbird. In May of that year, Thomas Braden's *Saturday Evening Post* article 'I'm Glad the CIA is "Immoral"' unveiled the connections between the CIA and US cultural programs.

3 Max Kozloff, 'American Painting during the Cold War' in Francis Frascina (ed), *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (Routledge 2000).

4 Louis Menand, 'Unpopular Front: American Art and the Cold War' *The New Yorker*; David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, 'Excerpt from "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting" Part 3' in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (Yale University Press 2005).

5 Stonor Saunders (n 1) (as quoted in David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The*

Harold Rosenberg, an influential art critic and outspoken supporter of Abstract Expressionism, proposes an argument from individualism for the artist's personal agency. However, this interpretation of Abstract Expressionism is flawed. Rosenberg asserts that the new 'American Action Painters' were distinct because of their 'consciousness of a function for a painting', tacitly implying the possibility of the politicality of Abstract Expressionists.[6] However, his argument that the 'act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence' contradicts this. It suggests that the artist's work is inextricable from biographical influences, and therefore that one is incapable of creating work with a meaning or motive different from those of their artistic upbringing.[7] Furthermore, when applied to Abstract Expressionism in the context of the Cold War, the argument invalidates that of Stonor Saunders. The infamous Jackson Pollock had previously worked in the workshops of Communist-sponsored artists. He had also collaborated with Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, a Mexican Communist Party member and supporter of Stalinism. Had Pollock's artistic life been truly inseparable from his work, his art could be read by Rosenberg as 'communistic'. Cockcroft believed that the alignment between American Cold War ideals and 'the way many Abstract Expressionists phrased their existentialist-individualist credos' was 'consciously forged'. This is unconvincing, yet so is Max Kozloff's argument that it was coincidental.[8] New York School artists were more probably concerned with creating the first internationally influential American artistic movement than with using their art as a propaganda weapon. This was instead done by those in power. We must therefore view the artist and the influencer as working within individual yet intersecting spheres.

The compelling rhetoric of American freedom that critics and officials applied to Abstract Expressionism engendered a pugnacious artistic climate. There was debate between art critics such as Alfred Barr and American conservatives on the movement's 'communistic' leanings. This debate demonstrates how art was not merely 'for art's sake', but was viewed as a propagandistic battleground. Barr countered conservative assertions, such as those of Representative Dondero, in a 1952 *New York Times* piece. It exemplifies the rhetoric of individualism that both critics and state figures repeatedly used as a riposte to Socialist Realism and the oppressive nature of Soviet totalitarianism.[9] Barr stated that 'the modern artist's non-conformity and love of freedom cannot be tolerated within a monolithic tyranny and modern art is useless for the dictators' propaganda'. These statements dismiss the 'communistic' leanings of Abstract Expressionism and reframe it as a symbol of political freedom.[10] Moreover, Socialist Realism came to be included in the US artistic sphere, for example with MoMA's 1946 retrospective exhibition of the Lithuanian-born American Socialist Realist artist Ben Shahn, strengthening the US's philosophy of freedom. Giants of capitalist business, such as Rockefeller, appeared open to funding art like that being displayed on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Although the US government itself exported art, without critics such as Barr and Rosenberg, as well as the actions of MoMA, Abstract Expressionism would have been a futile and apolitical 'weapon'.

Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War (Oxford University Press 2008) 546).

6 Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' (first published 1952) in Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Horizon Press 1959) 24.

7 ibid 28.

8 Cockcroft (n 1) 126.

9 Alfred H Barr, 'Is Modern Art Communistic?' *The New York Times* (New York, 14 December 1952).

10 ibid 22.

MoMA's economic connections exemplify how a Manhattan-based oligarchy used Abstract Expressionism to further the political interests of American capitalism. MoMA's funding, leadership, and very foundation were supported overtly by American financiers, and covertly by the CIA. The establishment of MoMA in 1929 was enabled by the support of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Nelson Rockefeller controlled it throughout the 1940s and 1950s—the peak of its cultural-diplomatic ventures. Cockcroft compellingly asserts that one must look to patronage and the 'ideological needs of the powerful' when analysing the success of an artistic movement.[11] It is difficult to maintain that MoMA would have had free rein without its Rockefeller benefactors. As giants of American capitalism, the Rockefellers would surely have supported the exhibition of a movement which advertised the US' rhetoric of freedom. One might disregard the connection between a person's wealth and their politics. Nonetheless, it is not a far-fetched possibility that Nelson Rockefeller, a high-profile Republican and one-term Vice President, would have supported US cultural-diplomatic ventures against the Soviet intellectual threat. The US arts sector was privatised, unlike its European counterparts. This let what David Caute describes as 'the pantheon of ever-ready demons of patronage' influence American psychological warfare, and thus Cold War politics.[12]

MoMA's International Council energetically displayed Abstract Expressionism abroad, demonstrating how the movement was used as cultural propaganda directed at Western European intellectuals. MoMA's purchase of the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and subsequent curation of its exhibitions there between 1954 and 1962, was the first time a Biennale pavilion had been autonomous from government ownership and influence. However, much like for Abstract Expressionism itself, the apparent apoliticality of this was more likely a front. MoMA's leaders had vested interests in the fight against communism. Abstract Expressionism already had a support base in Venice at Peggy Guggenheim's palazzo—she had given Pollock one-man shows in 1943, 1945, and 1947. MoMA exhibited Willem De Kooning's work in a US pavilion at an international event in 1948. Cockcroft argues that its private ownership made this pavilion free of 'the kinds of pressure of unsubtle red-baiting and super-jingoism applied to official governmental agencies'.[13]

MoMA aggressively exported Abstract Expressionism across Europe through exhibitions in the late 1950s. 'Modern Art in the United States' toured Europe in 1956. The largest of its five sections dedicated to 'Contemporary Abstract Art' comprised 28 paintings by 17 Abstract Expressionists. In 1959, 'The New American Painting' was shown in eight European countries. The tour would have exposed Western European intellectuals, many of whom might have been Soviet travellers, to an artistic movement which stylistically promoted American ideals of freedom of personal expression. It ran contrary to the Socialist Realism of the USSR, an explicit form of propaganda.

The US government passionately endorsed cultural diplomacy through art, both covertly and overtly. As mentioned, there is evidence, albeit dubious, of CIA influence on MoMA's leadership. Thomas Braden, executive secretary of MoMA in the late 1940s, went on to join the CIA as Supervisor of Cultural Activities in 1951. Braden enthusiastically supported the export of Abstract Expressionism as a weapon in the 'propaganda war'.[14] He defended

11 Cockcroft (n 1) 125.

12 Caute (n 5) 541.

13 Cockcroft (n 1) 129.

14 Shapiro and Shapiro (n 4) 441.

this in his 1967 article 'I'm Glad the CIA is "Immoral"': given that the Cold War was 'fought with ideas instead of bombs', 'to choose innocence [was] to choose defeat'.[15] Furthermore, René d'Harnoncourt and Porter A McCray, both from Roosevelt's Center of Inter-American Affairs, later joined MoMA. McCray, described by Cockcroft as a key figure in the history of 'cultural imperialism', joined as director of the museum's international programmes.[16] However, state intervention was more direct in some instances, with open government sponsorship of exhibitions. In 1946, the Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs curated 'Advancing American Art', an exhibition which used $49,000 of government money to purchase 79 paintings. Although its art was not exclusively abstract, the collection was overwhelmingly Modernist, providing an apt riposte to Soviet Socialist Realism.

The most explicit and successful example of Abstract Expressionism's deployment as a Cold War weapon was at the American National Exhibition's visit to Moscow's Sokolniki Park in 1959. Its open sponsorship by the USIA (United States Information Agency) is significant. The USIA helped censor the work of 'avowed communists … or persons who publicly refuse to answer questions of Congressional committees regarding connection with the communist movement'.[17] David and Cecile Shapiro assert that almost anything was a potential target for 'congressional pot-shots'. This supports traditional interpretations that emphasise the role of Abstract Expressionism as a weapon in the Cold War. Critics had so successfully fostered a connection between Abstract Expressionism and the ideals of the American psyche that the State was willing to promote it. Marilyn S Kushner asserts that despite Pollock's *Cathedral* (1947) and Lachaise's *Standing Woman* (1932) being seen as 'grotesque and mocking', the art at the exhibition was seen as a 'manifestation of a free society, much as was originally intended by the USIA'.[18] Pollock's brash handling of paint, his cold colour palette, and his non-representational subject matter may have contributed to Soviet disdain. They were antithetical to the vibrant colours used by artists such as Taslitzky, and the highly naturalistic scenes, frequently of a political subject matter, painted by Gerasimov.[19] This display of American values in the heart of the Soviet world sparked questions of political freedom, particularly from young Soviets who were interested in what forbidden ideals they had been sheltered from. It was an aggressive form of propaganda.

Abstract Expressionist works were not, therefore, inherently weapons of the cultural Cold War. Harold Rosenberg, in 'American Action Painters', said that Abstract Expressionists created an 'environment not of people but of functions', that 'his paintings are *employed* not *wanted*' (my italics).[20] Abstract Expressionism was not created with the purpose of being a psychological weapon against communism, but those with intellectual influence politicised it and made it such. It was this 'middle stratum' that engendered and buttressed cultural diplomacy through art. I have taken a hierarchical approach to analysing the impact of different strata within the cultural-diplomatic structure—from the artists, to the critic, to the museum, to the state. This approach demonstrates that critics created the weapon through politicising the apolitical Abstract Expressionism and aligning it with American ideals. Furthermore, MoMA, allied with the state, physically exported and mobilised art as propaganda, using the weapon created by critics. First came the fashioning of a culture that was anti-communist, and thus anti-Socialist Realist. Along with this came the dissemination of a belief among US art critics that Abstract Expressionism was the superior movement. Second came the aggressive physical exportation and touring of the artworks across Europe, including to Moscow in the late 1950s, in an attempt to woo Western intellectuals with the 'benefits' of capitalism. These currents were mutually supportive, bolstering the idea that art could be political. Regardless of whether the US government was successful in its psychological war against the Soviet Union, the argument that Abstract Expressionism was used as a weapon in the Cold War is persuasive.

15 Thomas W Braden, 'I'm Glad the CIA is "Immoral"' *The Saturday Evening Post* (20 May 1967) 14.
16 Cockcroft (n 1) 127.
17 As quoted in Shapiro and Shapiro (n 4) 339–40.
18 Marilyn S Kushner, 'Exhibiting Art at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959' (2002) 4(1) Journal of Cold War Studies 19.
19 See the paintings *The Strikes of June, 1936* (Boris Taslitzky 1936), and *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (Aleksandr Gerasimov 1938). Gerasimov won the Stalin Prize in 1941 for this painting.
20 Rosenberg (n 6) 38.