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“This kind of circus, all in cordiality”: Marcel Duchamp’s speech
“The Creative Act”

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"THIS KIND OF CIRCUS, ALL IN CORDIALITY"
MARCEL DUCHAMP'S SPEECH "THE CREATIVE ACT"

by

LAURI G. NELSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

"THIS KIND OF CIRCUS, ALL IN CORDIALITY:" MARCEL Duchamp'S SPEECH "THE CREATIVE ACT"

by

Lauri G. Nelson

Marcel Duchamp's speech "The Creative Act" and the context of its delivery at the American Federation of Arts (A.F.A.) convention in Houston, Texas, in 1957 reveal the manifold nature of American art discourse during the second half of the 1950s. In contrast to overly-simplified histories of the period which maintain that formal concerns and artist-centered criticism predominated, this paper determines that Duchamp's speech and its acknowledgment of the spectator are not unusual for 1957. Nor is Duchamp as author completely consistent with the ideas of critical "indifference" said to be present in the speech. On the contrary, the artist, his speech, and the 1957 A.F.A. convention are reflective of their complex history: of the political and economic climate of the mid 1950s, of both American and French aesthetic philosophy, of a growing popular interest in the arts, and of the growing media presence within American art discourse.
All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.

Marcel Duchamp, April 5, 1957

[Houston] was worth its weight in gold...I gave my little speech of 8 minutes, we debated in front of more than 500 ladies and gentlemen, three days of this kind of circus, all in cordiality.

Marcel Duchamp, April 17, 1957
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Introduction

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.

Marcel Duchamp

The idea of the spectator having an important role in the attribution of value to a work of art is frequently associated with the artist Marcel Duchamp. The statement above is contained within one of his few public statements about the importance of the spectator, a brief but cogent speech delivered at an art symposium held in Houston, Texas, in 1957. This paper proposes to use Duchamp's speech "The Creative Act," the circumstances of its delivery, and the context of the speech's contemporary and subsequent interpretations as a scrim through which to re-examine certain aspects of American art discourse of the late 1950s.

"The Creative Act" is a useful departure point because it doesn't seem to "fit" certain representations of Duchamp's history. Firstly, its simplicity, its clarity, and the earnestness of its delivery seem uncharacteristic of Duchamp, an artist whose art and personae are frequently interpreted as prankish and willfully obscure. Duchamp's role at the conference, that of a serious panel participant and critic also does not fit, given common art historical constructions of Duchamp's "indifferent" attitude towards his career and of his reluctance to interpret his art work. Secondly, the speech seems an unusually early articulation of certain post-structuralist approaches to art criticism. Duchamp's position that art production and its meaning are jointly derived between the artist, the spectator, and posterity is an idea which would not come into widespread use in art criticism until the 1970s. Linked to the speech's anticipatory ideas is its unusual context of delivery: within the mid- to late-1950s art world in the United States, a time when, it is usually recounted, a
"heroic" artist-centered form of discourse predominated, disparaging, or at least ignoring, its viewing public.

These anomalies or discontinuities from certain received explanations about the art world in the 1950s provide useful points with which to re-examine Duchamp's career and the nature of art criticism and discourse during this period. In the United States, the general economic and intellectual climate had fostered by the 1950s a broader-based public and regional participation in the cultural realm than ever before in its history. Duchamp's acknowledgment of the art spectator, therefore, described the very real condition of more people looking, writing, and buying works of art. The popularity of a conference held in Houston, Texas, with an audience of 1,400 when 200 were expected, attests to the acceptance, indeed, the institutionalization of a particular form of discourse about modern art and artists in the United States by the second half of the decade.

The media, and it is largely the print media during the 1950s, also influenced forms of artistic discourse. The general interest photography magazine was ideally suited to reproduce images of the paintings and the artists who had become such a focal point for criticism of the period. Such representations also influenced the way in which Duchamp's personae as a famous, but "retired" artist continued to be maintained throughout his life. Through the magazines one can chart both the popularity of artistic pursuits and the way in which such pursuits were valued in American culture. Representations of the "artist," "modern art," and "art expert" were reproduced in many popular general magazines, to say nothing of the developing readership of art magazines and journals. Duchamp's participation in the conference in many ways subscribed to the role of "art critic/expert" which had been forming throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. As discussions of modern art emerged from the small gatherings of the artists' studios and clubs and into the broader arena of panel discussions, media debates, and museum forums, the figure of the "art expert," whose role was to interpret and champion the popularly misunderstood forms of modern art, gained a broad visibility not evident before the 1950s.
Tensions arising from Cold War politics led to structural developments within such institutions of the art world as museums and art organizations and permeated the chosen forms of artistic discourse in art journals, artist statements, and the media representations of various forums. Institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the American Federation of the Arts (the sponsor of the 1957 conference) developed ambitious overseas exhibition touring programs in response to U.S. State Department sponsorship intended to encourage the dissemination of American culture abroad for propagandist purposes.\(^1\)

Concurrent with these institutional changes, particular forms of artistic discourse arose in the United States. As Ann Gibson has analyzed, one can constitute a "theory" of Abstract Expressionism on the basis of a confluence of shared sentiments and expressed ideas among a certain group of influential artists during the late 1940s and 1950s.\(^2\) A premium was placed on the ideals of individual expressiveness and freedom. There was reluctance to discuss artistic subject matter apart from form. Symbol and allusion were employed as a means of expressing artistic significance and meaning. And indeed, at the art critical extreme, artistic meaning collapsed into and became the formal qualities that could be ascribed to a work of art. This position was formulated most visibly by the art critic Clement Greenberg, whose definition of modernism found favor with various artists and critics of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Developments within the world of literary criticism also influenced forms of art discourse of the 1950s. Historians of the period point to the broad cultural influence that

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\(^1\) Andrew H. Berding, the Assistant Director of the United States Information Agency (USIA), in discussing the purpose for the founding of the USIA and their funding of an overseas exhibition program in 1953, would discuss a need for the government to:

delineate those important aspects of life and culture of the people of the United States which facilitate understanding of the policies and objectives of the Government of the United States...In sponsoring overseas exhibitions, and in providing money to assist in sending them overseas, we must keep in mind the objectives of the information program. Art sponsored by the United States Information Agency must serve the same purpose as press and publications, as books and libraries, as motion pictures, as radio. It must be a medium of communication, a means of interpreting American culture to other peoples. ("The Arts as Our Ambassador," Art Digest, November 15, 1953, p. 4.)

literary debates and "literary men" exerted upon the intellectual imaginations of the period. Refrains from literary critical discourse echoed within the statements of artists and art critics. Post-structuralist ideas regarding the inescapable subjectivity of interpretation and the acknowledgment of the role of the "reader" were developing in France, most importantly by Roland Barthes who published *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture (Writing Degree Zero)* in 1953. As will be discussed in Chapter V, these nascent ideas would have been familiar to Duchamp's own intellectual circle, through André Breton and François Le Lionnais, most particularly. But Duchamp's personal interest in such writers as Jules LaForgue and Raymond Roussel also linked him directly to the developing forms of French criticism during the 1950s. Somewhat at odds with the Continental theories of interpretation were those finding favor in American literary circles, a school of criticism known as the New Criticism, most visibly championed by T.S. Eliot. The New Critics believed firmly in the ideals of the impersonal interpretation of text, independent of elements of history and biography. Interestingly, elements from both critical approaches are in evidence within Duchamp's speech.

Forms of artistic discourse unique to the second half of the 1950s are clearly mirrored in Duchamp's speech, the context of its delivery, and its dissemination within the American art world. This paper will be organized in five chapters, both beginning and ending with a discussion of "The Creative Act." The first chapter will begin with a general discussion of "The Creative Act" in relation to Duchamp's own career. It will also discuss how the speech was composed, its reception by its audience on April 4, 1957, and the body of its subsequent criticism. Chapter II will begin to analyze the context of "The Creative Act," a period of time in U.S. history that underwent significant structural change due to the population's increasing affluence. One of the results was a growth in the art world that took the form of an increasing interest in a particular segment of American modernist artists and an increasing visibility of artists and aesthetic issues among the general population. This increasing visibility of the art world was undoubtedly due to the
increasing interest taken in aesthetic issues by the media, particularly the printed media, a consequence which, in turn, affected the way in which the art world presented itself to the larger world. Chapter III will again deal with the context of "The Creative Act," building towards a discussion of the form that art discourse took in the United States and France during the 1950s. Particular intellectual and political currents present during the decade placed unique requirements on the way in which art was made, discussed, and valued. Chapter IV will return to the specifics of the 1957 A.F.A. convention. The exposition of this chapter will reveal many correspondences between national and local forms of institutional and structural change, as well as a continuity in the form of artistic discourse. Chapter V will return to a discussion of "The Creative Act," analyzing how elements of the speech and aspects of modernist discourse explored in previous chapters coincide. In so doing, the speech will be revealed as really part of its own time, not as anomalous to its moment of delivery as some authors maintain. "The Creative Act" is evidence of a complex personal history on the part of the artist and of a richer, more diverse context of American art criticism than is frequently associated with the second half of the 1950s.
Chapter 1
"The Creative Act:," Its History

Representations of Duchamp as Artist and Art Expert

The pivotal point around which this thesis revolves is the eight-minute speech, "The Creative Act," which Marcel Duchamp delivered in Houston, Texas, in 1957. The speech, an important one in the history of the artist's own statements, was made when he was nearly seventy years old, at a time when he was recognized as an elder-statesman of the Dada and Surrealist movements. Up until that time, there had not been a substantive public address by this famous artist. His reputation was maintained through a remarkably consistent, two-prong representation within the media and the art world: that of Duchamp as "indifferent" artist, and that of Duchamp as an active intellectual, art critic, and curator.

Part of Duchamp's reputation as "indifferent" artist was fueled by the notion that he had retired and "given up art to play chess."1 In 1957, the art work for which he was most famous, Nu descendant un escalier (Nude Descending a Staircase [No. 2])(1912) (fig. 2), was over forty-five years old. The painting was famous for having caused popular outrage at the Armory Show Exhibition of 1913, caricatured at the time in the press by critics as, "a pack of brown cards in a nightmare," an "orderly heap of broken violins" or most popularly, "an explosion in a shingle factory."2 However, in the late 1950s, the Armory Show was seen as the founding moment of America's introduction to the great currents within the vanguard European modernism, the Paris Cubists and Fauves and the German Expressionists. Duchamp's "rejection" there solidified his place in the American avant-garde. As Rudi Blesh noted in 1956:

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Duchamp's cubist-futurist clamor became a symbol, not only of the Armory Show, but of "modern" art itself. Modern art was, indeed, a chain of explosions. The Armory Show was one in that chain, one whose repercussions are still felt today.³

Duchamp, then, had been a celebrity in the United States since his Armory Show appearance in 1913. During his first visit to the United States in 1915, despite speaking little English, he charmed the New York press and immediately occupied the social ground where New York's bohemia, artistic vanguard, and well-heeled society overlapped. From those early days in the United States, it was clear that Duchamp was seen differently from conventional representations of the artist: "he neither talks, nor looks, nor acts like an artist. It may be that in the accepted sense of the word he is not an artist. In any case, he has nothing but antipathy for the accepted sense of the term art."⁴ In Duchamp's earliest representations in the press, he was always the "reluctant" artist, one who had a contempt for the stereotype of the artist as non-intellectual, as someone fixated on the "retinal" or visual effects produced on canvas. When a statement of his, "Painting of precision, and beauty of indifference," was published in 1934,⁵ it seemed to be so resonant with the artist's constructed image that critics frequently thereafter utilized the term "indifferent" to describe his work and his personae.⁶

Duchamp's regard as an artist was always higher in his adopted country than in his native one, where interest in his work did not pick up until the mid-1950s, stimulated by the 1954 publication of Les Machines Célibataires by Michel Carrouges, a critical essay written on Duchamp's major work, La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même [La Grande Verre (The Large Glass)] (1915-1923/1936).⁷ On the other hand, as indicated

⁵La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (Boîte verte) (1934).
⁶Among such articles which uses Duchamp's indifference as a premise is, Moria Roth, "Aesthetics of Indifference," Artforum 16 (November 1977): 46-53.
⁷This rejuvenation of interest in Duchamp by the French art world following this publication has been noted by numerous authors including: Robert Lebel, Marcel Duchamp trans. George Heard Hamilton (New
earlier, Duchamp had always been famous in American art circles. His introduction to the Houston audience on the morning of April 5, 1957, used the clichéd, man-who-needs-no-introduction formula: "Surely Marcel Duchamp needs no introduction. Ever since 'that woman walked down those stairs' and into our show, Americans have known Mr. Duchamp." It is clear that when Duchamp delivered his speech in 1957, he was viewed by most of the audience as a "retired" artist. In fact, most of the general public thought he played chess all day long. As a major profile in Life magazine portrayed the situation in 1952:

"You know, he hasn't painted a picture since 1923," an anxious lady remarked, "What a pity! He has done practically nothing in all that time except play chess." Duchamp's reaction to the remark was merely to nod in happy agreement.

Duchamp's representations in the press and in the art world therefore returned time and again to the notions of Duchamp's past infamy in the avant-garde art world and his retirement from art making to concentrate on chess.

As some critics have noted, the history of Duchamp's non-participation in art was complicated and ironic. Bojana Pejic characterizes Duchamp's oeuvre, not as one in

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8Introduction by Mrs. Otto Spaeth, AFA board member, in transcript of The Creative Act panel. Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1957." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.


10As Amelia Jones has pointed out, this "construction" of an image of Duchamp's indifference was, in part, a result of the artist's own statements and activities. And particularly after the 1960s, such an indifference was seen as a "heroic" withdrawal from the increasingly commercial art world. Duchamp's deception involved his giving numerous interviews in which he insisted on his non-activity in the art realm—when, in fact, he continued to work on his final work, Étant donnés, in secret. Jones points to the irony of Duchamp's image as an indifferent artist within the art world:

The conundrum embedded in this notion of "silence" is the fact that, if Duchamp had truly been "silent," he would have been—to mix metaphors—invisible to the art world in the United States, where he lived and worked from the 1940s to his death in 1968. Duchamp's 'silence' was always complex, seductive, and cleverly equivocal: he was speaking under his breath, or out of the side of his mouth...but was never completely "voiceless." (Amelia Gwen Jones, "The Fashion(ing) of Duchamp: Authorship, gender, postmodernism." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991, p. 153.)
which there is an absence of attitude, but explicitly as one in which absence is an attitude (fig. 3). Duchamp's absence, or at least his image of inactivity, was consistently maintained through photography:

Many photographs document Duchamp's attitude of absence, registering his willingness to be a passive object of the camera and his awareness that he was being photographed. We see him sitting, walking, disguising himself, talking to friends, playing chess, posing. But we never see him working— or almost never. Duchamp did in fact work, though the photographs conceal it. He hid his own activity, was silent about it.\(^\text{11}\)

Besides photography, there are statements by Duchamp that contributed to this contradictory image of the famous artist who, nonetheless, does not make art. In the late 1920s, Duchamp was adamant about his having "given up" art. To a Chicago journalist he confessed to doing "nothing... just loafing and enjoying Paris..." because if he should paint again, he would merely repeat himself, 'so what's the use.'\(^\text{12}\) He was more pointed in a 1929 letter to his patron and friend Katherine Dreier: "It can be no more a question of my life as an artist's life: I gave it up ten years ago; this period is long enough to prove my intention to remain outside of any art manifestation is permanent."\(^\text{13}\) To *Time* magazine in 1936 he said, "My attitude towards Art is that of an atheist towards religion. I would rather be shot, kill myself or kill someone than paint again."\(^\text{14}\) By the end of his life, in 1966, he denied he had made such declarations: "Firstly, you know, I haven't given up painting, if I get an idea for a painting, I'll do it. I didn't make any hard and fast resolutions at all, of any kind."\(^\text{15}\) It is clear from these self-contradictory statements that Duchamp's own presentation of his career had changed throughout the forty-year time span.


\(^{13}\) September 11, 1929 letter from Marcel Duchamp to Katherine Dreier, cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, "Ephemerides."


By 1957, within the period of the A.F.A. convention, representations of Duchamp's activity are, predictably, equivocal. On one hand are the artist's own representations of himself, as one who had been actively engaged in artistic activity throughout his life. He had contributed to the design of the major retrospective exhibition of his and his brothers' work, "Three Brothers: Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Marcel Duchamp,"16 which was being shown at the Museum of Fine Arts during the convention. In the composition of his "Biographical Notes" for the "Three Brothers" catalogue (appendix 2), there is no sense of an abrupt cessation of art making in the late 1920s. Instead, there is a steady cataloguing of arts-related activity: his first "ready-mades" in 1914, his organization of "the first museum of modern art, the Société Anonyme with Katherine S. Dreier" in 1920, his organization of various exhibitions, his participation in films, his making of roto-reliefs beginning in 1934, "The Box" in 1934, and the Boîte-en-valise in 1942. There is no reference to the 1918 mural painting Tu m' as his final painting, as it has sometimes been termed. Interestingly, he referred to The Large Glass as being left unfinished in 1923, making no reference to a 1936 repair or "completion" of the work; he stated that he left The Large Glass unfinished so he could "devote himself to chess and experiments in optics." There are plenty of entries after 1923, listing a succession of exhibitions he organized and magazines and publications with which he was involved. The chronology ends in 1955, the year he became a U.S. citizen.

16 James Johnson Sweeney was particularly pointed in giving credit to Duchamp for the conception and design of both the exhibition and text of Three Brothers. His short acknowledgment in the catalogue reads:

In addition to those who have made this exhibition possible through their generous loans, thanks are also and in particular due to Marcel Duchamp. The idea of grouping the work by the three brothers was his. We are also indebted to him for the plan and design of the catalogue as well as the choice of the texts. His advice in the selection of the exhibits and help in assembling them have made the exhibition a realization. (James Johnson Sweeney, "Forward," Three Brothers: Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1957).)
In his completion of the "Biographical Sheet" for the 1957 convention (appendix 3), Duchamp listed as his present occupation "Free lance artist," and under notable involvements he listed the "Round Table in San Francisco" and "Co-founder of 'Société Anonyme Inc. Museum of Modern Art 1920." There is no mention of his chess or of his having retired from art making.

However, Duchamp's choice of work to include in the "Three Brothers" exhibition would seem to contradict the idea of his continuing activity within the art sphere. With the exception of one work, all ten works were paintings, all executed before 1914 (appendix 4). The single ready-made chosen for the exhibition, Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?, was executed in 1921. For those who are looking carefully, the catalogue includes photographic documentation of additional works not included in the exhibition: two more paintings, Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2) and King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes (1912); his masterwork, The Large Glass; and a carefully composed two-page selection of notes from his Green Box, interspersed with excerpts from his short book of puns and word games, Rose Sélavy (1939).

Some critics were completely taken in by the representation of Duchamp as "retired" artist. In his review of the exhibition, New York Times critic Howard Devree recites what had become by 1957 the standard clichés:

Marcel Duchamp, the enfant terrible of the three, has not painted for twenty-five or thirty-years but his "Nude Descending a Staircase" has for more than forty years served as a symbol of extremism in modern art in the minds of its antagonists.\(^ {17} \)

The other reviewer of the exhibition was not so taken in by Duchamp's image of retired avant-gardist. However, not only was Nicholas Calas an "insider" in terms of his familiarity with Duchamp's oeuvre, having written an article within the special 1945 View issue devoted to Duchamp,\(^ {18} \) but he was also a well-known poet and critic in both

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\(^ {17} \)Howard Devree, "The Villon Brothers," New York Times, March 24, 1957, p. 8x.

\(^ {18} \)Nicholas Calas, "Cheat to Cheat," View magazine, series 5, no. 1 (March 1945), pp. 20-21.
New York and Parisian circles. Perhaps he would have been more sensitive to the issues that Duchamp's oeuvre represented in its exploration of the relationship between the art object and its context, issues that were being explored very actively within French literary criticism by the mid-1950s. In his criticism of the exhibition "Three Brothers," Calas was laudatory of Duchamp to the extent of virtually ignoring the work of his two brothers:

Marcel Duchamp's avowed horror of being a professional painter...must never permit one to forget how great is his contribution to painting, his genius for creating entirely new images...But for Truth not to be drowned in the discourse of painting, the Word must, from time to time, be made flesh again. In our century this has been done by Marcel Duchamp.

So Duchamp's personae during the convention of 1957 can be interpreted along a spectrum of representations, that of a "retired" artist within the general press and popular understanding, that of an artist singular to the art of the twentieth century as interpreted in some sympathetic quarters, and Duchamp's own representations at the convention of himself as an artist with a serious and active history who was willing to engage in public art symposia like the A.F.A. convention. Perhaps by 1957 he was regarding his own life's activities as the important and legitimate forms of artistic production that critic's from the 1970s onwards would. In 1966, Duchamp in his interviews would be comfortable asserting the artistic legitimacy of all the activities of his life since giving up painting:

20 Calas' article is illustrated by a number of photographs of Duchamp's varied activities which underscore Calas' special knowledge of Duchamp's oeuvre including: Duchamp's roto-relief, Corolles, which superimposed upon Man Ray's photograph Dust Breeding (1920) became the cover for the Paris magazine Minotaure, v. II, no. 6, Paris, 1935; a still photograph of Duchamp and Man Ray from the René Clair film "Entr'Acte"; and an image of 2 Moulas Mâle (1914-15), a work which had come into the artist's own collection in 1956 from the collection of his friend H.P. Roché. (Nicholas Calas, "The Brothers Duchamp All At Once," Art News, v. 55, n. 10 (February 1957): 24.)
21 Duchamp's presence in postmodern criticism is the subject of an important dissertation by Amelia Gwen Jones, The fashioning of Duchamp: Authorship, gender, postmodernism, (University of California, Los Angeles, 1991). In writing my paper I was fortunate to benefit from her researches, most particularly regarding the construction of the image of Duchamp's image as an "indifferent" artist (Chapter 3).
For Jones, post-modern criticism is informed by the mainly French poststructuralist philosophies and theories of representation. Beginning in the 1960s such criticism identified and analyzed such art movements as Pop Art, Happenings, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and postmodern appropriation art. (p. 9)
...that is, for the time being, of trying to make my life into a work of art itself, instead of spending my life creating works of art in the form of paintings or sculptures. I now believe that you can quite readily treat your life, the way you breathe, act, interact with other people, as a picture, a tableau vivant or a film scene, so to speak. These are my conclusions now: I never set out to do this when I was twenty or fifteen, but I realize, after many years, that this was fundamentally what I was aiming to do.22

Having discussed the rather ambiguous position Duchamp occupied vis-à-vis his artistic production in 1957, it is possible to construct a more definitive representation of Duchamp within the press and within the art world of the 1950s in terms of his role as art critic and intellectual. In many ways such a construction is imbedded within his artistic production. His statements disavowing "retinal" painting and his derision of "stupid painters" take place against a backdrop of Duchamp as "intellectual." He is invariably portrayed with a pipe, playing chess, genteel and sociable, with no visible signs of his artistic (i.e., painterly) activity. Duchamp's studio, the typical site of "the artist at work," is invariably portrayed as dusty, solitary, and without much sign of activity besides a chessboard.23 (This is, of course, because, after 1946 much of his work on Étant donnés was going on in a secret studio.)

These photographs of inactivity can be compared to the images of other artists of the 1950s, who are invariably portrayed as being either actively painting or situated before signs of their activity within their studios. The popular Art News feature in the

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22 Life Is a Game; Life is Art." p. 17.

23 "He [Duchamp] lives four flights up in a little garretlike studio on 14th Street...It seems a strange place for a high-brow to live, but that is probably the very reason Duchamp has chosen it...His studio is dominated by its chess table. Here Duchamp sits by the hour, sometimes actually playing against an opponent." (Sargeant, "Dada's Daddy," pp. 110-111.)
1950s, "X Paints a Picture," took the form of an interview within the studio where the artist, his paints, or his work was photographed (fig. 4).  

Images of Duchamp's "inactivity" in the studio during this period are therefore all the more "empty" because there are no paintings in sight. Duchamp's other activities, his ready-mades, his Rotary Demisphere machine, his film projects, his alter ego Rrose Selavy, and his writings, become virtually invisible as art production when scrutinized through this period's representations of what constitutes an art work and artistic activity.

However, one area in which Duchamp was visible was in his activity as an art curator and critic. From his first visit to the United States, Duchamp had been involved with some of the most famous American collections of early modern art: those of Walter and Louise Arensberg, Katherine Dreier, John Quinn, and Peggy Guggenheim. After John Quinn's death in 1924, Duchamp and his friend H.P. Roché purchased the Brancusi sculpture from the collection before its public auction in order to keep the prices of their colleague's work from falling. Duchamp was known as an informal acquisition adviser to the Arensbergs, Dreier, and Guggenheim. And in the case of the Arensberg and Dreier collections, in his negotiations with important museums, such as the Chicago Art Institute, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Yale Art Gallery, to place the collections, he acted with the authority of a de facto estate trustee.

Looking at Duchamp's activities during and after World War II, it is clear that he was involved with curatorial pursuits of a most influential order. Coupled with the rise of the media's attention to the art world following the war, Duchamp's recognition as an influential critic and intellectual grew accordingly. With Breton, he organized the exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism" in 1942. A special edition of View magazine on Duchamp appeared in 1943. He planned with Breton another major Surrealist exhibition

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in Paris in 1947. He participated in the symposium "Western Round Table on Modern Art" in San Francisco in 1949. He published the catalogue *Collection of the Société Anonyme* along with Katherine Dreier, whose collection had been given to Yale University in 1950. He supervised the installation of the Arensberg collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1950 and 1951. He was the subject of major press coverage, including a profile in *Life* magazine, as a result of his organization of the exhibition "Duchamp Frères et Soeur, Oeuvres d'Art" at the Rose Fried Gallery in 1952. He organized "Dada 1916-1923" for the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1953. He began work with Robert Lebel on a monograph and *catalogue raisonné* in 1953. In 1956, Duchamp was broadcast on NBC in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney as part of a series "Conversations With the Elder Wise Men of Our Day."

This enumeration of activities leading up to Duchamp's participation in the 1957 A.F.A. conference makes clear that, in the art world at least, Duchamp had established a reputation as a curator and critic of high standing. The 1946 photograph of Duchamp, Alfred Barr, and Sidney Janis seems to capture his place in the art world perfectly (fig. 5). He sits with his pipe, along with the premier curator and dealer of modern art of his day, awarding the substantial *Bel Ami* prize to a Max Ernst painting, "The Temptation of Saint Anthony." Similarly, Duchamp was perfectly comfortable within the company that gathered for the "Western Round Table on Art" held in San Francisco in 1948. There, photographed among distinguished professors, a world-famous architect, and literary and art critics, Duchamp takes his place (again, with pipe), prepared to opine on the value, meaning, and importance of modern art (fig. 6).

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25 The Western Round Table on Art took place on April 8, 1949. It was organized by Douglas MacAgy, director of the California School of Fine Art. Besides Duchamp, other participants included: George Boas, philosopher and professor at Johns Hopkins University; Gregory Bateson, cultural anthropologist and lecturer at the University of California Medical School; Kenneth Burke, literary critic, philosopher and professor at Bennington College; Alfred Franenstein, music critic and art editor of the San Francisco Chronicle; Robert Goldwater, associate professor of art at Queens College; Darius Milhaud, composer and professor of composition at Mills College; Andrew Ritchie, director of the department of painting and sculpture, Museum of Modern Art; the artist Mark Tobey; and the architect Frank Lloyd Writght. Arnold Schoenberg, the composer, was also invited but is prevented by ill-health from attending. For a complete discussion of Duchamp's involvement in the proceedings see, Bonnie Clearwater, "Trying Very Hard To
As will be discussed in some detail later within the context of media representation of the American art world during the 1950s, images of formally attired, serious, and thoughtful men, gathered around a table to discuss the significant business of modern art, had become increasingly familiar within American art discourse. Duchamp's position within that representation is a seamless and comfortable one with no hint of his "indifference" or his anomalous casting as was the case in his role of artist.

**Duchamp's Composition of "The Creative Act"**

In March of 1957, one month before Duchamp's delivery of his speech, a reference to an early draft of the speech appears in correspondence about its circulation among panel discussants. It was hoped that a preview of the convention speeches would facilitate a more thoughtful discussion among panelists on the morning of April 5, 1957. Drafts of the panelists' speeches were also being distributed by the public relations staff of the conference. A copy of this early draft of Duchamp's speech, signed by its author in January 1957, is deposited in the A.F.A. files (appendix 5). The title of Duchamp's speech came directly from the title of the panel discussion to which he was asked to contribute: The Creative Act.

When asked about her recollection of Duchamp's preparation of this speech, Mrs. Alexina Duchamp responded that her husband made the speech very spontaneously at the time, that "he practically made no preparations, just notes." Given the existence of an early draft, Mrs. Duchamp's statement, while puzzling, may refer to Duchamp's making only minor revisions on a draft just prior to its delivery. The speech itself is structured by carefully considered and defended arguments. Given the fact that Duchamp was

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26 March 2, 1957 letter to William Scitz from Jean de Menil. Among the recipients of blindcover copies of the letter (and, I assume, copies of the speech) was Meyer Shapiro, who delivered the keynote address to the conference. The American Federation of Arts [hereafter the A.F.A.] Convention 1957, Archives of American Art [hereafter cited as AAA], Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm roll, 1780, fr. 85.

27 The A.F.A. files, box 10, AAA.

28 May 3, 1993 letter from Mrs. Alexina Duchamp to the author.
somewhat uneasy about public speaking\textsuperscript{29} and was being pressed to make a serious statement in his second language, it is improbable that the speech was delivered spontaneously from only a few notes.

Moreover, 1957 was a period when Duchamp was particularly attentive to his review of what was written about him. In 1954, he dissuaded Walter Arensberg from commissioning D.H. Kahnweiler to write an introduction to Arensberg's collection. He favored another critic, James Thrall Soby, instead.\textsuperscript{30} At this period of his career, most writing about Duchamp was done with his active cooperation, if not direct collaboration. As mentioned above, the catalogue and exhibition "Three Brothers" was a collaborative effort between James Johnson Sweeney and Duchamp. Besides his efforts to secure loans for the show, Duchamp scrupulously reviewed and edited the biographical data in the catalogue.\textsuperscript{31} He was also most interested, indeed anxious, to read the draft of Sweeney's accompanying introduction, going so far as to cable Sweeney on holiday in Yugoslavia, asking for a second time to have a draft sent to him.\textsuperscript{32} During the mid-1940s, Duchamp submitted to an extensive series of interviews with Sweeney and, likewise, was attentive

\textsuperscript{29}In 1950, Duchamp protested to Fiske Kimball of The Philadelphia Museum of Art that he did not believe in public speaking. Although he had participated in the Western Round Table on Art in 1948, he told Kimball that he had done so only because the proceedings would not be made public. (Duchamp was a central participant in the sessions and he reportedly enjoyed his experience as critic, see Bonnie Clearwater, "Trying Very Hard to Think," pg. 54). "I remain true to the saying: 'stupid as a painter' and I apply it willingly to artists who believe that they can say something otherwise than in their ideographical language." March 31, 1950 letter to Fiske Kimball cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, "Ephemerides." It is probable that Duchamp's reluctance to speak publicly was in some measure, an echo of his self-representation as a "reluctant" artist, a habit of self-deprivation that carried over to his public representations of himself. However, it is also true that the amount of his personal appearances in which he was a featured guest increased dramatically at the end of his life, leading to the conclusion that his personal unease in the spotlight had abated somewhat. A chart analyzing the dramatic increase in interviews with and articles written about Duchamp beginning in 1959 was provided in Studio International, v. 189, no. 973 (January-February 1975), p. 52.

\textsuperscript{30}January 27, 1954 letter from Marcel Duchamp to Walter Arensberg, as cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont "Ephemerides."

\textsuperscript{31}On August 26, 1956 Duchamp corrected the biographical notes for the Three Brothers catalogue and sends them to Miss Woodward at the Guggenheim Museum asked her to have the notes retyped and sent to his address in New York. He also asks whether Sweeney's introduction had been received and asked for a copy to be sent to him as well. As cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont "Ephemerides."

\textsuperscript{32}September 13, 1956 cable from Duchamp to Sweeney cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont "Ephemerides."
to editing excerpts for publication. At the time of "The Creative Act," Duchamp was thoroughly involved in collaboration with Robert Lebel on the first monograph to be published about his work. He endured a series of delays and disagreements in a strenuous effort to ensure that the work was designed, translated, and published to his satisfaction.

Duchamp was conscientious in his assistance on other authors' projects as well. Douglas MacAgy found Duchamp to be preparing in advance for his participation in the 1948 Western Round Table on Art. Duchamp was interested in knowing whether the conference proceedings would be broadcast overseas on Voice of America. He even went so far as to suggest a topic in advance which prompted a call for an additional session, "Art For All, Or Art For The Few?", a subject which had long interested him and certainly foreshadows concerns present in "The Creative Act." And following the conference, MacAgy relied on Duchamp's editorial advice when compiling the official transcript of the proceedings.

Therefore, while some interpreters have depicted Duchamp as "indifferent" to what has been said about him and his work, his actions reveal a very different attitude. As Duchamp's friend and interpreter Richard Hamilton has observed,

I often feel as Marcel Duchamp did before, that a single work doesn't mean very much...Duchamp realized that he had to control the context in which his objects were going to be seen for them to reveal the significance of his art of designation.

33 August 21, 1945 letter from Duchamp to H.P. Roché, cited in Gough-Coope and Caumont "Ephemerides."
34 This series of activities is documented through various correspondence between Duchamp and Lebel, his translator George Heard Hamilton, and his publisher cited in Gough-Coope and Caumont "Ephemerides:" October 24, 1957; November 4, 1957; December 17, 1957; January 7, 1958; May 14, 1958.
35 March 21, 1949 letter from Duchamp to Douglas MacAgy: "Here is one topic that might or might not be of interest to the symposiumists: 'Art for all or Art for the Few?' It might not be 'modern' enough. Affectueusement à trois deux, Marcel Duchamp." (San Francisco Art Association Papers, AAA, roll 2431, fr. 318).
Duchamp was often given to humorously downplaying his presence at serious gatherings. For example, he wrote to Lebel about his participation in Houston, "three circus days in Houston where I played my role of artistic clown as well as I could."\(^{38}\) However, there is no doubt he took his own participation in these scholarly discussions seriously, and there is no mistaking the serious tone and rigor of argument in "The Creative Act." As Alexina Duchamp points out, the statement was a presentation of many ideas articulated in conversations which, up until that point, Duchamp had not had occasion to present in written form or before a large audience.\(^{39}\) And perhaps because Duchamp had considered his speech so carefully beforehand, there were few changes between the three major forms the speech took: the January 1956 draft; the version delivered on the morning of April 5, 1957; and the version subsequently published in the summer issue of *Art News*. Only minor editorial changes were made to the *Art News* version, solely to clarify the passage regarding his notion of art in a raw state (*à l'état brut*).\(^ {40}\) It is likely that *Art News* editor Thomas Hess, or another editor from the *Art News* staff, made this minor suggestion to clarify the language. Drafts of the major speeches of the conference (by Duchamp, Seitz, Bateson, Arnheim, Shapiro, and Davis) were circulating at *Art News* because negotiations were underway between the Houston organizers and the publisher Alfred Frankfurter to include some of them in a special fiftieth anniversary edition of the magazine in the summer.\(^ {41}\)

It is this later form that came to be the standard version of the speech, reproduced in all subsequent publications, most prominently in Lebel's monograph, *Marcel Duchamp* (1959), Michel Sanouillet's *Marchand du Sel* (1958), and Arturo Schwarz' *Marcel*

\(^{38}\) Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 56.

\(^{39}\) May 3, 1993 letter from Mrs. Alexina Duchamp to the author.

\(^{40}\) The very slight changes between the two versions can be noted by comparing the January 1957 version (Appendix 5) to the version printed in *Art News* in the summer of 1957 (Appendix 1).

\(^{41}\) March 9, 1957 letter from John de Menil to Daniel Longwell and June 7, 1957 letter from Harris K. Prior to Preston Bolton. Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1957." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.

The Delivery and Reception of "The Creative Act"

The first moment in which to evaluate the criticism of "The Creative Act" is immediately upon its delivery to the audience on April 5, 1957. "The Creative Act" was a comparatively short speech for the A.F.A. convention, running eight minutes exactly.43 Duchamp read the speech aloud in a steady cadence which slowed, for clarity's sake, when reaching the arithmetic relationship of the "art coefficient" or when defining "art à l'état brut." He sped up as if he were speaking the paragraph in which he defensively acknowledged "that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role," as if speaking directly to the audience. But besides these nearly imperceptible variances, the speech was slowly and carefully read as if outlining a mathematical proof.

Audience members, who were well connected within the then-nascent contemporary art scene in Houston, found the speech astoundingly clear. One artist described the speech as a singular moment in his life; he remembered where he sat in the large auditorium and how the speech riveted him there.44 Another audience member (and conference organizer) remembers little detail about any of the speeches from the conference. However, he was left with an overall impression of Duchamp's speech as being "very thoughtful," an analysis of art "a level above" the obscure, or alternatively, self-interested talks of the other artists, critics, dealers, and collectors during those two

42August 1, 1957 letter from Duchamp to Maria Martins cited Gough-Cooper and Caumont's "Ephemeresides."
43There are three known extant audio recordings of Duchamp reading "The Creative Act;" the first is a damaged recording of the proceedings of the A.F.A., The Menil Collection, Houston; the second is contained on the cassette Texts (Augustsfehn, West Germany: Audio Editions Augustsfehn, n.d.); the third is a 33 RPM recording contained within Aspen, nos. 5+ 6, (fall/winter 1967) edited by Brian O'Doherty.
44Jim Love interview with the author, April 1993.
days. In this organizer's words, "Most artists had such an ego, they only talk about their
own work. Duchamp didn't do that, he went beyond all that." \textsuperscript{45}

According his wife, Duchamp himself was somewhat surprised by the reaction of
the audience: "We went down to Houston very naively to the conference. Marcel never
expected his lecture (his thoughts) to create such a positive impact and he was very
relieved by the reaction of the audience." \textsuperscript{46}

In its context, "The Creative Act" was treated as important by both Duchamp and
his audience. It was also popular with the general audience, who found it clear and
concise. Every newspaper and magazine article reviewing the conference mentioned
Duchamp's speech as defending the role of the spectator. As will be explored in Chapter 5
in some detail, fellow panelists understood the points of variance between Duchamp's
ideas and others which emphasized the artist's role in creation. So, while some members
of his audience merely recognized Duchamp as the "retired" artist, there is no doubt that
he was seen by most of his audience as making a significant contribution to the
conference.

"The Creative Act" and Its Criticism

In subsequent criticism of the artist, "The Creative Act" has long been viewed as
an important statement of Duchamp's ideas about art and the creative process. The major
presenters of Duchamp's oeuvre at the end of his life, Robert Lebel and Arturo Schwarz,
termed the address important and implied its definitiveness by including it in their final
chapters. Schwarz called the speech Duchamp's "comprehensively discussed concept of
art" and reproduced the text in full within the course of his analysis. \textsuperscript{47} In the first
monograph on the artist, published by Lebel in 1959, the speech is printed in its entirety
as a separate chapter. Duchamp was directly involved in the publishing of this work and

\textsuperscript{45} Preston Bolton interview with author, April 1993.
\textsuperscript{46} Mrs. Alexina Duchamp letter to author, May 3, 1993.
therefore participated in the decision to include the speech. The speech stands alone, with no introduction or commentary, only with an interesting reproduction of the drawing **Jacquette** as a facing plate (fig. 7).  

Many of Duchamp's most important interviews (including the extensive and oft-quoted interviews with Pierre Cabanne in the last year of his life) contain references to the main ideas of the speech, sometimes using the same manner of expression:

> I believe very strongly in the "medium" of the artist. The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator; so later he goes on to posterity. You can't stop that, because, in brief, it's a product of the two poles--there is the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.  

And perhaps most relevant to a contemporary critical vantage point, a number of writers have used the speech as a link between Duchamp and ideas contained within postmodern criticism. As Amelia Jones asserts, postmodern critics celebrate the supposed "populist" perspective suggested by Duchamp's reliance on the viewer in establishing the "meaning" of the work. Such a perspective would counter the modernist notions that art works contain or express the intention of their makers. Duchamp's speech, coming as it did in 1957, would seem an unusually early appearance of a "postmodernist" critical stance. But since "The Creative Act" was delivered within the period of the supposed "triumph" of modernist discourse, as defined by such critics as Rosenberg and Greenberg, this is obviously a juncture which points instead to the inadequacy of a particular view of history to explain the fact of Duchamp's speech.

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48 Duchamp originally designed **Jacquette** as a cover for Rudi Blesh's *Modern Art USA*, but it was rejected by the book's publishers. The pun of Duchamp's design is more evident in its use as a book "jacket" than in its use as an illustration for "The Creative Act." Perhaps Duchamp's choice of the work merely relates to its similarity in date to "The Creative Act" and its not having been utilized for its original purpose. But, perhaps, there is something thematic linking the drawing to the speech: about the two sides of the jacket which strikes a cord with the two poles of the creative act discussed in the speech.


As we have noted above, Duchamp's history is frequently more complex and contradictory than his various interpreters take the trouble to account for. As Schwarz observes in his discussion of "The Creative Act," Duchamp had throughout his career made several references to the role of the viewer. As evidence, Schwarz quotes a 1955 interview in which Duchamp says, "the viewers are those who make the painting."51 As early as 1915, in one of Duchamp's first English interviews, he was quoted as saying, "People give more to pictures than they take from them."52 How Duchamp viewed that relationship between artist and viewer has not to date been carefully examined within the literature. Certain scholars present parallels between Duchamp's interviews (often taken out of context, with little regard to date), his speech "The Creative Act," and certain semiotic and post-structuralist discourses, the implication often being that they are equivalent.53 Or they make assertions that Duchamp accepted all interpretations of his art works.54 Duchamp's opinion about the role of the spectator was not a static one nor one of unbridled enthusiasm for the judgment of public opinion:

The bore with art, as it is now, is this necessity for having the public on its side. Under the Kings, it was at least a little better: the sanction of a single person, or of a small clique was sufficient. Just as dumb but in smaller numbers...I know, I'll be thought a reactionary and a fascist...but I don't give a damn. The public makes anything look indifferent. Art has nothing to do with democracy.55

53 "One may survey the elements of Duchamp's theory of art and ask whether or not interrelationships constitute a 'semiotic theory'. The conclusion reached in this dissertation is that they do." (Kim Clifton Smith, "Semiotic Theory and The Epistemological Basis For Marcel Duchamp's Approach to Art," Ph.D. Brown University, 1983., p. x.)
54 "Duchamp never denied, as some might have hoped, that certain interpretations of his work had validity." (Carol Lee Plyley James, "The Writings of Marcel Duchamp in the Development of His Poetics," University of Minnesota, Ph.D., 1978, p. 86.)
And as will be examined further in Chapter 5, Duchamp was not quite as ready to surrender to an intrinsic meaning of his works as certain contemporary critics assume. Nor was he always willing to accept the spectator as the arbiter of what constituted an art work:

I have a feeling that if you put something in a lead box and dropped it in a river with a note on it: open in 500 years, this is a masterpiece—and if you put a toothbrush in there, or a typewriter—well all these schools of Africa, isn't that the same thing? That's where my doubts come. There is no criterion. 56

These quotations point to the difficulty in relying on a single statement of Duchamp's about what he "intended." Instead, "The Creative Act" is a more complicated text than merely an articulation of post-structuralist discourse. It is as self-contradictory, open-ended, and historically specific to the moment as the artist's entire œuvre.

56 April 8, 1959 interview with Jerry Talmer, Village Voice, as cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, "Ephemeredes."
Chapter 2

Structural Economic Changes During the 1950s

Introduction

Duchamp's speech "The Creative Act" and the A.F.A. conference where it was delivered occurred in the second half of a decade during which significant economic changes were producing new structural changes in American cultural life. During the 1950s, increasing affluence, an emphasis on domestic life, and an increasing demand in the service sector were factors leading to the growth of the art world. This growth took the form of an increasing interest in a particular segment of American artists, the increasing visibility of artists and aesthetic issues among the general population, and a broader participation in cultural pursuits by the population as a whole. This growth was stimulated by the media's increasing interest in the art world, a phenomenon which, in turn affected the way that the art world presented itself to the larger world. In this chapter, these structural economic changes and their impact on the art world will be explored in detail. Their characteristics will have resonance when we return to a detailed examination of the A.F.A. conference in Chapter 4.

The U.S. Economy in the 1950s

The 1950s have been characterized as the most materially prosperous decade in United States history. Describing the world economy in the two decades immediately following WWII, economist Walt Rostow has said:

[it was] the most remarkable two decades of economic growth in modern history, running from the early 1950's to the price revolution that began in 1972...the average annual rates of growth of both world industrial production (about 5.6 percent) and world trade (about 7.3 percent) in this period exceeded by a substantial margin any before experienced.1

Most histories of the United States during the 1950s are permeated with the images of affluence, particularly when compared to the images of poverty and sacrifice that are associated with the Depression and the war years. During the 1950s, America became accustomed to a standard of prosperity never before experienced. Images of domesticity abounded during the 1950s as more Americans married younger, slowing a rising divorce rate and creating a baby boom. American women were encouraged to return to their roles of wives and mothers in the home, giving up factory jobs and other places of outside employment they had occupied during wartime. According to Rostow, by the late 1950s, America's economy had become virtually saturated with consumer durables:

By 1957, 75 percent of American households owned automobiles; 81 percent, television sets; 96.0 percent refrigerators; 66.7 percent vacuum cleaners; 76.8 percent, washers. Increases over the next decade were inevitably modest: to 78 percent, 97.8 percent, 99.6 percent, 90.6 percent, respectively. Only freezers, dryers, and air conditioners remained still to be installed in 70 percent of American homes by 1967.

Rostow's statistics are revealing for reasons beyond the general state of domestic affluence they relate. They also describe a condition in which the markets for automobiles and durable consumer goods have become saturated. According to Rostow, these industries would not be able to fuel domestic growth beyond the mid-1950s. What was occurring during this period was a structural shift towards the sectors of housing construction, aerospace, and the nascent computer industry, all of which would provide the primary growth during the second half of the decade. Demand within these sectors, coupled with the rapid "increase in outlays in certain service sectors," provided the main source of growth from the mid-1950s and forward into the 1960s. According to Rostow, "the United

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3Rostow, The World Economy, p. 263.
States had more nearly completed the process by the mid-1950s. It faltered and then moved forward in the 1960s, with a different structural balance.\textsuperscript{4}

This changing structural balance is interesting in regard to the 1950s cultural realm. Because it was the developing service sectors which attracted a high proportion of the growing consumer income, expenditures in education, medical services, recreation equipment, and foreign travel, as well as religious and welfare expenditures would more than double over the period 1960-1970:

\begin{center}
Personal Consumption Expenditures by Product in the United States, 1960-1970\textsuperscript{5}  
(Ranked by Order of Percentage Increase)
\end{center}

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.\quad] Private Education \quad 181 \%
\item[2.\quad] Medical care \quad 148 \%
\item[3.\quad] Personal business \quad 122 \%
\item[4.\quad] Foreign travel \quad 118 \%
\item[5.\quad] Recreation \quad 113 \%
\end{itemize}

Although for purposes of this study the data postdates the period in question, it is nonetheless striking because it describes a change in the patterns of consumption for average Americans which, according to Rostow, had begun in the mid- to late-1950s. Americans were buying these goods faster than any others during the period. They were taking part in what has been termed luxury good consumption: private schools, foreign travel, recreation. And within that category of luxury goods, we would also expect to see expenditures in the area of art increase as well.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5}Ben J. Wattenberg, \textit{The Real America}, p. 85, from U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, quoted in Rostow, \textit{The World Economy}, p. 271.
The American Art World in the 1950s

Expenditures did rise for art purchases. However, this increased demand in the "art sector" is less easily quantified and, frankly, tells so little about the resulting changes within the art world as to be superfluous. A humorous example of the attempted integration of the art sector into the world of American business is an article appearing in a 1955 Fortune magazine picking "growth stocks" among certain American painters, including Baziotes, Kline, de Kooning, Motherwell, Pollock, Reinhardt, Rothko, and Still. Even so, such an "investment" indicator does indicate something about the institutional respectability generated by a particular set of artists by mid-century.

Higher artist incomes, higher art prices, and the increasing number of new galleries also provide some sense of the developing art world of the 1950s. Certain influential dealers began describing a discernible pickup in the market for a particular group of the American Abstract Expressionists. Sam Kootz described an abrupt change when "55 suddenly represented a willingness on the part of collectors to suddenly engage themselves in some of the American men." Eleanor Ward, owner of the Stable Gallery, described the years 1955-56 as the "golden years," a time which was stimulated "by Parisians coming over here. The Paris dealers were buying or wanting to show or have American group shows because nothing particular was going on with the exception of a few artists." For Ward, "things started to move around 1955-56." And according to John Bernard Myers, the owner of the Tibor de Nagy gallery:

by 1961 the whole attitude began to change, you know, because once a Pollock sold for $30,000 around 1958, the first-generation people began to sell for like 10,000 or 8,000. The whole market started to go up and up and up."9

Myers' memory is not quite exact: the Pollock painting, "Autumn Rhythm," was sold in 1957, not 1958, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for $30,000. In her study of the market for Abstract Expressionism, Deirdre Robson maintains that it was that Pollock painting which set a new high point in the art market of the 1950s:

[The] painting [had been one] that the Museum of Modern Art had been reluctant to buy for $8,000 before the artist's death. This sale served as an important validation of Abstract Expressionism, for it was the first time that a major museum had bought a painting in this style for a price commensurate with what it might pay for a work by a major European artist...This sale set the ceiling price for Abstract Expressionist work for some years and helped boost prices for the other artists.¹⁰

Robson analyzes the prices of other artists, such as de Kooning whose prices went from a range of $2,000-$2,500 in 1953 to about $15,000-$17,000 by 1959. Similarly, Rothko, Hofmann, and Baziotes had the prices of their work more than double over the decade.¹¹ For Robson, it is the mid-decade which saw the market for Abstract Expressionist painters match the critical acceptance that their work had already achieved by the early 1950s.

An influential dealer and friend to many of the first generation Abstract Expressionists, Betty Parsons remarked that her gallery started to feel pressure in 1952 as artists such as Pollock left her for other, more financially secure galleries such as the Sidney Janis Gallery. Clyfford Still joined Janis in 1953; Kline, Guston, and de Kooning, in 1956; Motherwell in 1957. Dealers such as Parsons, with little capital in reserve, could not compete with the favorable advances on sales and generous monthly stipends that such dealers as Janis were able to offer their artists.¹² Dealing art had become a financial, not just a partisan, matter.

Other evidence alerts one to the structural changes taking place in the cultural arena.

Increased museum attendance and enrollment in university art and art history programs,

¹¹Ibid.
increased exhibition activity, and greater numbers of art spaces, museums, and private collections are part of this. The frequency of articles in general interest magazines about new art and new artists not only provide us with specific information about those artists and attitudes towards their work, but are themselves an indicator of the popularity of such subject matter among a general readership. There are two aspects to the growth in the art market at work here: first, a growing interest by Americans in art and cultural activities in general, and second, an increasing interest in a particular segment of artists, the Abstract Expressionists.

The economist Alvin Toffler, author of the 1970 bestseller *Future Shock*, described a transformation in the American art world in a lesser-known book of 1964, *The Culture Consumer: A Study of Art and Affluence in America*. His explicitly stated intent was to counter a certain cultural elitism within some quarters of the critical community. Nonetheless, Toffler's book provides useful statistics and convincing arguments to account for a distinct change in the art community: "It is my purpose to prove that since the end of the last World War a series of astonishing, and on the whole healthy, changes have transformed the social base of the arts in this country."13

Toffler's descriptions provide useful qualitative as well as quantitative insight into the changes he documents. Cities like Flint, Michigan, and Quincy, Illinois, and Phoenix, Arizona, where in the early 1950s there were only one or two galleries, experienced geometrical growth in these numbers over the decade while gallery revenue increased over fifteen times. New York, which was becoming the capital of the international art world, had the number of its galleries double over the decade to 300. And Toffler's book describes a new spectrum for the art market, ranging from the large and impressive 57th street galleries handling top-priced Old Master paintings to small-scale galleries in communities

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where none had existed before. In suburban neighborhoods, art galleries become integrated into an affluent middle-class lifestyle:

The Raven is a storefront operation nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood [of Detroit]. Started on a shoestring of $5,000 by an art-loving former printer named Herbert Cohen, the tastefully laid-out gallery sells sculpture and paintings from $10 to $2,300, all the work of Michigan artists. To attract the public, Cohen stages chamber music recitals and discussions on cultural subjects for broadcast on WQRS, a local FM station. He serves patrons sandwiches and cafe espresso. In its first year, The Raven counted 40,000 visitors. Such turnouts are no longer uncommon. It is true that the mortality rate among such small (and often under-capitalized) galleries is high. They come and go. But for every one that closes, several new ones spring up to serve the growing army of small collectors.14

In this case, Toffler was describing a demographic shift as galleries became integrated into middle-class American life along with recitals, coffee, and sandwiches. America was becoming more "cultured," as Toffler is eager to substantiate:

Recently, the Stanford Research Institute reported, "The image of the uncultured American has been shattered by a statistical bludgeon," Arnold Mitchell, the S.R.I. economist responsible for this report, predicted that "the trends toward culture will create a total arts market of about $7 billion by 1970." Adds Mr. Mitchell: "I find it somehow quaint that more servicemen visiting New York go to the Museum of Modern Art than to any other attraction except for the Empire State Building."

Mr. Mitchell's servicemen are not oddballs. Americans have become a nation of museum goers, as foreign visitors note with surprise when they make the tourist rounds. A survey of 21 museums alone showed an aggregate attendance of 19,370,000 in 1958. Within two years this had climbed to 21,360,000—a gain of more than ten percent. Across the country museums are making room for unaccustomed crowds.15

Such stories about servicemen who wander through art museums have a correspondence with traditional accounts of the development of modern art in the 1950s. We might recall that Robert Rauschenberg, while in the Navy in the mid-1940s, visited the Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino. It was there, Calvin Tompkins relates, that he was

14 Ibid., p. 19.
15 Ibid., p. 17.
struck by the power of original works of art and where that he received insight into his
future career. Quoting Rauschenberg about the experience of visiting the museum:

what struck him was "that someone had thought those things out and made them. 
Behind each of them was a man whose profession it was to make them. That just 
ever occurred to me before."\textsuperscript{16}

Rauschenberg was among those who swelled the ranks of art schools following WWII,
when funds from the G.I. Bill were being allocated by the government for ex-servicemen
wishing to further their education. Beginning in 1947, more than one million war veterans
took advantage of this funding\textsuperscript{17} which contributed to the growth of university art
programs throughout the country.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Increasing Media Attention on the Art World}

If, as one historian describes, the 1950s has come to be represented to us as an era
of black and white Cold War politics, then it is also an era that is represented through the
black and white images of photography and television:

The fifties were captured in black and white, most often by still photographers: by
contrast the decade that followed was, more often than not, caught in living color
on tape or film...It was in the fifties that the nation became wired for television, a
new medium experimented with by various politicians and social groups. Ten years
later television had begun to alter the political and social fabric of the country with
stunning consequences...In that era of general good will and expanding affluence,
few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society. After all, it was
reflected back at them not only by contemporary books and magazines, but even
more powerfully with even greater influence in the new family sitcoms on
television.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} A Robert Hughes interview with Rauschenberg, \textit{Time}, November 29, 1976 as quoted in Calvin
Tomkins, \textit{Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time}. (New York: Penguin Books,


\textsuperscript{18}Bonnie Clearwater describes the boost in size and creativity that schools such as the California School of
Fine Arts in San Francisco experienced during the influx of serious and mature students under the G.I. Bill.

Indeed, the "stunning consequences" of the fact that eighty-one percent of American homes had televisions by 1957 was described by a contemporary writer, Daniel Boorstin, in a 1961 work, *The Image*. Boorstin with unmistakable alarm described "the world of our making, how we have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology, and our progress, to create the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life."\(^{20}\)

Boorstin formulated some of the theoretical constructs which would be echoed by Jean Baudrillard in the 1970s, proposing another realm of meaning that is constructed purely out of media-perpetuated images and values.\(^{21}\) Boorstin's constructs of the pseudo-event and pseudo-image are useful when turning more specifically to media coverage of the American art world of the 1950s. The recently developed form of the photography magazine was perfectly suited to represent the images which were so hotly in question and the artists whose personalities and lifestyles played a part of the story. Besides the aforementioned * Fortune* magazine article in 1955, other popular general magazines such as *The Saturday Review*, *Time*, *Life*, *Look*, and *Vogue* were, in the 1950s, finding it topical to write feature articles about contemporary artists. *Life*’s profile, "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the U.S.?"\(^{22}\) and *Time* magazine's "Willem the Walover"\(^{23}\) and "The Wild Ones"\(^{24}\) are musing, desultory, and even guardedly positive about the talents of such painters as Pollock, de Kooning, Baziotes, Gorky, Gottlieb, Guston, Motherwell, and Rothko. However, whatever the critical perspective, these articles signal an interest on the part of the general public in the artists and their work.

Particularly useful in analyzing these articles is Boorstin’s conception of the pseudo-image: a media representation, analogous to a movie character, that is radically simplified to the point of conforming to a pattern or type. This prototype is necessary in


\(^{22}\) *Life*, v. 27, no. 6, August 8, 1949, pp. 42-45.

\(^{23}\)“Willem the Walover,” *Time*, April 1950.

\(^{24}\)The Wild Ones," *Time*, February 20, 1956, pp. 70-75.
other, future appearances of the image in order for it to be identified by viewers. Indeed, as Baudrillard would emphasize, the audience comes to seek out, to desire, such signals because they conform to a realm of values the audience has adopted, whether or not they conform to anything in the "real" world.

Characterizations of artists appearing in 1950s media usually stressed a number of key factors, much as representations of art works did, becoming "pseudo-images" in the process. We have already discussed the way in which Duchamp's image of his "absence" from or "indifference" to the American art world was fed by a number of powerful and recurring signs: the photographs of his inactivity within the studio, his preference for the cerebral (chess) over the active (painting) pursuits, and the inability of his projects and activities to be recognized as art-making in the critical framework of the period.

Informing Duchamp's representation in 1950s media was the powerful impact that images of Jackson Pollock had exerted on the popular imagination at that time. The image of Pollock executing his large drip canvases was burned into the psyche of not only the 1950s art world but also the more general Life magazine readership as well.25 Barbara Rose asserts that images of Pollock painting came to stand as signifiers of greatness and radical artistic innovation during the 1950s. And she goes further to suggest that the famous Hans Namuth photographs of the artist were the direct inspiration for Harold Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters," termed by Rose "the manifesto of Abstract Expressionism."26 While Pollock became the representative "action painter," his paintings were representations of the critical values of heroic and original grandeur.27

T.J. Clark sees the Pollock paintings as representing another set of values, the "'primitive,' childish, deviant, lunatic, chaotic."28 Clark analyzes the famous Cecil Beton

25 "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the U.S.?” Life, v. 27, no. 6, August 8, 1949, pp.42-45.
fashion photographs of models in front of Pollock paintings, published in *Vogue* magazine in March 1951 (fig. 8). These photographs are signals that society "wants something" out of these images. In Clark's analysis, by the early 1950s Pollock's paintings had come to signify:

the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, spontaneous, uncontrolled, "existential," the "beyond" or "before" the conscious activities of mind...A poured line with splatters now equals spontaneity... A certain kind of painted interface now can be taken to stand--taken quite casually--for states of mind like rage or elation, another kind of interface for "pure harmony, an easy give and take," and so on.\(^{29}\)

In both Rose's and Clark's analyses, Pollock's painting became powerful symbols through their representations in the media. They became sites for layers of criticism and artist biography to imbue them with meaning (heroic originality and spontaneous emotion). These paintings become representative symbols and, in turn, influenced their audience and the media so that those qualities informed their notion about what art was.\(^{30}\) The "artist," symbolized by Pollock and represented in these magazines, increasingly conforms to the pseudo-image of the modern artist: a singular and independent white male who pursues (with actions, not words) a difficult, original, and popularly misunderstood abstract painting.

Another point about the abundance of these feature articles on art and artists is that they were appearing in large numbers for the first time within general magazines designed for the American middle-class audience. An amusing chart on "Everyday Tastes From High-Brow to Low-Brow" appeared in *Life* magazine in 1949 (fig. 9).\(^{31}\) Such a feature attests to the popular awareness of art as a "high" cultural pursuit. While wryly poking fun at notions of "high culture" and "suburban life-styles" through the classification of…

\(^{29}\)Ibid., 180.


everyday activities and accoutrements, this cartoon also signals the arrival of leisure time pursuits in which cultural events, literature, sculpture, and the fine arts are an integral part.\textsuperscript{32}

A parallel representation to that of "modern art" and the "modern artist" in the media was the representations of the "art expert" and the "art symposium." The period around 1948 has been characterized as a distinctly reactionary one in the American art world.\textsuperscript{33} Two incidents by anti-modern groups garnered much media attention. The first was the deaccessioning of the \textit{Advancing American Art} collection owned by the State Department.\textsuperscript{34} The second involved the controversy around the Museum of Modern Art, Boston, changing its name to The Institute of Contemporary Art.\textsuperscript{35} The museum did so in order to disassociate itself from the word "modern" and its associations with the Abstract Expressionist artists. I raise these incidents to point out the prominent role the media played in providing the stage upon which these battles between pro- and anti-modern forces were waged. Two prominent constructs arising out of these battles were the art symposia and the art expert.

One of the first of the symposia was held in May 1948, organized at The Museum of Modern Art on the topic of "The Modern Art Speaks." It was intended by the pro-modern forces to specifically counter the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art manifesto that was hostile to abstract art. The Boston manifesto had warned modern artists against the withdrawal "from a common meeting ground with the public and the emergence of a cult of

\textsuperscript{32}In his analysis of this article in \textit{Life}, Bradford Collins points to the association between abstract art, a painting by Picasso and sculpture by Maillol and Calder, to values of "the high brow" who, according to the \textit{Life} article, are among the intellectual class which is accorded "true prestige" and who run the "new U.S. social structure." Collins' article analyzes how \textit{Life} magazine was supportive of the values of the Abstract Expressionists and in turn, these artists were accommodating to the requirements of the media in communicating values which were shared by the larger cultural world. (Bradford Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," \textit{The Art Bulletin}, v. LXVIII, no. 2 (June 1991), pp. 291-293.)

\textsuperscript{33}The history of this particular period, and the inter-relatedness of the hot-house atmosphere of the domestic political currents and the ascendancy of The Abstract Expressionists has been most notably analyzed by two authors, Serge Guilbaut, "The Frightening Freedom of the Brush," \textit{Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston}, exh. catalogue (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985) and Michael Leja, \textit{Reframing Abstract Expressionism} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993)


\textsuperscript{35}Guilbaut, "The Frightening Freedom of the Brush"
bewilderment founded on obscurity and negation."36 Giving papers at the symposium were Paul Burlin, Stuart Davis, Adolph Gottlieb, George L.K. Morris, and James Johnson Sweeney. Life magazine previously fanned the flame of the controversy with a small article critical of the work of Burlin, Baziotes, and Morris.37

Intending to examine "the question" of modern art, and, implicitly, to take advantage of a topical controversy, Life magazine organized "A Life Round Table on Modern Art" at the Museum of Modern Art, an account of which was published in its October 11 issue (fig. 10). Under the subheading of "Fifteen Distinguished Critics and Connoisseurs Undertake to Clarify the Strange Art of Today," the symposium is presented in ways characteristic of other defenses of modern art. The first is audience; despite its undeniable intellectual tenor, the seminar was designed and directed towards the Life magazine reader, in order that "the layman, who might otherwise be disposed to throw all modern art in the ashcan, may think twice--and may on second thought reconsider."38

A second aspect involves the composition of the panel assembled. It is invariably characterized as "expert" or "distinguished," the representatives as recognizably accomplished members in their fields: art historians, critics, writers, editors, curators, dealers. (In this case, no artists made the grade of "expert" in the discussion of modern art.)

A third aspect of these forums is the manner in which the question of modern art is framed: modern art is a complex and difficult field in which the experts will struggle, eventually deciphering it. The experts will "agree to disagree," with the conservative critics coming down against the moderns and the progressives defending a modern artist's right to pursue a "free and independent" course:

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38 "A Life Round Table on Modern Art," Life, October 11, 1948, p. 70.
There is no more complicated subject in the world than that of aesthetics. To ask these gentlemen to be honest was, in effect, to ask them to disagree; indeed, as a number of them pointed out, if complete agreement could be reached concerning the important issues of art this would be a sign that painting had become academic. The very essence of the modern movement is variety. Nevertheless on one point the table was unanimous. It did not accept—indeed it denounced—the easy generalization that the layman is inclined to make, that anything exhibiting the characteristics already mentioned, unrecognizability and strangeness, is to be dismissed out of hand. There were "modern" pictures that the "conservatives" admired; and on the other hand there were "conservative" pictures to which the "radicals" at the table gave at least partial approval. The question of the familiarity of subject matter, in other words, was not accepted as the issue. Deeper and more complex questions were involved.  

Issues of the difficulty of modern art, its incomprehensibility before the lay public, the necessity of the interceding, interpreting critic, and the polarization between conservative and progressive critical factions are relayed in the passage above. Such issues became embedded in the debate about modern art which took place throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. Such debates increasingly took place in just this prototypical structure of a symposium where "experts" gather to discuss the "difficult" subject of modern art. Their organizers saw the importance of their conforming to a particular form of organization in order to receive media attention—they were becoming openly acknowledged pseudo-events.  

One example of this acknowledgment of the necessity for media attention came during the organization of another symposia following on the heels of the Life Round Table on Art. The 1949 Western Round Table on Art, in San Francisco, was organized ostensibly to counter what was perceived as a conservative tone in Life's symposia, one hostile to modern art. Douglas MacAgy organized a conference with a more favorable modernist stance, described as "being stacked in favor of the modernists."40 MacAgy was mindful of the requirements of full media attention. If the composition of the panelists was decidedly pro-modern, it would require a charismatic and articulate defender of the conservative anti-modern cause. He found just such a conservative in Frank Lloyd Wright who agreed to take part, responding by way of a pithy telegram: "ALL RIGHT DOUGLAS

39Ibid., p. 64.
40Clearwater, "Trying Very Hard To Think," p. 50.
MACAGY--YOU ASKED FOR IT. I'LL BE THERE."41 MacAgy was delighted. He wrote to the editors of the Magazine of Art hoping to interest them in covering the conference, which, like the popular Life Round Table, would pit pro- and anti-modern forces against one another: "So far it looks combustible enough, don't you think? Wright wired in reply: 'All right, Douglas MacAgy, you asked for it. I'll be there.' Our Wright was Life's Taylor. Thought you'd be interested in the development."42

Photos of the event subscribe to much the same format as the Life Round Table (fig. 6): intent, formally attired, and accomplished men discussing the serious subject of modern art. As Gregory Bateson, a participant in the 1957 A.F.A. conference would write:

There in that room, were a bunch of guys trying to think. We were most of us prima donnas, and from time to time we stopped thinking to try to pull off an epigram. But still--a bunch of guys trying to think. Still more difficult, we were trying to think aloud and trying to communicate with each other-- trying to get things clear which have never been gotten clear. 43

During the period 1948 to 1949 artists themselves began organizing into informal discussion groups and entering the fray of media representations of artists and art symposia. In the summer of 1949 Barnett Newman initiated a series of Friday night lectures which eventually became known as The Club. These sessions became increasingly formalized around a membership roster and scheduled speakers.44 It was at sessions such as these that artists grew familiar with such forums of lecture and debate, and they gained experience with articulating the values they and their paintings possessed. In April 1950 many of the artists involved in the Friday night sessions decided to hold a symposium for purposes of documenting a serious discussion of modern art among some twenty-six artists. The symposium was called the "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," and the three-day discussion was photographed, recorded, transcribed, edited, and a year later, published in

41Ibid.
43September 8, 1949 letter from Gregory Bateson to Charlotte Devree, San Francisco Art Association Papers, AAA, roll 2431, fr. 621.
44Philip Pavia Parpers, AAA, roll D176.
Motherwell's Modern Artists in America. I am not interested in analyzing the proceedings beyond noting that the documentation of this discussion was a serious attempt to record the ideas expressed by the artists. I would also perhaps note that the photograph of one of the sessions (fig. 11) portrays these artists, known as "action painters," sitting around a circular table, formally attired, wrestling with serious questions, and perhaps discussing some of the abstract paintings which are on the surrounding walls. It portrays artists themselves adopting the role of experts, conforming to the media requirements of the art symposium.

In summary, by analyzing the composition of the American art world during the 1950s, we can document not only structural change in the form of an increase in the numbers of people attending museums and galleries, the increased numbers of those pursuing art educations, and increasing prices and respectability of artists, but also the corresponding cultural impact of those numbers. As pursuits involving the arts became more and more a feature of middle-class life, the frequency of their representation within media outlets, particularly the printed media, increased. The media both generates and fulfills popular demand for representations of art and of artists. One result of such attention was the appearance by the early 1950s of the pseudo-event of the art symposia and the pseudo-image of the art expert. Within the increasingly institutionalized debate between conservative and modernist forces, the art expert emerged: a serious and thoughtful man, driven to ponder and capable of explaining the difficult and popularly remote products of artists. Such pseudo-images are part of an art discourse influenced by not only structural economic changes and developing forms of media but also by the intellectual and political climate we will explore in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

Factors Influencing Art Discourse in the United States

Introduction

This chapter builds towards a discussion of the form that art discourse took during the 1950s, in order that, in the following chapters, we might compare it to the nature of the 1957 A.F.A. conference design and discussions and, in particular, to Duchamp's speech, "The Creative Act." Obviously, the art discourse of a particular time period is determined within a complex system of cultural influences. We have already discussed the economic changes in the 1950s leading to new audiences and a new demand for American Abstract Expressionist art. The development of new forms of media outlets also influenced the way in which art and artists were seen, spoken about, and integrated into daily life. In this chapter, the political and intellectual climate of the 1950s will be addressed. Intellectual and political discourse are, in fact, embedded within the forces of structural economic change, so their separation is an artificial one. I have in this chapter, however, chosen to focus on the specifics of how intellectual currents, interwoven with political pressures, resulted in the particular forms artistic discourse took both in the United States and in France.

It is important to include a section on French art discourse beyond the obvious reason that Duchamp as a Frenchman would have been part of artistic discussions occurring in his native language. American art discourse during the 1950s was profoundly marked by French exile artists living in the United States during WWII. The United States continued to be influenced by such French intellectual currents as Existentialism in the immediate post-war world. Moreover, during the time of America's ascendency to economic and political leadership in the West, the international art capital moved from Paris to New York. Intellectual exchange between the two capitals continued to be fluid throughout the 1950s.
America's Post-World War II Political Climate

As historian Lary May has pointed out, the 1950s was a unique decade for reasons beyond its unprecedented material prosperity. While the United States has often maintained international economic alliances throughout its history, previous to the Cold War period, it had defined a national identity that was isolated from political and military alliances. During the 1950s, however, the U.S. moved into the international arena with major treaties, commitments of foreign aid, and defense pacts throughout the globe. April 1948, began the Marshall Plan in which over $17 billion in economic aid was committed to Europe. The following year the U.S. Assistance Bill committed an additional $5.43 billion. The Cold War began in 1948, and in the next year President Truman initiated the North American Treaty calling for the mutual defense of Western countries. In June 1950, the Korean War began.

Another unique characteristic of the decade was the particular virulence and duration of the Red Scare which developed as a result of the Cold War. It had unprecedented power to alter what had been, until then, America's traditional policies hostile to a defense establishment and international involvement. And domestically, the Red Scare launched a series of investigations and trials which, because of intensive media coverage, created a nationwide atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and alienation, especially among its intellectuals and artists. Beginning in 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities came to Hollywood for a series of televised hearings in which artists who wished to work were pressured to "name names" of their former communist associates. In 1949 eleven communist party members were found guilty of attempting to overthrow the government. In 1950 McCarthy advised Truman that the government was riddled with communists. This was also the year that Alger Hiss was sentenced for perjury and Klaus Fuchs was found guilty of betraying British atomic secrets to the U.S.S.R. Harry Gold, his American confederate, was sentenced to thirty years in prison. With 1951 began the trials which

1 Lary May, "Introduction," Recasting America, pp. 3-4.
ultimately convicted and executed Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage against the United States. By 1954, the worst of the communist witch hunts were over when, following McCarthy's televised attempt to prove Communist infiltration of the U.S. Army, the Senate formally censured and condemned him. By 1956-1957, the Cold War had settled into an uneasy truce defined by Eastern and Western spheres of influence, and domestically the nation began to focus on the civil rights movement that had formally begun in 1955 with the Montgomery bus boycott.

The Intellectual Climate in America During the 1950s

According to many historians and writers of the 1950s, one of the predominant self-images of the period was of a society that, while materially prosperous, was stultifying, conformist, and increasingly dominated by corporate culture:

...bureaucracy depersonalizes human relationships and encourages conformity. Standardized rules kill the spontaneity of natural human relations. Jobs are defined neatly. Lines of authority are spelled out with exactitude. Communication in the organization becomes increasingly formalized. A memo world is created. Paper stockades begin to fence people in. The results of this process were depicted in the flood of fiction and popular sociology that rained down upon Americans in the 'fifties and early 'sixties: The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit; The Status Seekers; The Organization Man; The Lonely Crowd. The mid-century American, we learned, was being suffocated by the all-enveloping standardization...

We find Toffler's period evocation of a stifling uniformity of culture present within many forms of critical discourse of the period. The anonymity, conformity, and materialism of 1950s culture were conditions intellectuals of the period saw themselves confronting. Jackson Lears describes "the tendency to perceive mass consumption and conformity as the defining characteristics of postwar American society." In his evocative analysis of one of the most popular and representative books of the mid-1950s, The Organization Man (1956), Lears describes the perplexity of the intellectual man who, believing that his

2Toffler, The Culture Consumers, p. 48.
fundamental economic problems had been solved, was left desiring an "ultimate end, a national or personal purpose." A pervading sense of spiritual disappointment remains which cannot quite be articulated:

William H. Whyte, an editor at Fortune, expressed that feeling in his enormously influential The Organization Man (1956). "The fruits of social revolution are always more desirable in anticipation than fact, and the pink lamp shade in the picture window can be a sore disappointment to those who dreamed that the emancipation of the worker might take a more spiritual turn," he wrote. "It is a sight, however, that we can well endure."

Whyte's "pink lamp shade in the picture window" was a significant choice of symbols. He implied that poor taste was a small price to pay for the economic "emancipation" of the majority of the population; criticism that focused on taste alone was, from this view, a dilettantish luxury. At the same time, though, Whyte--like many of those who were less able to endure the pink lamp shade in the picture window--tended to conflate aesthetics with more general "spiritual" issues. If one assumed that Americans' common condition was a prosperous homogeneity, then the very sameness that signified the spread of economic security also revealed the rise of a new cultural presence, less palpable than poverty but not a whit less alarming: the specter of conformity.4

Lears is describing a growing intellectual preoccupation with aesthetics which had become imbued with quasi-spiritual and redemptive values in a modern life that was psychically, if not materially, difficult. According to Lears, the intellectual could play a critical role in society by "assaulting conformity, promoting more diverse and challenging standards of taste, and serving as a kind of high-grade consumer advisor."5 Aesthetic pursuits were not only politically safe, but they were one of the few remaining places were meaning could be found in contemporary culture. Again, Toffler provides the period flavor of what was at stake in an individual's interest in art:

If life is gray, art is vivid. If life is clock-bound, art is spontaneous and, at least in appearance, uninhibited. On a very superficial or sensuous level, art brings color, variety, and "differentness" into life...The same is true in the emotional realm. Psychologist Rudolf Arnheim reminds us that much of the so-called emotional experience of daily life is very thin. It occurs within a very narrow band ranging from a pleasant tickle to mild irritation. These are, in a sense, retail emotions. But in art you are exposed to genuine emotional experience that reaches far beyond the ordinary.

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4Ibid., p. 44.
5Ibid., p. 45.
The focus on the aesthetic was taking place within a society increasingly preoccupied with the rejection of communism. As Serge Guilbaut describes, the rise of an aesthetic discourse that placed a premium on individual freedom of expression coincided with the rise of the ideology of post-war liberalism, and its emphasis on individuality, risk, and the new frontier.6 Such an ideology was set forth in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949), an influential book in which the new liberalism was situated midway between fascism and communism. As Guilbaut states:

Liberals saw themselves as equally hostile to fascism and communism, both totalitarian systems that sought to destroy freedom, Freedom, moreover, was thought to be inextricably intertwined with individualism. The concept of freedom is the central thread of Schlesinger's book, which ends with a chapter entitled "Freedom: A Fighting Faith."... The book makes fun of the naive and simplistic analyses on which the left had relied in the thirties. It sees man in the context of an industrial environment, beset by existential anguish. Anxiety (solitude, alienation) was in fact quite fashionable after the war.7

Guilbaut goes on to describe how against a backdrop of avant-garde painting in which anxiety was a central theme, Schlesinger's "new man" was a similar consequence of modern alienation and fallibility. Within this existential climate, individual action was the only outlet. For Guilbaut the activist foreign policy climate of late 1940s and early 1950s (the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, an expanding program of the dissemination of information abroad about American culture) does not accidentally coincide with the domestic popularity of quintessential action painters such as Pollock or the fact that Abstract Expressionism was the first American art movement to dominate the international art scene. For Guilbaut, the cultural is intrinsically tied to the political and economic conditions of its history.

Lears reminds us that aesthetic issues carried unprecedented weight during the period, and, it was particularly a focus on the literary which came to the fore in intellectual

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7Ibid., pp. 191-192.
circles. Lears and others point to the dominance of New Criticism during the 1950s—the tendency to elevate the text above the vicissitudes of history or biography. Literary critics acquired a disproportionate influence on the cultural scene. At a 1956 symposium at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "The Role of the Intellectual in Modern Society," W.H. Auden looked around to the other panel members and noticed all were writers and literary critics. His remarks were to the effect that had the panel been conducted in the Middle Ages, it would have been composed of mostly clergy; in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, mostly natural scientists; and in the twentieth century, "we are mostly literary men."\(^8\)

The preeminence of literary figures, led off by T.S. Eliot in particular, is confirmed by other historians of the period. Jeffery Hart described a poetry reading by T.S. Eliot at Columbia University in 1957:

Even Faculty members had difficulty getting tickets, and people were crowded into the windows and doors, and listening outside to Eliot over loudspeakers.

No modern writer has possessed an authority comparable to Eliot's in the Forties and Fifties, not Joyce, not Hemingway. Eliot had an authority backed up by his poems but also by his criticism, the most influential in English. His authority was backed by his intellectual and emotional career, a journey toward God. He was a modern Dante. His mere presence was overwhelming.\(^9\)

T.S. Eliot was the touchstone of New Criticism, and Eliot's notion that the poem itself, rather than its connections to life, should be the chief focus of a critic's attention had ramifications in terms of analytical emphasis.\(^10\) For the New Critic, every virtue had to do with sticking to the text, the text from which commentary, measurement, and analysis could proceed outward, objectively and impersonally.

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At odds with the New Critical approach which found favor in the United States was one being developed in France associated with the *nouveau roman* and the writers Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. French New Criticism was most visibly and eloquently defended by Barthes and whose first book, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, was published in 1953. Through that work and a second, Michelet of 1954, plus a collection of essays written between 1954 and 1956 and assembled in *Mythologies* of 1957, Barthes established his literary critical method which called into question the ability of language to objectively analyze a subject. For Barthes, a text, be it literature or a television program, was a product of both the style and the language with which it was composed. It could never escape that historical moment. Nor, for that matter, could interpretation escape being a product of an author’s particular moment, his approximation in language of that original text. For Barthes, in critical analysis, sticking to the text was not a virtue; it was a deception. Because there is no objective text, there is only the critical statement full of the prejudices and personality of the analyst.\(^\text{11}\)

In their extreme positions, the American and French literary critical methods are at polar ends:

While some New Critics realized it was not always possible to keep oneself out of the critical process, such subjective adulation was something to overcome and not to encourage. Barthes, on the other hand, goes so far as to identify the critical process with subjectivity. If history can be looked on as the repository of objects and events firmly beyond our subjective tampering then Barthes cries out sacrilegiously that history and subjectivity are the same thing.\(^\text{12}\)

This schism between the way the American and French literary critics approached their analysis of the text would have ramifications beyond the literary sphere. It has been noted that in the American intellectual community aesthetic discourse and, in particular, literary issues carried unprecedented weight. One explanation for this preoccupation is the aligning of values of individuality and "free" exploration (values possessed by the aesthetic) with


\(^\text{12}\) Ibid.
the doctrine of anti-communism. As a result, aesthetic explorations not only contained the promise of release from a politicized and alienating daily existence, but they also carried the weight of transcendent universality.

The 1950s: The Form Discourse Took in The American Art World

We have already touched on the way in which literary discourse captured the imagination of the 1950s intellectuals and how "literary men" came to exert a great deal of influence on American cultural life. This influence is no exception when it comes to the way in which artists and critics discussed art in the 1950s. Writers were often called on to participate in art symposia. Artists were frequently asked about the influence of literature on their art works. And, as was the case in the Anglo-American literary school of New Criticism, there was within American art discourse a surprising unity of approach in regard to the way in which an art object stood apart from the vulgarities of its context.

In her important research into the nature of the dominant forms of discourse in the 1950s, Ann Gibson focused on the content and editorial policies of artist-run publications of the period. She describes a uniformity in the views expressed, so much uniformity as to constitute a "theory" of Abstract Expressionism:

Abstract Expressionists held surprisingly coherent views about the necessity of unintelligibility, abstraction, and expressiveness. They displayed a body of convictions which may be grouped around their belief in the importance of improvisational, or spontaneous, creative procedures...it becomes clear that their relatively consistent choice of certain images, themes, subjects, manners of expression, attitudes toward the viewer, and creative process suggests the existence of a body of unstated "theory."\textsuperscript{13}

According to Gibson, the image present in artists' statements of the period is that of an essential isolation coupled with the inexpressibility of meaning. Mark Rothko's 1947 statement that the great achievements of painting of the past centuries of the human figure

could only be used "to form a tableau vivant of human incommunicability," is typical of this attitude.

This essential alienation is also echoed in traditional histories of the 1950s art world that saw artists turning inwards towards a focus on their art work, away from the pressures of conforming to political beliefs and popular understanding posed by a mass public:

They felt alienated...and most retreated from politics and turned inward. In fact, history-minded art consciousness and psychiatry replaced social consciousness as major interests after World War II. Proof of this change was the almost total absence of political discussions at The Club.

The creation of a "family art" by artists who felt the need to organize themselves into a kind of community can be viewed in a larger social context as a reaction against the social climate in America during the fifties...Artists were contemptuous of what they believed American society and its dominant culture had become after World War II (and very much as a result of the war), that is, a mixed welfare and garrison state in which a huge new middle class was achieving the American dream of affluence and, in the process, was embracing conservative, corporate, and suburban values with so little critical questioning that the nation seemed to be in the throes of a massive social conformity.15

In his description of the family of artists retreating from a conformist, corporate culture, Irving Sandler is very much echoing what we have found to be the dominant self-representation of all segments of the intellectual community: a world view of alienation and retreat in which American society as a whole participated during the 1950s.

This isolation was a short step away from the rejection of the viewing public, and according to Gibson, "some of the Abstract Expressionists (like Reinhardt and Gottlieb) rejected hesitant and negative audience response with exasperation, preferring to let events within the act of creating a work stand for the largely absent interaction between the work and potential viewers." 16 These characterizations of alienation and rejection of the spectator were voiced by David Hare during the "Artists' Session at Studio 35":

I see no need for a community. An artist is always lonely. The artist is a man who functions beyond or ahead of his society. In any case seldom within it. I think our problem would seem to be fundamentally psychological. Some feel badly because they are not accepted by the public. We shouldn't be accepted by the public. As soon as we are accepted, we are no longer artists but decorators. Sometimes we think if we could only explain to the public, they would agree with us. They may agree in the course of years. They won't agree now... they should not agree now.17

Gibson distinguishes between two phases of Abstract Expressionist discourse, the early phase in the mid-1940s during which there was a concern for the quest for a universal and authentic meaning and the mature phase by the mid-1950s during which artists became disillusioned by the possibility of expressing such meanings and focused instead on the physical and psychological resources they could bring to bear on the search itself.

This transition occurring in the mid-1950s found expression through the modernist criticism of Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Both critics found widespread acceptance by the artists of the period and created a powerful frame of reference for the criticism of Abstract Expressionist painting from the mid-1950s and into the 1960s. Examining the approaches of these two influential critics, Gibson has observed that they provided a way to avoid the difficulties inherent in interpreting Abstract Expressionist work that was, paradoxically, "about" the inexpressible.18

Greenberg's definition of modernism as "the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself" comes from a 1965 essay "Modernist Painting," but it was present throughout his writings from the 1940s and 1950s. Such an approach could be distilled into the dicta "form is content," and artists echoed the sentiment with a skepticism for discussion of anything outside of formal issues: "I don't understand, in a

painting, the love of anything except the love of painting itself. If there is agony, other than
the love of painting, I don't know exactly what kind of agony that would be."¹⁹

For Rosenberg, it was the creative process, the actions and decisions of the artist
acting in the arena of the canvas, which produced meaning. The canvas was only residue of
this heroic action. By looking through the lens of an artist working on a painting,
Rosenberg's well-known 1952 essay "The American Action Painters" encouraged a
preoccupation with explorations into the exact moment of creation, the creative act:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after
another as an arena in which to act...What was to go on the canvas was not a
picture but an event...A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of
the artist. The painting itself is a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of his
life...The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's
existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and
life.²⁰

In Rosenberg's essay we observe a conflation in which the very activity of painting and the
personality of the artist are perceptible from the marks on the canvas. As soon as painting
was seen as a tangible sign of the artist's activity, it also became shorthand for deeper
issues such as the artist's psyche or questions of metaphysical existence. Criticism like
Rosenberg's provided the framework which allowed images of artists at work to become
charged with a special, indeed a heroic, significance.

According to critic Philip Hayward, this "extreme 'fetishization' of the actual
moment of creation"²¹ influenced a number of films. Hans Namuth's "Jackson Pollock" is
one example, in which the filmmaker endeavored to both capture the artist in "the act of
creation" and provide a documentary record of his technique. Similarly, a symposium
which took place in the pages of Art Digest magazine in 1954 was meant to address "The

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¹⁹From April 22, 1950 session of "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," Modern Artists in America, p. 15.
²⁰Harold Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," Art News (December 1952) as quoted in Barbara Rose,
²¹Ibid., p. 9.
Creative Process."22 In reality, the "symposium" was an article that printed replies to questions addressed to eight artists. The questions ranged from the mundane (Do you work each day and keep regular hours?), to the inspirational (Do music and literature inspire any of your works?), to the social (Is the sense of an artistic community important to your work?). The widerange of replies makes it difficult to generalize about them. However, it is possible to look at the exercise itself and notice that its exclusive focus is on artists to define the creative process.

The 1950s: The Form Discourse Took In The French Art World

As Ann Gibson has analyzed, there were fairly consistent themes within American art discourse throughout the period of modernist criticism in the 1950s and early 1960s. Like the intellectual community in general, American artists articulated feelings of alienation as a reaction to political pressures and the demands of a mass audience. American artists rarely acknowledged the spectator and shunned a sense of community. Critics like Greenberg and Rosenberg provided a critical framework popular with artists of the period in which values of abstraction, unintelligibility, and expressiveness were present. Likewise, artists favored working methodologies that included improvisational and spontaneous creative procedures.

The situation in France was less straightforward. The economic and psychic devastation caused by their occupation during WW II did not immediately disappear after 1944. As Tony Judt observes, the French intellectual community occupied a uniquely influential position in relation to the rest of Europe in the wake of Germany's destruction and cold war political divisions.23 And given the morally ambiguous and uncertain state of post-war Europe, communism held an attraction for the intellectual Left in France. In the immediate post-war climate, French intellectuals were involved in radical political and post-

colonial causes. They did not shun them under the guise of anonymity, disillusionment, or aestheticism as their American counterparts did. Besides, American post-war culture was one of black and white, anti-communist absolutes; it didn't tolerate the political activism on the part of its artists and intellectuals as French culture did.

During the mid-decade of the 1950s, France's economic recovery had begun to accelerate rapidly. Particularly after the disillusionment provoked by Khrushchev's speech of February 1956, in which the leader of the communist world attacked the crimes and failings of the Stalin era, French intellectuals turned to other concerns. As Judt describes:

Ex-Communists turned to their academic and professional careers, the intellectual journals found other arenas in which to display their concerns, and the theory and practice of Marxism were diverted into ever narrower and more esoteric paths...The special claims to attention of the French intelligentsia were now channeled through more abstruse media, with Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, and their heirs replacing the generation of Camus and Sartre. The audience for French thought shifted quite noticeably from eastern and southeastern Europe to Britain and the United States, where the earlier, self-consciously political engagements of the postwar intellectuals had met less sympathy but which now found in the structuralist and poststructuralist discourse of a new generation a language no less exotically and ambitiously Parisian but easier to assimilate to the apolitical traditions of Anglo-American high culture.  

However, a decade earlier, Existentialism, most visibly championed by Jean-Paul Sartre, had emerged as one of the most powerful philosophical constructs to engage artists and critics of Paris' post-war generation. As Frances Morris describes, Existentialism spread quickly through books, plays, and journalism in post-war Paris. The distillation of its message, that pre-existing moral codes have little to do with an authentic existence, provided a resonance to Parisians who had lived through the Occupation years. The important construct of alienation and its alleviation through decisive individual action had

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parallels in both the Parisian and the American art worlds. Sartre's writings were influential, and art featured centrally within his philosophical enterprise:

Creative endeavor was, naturally, of crucial significance to a philosophy which called upon man to seek his own essence, defining himself through his actions. Sartre drew on the artist as a paradigm for authentic existence: "in life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait." To this moral imperative Sartre adds another, insisting on a tabula rasa: "As everyone knows there are no aesthetic values a priori...no one can tell what the painting of tomorrow will be like."26

According to Morris, another writer at least as influential as Sartre to post-war Paris was his close friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work developed from the same roots as Sartre is (the writings of the Germans Husserl and Heidegger and the Frenchmen Henri Gergson and Gaton Bachelard) but soon diverged:

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical texts and his writings on art and artists focus on the problem of perception. His second philosophical treatise, Phenomenology of Perception (1945), countered Sartre's vision of man's consciousness with an alternative model in which mind and body are unified both in perception and in the creative act. It was Merleau-Ponty's writing more than anything else that so radically redefined the role of the body and bodily action for contemporary art practice. The body was, stressed Merleau-Ponty, man's anchor in the world, the interface between consciousness and the world of objects and materials.27

Because Merleau-Ponty largely confined himself to academic and philosophical texts, he was less popular than Sartre, but his position as political editor and co-founder of the journal Les Temps Modernes nonetheless meant he played an influential role as political thinker from 1945 until he resigned in 1952. (Gibson cites Les Temps Modernes as readily available in New York and an important influence on Lionel Abel, the editor of the New York-based journal Instead, which published between 1945 and 1948. There were fluid connections between Paris and this journal, which published the work of such French

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27Ibid., p. 22.
artists as Antoin Artaud, Guillaume Apollinaire, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, André Breton, Andrea Caffi, Marcel Duchamp, and André Gide.\textsuperscript{28}

Another French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, was a broadly influential presence throughout the century, exerting a wide-ranging influence on the Surrealist, the Existentialist and the post-structuralist circles in Paris. Bachelard was a thinker of enormous breadth, whose expertise ranged from science and engineering, to philosophy and literary criticism. Bachelard's publications between 1928 and 1961 proved a primary influence on the French New Criticism. (Barthes' essay "Myth Today," contained within \textit{Mythologies}, gives credit to Bachelard as an early pioneer of new forms of literary criticism.)

Mary Ann Caws’ study of Bachelard\textsuperscript{29} closely links his literary criticism and, more particularly, his ideas about the literary imagination to those of André Breton. Breton often referred to Bachelard's theories of \textit{surrationalisme}, and Bachelard's ideas are so often linked to Surrealism that he has frequently been called the "philosopher of Surrealism."\textsuperscript{30}

What was significant about Bachelard’s so-called "epistemological break" was his dethroning of the bases of scientific knowledge and his undermining of deductive knowledge systems such as those constructed by Descartes and Kant. As scientific knowledge increased in the modern age it "broke" with common knowledge and shared less in common with "good sense" which could be proved through deductive methods. In Bachelard's non-Cartesian epistemology:

\begin{quote}
The rational subject is no longer sovereign, no longer autonomous, identical and unchanging, but rather transcended, upheld, created and recreated by something other than itself, by the non-self, by the discursive, dialectical, dynamic relationship between reason and reality.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} Gibson, \textit{Theory Undeclared}, pp. 84-86.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 12.
For Bachelard, the disciplines of mathematics and poetry had a great deal in common, particularly in the modern age of abstract symbols. He saw both as a form of language which could sustain infinite possibilities. Equation and image both break with everyday experience and become vehicles of exploration in the infinite and unknown. In his earliest published work, his 1927 doctoral thesis, he discussed mathematics in terms of "difference." He described an equation as a structure of that difference, the equal sign establishing the difference between the known and unknown.

One of the most significant aspects of Bachelard's thinking is that he does not polarize the two areas of science and humanism. Mathematics and poetry, two disciplines which use language most effectively, show how inadequate polarizations such as "outside" and "inside" are. One of Bachelard's most evocative metaphors is the spiral, likening "man's being to a spiral."\(^{32}\) The spiral is an image of movement and energy and, more important, one with no center.

One final writer we must include within the influential strains of French post-war thought is Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose friendship and influence is interwoven among many writers discussed already. Lévi-Strauss' 1962 work *La Pensée sauvage* was dedicated to the memory of Merleau-Ponty, who had died in 1961. Lévi-Strauss made the voyage to New York during wartime exile in 1941 aboard the same ship as André Breton, a trip evoked in a passage from *Triste Tropiques* (1955), in which the beginnings of a thoughtful friendship unwinds during the long stretches of time spent on board:

La 'racaille' comme disaient les gendarmes, comprenait, entre autres, André Breton et Victor Serge. André Breton, fort mal à l'aise sur cette galère, déambulait de long en large sur les rares espaces vides du pont; vêtu de peluche, il ressemblait à un ours bleu. Entre nous, une durable amitié allait commencer par un échange de lettres qui se prolongea assez longtemps au cours de cet interminable voyage, et où nous discutions des rapport entre beauté esthétique et originalité absolue.\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 14.

Lévi-Strauss was among those that Breton brought on his wartime radio program "La Voix de l'Amérique parle aux Français" in March 1942, and following Breton's publication of Arcane 17 in 1944, Lévi-Strauss wrote him a letter full of praise for "l'équilibre parfait entre la forme littéraire, la pensée philosophique et l'inspiration poétique. Les trois éléments jouent et s'entrelacent comme des rayons lumineux traversant un cristal."

During wartime in New York, Lévi-Strauss was a fellow teacher with the pioneering semiotican Roman Jakobson at the École Libre des Hautes Études. It was there, attending his lectures, that Lévi-Strauss was introduced to structural linguistics and thereafter declared himself a disciple of Jackobson. Lévi-Strauss was a pioneer in his application of semiotic theory to anthropological study. At its most basic definition, Semiotics is the study of language and meaning. Using some basic terminology to discuss the behavior of language (signifier/signified; icon/index/symbol), social scientists like Lévi-Strauss described the behavior of language, myth, and kinship systems within a particular society. A fundamental tenant of semiotics is that meaning, communicated through a human sign system such as language, is not an absolute, but rather a socially agreed upon, historically specific determination.

In France throughout the first half of the twentieth century, one sees recurring themes involving the destabilization of the subject from its surrounding context. From Bachelard to Merleau-Ponty, through Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, there is a common concern with perception and how meaning is ascribed to a text. By the late 1950s, these concerns had manifested in art discourse as an awareness of the complex set of relations between he artist, the art work, and the way it is understood by society.

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34"Chronology," Andre Breton: La beauté convulsive, p. 351.
35May 25, 1945 letter from Lévi-Strauss to Breton cited in "Chronology" Andre Breton: La beauté convulsive, p. 357.
Chapter 4

The American Federation of Arts Conference

Introduction

Having in the previous two chapters described some of the general economic, political, and intellectual conditions affecting art discourse in the United States during the 1950s, I will now discuss the 1957 A.F.A. convention in detail. The exposition of this chapter will reveal many correspondences between national and local forms of institutional and structural change, as well as a continuity in the form of artistic discourse. The A.F.A., like other institutions in the art world, grew in prominence in the post-WWII cultural climate. It became visible not only for its role in circulating exhibitions to localities that were newly interested in the arts but also from U.S. governmental sponsorship of the A.F.A.'s overseas exhibition tours. The A.F.A. supported the values of American modernism, using exhibitions and its annual conventions as platforms to expose the Abstract Expressionists who were growing in prominence throughout the art world during the period. Not necessarily an organization at the vanguard of promoting the American modernists, the A.F.A. nonetheless had board members who were powerful promoters of those interests. These individuals' experience and familiarity with the media made it a prominent and powerful device in advancing organizational aims.

The site of the A.F.A.'s 1957 convention, Houston, Texas, was a fast-growing and rapidly prospering city, the national headquarters for the petroleum industry, and the location for one of the most modern and busiest international ports in the United States. Houston was developing an interest in the arts, and its Contemporary Arts Museum had been founded in 1948, acquiring its first professional director by 1955 (fig. 12). The popularity of this conference, in which over sixty percent of the attendees were from Texas, attests to the regional interest in a conference devoted to discussions of modern art.
As we will examine in detail, the plans for the design of the panel discussions correspond to patterns which had been established within the art world throughout the first half of the decade. The media attention, actively encouraged by the organizers of the conference, was considerable, because the conference corresponded closely to what the media recognized as the way in which modern art was "debated"--the forum of the art symposium. Although, the convention's speeches and exhibitions resonate with forms of discourse heard throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, by 1957 certain structures, such as the "art symposium" and the defensive, alienated tone of rhetoric present in some speeches, had become firmly accepted. There are even suggestions of their having become institutionalized and somewhat stale. Duchamp's speech, which we will examine in detail in the following chapter, represented within the context of the convention not only a variant French intellectual tradition unique to his history, but also the diversity present within American discourse of the time.

The A.F.A. in 1957

The 1957 convention was the annual meeting of the A.F.A., an organization which, as it does today, circulated exhibitions nationally and abroad. It also promoted art educational activities and informational exchange among its membership of artists and small-scale arts organizations. The A.F.A. had never received, nor would it ever again receive, the national media focus that it did in 1957.¹

Incorporated in 1916, the primary activity of the organization was to originate and distribute traveling exhibitions. The staff of the A.F.A. during the 1950s did not number more than five persons at any one time: a director, president, administrator, and various assistants to carry out publicity and other administrative support tasks. In 1955, the

¹By 1959, a crisis of identity had struck, precipitated by an increasing operating deficit which engendered discussions of folding the organization into the American Association of Museums and the commissioning of a management consultant's study of the organization. December 17, 1958 letter from Bartlett Hayes, Jr., Director Phillips Academy Gallery of American Art to Roy Neuberger, President of A.F.A., A.F.A. files, box 4, AAA; Report, "New Dimensions for The American Federation of Arts," a report to The Board of Trustees from John G. Holmes Associates, Inc., May 16, 1958 A.F.A. files, box 4, AAA.
organization derived approximately sixty-five percent of its income from touring exhibitions and the rest from membership dues. By 1957, the A.F.A. could point with pride to the 100 shows,

circulating to museums and art centers throughout the U.S., her neighbors and possessions... In the belief that international understanding can be created through cultural exchange, the Federation conducts an active foreign program, whereby shows are originated for circulation to many parts of the world, and exhibitions from abroad are brought to the United States.3

Another implicit aim of the organization was to support American artists. In the words of a 1957 press release, "mindful of its aim to encourage American artists, the Federation also endeavored to promote sales..."4 Alfred H. Barr who had been a board member between 1949-1958, obviously favored many of the first-generation Abstract Expressionist artists who were shown in the Museum of Modern Art during the late 1940s and 1950s.5 Throughout his tenure, Barr was constantly urging the A.F.A. to take a leadership role in the issue of "artistic freedom" (i.e., the un-coupling of the issue of artistic expression from

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3 "History and Background of American Federation of Arts, New York City," A.F.A. records, box 10, "Convention Speakers Program" file, AAA.
4 Ibid.
5 "Regarding the Museum of Modern Art's support of the American vanguard before they became accepted in the wider art world, there is an interesting exchange of letters between Barr and Art News' editor Thomas Hess in September of 1957. In retrospect, Barr describes the museum's record during the 1940s and early 1950s in its support of such artists as Gorky, Pollock, Tomlin, Hofmann, de Kooning, Motherwell and Baziotes. While taking issue with the amount support and just how early it came, Hess concedes that "Mr. Barr is probably the most informed, courageous and efficacious champion modern art has had since Apollinaire." (Alfred Barr, "Editor's letters," Art News, September 1957, pp. 6, 56-58.)

Putting a humorous perspective on this discussion between two representatives of the modernist establishment is a second letter to the editor which followed in December of 1957. Calling attention to the arrival of another American vanguard and accusing the magazine of being slow to acknowledge it the writer said:

The Museum of Modern Art vs. Art News letter and answer is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. If you really wish to point a way to fresher, more creative directions in contemporary art, if you finally admit you are playing just as safe as the august institutions on Fifty-third Street and if you believe that 'difficulty' accompanies good new work, then you could mention to the Museum of Modern Art the names Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Lester Johnson, Jean Folette, Cy Twombly. (Raymond Carlyle, "Editor's letters," Art News, December 1957, p. 6.)

This letter shows there are clearly chinks in the modernist armor by 1957. As one recalls, that was the year that Rauschenberg executed his two "identical" Abstract Expressionist canvases, Factum I and Factum II, poking fun at modernist values of originality, spontaneity and artistic expression's link to the unconscious.
political associations) and wanted its board to make a statement during the summer of 1953. 6 However, the A.F.A. did not adopt and release its Statement on Artistic Freedom, which Barr helped to draft, until October 1954. 7 Other prominent proponents of the American vanguard who were involved in with the A.F.A. included René d'Harmoncourt. 8 But as a whole, the A.F.A. board, which largely comprised America's most prominent collectors and museum administrators, 9 rode the tide and did not champion the vanguard issues of the 1950s: the acceptance of the Abstract Expressionists and the issue of artistic freedom.

In 1957, besides the A.F.A.'s main focus on exhibitions and its indirect promotion of American artists (implicitly Abstract Expressionist artists), secondary pursuits of the organization involved "educational" activities, for example, circulating slide lectures and touring Life magazine photographic exhibits. The Federation published a monthly "newsletter," and as a benefit, members had since the mid-1950s received a copy of the magazine Art News. (Thomas B. Hess, the author in 1951 of the first book on Abstract Expressionism, Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase, had been managing editor of the magazine since 1948.)

Too many Grandma Moses can spoil the good beginning we have made with the two recent Bienallis [sic]. René cited the example of a recent exhibition of young Americans which was almost refused in Sweden, but which finally went and won great admiration. The point was that the Swedes wanted a more conservative show, saying that they were not ready for the younger more contemporary stuff. (July 20, 1954, Notes by Burton Cumming from a conversation with René d'Harmoncourt, A.F.A. Files, box 5, "René d'Harmoncourt," file, AAA.)

9 And although Stanley Marcus, the 1957 convention chair, came from Dallas, in large part, the board was comprised of senior art administrators and wealthy collectors from the North and Southeast; few were from west of Chicago. Another geographical exception was John de Menil of Houston who joined the board from 1956-59 and 1962-65, largely because of his involvement in the 1957 convention. Among the other board members in 1955: Philip R. Adams, Director, Cincinnati Art Museum; Pietro Belluschi, Dean, School of Architecture Mass. Institute of Technology; William Constable, Curator, Boston Museum of Fine Arts; Roy R. Neuberger; Mrs. Eloise Speath; John Walker, Director, National Gallery of Art. (September 26, 1955 memo from Ann Drevet to Richard F. Bach, A.F.A. files, box 4, AAA.)
Other activities important to the A.F.A. were their annual conventions, held in major cities chiefly in the northeastern United States. These functions, were in the A.F.A.'s words, designed to "bring together museum representatives and leading personalities concerned with art and art education." In practice, other motives were at play as well: to encourage membership, increase institutional visibility, and as one attendee to the 1955 annual board meeting witnessed, to attract favorable media attention to the cause of modern and vanguard art.

The A.F.A. Conference: The Schedule and Participants

The A.F.A. was an organization well known in Houston. It had provided the second exhibition to be shown in the newly organized Contemporary Arts Association in late 1949. And the director of Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, Lee Malone, had sat on a panel, "The A.F.A. at Work," at the A.F.A.'s 1955 convention.

Because Houston's museums and their staff were known to the A.F.A. and perhaps because a Texan, Stanley Marcus, was the A.F.A. trustee responsible for chairing the upcoming 1957 convention, Houston was approached in the spring of 1955 about hosting the convention. A formal invitation from the A.F.A. was extended during their

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11 "History and Background of American Federation of Arts, New York City," A.F.A. records, box 10, "Convention Speakers Program" file, AAA.
12 Preston Bolton interview with the author, April 1993.
15 It is interesting to speculate why Stanley Marcus, chairman of Neiman Marcus department stores of Dallas and board president of the Dallas Museum of Art from 1945-55 would not choose Dallas as the site of the 1957 convention. It is possibly because of the reactionary conservative groups which were active in Dallas cultural matters at the time. In the spring of 1956, the Dallas County Patriotic Council protested against an A.F.A. organized exhibition, "Sport in Art," which was at the Dallas Museum and due to travel to Sydney Australia in time for the Olympic games. The Dallas group was protesting the communist associations of such artists as Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Leon Kroll, Ben Shahn and William Zorach who were included in the exhibition. Because of the Dallas uproar, the U.S. government withdrew its sponsorship and the oversees tour was canceled.
1955 conference. The board of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston approved the sponsorship in October 1955, and the Museum of Fine Arts board, in November.\textsuperscript{16}

For the Houston organizers, attracting an event such as the A.F.A. convention to Houston would attest to the city's maturity and cultural sophistication. In his fund-raising correspondence to city fathers, one organizer urged, "This is quite a novel approach to the idea of the convention, and if it is as successful as we hope, it will stand to prove that we are just as good at having original ideas down here as we are at producing cotton, oil and prosperity."\textsuperscript{17}

By the time the conference came together in April 1957, it would be the largest in A.F.A.'s history, attracting an audience of 1,400. Only 250 had been anticipated, the organization's attendance record to date. Approximately sixty percent of the registrants were Texan. The conference was a three-day, three-night event. Two days were devoted to three panel discussions: "The Place of Painting in Contemporary Culture," "The Creative Act," and "From Artist to Public." The evenings were devoted to three major exhibition openings: Life magazine's "Illuminations" which featured life-scale color transparencies of art historical masterpieces, the Guggenheim Museum's "Three Brothers" exhibition held at the Museum of Fine Arts, and "Pacemakers" at the Contemporary Arts Museum.

Remaining daylight hours were devoted to luncheons around the Shamrock Hotel's

\textsuperscript{16}October 25, 1955, C.A.A. Board Minutes, C.A.M. Board of Trustee Files 1938-1949, Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.

\textsuperscript{17}February 1957, letter from John de Menil to Randolph Bryan, President of the Bank of the Southwest, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1957." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
swimming pool and visits to the homes of local collectors. On the third day, a chartered jet would enable delegates to visit museums and collections in three other Texas cities in one day, San Antonio and Dallas or Fort Worth. (In 1957, visiting multiple cities in a single day was rather glamorous, let alone traveling merely to see art collections, a point which was made in the lead photograph of the Life magazine article on the conference (fig. 13).)

The panel discussions were chaired by some of the most influential scholars, critics, artists, and dealers of the American art world in the late 1950s. Meyer Schapiro delivered the keynote address, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art," a speech which has since become one of the key documents of the period.

The long speech is a remarkably complete exposition of the values integral to American modernist discourse. Art objects are described as "passionate occasions of spontaneity or intense feeling." The medium, canvas, and activity of the painter is emphasized: "the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation—all signs of the artist's active presence." Painting is deemed a refuge from modern industrial culture: "While in industry accident is that event which destroys an order, interrupts a regular process and must be eliminated, in painting the random or accidental is the beginning of an order...a kind of order that in the end retains the aspect of the original

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18 The Shamrock Hilton in 1957 resonated with its recent portrayal in the 1956 movie "Giant." It was the first formal occasion that African-Americans were allowed to visit as guests at the Shamrock Hotel. A series of memos between the A.F.A. and its Houston committee clarifying in print the commitments made through conversation attest to the sensitivity of this issue. Negroes would be allowed to attend convention functions at the hotel although overnight accommodations in the Shamrock hotel, "could not be guaranteed." A convention representative would be on hand to assist in finding accommodation elsewhere. (1957 A.F.A. Convention, AAA, roll 1780, frs. 49-51; 63.) This period was the height of civil rights unrest as Martin Luther King was emerging as a leader. One year later in 1958, the Arkansas governor would defy the United States Supreme Court order to desegregate schools.


21 Ibid.
disorder as a manifestation of freedom."

And the aesthetic is of transcendental importance in relation to the modern culture of alienation:

And the pathos of the reduction or fragility of the self within a culture that becomes increasingly organized through industry, economy and the state intensifies the desire of the artist to create forms that will manifest his liberty in this striking way—a liberty that, in the best works, is associated with a sentiment of harmony, and the opposite stability, and even impersonality through the power of painting to universalize itself in the perfection of its form and to reach out into common life.

Shapiro's speech is a virtual microcosm of American high modernist discourse. The rhetoric of individual freedom and creative exploration is interwoven with the ideals of "our [democratic] culture."

Schapiro was seen by conference organizers as a key participant and was the first speaker invited during September 1956. Recognized by the mid-1950s as one of Abstract Expressionism's most articulate and authoritative defenders, Schapiro was the anchor around which the conference would establish itself as a forum for the important discussion of modern art. At Columbia University, Schapiro pursued what was an unusual methodology for art historians of the time, comparing contemporary figures (such as Pollock and de Kooning) with those of another historical period, the Romanesque, his field of expertise. Schapiro had been a major participant in the Western Round Table on Art in 1948, providing organizer Douglas MacAgy with a list of questions which later formed the basis of MacAgy's program outline to the press and other participants. Questions like "why is there no other school of value today besides the 'modern'?" gave little doubt to the perspective of the conference in defense of the modernist values.

Fellow participants in Schapiro's keynote panel included James Johnson Sweeney and Stuart Davis, also recognized supporters of modern art. Sweeney had been Director of the Guggenheim Museum since 1952. Before that, he was on the staff of the Museum of

22Ibid., p. 40.
23Ibid.
25San Francisco Art Association Papers, Western Round Table on Modern Art, roll 2431, frs. 214-5 and frames 310-312, AAA.
Modern Art almost from its opening in 1929 and was involved in many significant exhibitions for the museum before, during, and after his post as Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture from 1945 to 1946.  

Stuart Davis was recognized as one of the most accomplished American abstract artists of the twentieth century, having been the subject of a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1945. Like Duchamp, Davis had been a participant in the Armory Show, exhibiting five paintings. Davis had been politically active in the late 1930s as head of the communist-leaning American Artists' Congress. But he was one of those rare artists who were active in politics in the 1930s and identified as a WPA artist but who that still maintained favor in the avowedly "non-political" atmosphere of artistic discourse of the 1950s. Fellow artists during the 1950s featured Davis as a central figure, indeed, a progenitor to the Abstract Expressionist movement. A chart designed by Robert Motherwell and published in William Seitz's Abstract Expressionism in America (fig. 14), places Davis at the center of the origins of the New York School. Davis' speech, written in a pseudo-Beat style of prose (signaling his very "hip" awareness), and in some way falls clearly within the forms of artist-defined modernist expression: "...I feel able to make the categorical statement that The Place of Painting in Contemporary Culture consists entirely of what each artist emergently makes it." Davis also managed to combine the modernist concern for the creative event with a certain wry observation about the excessiveness of high modernist subject matter:

My personal guess as to the Meaning and Enormous Popularity of Modern Painting goes somewhat as follows: I see the Artist as a Cool Spectator-Reporter at an Arena of Hot Events....In his Professional Capacity the Modern Artist regards the subject of Subjective Feelings as a Casualty and never confuses them with the Splendor of the Continuity of Process, the Event itself. I see the Paintings as being made by Competent Workmen outside the self--not as a Signed Convulsion communicating an Enormous Capacity for Frustration with the Outside. I am aware that a number of excellent Artists today might seem to fall into the latter category and would regard my remark as offensive. But Offense is no part of my intention which is entirely one of Notation. I believe that there is a vast Audience which, like myself, is more interested in the Scenery than the Familiar Furnished Room of their own Short-Circuited Emotional Wiring.30

Davis managed to keep the speech about the values of artist-defined expression and the centrality of the creative event, yet he did signal a certain staleness to the idea of art as an expression of societal alienation. He even went so far as to signal the possibility of a vast and sympathetic audience.

The fourth speaker in the keynote panel was Randall Jarrell, Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress. Jarrell fit two criteria of the pseudo-event of the art symposium by his presence on the panel. Firstly, he was a recognized literary aesthete and poet. Secondly, he could be counted on as an articulate speaker for the "anti-modern" cause. He was identified by Alvin Toffler as one America's leading "cultural elitists" of the 1950s, decrying "the appalling taste of the age" in the so-called supermarket culture of the United States.31 As the "charismatic conservative," Jarrell would provide a lively media counterpoint to the pro-modernist sentiment of the conference.

It was on the following morning, April 5, that Duchamp participated in the panel entitled "The Creative Act." Fellow participants included William Seitz, Rudolf Arnheim, and Gregory Bateson. In 1955 Seitz had published his Ph.D. dissertation, Abstract Expressionist Painting in America. It was the first dissertation in the United States on the

30Ibid., p. 30.
31Alvin Toffler, The Culture Consumers, p. 4.
subject of the Abstract Expressionists, articulating "the fundamental premises—technical, aesthetic, philosophical, or ethical—through which Abstract Expressionism developed."32 Gregory Bateson was a cultural anthropologist and psychologist. He had participated in the Western Round Table on Art and was the designate for the slot of "psychologist" when Susanne Langer, author of the influential Philosophy in a New Key,33 declined the invitation. Arnheim was a professor of psychology at Sarah Lawrence College and author of the recently published Art and Visual Perception (1954).

The third and final panel held on the afternoon of April 5 was entitled "From Artist to Public" and featured Phillip R. Adams, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum; Jimmy Ernst, artist; Sidney Janis, art dealer; Bernard Reis, businessman-collector; and Kenneth Sawyer, art critic of the Baltimore Sun. As would be expected from the subject of the session, Duchamp’s speech was acknowledged as being relevant to the issues being discussed. In the session's introductory remarks his speech was cited in passing:

Marcel Duchamp said this morning that an artist plays no role in the judgment of his own work. How does the spectator react to this work? And he further went on to say that the artist must wait for the verdict of the spectator.34

Duchamp's ideas were raised in this passage but not explored again in any of the panel's speeches or in any of the discussions that followed. Neither was his position of the rather equitable role ceded to the spectator in evidence. The subject indicated by the panel's subtitle, "How Style is Carried to a Wide Audience by Modern Medias of Communications," dominated the minds of those speaking. A recurring attitude was that

33Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982 [1942]). Langer provided a popularized account of Freud’s definition of the function of symbols and her study of the philosophic and literary basis of recurrent archetypal patterns of symbols was of great interest to a number of Abstract Expressionist artists of the period including Gorky, Gottlieb, Motherwell, Pollock, and Reinhardt, among others. (Ann Gibson, "The Rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism," Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments. p. 67.
34 Transcript of "From Artist to Public" panel session, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
the issue of the art public was a less lofty one than that of artistic expression. As Adams
would say:

Actually it seems a shame to descend from the emporium plateau where we’ve been
dwelling the past two days, but we do have to discuss sometime in the course of
any human adventure the vulgar practicalities. Now that the arts have found their
place in our culture or culture of the arts, as Mr. Davis pointed out, now that the
creative act took place this morning, what are we going to do with the baby?35

In this perspective, modern media representation of art and artists had popularized them but
had also sullied them in the process. The newspaper critic Sawyer would chastise the role
he and fellow critics played in culture:

I’m not sanguine about the value or efficacy of the mass media of
communication in the dissemination of style...But what of the role assumed by,
particularly, the highly illustrated periodicals, those periodicals of popular
prejudice? Has it been a popular one? For those Americans who cherish the
tradition of free thought, of independent judgment, the smear techniques that
commonly manipulate in language of mass affection, work no alchemy to the mind.
To those disciplines [sic] reach no further than in abstract or respect to the printed
word, they constitute a palpable danger, the danger of pattern thought...in such
times as ours a most desperate field.36

Sawyer not only misses the irony of his writing from the position of subsidized whistle
blower (he worked for the media and was paid by convention organizers as such), but he
relies on the very clichés that the despised media use: “if the critic be courageous, and here
he must follow the example of the artist--the artists has set the example in our time--he will
probably be controversial and unemployed. If he is fortunate enough to represent an
unaffiliated agency, he will be controversial and Red.”37

The final sign of the institutionalization of the modernist discourse came with the
last lecture of the conference. Dealer Sidney Janis gave a long illustrated slide lecture about
the fantastic increases in prices that modern artists, particularly the American moderns, had

35Ibid.
36Ibid.
37Ibid.
commanded over the past few years. An artist sitting among the audience remembered being offended at the blatant commercialism of the tedious presentation.\textsuperscript{38}

Among the other important figures present at the 1957 conference\textsuperscript{39} were Vincent Price, who was invited as toast master of the conference banquet; Philip Johnson, who although not presenting a public address, did nonetheless participate in the private informal discussions which went on in the hospitality suite;\textsuperscript{40} and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was invited by John de Menil to photograph the conference.\textsuperscript{41}

The A.F.A. Conference: The Committees

From the earliest meetings about the conference, the organization was divided along two lines: the New York-based and the Houston-based committees. A clear and careful division of responsibilities between the New York and Houston groups signaled an early sensitivity about which group would be "in control."\textsuperscript{42} Detailed committee lists made sure that each task was assigned to one of the two groups.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{38}Jim Love interview with the author, April, 1993.
\textsuperscript{39}Other notable figures who declined invitations to the conference were Kenneth Clark, Alistair Cooke, Hans Hoffman and Willem de Kooning. (AFA Files, box 10, "Convention Speakers Program 1957" file, AAA.)
\textsuperscript{40}Johnson had built the residence for John and Dominique de Menil in 1948, one of his first private commissions and was in 1957 the architect of the Master Plan For St. Thomas University (1957-1959), a small private university in Houston, which the de Menils also supported. Susan J. Barnes, The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith (Houston: The Rothko Chapel, 1989), pp. 41-2.
\textsuperscript{41}Cartier-Bresson, a personal friend of the de Menils, was commissioned to document life in Texas in the 1950s as part of an on-going project initiated by the de Menils. It is likely that both Cartier-Bresson and de Menil saw the photographs of the convention as fitting into this larger project. The budget for the convention did not include any fees or expenses for Cartier-Bresson's documentation of the 1957 convention.
\textsuperscript{42}When the Houston group opened a bank account early in the planning stages, there was a flurry of correspondence initiated from New York clarifying the name of the account and the nature of how fundraising, subscriptions and expenses would be handled. (1957 A.F.A. Convention, AAA, roll 1780, frs. 33-37.)
\textsuperscript{43}Comparing past and subsequent A.F.A. convention files to the 1957 files leads to the conclusion that such detailed agendas and committee lists were a new planning tool, perhaps, the contribution of the Houston rather than the New York organizations. The C.A.A. was up until 1955, a volunteer-run museum with responsibilities for exhibitions, publications, membership, and fundraising apportioned by committee. John de Menil was active in the board of the C.A.A. from its founding in 1948 until the appointment of Jermaine MacAgy as the first professional director in 1955. For a more details on the history of the C.A.A. see: In Our Time (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1982) and Charlotte Ann Moser, "Community Involvement in the Arts: Contemporary Arts Museum," Houston, M.A. Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1972.
The New York group comprised director Harris K. Prior, President James S. Schramm, and administrator Ann Devret. Schramm had just taken over the presidency from Daniel Longwell, who had been president between 1954-1956. In practice, Longwell exerted a great deal of influence over the choice and promotion of Houston as a location for the 1957 conference. (Before his A.F.A. association, Longwell had been with Life magazine. As one of the founding editors in 1935, he remained Chairman of the Board of Editors from 1946 to 1954.44)

The Houston-based committee included John de Menil, a successful business executive and prominent local collector active in both museums; Preston Bolton, local architect and President of the Board of the C.A.M.; the two Houston museum directors; and Nina Cullinan, a patron of both museums.45

The two museum directors were to have an important impact on the design of the conference program. Lee Malone, director of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, was responsible for scheduling the Guggenheim exhibition "Three Brothers," which would be on exhibition in Houston during the convention in April 1957.

The Contemporary Arts Association director, Jermayne MacAgy, had just arrived in Houston in 1955 from her position as Curator and wartime Director of the Palace of Legion of Honor in San Francisco. As an undergraduate, MacAgy had studied with Paul Sachs at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum in the mid-1930s, and she was one of the first women in the country to receive a Ph.D. in art history. (Her dissertation was on the folk art collection of the Western Reserve University, Cleveland.) She was a well-known figure in the world of contemporary American art, but what she was particularly known for was the drama of her installations:

45 Miss Nina Cullinan was the daughter of Joseph S. Cullinan was one of the founders of The Museum of Fine Arts and a successful developer the adjacent neighborhood of Shadyside beginning in 1916. Toni Beurchamp, "James Johnson Sweeny and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: 1961-1967." M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1983. pp. 5-6.
Dr. Jermaine MacAgy, known far and wide as "Jerry," began a series of sensationally original exhibitions...Her dramatically installed "theme shows" like that of trompe l'oeil ("fool the eye") painting, and a wonderful one of sundials, watches, and waterclocks rolling off the story of time and man--have been second, in their way, to no exhibitions anywhere.46

MacAgy was one of the "invisible" women of the conference (indeed, of the 1950s art world), infrequently acknowledged as one of the key program organizers and appearing in hardly any of the photographs of the convention participants (fig. 15). (At one point, she had to insist that the A.F.A. send her copies of the planning correspondence as they had been doing with Malone.47) An influential curator of the period, MacAgy maintained close friendships with the artists Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Joseph Cornell, among others. She was respected within art circles for the breadth of her art historical knowledge, combining a sophisticated knowledge of Antiquity, African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian cultures and with an in-depth knowledge of Abstract Expressionist artists, particularly on the West Coast. Married to Douglas MacAgy at the time of his organization of the 1949 Western Round Table on Art, MacAgy's experience with assembling a panel of influential modernist participants was indispensable to the 1957 conference. Duchamp, James Johnson Sweeney, and Gregory Bateson had been part of the Western Round Table on Art. It was she who flew to New York to approach Meyer Schapiro to give the keynote address.48 Her friendship and philosophical accord with the views held by Thomas Hess, editor of Art News were noted.49 And, in one early version of the program's prospective participants, it was MacAgy who planned to approach Clement Greenberg with an invitation to participate in the conference.

48 October 1956 letter from Lee Malone to John de Menil, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
49 February 28, 1957 letter from Daniel Longwell to John de Menil, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
MacAgy's contribution to the exhibition schedule of the conference was the show entitled "Pacemakers," which was seen as an introduction to some of the "interesting new talent of the moment." The cover of the show's small catalogue consists of a splatter of black ink on a white surface, with no exhibition title. The title came instead on an inner title page (fig. 16). For a mid-1950s audience, this design doubtlessly referred to a Pollock painting. As with Pollock's work, audacity and immediacy are the values signified, with no interpretive "text" to intrude upon the art work itself. The exhibition consisted of fifteen artists, the majority of whom MacAgy called Abstract Expressionist, "the form most practiced by the leading artist today," but it also contained artists producing other work as well. In her essay entitled "The Validity of the Myth," MacAgy makes few excuses for this leading style of the day:

It is not our purpose here to justify the trends of modern art. They have happened; they are with us. The time has come not to argue but to try to understand. It is the role of such an organization as the Contemporary Arts Museum to expose the beginnings and the present status of the art of our time.

Photographs of the installation underscore the drama of "Pacemakers," a quality for which her exhibitions were renown. The exhibition provoked the Life photographer Ralph Elison to photograph four entire contact sheets of the installation when other events at the convention received about one half page at most (fig. 17). This was doubtlessly because the drama of the exhibition translated well into photographs. The C.A.M.’s galleries were dark with the exception of the floodlit works of painting and sculpture. MacAgy had a system of room dividers built of screens of vertical wooden planks (perhaps these were merely half-completed walls with no drywall in place, thereby exposing the two-by-fours).

51Ibid.
52MacAgy actively pursued her interests in museum installation. In October of 1949, she applied unsuccessfully for a Guggenheim Foundation grant which would have enabled her to travel the country studying various forms of museum installations. It would have also allowed her to publish a book documenting museum installation techniques because in her estimation it was a "period of museum practice in which the popularization of knowledge and the increase in the numbers of exhibitions" was occurring. From the Jermayne MacAgy files, The Menil Collection, Houston.
In the museum space, which technically had no walls, only a triangular roof structure over a floor, these wooden dividers served the function of partitioning the area into intimate viewing niches that allowed one's gaze to extend into the entire gallery. In photographs, the wooden slats also made it appear as if one were looking from "behind bars" into a world beyond. This metaphor which added drama to the viewing of contemporary art and its audience, was captured quite explicitly by Cartier-Bresson's view of the evening (fig. 18).

**The A.F.A. Conference: Planning the Houston Conference**

In the earliest memo between the New York and Houston committees, the purpose of the convention was articulated as "the convening of chapter and individual members whose ranks are expected to be greatly enlarged by local, regional and national visitors." It was also agreed that the project would have a distinctly "regional" flavor, that

museums of the region, especially the art institutions throughout Texas, would be kept informed of Convention preparations and would become as much as possible part of a project that is distinctly regional and national rather than local in scope.\(^{53}\)

This discussion of a regional rather than local emphasis was perhaps a concession to the civic loyalties of Stanley Marcus, Chairman of the 1957 convention, who was from Dallas and active in the affairs of the Dallas Museum of Art. The idea to expand the convention to include a plane trip to other Texas cities such as Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio was agreeable to the Houston committee because it would spread the burden of organization and fund-raising, while providing the out-of-state delegates a broader picture of art collections in Texas.\(^{54}\)

The Houston committee was responsible for planning and sponsoring the "important exhibitions" which would accompany the conference. And it was responsible for raising the estimated $15,000 budget for those exhibitions. This was an extravagant amount when, by comparison, the total conference budget of the 1955 A.F.A. conference

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\(^{53}\) February 27, 1956 letter from Thomas M. Messer to Stanley Marcus, A.F.A. files, box 10, AAA.

\(^{54}\) Preston Bolton interview with the author, April 1993.
had been $5,000. It was envisioned that the New York committee would take in revenue from ticket admissions to cover the cost of staging the conference. Houston would have to fund-raise in order to pay for the local exhibitions.

In past years, the A.F.A. had merely covered the cost of airfare and expenses for its speakers. In early correspondence suggestions were made that the 1957 conference be organized in the same way. The idea of having no speakers honoraria quickly became unworkable, however, especially as the program committee was hoping to attract such notable speakers as Sir Kenneth Clark from London. Clark declined the invitation, and Vincent Price was ultimately the toastmaster for the annual banquet. Meyer Schapiro, as keynote speaker, commanded the highest speaking fee of $500, followed by Price at $250, with all other artists and critics receiving $100 and expenses for their participation.

Besides showing the interesting "relative" value that the speakers were able to command, these honoraria show just how unrealistic the original budget projections were. An estimate of the expenses from the speakers honoraria, transportation costs, and hotel expenses came to over $8,500. Expenses for publicity, the chartering of airplanes, printing, and convention hotel charges brought the total expenses of the convention to over $40,000 (or over $200,000 in 1994 terms).

Subscription revenues covered only about forty percent of this cost; the rest was covered through local fund-raising. Most donations came from the families of oil-related fortunes, the founders of such companies as Exxon, Shell Oil, Brown and Root, and Schlumberger, as well as the banking and retail sectors. However, when the final calculations were made, a few individuals such as the de Menils and Nina Cullinan were

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willing to make up the deficit, in essence funding the conference they had organized on behalf of the A.F.A.\textsuperscript{58}

As this discussion of the budget makes clear, Houston's role in the conference, particularly in its later stages, became greater than the New York group. But during the earliest stages, the issue of which group would have more influence on the choice of speakers and conference themes would prove the most troublesome.

**The A.F.A. Conference: Houston Takes Over**

The earliest memo documenting a meeting in which the program theme and prospective panelists were discussed is dated March 12, 1956. Only one New York A.F.A. member, Daniel Longwell, was present at the meeting held in Houston.\textsuperscript{59} The memo describes Lee Malone presenting "a list of prospective speakers for the conference and the program which it is proposed they follow." The list of speakers was said to have been the result of previous discussion between himself and Dr. MacAgy. Therefore, the two Houston museum directors had already been busily working on the program and had conceived of the presentation as a series of different analyses of creativity: "The Selective Eye," "The Creative Act," and "The Mind's Eye." At this stage, although Duchamp was envisioned as one of the participants, his contribution was under the panel "The Mind's Eye." "The Creative Act" panel would be a physical demonstration followed by an analysis, with Georges Mathieu executing a splatter painting in the presence of Thomas Hess, the *Art News* critic, and Nelson Rockefeller, collector and Museum of Modern Art benefactor.

It is also at this early date that tensions between the two groups surfaced. It became apparent to the New York organizers that the Houston group was a bit too independent for

\textsuperscript{58}Generously, John de Menil offered to take care of the deficit: "do not let the matter of cost bother you. It never was our intention to turn to the A.F.A. for any help. There is a small group of people down here who will be prepared to take care of the deficit as it comes out after accounts have been cleared." (April 29, 1957 letter from John de Menil to James Schram, 1957 A.F.A. Convention, AAA, roll 1780, fr. 148.)

\textsuperscript{59}Minutes from Program Meeting, March 12, 1955, 1957 A.F.A. Convention, AAA, roll 1780, fr. 243.
its liking. Notes from a spring meeting held some fifteen days after the initial program
meeting in Houston quotes the A.F.A.’s Executive Committee as patronizingly stating that
it needed to remain in "control of the situation":

Among the items of the agenda, was the 1957 convention, Chairman of which is
Stanley Marcus. The Program Committee consists of Lee Malone and Jermaine
MacAgy, Directors, respectively of the Museum of Fine Arts of Houston and the
Contemporary Arts Museum. It was the opinion of the Trustees at the Chicago
meeting that while nothing should be done to damage the spirit of the Program
Committee, the Federation must remain in control of the situation...60

The "live" demonstration of Mathieu was not mentioned again in program planning
 correspondence. The design of "The Creative Act" panel became a discussion of, rather
 than an execution of, a creative act. However, some insight into this programming
disagreement is amusingly brought to light in a United Press story submitted by writer Paul
Mocsanyi. Dated April 8, 1957, the story was never picked up by the wire service. (His
 tear sheets were given to the A.F.A. publicity representative for her files.61) Mocsanyi
writes:

Lee Malone, Director of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, has spent many a
sleepless night in quest for something that would catch and open the eye of the
public during the convention.

In his predicament Malone conceived the idea to demonstrate dramatically
what art is and how it is done. The planned demonstration was to take place in the
huge ballroom of Houston's $22,000,000, Shamrock-Hilton Hotel. Two artists--
the French painter Mathieu and the American violinist Isaac Stern-- were to be the
protagonists of the show. Mathieu is a painter who does not apply the paint on the
canvas with brush or knife--he throws it from a distance. Malone's ideas was to set
 up a huge canvas in one corner of the ballroom. In front of the canvas Mathieu was
to throw his painting, behind it Isaac Stern was to play particularly difficult
technical passages on the violin.

Malone's plan was received with great enthusiasm by the Houston
collectors and other local notables. The idea to assist to say [sic] at the birth of a
work of art appealed to them. The New York members of the Federation gave,
however, a cold shoulder to Malone's picture throwing proposition. They decided
instead to get the public into the convention with the conservative, time tested,
double bait of social entertainment and practical advice for would be collectors,
spiced with some highbrow discussion that to attend would be considered as the
sign that one belonged not only financially but also intellectually to the upper ten.62

60 March 28, 1956, Executive Committee Meeting Notes, A.F.A. Files, box 4, AAA.
61 A.F.A. Files, box 10, "1957 Convention Publicity" file, AAA.
62 Ibid.
Although this story is related in a comic tone, implicit is a framework that Mocsanyi could have got only by speaking with Malone, not the New York group. And while the article's interpretation is simplified almost to the point of caricature, there is probably some truth to its basic representation of the Houston group wanting something exciting in the program while the New York group wanted to rely on a tried-and-true formula for panel discussions. That Mocsanyi, as a reporter, could read a certain "formula" in the composition of this art convention is certainly an indication of the institutionalization of the art symposium by 1957.

The finalization of the program occurred over the course of March and April 1956, documented through numerous memos which proposed numerous speakers in various panels. The desire to maintain a multi-disciplinary approach to the question of creativity can be discerned throughout this process as various speakers from a variety of fields were proposed and then discarded. Ultimately, "The Perpetual Discovery" was decided upon as a theme for the conference, its subtitle being "An Investigation of What the 20th Century Has Contributed to Creative Thought and Expression."\(^6^3\)

It was the Houston group, therefore, particularly the two museum directors and John de Menil, who did the majority of program planning. Obviously they did not share the sensitivities of the New York art world. As much was hinted at in an exchange between the editor and president of *Art News*, Alfred Frankfurter, and Convention President Daniel Longwell. Firstly, Frankfurter complained that he had not been consulted in the program planning:

\(^{63}\) Undated memo (circa May 1956), discussing theme and panel discussants, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
P.S. One question arises in my mind and it has nothing to do with injured pride—in fact, only with curiosity: How is it that no member of this staff was ever consulted for the preparation of the convention program nor invited to prepare material (not necessarily in the form of a talk) of which we have ample available, considering the range of editorial experience and the wealth of both past and future files?64

Longwell wrote a speedy reply attempting to smooth Frankfurter's feathers:

I assure you that the staff of the A.F.A. was not neglecting you nor the resources of your office. It's simply that the Houstonians simply took over and have made it very much their own show. I've simply hung onto their coat tails. They've arranged a fine event, too. I am glad you are coming.65

Besides underscoring the rather independent course the Houston committee was pursuing in its organization of the conference, the exchange between the powerful publisher and the A.F.A. official points out a second issue. Frankfurter is suggesting there is a "natural" ideological closeness between the magazine and any symposia that the A.F.A. would organize, thus making it sensible to use Art News' files and editorial experience. This incident, coupled with the A.F.A. distribution of Art News to its readership and the fact that the conference would, in part, subsidize their forthcoming issue, points to the interconnectedness of their relationship. That these two institutions would be partisans to the role of "modern art in the twentieth century" points to the establishment of the discourse by 1957.

The A.F.A. Conference: Efforts to Attract the Media

In its earliest dealings with the Houston organizers, the New York group never really let on it was much interested in issues of content. From the initial correspondence from New York, it was clear that the choice of speakers and topic themes was secondary in the A.F.A.'s mind to that of a well-attended and well-publicized annual convention.

64 February 24, 1957 letter from Alfred Frankfurter to Daniel Longwell, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.

65 February 28, 1957 letter from Daniel Longwell to Alfred Frankfurter, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
of attendance, increased tourist revenue, and favorable media attention were prominent in the A.F.A.'s effort to "sell" Houston on the idea of hosting the conference. The desire for a particular theme for discussion or the desire for particular speakers was not mentioned.

An early letter from Daniel Longwell to Lee Malone described the results of the 1955 convention recently held in Des Moines, Iowa:

... It's the best publicity we've had and we'll gain new members, and we have gained new chapters, which is what we wanted.

Jim Schramm tells me that Des Moines is happy as can be, that the Art Center has gained new members, contributors, visitors, etc. Four full days on the front pages of the Register and Tribune with their state wide [sic] circulation is the most attention the Art Center has had since its opening.

Then, to my surprise, Time came through with its story in the issue of October 31. I didn't plan that and I doubt if Luce knew about it... The Time story should have made the entire region feel pretty good.

I don't see how one can do better. The town felt fine, we feel fine, the show attracted New York dealers, etc. The papers down here noticed it. With this experience in back of us, Houston should be a greater show, with wider interest. You've got South America to draw on, all of Texas and the Southwest and plenty of time to draw from Europe, etc. I could hope that your schools, universities, symphony, the Texas writers, etc., could all join in and make it a really important do.66

Issues of media coverage are interwoven with issues of civic pride and success. Such emphases are easily understood as Longwell was the founding editor and former chairman of the board of editors of Life magazine until his retirement in 1954. But he was at great pains to emphasize that he exerted no undo efforts to get media attention: "Des Moines earned that story on its merits. I admit I tried to sell the idea to my old colleagues on Life, but they threw me out. Without my knowledge Time picked it up."67

Media was recognized as crucial to the conference organizers. Preston Bolton recalls from the 1955 A.F.A. conference in Des Moines that a prime goal of the national conference was articulated as attracting favorable media towards the cause of modern art. The means by which that media was attracted spared no effort.

67 Ibid.
John de Menil went to great lengths to insure that a package of information on the upcoming convention made it into the hands of the visiting chairman of the board of Time. It was hand carried to a remote lodge in South Texas where the chairman was on a hunting trip.68

During December 1956 and January 1957, the A.F.A., very anxious to interest Life magazine in a story about the convention, agreed to take an exhibition organized by Life, "Illuminations," and place it in the lobby of the convention hotel in Houston. In much of the correspondence about the exhibition, the mutual self-interests of the A.F.A. and Life magazine were overtly acknowledged: press coverage by Life in exchange for the A.F.A.'s booking of the exhibition. There was, of course, already the implicit relationship between Life and the A.F.A. through Longwell's involvement and also in the arrangement by which Life's photography exhibitions were toured nationally under A.F.A. auspices.

Initially, New York was to handle all national publicity while Houston would handle local and regional coverage. A New York A.F.A. trustee member, Fred Palmer, of the public relations company Earl Newsom and Company, was initially drafted into providing publicity services free of charge during the fall of 1956.69 By the new year, however, the New York office had hired a full-time, free-lance public relations officer, Mary Margaret Mullins, solely to encourage press coverage of the 1957 convention.70

Once Mullins was hired a big push was begun to interest the press in the conference. In February 1957, the print, rather than the broadcast, media seemed to have the focus. The television angle apparently was hard to attract unless the convention was

68 November 26, 1956 letter from John de Menil to Francis Coates, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
able to supply someone who did not "mind being asked controversial and, at times, personal questions." 71

The print media also seemed much easier to interest in taking a number of different approaches to coverage: "Texas collectors, art-world personalities, 'important' art issues, Southern hospitality..." 72 Mullin's list of possible media "angles" seems endless. The most important focus of the convention's publicity plan was on twelve general magazines such as *Time, Newsweek, Life, Look,* and *Fortune.* Art magazines, newspapers, syndicates, and wire services were another major focus. Fashion magazines such as *Glamour, Charm,* or *Mademoiselle* were also considered, as they "might be interested in [a] story on parties and other social activities."

The only fashion magazine that did a related story, *Harpers' Bazaar,* published the conference photography by Cartier-Bresson. His photographs of the conference are notable in their signature qualities of immediacy and their seemingly "by chance" compositional structure. 73 Compared to the images taken by the *Life* photographers who at times utilized models admiring art works in tritely captured compositions (fig. 19), Cartier-Besson's work seems both fleeting in its framing of subject matter and penetrating in its insight. Certainly, he was able to capture the tiring and crowded nature of the three-day succession of lectures, panel discussions, and social events. However, an air of serious intent and even, at times, exhilaration is conveyed as well, whether the subject was an important art personality or member of the general public (figs. 20-24).

Efforts to have the conference speeches published were initiated by the New York group, who approached the publisher of *Art News,* Alfred Frankfurter. Frankfurter replied


72 Ibid.

73 In describing Cartier-Bresson's characteristic technique Beaumont Newhall said: "What my friends had considered "The Art of the Poetic Accident," the result of chance snapshotting, proved to be based on strict discipline in the mastering of instantaneous, intuitive recognition of "the decisive moment" or, more accurately, the decisive split second." (Beaumont Newhall, "Vision Plus The Camera: Henri Cartier-Bresson" *Photography: Essays and Images* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 283.)
that he was interested in publishing the proceedings, perhaps as an insert to the magazine's Fiftieth Anniversary Issue, "the only obstacle being the question of expense." In his words, he was "not interested in being subsidized" but asked instead for "a guarantee of a minimum purchase," which, in reality, covered fifty percent of the cost of the issue. John de Menil covered this cost.

One final effort doubtlessly clinched the national press coverage: John de Menil's subsidizing of a private chartered jet and hotel expenses for over seventeen New York-based publishers, editors and critics. Major magazines and wire services such as Art News, Fortune, United Press, Arts, Time, and Life sent staff. The staff from Time/Life Inc. alone included nine people, from the publisher and his wife to the publicity director of Time and his wife to various art editorial assistants.

The A.F.A. Conference: Its Dissemination Through the Media

That the media was won over so successfully to cover the convention was a result of both the deliberate media strategy on the part of conference organizers and, I believe, a certain willingness on the part of the media during the late 1950s to believe that a gathering of artists, art critics, and intellectuals talking about modern art constituted "a story".

In all press accounts of the conference, Duchamp's ideas of the spectator were cited. And while the full implications of those ideas were rarely explored, most critics recognized how they differed from the other speeches at the conference. His language was easily comprehended and therefore quoted in every newspaper account of the conference. It was, after all, a speech by the famous, "retired" European artist, Marcel Duchamp. But it also featured Duchamp in a role for which he was already known, that of art critic.

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74 February 24, 1957 letter from Alfred Frankfurter to Daniel Longwell, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1955." Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, Texas.
75 March 9, 1957 letter from Harris Prior to Jean de Menil, A.F.A. files, Box 10, AAA.
76 March 27, 1957 letter from Ruth Burnham to Nina Cullinan, 1957 A.F.A. Convention, AAA, roll 1780, fr. 133.
However, the "story" of the convention, as reported by the media, was helped along by the speech given by Randall Jarrell. As noted, Jarrell was booked by the program committee as a conservative pundit, someone who could be counted on to provide an interesting counterpoint to the keynote panel which included such recognized modern art supporters as Meyer Schapiro, James Johnson Sweeney, and Stuart Davis.

And Jarrell certainly delivered with a speech in which he attacked Abstract Expressionism by calling it the "intensive exploitation of one part" of the revolutionary tradition of Bonnard, Matisse, and Picasso. He also compared Abstract Expressionism to the recent media phenomenon of a monkey in Baltimore who had been trained to paint. Such an allusion prompted some hearty laughter at the convention as well as the imagination of the press:

I am reminded myself of this as, on Saturday, I watched on Channel 9 a chimpanzee painting...His painting, I confess, did not interest me; I had seen it too many times before. But the way in which he painted it! He was, truly, magisterial. He did not look at his model once; indeed, he hardly looked even at the canvas...He was the most active, the most truly sincere, painter that I have ever seen; and yet, what did it all produce?—nothing but that same old Abstract Expressionist painting... 77

In some ways, Jarrell's use of the monkey allusion, and indeed the reason for its humor among the audience, could be that it struck a chord about the latent meanings of Pollock's paintings. The monkey recalls T.J. Clark's analysis of Pollock's paintings as signifiers for a set of values, the "'primitive,' childish, deviant, lunatic, chaotic," that society had begun to read into the Pollock canvases and by association, into Abstract Expressionism in general. Yet, whatever the offense to the modern sensibilities, the monkey allusion was a godsend to the conference organizers seeking publicity. It became the hook with which the media would grab hold of the conference. In an important story written by UP literary critic W.G. Rogers, the monkey was a powerful image. His article, "Artists Argue Over Art,

Artists, Spectators and a Baltimore Chimp," was syndicated all over the country with varying headlines. The delightful variants to the theme attest to the creativity of small-town newspapers. The Chesley, Philadelphia, Times used, "Why Must Artists Be Human Anyway," while the High Point, North Carolina, Enterprise came up with "Critics Debate Monkey Art." Most newspapers used some variant of Rogers' original headline, as the Marquette Michigan Mining Journal would: "Artists Argue About Art Spectators, and Painting Chimp."

Rogers' story went all around the nation: to New Haven, Connecticut; Marion, Indiana; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Fort Myers, Florida; Everett, Washington; Augusta, Georgia; Bloomington, Indiana; Richmond, Virginia; Gatesville, Pennsylvania; Hamilton, Ohio; and Kingsport, Tennessee, among other places. And once readers were hooked into this curious story about modern art and chimps, they read Rogers' article about an art conference held in Houston, Texas. The article was made even easier to grasp by a simplistic dualism Rogers set up around the proposition that none of the experts could agree: for every artist who felt "he should not be bothered with the opinions people have of his work," there would be another who maintained "it is those people who will save him for posterity." To quote Rogers:
the one thing the audiences at the various sessions could count on was that the experts would not agree with the experts and indeed they didn't. They quarreled over big and little matters: Is anybody greater than Rembrandt, does the artist know what he's doing, should he bother with his public, and why, and can a monkey paint as well as a man?78

It wasn't just generally syndicated writers like Rogers who seized upon the simple image of "the experts can't agree" in order to anchor their stories. As discussed above, this formula was integral to the pseudo-event of the art symposia, and in the case of the coverage of the 1957 conference, most of the art journals used it to anchor their articles. Also present in the articles were the conservative anti-modern versus progressive pro-modern dualism and the reassuring presence of the critic to interpret work whose values aren't accessible to the viewer.

Chapter 5
"The Creative Act"

But, of course, as Foucault's notion of the author-function reveals, the source of these tensions in Duchamp's "meaning" or "intention" as an artist as we "know" him is not to be located within Duchamp as living subject at all. It resides rather at multiple sites: in the gaps between the maker, the making of the object, the object as it exists in the world, and the perception, reception, and codification of the object through interpretive analysis.

Amelia Jones

In returning to a focus on Duchamp's speech, "The Creative Act," I start with the proviso that I do not propose to perform a master reading of the speech that, with a few key elements, will unlock meanings never before revealed. The speech is as complex, open-ended, and contradictory as Duchamp's own statements and art works are. It contains elements of historical detail and traces of past interpretation which are a necessary part of its fabric. As Jones points out above, "meaning," whether ascribed to Duchamp, his art works, or his statements, is a complex matter, arrived at through a combination of representations and interpretations which have little to do with an artist's own "intent." (Duchamp, himself, addressed just these ideas within "The Creative Act," discussing the role artistic intention has in the making of an art work and the spectator or posterity's role in determining aesthetic value.)

In this final chapter, I return to a detailed examination of the speech and its interpretation by panelists at the time of its delivery. In so doing, I will analyze the coincidence between elements of the speech and aspects of modernist discourse explored in previous chapters. But there are other ideas within the speech which do not coincide with such a discourse. Questions by fellow panelists and a certain reluctance to fully explore the implications of Duchamp's ideas in the press suggest that the speech was not fully contained within the confines of the dominant forms of modernist criticism, at least that practiced in the United States in 1957. Duchamp's ideas were a product of a complex

1Amelia Jones, "The fashion(ing) of Duchamp: Authorship, Gender, Postmodernism," p. 188.
moment, part of both American and Continental art circles, party to art movements ranging from the early European vanguard of Cubism, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism, to the moment in 1957 when American Abstract Expressionist painting was at its critical ascendancy. It is to be expected that Duchamp's speech would draw on this rich and complex history.

"The Creative Act" was radically short compared to other speeches at the convention, running eight minutes exactly. Its title and its first sentence set out the subject of inquiry: the creative act. As mentioned above, the subject was supplied by the conference organizers. Therefore, since conference organizers proposed the topic, it was consistent with the period's interest in the subject of the "moment of creation." In fact, recalling that the Houston organizing committee had originally proposed to address this panel's topic through a live violin performance by Isaac Stern and a canvas executed by Georges Mattieu, it is clear that a demonstration of unmediated, uninterpreted action exerted a strong pull on the critical imaginations of the period. A more subdued means of addressing the question of creativity, however, was taken in the subsequent design of the panel discussion. There was even some suggestion that the New York committee overrode the idea of the live demonstration in favor of the well-established formula of the "panel of experts" in order to establish critical credibility, i.e., recognition as the pseudo-event of the modern art symposia.

When Duchamp was introduced at the microphone, he was the only "artist" on the panel, among a psychologist, sociologist, and critic. And during this period when an artist's views about creativity were considered primary, there doubtless was much anticipation of his speech, "retired" artist or no. In addressing the question of the creative act, with his very first sentence, Duchamp set out the terms of his exploration using an arithmetical relation. There were two poles of creation: the artist and the spectator or posterity. One wonders if Michel Sanouillet had this very speech in mind when he asserted "even when he expressed himself in English before a receptive English-speaking audience,
he thought in French, and it was the Cartesian dialectic that structured his thoughts and acts.\(^2\)

Later in the speech there is another arithmetic relation, the quotient proposed in the "art coefficient," defined as the gap between an artist's intention and his expression. This use of a mathematical expression was hardly the first occasion for Duchamp. One has seen evidence of proportional equations in his earliest writings, from his collection of published notes from 1914, for example.\(^3\) One can see "mathematics" at work in his visual works as well. In one sense, his complex master work *The Large Glass* can be interpreted as an equation of sorts, in which two realms, that of the Bride and the Bachelors, are separated but related to one another by particular operations and relationships. This resemblance between Duchamp's work and mathematical expressions is not incidental. As Craig Adcock has analyzed, there are many resonances between *The Large Glass* and various ideas present in speculative mathematical texts of the turn of the century, particularly those involving n-dimensional geometry and the fourth dimension.\(^4\) Linda Henderson has also examined specific correspondences between Duchamp's notes of 1914 and the scientific writings of E.P. Jouffret and Poincaré, texts he would have had access to while working as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genevièvre, Paris, in 1913.\(^5\)

But perhaps there are traces of more contemporary influences as well in this desire to reduce a question to its most basic arithmetical relations. Duchamp's colleagues,


\(^3\)For example:

\begin{align*}
\text{arrhe is to art as} & \\
\text{shitte is to shit.} & \\
\text{arrhe/art = shitt/shit} & \\
\text{grammatically:} & \\
\text{the arrhe of painting is feminine in gender}
\end{align*}

(from *The 1914 Box*, in Sanouillet and Peterson eds., *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 23.)


particularly his Parisian ones, were well acquainted with the developments occurring as structuralism spilled over into literary criticism and anthropology. We have mentioned Claude Lévi-Strauss and his connection to Breton beginning in the early 1940s. Lévi-Strauss' essays, dating from the mid-1950s, used structuralist methodologies to map the complexities of the language and kinship structures of the cultures he studied. Duchamp, who was part of the circle of French émigrés in New York during the war years and afterwards, kept in touch with Breton and H.P. Roché, periodically availing himself of the gossip of the Parisian literary world.

The broad influence exerted upon Surrealist thought by the scientific theorist Gaston Bachelard, particularly his simultaneous embrace of the disciplines of science and poetry, has been discussed above. Perhaps, however, a more concrete connection can be made between Duchamp and post-structuralist discourse by looking at his personal interest in the literature of Jules Laforgue and Raymond Roussel. These were the two writers that Duchamp uncharacteristically credited as a source of influence and inspiration throughout his lifetime. In 1911 Duchamp executed three drawings inspired by three Laforgue poems from the turn of the century posthumous anthology, Sanglot de la Terre. And throughout his life Duchamp continued to refer to the 1912 visit he made to attend the performance of Raymond Roussel's Impressions d' Afrique at the Théâtre Antoine, Paris.

As Michel Sanouillet points out, Duchamp had focused throughout his life on a particular group of marginal and eccentric writers all of whom shared a common disdain for the conventional roles of the artist and writer and for conventional societal structures.

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6Especially his first major book, Les Structures elementaire de la parenté (Elementary Structures of Kinship (1949)).

7In a long letter to Breton dated October 4, 1954, Duchamp urges him to keep him abreast of the debates in Médium; October 10, 1950 Duchamp and H.P. Roché spend the afternoon with Jean Paulhan, writer and former director of La Nouvelle Revue Française; December 14, 1954 the Duchamps dine at the home of Louis Carré in Paris. All cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, "Ephemerides."

8In an interview with James Johnson Sweeney during the mid-1940s, Duchamp discussed his interest as a young artist in the poetry of Jules Laforgue (J.J. Sweeney interview with Duchamp first published in Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, vol. XIII, no. 4-5, 1946, reprinted in Sanouillet and Peterson, The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, p. 124). Twenty years later, in an interview with Pierre Cabanne would say, "I liked Laforgue a lot, and I like him even more now, although his public stock has gone way down." Cabanne, Dialogues..., p. 30.
Laforgue and Roussel among them, these writers used various means to attack conventional society: "...the proto-Dadaist gesture of scorn and anger, the vocation of failure, the championing of doubt, the use of new language made up of vulgar words, neologism, aberrant figures of speech, abstruse rhetorical usage, or quite simply syntactical structures unintelligible to most ordinary mortals."  

We notice that the rebellious and experimental tactics of Laforgue and Roussel resonate with the personae and activities of Duchamp, from his proto-Dada pranks to the recurring word play of his published notes and puns. For example, Laforgue had a penchant for making up words, sometimes marrying popular and scientific language into such combinations as \textit{vi volupté} (rape and voluptuous), \textit{eternullité} (eternal and null), or \textit{massacrilège} (massacre and sacrilege).\textsuperscript{10} Roussel, too, engaged in deliberate forms of word manipulation. For example, in his \textit{Impressions d' Afrique} he took two nouns, each possessing more than one meaning, and combined them using the general-purpose preposition \textit{à}. Roussel then would take the combination and weave his plot around it.\textsuperscript{11} (For example, the phrase \textit{maison à espingnolettes} [house with window latches] served as the basis for an episode in \textit{Impressions} about a house [a royal family or house] descended from a pair of Spanish twin girls.\textsuperscript{12}) Elsewhere Roussel would transform a common phrase, a book title, or a line of poetry into a series of words with similar sounds. (A line of Victor Hugo, "\textit{Un vase tout rempli du vin de l'espérance}" was transformed into "\textit{sept houx rampe lit Vesper}" and became the basis for a tale in which Handel uses seven bunches of holly tied with different colored ribbons to compose, on a banister, the theme of his oratorio \textit{Vesper}.\textsuperscript{13})

\textsuperscript{9}Michel Sanouillet, "Marcel Duchamp and The French Intellectual Tradition," p. 49.
\textsuperscript{10}Ronald Johnson, "Poetic Pathways To Dada: Marcel Duchamp and Jules Laforgue," \textit{Arts}, v. 50, no. 9 (May 1976), p. 82.
\textsuperscript{11}Rayner Heppenstall, \textit{Raymond Roussel} (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966), pp. 36-37.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
The profuse and absurd meanings culled from these intricate games were not lost on either Roussel, who evidently spent hours working with dictionaries, or Duchamp, who would claim in 1954 to be engrossed in the recent Jean Ferry biography on Roussel.14 Echoing the theme of Breton's introduction to the book and asserting there are secret, underlying meanings to Roussel's word play, Duchamp said:

Le livre de Ferry m'a beaucoup éclairé sur la technique de Roussel. Son jeu des mots avait un sens caché. Mais l'obscurité de ces jeu de mots n'avait rien de mallarméen, rien de ribaldesque. C'est une obscurité d'un autre ordre. C'est cela qui m'intéresse chez Roussel: ce qu'il a d'unique. C'est qu'il ne se rattache à rien d'autre.15

Duchamp, then, was intrigued by what he described as Roussel's utterly unique sense of word play.

Roussel's techniques of self-conscious literary experimentation would also attract a the new generation of Parisian writers associated with the nouveau roman and post-structuralist literary discourse. For example, Michel Foucault recalled wandering into a bookstore and discovering Roussel's book La Vue on a dusty shelf. He later acknowledged that his initial attraction to it was because of its resemblance to the work of the nouveau roman writers Robbe-Grillet, butor, and Barthes. As a result of this "shock of recognition," Foucault wrote the work Death and the Labyrinth (1963).16 This discovery by the new generation of Parisian writers of their experimenting precursors took place during the period of 1950-1960 when, as Foucault observes, "the problem of the relationship of literature and linguistic structure was not only a topic of theoretical speculation but also loomed large on the literary horizon."17 Duchamp in his lifelong interest in the literature of Laforgue and Roussel managed to span this inter-generational connection.

15Ibid.
16Charles Ruas, "An Interview with Michel Foucault," in Michel Foucault's, Death and the Labyrinth, translated by Charles Ruas, pp. 169-186.
17Ibid., p. 176.
Duchamp, too, had personal acquaintance with mathematicians and semioticians quite directly involved in the literary experiments of post-war Paris. After the late 1920s, Duchamp had played chess quite regularly with François Le Lionnais, one of the founders of Bourbaki, a collective of famous French mathematicians formed before the Second World War. As Le Lionnais described their relationship:

Well, he showed interest in our conversation. He liked talking to people with a scientific background, and he asked them questions; he talked about mathematics...He had read a lot of books—not mathematical texts which he would have been unable to understand, but...philosophical works...for instance 'Science and Theory.' [Poincaré's La Science et l'hypothèse (1902)] That is the philosophical musings of a great mathematician, which combine philosophical and mathematical qualities. This influenced him a lot. And I talked to him about Bourbaki, who was very modern at the time. Because I was involved with the Bourbaki movement from its origins... Bourbaki gave rise to OuLiPo--with a lot of free interpretation of course. And when I spoke of Bourbaki to him he was very interested...  

The group of mathematicians known as the Bourbaki made theoretical contributions to structuralist thought, attempting to model some of the most basic relationships that exist to describe the behavior of a totality—either its elements, the links between these elements, or the arrangements of these links. The Bourbaki arrived at a radically simplified model of "three 'mother structures' under which all others can be subsumed."  

The OuLiPo group, in which Duchamp became a honorary member, stood for Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle. Founded around 1960 by Le Lionnais, Georges Perec, and Raymond Queneu, the group's aims were to explore techniques and methods of creating literature. And, although the date of this latter association post-dates our discussion of "The Creative Act," Duchamp had always been intrigued by experimental literature, pseudo-scientific terminology, and word play.

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As structuralist terminology permeated into literary and art criticism during the mid-1950s, the vocabulary became formalized, and the word and its signified meaning lost their objective and immutable connection to one another. Duchamp had always been interested in this issue, but he arrived at it more indirectly through Symbolist and quasi-scientific literature, which were part of the Dada and Surrealist milieu, as well as informally through his acquaintance with the post-war Parisian literary community.

It is clear that by the time of the conference, Duchamp was conversant with the terminology used in the developing post-structuralist discourse. In 1953 Duchamp would write in a letter, "words are too much of a passé-partout approximation and never carry the subtleties of our thoughts." But in 1922 Breton was saying similar things about Duchamp's written notes: "But words have stopped playing. Words are making love." This time lag points to the inter-connection between Duchamp's personal predilections, his associations among colleagues, and a line of continuity in French art discourse throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

I am not the first to point out the similarity between Duchamp's ideas, or "The Creative Act," and structuralist ideas. In his thesis devoted to exploring this tie, Kim Smith sets out to:

- demonstrate the extent to which semiotic theory is implicit in Duchamp's orientation toward the visual arts and to suggest through this convergence of creative practice and theory in the work of such a singular artist, the broader implications that semiotic theory may hold for art history and criticism.

Smith admits his aim is "not a search for possible sources for Duchamp's theory."

However, in neglecting to examine Duchamp's surrounding historical context, Smith has a tendency to represent Duchamp's ideas in a wholly groundbreaking light and as ideas unaccepted by his contemporaries:

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21 December 3, 1953 letter from Duchamp to Walter Arensberg cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, "Ephemeraes."
22 André Breton, "Les Mots sans rides," Littérature, December 1, 1922.
[In "The Creative Act"] he outlined what may have struck many as a merely whimsical theory of art, a theory all the more striking because it either inverted or altogether denied many commonly held assumptions in the art world concerning art, artists, and viewers of art.\textsuperscript{24}

Smith may be correct in identifying a "dominant" discourse present in American art circles in 1957, much as Ann Gibson identifies a generalized locus of critical opinions held by Abstract Expressionist artists and critics. However, by the mid-1950s the American art world was one permeated with many strains, among them the influences which Duchamp's speech represented. In this case, the A.F.A. conference of 1957, the dominant discourse certainly acknowledged Duchamp's ideas. The press accounts of the conference, while not pursuing its significance in any detail, cited Duchamp's speech as one which spoke for the "role of the spectator." It was understood that those ideas were in opposition to other speakers who championed the interests of the artist. As \textit{Arts} magazine reported but did not pursue:

The second panel, with William Seitz as moderator, was concerned with "The Creative Act" and formed one of the convention highlights. In his introduction Professor Seitz declared that the modern artist "chose to embark on a life of creation for ends entirely self-generated, and produced works for which there was no social demand...let us face one fact squarely: while he is working, the typically contemporary artist is unaware of what the public likes or dislikes. He is totally occupied with the authenticity of his experience." Commenting on this, Marcel Duchamp claimed that the "creative act is not performed by the artist alone. The spectator brings the work in contrast [contact] with the external world...interpreting its inner qualifications and this adding his contribution."\textsuperscript{25}

Even though the implications of Duchamp's idea of the spectator were not explored in any depth, the fact that these two views were juxtaposed bespeaks a certain diversity of opinion which was comfortably accommodated within art criticism of 1957. Duchamp's opinions were not ignored or disputed in the media accounts.

Similarly, in the discussions that followed Duchamp's speech, fellow panelists easily identified the points of divergence between his ideas and others. Panel moderator

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. vii.
William Seitz (using the formulaic critical approach of a "difficult " problem of modern art for experts to tackle) immediately identified the issue of the artist’s role in determining meaning as a point of divergence between the discussants:

Seitz: I think, gentlemen, our agreements and our disagreements are complex; we might call it a pattern of tension, maybe. But here’s a place I think we could begin: It seems to me that Rudolf Arnheim’s call for judgment and awareness on the part of an artist is implicitly quite opposed to the mediumistic role which Marcel has proposed, and maybe--Rudolf, would you like to begin talking on that?

Arnheim: ...It seems to me that when we talk of the artist as a medium, we attribute to him the kind of passivity and the kind of being an instrument which seems to me to neglect the very essence of what we call the artistic process. And I’d just like to throw this in so that we might fight about it or play with it.

Seitz: Marcel, would you like to go on?

Duchamp: No. I don’t have much to say about this, except that what I meant is not to make a medium of the artist but to compare him to the status of a medium, in which when we say he produces aesthetically, I’m not talking about any subject or what intention he has; I’m talking from the aesthetic plane, when posterity would have to segregate him as a great artist, because if he is not a great artist he will be forgotten...

Seitz: In regard to this, would I be right in paraphrasing or interpreting this idea in saying that you suggested that the artist begins with an intention, didn’t you?

Duchamp: Oh, of course; yes, yes. I mean all the exterior, even if the artist is not to be a great artist. As Bateson says, we do--we create all the time, great artists or not.

Seitz: But what the artist creates is not what he intended?

Duchamp: No; of course not. That’s the point.

Seitz: And he doesn’t understand then what he did create?

Duchamp: No; of course not.
(Laughter.)

This exchange documents very well that the proponents of the dominant discourse, those with a stake in the artist-centered forms of interpretation (Seitz, and to some extent, Arnheim), knew that Duchamp was proposing something at odds with their ideas. (Perhaps

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26 Transcript of "The Creative Act" panel, Office of the Director (RG2) Lee Malone (Subgroup 2) Correspondence and Subject Files: "AFA Convention 1957," Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.
even the laughter by the audience signaled that it understood this difference of perspective as well.)

The flip side of Duchamp's diminution of the artist's importance is his emphasis on the spectator. In the following exchange, Duchamp attempts to clarify what he means by spectator. This view, too, is somewhat at odds with modernist discourse. The other panelists have some trouble, firstly, in following what it means for a spectator to "refine" a work of art from its "raw state." Secondly, there was some reluctance to actually allow the spectator or posterity to take over the role that Duchamp was ceding to them in the determination of the longevity and quality, or the "greatness," of a work of art.

**Duchamp:** The artist produces bad art as well as good art, and it's art. You see, when we speak of art, it's always Rembrandt, Raphael. And there are everyday artists who produce bad art, and we never speak of it as raw product. And this exists. And it will be refined by society in the form of the spectator or posterity, that refines it, and--as I said, as sugar from pure molasses.

**Arnheim:** But isn't that like sending the molasses out and let the customer refine the molasses?

(Laughter and applause.)

**Seitz:** Touché. Well, isn't this treatment of the customer in certain ways characteristic of the contemporary creative processes of contemporary art in general? He's expected to do more work. The services are becoming more and more expensive. (Laughter.) Do you own creating nowadays.

**Arnheim.** That's a make it yourself chore.

**Seitz:** Would you agree, Marcel, that the image on your--I won't say retina--on somewhere in your mind created by the simple perception which Gregory has outlined, would you call this art?

**Duchamp:** Not at all. It has nothing to do with art. Art, if I'm not wrong, is 'to make.' This from the Latin, to make, that's all. You have to make, to do it, to do.

**Seitz:** To form.

**Duchamp:** To form. And anything that is not formed or made by man I suppose is not art. I mean, nature is not art. It's evident.
Arnheim: You'd better let me do it in a roundabout way. The other night I saw the exhibition of—the "Three Brothers" exhibition. Now, one of the things which struck me about the pictures I liked was the absolute precision and finality of these pictures. You see, it did not seem to me that I had the necessity for refining. And it seemed to me it would have been an impertinence to me if I would have walked up to you at the exhibition—I would have said, "Now I'm going to do the refining." And you would have probably thrown me out of the place.

(Laughter.)

Duchamp: I'm using all this--these words symbolically. There is no refining in that way except pragmatically. In other words, my point, what's more important is that a creative act is performed half way by the public or the spectator or posterity. And not only decide or refine; the refinement or refining is a creative act. Because you decide whether it's good, bad or indifferent; and it's the end of a painter if say "bad," you never see him again.

Arnheim: No; you decide that.

Duchamp: Oh, no. No, indeed. I mean, I decide that. I believe in that. What happens in fact in the Louvre, and you know that El Greco was forgotten for centuries and reactivated only fifty years ago.

Arnheim: Was he not good in the meantime?

Duchamp: Very medium, yes. (Laughter and applause.) He did all right, having no more than many of us who are not going to be good again.

Arnheim: No, I mean, I know that he was not appreciated very much--at least, I think that's true--but I wonder whether he was not--whether what he had done did not continue to be good in itself regardless of whether anybody saw it as good.

Duchamp: Exactly. But that's where the point comes in--when you have to consider society and posterity and the spectator in the problem. The problem doesn't...in other words...the creation does...the painter...If the world did not exist, the painter wouldn't exist, ipso facto. There wouldn't be any creation if there was nobody to look at it. In other words, half of the creation is done by these onlookers.  

The first part of this exchange involves Duchamp's reluctance to describe art beyond its existence in a raw state: bad, good, or indifferent. This definition of art as, essentially, a man-made object with a spectrum of possible values corresponds to our notion of Duchamp as the author of the readymades, an artist whose life's activities challenged notions of artistic production. Such a definition also corresponds to his image of "indifference" in regard to critical opinion or interpretation, with history or posterity designated as the final

27Ibid.
arbitrator. These issues are inextricably present in speaking of Duchamp and his work. However, in Chapter I, I touched on the ways in which Duchamp was hardly "indifferent" to the presentation of his work or to the commentaries of particular critics throughout his career. He was careful to keep all of his work within the hands of a few sympathetic collectors with whom he could control its loan frequency and ultimate placement. And Duchamp often collaborated directly with authors and curators in the presentation of his work. These were not the actions of an artist "indifferent" to interpretation, only one sensitive to its context.

Therefore, when Duchamp describes an art work being good, bad, or indifferent, it does not mean that he has no standards of judgment, only perhaps it is chiefly the spectator's opinion which will count in the end. As noted in the exchange above, Duchamp finds it impossible to discuss creation without according the spectator his "half" of the job: the spectator's "refining" is a creative act.

But he is hardly eliminating the role of the artist altogether, whose responsibility is the making, the "forming," of "art in a raw state." By emphasizing the artist's lack of awareness in the creative process, Duchamp falls squarely within the modernist, Surrealist-inspired belief in spontaneous or improvisational creative procedures. He turns towards the words of T.S. Eliot, the period's much esteemed author, for support on the issue of the lack of consciousness on the part of the artist to even know the value of his efforts. The essay from which Duchamp quotes, "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1917), is frequently cited as an early defense of the New Critical position that places the existence of the art object above the vulgarities of interpretation or history. Duchamp uses the essay to deny the influence of the outside world in the making of an art work: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he at the moment to something which is more valuable. The Progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."28

It would seem Duchamp is positing that the act of creation is a mysterious, unconscious "transmutation" and this is the prerogative of the artist, having little to do with daily life and culture. But Duchamp is making a distinction between the making of an art work, which occurs in a remote, unconscious realm, and the evaluation and interpretation of that art work, which happens in the everyday world. It is with regret that Duchamp realizes an artist can do little to influence either. As he would reply to an author writing about his work in 1949,

I found myself realizing a wonderful non-dimensional, timeless continuum where wordless thoughts through paints are the only apparition transferable of another "human being."

Now if you accept, for a moment the complete disassociation of the signer of this letter and the hero of your perception, I can tell you that it is very sad for the artist in general, not to be conscious of what his work carries or implies and not to be able to realize that what he wants to express has nothing and can't have anything to do with the inner significance. This complete divorce that you divulge so rightly, makes me think of the unimportance, of the nonsensical entity of the artist as opposed to the all mighty position of the work, in relation to which the artist is only a blind medium. Bête comme un artiste seems to apply perfectly, long live the works, superior animals in a timeless and a-dimensional world. 29

In this 1949 letter, Duchamp seems to working out many of the ideas present in "The Creative Act." Early conceptions of the notion of the transmutation of aesthetic meaning through the medium of paint is here. So, too, is the idea of the inability of an artist to affect the "inner significance" of his work, later modeled in "The Creative Act" as the proportion of the art coefficient.

The ideas present in "The Creative Act" are to some degree part of the rhetoric we associate with modernist discourse: the art object is a perfect, unreachable, inarticulate object isolated from the "real;" artists are ineffectual at articulating and reaching the inner significance of their art work. Yet "The Creative Act" is also part of the French post-structuralist tradition which de-centers the locus of meaning away from the art object itself and places it within its context. In the speech, it is the spectator who assigns meaning, who

29December 20, 1949 letter from Duchamp to Helen Freeman as cited in Gough-Cooper and Caumont, "Ephemerides."
distinguishes quality, who becomes posterity. Through it, however, Duchamp has not
totally cast off the idea of intrinsic meaning. The art object is still hovering at some distance
from this dialectic of creation and interpretation. It is mute and remote, located in the
labyrinth beyond time and space.

Conclusion

On the simplest of levels, Marcel Duchamp's speech "The Creative Act" is
important to analyze merely for the frequency with which the artist would later refer to its
themes, often using identical phraseology, throughout his life, particularly in later years
when his public appearances and statements increased dramatically. Critics, too, frequently
refer to the speech as evidence of Duchamp's willingness to "let the spectator complete the
work of art."

However, in this paper I hope to have come some measure towards establishing
"The Creative Act" firmly within the art discourse of its time. It was not, as some critics
have implied, an unusual speech for its period, although it did anticipate forms of artistic
criticism associated with a decade and two later. And, while he did acknowledge the
spectator, Duchamp had a particularly ambivalent history in his regard for the viewing
public and the open interpretation of his own art works. Rather the speech is evidence of a
complex personal history on the part of the artist and of a richer, more diverse context of
American art criticism than is frequently associated with the second half of the decade of the
1950s.

Duchamp was part of a primarily Continental artistic tradition of Cubism, Futurism,
Dada, and Surrealism in the first quarter of the century, which then moved into the
developing post-structuralist discourse of the 1950s. But because Duchamp was an artist
who lived a significant portion of his adult life in the United States and because of the
speech's delivery at a conference in Houston, Texas, "The Creative Act" exists as part of
American art discourse of the mid-1950s. It is true that the speech stood somewhat at odds
with what has been described as the "dominant" form of discourse, involving the values of spontaneity, abstraction, and artist-centered creative procedures. Fellow conference participants remained somewhat confused about its central ideas, although these were dutifully related in all press accounts of the conference. A careful examination of the speech reveals both its correspondences with and its differences from such dominant values.

Duchamp's personae and his art works present at the convention were, like his speech, interpreted in contradictory ways against the dominant discourse: a few recognized the full range of his artistic activity; however, most of the public saw him as the infamous, retired artist whose paintings created a stir over forty years before. Besides "The Creative Act," there are art works and statements from other artists of the period, Rauschenberg and Davis among them, that hint at a growing restlessness with certain modernist values, which by 1957 were starting to become clichés.

Duchamp's even-handed acknowledgment of the spectator in the speech came at a time of growing popular participation in the American art world. The media played some role in this popularization and had a hand in the perpetuation of certain stereotypical values and images of art and artists of the 1950s. It is the period when the pseudo-images of the artist as action painter, the art expert as "high brow," and the art symposia as contentious ideological battleground, all made their appearance. These images became familiar fixtures within the art magazines, as well as the more general-interest photography magazines such as Life. One could even make the argument that Duchamp's presence at the conference resonated more with the pseudo-image of art expert than with that of artist, due to a certain categorization of his artistic activity (more "curatorial" than "artistic") according to the images and critical frameworks of the 1950s.

The media's attention to modern art was turn encouraged by the growing popularity of aesthetic issues among an affluent American public who could afford to purchase and spend time in cultural pursuits. The intellectual underpinning of the popularity of aesthetic issues was articulated in the popular books of the day: The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.
The Organization Man, The Lonely Crowd. Aesthetic concerns were linked to the values of individuality, freedom, and a-political expression in the face of modern alienation. During the 1950s, aesthetic concerns became a means of escape from the pressures of a modern life of bureaucratic conformity and domestic political pressures.

Duchamp's speech fits within this context through his accord to the spectator of half of the role of the creative act. He thereby acknowledged the very real situation in which a large public was engaged in decisions about what art was bought, written about, and valued in culture. This point has no more visible manifestation than the spectacle of the 1957 A.F.A. annual convention (fig. 25). Held in the regional city of Houston, Texas, the convention managed to attract an audience of 1,400 and considerable national press attention for a two-day discussion of the role of modern art in American society.
APPENDICES

1. "The Creative Act"
   Version printed in Art News, Summer 1957

2. "Biographical Notes"
   Chronology of Duchamp's Life, prepared by the artist and included in "Three Brothers" catalogue (1957)

3. "Biographical Data Sheet"
   Data sheet prepared by Duchamp for conference organizers

4. Checklist of Duchamp's work in the "Three Brothers" exhibition

5. "The Creative Act" draft submitted to conference organizers by Duchamp, January 1957

6. Complete schedule of 1957 A.F.A. conference
Appendix I

The Creative Act
By Marcel Duchamp

[Version printed in Art News, Summer, 1957]

Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.

If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay on "Tradition and Individual Talent," writes: 'The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."

Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity.

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.

I know that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role and insist of the validity of their awareness in the creative act-- yet, art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.

If the artist, as a human being, full of the best intentions toward himself and the whole world, plays no role at all in the judgement of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art? In other words, how does this reaction come about?

This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an aesthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano or marble.

Before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word "art"-- to be sure, without any attempt at a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I refer to "art coefficient," it will be understood that I refer not only to great art, but I am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art in a raw state-- à l'état brut-- bad, good, or indifferent.
In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of.

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal "art coefficient" contained in the work.

In other words, the personal "art coefficient" is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this "art coefficient" is a personal expression of art à l'état brut, that is still in a raw state, which must be "refined" as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict.

The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabsilitates forgotten artists.
Biographical Notes

Marcel Duchamp

1887 28 July, born Blainville, near Rouen
brother of painters Jacques Villon, Suzanne Duchamp, and sculptor
Raymond Duchamp-Villon
attended school, Rouen
librarian, Bibliothèque Sta. Geneviève, Paris

1904 studied painting, Académie Julian, Paris
1910 painting, Portrait of Father, exhibited Salon d'Automne
first Chessplayers
1911 formally joined Cubists
first sketches and first oil for Nude Descending a Staircase
The Coffee Grinder
painted Portrait of Chess Players

1912 Nude Descending a Staircase, No 2 exhibited with Sèvres d'Or, Paris
painted The King and Queen Surrounded by Switti Nudes
Munich: The Virgin, The Bride

1913 Cemetery of Uniforms and Livreries, first panel study
Boxing match, Chocolate Grinder, No 1
Armory Show, New York: The King and Queen Surrounded by Switti
Nudes
Portait of Chess Players
Nude Descending a Staircase
Nude (sketch)

1913 Water Mill within Glider (in Neighboring Maelas), first painting on glass
1914 Paris, painted Bachelors
revised first 'ready-mades', Pharmacy: bottle-cork
Chocolate Grinder, No 2
1915 left Paris for New York

1915-1923 worked on glass, La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même

1916 Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2, made especially for Walter and
Louise Arenberg
ready-made, Ball of twine
ready-made, Girl with Bedstand (Apollinaire Enamelled) 1916-1917
founding member of the Society of Independent Artists, Inc.

1917 published reviews, The Blind Man, Rong-wrong
sent ready-made Fountain, secretarial urinal, to first exhibition of Independent
signed to R. Mutt, rejected by executive committee, from which he resigned
quasi-Dada group with Picabia, Man Ray, Jean Cocteau

1918 mural painting, Tu m' to Argentina

1919 to Paris, ready-made viel, 50 cc. Air de Paris
La Joconde with moustaches: LH00Q—visual and literal pun

1920 New York, with Katherine S. Dreier, organized the Société Anonyme, first museum
of modern art
birth of ROSE SELAVY in New York

1921 Revolving Glass (Appareil Rotatif, Optique de Précision)
New York, with Man Ray, published one issue of New York Dada
constructed object Why not s美za?

1922 Paris, exhibited in International exhibition organized by Dadaists, Galerie Montsalvage
began creation of anagrams, word games

1923 left La mariée mise à nu . . . unfinished, to devote himself to obsess and
experiments in optics

1925 associated with the surrealists, Paris
produced film, Anemic Cinema

1926 Paris
wrote book on chess
organized exhibition of modern art for Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum

1926-1927 installed Brancusi exhibit, Brummer Gallery, New York, and Arts Club of
Chicago

1934 started making reliefs
made the Box, portfolio containing 93 documents in facsimile

1935 bookcover for Jarry's Ubu Roi, bookbinding executed by Mary Reynolds

1937 first one-man show, Arts Club of Chicago

1938 published Rose Selavy: Ocullisme de Précision

1943 organized surrealist exhibition in New York with André Breton
published suite of reproductions, Bolle-au-vallée

1942-1944 New York, with David Hare, André Breton, Max Ernst, edited VVV, surrealist
review

1947 International surrealist exhibition, Paris: contributed "Rain Room" and "Labyrinth"
made cover for catalogue

1955 became American citizen
Appendix 3
THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

Convention 1957

Biographical Sheet

NAME

DUCHAMP Marcel

PLACE OF BIRTH

France

HOME ADDRESS

327 East 58th St. New York

TEL. NO. PL. 11658

BUSINESS ADDRESS


TEL. NO.

CITIZENSHIP

American

PRESENT OCCUPATION (with exact title)

Freelance artist

COLLEGES OR UNIVERSITIES ATTENDED (Please indicate degrees received and subjects of special interest.)

BACHELIER ES LETTRES IN FRANCE

HONORARY DEGREES RECEIVED

PUBLICATIONS (Include books, articles, published addresses, etc.)

PAST POSITIONS

OTHER (Include special projects, assignments, conferences, committees, etc. of interest to the public, on which you are or have been active.)

Round Table in San Francisco 1957 (?)


To be filled in by AFA Office:

Participant in Panel Title , April , as

To give address, April , Title
MARCEL DUCHAMP

THE ARTIST'S FATHER.  1910. Oil on canvas. 36½ x 28½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

THE CHESS PLAYERS.  (Partie d'Echecs.)  1910. Oil on canvas, 45 x 37½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE, NO. 1.  (Nu descendant un Escalier.)
  1911. Oil on cardboard, 37¾ x 23½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

PORTRAIT OF CHESS PLAYERS.  (Portrait de Joueurs d'Echecs.)
  1911. Oil on canvas, 39¾ x 39¾".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

THE SONATA.  (Sonate.)  1911. Oil on canvas, 57 x 44½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

YVONNE AND MAGDELEINE TORN IN TATTERS.  (Yvonne et Magdeleine
déchiquetées.)  1911. Oil on canvas, 23½ x 20¾".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

THE BRIDE.  (La Mariée.)  1912. Oil on canvas, 35¾ x 21¾".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

THE KING AND QUEEN SURROUNDED BY SWIFT NUDES.  (Le Roi et
la Reine entourées de Nus Vites.)  1912. Oil on canvas, 45½ x 50½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE, NO. 2.  (Nu descendant un Escalier.)
  1912. Oil on canvas, 58 x 35½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

LE PASSAGE DE LA VIERGE A LA MARIEE.  1912. Oil on canvas, 23¾ x 21¾".

CHOCOLATE GRINDER, NO. 2.  (Broyeuse de Chocolat.)  1914. Oil, thread
and pencil on canvas, 25½ x 21½".
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

READY-MADE. WHY NOT SNEEZE ROSE SELAVY?  1921. Marble blocks in the
shape of lamp sugar, thermometers, wood and cattlebone in a small bird cage, 4½" high,
8½" long, 6¾" deep.
  The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Appendix 5
THE CREATIVE ACT

Statement by Marcel Duchamp on the creative act.

Let us consider two important factors, the two poles of artistic creation: the artist on the one hand and the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.

To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.

If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must deny him the state of consciousness on the aesthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay on "Tradition and Individual Talent," writes: "...the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material." Millions of artists create; only a few thousands are discussed or accepted by the spectator and many less again are consecrated by posterity.

In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all
the roof tops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.

I know that this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic rôle and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act — yet, Art History has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist.

If the artist, as a human being, full of the best intentions toward himself and the whole world, plays no rôle at all in the judgement of his own work, how can one describe the phenomenon which prompts the spectator to react critically to the work of art; in other words, how does this reaction come about?

This phenomenon is comparable to a transference from the artist to the spectator in the form of an aesthetic osmosis taking place through the inert matter such as pigment, placo, or marble.

But before we go further, I want to clarify our understanding of the word art — to be sure, without any attempt at a definition.

What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good, or indifferent but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it
art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion.

Therefore, when I speak of "art coefficient" in the following explanation, it is to be understood that I never refer to great art only, but am trying to describe the subjective mechanism which produces art à l'état brut—bad, good, or indifferent.

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization, through a chain of reactions totally subjective. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the aesthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference which the artist is not aware of.

Therefore, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention, this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal art coefficient contained in the work.

In other words, the personal art coefficient is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this art coefficient is a personal expression of art.
a l'état brut, to be refined by the spectator after the revelation of the aesthetic osmosis, and the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the aesthetic scales.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone. The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates many a forgotten artist.

Marcel Duchamp  
Jan 1957
1957 American Federation of Arts Conference
Houston, Texas
Schedule of Conference

Wednesday, April 3, 1957

Noon
Registration

5:30 PM
Opening of "Illuminations" exhibition at Shamrock Hilton; buffet supper following

8:00 PM-10:00 PM
Opening of "Three Brothers" exhibition at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Thursday, April 4, 1957

10:00 AM
Welcome by Oscar Holcombe
Mayor of Houston

10:30 AM - Noon
Keynote Speech by Meyer Shapiro
Professor of Art History, Colombia University
"The Place of Painting in Contemporary Culture"

12:30 PM - 1:30 PM
Mexican Luncheon at Junior League

2:00 PM - 4:00 PM
Discussion of Keynote by:
René d'Harnoncourt, Director
Museum of Modern Art, New York
James Johnson Sweeney, Director
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Stuart Davis, Artist
Randall Jarrell, Poet-in-Residence
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

4:00 PM - 7:00 PM
Tour of Houston Homes:
Miss Ima Hogg
John and Dominque de Menil
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Strauss

9:00 PM - midnight
Reception of "Pacemakers" exhibition
Contemporary Arts Museum
Friday, April 5, 1957

10:00 AM - Noon
Panel Discussion of "The Creative Act"
William Seitz, Professor of Art History
Princeton University
Marcel Duchamp, artist
Rudolf Arnheim, Professor of Psychology, Sarah Lawrence College
Gregory Bateson, Cultural Anthropologist and Psychologist

Noon - 2:00 PM
Poolside Buffet, Shamrock Hilton

2:00 PM - 5:00 PM
"From Artist to Public"
Phillip R. Adams, Director
Cincinnati Art Museum
Jimmy Ernst, Artist
Sidney Janis, Art Dealer
Bernard Reis, Collector and Businessman
Kenneth Sawyer, Art Critic
Baltimore Sun

4:00 PM - 5:00 PM
Meeting of Board of Trustees

8:00 PM - 10:00 PM
Annual American Federation of Arts Banquet, Vincent Price, toastmaster
Emerald Room, Shamrock Hilton

Saturday, April 6, 1957
Plane Tour of Texas Cities

9:30 AM
Departure from Houston airport to San Antonio

10:30 AM - 2:00 PM
Visit to "Fifty Paintings from Fifty Texas Collections," MacNay Art Institute
and "Contemporary Religious Art," Witte Museum

2:00 PM
Departure for either Fort Worth or Dallas museums and private collections

2:00 PM - 9:00 PM
"A Survey of Texas Painting," Dallas Museum of Art
or "Sculpture of Texas," Fort Worth Art Center

10:45 PM
Arrival back in Houston
Illustrations
Figure 2.
Marcel Duchamp, *Nu descendant un escalier* (Nude Descending a Staircase, [no. 2]) (1912), oil on canvas
Duchamp's studio at 33 West 67th Street, 1917-18.

Figure 3.
Photograph of Duchamp's studio at 33 West 67th Street (1917-18)
Figure 4.
Hans Namuth photographs of Jackson Pollock in Robert Goodnough's article "Pollock Paints a Picture," *Art News*, May 1951
Figure 5.
1946 Photograph of Marcel Duchamp, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Sidney Janis with the winner of the Bel Ami International Competition, Max Ernst's *The Temptation of St. Anthony*
Figure 6.
Western Round Table on Art, San Francisco, April 8-10, 1949
Figure 7.
Marcel Duchamp, *Jaquette (Jacket)* (1956), pen and ink drawing
Figure 8.
Cecil Beaton photographs of model in front of Pollock paintings at Pollock's 1950 Betty Parsons Show, reproduced in Vogue, March 1951
Figure 9.
"Everyday Tastes from High-Brow to Low-Brow Art Classified on Chart,"
*Life*, April 11, 1949, pp. 100-101
Figure 10.
"A Life Round Table on Modern Art," *Life*, October 11, 1948, pp. 36-37
Figure 11.
"Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," 1950, photograph reproduced in
Modern Artists in America (1951).
Figure 12.
Frank Freed, *Opening Night at The Contemporary Arts Museum*, 1953, oil on canvas
Turnout for Art in Texas

1,400 tour state's museums and homes

For a few busy days this month, Texas was the hub of the U.S. art world. Playing host to a convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas were thronged by 1,400 art lovers from all over the country. An extremely large number of nonprofits and municipalities stepped up to promote art, invited well-known speakers, but the major attractions were provided by Texans. After fetting the visitors in Houston's art-filled museums and homes, they organized an all-day, all-night tour of museums and private collections in three other Texas cities. The art lovers covered hundreds of miles, viewed hundreds of paintings and sculptures and went home convinced that art like everything else was booming in Texas.

Figure 13.
Figure 14.
Robert Motherwell, Diagram of “an impression of the true chronology...that taken together are sometimes called Abstract Expressionism," from Seitz, Abstract Expressionist Painting in America (1955), appendix 1
Figure 16.
Cover of "Pacemakers" exhibition catalogue,
Contemporary Arts Museum, April 1957
Figure 17.
*Life* photographer Elisefon's contact sheet of "Pacemakers" exhibition
Figure 19.
*Life* photographer Elisofon's contact sheet of 1957 A.F.A. conference
Figure 21.
Cartier-Bresson photo of conference, 1957
Figure 22.
Cartier-Bresson photo of conference, 1957
Figure 23.
Cartier-Bresson photo of conference, 1957
(Duchamp with Lee Malone)
Figure 25
The A.F.A. Conference 1957, (photographer unknown)
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